

DISCOVER a new Ireland



While tourism in Ireland has always benefited from a reputation of warm hospitality and “a hundred thousand welcomes”, Irish eco-tourism is gaining a reputation of its own, writes Catherine Mack.

Green is not just a fad in tourism, internationally or domestically. In 2008, in response to a question in Fáilte Ireland’s Visitor Attitudes Survey, 46% of respondents said that they would seek to stay in a hotel that has reduced its environmental impact, and 32% stated that they would pay more to do so. In addition, the survey found that 32% think about the environmental impact of their holiday when booking.

A recent survey in the US by Tripadvisor, showed that just over a third of travellers reported plans to stay at an eco-friendly hotel or resort in 2009, a 30% increase in a year. Justin Francis, managing director of Responsibletravel.com, one of the world’s pioneers and market leaders in selling eco-tourism products, announced a 25% increase in revenue in 2007/8, at a time when other tourism businesses were feeling the pinch of the worldwide economic downturn.

Over recent years this growth

of more ethically-aware tourism has been understandably confusing for those working in the industry. Not least because of terminology. Many argue over the subtle differences between eco-tourism, responsible tourism, green, ethical, or sustainable. Call it what you will, they all have one thing in common: making tourism last in the long term, with maximum positive impacts not only for the visitor, but also for the host. Whether that is in terms of protecting the environment, generating income for the people living and working in the destination, sustaining the country’s cultural heritage, or ensuring that the social impacts of tourism are minimised, it is all about making it fair for one and all.

The issues of sustainable tourism are not, therefore, just about the environment. However at international level, (and in the media), it is the most pressing issue. At the Second International Conference on Climate Change and Tourism, in Davos 2007, co-run by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Meteorological Organi-

sation (WMO), Ireland was one of the UN delegates to sign the Declaration, accepting that the tourism sector must “rapidly respond by reducing its greenhouse gas contribution (GHC)”. The UNWTO is focused on “mainstreaming climate change”, or getting the message to every organisation, big or small, that their business plans should fight climate change.

Irish tourism has still a long way to go, but its response has certainly been rapid.

In March 2009 Fáilte Ireland published Ireland’s first Eco-tourism Handbook, supported by Greenbox and the Border Action Agency. It is a concise 70-page guide, aimed at people working in tourism to help them operate more sustainably, looking at all issues, not just environmental ones. With chapters on “greening” a business, marketing, finance, local sourcing, certification and funding for sustainable tourism businesses, it has become an important tool in the industry. This publication was just one of several initiatives emanating from Fáilte Ireland’s Environmental

Left: Currarevagh House, Galway, Opposite page, L-R Rathmullan House, Donegal, Ard Nahoo Health Farm, Leitrim and Coopershill, Sligo

Action Plan 2007-2009. Another was its Carbon Strategy 2008, entitled Facing the Challenges of Climate Change; its main aim is to measure the carbon footprint of the 18,000 Irish tourism businesses. Another still is the provision of a consumer resource online, with detailed information on green itineraries in Ireland, the benefits and logistics of green travel, conservation organisations, walking and cycling trails, and accreditation schemes that are supported by Fáilte Ireland for green tourism providers. This website addition, a significant development for any national tourist board, should be live by August 2009.

“Given that so much of interest in Ireland as a holiday destination among overseas visitors has to do with our clean, green image, Ireland has to make sure that it can walk the talk when it comes to environmental quality,” says Paddy Matthews, environment manager at Fáilte Ireland. “There is a strong desire among providers to diversify into what they believe is a rapidly growing sector. For its part, Fáilte Ireland is investigating the establishment of a number of eco-tourism networks and destinations throughout the country that can be packaged for the visitor. We are also undertaking comprehensive market research into the extent of the appetite for eco-tourism in our main overseas markets.”

At the launch of the Eco-tourism Handbook for Ireland, Paul Keeley, director of Business Development and Investment at Fáilte Ireland was also enthusiastic about the move. “Sound management of our core tourism asset, our environment, is not only an ethical choice but also a business necessity,” he said. “As a nation, we sell ourselves as a ‘green’ country. Visitor expectations of unspoilt landscapes and a green environment are part of the attraction that lures many to our shores. However, it is not just a matter of image. An environmental approach has the potential to



yield cost savings for tourism businesses – an important consideration given the challenges we face in the year ahead.”

