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Growing tourism opportunities inspire development of B.C. aboriginal centres

Bands building interpretive facilities to educate tourists and help kick-start other native enterprises

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Aboriginal interpretive centres are hardly a licence to print money, but that hasn't stopped B.C.'s native bands from building the educational tourist attractions.

The Queen Charlotte Islands-based **Skidegate Band** plans to open its \$28 million Haida Heritage Centre at Qu'y'lnagaay on July 1.

The launch follows last June's opening of the **Osoyoos Band's** \$9 million interpretive centre. It also precedes the scheduled April 2008 opening of the \$19 million Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre.

The move comes as the province increasingly dons aboriginal garb to market itself to tourists.

International visitors pass large totem poles and other aboriginal carvings before they see a customs officer at Vancouver International Airport.

The official symbol of Vancouver's 2010 Winter Olympic Games is the inukshuk, and politicians regularly surround themselves with First Nations paraphernalia when welcoming guests.

"The key to our independence is economic development," said Skidegate Band chief **Willard Wilson**.



Skidegate Chief Willard Wilson: "the key to our independence is economic development"

The Skidegate centre's price tag is being covered in part by funding from Victoria and various federal government departments, but Wilson said the band is also investing \$5.5 million in the project.

The 50,000-square-foot Haida facility, which employed 16 band members to fell trees and 35 to build the attraction, includes several traditional cedar longhouses. Another 22 band members will work in the facility once it's open.

"We have to look at tourism entirely differently now," Wilson said. "We're counting on visitors to come see us. We want people to find out about what we're do-

ing. We want people to come to Haida Gwaii to see what we're doing, and there's a whole bunch of spinoffs that can happen if a large amount of people start coming to Haida Gwaii."

"These things you don't make money off of"

- Clarence Louie, chief, Osoyoos Band

Wilson said his people enjoyed high employment until the 1980s when "fish started disappearing" and logging options dwindled. Squeezed into the pro-

ject are the Haida Gwaii Museum and the **Bill Reid Teaching Centre**, eating space, a performing arts centre and a gift shop that will sell Haida art, jewelry, books and other souvenirs.

Osoyoos Indian Band chief **Clarence Louie** told *BIV* that he wishes the Haida well with their new facility, but that he believes building interpretive centres is more an obligation than an act of entrepreneurialism.

"These things you don't make money off of. It's like, you don't make money off schools or hospitals. It's a leadership responsibility," Louie said.

"Every museum and

cultural centre that I've ever seen has not been opened by an individual entrepreneur."

Louie's own Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre helps preserve his people's and his region's histories. But it also draws business to the band's other tourist-oriented ventures.

The centre's visitors tend to be tourists interested in aboriginal culture but who are also keen to stay at a luxury hotel, visit an award-winning winery and play golf.

That's why the Osoyoos Indian Band's 230-acre Nk'Mip resort includes the Nk'Mip Cellars winery, the nine-hole Sonora Dunes Golf Course and the 94-room Spirit Ridge

Vineyard Resort and Spa.

Louie is pleased that the interpretive centre drew roughly 13,000 visitors in its first full year, and he expects that attendance to grow as the centre becomes better known.

Non-resort-based interpretive centres aren't faring quite so well.

"We're not losing money, but we're just managing to hold our own with some creative fundraising," said U'Mista Cultural Centre executive director **Andrea Sanborn**.

Her well-established interpretive centre is on Cormorant Island, off the northern tip of Vancouver Island, and it bills itself as "one of the longest-operating and most successful First Nations cultural facilities in the province."

The facility drew approximately 15,000 visitors last year, but she said approximately 60% of those visitors didn't pay the \$5 adult admission because they're First Nations members.

Tourists interested in learning about aboriginal culture have other interpretive centre getaway options. They include:

- the Quw'utsun' Cultural Centre in Duncan on Vancouver Island; and
- the Xaytem Longhouse Interpretive Centre, which includes pit houses, a longhouse and an art gallery, in Mission. ■

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