Jan. 31, 2024

**2023’s tourism success, news, efforts and future promise**

Dear friend of tourism,

On this 10th anniversary of my arrival in Buffalo, I am grateful to have witnessed our region’s transformation and the tourism economy that continues to thrive in its wake. To see it underway when I arrived — waterfront cranes were at work building Canalside’s park and promenade — made Buffalo an exciting place to be. The result, a decade later, of continuing change and discovery, is the community impact we work for: More and more people are coming and staying longer to experience Buffalo’s outdoor recreation, sporting venues, arts, theater, history, music, food, culture, convention amenities and the warmth of its people who continue to make the visitor experience remarkable.

Numbers reflect this dramatic change:

Tourism spending in Western New York increased by 37.5 percent in the last decade.

Last year’s total reached an all-time high of $2.2. billion, surpassing the pre-pandemic high by 16 percent.

Hotel business has also risen dramatically. A new study, released this month, revealed improvement and strength -- in spite of a 7.8 percent decrease in rooms, convention business still in recovery and a slow return of Canadian visitors -- 2023 hotel revenue was $309,591,826. A 16.3 percent increase.

This is a credit to our community of hoteliers offering remarkable stays that either didn’t exist 10 years ago or have been transformed – at the Marriott, the Westin, the Richardson Hotel, the Hyatt. The historic Statler, with renovations and reopening on the horizon, promises to become another sought after Buffalo stay.

As our attractions continue to emerge, evolve and win acclaim, like the Buffalo AKG Art Museum and its $195 million expansion, dynamism has become part of Buffalo’s identity and appeal. News of Buffalo’s new elements, like this summer’s planned re-opening of the expanded Colored Musicians Club and museum, helps us do our job. As we share the depth and diversity of travel experiences people can have here, we’re able to tell fresh and unique stories.

Travel writer Ashlea Halpern described the new Buffalo well in an article for [NeueHouse](https://www.neuehouse.com/neuejournal/essentialist-buffalo-getaway/)*: “*Its transformation is truly remarkable and it’s a place I always look forward to visiting because its evolution is constant and inspiring,” she wrote.

This year’s transformational news included the $6 million upgrade of the convention center, its façade, lobby and meeting rooms. The bright new colors and open entryway have turned it into a more welcoming space that have led 20 of the 30 convention planners who visited this year to choose Buffalo for their upcoming meetings.

Increasing convention center business is a major focus at Visit Buffalo Niagara. We also host regular Buffalo tours to showcase the city. Last year that included the Thought Leader Summit for Meeting Professionals International, the largest international planner association. Visitors also came to see us from faith-based organizations working with Arrowhead Conferences. Our Washington, D.C.-based staff member stays connected to the community of associations at the capital.

Last year’s amateur sport success stories include some of the nation’s fastest growing sports – women’s wrestling, flag football, adaptive sports, kickball. Buffalo, with its sports-centric centric heart and love for its pro teams is also a community that embraces amateur athletics.

Buffalo’s strength in hosting athletic events is a pillar of our economy because, as we’ve learned, sports is a recession-proof, and pandemic-proof, category of tourism spending. We are continuing to expand our efforts to attract tournaments and competitions with an emphasis on diversity.

Sports executives, like John Deffee, a former vice president of Compete Sports Diversity, have been impressed by our community and its sense of pride. “If we had more Buffalo mindsets in place, our country and world would be a better, safer, and more inclusive place for all,” he said.

This past year we have had great success in getting our story out. People rely on video as they plan travels. We have focused on expanding our presence on YouTube and Instagram reels with some standout videos: The decadently delicious tacos cooking on the griddle at D.A. Taste earned 1.2 million [views](https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cr3pmfjgkif/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA%3D%3D). Our breakfast sandwich [roundup](https://www.instagram.com/reel/CpVPzXmgs8U/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA%3D%3D) was a close second at 1.1 million.

Our [sneak peek](https://www.instagram.com/reel/CtezK4FgN1t/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA%3D%3D) tour of the new Buffalo AKG Art Museum was also at the top of our Instagram counts with 593,000 views. The former Albright Knox Art Gallery, long known as one of the world’s finest contemporary art collections, debuted its reimagined and more welcoming campus this past summer. The effusive reception from writers and critics was the news in many of the 120 Buffalo-related travel stories this year. Together they had a combined readership of 1.1million. People read about our city and region in an award winning Travel + Leisure [story](https://www.travelandleisure.com/how-buffalo-new-york-became-an-arts-and-culture-hub-7852257), a rave [review](https://www.cleveland.com/news/2023/08/newly-expanded-buffalo-akg-art-museum-is-a-national-treasure-worthy-of-a-road-trip.html) in the Cleveland Plain Dealer and in [Forbes 50 Best Places to Travel in 2024](https://www.forbes.com/advisor/credit-cards/travel-rewards/best-places-to-travel/).

The coverage and public delight in the reopened museum became one of the “Unexpected Buffalo” moments that we’ve built the city’s brand around. We were grateful to be recognized by a Buffalo News editorial, in October, that said, “Western New York is fortunate to have the steak – legitimate tourist draws, as well as the sizzle – a smart visitor’s bureau. May this never be taken for granted.”

As a destination marketing organization, we are selling something that can seem invisible – experiences. We do that by getting the word out and collaborating with our creative community partners.

New initiatives include spearheading a revived Restaurant Week, which has contributed to more dinners out, great local news stories and new awareness of the depth and range of the local dining scene. We’ve also worked closely with our theater community by promoting theater month and producing promotional videos for each of our professional theaters.

As 2024 begins, we look forward to the new Outer Harbor amphitheater and its sunset views, the reimagined and expanded Ralph Wilson Park and the promise of cruises returning to the Great Lakes. The renaissance of our shimmering Queen City continues.

Sincerely and with wishes for a happy, healthy and abundantly good year ahead,

Patrick Kaler

President and CEO