

Tourism Promotion in Co. Cavan: a geographical investigation

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Abstract: While tourism in Ireland is of significant economic importance, there is major geographical variation in its impacts. A case study of County Cavan, located in one of the less successful tourism regions, is used to examine some characteristics of tourism promotion and the various factors which may influence the generation of tourist numbers,

revenue and jobs at a local and regional level. The range of research methodologies utilised for the study is also outlined.

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INTRODUCTION

Relatively little research has been undertaken in Ireland in relation to the promotion of tourism other than at a national or regional level. This paper reports on a project which evaluated the degree to which tourism has been developed in Co. Cavan, with particular reference to the case study towns of Ballinagh and Belturbet. A number of complementary approaches are used to understand the factors affecting tourism promotion and possible improvements which could be made. Beginning

with a general overview of tourism in Ireland, the features of tourism in the North-West region are placed in context. Subsequent sections explore the nature of tourism promotion in County Cavan, the facilities available in two case study towns, and an evaluation of the challenges and issues facing the tourism industry in the region. In the appendix, the paper also demonstrates some of the different approaches to research which were adopted in the study.

TOURISM IN IRELAND: THE REGIONAL DIMENSION

Tourism has long been recognised as an important vehicle for national development. With its potential for economic and employment benefits, successive Irish governments used tourism as a means of economic development from the 1980s onwards (Breathnach, 1994). Whereas the Republic of Ireland had 3.6 million international tourist arrivals in 1990, this had grown to 5.9 million by 2002, peaking at 7.7 million in 2007. By 2007, foreign exchange earnings from tourism had reached €4.9 billion, while tourism supported 322,000 jobs or job equivalents (Fáilte Ireland, 2008). The most recent National Development Plan (2007-2013) provides for a total investment of €800 million in tourism.

Clearly, then, tourism has a significant economic role. Furthermore, because consumption of the tourism 'product' takes place where the service is available, one of the perceived benefits of tourism is its potential to bring about regional redistribution of wealth. Traditionally, tourism has tended to bring visitors (and therefore money) from metropolitan centres to rural peripheries such as the Italian Mezzogiorno or the West of Ireland. It has therefore been seen as a particularly potent force in the economic development of less favoured regions, whose unspoilt landscape and distinctive local cultures became positive tourism resources (Duffield & Long, 1981).

However, changing patterns in tourism in recent years have reduced the regional benefits of Irish tourism. Whereas in the past, tourists tended to travel to the remoter, scenic locations in the West and South-West of the country, the expansion of short-

break and city break tourism has seen a shift in tourist figures, and associated employment, towards the East of the country, especially Dublin (McManus, 2001).

