

A golden opportunity for *golf tourism*

As Royal Co Down prepares for the Irish Open and the tourist board releases a five-year strategy, Tom Cotter reviews the potential for golf tourism in Northern Ireland.

Over the last weekend of May, some of the best golfers of their generation will grace the fairways of the Royal Co Down (RCD) Golf Club and test themselves on unquestionably one of the finest golf courses in the world.

When Rory McIlroy, Ernie Els, Rickie Fowler and Sergio Garcia among others tee it up on the revered Newcastle links, it will only add further weight to the notion that this part of the golfing world is more than capable of hosting world-class professional golf tournaments.

We are fortunate to not only have Co Down on our doorsteps but, as the successful hosting of the 2012 Irish Open at Royal Portrush proved, we have the scope to grow this reputation further. That the North Antrim venue has recently been returned to the Open Championship rota, after a gap of more than 60 years, demonstrates just how far we have progressed.

It is also little coincidence perhaps that these venues have been selected following an unprecedented period of success for our local golfers who between them have collected six 'Major' championships since 2010. Yet when Messer's McIlroy, McDowell and Clarke arrive at RCD, they will not only have the task of trying to become the first Irish winner since Shane Lowry back in 2009 on their minds. The aspirations of the local golf tourism community will also be weighing upon them.

That Tourism NI should release their Strategic Review of Golf Tourism 2015-2020 (see opposite) in the run-in to this particular tournament is certainly no coincidence. The document, the most comprehensive insight into golf tourism that this part of the island has possibly ever seen has the 'aim' of raising the value of golf tourism in the local economy to £50m per annum by the end of the review period. One of the cornerstones of the strategy is to 'build on the role of the golf champions to maintain Northern Ireland's competitive advantage in golf tourism'; so no pressure there lads!

Minister for Enterprise Trade and Investment Arlene Foster describes the review as a 'fresh direction in what, until now, has been a limited strategic approach to golf tourism'.

This is a refreshingly honest, yet equally

damning indictment of her own Department's failings in its responsibility to golf tourism at the grassroots since she took office in 2008; a period during which time, lest we forget, the profile of golf in this part of the world has, and arguably never will be again, higher. The success of McIlroy & Co has been unquantifiable in marketing terms but ironically it has also provided a distraction from examining the core issues in the game locally. Regrettably there is little if anything 'fresh' in this particular strategy.

Industry figures, of whom I was one, spent over a year debating these and other issues with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (now Tourism NI) as far back as 2009 only for the then 'Golf Advisory Board' to be wound up. In the intervening six years, any hope of securing a comprehensive golf tourism strategy has languished well behind a plethora of other tourist board priorities; were it not for our local professionals, we simply wouldn't be where we are today.

Overseeing the executive delivery of this strategy will be Simon Wallace, recently appointed to a new and long overdue role of golf manager at Tourism NI. He will need significant industry engagement to ensure any degree of success and whilst hitherto fore that engagement could be best described as 'optimistically pessimistic', I sense that the industry will not be found wanting. However, with more than two thirds of golf clubs here failing to be convinced of the benefits of a Golf Quality Assurance scheme, (modelled along accommodation grading lines), and significantly more still seemingly unwilling to engage openly with a Golf Tourism Monitor established to collect quantitative visitor data, his role, at least initially, will be a challenging one. Nonetheless the QA scheme, borrowed from Fáilte Ireland in the Republic, is a good concept and clubs here should embrace the process.

Among the statistics included in the Review (some of which are from research I conducted in 2013), the obvious figure missing is the one detailing the degree of funding that DETI will commit in order to assist its implementation. Perhaps the answer is revealed in an interview the Minister provided to Radio Ulster on the day



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of the launch, where she noted that 'it (delivery of the strategy) really won't cost the government a lot of money' as the private sector would be taking on the majority of this responsibility.

The Review contradicts this supposition however, acknowledging that in order to realise the full potential of golf tourism here the 'resources allocated to golf tourism development (need) to be significantly increased from current levels'. If this strategy is to be successful, it must be properly resourced. The already cash-strapped golf clubs of Northern Ireland will take some convincing.

The fact that we now have a strategy at all to hang our collective golf tourism aspirations on is a massive step forward to be universally welcomed by anyone with a vested interest in golf tourism considering the economic impact it can have. Yet having overseen the debacle of the Bushmills Dunes project, the next five years will demonstrate a lot in terms of this Executive's ambition and attitude towards developing a sustainable golf tourism offering. I wish this strategy, as I do all our Irish golfers playing at Royal Co Down, every success and I encourage all facets of the hospitality industry here to engage in the process and contribute to it. This Irish Open at Co Down, the tournament in Lough Erne in 2017 and the potential of an Open Championship in 2019 are golf tourism 'gold dust'. Embrace the opportunity presented. *Tom Cotter is a golf tourism consultant and the owner of the Cotter Collection, an organization that works with accommodation providers and golf courses to forge better relationships with the international golf tour operators market and their clients. He can be contacted via his website www.cottercollection.com.*