



Contribution from Aldeburgh



I have prepared a short synopsis of what I propose to say, I hope you find that helpful. Having listened to a great number of speeches in languages which are not my own, I know how easy I personally find it is to concentrate so hard on the words, that one misses the meaning. In any event, it will serve as an aide memoire for you, in case some of you find I have said something you wish to remember.

I have headed that synopsis with the definition of Tourism, produced by the British Tourism Society. Tourism is such a vast subject that it is difficult to know where it begins and ends. Am I a tourist, for example, when I eat in my favourite restaurant in Aldeburgh? And if I take a friend, visiting from abroad, to the theatre in London, am I a tourist? Or are both of us?

The definition you have in front of you helps us to answer those questions, which is important for those of us gathering tourism statistics. Happily, those questions become slightly academic if we are talking about the overall benefits of tourism. If we provide an environment which is right for visitors - somewhere that is clean, interesting to live in, with friendly people and lively cultural traditions - we have probably created exactly the kind of environment in which people are happy to be resident. That is one of the benefits of tourism. Much of the work we do to appeal to visitors is equally of value to the resident population.

Tourism is (as I'm sure you all know) one of the very few, sure-fire, growth industries in the world. Its potential benefits for villages are enormous, and growing more important by the day as employment migrates to large towns and cities. I think, however, that those of us who promote the industry should acknowledge freely that it has negative aspects as well as very positive ones. If we want to gain universal support for Tourism, we should be open about its challenges, and work to make sure that the positives vastly outweigh the negatives, as I believe they do.

There are three constituencies to consider when thinking about tourism: Customers (the tourists themselves, whether they be visitors from overseas, or from other parts of our own countries); Providers (those who provide overnight accommodation for visitors, or who manage the attractions which tourists come to see); and the Community (those who are resident in the areas where tourism takes place). Let me start with the customer, or tourist visitor. What does he or she want?

Firstly, they want to enjoy themselves. They want to go home feeling they have had a good time. Secondly, they want what we can call Quality Assurance. They want to know, preferably before they come, that where they are going to stay is clean and safe and welcoming, and that the things they are coming to see will be well-maintained. Thirdly, they want value for money. They want to feel that the pleasure they have had, and the interest in what they have seen and experienced, is at least proportionate to the money they have spent on the trip.

I want to say two things about that. Firstly about Quality. Almost every country in Europe has, in some form or other, a Quality Assurance Scheme, whereby the level of quality which a visitor can expect is indicated, usually by a system of stars. Some countries make this a statutory process, so that, for example, all overnight accommodation offered to the public must by law be inspected and certified at regular intervals. Others, like this country, rely on a voluntary system, so that although health and safety issues are subject to law, quality relies on inspection by independent bodies, and is not required by law. The public is then encouraged to look for the symbols of Quality Accreditation, but can choose if they wish, to stay in uninspected properties. I shall return to this in a minute, but it is clearly in the interests of villages and those who manage them, to make sure that whatever national system prevails, the visitor is given the comfort of Quality Assurance which, if lacking, will undermine the whole tourism enterprise.

Secondly, we have found in England -and I should be amazed if it was different in any other country -that "enjoyment" is not merely a matter of "fun". Increasingly, and especially for the discerning tourist (who is invariably the higher spender) tourism is about the search for "distinctiveness". Tourists want to learn. What we call bucket and spade holidays, or holidays which last for a week or two, still represent a huge market sector, but the growth market is in short breaks. People in England now take three or four or five short breaks each year, often instead of, not as well as a longer holiday. And these short breaks are designed to explore something unfamiliar. They want to understand the area they have chosen to visit. They want to eat local food; they want to hear about local history; they want to learn about local flora and fauna. In short, they want to understand the local culture. Again, I shall return to this, but it clearly represents an enormous opportunity for villages. So much for the Customer.

Secondly, the Provider, the individual or business, which provides facilities for the tourist. There are two fundamental requirements for success as a tourism business. You must offer an excellent product, and you must make it easy to buy.

I do not need to say much about product excellence. But making something easy to buy is a very big subject. Everywhere, the pace of life is increasing, driven by improvements in transportation and communications, especially the electronic revolution. Very few people have the time to conduct substantial research into their tourism destination. They will take an easy option. They will go for something which is easy to buy. Which means information must be readily available, a website is now virtually imperative, transportation must be simple, access must be flexible, personal and internet booking simple and secure, and payment easy to arrange.

All that, of course, can be established before deciding to make a trip. But one other thing which Providers need to do, and which I'm afraid in this country they are too often unwilling to do, is to work together. The visitor who wants to learn is not going to be satisfied with one experience in one location. He or she will want to be told about other attractions in the Region. Their time is short and these short-break visitors, who are as I said the growth market, want to squeeze every gram of value from the trip that they can. I like to apply my 24-hour test to anyone responsible for tourist information. The standard question from visitors these days is "I have 24 hours in this place. What should I do?" Everyone, all of us who are interested in encouraging high-quality, discriminating tourism, must be able to answer that question without hesitation, giving a number of options.

