

REPORT



# Cool Green

# IRELAND

In a crowded tourism market, Ireland held its own at World Travel Market 2018. On display was Ireland's unique scenery, friendly locals, sustainable food and drink, nationwide attractions and superb accommodation. Leah Leslie reports.

**A** Japanese ninja poses for a selfie with two Día de Muertos skeletons at the vibrant Mexico stand. Elsewhere, I walk past Parisian cancan dancers flashing their legs for France, and at Visit Britain, grown-ups giddily revisit their childhood at the Harry Potter Studio Tour stand, dressing up in their favourite Hogwarts House school uniforms.

## Why WTM?

Around 50,000 travel professionals from 182 countries are here for World Travel Market London (WTM), from 5 to 7 November 2018. WTM is a leading global B2B event for the travel industry to meet international industry professionals and conduct business deals. Organisers estimate that £3.1 billion (about €3.5 billion) worth of business was done at last year's WTM.

The jostling crowd, and the sheer volume of sounds, sights and exhibitors all vying for attention, is vast. Visitors to WTM this year could experience numerous special activities, including VR tours of far-flung travel destinations, competitions to win luxury holidays, traditional tea ceremonies, martial arts, photoshoots in national costumes, parasol painting, calligraphy lessons, or simply kick back and enjoy the many local delicacies and beverage tastings on offer. WTM also organised a packed programme of speed-networking opportunities and an impressive range of seminars, many focused on digital advances in the tourism industry.

## Ireland, Inc. On Parade

Despite the high level of competition this year, Ireland's exhibition stand showcased a strong presence. Tourism Ireland – working in partnership with Fáilte Ireland and industry partners – organised key tourism businesses from across the island of Ireland to join WTM. *Hospitality Ireland* interviewed

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Cyril Laffan, City North Hotel; Neil Grant, Celtic Ross Hotel; Michelle Campion, Talbot Hotel Stillorgan; Úna Young and Jim Maher, both Select Hotels of Ireland; Catherine McGovern, City North Hotel; Tourism Minister Brendan Griffin; Niall Gibbons, CEO of Tourism Ireland; and Judy Zhu, Rachel Sunshine International, at World Travel Market in London.

Niall Gibbons, CEO of Tourism Ireland, on the opening day.

**Irish Presence**

“Ireland’s exhibition is one of the busiest and the best,” Gibbons explained. “We have 70 companies from across the whole island of Ireland representing everything from accommodation, attractions, activities, events ... all with a very busy set of appointments over the next three days.”

This year’s line-up of partners included cultural hot spots like the Guinness Storehouse, the Cliffs of Moher, the GPO Witness History exhibition, and the Castle Leslie estate, and tour and transport services like Railtours Ireland and Stena Line.

Gibbons continued, “We’ve got the Minister of State for Tourism and Sport, Brendan Griffin, coming over this afternoon. We have a dinner in the Irish embassy this evening, and the Minister will be on the stand Tuesday morning [6 November]. We have a networking event for Irish trade, and a ‘Meet the Irish’ reception for several hundred people on the stand. What this is really all about is making sure that Ireland is out there, front and centre, in what is a very busy and competitive marketplace.”

What set the Ireland stand apart this year?

The facade resembled a cosy traditional Irish village, complete with cobbled streets, with interesting participants.

Gibbons said, “The design is excellent, focusing on some of the big themes that will be coming to Ireland for 2019. The look and feel of it is genuinely Irish, too, and that lends well to what we’re conveying.”

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Speaking on behalf of Ireland’s tourism industry and the latest CSO figures for 2018, Gibbons was very positive.

“It’s been a very good year, from a tourism perspective – numbers are up 7%. It’s nice to see, on the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday peace agreement, that companies from across the whole island of Ireland are collaborating for everyone’s benefit. So, despite whatever Brexit conversations are out there, as far as we’re concerned, it’s business as usual for 2019. We’re looking forward to welcoming over 11 million visitors to the island of Ireland this year, which is a record number, and we’re committed to building on that again in 2019.”

*Hospitality Ireland* also interviewed Eoghan O’Mara Walsh, the chief executive for the Irish Tourism Industry Confederation.

“Ireland’s having a record time in terms of tourism numbers – and revenue,” O’Mara Walsh commented. “It’s now Ireland’s largest

indigenous sector and employs about one in nine people throughout the island of Ireland. It’s also one of the vital industries that can provide regional balance, jobs, and long-term economic development in places well outside the urban hot spots, so it’s very important to Ireland.”

**New Opportunities**

How will Ireland retain its charm and appeal without being swamped by tourists?

O’Mara Walsh added, “There have been surveys done by independent parties on how well Ireland rates as a holiday destination. How well does the holidaymaker feel Ireland rates? The results still are very strong, at about 99% satisfaction. It sounds almost too good to be true, like a North Korean figure, but 99% of holidaymakers think Ireland either matched or exceeded their expectations. There are pressure points, certainly during the peak summer season, when visitor attractions are close to capacity, but, so far, we have been able to manage numbers.”

O’Mara Walsh continued, “In the next five years, the challenge for Irish tourism will be, if we want to sustain this growth level, to make sure there’s a better dispersal of tourists around the country, and a lot of that comes down to creating new experiences. Revealing new things to see and do, rather than funnelling everyone into the Cliffs of Moher or the Guinness Storehouse or wherever, so both the private sector has to create new visitor attractions, but also the government, to ensure that there is adequate focus with funding to make sure that parts of Ireland that are absolutely wonderful and gloriously beautiful, yet not well known, are promoted.

“There is a vast array of brilliant and unique things to do and see in Ireland, so we need to put them in the shop window, for example, the likes of Seamus Heaney HomePlace in Derry – it has a very modest budget itself, so it can’t carry out complex, convoluted marketing plans abroad. It relies on the likes of Tourism Ireland to include it in its inventory, but Tourism Ireland, equally, has a finite budget because it receives it from the government. Tourism Ireland has had about a 40% cut in budget over the last ten years, and that really needs to be reversed.”

O’Mara Walsh concluded, “We have enough tourists in the hot spots. We need to make sure the less-visited places, like Derry or the West of Ireland or Midlands, are in the shop window. Businesses in those areas can only do so much on their own. They actually need the support of the state.”

From 2019 onwards, an experienced and willing Irish industry, with strategic support, is more than ready to attract and increase visitors from established and new markets.