

Torbay cultural tourism strategy development

Executive summary

The opportunity

Cultural tourism presents an opportunity for Torbay. An opportunity that brings with it some choice. For Torbay, that choice centres around how it wants to build on its undoubted assets to create a more distinctive, more year-round, and more sustainable and locally-relevant offer, for visitors and residents. There are many ways to do this, but we suggest that in Torbay the approach is less about pursuing the high-risk, high-investment, 'build it and they will come' magnets and one-off moments, but to develop more sustainably, to grow stronger local and sub-regional support, to win the hearts and minds of key stakeholders, artists, partners and residents, thus creating bolder, stronger and more compelling product with what is already there.

We recognise that whilst this might not be what some partners expected to hear, we assert that this isn't by default an unimaginative or reductive approach – quite the opposite, it should still be visionary and ambitious.

Why? Whilst cultural tourism is a clear prospect for Torbay, there is a need to develop the existing cultural infrastructure first, to shape and own an exciting and compelling creative and cultural vision for the bay, to prospect for political and strategic champions and to create the necessary delivery mechanisms and partnerships. In so doing Torbay will build stronger and locally distinctive cultural products, that will, in time, be right for the national and international cultural tourism market. Moreover, it will be clear as to where the will is coming from, who owns it, who is leading, who is delivering.

This doesn't mean step back and do nothing now. The framework that we recommend in the full report proposes that cultural tourism is closely aligned with the objectives of the core cultural strategy (*enjoy, talk, be, do, 2014-2024*) which sets out to nurture and retain creative talent by building opportunities, to raise levels of everyday participation, to use culture to tackle specific local challenges around wellbeing and poverty. By asking 'how does this work for residents and visitors' the result will be something that is viable and sustainable, building on existing strengths and assets and addressing real needs. The aspirations embodied in life on the Seafood Coast or English Riviera need to mean something to the experiences of both local residents and the tourist visitors you want to attract – applied strategically culture is a key mechanism to help do that.

Clearly in the meantime tourists will still come, some specifically for cultural events like the International Agatha Christie Festival and The Tale. These are moments of real significance in the

calendar and need to be seized as change-making moments, signals of what might be possible. Other visitors will continue to engage with the existing venues, festivals and events when they are here – and if they are strengthened (in terms of artistic quality but also in terms of working practices and partnerships) the result will be a better and more memorable tourism experience, linking important community development work with wider culture, tourism and economic regeneration. This active balance between resident and visitor, social and economic, local and national encourages the kind of collaborative and creative practice that can define a cultural tourism USP for Torbay. This is developmental – it isn't preoccupied with finding a massive investment injection or 'magic bullet' solution – it accepts it will take time, but that cumulative progress will allow these partnerships to build. This is how successful cultural destinations have emerged in recent years, and the return on their investment is real, measurable and with continued leadership, sustainable.

The priorities

This report maps out a number of recommended outputs, that can be prioritised by Torbay according to the wider strategy agenda. The report attempts to set out a simple 'route map' framework that details a number of key strands for realising as much of Torbay's cultural tourism potential as possible in the next few years. However, if there were just three absolutely fundamental elements that should be adopted and supported, they would be:

1. Work together and be joined up

A Destination Marketing Group is a good route to take, bringing together the right people (people who do and who can influence) in the right forum – tourism, culture, sport, food and drink, accommodation, communications. Torbay is complex in terms of its leadership – something everyone is very aware of. A talking shop is not needed. This group would require a clear agenda, and a mandate that affords the necessary authority to listen, research, develop, propose and action for Torbay.

The working agenda should focus on adding to the campaign offer for Torbay by creating more compelling messages for the increasingly competitive and innovative marketplace. This messaging is also essential for all contributing partners to Torbay's (cultural) tourism offer – it is the collective weight of marketing that Torbay has at its disposal that can penetrate the market and smartly reposition and update the offer. Messaging only gets a destination so far of course. People visit places, and people also buy product.

It is essential that the messaging is brought to life well-crafted narratives (content, see point 3.) that can be shared by all the tourism voices of Torbay – agencies and authorities, hoteliers, restaurants, events and attractions, tour guides... everyone. A shared narrative through connected channels will deliver much more favourable economies of scale, as well as magnifying consistent campaign messages that increase market awareness and engagement.

Cascading across the sub-region will back this up – whilst aspirational, the messaging must be clear and genuine in its promise to visitors – with creative cultural programming that can deliver visitors

alongside more local and sub-regional audiences. This is what will create an offer that is authentic for Torbay, and nowhere else.

And turn around, look inland to build critical mass through sub-regional partnerships: develop Exeter and Plymouth as your cultural tourism allies for diversity, year-round product offer, extended reach and enhanced credibility.