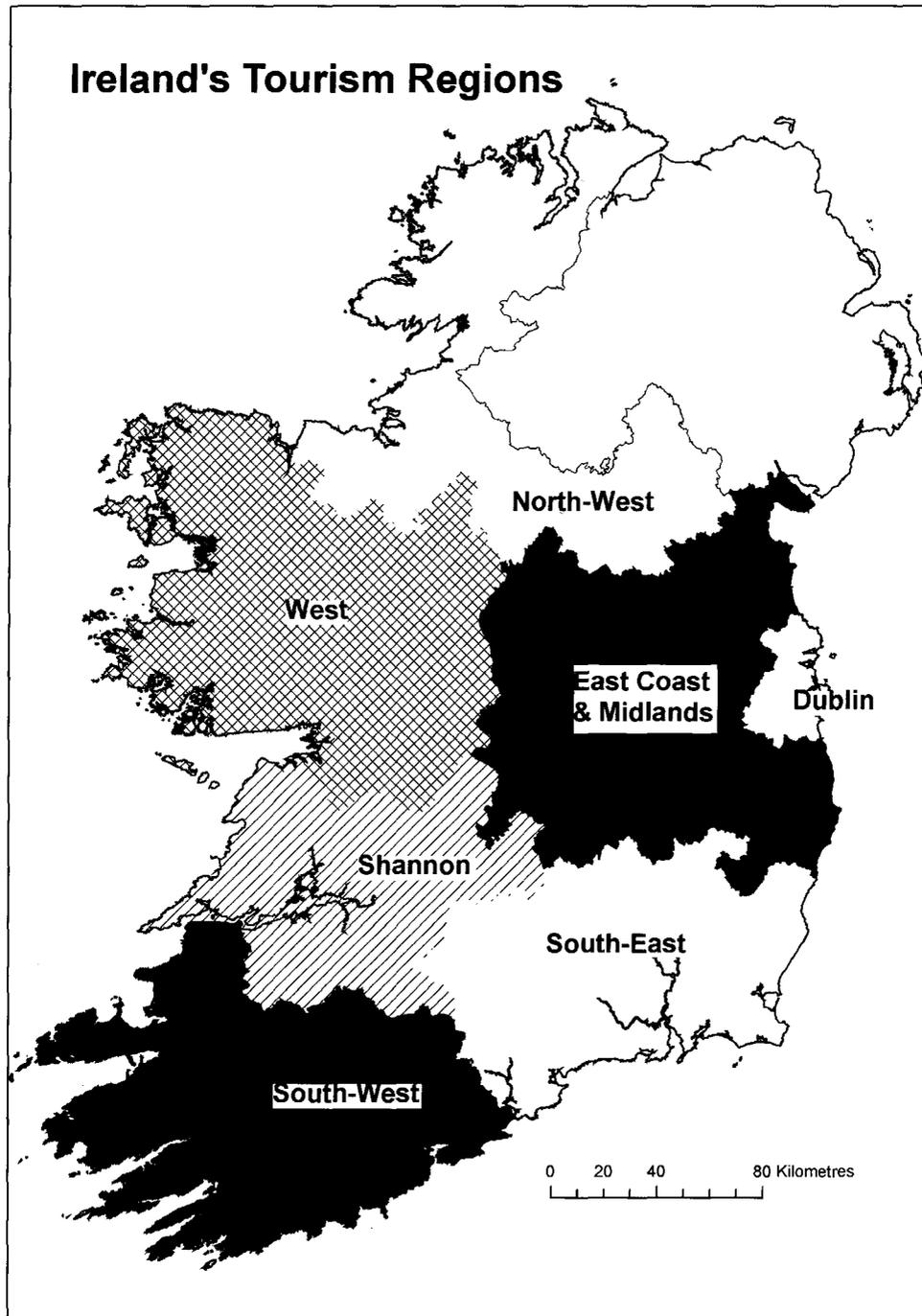


Figure 1: Ireland's Tourism Regions

¹ In Ireland, Fáilte Ireland, the National Tourism Development Authority, has divided the country into seven regions for administrative and promotional purposes- Dublin, East &

Midlands, South-East, South-West, Shannon, West and North-West. See Figure 1.

As Table 1 shows, the Dublin region earned the greatest amount of tourist revenue in 2008, while the North-West region earned the least. Overall, the North West region, which comprises the six counties of Donegal, Leitrim, Monaghan, Sligo and Cavan, is the least successful of the seven tourism regions in terms of both tourism numbers and revenue. Its geographic location has led to a very distinctive tourist profile. Because it adjoins

the border with Northern Ireland, cross-border visitors account for a significant share of all tourists in the North-West region. In 2008, Northern Ireland visitors accounted for 18% of all tourists to the region, generating €134 million in tourism revenue (Fáilte Ireland, 2008). This contrasts with the other six tourism regions, in none of which does the proportion of Northern Ireland visitors exceed 3% of all visitors.

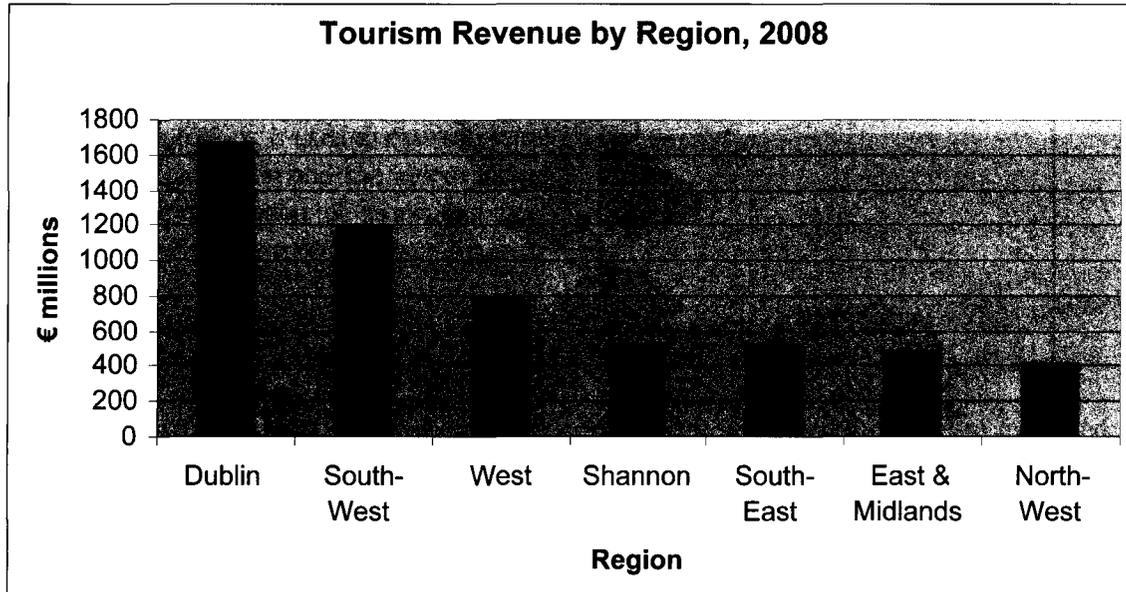


Table 1: Tourism Revenue by Region, 2008, based on data from Fáilte Ireland (2010)

Approximately twice as many domestic and Northern Ireland tourists visit the North-West region as overseas tourists, accounting for about 55% of tourism revenue (see Table 2). The region's geography, in terms of its relative lack of accessibility from major airports and ferry termini, may also explain its

relative lack of tourism success, particularly for overseas tourists. Perceptions of the tourism product may also be a factor, particularly a comparative lack of awareness, in comparison with better-known destinations such as the 'honey-pot' destinations of the South-West and West (e.g. Killarney, Dingle, Westport).

