Naturally NI

A practical guide to experiential tourism in Northern Ireland
Contents

Introduction ................................................................................ 1
What can the Intelligent Perspective Series do for me? ...........1
What is experiential tourism and how to use it? .....................2
Spotlight on this theme – Naturally NI .....................................4
Why this theme underpins NI’s approach to experiential tourism .............................................................. 8
Focus on Food & Drink, People & Stories and Our Crafts ......9
Opportunities for businesses ....................................................22
What you can do NOW ...............................................................25

ni2012 has changed global perceptions and created a legacy for tourism in Northern Ireland. But where do we go from here? What is the next step in our journey? Best practice points towards experiential tourism. By focusing on our strengths and natural assets, we can create truly authentic experiences and unlock stories to surprise and delight visitors. We believe in this approach and its ability to create opportunities to drive increased revenue in tourism. This publication has been designed to deliver the ideas and inspiration that can help us all to continue bringing to life the experiences we offer to our visitors. Collaboration will be the key to success – we are all unique but together we can deliver more rounded, more exciting and more inspiring experiences that visitors will spread the word about and return for more. The future success of the industry is in our hands.

Alan Clarke
Chief Executive of Northern Ireland Tourist Board

© Copywritten, designed and produced by Tallpoppies Ltd. 2013
Introduction

The Intelligent Perspective Series was developed to inspire everyone to take the next step along the road of delivering outstanding experiences to our visitors in Northern Ireland. Throughout the series, we have looked at what experiential tourism means for NI under the context of each experience pillar and how we can develop more authentic and joined-up visitor attractions through a clustering/collaborative approach.

We have created a common understanding of what experiential tourism is and isn’t for Northern Ireland. We have looked in depth at our product range and have identified some high growth opportunities e.g. screen tourism and cycling. We have looked at how these sorts of opportunities can link with other themes and be tailored to give particular benefits for individual business types. We have delivered insights and best practice from other destinations as well as already existing inspiration from Northern Ireland. And above all we have hopefully inspired and encouraged NI’s businesses to understand the benefits of working more closely together and to form clusters around which new innovation and new experiences can be developed.

This report, Naturally NI, is slightly different to the other reports as this theme cuts across and supports the whole experiential tourism approach in Northern Ireland – Naturally NI - Adding authenticity through our local culture. The main purpose of this theme is to demonstrate HOW to build better visitor experiences through what comes naturally to NI.

But we must remember that no one insight, theme or report in the series sits in isolation from another. So many of the ideas and examples in each of the reports cut across a number of our four main themes; Coasts and Lakes, Unique Outdoors, Creative Vibe and Living Legends; so we need to mix ideas from each and use our imagination, expertise and flair in doing so.
What is Experiential Tourism and how to use it?

Throughout this series we have looked at best practice examples of experiential tourism from across the globe. Each experience is unique – but the common thread in all the experiences is that they are more than just standard tourism products. Experiential tourism connects with visitors on a deeper level. It’s about the emotions, feelings and sensations that tourism can invoke. It’s about the stories that visitors learn, the connections they make and the memories they take home. It’s the things that surprise and offer the wow factor to our visitors – things that they will tell their friends about when they go home.

Benefits of Experiential Tourism

✔ Encourages visitors to explore NI in new ways
✔ Gives NI global stand-out
✔ Gives visitors a more authentic and consistent visitor experience overall
✔ Encourages businesses to work together - the competition is over there, not here;
✔ It is the key to offering greater visitor satisfaction, which will help us to attract more visitors who will spend more money and recommend their friends to visit too.

The definition of Experiential Tourism is: –

“...The creation of an emotional experience for the visitor that uses local authenticity to create unique global appeal. ”
How to put experiential tourism into practice in NI

In Northern Ireland, it is to be expected that we have fewer ‘Global Experiences’ than countries such as Canada. However, one way in which we can create a competitive edge is through working together to develop a critical mass of ‘Clustered Experiences’ adding value, depth and variety to Northern Ireland’s tourism offering. Another way of enhancing the visitor experience is through adding an experiential element to ‘Local Experiences’ to create the hidden gems and memories that keep visitors coming back.

This model can be put into practice across the five experience themes, which group together the best experiences that NI can offer visitors. Naturally NI cuts across and underpins all experiences regardless of the theme. It’s the glue that adds the local authenticity that visitors demand.

Level 1 – Global experiences
Global experiences are fewer in number. They are stand-out tourism experiences that every destination relies on. They are international demand generators that have the ability to put NI onto the wish list of visitors around the world. Northern Ireland can be famous for these experiences.

Level 2 – Clustered experiences
Clustered experiences are often smaller in scale but are equally as important. They can be clustered around a destination (e.g. Causeway Coast) or a theme (e.g. Creative Vibe). It’s about businesses working together to offer more and looking at existing tourism products in a new way. A way which gives the visitor more to do, more to spend their money on and more reason to return.

Level 3 – Local experiences
Local experiences are the businesses that go the extra mile to add depth and value to a visitor’s trip. They are the B&Bs that offer more than just a bed. The attractions that bring their visitor experience to life. The hotels that turn themselves into a living exhibit of the local culture that awaits outside their walls.
Spotlight on this theme – Naturally NI

Naturally NI is what comes natural to Northern Ireland. It’s everything that we often take for granted but what makes us globally unique.

