

Culture and Heritage Tourism....An Emerging Economic Engine?

Welcome & Opening address

Redmond O'Donoghue – Chairman, Fáilte Ireland

Good Morning Ladies & Gentlemen

I would like to begin this morning by welcoming you all to our Tourism Conference entitled "*Culture & Heritage Tourism – An Emerging Economic Engine?*", which is being hosted by Fáilte Ireland as an event within Ireland's Presidency of the EU. I would like to thank you all for taking the time to join us, and I am pleased to say we have a full house today to help us consider this theme and to join in the discussions. I am particularly pleased to welcome all our distinguished speakers and contributors to the conference, and most especially those who have travelled considerable distances to be with us. I would like to offer a particular welcome to Minister of State with responsibility for Tourism and Sport, Michael Ring T.D, and Ms Fabrizia Benini who is today representing the Vice-President of the European Commission, Antonio Tajani.

I should also make mention at this point of the European Parliament, and in particular it's Committee on Transport and Tourism. Last week I received a Position Paper from the Chairman of the Committee, Mr Brian Simpson MEP, which is addressed to this conference, and which has been prepared and submitted as an input to our deliberations today. This paper has been posted on our website – www.failteireland.ie – and I will say a little more about it in just a few moments.

Right now, I would like to say a few words about our conference title.

Fáilte Ireland is principally and properly concerned with economic

development and job creation through the tourism industry. Hence the concern to ensure that every available economic engine is working properly to support this goal. The implication in our conference title is that Culture and Heritage can serve as one of these economic engines and that perhaps, just maybe, we have overlooked the potential that this particular engine can make. Of course we should define our terms here, because although I suspect most of us in this room would agree on what we mean by Culture and Heritage Tourism, I equally suspect that some of us might use a somewhat different vocabulary. Let me explain what I believe the term means by way of a brief digression.

Some time ago I was reading quite a technical research report on tourism in Europe. Lots of tables of figures – lots of charts – the kind of thing that puts most normal people to sleep. At the conclusion of the report, the author finally got to the point and said something interesting in plain English. He said that the two principal things that drive tourism across Europe – the two things that make people get on a plane and travel somewhere else - are Mediterranean beaches and Alpine ski-slopes. As I read this, my first thought was “well yes, that’s kind of very obvious”. However my more worrying second thought was that “well yes, but Ireland is noticeably light on both those assets!”

I then thought perhaps the writer of the report was correct in pointing to both these features, but that maybe he had overlooked a third and fundamentally important driver of tourism in Europe. Surely I thought our common European heritage – our architecture and art, our literature and music – serves as a major driver of tourism across Europe. More immediately I thought about our own position in Ireland, and how important it was to be clear on our core tourism assets – the things that are unique to Ireland, and serve as a source of comparative advantage over other destinations. I would argue that there are three key areas where we can find this comparative advantage:

1. Our Natural Heritage – in other words our mountains, lakes, and rivers, our coastline and our countryside. This after all is where go hill-walking, golfing, angling, surfing, and where we find our increasingly important adventure tourism.
2. Our Built Heritage – everything from the Ceide Fields in Mayo, the Neolithic Passage Tomb at Newgrange built over 5,000 years ago, and on to our Viking and Norman cities and towns, including the elegant architecture of Georgian Dublin and Merrion Square in particular. This rich and tangible heritage is an immediately accessible story-board for visitors to Ireland.
3. Our Cultural Heritage – here we can point to our music, our literature, our Gaelic games and Irish language, our theatre, folklore and oral story-telling traditions, as well as our capacity for conversation and friendship. For some visitors this heritage can remain intangible and concealed, and we probably need to work harder in this respect.

I believe these three things are our core tourism assets, and that the second and third of them in particular, are what I bundle together under the term “Culture and Heritage Tourism”.

Happily, I do not merely offer this thought to you as a personal view. Year after year Fáilte Ireland surveys tourists while they are in Ireland, and this research confirms that the expectation of engaging with this heritage is the principal reason most tourists come to Ireland. Yes of course they will book a hotel when they are in Ireland, and they will eat and drink in our restaurants and bars. But these are not the reasons people come to Ireland. Our research shows that visitors come to Ireland with an expectation of connecting with different aspects of our heritage. This is the principal driver.

