

Technology ON THE MOVE

ENTER is Europe's leading tourism technology event, which operates under the auspices of the International Federation of Information Technology in Tourism (IFITT), in partnership with the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) and the World Tourism Organisation (WTO). Gilbert Archdale FTS reports on the proceedings of this year's ENTER conference, held in Helsinki.

ENTER, the annual tourism technology conference, celebrated its 10th birthday in the Finnish capital, Helsinki from 29-31 January this year. Billed as 'the coolest place on Earth', Helsinki certainly lived up to its reputation, with temperatures plunging to a 'cool' minus 20 degrees Celsius. But, despite the thick covering of ice on the pavements, even in a hard winter Helsinki remains highly navigable and the public transport works like clockwork. The indomitable spirit of the Finnish people was perfectly reflected by well-known local journalist Mari-Leena Kuosa who, as the sun shone across the frozen seas of Helsinki's harbour and the mercury headed down towards minus 18, observed 'It feels almost Springlike today!'

The conference itself attracted over 400 hundred delegates from nearly 40 countries but technology conferences are two a penny these days. So what is special about ENTER and why it is worthy of a report in a destination journal? Firstly ENTER, from its inception in 1993 by the far-sighted Tirol Tourist Board, has always had a destination focus. Secondly, a key value-added element of ENTER is its continuity and its focus on the importance of new technologies. Thirdly, ENTER has a major research focus and offers a full day's PhD workshop as a pre-conference event. Thus the event itself is a refreshingly unusual affair, blending industry practitioners with an

eclectic brew of leading researchers and academics, industry consultants, major travel companies, technology suppliers and destination marketers in a spirit of collaboration and it is largely free of the kind of sales pitches that masquerade as presentations and devalue so many commercial conferences.

Organised by IFITT, the International Federation of Information Technology in Tourism, ENTER was chaired this year by Dr Dimitrios Buhalis of the University of Surrey. It also enjoyed the patronage, and presence, of Finland's EU Commissioner, Erkki Liikanen, well-known as a champion of technological innovation. Mr Liikanen stressed the significance of the tourism sector, its potential for the development and adoption of many new and innovative services and stated that the Commission was working to encourage the participation of tourism industry elements within the eEurope 2005 Action Plan currently being developed.

This year's theme, not surprisingly considering the conference location was almost adjacent to Nokia's glistening headquarters in the country that is regarded as the spiritual home of mobile telephony, was 'Technology on the Move'. Examining and debating how travel providers and tourism bodies can profit from the next generation of mobile applications and other new distribution





Helsinki's South Harbour

channels was indeed a major element of the conference. However the event is so broad that as many as six separate tracks were often running at the same time. This does make the reviewer's job a little tricky but it also makes for a hugely interesting event and a stimulating mix of people and topics.

It is widely recognised, of course, that the tourism industry is not only information dependent but is also a key driver of e-commerce developments. In particular the internet revolution has dramatically improved the ability of individuals to obtain information in advance of travel and is revolutionising many aspects of the industry. For example, the rapid growth of low-cost airlines would not have been possible without their simple, on-line product and availability search capability with dynamic pricing and on-line reservation, payment and confirmation. The ease of use and appeal to customers of full on-line bookability is such that both Ryanair and EasyJet now receive over 90 per cent of all their bookings via their internet reservations services. This compares with a figure of 10 per cent from a 'traditional' airline such as SAS, itself regarded as one of the more technologically innovative companies around.

The impact of the internet on destination organisations

From its earliest days, ENTER has always had a destination focus, initially looking at the impact of IT on destination marketing – still a black art for some but now mainstream marketing for almost every leading destination. However there has been a gradual shift towards consideration of deeper issues, reflecting, of course, the growing expertise within the industry which has been fostered by ENTER itself.

For example, the opening session considered the changing role of the Destination Marketing Organisation (DMO) in today's modern economies. IFITT President, Josef Margreiter, the CEO of Tirol

Werbung, argued cogently that DMOs are handicapped both by their constitutions as public bodies and the multiplicity of tasks they are required to undertake. In particular the dynamics of the on-line marketplace raise the question of how far DMOs should limit themselves to marketing tasks – after all, the consumer, having identified the correct product, naturally wishes to be able to buy it.

This has resulted in a widespread move towards the establishment of reservations services by DMOs, either in their own right or in partnership with private sector companies, a situation currently seen in the UK, for instance in Wales and Scotland respectively. Dr Margreiter acknowledged that this development does raise policy questions regarding the issue of public sector competition with the large number of private companies already offering similar services.

Inkeri Starry, the Finnish Tourist Board's highly regarded IT Development Manager, went on to echo several of his points. Inkeri was not only the moving spirit behind the conference but is also the IT champion of Europe's 33 National Tourist Offices (NTOs) through her chairmanship of the European Travel Commissions' New Media Group. From the European perspective, she underlined the need for cooperation between NTOs, rather than narrow competition. The Nordic countries have a long tradition of constructive cooperation between their very professional NTOs in such aspects as trade fair representation, but the impact of new technologies is such that throughout Europe NTOs are finding that cooperation can bring them direct benefits, whether through addressing cross-border marketing needs or, in the case of the ETC, the development of a new European internet portal.