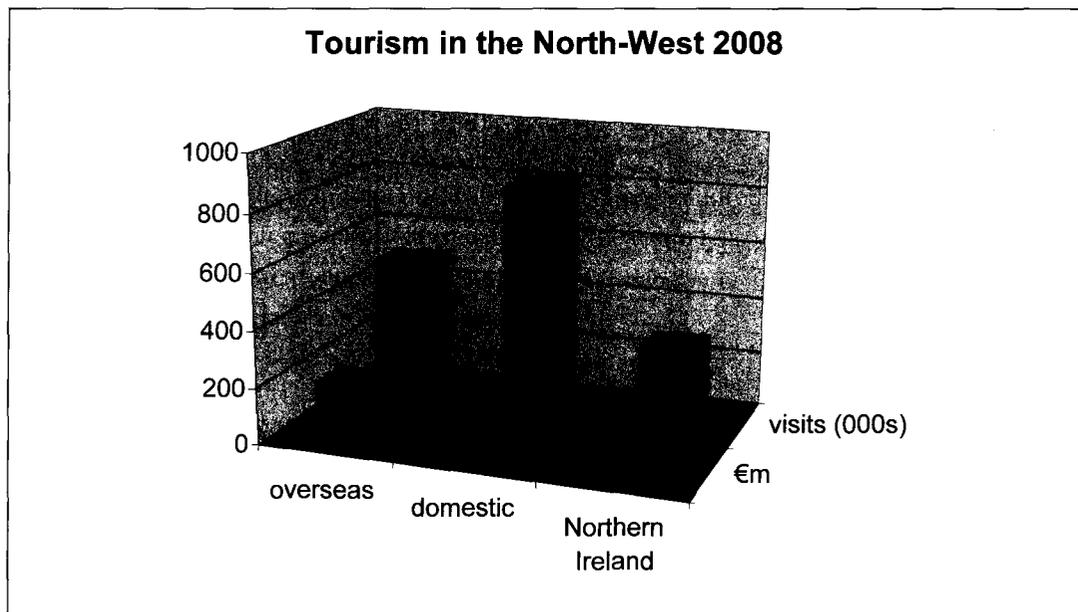


Table 2: Tourism in the North-West region, 2008, based on data from Fáilte Ireland (2009).

Box I: Definitions used in Tourism literature.

According to the UNWTO/United Nations Recommendations on Tourism Statistics, tourism comprises the activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes.

In collecting tourism data, a differentiation is made between a **visitor** (who does not make an overnight stay) and a **tourist** (who will stay for at least one night and not more than one year).

Tourists may be defined according to their point of origin:

Domestic tourism involves the residents of a country travelling only within that country.

Overseas tourism involves the residents of a country travelling overseas.

In Ireland, tourist information is usually gathered separately for domestic (i.e. Republic of Ireland residents), Northern Ireland and overseas tourists. Sometimes the term 'out-of-state' tourist is used in an Irish context, to refer to all non-domestic (i.e. Northern Ireland and overseas) tourists.

Tourists are also typically defined by the purpose of their visit:

Holidaymaker: a tourist whose purpose of visit is for holiday or leisure reasons.

Business: a tourist whose main purpose of visit is for business purposes.

VFR (Visiting Friends and Relatives): A tourist whose purpose of visit is either meeting or staying with friends and/or relatives.

Income from tourism is measured in a number of ways:

International Tourism Receipts are the receipts earned by a destination country from inbound tourism and cover all tourism receipts resulting from expenditure made by visitors from abroad, e.g. accommodation, food and drink, fuel, transport in the country, entertainment, shopping, etc. This concept includes receipts generated by same-day trips as well as overnight visits, which can be substantial where there is a lot of cross-border shopping for goods and services by visitors from neighbouring countries.

The calculation for International Tourism Receipts excludes earnings related to international transport, such as airline ticket receipts etc, which are measured separately as International Fare Receipts which for most recent years is estimated at about 18 per cent of total tourism and fare receipts. For example, in Ireland in 2009, out-of-state tourist expenditure, including spending by visitors from Northern Ireland, amounted to €3.4 billion. With a further €0.5 billion spent by overseas visitors on fares to Irish carriers, total foreign exchange earnings were €3.9 billion. Domestic tourism expenditure amounted to €1.4 billion making tourism in total a €5.3 billion industry in 2009.

LOCAL AND REGIONAL TOURISM PROMOTION: A CAVAN CASE STUDY

The data presented above have shown that the North-West region is relatively underdeveloped in comparison to other Irish tourism regions. The research project described below attempts to understand some of the underlying causes of this situation, focussing specifically on Co. Cavan. Relatively little research has been undertaken in Ireland in relation to the promotion of tourism other than at a national or regional level. This project considers the degree to which tourism has been developed in Co. Cavan, with particular reference to the case study towns

of Ballinagh and Belturbet. It seeks to understand the factors affecting tourism promotion and possible improvements which could be made, using a number of complimentary approaches. The study began with desk-based research to evaluate the available tourist literature and websites for the area. Second, field observation was undertaken in the two towns. Third, a combination of interviews and questionnaire surveys was used to obtain both quantitative and qualitative information (see Appendix).

TOURISM PROMOTION IN CO. CAVAN

For the purposes of this project, a collection of literature and brochures relating to tourism in Co. Cavan was gathered between June 2007 and May 2008. These were all the brochures which would be most readily available to tourists visiting a tourist information centre in the county. The information leaflets promoting tourism in Cavan came from a range of different organisations, namely Fáilte Ireland (National

Tourism Development Organisation), Cavan Tourism and Bréifne (see **Box 2**). Noteworthy was the considerable overlap in information being provided, and the fact that most of the brochures had been funded or part-funded by the EU. The degree to which such brochures represent value for money should be questioned, given the level of duplication.

