

Welcoming the Queen

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HEAD OF GREAT BRITAIN, TOURISM IRELAND

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This year marks a key moment in which Ireland will redefine its relationship with Great Britain. When President Mary McAleese extended an invitation to HM Queen Elizabeth II to visit Ireland and Her Majesty accepted, the pair made history. This is the first visit from a British Monarch since the founding of the Irish state. As such it has huge significance for both the people of Ireland and Great Britain.

The closeness of this relationship is crucial to the overall health of the Irish Tourism Industry. Tourism Ireland is the body responsible for marketing the island of Ireland overseas as a holiday destination. In 2010, 6.6 million overseas visitors came to the island of Ireland delivering revenue of €3 billion.

In fact, British tourists make up the lion's share of all tourist travel to Ireland, a massive 50 per cent of all overseas travellers come from Great Britain and their loyalty remains strong. Research published this year demonstrates that Ireland continues to hold allure for British travellers, as it was named number seven in a list of top ten desirable destinations.

The huge significance of this to the Irish economy cannot be overstated. In 2010, Ireland welcomed 3.4 million visitors from Great Britain to its shores, generating over €1 billion in revenue. Tourism Ireland will never underestimate the importance of the GB market and has significantly increased its marketing investment by 30 per cent for 2011.

The visit of the Queen and the attendant global media exposure that will follow couldn't have come at a better time. Ireland's close relationship with its British neighbours has long been a cornerstone of our tourism industry but numbers have been falling after a peak period in 2007. British visitors have fallen from a peak of nearly 5 million to 3.5 million in 2010. The economic situation in Great Britain has been the main challenge. This has resulted in reduced consumer confidence, fewer holidays abroad and a trend in holidaying within the British Isles.

Market research indicates that a perception of Ireland as an expensive place to visit still pervade. While the boom years saw a wholesale rise in prices, this view is now outdated. Ireland has responded

with flexibility to economic changes and is very competitive in terms of price. This is borne out in the value for money now available in hospitality across all price points. The latest measures include the introduction of a lower rate of VAT of 9 percent for certain tourism related services (down from 13.5 per cent) and the reduction of air travel tax to zero.

As a near neighbour, though one with a very distinct identity, there is an opportunity for



Cork's English Market
is on the visit itinerary

Ireland to capitalise on shifts in spending habits in Great Britain, luring tourists away from more expensive locations further afield.

The Queen's visit this month offers the chance to throw into relief some other key selling points about Ireland as a destination. One of the obstacles Tourism Ireland has been tackling head on amongst British travellers is a perception of Ireland as being akin to a domestic destination, offering an experience not all that different to holidaying at home. The warmth of the reception that the Queen receives will be great evidence of the legendary warm welcome that the Irish are famed for. When the Queen visits Croke Park she will draw the international gaze to our national stage for the high drama of Gaelic Games, serving to highlight Ireland's cultural exoticism to the British traveller.

Other points on the Royal Itinerary offer the chance to compound this effect. The Rock of Cashel and the coastal city of Cork showcase Ireland's geographical grandeur and urban dynamism, but most importantly a character and charm that is uniquely Irish.

Other landmarks on her route underscore the strong link between the two countries and our intertwined pasts. The Queen's visit to Trinity College, her symbolic appointment at the Garden of Remembrance and the scheduled call to Dublin Castle highlight the immediacy and relevance of Irish heritage to the British visitor.

Sports and leisure has always been a huge draw for visitors to Ireland, thanks to the unsurpassed facilities for golf, sea sports and horse racing. This sector will receive a significant boost as Her Majesty has included a visit to the Irish National Stud, a world famous centre of excellence in the racing world, as part of her tour.

Also this year Ireland will play host to another world Statesman when President Obama pays a visit. As one of the millions of Diaspora with familial links to Ireland, Obama joins a long line of travellers who have landed on Irish shores with the intention of connecting to their genealogical roots. This is of key

importance too, for British visitors, over 6 million of whom claim Irish ancestry.

In 2011 Tourism Ireland will capitalise on this unique and golden opportunity for unprecedented visibility in Great Britain. The global attention that the Queen's visit attracts will be re-enforced with cross-platform campaigns through radio, TV, online and utilising offline promotions and social media. Tourism Ireland has invested heavily in its online presence, designating 25 per cent of its marketing budget to digital media, while engagement with traditional platforms remains strong. Up to 17 million British viewers will see television campaigns highlighting the unique allure of this island.

Tourism Ireland launched its presence in Great Britain on St Patrick's Day this year in spectacular style. The 17th March is a key moment for Tourism Ireland to announce that Ireland is open for business and the scale of the festival's visibility and impact in London and across Great Britain was unprecedented.

Nelson's Monument in Edinburgh was turned green while in London the London Eye and Battersea power station were also given a green hue. All of these things served to highlight, in a dramatic and arresting way, the longstanding association between Ireland and the exuberant pursuit of fun and pleasure.

The visit of the Queen will create another key moment for Ireland, an event with a legacy that will be built on for years to come.

The eyes of the world are soon to be on Ireland. Tourism Ireland is ready to hold their gaze. **E**

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The Rock of Cashel, seat of the Kings of Munster before the Norman invasion