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Wonderful Outdoors

Wallonia : WOW

Events and Incentives Case Study



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Introduction

This case study arose from an Erasmus+ funded visit to the Wallonia Region of Belgium in May 2016 by a group of tourism professionals who work in and promote tourism destinations, hotels or attractions in the UK with a strong emphasis on nature tourism and outdoor activities. The visit was organised to allow us to learn from our Belgian hosts and share with them our own experiences of developing and promoting outdoor tourism.

These notes are intended to accompany our working group's [short video](#) on using events and festivals to promote and grow tourism, and we hope that together these will be of use to our hosts, to our own networks of tourism professionals and to college and university lecturers and students.

Tourism in Wallonia – Organisation and Value

Wallonia is the largely French speaking, southern region of Belgium, covering approximately 55% of the country and with a population of 3.5 million.

Tourism at regional level is the responsibility of the Commissariat General au Tourisme (CGT). The CGT has four main objectives: to position Wallonia as a tourism offer; to improve the quality of that tourism offer; to consolidate Wallonia's image as a quality destination and to promote ethical and sustainable tourism development. It has an international marketing plan, a strategic role in regional tourism product development and responsibility for quality assurance.

Wallonia consists of five provinces: Hainaut, Namur, Liège, Walloon Brabant and Luxembourg. Centre' d'Action Touristique des Provinces Wallonnes (CATPW) is an umbrella organisation which provides tourist information and promotes the five provinces, co-ordinating Wallonia's presence at major tourism exhibitions and trade shows. It works with the tourism federations of the five provinces, as well as the 42 Maisons de Tourism in Wallonia. The majority of campaigns target Northern France, the Netherlands, Germany and Luxembourg, and priority languages for printed marketing materials and web sites are therefore Flemish, French and German, with a lesser emphasis on English.

Tourism promotion and development is currently well supported by public sector funding at national, regional, provincial and local level, as well as through EU funded projects.

Wallonia received 2.86M visitors in 2014, totalling some 6.62M bed nights. (Source: La Wallonie touristique en chiffres 2014). A survey of 1804 day and staying visitors carried out by TNS Sofres in 2014 indicated that 20.5% of visitors took part in walking or cycling, 5.6% visited wildlife parks and nature sites, and only 3.3% visited festivals or events (Source: <http://cgt.tourismewallonie.be/>). According to VisitBritain, 4% of inbound visitors to the UK and 11% of inbound visitors to Scotland attended festivals or events in 2015 (Source: <https://www.visitbritain.org/activities-undertaken-britain>)

Wallonia's tourism offer

Our visit concentrated on Wallonia's outdoor activity offer: walking, cycling and the use they have made of their disused railway lines and towpaths to create and link into the international network of 'greenways' and 'slow routes', as well as outdoor activity sites such as the Lacs d'Eau d'Heures and Dinant Evasion. Wallonia also has a heritage of food and drink, particularly the beers associated with

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the many monasteries in the region, which forms the basis of some of its events offer. We also learned something of the “Most Beautiful Villages of Wallonia” project and this rural community regeneration initiative’s experience of organising events.



What do we mean by events and festivals, and what opportunities do they offer for tourism?

There is a wide range of different types of event. At one end of the scale, there are major annual or one-off international events, sporting or cultural, which attract visitors to a destination from all over the world such as the Olympic Games, Venice Biennale and Edinburgh Festival. At the local level, community events may not in themselves be a primary reason for a tourist visit but they can add value as part of an overall holiday by enabling visitors to experience local traditions and activities and/or immerse themselves in local life and culture. For example, the traditional county or country show in England and Scotland is first and foremost an opportunity for the farming and agricultural community to get together, show off their livestock and other produce and for associated trades and retailers to promote their wares. At the same time, domestic visitors will travel to the shows and staying visitors may also go to such shows to get a feel for the local way of life which adds to the enjoyment of their holiday.

