

Is it finally ‘Open’ season for golf tourism?

With the Open Championship finally returning to Royal Portrush in 2019, Tom Cotter reviews the potential of golf tourism for the guesthouse accommodation sector.



Rayanne House

The worst kept secret in golf was finally confirmed on the morning of the October 20 when the R&A, the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrew’s, gathered in the Royal Portrush clubhouse to announce that the 148th Open Championship would return to the famous links in the summer of 2019 after a gap of more than 70 years.

The ‘Open’ is the largest golf event in the world and one of the four coveted ‘major’ championships in golf. Arguably the most prestigious, questionably the most sought after for the players, but the hosting of the championship in 2019 will undeniably be one of the proudest moments for Secretary Manager Wilma Erskine, for whom it will be the culmination of more than ten years of hard work. It will not only secure the position of Royal Portrush as one of the best golf courses in the world and provide a massive boost for golf tourism in Northern Ireland, but their achievement will also bring significant benefit to golf clubs the length and breath of the island for years thereafter.

With the exception of participating in a potential Rugby World Cup in 2020, the Open is the biggest sporting event ever likely to be held in Northern Ireland, with upwards of 230,000 spectators expected to visit the course and region over the week of the tournament; that’s 100,000 more patrons than attended the sold out Irish Open when it was held at the same venue in 2012. It



Tom Cotter

should be stressed however that the ‘Open’ is in a completely different league from any regular season European Tour event. Take for example the independent research done on the economic impact of the 2011, 2013 and 2014 events held at Royal St. Georges on the Kent coast (where Darren Clarke triumphed), Muirfield outside Edinburgh and Royal Liverpool (scene of Rory’s victory) respectively. The ‘average’ economic benefit returned to Kent, East Lothian and The Wirral is estimated to have been £74.4m. This figure comprised, on average, £22.5m in direct spend and £50m in destination market benefit from the international exposure gained through television; ten times what the Irish Open is estimated to have had on the region in 2012. To put these figures into a better local context, the £74m figure surpasses what Tourism NI estimate to be the impact of the ‘entire year’ of activities for the ni2012

– Our Time Our Place campaign. The 2014 Championship produced over 5,400 hours of television coverage and was beamed to 505 million households around the globe. Should this be repeated in 2019, and there is no reason to suggest that it won’t in fact be exceeded, the North Antrim coast and its environs will benefit immeasurably.

Despite such impressive projections, hospitality and retail businesses in the Portrush area couldn’t be faulted for being somewhat sceptical about these assertions. The financial bonanza promised around the time of the Irish Open in 2012 simply didn’t materialise for many retailers and that was despite the fact that this was the first tournament in European Tour history to put up the ‘sold out’ signs. The combination of a ticket restriction preventing attendees re-entering the course if they left, and a very efficient transport management system, left some business owners in Portrush actually seeing their levels of business fall over the week of the tournament, vis-à-vis other years.

GOLF TOURISM & ACCOMMODATION

Golf tourism has however been growing steadily in Northern Ireland for the past decade and, as it does, it is having an impact on all segments of the accommodation offering and one of these is the guesthouse and B&B sector. According to Sharon Schindler, owner of the Shola Coach House B&B in Portrush, voted the 2nd best B&B in the World by the Trip Advisor Traveller



Choice Awards, golf is of “growing importance to their business... and is increasing year-on-year”. Furthermore, Sharon says the golfers that do stay with them are “the easiest guests in the world to look after” and she says that doing so is reasonably straightforward. “They tend to rise early to get to the golf course on time and are usually early to bed for that reason too. It’s as simple as a good bed, a good breakfast, a good shower and superfast Wi-Fi. That’s what our guests want and that’s not hard to provide” according to Sharon, “the basic things just have to be right”.

Yet it’s not just the traditional golfing towns of Portrush and Newcastle seeing an upward projection in golf visitors, with properties in Greater Belfast also witnessing their numbers of golf visitors rising. Rayanne House, located in the shadow of Rory McIlroy’s home club of Holywood, is perhaps unsurprisingly for this reason seeing its number of golfing visitors grow. Owner Conor McClelland attributes the “Rory factor” to an incredible “10-fold increase” in his golf business to those accommodated before the Holywood man rose to world number one. As a result, you can now book into the Rory McIlroy Room at Rayanne House, resplendent with a golf-themed bathroom, shower rail made from one of ‘Ror’s’ old golf clubs and a selection of his signed memorabilia on display. While golf is not “vital” to the success of Rayanne, it still makes up “a good percentage of business, as golfing purists are keen to play the home course of Rory McIlroy” according to Conor.