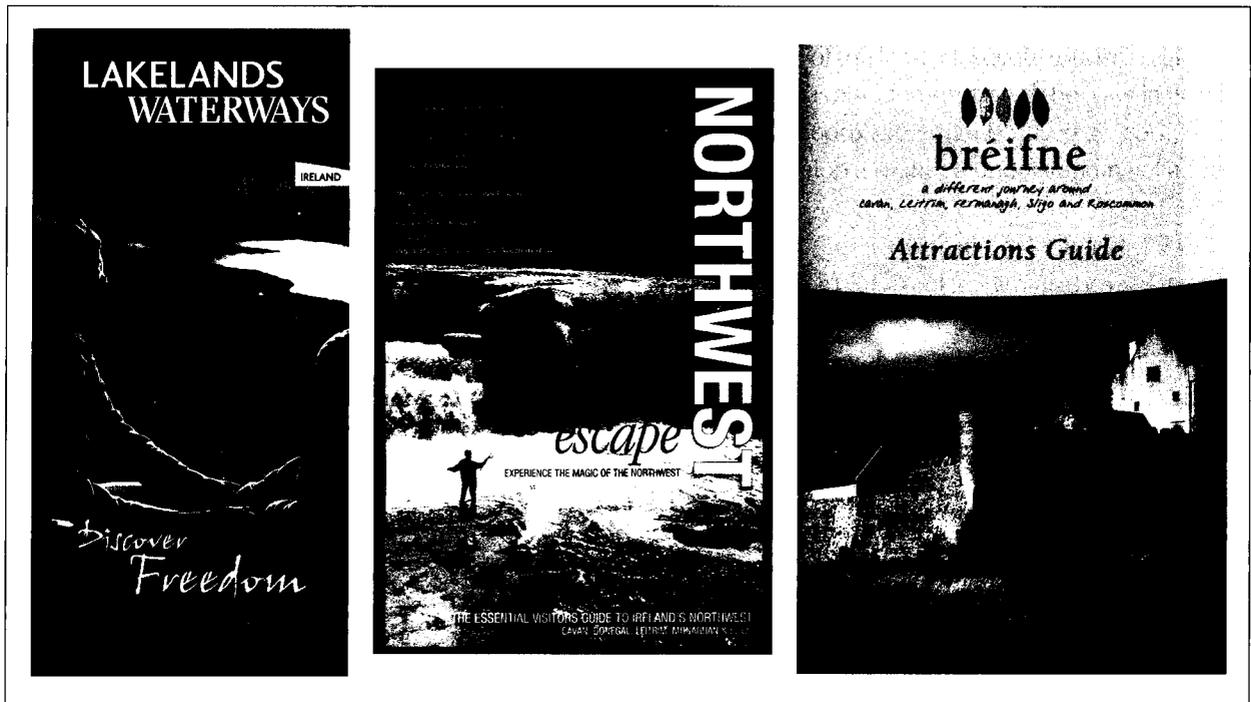


Figure 2: Selection of brochures covering Co. Cavan and environs

Analysis of the available brochures shows that Cavan is clearly being sold as a “Lake County”, with its reputed 365 lakes. Two brochures were available from Fáilte Ireland on the theme – “Inland Lakeland’s & Waterways” and “Ireland’s North-West Angling Guide”. Neither brochure focussed solely on Cavan, but

each provided some information on the county. Two brochures printed by Cavan Tourism in association with Fáilte Ireland, this time solely based on county Cavan, provided much the same information. – “Cavan- the Lake County” and “Ireland- Cavan- The Lake Country” (see Figure 3).