Festivals are celebrations, whether they last for a day, a weekend, a month or a year. Bringing local and regional people and businesses together to celebrate something of value to them as residents may also be something which adds value to a tourist visit or to visitor experience. Events and Festivals can be a way to encourage ‘co-opetition’ among local businesses for the common aim of increasing awareness of a type of product or activity, as well as to promote an area as a tourist destination. This case study

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looks at the types of events and festivals we learned about during our visit to Wallonia, giving some examples from the UK, and draws some conclusions about the opportunities for growing tourism through events and festivals.

Cycling and walking events in Wallonia

We heard a little about the Beau Velo de Ravel (<https://www.facebook.com/LeBeauVeloDeRavel>), which is a summer-long series of guided cycle rides and musical events to encourage visitors and residents alike to discover the networks of cycle routes. They take place on every Saturday, in a different place each week. Each town builds a programme of street theatre and other activities around the Beau Velo event, the guided ride happens in the afternoon, and when the cyclists return, there is a big open air concert.

We heard about the Festival Rando, organised by the Maison du Tourisme du Pays d’Houffalize – La Roche-en-Ardenne, over the weekend of 14-15 May 2016. Over the course of the weekend, local residents and visitors can choose from a selection of themed, guided, circular walks exploring the countryside, nature, heritage and produce of this part of the Ardennes. The whole weekend is publicised via a specific web site, <http://www.festivalrando.be/> which also gives information on accommodation, start times and locations.



Community Events

The village of Falaens participates in the “Most Beautiful Villages in Wallonia” project, a community regeneration initiative to restore and celebrate the built and community heritage of villages in Wallonia. During our guided tour of the village, we learned that there had been a festival to celebrate local artists but that this had now run into difficulties because it had been run by volunteers from within the community, the person who had been the driving force behind the events had retired and the impetus had been lost.

Food and drink based events

Like Belgium as a whole, Wallonia has a number of breweries, particularly associated with the various abbeys and religious houses such as the one we visited at Maredsous and the famous Leffe brewery in

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Dinant. It is not surprising, therefore, to find beer festivals such as the Arch'en Bieres, which takes place in August in Archenne and is described as the Walloon-Brabant beer tasting festival (<http://www.belgiansmaak.com/belgian-beer-festivals-2016-festivals-in-belgium/>), and La Grande Choufferie, Wibrin's celebration of the locally brewed Chouffe beers, which has been running since 1985.

Another long-running food based event is the Festival de la Soupe, which takes place in La Roche en Ardenne in September. In its 13th year in 2016, this event brings together chefs, restaurateurs and amateur cooks to create exhibitions and a trail through the town where locals and visitors can taste and find out about a range of different soups. According to our hosts, this event regularly sees La Roche en Ardenne at near capacity.

Events and Collaboration

Festivals are a great way to encourage collaboration in a destination. They can provide an overarching theme or subject to bring businesses together to address a wider market or target audience through a greater reach whilst enabling them to promote their individual USPs. Food based festivals are a great example.

The Loch Lomond Experience

The Loch Lomond Food & Drink Festival has had 10 very successful events, 2015 being its 10th Birthday. 2015 was also the Year of Food & Drink in Scotland therefore it was a superb reason to run an additional event totally focussed on Scotland's own food and drink industries; Springfest, The Scottish Food & Drink Festival was born.

In 2015 each 2-day Festival brought around 28,000 visitors to Loch Lomond to enjoy the atmosphere, learn about Scottish provenance by meeting the producers, take part in Haggis eating competitions and also learn about using Scottish ingredients. Every business that took part in each event had a listing on the event websites and was promoted on social media platforms which linked back to their own web and social media connections. This allowed for a full traceable story on each producer and gave access to the background and provenance of all of the products.

Where possible the organisers utilised food stuff from the producers within the cookery demonstrations to open discussion on the use of local and Scottish produce.

Each producer was encouraged to have their names and details on their stalls, and to come out and meet their customers at the front of their stalls instead of basing themselves behind them – this worked well and encouraged conversation and a better sense of 'meeting the producer' at the event.

