

# BREXIT AND THE BORDER

## CHALLENGES FOR THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

Over the last number of years Castle Leslie Estate in Monaghan has proven its resilience and flexibility in responding to changing market circumstances, by delivering continual growth since 2009, according to estate manager Samantha Leslie. She outlined some challenges and opportunities which will be presented by Brexit at the AILG Autumn Training Seminar. Report by Grace Heneghan.

**S**amantha ‘Sammy’ Leslie is the proud guardian of Castle Leslie Estate. Sammy took up the reins at the young age of 24, starting up her first business in the form of the tea rooms in the leaky conservatory of the castle. Since then, through sheer dedication, stubbornness and passion, she has restored many of the buildings on the estate, and in so doing she has created a sustainable future for her family business.

Castle Leslie Estate now boasts a variety of ways in which it can be shared and enjoyed, including the Castle and Pavilion, the charming Hunting Lodge, the self-catering cottages in the Village of Glaslough, and the refurbished Old Stable Mews.

Guests can also enjoy a range of activities, including a state-of-the-art Equestrian Centre, a Victorian Spa and fishing on Glaslough Lake. Sammy is always interested in exploring new and less obvious ways in which Castle Leslie Estate can reach more diverse audiences, and is at the forefront of forging future plans for the next 100 years of the Estate.

### MONITORING DEVELOPMENTS

Since the UK Referendum on Brexit in 2016, Castle Leslie Estate has monitored developments closely and the behaviour of the UK Market (including Northern Ireland), noted Samantha Leslie, Castle Leslie Estate Manager.

“The Irish border is nearly 500km long, and when people ask me where I’m from I say ‘Monaghan’, and they ask ‘Where’s that?’ and my stock answer is ‘We’re at the bottom of the border. So, it promises to be interesting times ahead!

“We sit in a very interesting pocket on the border – where three counties and three estates meet, which does not happen anywhere else in the country. Castle Leslie and the Village of Glaslough in Monaghan, Tynan Estate in Co. Armagh and Caledon Estate in Co. Tyrone all provide an amazing microcosm and populace of Irish history of three estates in three amazing villages in three counties with a border running through them.

“Castle Leslie Estate differs in a number of key areas from its competitors in this region, by offering a truly unique visitor attraction, a truly unique visitor experience and a truly unique brand that offers value for money.”

### GROWING COMPETITIVENESS

Sammy Leslie said that the depreciation of the pound against the euro has made competitiveness and value for money more important than ever for the UK market this year and next.



*Samantha Leslie pictured with Cllr David Maxwell, Cathaoirleach of Monaghan County Council (left) and Cllr Luie McEntire, AILG President (right), following her presentation to delegates at the AILG Autumn Seminar.*

“Ireland’s competitiveness as a whole has been impacted. However, unique visitor experiences and those that represent value for money will continue to stay ahead of market forces,” she added.

### BREXIT – THE STORY SO FAR...

- UK visitors to Ireland peaked at almost 4.1m visitors in 2008.
- Economic downturn that followed saw UK visitors drop to 2.77m in 2012.
- UK visitors rose to 3.9m in 2016.
- However, since the Brexit vote the Euro has strengthened significantly against Sterling making Ireland a more expensive destination and UK visitors declined to 3.7m in 2017.
- This decline in UK visitors is further compounded by the fact that outbound travel from the UK is actually up by 3% for the year (Jan-Oct 2017) according to the UK Office for National Statistics.
- The Northern Ireland market remains an important leisure market segment for the border counties and a survey by Crowe Ireland just after the Brexit vote showed that 75% of border county hotels expected a decline in occupancy levels in 2017.

“In terms of marketing, brand awareness is a key differential when driving your customers towards your business. Price needs to be competitive and flexible, and a responsive pricing model is required to meet the changing market exchange rates. Meanwhile visitor numbers from the EU and the USA have grown significantly over the past three years, pointing to continued growth from these markets. This has helped to readdress any shortfall experienced from the UK market, and so it will be important to capitalise and build key relationships there. We are also working harder to retain our existing customer base, and continue to promote Ireland as a safe and friendly tourist destination.”

**‘THE BORDERLANDS’**  
A range of supports have been customised by Failte Ireland for the tourism industry, focusing on four key areas to assist businesses through these uncertain times. These include driving business performance, building sales capability, getting Brexit ready and getting quality assured.

Failte Ireland has also worked on developing key marketing strategies for Ireland, through ‘Ireland’s Ancient East’, the ‘Wild Atlantic Way’ and ‘Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands’ (in the Midlands Region, which was our cover story in the last issue of ‘Council Review’).

“Now our suggestion is to develop and market what we could term the ‘Borderlands’, which would involve

Monaghan and our 11 neighbouring counties. This is something which should be looked at in the near future by Failte Ireland,” she told ‘Council Review’ after the seminar. This is an issue which we will be following up in more detail in a future edition.

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