Naturally NI includes the following three elements:

1. **Our Food & Drink**
Uniquely Ours

Naturally NI is our culture and our heritage. Adding it to everything that we do can add great depth and authenticity to the visitor experience in Northern Ireland.

Our food & drink, our people & stories and our crafts are the sorts of things that live in our visitors’ minds as being what they associate with Northern Ireland. Naturally NI is everything that cannot be replicated and is uniquely ours.

The purpose of this report is to offer ideas and inspiration on how to better capitalise on our unique competitive advantage through playing to these natural strengths – this local authenticity is what visitors want.
Why do people want a more authentic experience?

There are a variety of reasons why this trend for authenticity is growing. Visitors want to connect and immerse themselves into a local community where they can buy local produce, support local artisans and get a real sense of place. Even though social media and technology advancements have increased people’s desire for new experiences, there is still a longing for more basic human interactions. For this reason the tendency now is for people to place much more value on real things - real friends, real communities, real conversations. They want to socialise and interact more within a local area and are quicker at spotting the marketing ploys that try to imitate the ‘real deal’.

Fforest

At Fforest, a 200 acre camp on the West Wales Coast, visitors can enjoy the simplicity and pleasures of outdoor living in an outstanding natural environment, while living in geodesic domes, nomad tunnel tents or serviced log cabins. Promoted as an antidote to a busy modern world, the ethos is one of ‘community’, with guests breakfasting, learning and playing together as they seek to clear their minds by learning new skills or taking part in activities from wildlife boat trips to white water rafting.

Traditional and local skills such as bushcraft, hedge laying, pole lathing, coppicing and willow weaving are on offer, and there’s even an opportunity to help the team grow the vegetables which make it to the dinner plate each night.

Local produce is the order of the day, with meat and fish barbequed on charcoal made in the woods, bread and pizza made in the camp’s own wood-fired oven, home grown spit-roasted pig, and crabs cooked on the local beach.

www.coldatnight.co.uk
What do our visitors want?

The term ‘authentic’ has been lifted from the world of museums where experts would test whether a work of art is what it appears to be and therefore worth the price paid. We now use the term to describe a broad range of criteria on a visitors’ shopping list such as; general ambience; festivals, events, rituals, music, cuisine, costume, décor, architecture, staff nationality, language, crafts, experiences, tours, attractions, culture, community, local residents, textiles, design... and the list goes on. **So do we know how to give more authenticity across this wide kaleidoscope of tourism experiences and is it a one size fits all?**

Tapping into the assets of Naturally NI’s theme can appear very simplistic but its effect is very important and influential. It can make the difference from an ‘as I expected’ experience to something to really brag about. It’s often the small things that create a sense of place and give long lasting memories to our visitors.

Naturally NI is particularly important in adding depth and value in Local Experiences. By tapping into local food, drink, stories and crafts and by providing exceptional customer service, tourism businesses can really make the difference to the utter delight of visitors.

**If every tourism business just does one thing for each visitor that taps into this theme, we could collectively develop our tourism experiences in NI to be on a par with any destination. It really can be just that powerful.**

---

**Did You Know?**

“**The question here is not whether the individual does or does not ‘really’ have an authentic experience but rather what embellishes his experience with authenticity in his own view.**

Cohen (1998)

There is no black and white answer and it is a subjective notion that depends on what dreams and expectations an individual is projecting on the experience he has bought.

---

**“It’s the little details that are vital. Little things make big things happen.**

John Wooden
A first visit to Belfast and the first three hours – a tale of two visitors

**Visitor 1 - Alex**
- Taxi from the airport and you hear chat and stories of Harland and Wolff as well as the live traditional music playing at the many pubs across the city.
- Arrive at the B&B and greeted by the owner. Pulls you in for tea and scones to tell you some info about what’s on. She has already found out why you are here and what you need to know.
- Go out to see a couple of attractions on foot. Ask a passer-by for directions to Crumlin Road Gaol and they offer a friendly helping hand. They even go as far as to tell you about a great place to eat seafood en route. You get there and it is full of locals – a great buzz.
- Sharing a table in the restaurant with some locals you get chatting. Their stories are great and they invite you for an afternoon pint in the Duke of York – another legendary hostelry.

**Visitor 2 - Paul**
- Taxi from the airport. You follow the route to the B&B on your iPhone. Taxi driver is talking on his phone to a friend.
- Arrive at the B&B and ring doorbell a few times. Maid answers eventually but the vacuum cleaner is still running on the landing. Put bags down and you look around to speak to her again to ask about local bus times. She can’t help as she is not from the area.
- Go out to see a couple of attractions on foot. Follow your map but miss out on finding Crumlin Road Gaol. Ask a passer-by but they couldn’t help. Try to find something to eat – looking for a seafood place with a local buzz but can’t find any recommendations in any of the maritime attractions. Shame no one made the link.
- Feeling hungry, frustrated and tired, you dive into a nearby cafe which is full of tourists. You eat quickly and leave. You decide to now go to the welcome centre to try to get more information you need.
All visitors have to eat and drink – regardless of their reason for visiting. In fact it is reported that 80% of visitors say that food and drink alone will influence their choice of where to go. According to the NITB Consumer Barometer 2013, visitors to NI cited ‘experiencing good quality, food, drink and dining’ as a key factor when choosing the destination for a short break/holiday.

