

Cultural tourism – the universal fix?

Pam Jarvis investigates how culture is looked at as a fix for many things – health, social capital, community cohesion, economic growth, education, regeneration ...

Destination managers and local authority tourism units have realised for some time the potential contribution culture can make to their visitor economy, to animate their streets and public spaces and to enhance their destination brand by providing something that will differentiate them above their competitors. Places have, for centuries, been commodities to be consumed, branded and packaged like any other.

London 2012 and the Cultural Olympiad were seen (by some) as a huge boost to the UK's international and domestic tourism economy. As local authorities face major funding challenges many are downsizing their tourism infrastructure – despite the fact that tourism is a UK growth sector and a buoyant visitor economy is integral to the sustainability of many places.

It is timely to reassess the role of cultural organisations in cultural tourism. At the heart of tourism seems to be a search for a new, exciting and authentic experience; something that goes beyond the mundane and offers a new perspective. Issues and investigations about what cultural tourism involves and what makes a 'successful' destination have intrigued our company; sam-culture, for some time. This article shares our thoughts on what has emerged from years of projects and conversations with people working in all aspects of tourism and placemaking.

So who's interested in cultural tourism and why? Trying to grasp the various expectations and demands on what cultural tourism can deliver is like constructing a huge Venn diagram. It involves many different players: regenerators and planners, cultural organisations and venues; local business; heritage; retail and hospitality; transport; politicians and so on. There are a raft of agenda aims to make places more attractive and sustainable, residentially and commercially as places to live, visit or do business; to be a magnet that attracts high-spending visitors; to boost the image of a place and create the sense of civic pride. And there's also a more problematic issue: not all residents want what they see as the 'tourism invasion', equating this to crowded places, no space in their local pub and disruption from which they perceive no benefit. Add to this the complexity and fragmentation of the tourism industry

which in many places is a maze of networks, consortia, pressure groups, websites and splinter groups, as well as agencies and local authority departments.

If a place makes the decision to develop its role as a destination for cultural tourism the starting point – as with any venture – is defining what success would look like. Who will benefit? And in what way? Going back to the idea of the Venn diagram the starting point is to find the convergences and overlaps between all these different interests and agenda – and to recognise the divergences and danger spots in order to drive the joined-up thinking that forges the motivation, strategic vision for cultural tourism development.

And if this discussion is to be fruitful and constructive it is important to get all the participants thinking along similar lines and working to a shared vision.

sam-culture's primary research for a wide range of cultural and heritage organisations and festivals has helped us to understand more about expectations, needs, motivations and impacts and to begin to segment the cultural tourism market. At one end of a spectrum there is the tourist who makes a conscious decision to visit a cultural destination, an attraction or event; they do their homework, research and planning. They therefore have high expectations of a creative and special cultural experience, from investing time and money, and something in which they can creatively participate. For some, culture is not the primary motivation but is an 'added extra' – part of seeing a variety of local sights which adds to a pleasant visit and influences their choice of destination. Others are more casual, 'accidental' cultural tourists who decide to do something cultural by chance.

Almost every town and city in England says that it has a cultural offer: *vibrant cultural scene* has become the most overworked phrase in tourism marketing. Our seminar series, *The Making of* and our think tanks explored the interface of the cultural offer, regeneration and tourism in Medway, Margate, Milton Keynes, Winchester, Portsmouth and Brighton. In each case we opened up for discussion across all involved – or potentially involved – as to what might be the catalyst for growth and repositioning. Essentially, we aimed to build a sense of shared understanding about the

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FOOTNOTES

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significance and potential of cultural tourism in contributing to successful places and communities. We brought together public and private sectors: local business, the hospitality industry, arts, heritage and cultural organisations and attractions, politicians and opinion formers, and community groups to look at how these places were performing as destinations – and tested this received wisdom and commonly held perceptions with a set of external voices. We asked travel journalist, Simon Calder, place-brander Simon Anholt, architects Terry Farrell and Piers Gough, and creative thinker Charles Landry to take an objective look at these places from the outside. They challenged assumptions and shared their insights with local contributors and looked at opportunities for places to connect up and make more of their cultural offer.

Cultural organisations hold a portfolio of the attributes needed to help grow cultural tourism and drive change in their area – not just because they have the talent to create the products and unique opportunities that potentially attract cultural tourists.

Our think tanks showed the potential that the culture sector itself can offer in the development of cultural tourism:

- Create vision and strategic thinking for their own organisations,
- show leadership, ambition and capacity to see the bigger picture, broker and negotiate partnerships for critical mass,

- tell a good story about the place and its real character – backed up by evidence that reinforces the value and impacts of culture,
- apply the skills of marketing and communication,
- reach out to their communities and respond to their needs.

Ed Vaizey, Culture and Creative Industries Minister, has referred to the new partnership between VisitEngland and Arts Council England and encouraged and challenged them to champion England’s cultural offer, co-ordinate activity, and support destinations to grow their economies by nurturing local culture. The approach we developed at sam-culture demonstrates that if cultural tourism is going to work, it needs local leadership to get wide buy-in; a commitment that it will benefit residents as well as visitors, the vision to grasp opportunities and to create experiences that are engaging and authentic and involve visitors with the place and its culture. ■



Pam Jarvis
 Director, sam-culture
t 01273 882112
e pam.jarvis@sam-culture.com
w sam-culture.com