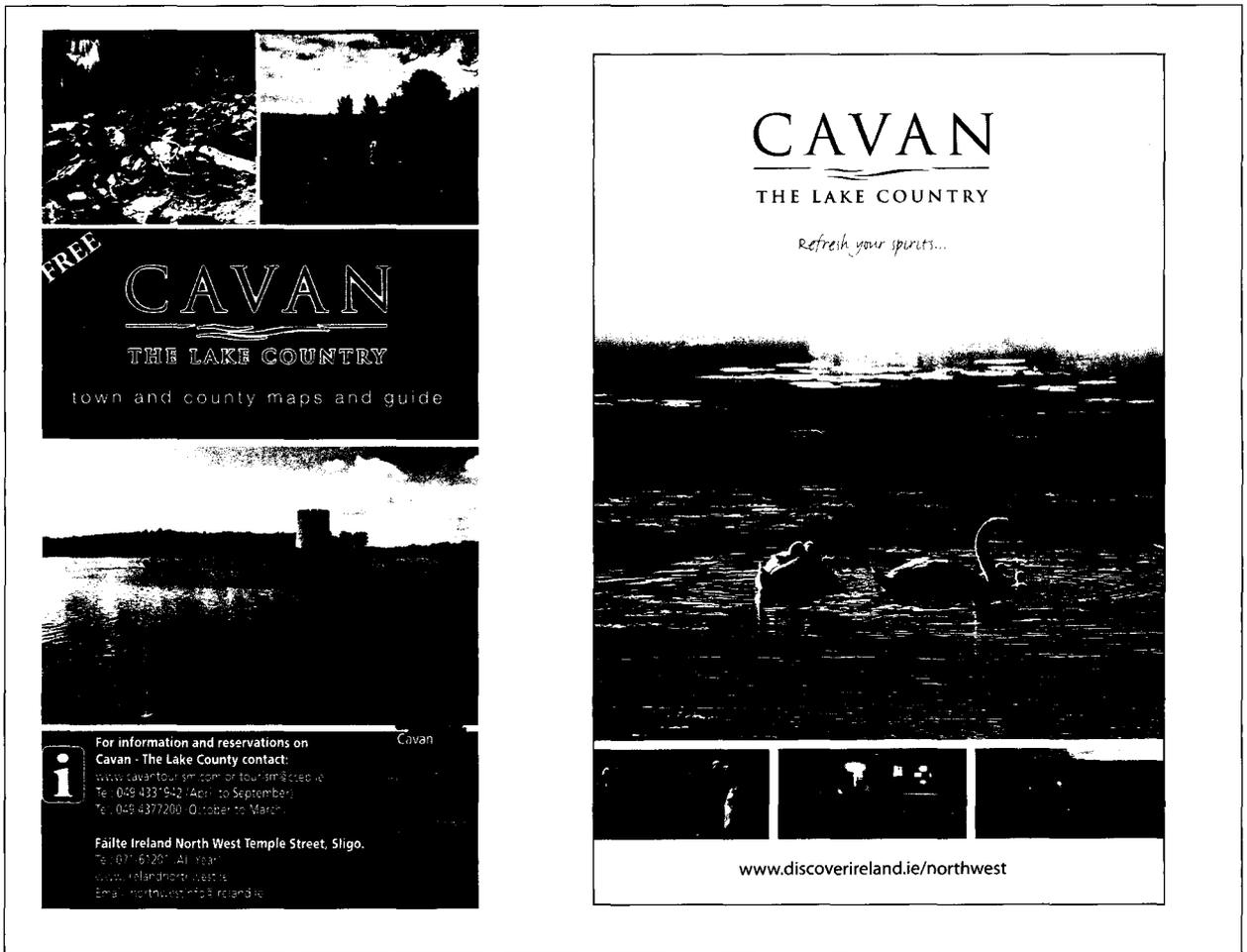


Figure 3: Cavan Lake Country brochures

Another marketing focus is on walking in the county, with two brochures on this theme- "Cavan the Lake Country- the walking guide" and "Ireland's North West Walking Guide" (in association with Fáilte Ireland), both of which are part-funded by the EU. The information provided, however, is at a relatively general level and does not provide sufficient detail to enable the visitor to locate the walks mentioned. A single brochure was available in relation to accommodation in Cavan. "The Accommodation Guide 2007" provides information on B&B's, hotels and self-catering accommodation in different towns in the county. Of all of the printed information available, this was probably the

most useful in terms of specific holiday planning, giving details of location, amenities, contact details and prices.

Finally, several brochures are available which provide general tourist information on the county- "Cavan-The Lake Country Events Guide 2007", "Cavan-The Lake Country- Things to do in County Cavan" and "Attractions Guide" developed by Breifne. These brochures all provide information on events, accommodation and general visitor information for the whole county, which would be of use for someone touring the county.

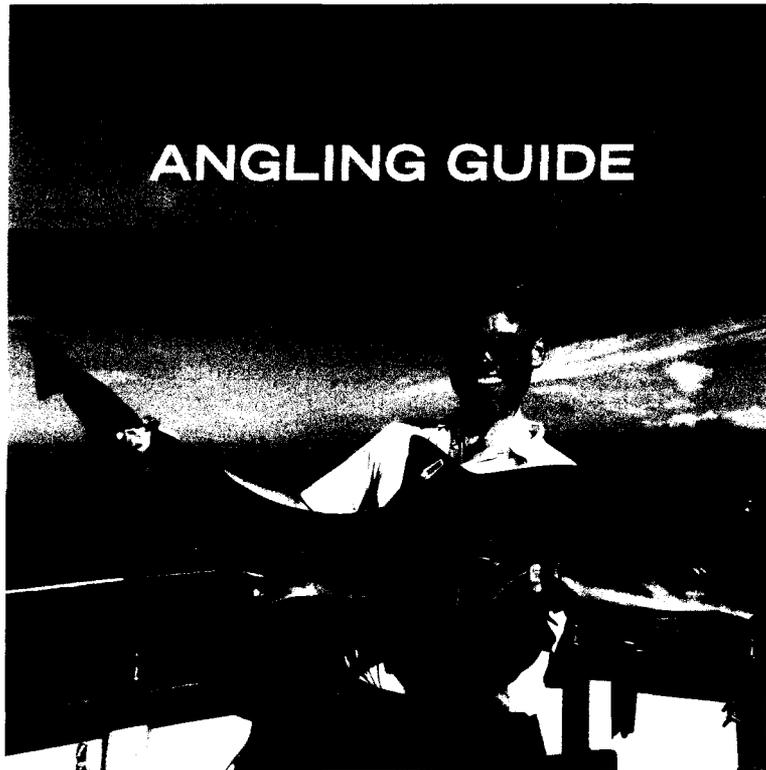


Figure 4: Promotion of Angling in the Region.

Over two-thirds of all overseas visitors use the Internet when planning their holiday in Ireland (Fáilte Ireland Visitor Attitudes Survey 2008), so an analysis of web-based information on tourism in Cavan was also undertaken. Two main websites promoting tourism for the county of Cavan were identified: www.cavantourism.com and www.countycavan.com.

The first site, www.cavantourism.com, has been developed by Cavan Tourist Office and Fáilte Ireland, and is effectively an online brochure for County Cavan. It provides information on accommodation, places to visit, things to do, restaurants and towns and villages in the county. It provides downloadable maps and “to do” guides for the whole county. This high quality and well-developed website outshines most of the brochures previously discussed.

By contrast, www.countycavan.com is a commercial site developed in conjunction with www.goireland.com, a privately-owned tourism reservations company. It also provides information on accommodation, car rentals, pubs and restaurants and sports. However, it lacks the use of colour and pictures and therefore is less appealing. It is more difficult to use and the information is not as well presented.

Overall, the evaluation of available promotional material suggested that there was considerable overlap between different tourism organisations and that there was a relatively narrow focus on a few aspects of Cavan’s tourism potential. It was also noteworthy that distribution of the leaflets was relatively limited so that it may be difficult to obtain printed promotional material in the county.

Box 2: Promoting tourism in Ireland and in the study region**Government Departments:**

Irish Government Department: Department of Tourism, Culture and Sport (www.arts-sport-tourism.gov.ie).

Northern Ireland Government Department responsible for tourism: Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (www.detini.gov.uk).

International Tourism Marketing for Ireland:

Tourism Ireland (www.tourismireland.ie) is responsible for marketing the island of Ireland overseas as a holiday destination. Established under the framework of the Belfast Agreement of Good Friday 1998, it is jointly funded by the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive. Tourism Ireland works with the two tourist boards on the island, Fáilte Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, who are responsible for product and enterprise development and marketing to tourism consumers within the island of Ireland.