So food experiences have become more important in tourism than ever before and can be a way of a country differentiating themselves and being unique.

And strong as this influence is – it is even stronger when we offer quality, authentic regional food on our menus to satisfy visitors’ desire for an authentic experience of a country through its food.

It is argued that today, the consumer no longer just pays for the basic service, but instead they are happy to pay extra for a fuller and more complete experience. But they will expect more value and more experience in return. These food experiences can provide a gateway into local culture, creativity and landscapes as well as a chance to get closer and more involved in a locality.

Food provides a basis for tourism experiences by:

➤ Linking local culture and tourism
➤ Developing a quality food experience
➤ Producing distinctive regional foods
➤ Developing the critical infrastructure for food production and consumption
➤ Creating a sense of place and landscape

In Northern Ireland, good food is in our nature with the finest and freshest ingredients available anywhere in the world. For businesses who sell, produce or serve food, fully leveraging this strength for our visitors is a huge opportunity.

Food is a vital part of the tourism experience and is as important as accommodation, culture and scenery for visitors coming to experience the real Northern Ireland. Latest research tells us that visitors prefer fresh, seasonal, locally sourced produce on menus and that they are interested in where the food on their plate comes from.

The variety of Northern Ireland produce available gives us the scope to offer our visitor a great variety of food experiences.

But we need to do much more to encourage visitors to appreciate the wealth we have at our fingertips. NITB research in 2011 found that just 10% of GB consumers and 6% of RoI consumers would come to Northern Ireland just for the food. This is a very low proportion when we think of the wonderful natural larder we have. People clearly are just not aware of it.

The NITB Visitor Attitude Survey 2013 found that it is the people aspect of our food that performs strongly. Statements such as “friendly and efficient service” and “friendly, genuine welcome” were rated above average but it also reported statements such as “lack of locally sourced ingredients”, “poor value for money” and also “not enough information on places to eat and drink”. While these are things for us to work on, they represent new opportunities to grasp.

Did You Know?

GB and overseas visitors to Northern Ireland in 2012 spent approximately 33% of their total spend on food and drink. But NI residents spend even more! NI residents spent approximately 36% of their total spend on food and drink during a day out and just slightly less, 34% if they were staying away from home overnight. So food and drink is big business and visitors will spend it with you if you can provide interesting and appealing menus.
Provenance - Think Local

According to NITB research, 68% of RoI consumers and 58% of GB consumers agree that food is an important part of the holiday experience. However, only 28% of GB consumers and 17% of RoI consumers agree that local produce is very apparent in Northern Ireland's restaurants. This means that there is much that we need to do to ensure our wonderful local produce is reaching our visitor’s plates—and that we tell visitors when they are eating local produce. Food provenance and menu messaging are vital.

5 reasons why locally sourced food is good for business

1. Visitors are willing to pay more for food with provenance, so let customers know where it is from and how it is cooked.
2. Having a food experience encourages people to stay longer and spend more in visitor attractions and at festivals/events. If you don’t offer freshly baked cakes, scones and pots of tea—could you consider doing this?
3. You can differentiate your business by offering a themed food experience that links to your offer.
4. You can encourage new customers to visit your business by first attracting them to sample some home cooked food.
5. If you offer locally sourced food you will be supporting other local businesses and the wider community. This is great for helping to encourage collaboration and clustering.

Did You Know?

Visitors say that on average they would pay 7% more for local food. They will also spend that little bit more on local produce, which offers a sense of place and a true taste of the region.
**Recent Accolades**

The number of Northern Ireland producers awarded accolades in the Great Taste Awards – the ‘Oscars’ of the food and drink industry in the UK and Ireland - is phenomenal - 227 stars were awarded to NI food products in 2013. Category winners have been: in 2013, En Place Foods UK Ltd in Cookstown and The Yellow Door Deli in Portadown; in 2012 and 2011 Northern Ireland producers claimed the title of Great Taste Awards ‘Supreme Champion’; in 2011 McCartney’s of Moira for its traditional corned beef and 2012 Hannan Meats for its Guanciale, a cured bacon.

The 2014 Eating Out in Pubs Michelin guide revealed that County Down - with 7 restaurants - holds the highest number of recommended pubs county wide in Ireland: The Pheasant in Annahilt; Coyle’s in Bangor; Lisbarnett House in Comber; Grace Neill’s and Pier 36 both in Donaghadee; The Parson’s Nose and The Plough both in Hillsborough. Four NI restaurants gained exclusive Michelin Bib Gourmand marks in the 2014 Michelin guide - the Bib Gourmand category (affordable and enjoyable meal for £28 or less) Oregano – Ballyclare, Coppi – Belfast, Home Restaurant – Belfast, Fontana – Holywood.

These accolades are definite steps in the right direction. We have a food culture and heritage to be proud of. Telling our visitors about it can add so much to their experience.

Did You Know?

Three of our indigenous foods – Comber Early Potatoes, Armagh Bramley Apples and Lough Neagh Eels – now hold EU Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) status putting them on the world stage alongside Champagne and Melton Mowbray pork pies.

