

Leinster: Ireland's Prime Destination



Labour's 7 point plan for the tourism industry in Leinster

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THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR TOURISM IN LEINSTER

The global economic situation presents a challenge to Irish tourism across the board, particularly in Leinster. Since November 2008, the downturn affecting Irish tourism's primary markets have led many to predict a disappointing outlook for this important industry.

According to a report in March 2009 by Tourism Ireland, the body responsible for marketing Irish tourism abroad, visitor numbers to Ireland could decline as much as 9% and revenue could drop as much as 15%. These figures are a symptom of global economic trends. The recent Swine Flu outbreaks in North America are likely to further depress outbound tourism from the USA this year, which will compound the existing problems.

Two thirds of our visitors come from the UK and North America. GDP in these countries is not set to return to growth until mid 2010 at the earliest and that is an optimistic prediction at best. Consumer confidence has declined massively as a result, leading to less and less spending on luxuries such as holidays abroad. The near 20% drop in the value of sterling against the euro deters British tourists from visiting the eurozone and boosts domestic tourism in UK.

Current trends in Irish tourism show that Leinster is particularly vulnerable to a downturn in this vital industry unless we enact a sustainable regional tourism policy. As it stands, Leinster is the least visited part of Ireland. In 2007, Dublin accounted for 49% of all visitors and 33% of tourism revenue while the South-East and Midlands regions combined (Leinster outside of Dublin, but including Waterford and Tipperary), accounted for 21% of visitors and just 14% of tourism revenue.

While the challenges facing Leinster's tourism industry are significant Labour is convinced that with the right strategy and support tourism in the region has a bright future and has the capacity to deliver growth and jobs in the coming years.

With Leinster's prime location close to Dublin and our wide range of events and attractions, there is no reason why we cannot compete with Dublin and the South-West (Cork and Kerry) region, which alone accounts for 23% of visitors and 19% of revenue. In 2007, only 3 of the top 20 fee charging attractions were in Leinster (outside of Dublin). Labour's tourism strategy can put Leinster in its rightful place as Ireland's primary tourist destination.

Labour's Proposal

- Leinster must present itself as a **quality destination that is easily accessible and value for money**. A strong marketing campaign must be launched to communicate this to potential visitors. This campaign can exploit Leinster's natural advantage of being close to Dublin airport and Dublin city itself which, as outlined above, accounts for half of all tourists to Ireland. This will involve an extensive advertising campaign in points of entry, primarily Dublin Airport, as well as in hotels and hostels.

Rosslare Europort must also be exploited by advertising at overseas points of departure, while the ferry is in transit and also upon arrival at Rosslare. Domestic tourism is likely to further increase as we all tighten our belts. With Dublin being Ireland's main population centre and with the existing rail link to Belfast, Leinster is the easiest option for Irish people who may choose to holiday at home in the current economic environment.

- In tandem with a strong marketing drive, issues regarding access have to be addressed. In order to ensure visitors can get to their destinations there needs to be appropriate expenditure on **signage** and environmentally sensitive development of **transport infrastructure** to make attractions reachable. Insufficient signage is an easily remedied

problem that has been causing unnecessary confusion to visitors, most recently at the Museum of Style Icons in Newbridge.

- As it stands, Leinster's **natural resources** are underexploited as potential tourist attractions. From the Cooley Mountains in Louth to the Wicklow Mountains and “three sisters” river valleys in south Leinster, there is remarkable potential to increase visitor numbers. The West coast has become a primary destination for surfers and there is no reason why the East coast cannot become a primary destination for **walkers, cyclists and adventurers**. In 2007, more than half of all domestic tourism trips were made with the purpose of visiting national parks, cycling and walking. Maximising potential for this kind of tourism will involve environmentally sensitive development of rural sites' access and presentation. The Barrow Way is a prime example of such a project, as is the long established Wicklow Way.
- As well as its natural beauty, Leinster has a rich **historical and cultural heritage** that needs to be promoted. There are a vast number of sites across the region of huge historical significance including well known venues such as the Battle of the Boyne Site, Newgrange, Kilkenny Castle, Wicklow Gaol, Clonmacnois and Glendalough, as well as the lesser known sites such as Kilcullen Round Tower in Kildare, and the National 1798 Visitor Centre in Wexford. These heritage sites offer great potential for educating our own young people, as well as tourists. County and regional tourism bodies should actively promote their heritage sites not just to tourists, but also to schools across the country.
- To make it as easy as possible for potential visitors to book and plan their trips, Leinster tourism needs to embrace the technology available to it. Town and Country Homes (TCH) has successfully invested in eBusiness and we encourage other B&B and guesthouse owners to follow suit. As eBusiness can be a complicated process, local, regional and national tourism bodies should assist accommodation owners with the setting up of an online booking function and provide technical support where necessary. eBusiness can also be useful in the marketing process which is the key to a sustainable tourism industry. In particular, it can be of great assistance in promoting festivals, such as the 400th Birthday Celebrations in Kilkenny, by providing a central venue for potential visitors to find accommodation.
- **Jobs:** Aside from the jobs created directly catering for tourists in the hospitality industry, the implementation of a tourism policy itself can create jobs. Local employment can be created in both marketing and in the improvement of local infrastructure. Training opportunities should be made available to people seeking to enter the tourism and hospitality industry and grant aid for new attractions should be provided.
- Boosting Leinster's tourism industry need not be at the expense of the local environment. On the contrary, **ecotourism** is growing in popularity. The Greenbox initiative in the North West, partly funded by the EU, can be replicated here in Leinster with a focus on nature based and community orientated educational programs themed around environmental sustainability. Our beautiful natural landscape is perfect for this kind of tourism and interest in this sector will only grow as consumers become increasingly concerned about environmental issues.

Act Now

We can no longer afford to ignore the vital importance of the tourism industry. This Government's lack of a strategic tourism policy in the face of a severe downturn in the industry shows a blatant misunderstanding of the issues at stake. As the market changes, we can no longer sit back and rely on a steady stream of British and American holidaymakers. Labour's policy will strategically market Leinster's unique touristic advantages and ensure the sustainability of the industry by investing in the infrastructure necessary to set Leinster apart as Ireland's prime tourist destination.