All of this might sound obvious when you hear me say it like that. Nevertheless there can be a danger that we overlook the obvious, and that we under-estimate the power of the familiar, particularly when that familiar aspect of Irish life is something quite new and unexpected for the visitor to this country.

What then is all of this saying to those of us concerned with tourism development?

Well, I think its saying a number of things:

- It's saying that Ireland's authentic culture and heritage are extremely important for the continuing development of Ireland's tourism industry.
- It's also saying that the care, maintenance, and expression of our culture and heritage lie for the most part with people outside of tourism, and people who quite understandably may not consider tourism as one of their top priorities.
- That in turn reminds us that Fáilte Ireland, and indeed all of us with an interest in tourism development, need to be particularly attentive to how we can build constructive partnerships with those in the culture and heritage sector.
- In effect, any initiative or collaboration must contain wins for those in tourism as well as those in heritage/culture (however we decide to define those wins).
- Finally, and I believe most importantly, its telling us that we need to pay particular attention to how our heritage and culture is presented to the visitor – how it is interpreted and animated – how it is made both physically and intellectually accessible. In many

cases we might simply adhere to the “less is more” principle – in other words don’t over-complicate or clutter the presentation. Don’t mess with the message. Equally however, in many cases “less” can at times mean total invisibility and inaccessibility. It can mean that our heritage remains concealed, our stories remain silent, and most importantly, the paying consumer remains frustrated.

I am especially happy however to report some progress on this front. All is by no means bleak. In the last three years Fáilte Ireland has invested €110 million in tourism product development, mostly in heritage and culture related assets. Some of this has been in new developments, and some of it has been in the innovative renovation and restoration of heritage infrastructure.

However in each case of capital investment, we have asked that project promoters also set out their plans for the interpretation and animation of the newly renovated tourism asset. This has prompted a very imaginative and encouraging series of interventions in areas such as new festivals and events, guiding, re-enactment, street animation, story-telling, and interpretation. In my own home city of Waterford, the improved presentation of the city’s medieval and Viking stories has resulted in changed tour itineraries where a number of tour operators now take in Waterford as an overnight stop. This is a direct boost to businesses and jobs in the city. A similar jobs expansion has been experienced with the Greenway in Westport. The *Tribes Alive* animation project in Galway has been similarly successful, and I am very confident that the full development and realisation of the Dublin project here in Dublin will provide a similar stimulus for tourism in the capital city.

The simple point I wish to make here is that we have been involved for a number of years now in the implementation of a significant capital development programme. While we have always understood the particular

importance of heritage and culture in tourism, this recent work has made us even more certain that bricks and mortar alone is not the answer – it is not just about developing tourism assets or renovating heritage ones. It is about how we subsequently tell our stories to our visitors that really counts.

Before I finish, I would like to return to the paper addressed to us by the Chairman of the European Parliament's Transport and Tourism Committee, Mr Brian Simpson MEP.

I would like to quote one particular section from this paper which states:

"The Intangible Cultural Heritage, safeguarded and promoted by UNESCO, encompasses not only preserved monuments and objects, but also inherited living expressions in the domain of handicrafts and visual arts, gastronomy and culinary practices, social practices, rituals and festive events, the performing arts, oral traditions and expressions. Fostering this living heritage for tourism purposes can provide new employment opportunities, help alleviate poverty, curb rural migration, and nurture a sense of pride amongst communities. Furthermore, it offers a powerful incentive for preserving and enhancing cultural heritage itself, since the revenue cultural tourism generates can be channelled back into initiatives to aid cultural heritage's long term survival".

This perspective represents significant common ground with our own work in Fáilte Ireland. The Committee's paper also sets out twelve areas of particular emphasis for collaboration between tourism and heritage. We believe each of these areas merits support both at European and national level, and I would encourage you to visit our website and read this Position paper which has been submitted by the European Parliament for our consideration.

With that, may I finish by hoping you have an interesting and engaging experience at our conference today. Thank you once again for taking the time to join us.