Northern Ireland’s reputation for high quality food & drink is going from strength to strength based on local businesses recognition in awards from The Guild of Fine Foods. With two supreme champions for the whole of the UK and Ireland (McCartneys and Hannan Meats) and European recognition of our Comber Early Potatoes, Armagh Bramley Apples and Lough Neagh Eels. It really is something to shout about. Our fresh local produce adds value and a real stamp of authenticity to the visitor experience. By linking with local produce there is a huge opportunity for Northern Ireland to grow its reputation on the global stage as a great place to visit and eat. After all, everybody remembers that time they had an exceptional food experience.

Michele Shirlow from Good Food NI
Top Tips

Think about the food on your menu – is it locally sourced? How is it cooked? Do you do your best to support your local suppliers? Visitors want to eat food that is grown or bred in Northern Ireland. The reason? Because it gives them an enhanced experience AND they are prepared to pay a premium for it. So be proud and tell your visitors that your ingredients are born, bred or grown in NI.

Think about your shopping list – which products that you currently use could be replaced by local produce? Contact local food producers or farmers markets to see what good value local suppliers can provide. Remember – NITB research indicates that 73% of NI consumers and 77% of RoI of consumers like to try local food when on holiday.

Tell the story – use local produce and tell your visitor who grew it, reared it or baked it! It’s as important to celebrate the ingredients as it is to promote the finished dish. Find out the stories from our producers – with our strong agricultural heritage set amongst breath-taking landscapes, there’ll be many stories that you can tell.

Little things make a big difference. If you’re a self catering accommodation provider, why not link up with local suppliers to leave a welcome hamper that is packed with local fare for your guests and provide information on where they can buy more? It is a great way for local suppliers to get better seen.

Create special packages including accommodation and meals using local produce. Leave recipe cards so people can recreate the dishes back home.

If you have biscuits or chocolates for guests in rooms – are there any local producers that may be able to link up with to add the authentic experience? It is always a little disappointing to be given a generic brand from England when there is so much more interesting produce closer to home.

Provide information on local restaurants/cafés etc to your visitors. Take their preferences into account e.g. Mature Cosmopolitans are more likely to prefer a fine dining experience, whereas Young & Lively want good quality ‘cheap eats’ such as burrito bars or noodle bars. Team up with a local restaurant to offer exclusive discounts for your guests.

Menu messaging

Why not include place and producer names to connect the food you produce with Northern Ireland. The perceived value and quality will be greater and your menu will turn into a story book which will attract an enthusiastic customer who appreciates good food.

Put yourself in your visitors' shoes – which dish sounds the more tempting and exciting?

Organic Short Horn Beef fillet reared on Lord Antrim’s Estate in the Glens of Antrim served with Causeway Cheese Mash and fresh seasonal greens from McKee’s Farm Shop

or

Fillet of beef served with mash and green veg
Creating food experiences

If we consider that every visitor – no matter who they are or why they are here – has to sleep somewhere and has to eat and drink, then this can be used as a way to enhance a host of other experiences as well as being a culinary food experience in its own right. Food and drink can be used as the basis for letting our creativity, innovation and imagination really flow. **It can give us the opportunity to be unique, to be outstanding and above all to memorable.** We just need to get inspired!

Belfast Restaurant Week

Belfast Restaurant Week, a delicious celebration of local food and events, has gone from strength to strength since its inception in 2012. Festival-goers can tuck in to Belfast’s eating scene at over 80 participating restaurants, with special offers and activities, food tours, talks, tastings, pop-up restaurants and much more.

Key to the festival’s success is its programme of experiential fringe events, which immerse visitors in aspects of Belfast’s culture in a fun and ‘hands on’ way.

2013 highlights included a 5 course gastronomic Titanic Taste Walking Tour, with theatrical guides taking participants on a journey through life in Belfast over a century ago - illustrated by good food, local music and craic - and Style Sunday, where a glamorous four course lunch accompanied trend forecasts, a mini fashion show and seasonal style tips from some of the country’s top style experts.

www.visit-belfast.com/food

Did You Know?

“There is nothing in the USA that compares to an Ulster Fry!” according to one respondent in research conducted by NITB in 2013. Make the most of breakfast – Northern Ireland has such a unique offering at the breakfast table with the holy trinity of potato bread, soda farls and wheaten bread. You can really make a deal of this and visitors will LOVE it!

Dine Around Deane’s

Originally part of Belfast Restaurant Week, Dine Around Deanes has become so successful that it is now a regular fortnightly fixture in Belfast’s foodie calendar.

On this unique dining experience, guests take a Double Decker Bus Tour to four different restaurants in the Deans portfolio, enjoying a different course at each, taking part in a cocktail-making masterclass and listening to live music sessions.

www.michaeldeane.co.uk/dine-around-deanes

Mourne Foods Cycle Trail

The Mourne Foods Cycle Trail, developed by the Enniskeen Country House Hotel in association with local food producers, pairs up gentle cycling and stunning scenery with delicious, artisan food from the local area.

On self-guided cycling tours, food lovers can stop off with local producers, hear their stories, buy directly from the farmer, and then store their provisions in the specially provided bike panniers.

