

## **European Tourism – Building a sustainable future Sicily 27 -31 march 2011**

European Tourism – Building a sustainable future is a 2 year project between Sicily, Catalonia and Scotland that aims to promote a greater awareness and co-operation between and within countries to deliver tourism and related benefits. I would like to acknowledge the support and funding provided for this partnership project within the framework of the Leonardo da Vinci programme of the European Commission (DG EAC) that has made this programme possible.

The study tour was conducted over 3 days and is best summarised under 3 broad headings.

### **Art and Culture Accommodation and slow food History.**

#### **Art and Culture**

In this northern part of Sicily are 2 hidden gems – Parco Fiumara d'arte (an area of land embracing old river beds, hills and shoreline where 9 inspired pieces of art are located) and Art Hotel Atelier sul mare. (A hotel with 20 rooms inspired by artists and a further 20 in a more traditional style)

Parco Fiumara d'arte provides the visitor with a trail that would take all day to complete and appreciate, and comprises of large sculptures and inspired decorative art. There was only time to visit 'window on the sea' an 18m high reinforced concrete window frame that allows visitors to view the sea through a window and reflect on what they see. 2 further sculptures could be viewed from the main road, but time was not available to visit these.



Art Hotel Atelier sul mare is a 40 bedroom hotel with 20 rooms presented in styles inspired by artists. Not all rooms would be to everybody's taste, but there will be at



least one artist inspired room that somebody would be comfortable to sleep in. The further 20 rooms are in a more traditional design that allows the hotel to provide flexibility and alternatives for the visitor. This was a very interesting visit and experience as you are embraced with art in different styles and methods of delivery from before entering the property and within the entrance foyer and ceramics workshop. Once past this,

there is nothing to suggest that any of the rooms are different from each other until you open the door, and then the wow or Hmmm factor hits you. I very much liked this idea and it is something worth exploring in Scotland. I would not advocate going down the route of the 'Robbie Burns, Prince Charlie, Rob Roy concept as I find that a bit stereotypical and reminiscent of shortbread tins and see you jimmy hats, but I think that there is a market for artist inspired rooms as part of a hotels unique selling point.

We also visited a house that was once owned by a famous Sicilian writer. I did not find this very inspiring as it was not someone that I had heard of or knew anything about. This would I feel be more appropriate for an audience who knew of the person and appreciated their work. In some ways it is a bit like explaining the workings of the Brahan Seer to somebody from Cyprus.



## Summary

There is significant potential in considering how in Scotland we could look to diversify more into capturing a different market and accommodating their desires. In Scotland we actively promote our lochs, mountains, views and castles, and also aspects of our culture that might mean more to us than to visitors. E.g. Robbie Burns. Art generally has no geographic boundaries, yet there are a number of art pieces emerging across our road networks, towns and cities but what are we doing to promote/support these? There is an opportunity here that has been missed and we should be considering how we can resolve that. We have embraced and

successfully promoted the Speyside whisky trail, so why not look at promoting an art trail where large pieces of art are publicly and freely available for all. There is also the opportunity to consider themed rooms or themed hotels that provide something different for the visitor. We are a very reserved nation and as such trying to persuade people to consider this could be difficult, but it does remain a challenge that should be considered. Rather than moaning about lack of visitors or not responding to visitors reactions to being in the same style of room for the 9<sup>th</sup> night in a row, we should be looking at adding to the experience for the visitor.

## **Accommodation and Food**

A number of Hotels and accommodation opportunities were visited ranging from the 4 \* accommodation in the resort of Taormina to the village of Novara di Sicilia struggling to embrace tourism opportunities. The tourism resort of Taormina had no appeal for me as in my opinion it offered fairly standard (and not 4\* accommodation) at very high rates. There was nothing about the Hotel that suggested any kind of quality experience. The rooms were literally on top of each other with limited privacy. It is the type of hotel that you might expect to find promoted at the more expensive tour market. By contrast, what was on offer in Novara di Sicilia and Agriturismo Villa Nicetta offered the visitor the opportunity to live amongst the locals in converted buildings that had character. Novara di Sicilia in particular has over 50% of the properties abandoned and given its setting in the hills could be an ideal location to explore from, and to provide a retreat from busier places on the island. There is an opportunity there to carefully and selectively develop old properties and to promote an experience, not a just a holiday. In Scotland, we are fortunate to have considerable accommodation in less visited areas, but we also have very limited opportunities to acquire abandoned properties for conversion as a result of price.