Tourist Boards:

Fáilte Ireland, the National Tourism Development Organisation: formed in 2003 under the National Tourism Development Authority Act to guide and promote tourism as a significant driver of

the Irish economy. It operates Ireland's home holidays website and associated media campaigns 'Discover Ireland' (www.discoverireland.ie), featuring information on Irish accommodation, things to see and do, what's on and special offers.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (www.nitb.com) runs a similar home holidays website at www.discovernorthernireland.com.

Regional Tourism Promotion:

Each of the 7 Bord Fáilte tourism regions has its own promotional website, e.g. www.irelandnorthwest.ie.

Individual counties also undertake tourism promotion, e.g. Cavan Tourism is part of Cavan County Council and is dedicated to the continuous development and promotion of tourism in the county. www.cavantourism.com

Specific destination areas may also develop their own promotional materials, e.g.

Breifne, a cross-border tourism venture aiming to develop a new branded tourism destination "Bréifne" in a region including Cavan, Leitrim, Roscommon, Sligo and Fermanagh).

<http://www.passport-breifne.com/>

FIELD OBSERVATION OF TOURISM FACILITIES AND POTENTIAL

The second stage of the research involved observation of the existing facilities and tourism potential in two case study towns, Ballinagh and Belturbet (see Figure 5). Ballinagh is a small town with a population of 502 (Census 2006), located approximately 10 kilometres from Cavan town on the main N55 road. Belturbet is located 15 km from Cavan town and just 4 km from the border with County Fermanagh, on the N3 road.

The proximity to the Northern Ireland border has had a huge impact on the development of town. In 2006, the population of Belturbet was 1,295. There is a rather large population size difference between Ballinagh and Belturbet, but Ballinagh is presently growing at a faster rate than Belturbet, largely due to its proximity to Cavan, for which it acts as a dormitory town.

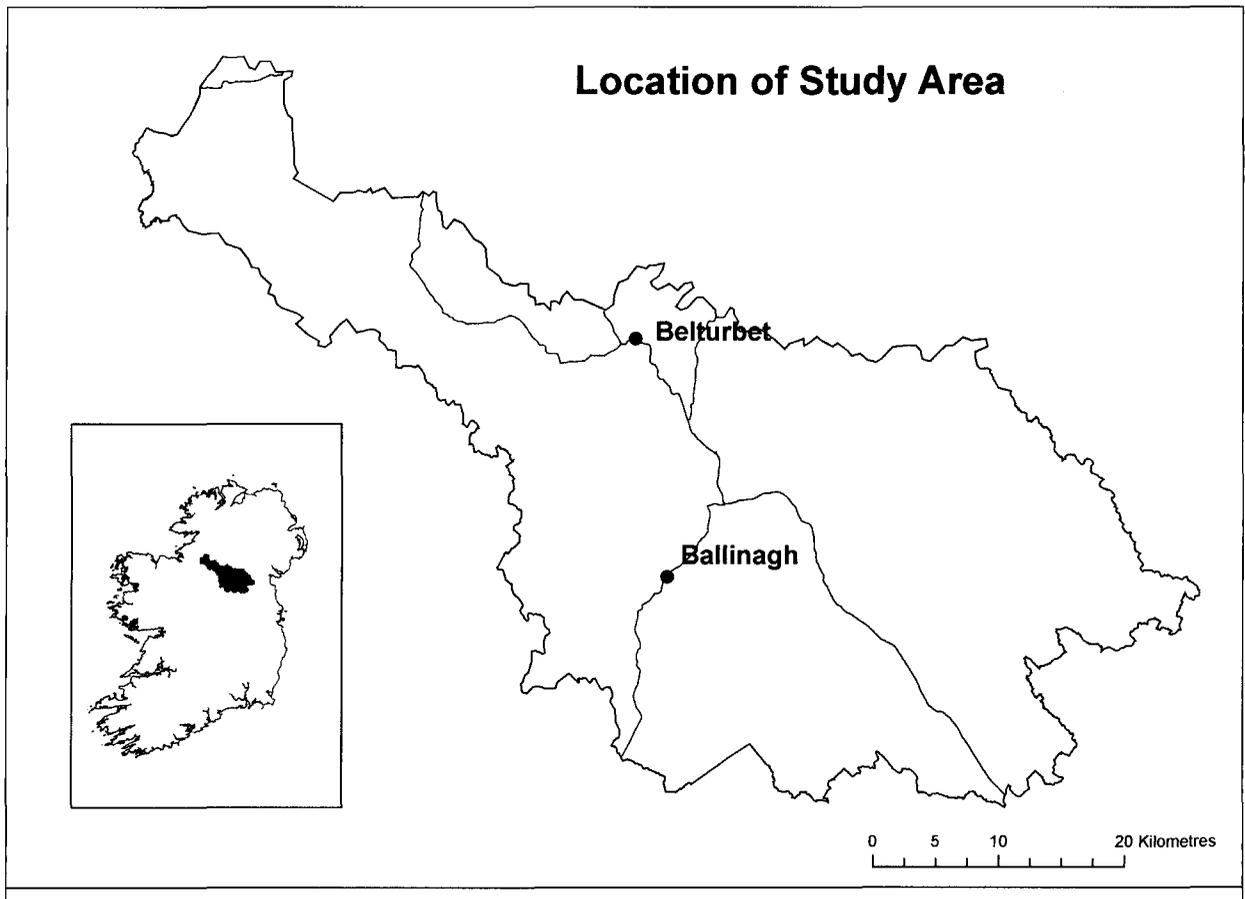


Figure 5: Relative location of Ballinagh and Belturbet. Map also shows the main roads in Cavan.