2. Add value to what is already there

So how does Torbay create a programme, engaging local audiences and attracting new visitors? The answer does not start with a blank sheet of paper. Torbay has often developed and delivered great cultural programming, but not so often building on its own assets and talents, or as part of a committed forward-plan. This has led to inconsistency in developing both a culturally-rich area, and a culturally-attractive destination. It is time to stop looking for the next big thing (indeed there are plenty of big things already in the pipeline) and build on the strengths of Torbay's cultural infrastructure to make the overall cultural calendar better. Many cultural assets struggle for support as much as any other part of the country, but are at the same time underdeveloped. There is real potential though, and some obvious starting places. We suggest these include as priorities the International Agatha Christie Festival and the opportunity afforded by the appointment of a new director and a biennial structure to take it to a new level creatively but also year-round, in and across the bay; Torre Abbey a unique site with much potential as a cultural hub; The Tale (see below) and the broader Seafood Coast story.

By taking a bay-wide view, as a Destination Marketing Group that has cultural tourism embedded in its agenda could, the potential is clear.

3. Develop the digital skill set and content you need

Collectively developing the digital skills of cultural tourism partners will deliver benefits beyond the digital enhancement of individual brands – fostering cross sector partnership, destination marketing, searchability, amplification and conversion to goals.

To make this happen you need to invest in a central platform that will support the sharing Torbay's cultural event and attraction offers online. We suggest that Creative Torbay is the obvious candidate for this role subject to some investments that will make it fit for purpose (see appendix). The platform will be capable of delivering information, listings and shared content that can be manipulated into brochureware, itineraries, bespoke guides and campaigns, and even used face to face at visitor information points.

The platform itself however will only deliver if there is an active partnership engaging with it, which needs nurturing, and so a related programme of skills development activity will, at the same time, sow the seeds for new ways of working. It will require partners to change their digital practices for their own and shared benefit. In this way 'digital skills development' becomes a mechanism for putting into place the working practices and relationships that will support a strategic cultural tourism approach.

The live example, or accelerator project

The Tale, produced by Situations UK, is a major coup for Torbay. Major cultural projects like this are of limited number and can have numerous towns, cities and destinations in effect bidding to host them. However, when the location is settled, the real work begins. These projects require significant investment (in every sense of the word) to make them a success. Situations UK introduce the project in these terms.

The Tale will be a story told through public artworks, sound and theatre performances across the landscape of Torbay over nine days in 2017. Bringing their distinctive approach to producing arts projects through collaboration to Torbay, Situations will work closely with local partners to develop The Tale over the next eighteen months (starting in January 2016).

The Tale combines three distinctive methods of producing arts in the public realm – the arts festival, the immersive promenade theatre and scattered-site visual art exhibition. Artists, musicians, theatre-makers and performers will be commissioned by Situations to produce new artworks, events and participatory projects inspired by a new text authored by writer and broadcaster Philip Hoare in response to the landscape, towns, histories, people and unique geological heritage of Torbay.

This is a major first step to propel Torbay forwards as a cultural tourism destination. Failure would not only reflect poorly on Torbay as an ambitious cultural centre for (South) Devon, it could impact on future partnership and funding assessments. Significant *Ambition for Excellence* funding has been secured for this project from Arts Council England in the belief that Torbay's cultural ambitions make it a ready and willing host. It will be essential to fully grasp their expectations and measures for success, and frame them positively. To make a success of this opportunity, a number of elements need to come together in its development and delivery:

Joined up management

This simply means that the local management in Torbay needs to be clear and understood in terms of its existence and role. Local leaders have to buy-in and support. A resourced point of contact needs to work closely with Situations UK to ensure that the project embeds within Torbay, delivering value before, during and after the event itself. This in turn relies on a clear set of qualitative and quantitative targets to define what success will look like.

Learn by doing

This must not be another 'parachuted-in' event. The ongoing process should be well coordinated and monitored, capturing the insights into how to deliver major cultural projects in the future, but also

building partnerships, engaging communities and artists locally to be able to achieve the potential of this work, and those that will follow in future years. There is still plenty of time to see this as the start of a new approach to managing and marketing cultural events, part of a planned and locally owned continuum. Use it as a vehicle to start to create a cultural tourism toolkit – the shared messages, joined-up itineraries, digital networks, shared listings and cross-promotion of future events and activities on the calendar.

Artist-led cultural tourism

What does this look like? Well, if this project is as successful as it can be, then it will in large part be because it has clear artistic vision, independence and credence. That is not to say that every decision and output is artistic only – but it is important that the central role of the artist is protected, so that they can deliver a compelling and ambitious cultural statement for Torbay. The nature of local partnership and engagement is critical to success – balancing challenge with trust. Without it, culture by committee and/or partnership without creativity can be the result, and the outcomes will not be impressive or provide longer-term impacts. Consider – do you want a Millennium Dome or an Olympic Opening Ceremony?

Shared responsibilities

A major area to explore will be around supporting communications: national media, domestic and international tourism campaigns, local community ‘hosts’ – activities which partners in Torbay are better placed to deliver than Situations who don't own the long-term destination objective. The digital skills development programme could connect to this as a pilot project.

Tap into other agendas

The Tale will be a success if it sits well in the local community with residents and employers informed and engaged. Connected plans to create a cultural ambassador programme could perhaps see this as an opportunity to pilot new ideas and ways of working that also deliver to cultural tourism.

So the next steps are simple and they must happen immediately if they are not strongly in place already – establish a clear project lead to develop this major opportunity and coordinate the local assets and talents to ensure that The Tale comes from Torbay, and not just happens in Torbay.