Thirdly, I mentioned the Community. I'm sure you know better than I, that we cannot take support for tourism amongst the local community for granted. And yet, widespread support for tourism within the Community is a pre-requisite of a good experience for customers. What can local authorities, and those responsible for creating a friendly environment in which tourism can flourish, do? So many things. Information must be widely available. Transport problems must be addressed. Quality must be assured. And residents in the community must be reassured that the benefits of tourism far outweigh any disadvantages.

Transport is invariably a major issue. And in villages, and rural areas, we cannot wish it away. Public transport is well developed in many places, and we should certainly do everything reasonably possible to encourage visitors to use it. But even in the Netherlands, a small country with excellent infrastructure, I suggest that the majority of visitors will arrive by private car. If we fail to recognise this, and try to exclude the car, we shall strangle tourism at birth. What we have to do is to provide facilities both for cars and coaches, which are convenient, but not intrusive. This is a huge subject, but a challenge which simply has to be grasped.

Information is another. In countries like England, where Quality Inspection and Grading is not a legal requirement, local authorities must resist the temptation in their promotional literature to recommend any property which is not Quality Assured. Town and regional councils everywhere have a responsibility to support those businesses which provide a nationally-recognised level of quality. Suffolk Coastal, I am glad to say, adopts an "Inspected Only" rule in publications like this.

Still on the absolutely critical subject of Information, we have in England, a network of nearly 600 Tourist Information Centres. These are generally run by local authorities and they are tasked with making comprehensive information available to all comers. When a TIC is as well-located as the one here in Aldeburgh, we often find they are used almost as much by local residents as by visitors. Those TICs, above all, must be capable of meeting the 24-hour test. The visitor has to be made to feel welcome, and by locating the TIC in the middle of the High Street, Aldeburgh is sending out a message that it does indeed welcome visitors. TICs are the backbone of good tourist information in England.

Finally, I believe local authorities have what we call a selling job to do. They need to persuade residents that tourism brings something valuable to the area. Everyone in this room must have heard complaints about congestion and noise and litter created by tourists in the high season. Few local businesses, however, would deny that more tourists, especially high-spending ones, in the shoulders of the year (October and November, February and March) would bring economic stability to small businesses, and make business management a great deal easier. We need to emphasise the positive, and work to alleviate the negatives.

I'd like to close with a few words on that subject, with particular regard to tourism in villages. For villages, and indeed all rural areas in developed urban societies, tourism is an economic imperative, and frequently a matter of survival. What other industry is going to provide jobs, real jobs, rewarding jobs, for young people who would otherwise drift to the towns? What other industry is going to provide the employment which agriculture provided in the past, but which the modern farm has very little need for. The challenge is to foster Tourism, without degrading the environment.

Degradation comes in two forms: environmental damage from mass tourism, from concentration of too much tourism in too short a period, from unthinking tourism where tourists have simply not understood that behaviour must be adjusted to the environment that they are in. That degradation is obvious and widely mentioned. The other form, I believe is what I call prettification. Tourists love museums, especially good ones. But they don't like villages which are themselves museums. They like to see life, a different life preferably from the one they lead themselves, but a place where real people live, doing real jobs, and facing real challenges. It is hugely beneficial to Aldeburgh that it has a thriving cultural community, spearheaded by the Music Festival, and that those boats you see on the beach are in regular use by real fishermen who earn their living in the traditional way. If Aldeburgh was no more than a charming High Street with an interesting coastline, it would still be attractive for tourists but its interest as a short-break destination for higher-spending visitors would be greatly diminished. Villages should be clean, and should be proud of their historic traditions, but they should not be prettified in the supposed interests of tourism.

What I have said today should, I hope, make you feel as I do that current trends in tourism provide a real opportunity for villages, and especially those with deep cultural traditions. The search by discerning visitors for "distinctiveness" greatly favours villages. Villages provide what the vast majority of people cannot get in their routine lives. I believe we should promote tourism (not only to tourists, but to providers and our own communities) not as "fun", but as "enrichment". It has social benefits, as well as the very obvious economic ones.

What we are offering tourists is an opportunity to learn and understand aspects of life which are outside their normal range. We are encouraging town and city dwellers to understand the countryside; we are encouraging workaholics to recognise that leisure activities are directly associated with health; we are encouraging car-drivers to get out of their cars and walk; we are encouraging those who perhaps have recently arrived in our country to live, to understand the culture of the country they have joined.

Good tourism is a voyage of discovery. And success for village tourism depends on fostering and meeting that aspiration.