Ballinagh is relatively undeveloped and many of its green areas seemed, at the time of the survey, to be poorly managed and maintained. There is a large car park at the back of the Community Centre where, at the time of the survey, work had begun on the development of a children's playground. The location chosen is rather unfortunate, only about 100 metres from the main road, and close to a tributary of the River Erne. Another example of a lost opportunity, in the view of the researcher, was the development of a new medical centre on a site where a footbridge over the river could have been located. A ruined mill along the river is currently under restoration and has tourism potential as a café and/or visitor centre. However, the owner's hopes of erecting a footbridge from the mill to the area of the car park where there were picnic benches were dashed when the Council erected a new medical centre on the site.

Ballinagh's historic market house, built in 1821 by Captain Fleming, is an underutilised potential tourist attraction. Located in the centre of the town, the market house was transformed into a venue called 'Cissie's Kitchen' during the fleadh ceoil.

Unfortunately, a butcher's shop built in 1938 is located directly in front of the derelict market house and damages the aesthetics of the market square. Captain Fleming is also associated with a further potential tourist attraction in Ballinagh, the two storey rough stone tower known as Fleming's Folly built in 1836 which is located approximately two miles from the town.

Observations undertaken in Ballinagh suggested that cleanliness in the town can be hit and miss. Most of the streets have a lot of litter, especially following the weekend. Street maintenance is generally undertaken by FÁS employees, who may have a range of other jobs to complete. On a more positive note, many houses and businesses in the town had window boxes on display. While there are relatively few potential attractions in the town, there are many in the surrounding hinterland. Unfortunately, there are very few signposts, and the few which are in place are cluttered. There is no information around the town such as an information point or posters to provide information for passing tourists.

There is a strong contrast between Ballinagh and Belturbet. The latter is a picturesque town, with many well developed and maintained green areas, including a large park with a children's playground, as well as a marina with walkways which can be enjoyed by visitors. Boats and cruisers are available for hire. The Emerald Star cruise line has a base in Belturbet and hires about 50 boats, while there are facilities for approximately 120 private cruisers to moor at the three private marinas around the town. The thirteenth-century ruins of a motte and bailey lie close to the marina, with an information plaque. The town itself is kept clean; all of the buildings are presentable and painted. Many

of the houses and shops along the main street have window boxes on display for the summer and autumn months. All the attractions in the town are sign posted, however some of the sign posts are cluttered and confusing. Although there is no tourist information office in the town, there are many sign posts and posters providing information about local attractions. One major local visitor attraction is the former Great Northern Railway station, which operated from 1885 to 1959 and has now been restored, including a visitor centre and conference centre, as well as apartments and offices for rental.



Figure 6: Contrasting Images of Belturbet (left) and Ballinagh (right)

QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY OF TOURISTS

Field observation in both Ballinagh and Belturbet was supplemented by a questionnaire survey of tourists at each location (see appendix). While the sample size was small, the survey offers an additional perspective, that of the tourists themselves. Most tourists said that they chose to visit Cavan for fishing or visiting the lakes. Some general points were raised in relation to tourism in the county. Lack of tourist information in the smaller towns was mentioned, as was the limited availability of public transport. On a positive note, almost all of the tourists surveyed stated their intention of returning for future holidays.

Of the tourists surveyed in Belturbet, the majority came from mainland Europe, with just one coming from Northern Ireland. Most were boating in the town and staying on board, with the remainder being equally divided between those staying in B&B's and in hotels. They generally intended to stay two or three nights, with people staying in hotels (The Seven Horse

Shoes and the Slieve Russell) for up to a week. Reasons for visiting Belturbet varied from visiting family (VFR), to attending the Festival of the Erne to taking a holiday on the River Erne. When asked to identify the main attractions to Belturbet, the majority named the River Erne. Other attractions included the nearby Slieve Russell golf course, the live music in the local pubs, and fishing.

The main problems identified by tourists were traffic on the main street and associated noise. They all agreed that there was a small amount of tourist information available along the street but many recommended the development of a tourist centre in the town in the 'other comments' section of the survey.

The visitors to Ballinagh who were surveyed came from the USA, England and from other counties in Ireland. Their profile was significantly different to those interviewed in Belturbet, with the most commonly cited reason for their visit being to visit friends and relations (i.e. VFR). As a result, the majority of accommodation used was families and friends with a few staying in local B&B's. Length of stay also reflected this difference. Those staying in local B&B's were generally only staying a night or two while those staying with family were staying for up to two weeks.

INTERVIEWS WITH TOURISM STAKEHOLDERS IN BELTURBET

While questionnaire surveys can provide the general tourist perspective, formal in-depth interviews were also undertaken with seven key tourism stakeholders in order to develop a further understanding of perceptions of tourism in the region. These included politicians, local entrepreneurs and the county tourist development officer.

Three people were formally interviewed in relation to the promotion and development of tourism in Belturbet, namely a hotel manager, a town councillor and a tourism officer. All three agreed that tourism is very important to the town, with the River Erne providing the focal point and main attraction. However, they also agreed that tourism could and should become more important to the local economy, with potential to further grow the angling market, to develop walks, and to extend the river navigation.

Belturbet has many strengths for the development of tourism. The main strength, mentioned by all interviewees as well as the tourists who were surveyed, is the River Erne. This is a major natural attraction available to the town. The town is also located along the N3, the main Dublin to Donegal route. There is a range of accommodation available to cater for different needs, from the ten B&B's in the town to the luxurious four-star Slieve Russell hotel. The small size of the town makes sightseeing and general exploration easy.