This backing at government level, for an industry which generates so much income for Ireland, is setting the country's growth in eco-tourism apart from other destinations. There have been hotels trying to 'do their bit' for years in Ireland, but now they are being offered the support and recognition they deserve, in terms of marketing, finance and training. These businesses are now also acting as flagships in the Irish eco-tourism market, and receiving substantial international PR as a result. Such as Ard Nahoo Health Farm in Dromahair, Co Leitrim, with eco-cabins, home-made organic food, and low-impact leisure activities. Rushin House Caravan Park on the shores of Lough Erne, Co Fermanagh is the first caravan park in Ireland or the UK to be awarded the EU Flower. Creevy Cooperative in Co Donegal has created a complete package for visitors to the Ballyshannon area, restoring an impressive collection of stone cottages for self-catering purposes, creating a 15km coastal walk, as well as a chartered boat service, skippered by a local fisherman.

Local food sourcing in order to sustain the farming industry has become key to a more responsible form of tourism, from the award-winning B&B Ard na Breatha in Co Donegal, to high end tourism providers such as Currarevagh House in Co Galway and the prestigious Gregans Castle in The Burren. Many Irish businesses are now exemplary in their local sourcing practices.

Another area of confusion for many tourism providers is the

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target market for eco-tourism products. Previously, eco-tourism was perceived as two very different things. As an eco-tourist you were either a wealthy adventurer who opted to stay in luxurious rainforest eco-resorts or a tree-hugging hosteller. However, eco-tourism is now an option for everyone, with products being created to suit all budgets and tastes. The Omagh Hostel in Co Tyrone and The Benwiskin Centre are both hostels operating impressive eco-tourism policies, but the former is run by a farming family, and the latter by the local community. When I stayed at Benwiskin, there was a group of affluent architects staying there for the weekend, hiring bikes, supporting the local pubs and generating substantial income for the community which has set up such an impressive hostel. Yet, they chose a hostel over a five star so called "eco-spa".

There are two tourism accreditation schemes approved by Fáilte Ireland, The EU Flower Ecolabel and the Green Hospitality Award (GHA). Both are classed as Type 1 ecolabels as defined by the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO). The latter is aimed only at hotels, and the former at all tourism accommodation.

Hilary Finlay, marketing director of Ireland's Blue Book, an exclusive listing of luxury accommodation, has embraced accredi-

tation as a necessary form of auditing genuine green practices, saying, "The members of the Blue Book association have always been very interested in best environment practice. When the opportunity arose for the Blue Book to assist our members with the EU Flower process, we did so without hesitation. The commitment shown by our members to introduce best environmental practice to achieve this accreditation is quite staggering. It is not an easy process, requiring staff as well as owners to work towards the changes required, but the effort will be worth it." With Fáilte Ireland backing these accreditation schemes, it will ensure that businesses that are changing their business practices will be marketed and supported, while those that are 'greenwashing', for tokenistic marketing purposes, will be discouraged.

One of the main bodies responsible for putting Ireland firmly on the global green tourism map is Greenbox. My first inspiration for writing about eco-tourism in Ireland came from this non-profit making organisation based in Co Leitrim, which started working with local tourism businesses in the Northwest of Ireland in 2002. Both Fáilte Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board recognise Greenbox as Ireland's leading eco-tourism advisory, training and marketing organisation. Greenbox has now expanded due

to the growing demand for excellence in, and supply of eco-tourism products. Mary Mulvey, CEO of Greenbox commented on this surge of interest, saying, "Greenbox has experienced much greater demand for its training in 2009, and so increased resources will be required to help the tourism industry develop eco-tourism in other parts of Ireland. Developing high standards is key to how we develop a sustainable product for the future, and a training learning network (TLN) of 28 businesses is now underway in the Northwest region, as part of a national TLN programme."

The future of eco-tourism in Ireland is, therefore, not only green, but very rosy. Eco-tourism has gone from niche to mainstream, and Ireland is definitely ahead of the game in preparing for this market change. As Justin Francis, managing director of Responsible-travel.com said in the Eco-tourism Handbook for Ireland, "Responsible travel of the future will be about celebrating (and sustaining) the diversity of places, cultures, people and environments rather than offering homogenous experiences often associated with mass tourism. Smart destinations, like Ireland, will plan ahead, focusing more on the types of tourists they need and matching these to the most suitable areas and communities within their country. As a result, we will have tourism that creates the most economic benefits at the least social and environmental cost."

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