A complimentary bus shuttle to the start point, coupled with flat and downhill cycling terrain, means the tour is suitable for the whole family. However for determined couch potatoes, electric bikes are also available to take the strain!

www.enniskeenhotel.co.uk/MourneFoodsCycleTrail.html
### From Bog to Bottle

**Muskoka’s Cranberry & Wine Discovery**

Muskoka in Ontario, Canada is recognised as one of the world’s great cranberry-growing regions. Capitalising on growing interest in local food and drink, a local grower is giving visitors the opportunity to follow cranberry production from native bog to wine bottle.

On guided tours, visitors can get a glimpse behind the scenes at the Johnston’s heritage farm and then stand in the low-growing vines and discover the surprising way cranberries are grown and harvested. Back at the winery, they learn about winemaking techniques before sampling the finished article in one of the few places in the world where it’s produced.

This is a good example of how a region has developed a story and experience around one of its core ingredients. What could be done with Armagh Bramley Apples for instance along these lines?

[www.cranberry.ca](http://www.cranberry.ca)
2. Our People & Stories

NITB undertook research in 2013 to ask visitors to explain the most memorable aspect of their trip to Northern Ireland. The research found that, underpinning all experiences, the role played by the locals of Northern Ireland was fundamental to visitors feeling that they had connected with the place. NI is famed for its friendliness and craic but many visitors were still surprised by how true this is. In nearly all the examples collected of ‘memorable experiences’ in NI, locals and staff were a central theme.

So what really stood out is that it is our people and our stories that create the memories that visitors take home.

What our visitors are saying

“Every place I stayed, the locals were so friendly and open. I learned so much about Northern Ireland.”

“We never realised how friendly EVERYBODY was.”

“The owner of our B&B helped give us the background of NI’s history which was very evocative.”

“The guide was excellent in terms of his historical knowledge and his ability to tell yarns.”

“Sitting in a pub being entertained by the publican – probably the funniest natural comedian ever! Hilarious!”

“The waiter was exceptionally good with our children and even remembered us three days later when we returned.”

“Visiting the Giant’s Causeway. Our guide had a lovely way of telling the two sides (scientific and mythical) to the story.”

“Chatting to a local on a bus! I love the pride locals have in their city, plus their easy going manner.”

“Meeting the local people in this country was very nice and interesting, as they were very open-minded and happy to tell me their stories.”

“Somewhat nervous of possible reaction to our Southern accents but staff were a pleasure to deal with – practical, helpful, courteous, humorous and friendly.”

“Somewhat nervous of possible reaction to our Southern accents but staff were a pleasure to deal with – practical, helpful, courteous, humorous and friendly.”

“Did You Know?”

Did you know that Winston Churchill once owned the Londonderry Arms Hotel in Carnlough, County Antrim? Did you know that Dungannon Park is home to the oldest dam in the island of Ireland? Did you know that over forty recorded shipwrecks lie on the seabed around Rathlin Island? Did you know that Killyleagh Castle is the oldest inhabited castle on the island of Ireland? Tell your visitors about things like this – it will give them a sense of place and surprise and delight them.
What story can you tell?

In this hyper-connected world, travellers of all ages are seeking a deeper connection with the destinations they visit. One of the major reasons for this demand is that guests are arriving to their destination with a wealth of information previously sourced through online research. They already know what they want to do and see and so now they are looking for a deeper connection. They want to know more. Innovative businesses realise this opportunity and introduce their visitors to a diverse network of people, stories and traditions in their local community. And the result is that the visitor spends more, stays longer and tells everyone about the experience they had. Everyone is delighted!

Visitors love stories. It helps them to connect with a place and feel like they’re part of it. Northern Ireland and ‘Irishness’ have a highly emotive appeal throughout the world – so use this to your advantage. Has your business been in the family for generations? Has a famous person ever stayed with you? Have you won any awards that you could show off?

What stories can you make more of? People will love you for it!

Top tips to storytelling

From Liz Weir, Ballyeamon Barn

Everyone has a story to tell and the art of storytelling is a skill which can be developed. Here are a few tips:

• Take your time – people here are fast talkers but we need to pace our stories, especially when talking to people who are unfamiliar with our accents and for whom English may not be a first language.

• Be natural – our local turns of phrase are lyrical and enrich any story. We may have to explain certain terms, but visitors are keen to learn local expressions.

• Know your story – find out the background to local landmarks, get behind the dates and dimensions. Learn about the meanings of place-names. Tell tales of local characters.

• Keep it short and snappy – watch out for people’s eyes glazing over. Little snippets are better than long drawn out rambles. Some stories are only worth a certain amount of time.

• Build up a repertoire – reflect on which of your stories go down best. Look for other similar ones.

www.ballyeamonbarn.com
How to tell a story

Ballyeamon Barn, is a hostel in the Glens of Antrim. But it is a hostel with a difference as visitors can join in on regular evenings of folklore, music and dance. The owner, Liz Weir, also offers workshops on storytelling, creative writing, music dance and traditional crafts. Here she offers some insights on the art of storytelling:

“When people come to Northern Ireland they are of course very impressed by the beauty of the scenery, but the interaction with friendly locals is something that is often discussed. Visitors want to get to know the real Northern Ireland and storytelling is a perfect medium to help them do so.

