

# Going anywhere nice on your holidays?

Take a trip around the cultural tourism statistics with *Heather Maitland*

**I**t's the first week in August. I get in my car and drive for five hours to spend eight days dancing my socks off in a field full of cow pats. And that makes me a cultural tourist.

Overseas and domestic visitors make up 90% of the 106,000 individuals that each attends an average of 3.3 of the UK's 350 folk music festivals. Together, we spend £77m. Not all of us brave the cow pats, so we spend £8.34m on 300,000 bed nights in hotels and B&B's. We love our 'holidays with music' so much that 76% of us come back to our favourite festival most years. Feeling tempted? Be warned, folk festivals are addictive. A quarter of visitors are first timers and three quarters of them come back the following year<sup>1</sup>.

And this enthusiasm applies to all kinds of music concerts and festivals. In the past five years, there has been a 69% increase in spend by UK

visitors on what Mintel describes as 'affordable escapism'<sup>2</sup>.

But can we really argue that cultural festivals are essential for tourism? After all, only 4% of UK and overseas visitors in 2011 said they came to Scotland specifically because of a cultural event or festival (although the authors of the guide think that the difficulty of getting information and booking tickets may be a factor)<sup>3</sup>.

Even the term 'cultural tourism' is difficult to define. Almost anything could be a cultural experience. But visitors don't tend to think like that with two-thirds of visitors to the UK who said they were not on a cultural holiday visiting a museum or gallery all the same<sup>4</sup>.

## So, why the focus on cultural tourism?

In 2010, overseas visits to the UK dropped by 1%, even though overseas tourism to the rest of Europe rose by

3%. The volcanic ash cloud and severe winter were blamed but it appears a bit more complicated than that. Visits from countries with the weakest economies dropped by more than 10%, but visits increased from the countries that were better weathering the economic storm<sup>5</sup>. So we need strategies that maximise spend and increase rates of return.

A flurry of research shows that cultural tourism brings all sorts of benefits. Cultural tourists spend more: overseas tourists who bought tickets for a music festival before they travelled spent an average of £99 per night compared to £72 for overseas visitors as a whole<sup>6</sup>. More than half of the £250m gross spend of visitors to the twelve major Edinburgh Festivals was with local tourism providers<sup>7</sup>.

A report by The Cooperative Research Centre for Sustainable Tourism found that cultural events raised awareness of an area,



FOOTNOTES

1. Morris, Hargreaves, McIntyre, *A report into the impact of folk festivals on cultural tourism*, The Association of Festival Organisers, 2003, pp 4-5
2. Tourism Intelligence Scotland, *Events, Festivals and Cultural Tourism in Scotland*, 2012, p12 consulted at [http://www.tourism-intelligence.co.uk/TIS\\_SWF/PDF/TIS\\_-\\_Events\\_Festival\\_and\\_Cultural\\_Tourism\\_in\\_Scotland.pdf](http://www.tourism-intelligence.co.uk/TIS_SWF/PDF/TIS_-_Events_Festival_and_Cultural_Tourism_in_Scotland.pdf) 20/5/2013
3. Tourism Intelligence Scotland, (2012) p24
4. Sejul Malde, *Moving Targets*, Culture24, 2012, p16
5. VisitEngland, *Marketing Plan 2011-15*, 2010, p3
6. UK Music, *Destination: Music*, 2010, p9
7. Tourism Intelligence Scotland (2012), p13
8. VisitEngland, (2010), p3
9. VisitEngland, (2010), p10
10. VisitBritain, *Culture and Heritage Topic Profile*, 2010, p2
11. VisitBritain (2010), p58
12. VisitBritain (2010), p41
13. VisitBritain (2010), p68
14. VisitBritain (2010), p69
15. VisitBritain (2010), p75
16. VisitBritain (2010), p43
17. VisitBritain, *Foresight*, Issue 87, January 2011, p3
18. Sejul Malde (2012), p14

enhanced its reputation, extended the tourism season, increased income from tourism in the area out of season and preserved the unique culture of an area by celebrating it.

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The tourism authorities see culture as an important part of their national offer. VisitEngland's brand statement describes culture as part of England's personality and history and heritage as part of its soul<sup>8</sup>. VisitBritain segments the market by life stage and level of commitment to the UK as a destination. Committed visitors represent 30% of holiday makers and are open to taking additional breaks similar to the ones they take already. The families in this group would consider extra mid-length breaks and the pre-family segment would consider extra short breaks. VisitEngland's strategy is to persuade them to actually take those additional holidays by giving them greater depth of information and choice of ideas<sup>9</sup>. And that's where culture comes in.

Overseas visitors rated Britain as fourth out of 50 nations in terms of having an exciting contemporary culture, seventh as a nation with a rich cultural heritage, and eighth as a nation excelling at sports<sup>10</sup>. But the strength of our cultural legacy can be problematic. Potential overseas visitors get many of their perceptions of Britain from literature and cinema. The strongest perceptions are those of the industrial revolution and colonial Britain and they remain pretty much undented by more recent books

and films, however popular<sup>11</sup>.

Almost a quarter of overseas visitors visited a museum or gallery in 2006, rising to 41% of visitors on holiday. They are persuading people to choose Britain as a destination and not just among older people. Visiting a museum or gallery was the third most popular activity for European young people visiting Britain. Only the Japanese said it was the most important factor, but ratings are so consistently positive, it comes out as the fourth most popular activity across all overseas visitors<sup>12</sup>.

Contemporary culture appeals to particular age groups and markets, like Sweden, South Africa and Australia and including some emerging tourism markets especially Poland, Russia, Argentina and Mexico<sup>13</sup>. It is not a universal driver. Although British music has a high profile, only 5% of overseas visitors agreed strongly that it was a key driver and 20% disagreed strongly<sup>14</sup>. One in three US adults say they listen to British music regularly but only 19% of US survey respondents said music had an influence on their choice of music destination<sup>15</sup>.

Although overseas visitors ranked a visit to theatre, opera and ballet 24th out of 30 listed activities<sup>16</sup>, that still represents 3.1m attenders, 10% of all overseas visitors. The longer their stay, however, the more likely they were to attend<sup>17</sup>. Art galleries were highly rated as the eighth best activity but only figured 17th on visitors' to do lists. The difference between markets

is pronounced, though. Visitors from the Nordic nations are among the least likely to go to an art gallery but, together with Irish visitors, among the most likely to go to a musical.

Even as a niche tourism product, culture has an important role to play in the visitor experience and contributes to the local economy. Beatles tourism, for example, accounts for 600,000 visits to Liverpool, bringing £20m in gross spend<sup>18</sup>.

If you want to make the case for the contribution your organisation makes to the tourism economy, there is an easy-to-use, thoroughly tested web tool supported by Arts Council England at <http://www.eitoolkit.org.uk/default.aspx> ■



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