The approach to food in Sicily is something that we should adopt. In Scotland the demand for local produce is growing, but hampered by legislation, health and safety etc, to the point that it almost becomes uneconomical to sell. There is however movement to improve this, and for example on the west coast there has been a big increase in the amount of pigs being reared to produce local meats. Slaughtering of these is however restricted to core processing plants and adds to the costs. In Sicily, the food is local, fresh, well cooked, varied and affordable. In Scotland we take all the excellent fresh ingredients and prepare them in an artistic way on plates, with fancy sauces, squirts of red stuff and unusual combinations.



Sicilians produce good fresh food that comes out of the pan without the need for decoration.

### Summary

A number of years ago a restaurant opened in Edinburgh using the promise of good food, cooked well and affordable, without the need for a qualified artist to put it on a plate. It was successful. Why do we not have more of these places producing good food, that is well priced and without the additional cost of a squirt of sauce or attention paid to balancing peas in a pyramid? We have some of the best produce in Europe, why mess around with it and add to the cost?

### History

Sicily has a long and varied History where it has gone through a variety of 'ownerships'. Most significant were the Greeks who settled there approx 2500 years ago. Sicily is full of Greek buildings and ruins and apparently there are more in Sicily than in Greece. I do however feel that not enough is being done to promote Sicily's history out with the key tourism areas. In Taormina, even late in the day, there were a significant number of tourists about visiting the amphitheatre. I would guess though that the amphitheatre at Tindari to the north had no visitors. Both are equally important in the history of the country, but only one of them gets the attention. Is this a result of targeted tourism marketing?



Food culture such as making traditional cheeses in Novara and the history and social activity surrounding these are very important and more could be made to promote these for visitors. In Scotland we have gone over board with whisky and distillery tours, for once you have seen how whisky is made, every other distillery shows the same process. We



have many other unique experiences though, but again these are hampered by legislation, health and safety etc. Baxters of Speyside have tours of their processing plant, but they can afford to put the infrastructure in place to accommodate this, yet how many people have visited the Rannoch smokery to see how venison is prepared and smoked? In Sicily, they just get on with it and in places invite people in to watch the process and taste the product.

## Summary

History and culture play an important part in the life of Sicilians and they are proud of what they have. They are not very good at sharing it though and it was only with the benefit of local knowledge that we were able to see and experience so much. We are fortunate to have the likes of Historic Scotland and the National Trust who take a serious interest in the built environment and actively promote this across Scotland. It is possible to travel no more than 30 miles in any direction in Scotland without finding some built structure of interest. The Sicilians have a tremendous amount to offer the visitor, but appear to lack any infrastructure to deliver this outside of key areas. I feel that there is considerable demand for specialised tours in Sicily that embrace quality rural accommodation, good food, idyllic settings, rural life, history and culture. But who will deliver these? We also need something akin to that in Scotland that allows for small groups to tour out with the Loch Lomond, Edinburgh, Inverness corridors, and to get a flavour of the real Scotland, not the mass produced and promoted Highland Hotels tours. Although these do exist, is there an opportunity to look wider and more International and to have a consortium of people offering affordable tailor made rural holidays?

## In Conclusion

This exchange highlighted to me various opportunities for both Scotland and Sicily.

- We should embrace the simple approach to food production and presentation;
- We need to look harder at the opportunities for more specialised tours. They do exist but how many of the providers work together?
- We need to explore opportunities for a more diverse range of accommodation that is not the 4 concrete walls and en-suite, to your right or left when you go in the room;
- We should promote our range of road and street art that is so often paid for and then forgotten about but still visible.

For Sicily, there are significant opportunities for taking visitors away from key resorts and offering a more rural experience that can be tied into geothermal spas, boat trips, bike hire, rural life and tradition, quality food and culture and to discover many of the secret and hidden gems that are there to be discovered.

A down point for me was during the flight from Milan to Gatwick. An Italian couple were trying to order food and the Stewardess was adopting the speak slow and loud in English approach, and waving things at them in the hope that they would suddenly understand English. Why are they not taught basic phrases in 3-4 languages – this would immediately improve customer care. They were then short changed as there were no Euros for change and got it in Sterling after discussing with another steward what the exchange rate could be.

If that had been my first experience of another country, I do not think that I would have returned. There is an important lesson for us all there regarding first impressions.

Mike Strachan

