

Transport creates momentum in the visitor economy in Scotland

The days when tourism was viewed as a peripheral part of the Scottish economy, of significance only during the short-lived summer, are now long gone – its national value in terms of income generation is well recognised, and its growth reflects the dominance of the service sector, which now supports 81% of all jobs in the Scottish economy, according to the latest ONS statistics.

With an impact which is almost unmatched across other industries, tourism has become a central focus for economic development plans - at all levels, and in all areas of the country. Of course 'the tourism industry' in Scotland is in reality a very wide and diverse range of companies and organisations of all shapes and sizes, from the individual craft-workers running their own businesses, through to the international hospitality companies whose brands enable hotels in Scotland to be recognised and reserved by international travellers. These are the service providers who represent so many of the links in the tourism supply chain, and on which the industry is reliant for maintaining future growth.

'The essential component'

There is no other sector of the Scottish economy as dependent on better transport for future growth, with daily choices being made by tourists about where and when to travel. Whilst transport plays a fundamental enabling role across all sectors of the economy – the tourism industry has a relationship with transport which is both close and constant, as visitor choices are flexible depending on the available transport. Remove the provision of transport services from any stage of the tourism supply chain, and the model simply breaks down – such is the fundamental and multi-dimensional reliance on transport, not only in bringing the visitor to the destination, but just as significantly in enabling every element of the 'visitor experience' to be delivered.

That relationship between transport and tourism has been present from the earliest days – when the development of transport was the driving force behind the establishment of tourism, as railway routes were pushed through unforgiving landscapes to open up Scotland to intrepid Victorian travellers, making possible the development of major hotels such as Gleneagles or the Grand Central in Glasgow, still important parts of the tourism infrastructure in Scotland. Today it is present in everything from international air links through to the ferry service that connects Tobermory with the remote settlement at Kilchoan, and in the specialist tourism products which are based around a transport experience, whether that is a sail on Loch Katrine on the veteran steamship 'Sir Walter Scott', a tour on the 'Royal Scotsman' train, or a cruise on the 'Hebridean Princess'.

These are the services which tourists use, these are the services which tourists depend on, and these are the services which make it possible for Scotland to deliver that "memorable customer experience", which is at the heart of the National Tourism Strategy.

“It’s not just about the headline events”

If there has been one over-riding theme which has characterised tourism in Scotland more than any other in recent years, then it must be ‘events’ – covering occasions ranging from Edinburgh’s well-established festivals through to such high-profile sporting events such as The Commonwealth Games and The Ryder Cup, as well as everything staged under the banner of a ‘themed year’ such as that being carried in 2015 (‘Scotland’s Year of Food and Drink’). The focus on events has undoubtedly been hugely successful, yet it is not a risk-free strategy, given the capacity of an event-driven strategy to distort prices, to disrupt supply chains, to threaten traditional markets, and to generate short-term relationships with consumers who have an association with the event rather than with the destination where it is located. At the same time, the planning and provision of the associated transport services can either demonstrate the ability and the capacity of a destination to host events – or (when problems arise) expose fundamental weaknesses in the delivery of transport services.

The travellers who are motivated however to visit Scotland more by the country’s essential attributes than by on one-off events are the customers who won’t be relying on the transport facilities arranged in connection with those headline events. The new Borders Railway will make it easier than ever for them to reach the National Mining Museum or Abbotsford, but it is just as likely that their travel plans will take them to parts of the country untouched by signature projects such as the new Forth Crossing, or the Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route, for it is in the nature of the tourist that where a major north-south route is being upgraded, then they will want to travel from west to east, to reach that golf course which a friend recommended, or to dine in that restaurant which has been getting such fabulous reviews. As soon as they go online to search for the information they need to plan their trip, until they arrive back home, they will be depending on all of Scotland’s transport operators to meet their expectations – the airlines, the ferry companies, the taxi firms, the rail network, and all the other service providers. Ensuring that organisations such as these have the training and support which they need is just one of the roles of the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport, which seeks to empower and enable all of its members involved in delivering the transport services which are at the heart of tourism.

The transport services provided by the Institute’s members are those which visitors to Scotland rely on day in, day out, and their importance in helping to maintain the momentum of growth in the visitor economy cannot be emphasised strongly enough. In the context of the targets set for the growth of tourism by 2020, is there any other sector of the Scottish economy so dependent on transport for future growth?

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