

Personal thoughts on Tourism on the Black Isle

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One of the first things I learnt coming to the Highlands was about subtleties of language. I grew up in the suburbs of London and for most of my adult life 'lived' in Yorkshire. I even spent a year in the Netherlands before coming to Scotland but my attempts to learn Dutch is another story entirely. What struck me straight away was how people would ask: 'Where do you stay?' In my English way I thought they must be mistaken as I had definitely made the decision to 'live' here on a permanent basis. 'Yes, but where do you stay?' Well, as it happens, I stay in Cromarty, and have done for the last seven years.

Jon Palmer in his first Cheese House

I love the use of the term 'stay' as opposed to 'live'. It implies a state of impermanence – however long you may actually remain in an area, community or even a single dwelling. After all, none of us can say for sure how long we might be here. As such it also alludes to a sense of guardianship. That for the time we're here we have a responsibility, a duty even, to care for the place we're currently living in until such time as one moves on and it gets handed on to the next 'stayer'.

As chair of the Black Isle Tourism Team it became obvious to me that we needed a clear statement of intent for our area - something that could be agreed upon by the majority of people 'staying' and working in the Black Isle. The Tourism team came into existence through a desire from, primarily, local businesses to have a more coherent approach to what we might call 'tourism'. Two reasons: a) to promote the area better and b) to deal with issues arising from a steadily increasing number of visitors. Rather fortuitously in the five years since Black Isle Tourism came into being we have witnessed the emergence of the North Coast 500, an increase in the numbers of cruise ships off-loading passengers at Invergordon, and generally an interest, particularly from overseas visitors, in all things Scottish – helped by a weak pound and a TV programme called Outlander.

These are the stereotypes one thinks of as 'tourist', because at the same time there has also been a re-awakening in folk closer to home who are genuinely seeking a break and a change of scenery that is relaxing, invigorating, and above all authentic. Young families, retirees and time-rich

millennials have become increasingly interested in exploring nature, respecting the environment, and generally delving more deeply into places they choose to visit.

In the beginning the team – basically anyone with the time and inclination to help grapple with issues of tourism in the Black Isle – was fortunate to have the impetus of someone working part-time. Lizbeth Collie's role was grant-funded through a Transition Black Isle project, initially to set up Black Isle Bicycles but more broadly to promote the area for cycling. When the three-year project ended, and her post no longer funded, a small group of volunteers determined to keep the momentum going. Verity Walker was instrumental in facilitating a working group that came up with a brand strapline: 'The Black Isle - Savour the Unexpected'. This group also commissioned the accompanying logo.



Two years on, having received an overwhelmingly positive response to the concept, it seemed necessary to add more flesh to these bones – to articulate what savouring the unexpected actually means and could mean and how that could be a focus

for specific projects. By implication it soon became obvious that to really savour something (the soothing calm of the firths on a still day, the exceptional taste and quality of local produce etc), or to discover the unexpected (to delve deeper into the lesser-known corners of the area, its history and culture etc), one really had to 'stay' – certainly for more than a couple of hours or a day trip. Better still, return at different times of the year to experience the changes with the seasons.

This all has a natural affinity with the idea of slow tourism. Many areas in the Highlands are now promoting a similar concept, more in an attempt to counter the worst aspects of the NC500 which has, correctly or otherwise, been construed as having to 'do' the route and, in some cases, ticking off as many must-see sights in as short a time as possible. In this respect we have, perhaps, been fortunate that the Black Isle is a little off the main 'drag' and not so well known. Although there is a sense that this might be changing. Hence there is a need to be pro-active and attempt, to some extent, to manage the change rather than simply allowing market forces to determine our futures.

As the owner of The Cheese House in Cromarty I have been privileged to get to know a fair few people across the Black Isle in a relatively short time. We always enjoy conversations with customers in the shop and at the different community markets. And, of course, we encounter a lot of visitors when they're in Cromarty, particularly through the summer months.

Our intention when starting the shop was to be a local resource for local people but inevitably, because our products are perceived as a bit of a luxury item, the shop has become something of a tourist attraction. As such we are in the fortunate position of hearing views from both sides – the local and the visitor.

For the most part the 'locals' are positive about tourism. There is a generosity of spirit, and a sense that they are open to sharing the beauties of what we have here in the Black Isle. Pride in the place and a feeling, that notion of 'staying' again, that we don't own it and if others want to come and appreciate what's on our doorstep that should be welcomed. Perhaps too, from an economic

point of view, an understanding that for businesses like ours more visitors has to be a good thing, right? Well, I would say, be careful what you wish for.

Yes, we benefit from more visitors, but it is more nuanced than that. It depends on what kind of visitor they are. Without doubt our best customers are those who stay within a reasonable travel time from Cromarty – let's say a 50-mile radius - and as such are prepared to make a trip a number of times throughout the year. We definitely benefit when the Cromarty-Nigg ferry is running and through the season have regulars from the Tain area and beyond. (With the number of shops and eateries now available in the town, leaving the car at Nigg and having a pedestrian day out has genuine appeal, especially if you own a travel pass!)

Other really enjoyable customers are those holidaying locally in self-catering accommodation. Once they discover our shop, they return time and again during their stay with cheese consumption becoming a major part of their holiday pleasure! But we also have to, literally, grin and bear another kind of tourist. The coach parties and package tour visitors are often given just an hour to 'do' Cromarty as part of a busy itinerary. You would be amazed at the number of folk who traipse into the shop, (as if it's a self-inflicted necessity to go everywhere that's open), and declare: 'Oh, it's a cheese shop!' As if the clue wasn't in the name. They usually have no intention of buying anything, especially if they're on an all-inclusive package, and one is often left with a feeling that we're merely part of a living museum.

So from our point of view it is evident that the slow tourism ethos is a win-win. Less frantic visitors spending more time, and money, in the area. One feels confident this message is already setting seed. It is encouraging that most people 'passing through' on their hectic desire to see as much of the Highlands as possible do, in fact, openly express something akin to: 'I didn't realise how much there was to see and do in the Black Isle. We should definitely return and take longer to explore it fully next time.'

This chimes with the overwhelming view that came out of discussions at an initial workshop held in November. Collating all the ideas the Tourism Team grouped them into three key objectives that in turn support an overarching aim. A call to action, which can best be summed up as: 'stay close, feel connected'.



The Black Isle Tourism Team Committee at the launch of the Black Isle Tourism Strategy, Culbokie Inn, April 2019 – L to R - Julian Paren, Keith Martin, Shirley Matheson, Anne Phillips, Becky Richmond, Rose Grant, Jon Palmer

The views expressed here are personal and do not necessarily reflect those of the rest of the team, let alone the wider communities of the Black Isle. Which is why the strategy is currently in draft form. It is a document for discussion, and we are asking people to reflect, respond and help refine it. The various Community Councils have been asked for their input, as have a number of organisations with a vested interest in the area, but as individuals who 'stay' here on a permanent basis – we encourage your input above all.

More information about the Black Isle Tourism Team can be found at: www.black-isle.info/BITT and a copy of the strategy document is available to download from the foot of the webpage.

Feedback can be sent to: tourism@black-isle.info