Research carried out by Loch Lomond Shores has shown that the spend at these events has increased each year, with over 22% of visitors spending over £40 on food and drink at the producers stands. Their surveys also showed that nearly 50% supported the statement that knowing where their food comes from is Very Important with a further 42% saying it was Quite Important; this really hits home the importance of having these types of festivals and events to allow home-grown businesses from this part of Scotland an opportunity to showcase their produce.

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One of the highlights of these events is that Loch Lomond Shores has grown its twice monthly Farmers Markets so that many producers can supply all year round to their customers.

At the first ever Springfest event, 100% of the businesses attending said that they would take part in other festivals at Loch Lomond.

This shows the Menu of Activities the 2016 event:



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To find out more visit www.lochlomondfoodanddrinkfestival.co.uk and www.lochlomondspringfest.co.uk

Themed Years – Wallonia’s Year of the Bike

Wallonia’s Year of the Bike in 2016 brings together a number of initiatives to capitalise on the investment in developing the networks of disused railway lines as paths for walkers and cyclists. Since 1996 the voluntary organisation Les Chemins du Rail has converted 650 km of disused railway line to paths suitable for cycling and walking as part of the RAVeL (Reseau Autonome des Voies Lentes) network and these are now being promoted to visitors as part of the tourism offer, as well as to local residents. This change in emphasis is shown by the fact that responsibility for the network has moved from the Ministry for Public Works to the Ministry of Tourism. Recognising that cycling tourists, whether serious distance cyclists or more leisure oriented, need specific facilities, the CGT developed a Bikes Welcome initiative to enable and encourage tourist accommodation providers and other tourist businesses to invest in facilities for cycle tourists, such as sheltered/secure bike storage, provision of information on cycle routes and networks, having bicycle repair facilities or equipment available.

Themed Years – the Scotland Story

Scotland’s themed years were introduced in 2009 and have proven to be a successful model for co-ordinating a national approach to tourism and event development. Themed years are set out as a 5 year programme, agreed by Scottish Government and VisitScotland, the national tourism body. Each year is overseen by a steering group that reports directly to the tourism minister, with the delivery of the planned programme being managed by a working group made up of a cross section of tourism

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professionals from the public and private sector. The lead agency will change depending on the theme, so for instance 2013's Year of Natural Scotland was led by Scottish Natural Heritage, whereas 2015's Year of Food & Drink was led by Scotland Food & Drink.

Sitting alongside any promotional and marketing campaigns is a fully developed national events programme that celebrates elements of the theme. This helps the entire industry focus on a particular strength that Scotland can offer the visitor. Some themes are more event friendly than others but all are flexible enough to ensure as many events as possible can be co-branded with the themed year logo and be included in the programme. The themed years programme is one element that is working towards our industry-led national tourism strategy "Tourism Scotland 2020". This strategy has set goals for the tourism industry to achieve by 2020 and has been adopted by both the public and private sectors.

The themed year success is measured through industry engagement – how many events and festivals have been created, how many people attended these events, what was the economic impact of these events. We also measure visitor engagement through digital channels. PR success is another key measure, paying close attention to media engagement both within Scotland and across our international audiences.

The key strength of the themed year programme is bringing a focus to the work of the wider industry to ensure an accessible and compelling visitor offer is available to our markets. Its success can be attributed to the collaboration of and commitment from public and private industry groups.

Issues and Challenges

There was little evidence of segmentation within any of the marketing presentations we experienced (although that doesn't necessarily mean that it wasn't being applied) but there did appear to be an emphasis on geographical targeting, principally in the near neighbour regions of the Netherlands, France and Germany. As a crossroads within Europe and with opportunities to market Wallonia through 'Brussels South' Airport, using this as a gateway for inbound visitors, it would have been interesting to learn more about aspirations to extend the reach of geographical-based marketing approaches. The lack of marketing material available in English would also hinder the development of other international markets as English is a lingua franca for many other European language speakers.