Although relatively few weaknesses were identified in relation to the promotion of tourism in Belturbet, those that were are very important. While there is extensive accommodation in Belturbet, many of the B&B's are unapproved. Traffic is a major problem. Other problems identified in relation to tourism in Belturbet included the fluctuating Euro/sterling exchange rate

Those surveyed named the main attractions in Ballinagh as Bishop Bedell's grave and Killykeen Forest Park. The problems which the tourists identified in Ballinagh included lack of public transport to the town, the lack of live music in pubs, traffic and dirty streets on the weekends. Everybody surveyed also commented on the absence of tourist information in the town.

which increases the cost of holidaying in Belturbet for Northern Irish and English visitors and finally, the threat to fishing caused by declining fish stocks linked to illegal fishing.

There is also a lack of organised promotion by the local tourist providers in Belturbet. This had been a feature in the past, when providers travelled to trade fairs to promote the town and their businesses, but ceased when those involved retired. One of the interviewees stated that it is too expensive for representatives from a small town to go abroad to promote themselves. Perhaps surprisingly, there is no committee in place in Belturbet to promote or develop tourism in the town, although the AOIFE committee organises the highly successful Festival of the Erne which is run in Belturbet each summer. Everybody agreed that more needed to be done to promote the town, and all supported the opening of a tourism information centre. When asked who should take responsibility for the promotion and development of tourism, however, none of the interviewees could provide a definite answer. Interestingly, although the question was meant in relation to tourism on a local basis, all three respondents referred to Fáilte Ireland, the national body. One also mentioned Cavan County Council, which is involved in developing tourism through Fáilte Ireland's NDP Infrastructure Development programme.

INTERVIEWS WITH TOURISM STAKEHOLDERS IN BALLINAGH

Five people were formally interviewed in relation to the promotion and development of tourism in Ballinagh. They included a county councillor, a member of the local enterprise committee, a local FÁS manager, a tourism officer and a business owner and former member of the Tidy Towns Committee. There was a difference of opinion among the interviewees as to the importance of tourism in Ballinagh, some believing that it is very important while others not considering it to be of significance. All agreed that Ballinagh has huge potential to further develop its tourism industry, given the natural beauty of the surrounding landscape and a considerable number of historic features (e.g. Kilmore Cathedral, Bishop Bedell's grave, many old graveyards, tombs and forts). Proximity to Cavan town and to the Killykean Forest Park were mentioned as additional strengths.

However, many weaknesses were associated with the developed of the tourist industry in Ballinagh. As with Belturbet, traffic was identified as a major problem. One local business person had conducted research which suggested that only 5% of all of the traffic passing through the town actually stopped there. This could be changed if local amenities were improved. Poor quality accommodation in the town is an issue, with no approved B&B's in the town. Interviewees also referred to a lack of coordinated effort among the main stakeholders in the town to promote Ballinagh as a destination. It appears that the same few people are always left with the organising of events. The recently-established Ballinagh Enterprise and Development Committee occasionally touches on tourism, although this is not their main focus. While Ballinagh lacks the range of natural attractions which draw tourists to Belturbet, it nevertheless has considerable potential and it is lack of community involvement which appears to be the main issue holding Ballinagh back from developing a thriving tourism market.

CONCLUSIONS

By using a combination of different research methodologies, a profile of tourism in the case study area was developed. A number of conclusions can be drawn concerning the potential for further promotion and development of tourism. The study suggests that tourism in Cavan is generally underdeveloped but has considerable potential for future growth. Most tourism in the county is currently directed at fishing and there is scope to develop other aspects of tourism such as history and cultural tourism, as well as walking and leisure tourism related to forest parks. Tourism publicity is generally quite weak throughout the county, with either limited or no tourist information in many of the major towns. The tourist information office in the county town, Cavan town, has restricted opening hours, remaining closed at weekends. A sole tourism officer has been appointed by the County Council to deal with tourism development for the entire county, which seems to be too large a job for one individual. Tourism promotion in the county is limited, although the Cavan County Council's tourism website - www.cavantourism.com - provides useful information for the county as a whole.

General issues throughout the county are related to poor signposting, with many tourists unable to find local attractions, and lack of accessibility through public transport. Very few local bus services are available. Fishing is currently a major focus for tourism in Cavan, yet many of the lakes are inaccessible and quite hard to find. A problem also exists in Cavan with over-fishing, which poses a significant threat to the county's major tourist attraction. The market price of foreign currencies has had, and will continue to have, a huge impact on the tourist industry in Cavan. Given its geographical location as a border county, Cavan is heavily reliant on visitors from Northern Ireland. At times when the Euro is strong against Sterling, this impacts negatively on the local tourist trade.

On the surface, Belturbet appears to have a thriving tourism industry. However, from talking to people in the town they believe it has declined a lot over the past five to ten years. They also noted a decline in community involvement, with little communication between the main stakeholders in the town, particularly since the Belturbet Tourist Association ceased to operate. Ballinagh, on the other hand, appears to have very little by the way of a tourist industry, but there is considerable undiscovered potential.

The county would definitely benefit by providing more tourist information. While it would not be viable to have a tourist information centre in every town, this could be overcome in towns such as Ballinagh if local shops or the post office agreed to participate in tourism promotion initiatives.

Overall, this study has identified some of the key features of tourism in one of the least successful tourism regions in Ireland. In doing so, it has also demonstrated the ways in which different research methodologies may be used to complement each other and develop a rounded understanding of a topic.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to the following for their assistance in the original dissertation research on which this paper is based: Winston Bennett, Francis Cahill, Eamon Gavin, Dessie Harrington, Joanne Hayes, Anne McPhillips, Anthony Vesey.

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