Stories come in many forms, from traditional tales of fairies and banshees, to more hard hitting personal recollections told during history tours. Visitors have a deep interest in history but appreciate hearing stories told by local people who have a feel for their own community. Our stories are rooted in the landscape. The told story touches the memory and engages the emotions far better than any printed brochure or power point presentation. While there are many natural storytellers in Northern Ireland, many people lack the confidence to even try.”

A quote from a visitor who tells what the power of a good story means to her

“In my two weeks in Northern Ireland and Scotland, I saw so many places. But the things I remember the best are the things that were connected to “stories”. Facts can be interesting, but most people retain stories way better than facts. Also – we tend to want to tell the stories we heard – again and again.

In Northern Ireland, we went first to the Giant’s Causeway. It was so beautiful and we spent a good amount of time there. Our tour guides were very knowledgeable and gave us a lot of facts. But the Giant’s Causeway can really stir one’s imagination. How wonderful it would have been if there could have been some storytellers at different points along the way to tell us some tales about the history of Giant’s Causeway and human interest stories from over the years. When I stand and view a historical site like that while I hear facts, I remember some of it. If I stood there and heard good stories, I would retain and tell all of them.

We went next to Carrick-A-Rede and Larrybane. There was a sort of storyboard at the entrance and I read it all. I still think about what an intriguing place I found this to be. But, oh, there must be so many stories from over the years at that location. I would have loved hearing some of them and would so enjoy being able to share some of them. It would have been wonderful had there been even one storyteller standing close to the storyboard to share stories.

Our next stop was Ballyeamon Barn. Now we had a whole evening of storytelling there – where we also spent the night. The storytellers were all from the area and we got to know them as well as their stories and their music and their poetry. We remembered the stories and talked about them throughout the trip. At Ballyeamon Barn – we felt that we got to know the people and also the area. We left with some idea about what life is really like there and what the people are like. Because of the stories, Ballyeamon Barn was one of the most memorable parts of our whole trip.

There is just something very magical about a storyteller and about hearing good stories. Storytellers do more than just tell stories – they paint pictures to go with the stories and we never forget them. The stories are not only educational; they also preserve the culture and instil values. The tour guides, brochures, travel books are all good aids to travel - as well as the photos and notes the travellers themselves take. But the storytellers are artists who can paint living pictures for the travellers to take home and cherish.

Jo Anne Jones, visitor to Northern Ireland from Jonesborough, Tennessee, USA
At the core of our tourism brand is who we are and what we stand for. Let’s remember what our attributes are:

➤ **Values**: Forward thinking, self believing, self aware, authentic
➤ **Behaviours**: Be yourself, be celebratory, be brave, be engaging, be realistic, be challenging

These words come from a deep exploration through research into how we see ourselves and most importantly how others see us. This is the core of our spirit and if we use this as our guide – we can only become unique and authentic ourselves.

So it is down to each and every one of us to take these sentiments to heart and make sure our visitors see and feel us at our authentic best.

It is all of us that will make the difference in tourism as we are the heart and soul of the brand.

There are 5 golden rules in how we do this:

1. **Being yourself.**
   Make sure that all your communications come from a person, not a ‘body’. The more personal touches that you can add to all your interactions the more people will feel they trust you.

2. **Being more personable.**
   Make sure that everyone who represents your business embodies the brand attributes too. People who are forward thinking, proactive, fun and engaging will be brilliant ambassadors for your business. The reverse is also true.

3. **Being more engaging.**
   Engage don’t hard sell. Think about how you can entice people to buy from you and also buy more experiences – if not from you, then from others in your community. Be enthusiastic and think collaboratively.

4. **Being more communicative.**
   People like to experience things in different ways using different senses. Whether you can appeal to people through sight, sound, touch, smell or taste – can you use three or more of these to do it? You will capture the excitement of more people if you can.

5. **Being more surprising.**
   How can you go the extra mile to really wow a visitor? What can you do that costs you nothing but is really quite extraordinary for them and will make you very memorable? What is it that you can delight with? You will reap the benefits tenfold – and it will make you feel good too!

Going from Good to Great

So what is exceptional customer service? And how do we do it? Of course there is a basic standard of service that we all expect when we are in a service environment. But these are not memorable or even things that you would mention to others. They are merely meeting expectations. We expect a clean and tidy bedroom in a hotel, our orders in a busy restaurant to be taken promptly. We expect people will say hello and goodbye and did you enjoy the experience. We expect people to be caring and polite to us. So how do we step our service up to make it memorable?