The progress on using cycle tourism as a driver for development was impressive but it was also clear that Wallonia had a long way to go to catch up with Flanders in creating a detailed cycle network at the level achieved in the Netherlands and in the remainder of Belgium.

Monitoring /impact

The various projects that were reviewed in Wallonia were mostly able to provide facts and figures regarding visitor volume and value and it was clear that markets had been segmented, both traditionally and along geographical lines, but it would be interesting to consider comparability of data and whether the individual destinations experience some of the difficulties found in the UK regarding the comparison of 'apples and pears' Do they all use the same survey approaches or modelling devices? Experience in other destinations has also shown that a lot of activity-based visitor experiences don't always convert

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into high visitor expenditure as participants are often well-prepared and bring their own resources including food and drink. It would be interesting to examine actual spending patterns, particularly for day visitors engaged in activities such as cycling.

Dependence on individuals and volunteers

It was clear that some of the most successful events that were viewed in the case studies had grown incrementally from smaller local events and had relied on a small number of individuals to act as catalysts and to take on a disproportionate level of organisation. This is quite normal in a bottom up approach to events programming but it carries with it a large element of risk as inevitably, individuals will move on or retire and sustainability then becomes a crucial factor. The role of coordination is paramount in bringing together a number of ad hoc or disconnected events and is suited to local or regional tourism organisations to undertake but it is also a classic 'market failure' issue as the commercial benefits are sometimes intangible or have to be sought from a destination rather than individual business perspective.

Clarity of roles in promoting

There was an impression given to the study group that across Wallonia many of the festivals and events were quite localised in terms of the way they were promoted and the reach they had. This is also a symptom of events growing from local communities and establishing their own identities but for visitors it is sometimes difficult to drill down to a collection of activities happening across a region. Whilst they may not always be connected with one another, in terms of promotion, especially to national or international markets, it is better to take a more holistic approach which not only makes it easier for consumers but also adds a multiplier effect. Thus the whole region becomes more exciting and attractive as an events destination with a greater overall offer.

Conclusions

The case study successfully identified a number of events throughout the visit relevant to outdoor tourism in Wallonia. Whilst there was clearly passion from individuals, businesses and regional tourism officials, it was the opinion of the group that they were all working in relative isolation rather than aligning to a central plan or strategy. This in turn led to fragmented marketing and potential lack of awareness for outdoor tourists. Therefore, it is the conclusion of this case study that an overarching events strategy should be employed across Wallonia to ensure cohesion / alignment to strategical objectives to maximise return on investment, utilise expertise and deliver on national objectives.

Specifically, a hierarchical network of events should be developed with clear line of site from low key, informal, localised events through to national pinnacle events or celebrations. By creating this central strategy and framework, outdoor tourism events in Wallonia would benefit from a centralised marketing plan and cohesive message, alignment to national initiatives such as the 'year of the...' and better investment and utilisation of public money to pump prime communities, businesses and passionate volunteers to deliver a wider programme or local events that would then feed into regional and national events.

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Furthermore, an opportunity exists for local events delivered by volunteers (albeit equipped and trained using public money) to provide greater financial sustainability and less reliance upon uncertain public funds. Moreover, many events already engage local businesses to assist operationally but where these are likely to directly benefit financially from an event then it does not seem unreasonable that they could part-fund the event and still deliver a return on investment from doing so through brand exposure and increased bookings.

Additionally, the use of gamification was evident in a small number of destinations and focussed around walking trails and tours. Using gamification as an incentive to participate in events, particularly on the Node system, it could be used to convert latent demand within an activity which would then feed participants into events and encourage outdoor tourists to return to Wallonia to attend the larger events in the future.

The below diagram summarises how such a system may look



Wallonia is blessed with beautiful natural environments, exceptional infrastructure for outdoor tourism as well as the passion and commitment of many proprietors, employees, volunteers and active participants. The events business is by no means broken, but with some many passionate people working together, with central support and strategic alignment the Wallonia events programme can but benefit.

Please take a few moments to [review alongside the group video](#), made during the study visit.