A new approach by Ireland

A somewhat different emphasis, which raised considerable interest and resonance among delegates, came from John Rafferty of the



Visitors enjoy Helsinki's street culture

Irish Tourist Board on the Thursday. John is one of the most experienced of all senior European NTO officials, having spent much of the past 15 years with direct responsibility for the pioneering the Gulliver information and reservation service in Ireland. Taking the view that it is important to challenge conventional wisdom, he explained that his Board had 'gone back to basics'. John argued that the demands of e-commerce fulfilment and multiple channel marketing had perhaps led to too much emphasis by tourist boards and system suppliers on the technology rather than on the key issues of supporting business processes and the management of quality destination content.

His Board is therefore now prioritising the issue of content management and content availability – seeking to ensure that publicly managed content is widely and freely available to all product and service providers. At the same time, while the reservations process should indeed be facilitated by NTOs, market forces should be regarded as the primary element, driven by business requirements and e-commerce developments rather than by the NTO itself.

John fully acknowledged that each DMO has individual circumstances and must address these in its own way. However the underlying significance of this new approach adopted by the Irish Tourist Board lies in the fact that it has perhaps more experience in this field than any other European NTO. Both customers and suppliers are now able to do business with each other and to make reservations. Whether NTOs can best facilitate this process by becoming directly involved in the reservations process as an intermediary another matter entirely, especially when there are so many existing commercial relationships at all levels of the tourism value chain.

Later the same day the English Tourism Council's Andrew Duff also addressed the issue of content management, giving a detailed

and comprehensive review of the many issues that the EnglandNet initiative was seeking to address. The mix of content management, standards development and provision of e-commerce facilities that this £3 million-plus project is providing is intended to help DMOs throughout England to achieve an improved Rol on existing and future technology investments.

Think from the customer's perspective

The delightfully named Ola Strangeways, Director of eCustomer and eTechnology Development for Scandinavian Airlines (SAS) revealed that his airline is planning for the disappearance of printed timetables within two years, such is the speed of the move towards the use of fixed and mobile devices by passengers. Echoing several other speakers, Ola's key recommendation was 'Think from the customer's perspective' and deliver solutions, not just technical innovations.

Many of the other speakers addressed the future opportunities that the new 3G mobile services will provide for tourists and travellers on the move. It is unclear though at the moment how fast the roll-out of new services will be and how fast their take-up. The current WAP services are widely agreed to have 'underperformed'. Whether more information delivered faster will break the mould (and rescue the finances of the telecommunications companies which have invested so heavily in 3G licences) remains an unknown. Take-up will depend not only on the quality and organisation of information but also on its relevance to the user and the acceptability of the intrusion. The antagonism of many people to direct mail (junk mail) and e-mail marketing (spam) is well known, and there would appear to be a considerable risk of customer rejection of many of the location-based push services whose development is forecast.



Helsinki entertained ENTER delegates in January

The ENTER research proceedings

Last but not least, what of the ENTER Research Programme? In 2003 over 150 researchers from more than 25 countries have had their work featured in the ENTER proceedings (*Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2003*, Springer Computer Science, ISBN 3-211-83910-0).

Such is the depth of the results that it is not possible to do them full justice in this short review but some points include the importance of transport information as an attribute of mobile information services, the poor handling of e-mail enquiries by some of the largest names in the hospitality industry and the relatively limited and restricted provision of web-based information services in the majority of Mediterranean countries. Since such substantial parts of inbound tourism to these countries is from Northern European markets, which are heavily web-oriented, this is perhaps surprising, but there is a clear implication that the promise of new techniques is not overcoming existing cultural and business practices and prejudices. In turn this implies that the development and take-up of even newer and more sophisticated services is likely to be even slower, a not entirely welcome conclusion for many.

Co-edited by Drs Andrew Frew, Martin Hitz and Peter O'Connor, these papers represent an excellent snapshot of current research findings and priorities in the tourism technology field. Importantly, though, they form part of a series which has been published every year since 1993, enabling researchers, students and practitioners alike to continue in the ENTER tradition of sharing knowledge and building bridges between the fields of travel and tourism and information and communications technologies.

Conclusions from ENTER 2003

What conclusions can be drawn from ENTER 2003? The first is that the exploitation of technology is now a key aspect of tourism and destination marketing. Its use is going to expand, and while it will be an enabler, it will also be an increasingly high overhead and a driver of change among DMOs. The second lesson is a direct corollary of this. As its importance grows so do the risks of getting it wrong. The annual collective expenditure by DMOs in the United Kingdom alone on technology is now in the tens of millions of pounds and similar sums are being spent by other countries throughout Europe. Developing the right strategies and ensuring effective implementation will be essential, not just for DMOs themselves but also for their constituents, the tourism businesses they are established to serve. This requires, as Ola Strangeways of SAS so correctly stated, a mindset that addresses the issues from the customer's perspective and which is intent on delivering solutions rather than technological innovation for its own sake.

Thankfully, the annual ENTER conferences, together with the ongoing work of IFITT, provide a superb platform for all parties to exchange experiences, to challenge conventional wisdom and to learn from each other, whether in the 'coolest city in Europe' or in the venue for the next ENTER conference, planned for January 2004, details of which can be found on the IFITT website www.ifitt.org.

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