

It's not the destination, it's the journey

Helen Palmer takes a look at the current focus on cultural tourism and what that might mean for the cultural sector

Cultural tourism is where it's at. Take next year's Commonwealth Games in Glasgow as an example, or the Tour de France (with its Yorkshire detour), or even the nation's plans to commemorate World War I. What unites them all is the fact that cultural tourism is a major part of the planning process. It doesn't stop there. Cultural tourism is now firmly on the political agenda, thanks to a new Arts Council England and VisitEngland memorandum of understanding – which includes the promise of a new joint fund – and thanks in part to a changing funding landscape that now more than ever requires a greater return on public sector investment.

All this means that *cultural tourism* is the phrase on everyone's lips – but what does it actually mean? The short answer is pretty straightforward. It means using culture to motivate tourism visits, though not just any visits: cultural tourism focuses on targeting a highly discerning, high-spending and niche market, one that rarely responds to traditional forms of tourism or destination marketing.

The longer answer is that cultural tourism is fundamentally about people and partnerships. It often requires changing people's perceptions of a place, and that takes time. It always requires a consistently good cultural 'product' over an extended period; those exhibitions and events, venues and, crucially, stories that drip feed the right messages to the right people across the right media. It thus needs to be led by the cultural sector but must be underpinned by a robust understanding of the tourism industry – because, at its heart, cultural tourism is driven by economic imperative: the need to attract visitors to a destination in order to spend money.

Manchester is a city already well into its cultural tourism journey. Following the launch of Manchester International Festival in 2007, the city's Museums Consortium spotted a gap in the market. The festival had acted as a mirror for Manchester's cultural scene; its stakeholders realised that, outside this biennial event, it wasn't attracting the same quantity or quality of culturally-motivated tourists. Funding was secured from the Northwest Regional Development Agency for a more ambitious cultural programme; a

partnership with Marketing Manchester and its tourist board Visit Manchester was established.

This was a step change for the city's museums and galleries, who were not only now working across their own sector in a different way, but were also working with an entirely new one. As with any fledgling relationship, it took time to understand each other's strategic priorities and, in hindsight, some initial activity, such as the setting up of numerous sub-groups to tackle issues particular (such as wayfinding and transport), was over-ambitious. An early joint marketing campaign fell short of the mark, targeting existing visitors rather than those from outside the region – a prerequisite of the project's funding agreement.

But learning, and occasionally failing, is part of the cultural tourism process and, in Manchester, following extensive internal and external analysis, and scouring market data from within both the cultural and tourism sectors, an entirely new approach was devised. Led by Alex Saint (on behalf of Manchester Museums Consortium), Helen Palmer (then Director of Strategic Marketing at Marketing Manchester) and Susie Stubbs (appointed by Alex and Helen to oversee the project), that approach was to develop Creative Tourist.

At first glance, Creative Tourist is easy to define. It is a consumer website – creativetourist.com – supported by seasonal tourism campaigns. It carries daily, year-round content that provides the 'drip, drip' of information required to change perceptions. But that's just the visible part of the iceberg as, below the waterline, so much else occurs. It is here that partnership working comes to the fore. It is here that the project focuses on the needs of the market, rather than the wants of individual venues. It is here that new cultural products are developed. What is most important, though, is the fact that Creative Tourist is not democratic. It takes an editorial approach, presenting its target market only with relevant information and, because of that, it has become an independent, authoritative and trusted voice for visitors – exactly those discerning cultural tourists the city is trying to reach.

Its editorial approach only works thanks to the partnerships that underpin Creative Tourist, from within

One of the biggest challenges faced by those working within cultural tourism is how to demonstrate impact.



Len Grant flash mob, photo © Andrew Palmer

the Museums Consortium to the wider cultural sector, via new relationships with hotels, restaurants and organisations such as BBC North. Those relationships operate at multiple levels, from museum and gallery directors to marketing staff, and Creative Tourist has developed everything from new programmes to a ‘cultural concierge’ initiative designed to improve the visitor experience at the city’s museums and galleries. And all while continuing to meet the daily web and social media demands of creativetourist.com.

One of the biggest challenges faced by those working within cultural tourism is how to demonstrate impact. Collecting data is complicated by the fact that both the cultural and tourism sectors use different methodologies. After grappling with this issue since its inception, Creative Tourist is now working with a specialist researcher to develop a cultural tourism research and evaluation framework to identify the impacts and outcomes of its work. More detailed analytics, and a new ticketing affiliation with Quay Tickets, also provides added value for customers as well as earned income for the site.

If cultural tourism comes with an economic caveat, and if it is about enabling the cultural sector to demonstrate its wider value and to ultimately become more sustainable, then that too is the territory that Creative Tourist occupies. It began life as a project but has, since April 2012 and with the agreement of its original partners, become an

independent, limited company. Its consultancy arm now works with clients across the country, as well as with Arts Council England and VisitEngland, to develop cultural tourism initiatives. That work ranges from auditing a location to assess its readiness for cultural tourism (both in terms of its cultural product and existing partnerships) and developing full cultural tourism strategies to events creation, digital branding and tactical marketing campaigns, all of it underpinned by an understanding of its clients, their particular markets and the firm belief that one size never fits all. So like cultural tourism itself, the work of Creative Tourist is simple and sustainable – but remains focused first and foremost on people and partnerships. ■



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