Located literally a stone’s throw from the clubhouse of Royal Portrush Golf Club, the owners of the Linksview House would attribute almost “80% of their business to golf” and, according to Robert Gardiner, the owner, “there isn’t a country in the world that we haven’t seen golfers coming from” in the past few years. In fact Robert describes as “crazy” the number of golfers he has to turn away from his doors in the peak months but worryingly his main problem is that he has “nowhere to send them, all the hotels are booked up also”. As a result, he has resorted to producing a list of all the other B&Bs in the area, which he prints off and distributes to those he cannot accommodate. Immediately after the 2019 announcement, Robert “had to unplug his phone” due to the

volume of calls they were receiving and he says you can already see the impact of the announcement being felt in the town. With rumours of the tournament potentially coming being spread almost as soon as the Irish Open had packed up and left the town, it appears that investors have also been extremely active. “You don’t see property signs staying up for too long now anymore and the painting scheme that was introduced back in 2012 for unoccupied buildings has made a real positive change to the image of the town,” he says.

Conor McClelland also believes that “the spin offs will be tremendous” from the Open coming to Portrush and he wasn’t surprised to hear that even hotels in Belfast were already starting to get booked up. Conor believes that it will encourage golfers to come in to play a variety of courses in Northern Ireland and naturally, as far as his own business is concerned, he would be hopeful that Holywood and Royal Belfast would be included in that. He further recognised that the average golfer who is “prepared to travel over 3,000 miles is not on a budget trip” and so they tend to have money to spend in the economy, something that I personally researched a number of years ago. Whilst looking at the economic impact of golf tour operator clients on Ireland’s links courses, I determined that the average daily spend by one of these golfing clients was in excess of £400, more than four times what the average leisure visitor will spend. Sharon Schindler concurred with this supposition and highlighted the economic impact that the international golfer is already having not only on Shola but also on the wider area. Having often done a mental calculation herself she told me, “it would blow your mind what our golfing guests spend in the local economy when you include taxis, caddies, restaurants etc”.

The properties I spoke to all shared some similar guest characteristics and the North American market was evident as a vital source of business for all three. The majority of the golfers each property received were male, despite the perception that the guesthouse sector was perhaps more ‘couple’ orientated. A significant portion of their bookings come to them directly via their own website with another good proportion by telephone although, in the case of Shola, Sharon did say that Trip Advisor and the exposure they achieved by winning

the Traveller Choice award was the attributing factor for “at least 40% of their North American business”. In addition to this, she believes it is vital to pro-actively engage with specialist golf and traditional tour operators who she says have been “great for us” and to keep all their options open, but she feels there just “isn’t an industry body out there to turn to that would help (us) to get those individual golfers” a sentiment somewhat endorsed by Rayanne and Linksview also. Sharon went on to say, “there is something that could be done (to help promote them), but (she) just cannot put her finger on what it could be”.

When the Open Championship finally returns to these shores in 2019, the eyes of the golfing world will be firmly focused on Royal Portrush Golf Club. The news of its inclusion on the rota of Open courses has immediately sparked excitement and column inches far and wide and has been particularly well received in the US where we rely for a significant portion of our annual golfing visitors. Only 14 golf courses in the 144-year history of the Open have ever been deemed worthy to host the Championship, something that should be widely highlighted in our destination marketing to prospective visitors in the run in to the event. Almost a year into the five-year strategic review of golf tourism announced by Arlene Foster back in March, confirmation of the Open coming here should provide a massive boost to this process. This once in a generation ‘game changer’, attracting golfing tourists to these shores from far and wide will generate immediate benefits that should be felt for the best part of three decades. I very much look forward to seeing the fruits of both this announcement and the strategic review of golf tourism benefiting not only our guesthouse and B&B sector in the years to come but the entire tourism landscape. The prospective golfer and spectator should take note however, rooms are filling up fast.

Tom Cotter is a golf tourism consultant and owner of the Cotter Collection, a bespoke representation agency that works with Irish golf courses, resorts and accommodation providers to forge profitable relationships with international golf tour operators and golf travellers. He can be contacted via his website www.cottercollection.com or follow him on Twitter @tompcotter.