In 2010, NITB produced a toolkit on ‘16 simple steps to becoming visitor inspired’. Many of the steps resonate with exactly what Naturally NI is all about. Check how many of the 16 steps you have taken and also refer again to the guide – it is still highly relevant today. Download the toolkit at [www.nitb.com/ni-brand](http://www.nitb.com/ni-brand)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand behaviour</th>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BE YOURSELF</td>
<td>1 Remember. First impressions really do count.</td>
<td>• Talk to guests – before during and after their stay. Why not offer a free cup of tea or coffee on arrival.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 Yes. We can.</td>
<td>• Be worth your weight in gold. • Befriend a reliable taxi driver and keep giving him your business.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 Take pride in being proud.</td>
<td>• How can you celebrate your people more – a great chef, a talented barman, a brilliant story teller?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BE CELEBRATORY</td>
<td>4 Don’t sell the destination - sell the story.</td>
<td>• Collect all the stories you can and share them – knowledge, facts, tall tales.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 Plan a celebration – invite everyone.</td>
<td>• Be part of other events and celebrations happening locally – be the one who knows what’s on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BE BRAVE</td>
<td>6 Collaborate with others.</td>
<td>• Get together with others– what collaborative ideas can you all come up with? A food trail? A storytelling session? A collaboration around new product?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7 Embrace technology.</td>
<td>• Get to grips with social media – there are so many great tools for you to use to make a difference in your business – and to share with visitors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BE ENGAGING</td>
<td>8 If it isn't broken, don’t fix it.</td>
<td>• Ask visitors in advance what they would most like to see in NI and try to make this experience extra special for them. Do you know someone who could help?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BE REALISTIC</td>
<td>10 Be authentic.</td>
<td>• Pay attention to all the little things and turn ordinary into extraordinary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11 Get everyone singing the same song.</td>
<td>• Get staff to contribute to your vision. They may be younger than you or have different experiences. This can give a great perspective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BE CHALLENGING</td>
<td>12 Look at familiar things from a new angle.</td>
<td>• Be a visitor in your own business – what do you notice? Ask a friend to visit and be honest about what could be refreshed or improved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13 Set high standards.</td>
<td>• Simple things make a difference – look around in your business – is everything as good as it could be – the layout, the toiletries, the theme, the garden?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14 Be World Class.</td>
<td>• Look at what others are doing, take inspiration and do it for your own business with a Northern Irish twist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15 Push things to the limit.</td>
<td>• Gather ideas and make them happen – don’t just talk about it • Keep everyone inspired and lead by example.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16 Test, test and test again.</td>
<td>• Keep asking for feedback and take action on what you find out. • Encourage staff to be your eyes and ears.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Northern Ireland has always had a rich craft tradition – from ancient artefacts to modern day creations. It’s a thriving craft sector with numerous local artists producing unique hand-made jewellery, textiles, ceramics and furniture.

Today’s travellers demand ‘real’ experiences and like to buy products connected with the people and place – a unique reminder of their visit. Our contemporary craft offers visitors a connection with people and place.

Organisations like Craft NI (www.craftni.org) have taken on the remit of encouraging growth in the Northern Ireland’s arts and crafts industry and act as a catalyst for its development. The craft industry of Northern Ireland is a fantastic hook through which we can offer our visitors a really authentic taste of our culture, stories and people.

Research shows that the modern visitor wants to engage with local communities and participate in their culture. This is where craft can add depth and authenticity to the visitor experience in Northern Ireland. Our wealth of craft producers and artisans preserve Northern Ireland’s centuries old traditions, and tangibly bring our cultural heritage to life for our visitors in new and contemporary ways. There is huge potential to strengthen the link between craft and tourism even further. Tourism can provide new markets for craft producers, and in turn a vibrant craft scene can add attraction, rich stories and animation to Northern Ireland as a tourist destination.

Alan Kane, Chief Executive of Craft Northern Ireland

Did You Know?

Craft NI has developed a Craft Map which signposts where visitors and locals can experience and buy the best of Northern Ireland's craft. This is a really good resource for passing on to visitors. See www.craftni.org for further details.
7. Économusée

‘Économusée’ is a global working museum project which combines culture, craft and tourism to create an economic platform for craft artisans practicing traditional techniques. Through the project, participating countries receive funding to work with local artisans to convert their workshop into an Économusée, where visitors are invited to watch artisans at work, learn about the history of their craft and the heritage of the traditional skill.

There are now three Économusée in Northern Ireland. When visiting Broglasco Farm, home of Broighter Gold Rapeseed Oil, visitors can watch the oilseed rape being transformed into a crystal clear golden liquid, wander through the exhibition to explore the historical connection to the Broighter Hoard, and learn more about the inspiration behind Broighter Gold Rapeseed Oil and the local restaurants that use the oil in their menus.

At Scullion Hurls, on the edge of the Antrim Coast, the Scullion family invites visitors to experience the craftsmanship involved in hurl making, by watching the intricate processes involved and explore the exhibition area to learn about the history of hurling and the family connection behind the business.

The newest addition to the trio, Steensons are a family run goldsmiths who for nearly forty years have been producing strong contemporary design with the highest standard of craftsmanship. Visitors will be able to visit Steenson’s workshop and watch their unique piece of jewelery being made before they buy it.

8. Be inspired on the Cabot Trail

Looking at one of the leaders in artisan trails is the Cabot Trail in Nova Scotia. This is a particularly interesting case study for NI because it could set our vision for what Économusée could perhaps become?

The Cabot Trail in Nova Scotia, one of National Geographic’s ‘Drives of a Lifetime’, is a real magnet for artists and creative people from across the world.

Home to an eclectic mix of artisan workers who have joined forces to create a fantastic range of visitor experiences and packages, the trail offers a great opportunity for visitors to immerse themselves in local arts and crafts, meet the artists, share their passion and enjoy their hospitality.

On the ‘Find Your Inner Mermaid’ experience, visitors can learn about the history of local sea glass, go to a beach to find their own gems and create their own beautiful piece of jewellery in the studio, alongside the artist.

‘Painting en Plein Air’ sees guests paddling by kayak to beautiful St Anne’s Bay, where they join renowned watercolour artist Kenny Boone as he teaches the basics of watercolour painting.

At the Cape Breton Centre for Art and Design, visitors can even create a special memory and experience the thrill of making their own wedding rings!

www.cbisland.com/regions/cabot-trail

“Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust is leading the Économusée network in Northern Ireland which in partnership with organisations in Canada, Norway, Iceland, Sweden, Faroe Islands, Greenland and the Republic of Ireland aims to develop craft and artisans into visitor attractions. The existing three Économusées in the Causeway Coast and Glens, Broighter Gold Rapeseed Oil, Scullion Hurls and Steensons Jewellers, offer unique opportunities for visitors to learn about local craft, local history and experience these crafts.

Maxime Sizaret, Chief Executive, Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust"
To effectively offer tourism experiences in Northern Ireland we must start to work together. You are not able to do this on your own! So collaboration is key.

But who do you work with? How do you start it?
If you have been used to working on your own and keeping a close eye on neighbouring tourism providers in case they steal your customers – THINK AGAIN! Competition isn’t ‘here’ – it is ‘over there!’ We must start to organise ourselves to reflect the way that visitors make decisions.

The buying decision for our visitors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Customer Decision</th>
<th>Customer mindset</th>
<th>Does a business collaborate or compete?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FIRST</td>
<td>Will we be able to do what we want to do in NI?</td>
<td>NI tourism businesses collaborate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECOND</td>
<td>Where in NI can we meet our needs (activities, places to visit, places to stay)? REGION</td>
<td>Regional/county tourism providers collaborate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THIRD</td>
<td>We have found a great deal/ offer to stay at X (hotel/B&amp;B etc) – what can we do nearby? TOWN/VILLAGE</td>
<td>Local area tourism providers collaborate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOURTH</td>
<td>Which restaurant/activity provider shall we choose in X? What else can we do here?</td>
<td>Same providers compete (on value and quality – not on price, because it drives down the market), everyone else collaborates</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tips on how to collaborate

✔ Choose other providers who have the same quality and values as you do.
✔ Select and approach those businesses that you know your visitors also visit on their trip. You are then ‘linked’ by the visitors that you share.
✔ Have trust, loyalty and transparency between everyone in your collaboration group.

Working together brings great rewards for everyone – better insights, more bookings, more support and an opportunity to grow and learn.
A final word on Clustering

The idea of clustering is at the core of how we can deliver experiential tourism in Northern Ireland. Throughout all of the guides in the Intelligent Perspective Series we have looked at the different hooks, themes, products and experiences that you can start to form clusters around to benefit your business.

As a reminder, let's again consider a cluster around a theme. Regardless of what theme we put in the centre – Coasts and Lakes, Unique Outdoors, Creative Vibe or Living Legends – each will have an element of Naturally NI and also links to the other themes. It is your choice how you put it together and who you chose to work with and how you promote it. You just have to get started!
Opportunities for businesses

A final reminder on the Benefits of Clusters

✔ Can operate as a strategic alliance with a single stronger voice
✔ Can make a stronger bid for funding
✔ Economies of scale in joint marketing initiatives
✔ Greater opportunities to learn from each other and access useful knowledge and insights
✔ Can share resources (marketing, technologies, benchmarking etc)
✔ Encourages innovation
✔ Promotes better business through providing a joined up experience to visitors.
## What you can do NOW

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What you can do NOW</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collaborate with others</strong></td>
<td>How are you going to use clustering in your business? Who are you going to work with? Why not invite a few others to get together and make a plan to get started?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Get the basics right</strong></td>
<td>People want good value, good service, authenticity, lots of information, an integrated tourism product and life to be made easy. Above all they want you to care about them and their holiday. Do you do enough? What more can you do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Understand what visitors want</strong></td>
<td>Understand all the different visitor segments – who they are what they like and how best to reach them. Find ways to get your business better noticed by the types of visitors that are just right for you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Keep an eye on others and copy their good ideas</strong></td>
<td>Look at what others are doing. What good ideas can you adapt for your own business or tell another local business about so they can adopt it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Be proud of NI and all that we have to offer</strong></td>
<td>Be proud of NI and show people this. Be proud of our food, our stories, our achievements, our heritage, our history and our people. Visitors are keen that you share your culture with them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Know what is going on</strong></td>
<td>Know the stories of your local area and share them with visitors. Know what is on locally and what visitors might like to go to. What events, festivals, open days, etc. could you tell people about?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Share more of your own stories. Skills and traditions</strong></td>
<td>Do you have a specific skill or passion? Do you sing, tell poetry, tell jokes or play an instrument? Can you share this with visitors? What family stories and folklore can you share with visitors? How would you do this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Help to join the dots</strong></td>
<td>Ask visitors where they have been before visiting you and also where they plan to go afterwards. Can you start to help them to join the dots? Lack of awareness is a key issue for visitors – how can you help to ensure your visitors know everything to see and do in the area?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>