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**CHALLENGES FOR THE NORTHERN
IRELAND TOURIST BOARD IN
MARKETING NORTHERN IRELAND**

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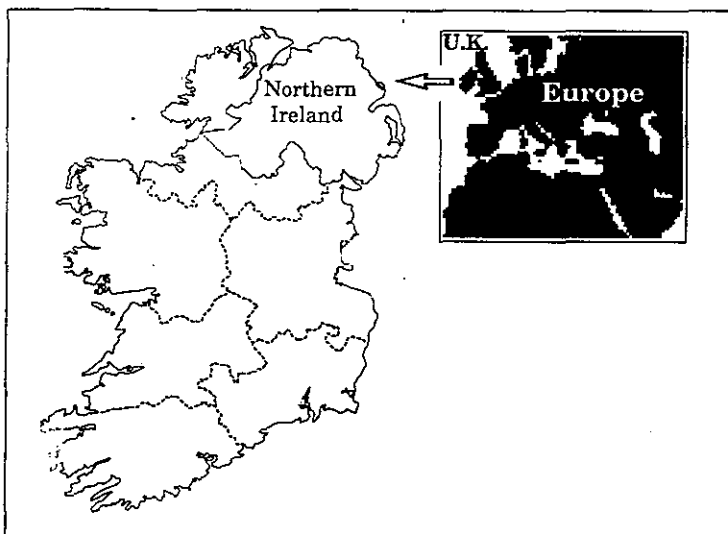
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INTRODUCTION

Northern Ireland (NI) is located on the northeast quadrant of the Irish land mass, and encompasses the six counties. While NI may be physically located on the island of Ireland, it is not a part of the Republic of Ireland. Rather, it is a part of the United Kingdom.



The Republic of Ireland (more commonly referred to by Northern Irishers as just the "South") gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1921. The predominance of those citizens loyal to Great Britain were located in the North. So, rather than risk major conflicts, the British government decided to maintain rule over six of the nine counties of the north of Ireland and called this area "Northern Ireland". Even the border between the north and south is controversial, in some areas, one farm is in the South (or the Republic

of Ireland), while directly across the road, a brother's farm is located in the North. In fact, the northern most point on the island of Ireland is not in NI, but rather in the South. So, one can see how confusing it can be for both the local and the tourist alike.

The political aspects of Northern Ireland can also be very confusing. The republicans feel that it should be a part of the Republic of Ireland. The unionists and loyalists feel that it should remain a part of the United Kingdom. There are many different loyalist and republican groups, each with different messages.

TOURISM

Northern Ireland as a tourist destination has not been high on most tourists' lists. Northern Ireland's image has been shaped by the media reporting on the more recent conflicts and terrorist activities of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Loyalist groups. In the past, the "troubles" as the conflict is commonly referred to, have been the overall driving force behind the news of Northern Ireland around the world. Pictures of bombed out buildings, soldiers in combat fatigues with rifles at the ready, and young men in terrorist type outfits have been the image that the world has seen of Northern Ireland over the past.

However, in August 1994, the IRA announced a cease fire. Two months later, the Loyalists followed suit. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) maintained the cease fire

would have major implications for an increase in tourism. Ian Henderson, Chief Executive of the NITB, has stated that tourism would increase by 20% overall in 1995.¹

In pre-trouble times, Northern Ireland as a tourist destination had no special advantages over the rest of the United Kingdom and in a study carried out by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board in 1978, it was demonstrated that even a peaceful Northern Ireland was perceived as having no advantage over the South of Ireland as a destination.²

Another poll in 1990 found that some 73 percent of residents of the South had never spent a night in the North.³ Against this extremely negative background, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board was assigned the task of increasing tourism to Northern Ireland.

In 1990 a Cardiff University/Queen's University of Belfast study of *The Main Factors Influencing Success and Growth in The Small and Medium-sized Hotel Sector in the British Isles*⁴ included a census of Northern Ireland Hotels and a sample of Republic of Ireland Hotels. The findings showed that in spite of the troubles in Northern Ireland, there was little difference in the degree of optimism for the future between Northern and Southern Irish hoteliers. Northern Ireland hoteliers in common with their southern counterparts expressed cautious optimism about the future but stressed that more could be done in developing the industry infrastructure and in marketing hotels if more government assistance was forthcoming. Another important factor identified as being necessary for future growth was the whole area of staff development and training especially management training.

The NITB in conjunction with the district councils and the hoteliers were reasonably successful in stimulating a slow growth in hotel occupancy rates through a concentration on business travellers, encouraging tourists to visit friends or relatives, promoting special interest holidays such as golfing or fishing, encouraging more people to holiday at home and taking advantage of higher prices in the South to encourage shoppers. One of the most effective campaigns to attract Southern visitors was the "Belfast is buzzing" campaign (initiated in 1987) which proved highly effective in bringing shoppers back to the city centre. There was a slow steady growth in hotel room occupancy from an all time low in 1973 of 32% to a peak in 1987 of 47% (see Table 1). This was encouraging but occupancy rates still lagged behind the rest of the U.K. and Ireland especially in terms of bed occupancy, (see Table 2).

Certainly, the troubles have had an impact on tourism in Northern Ireland. When the terrorist incidents were low, tourism was up; conversely, when the troubles escalated, tourism went way down.

Against the encouraging backdrop of the best tourist figures since 1973, the NITB and the Tourism Branch of the Department of Economic Development launched a planning document *Tourism 90*⁵ in 1987. The document addressed key areas such as marketing,

1. Speech given at *Peace: The Economic Dividend for North and South*, Irish Peace Institute Conference; Limerick, Ireland, March 30, 1995.

2. *Attitudes to Holiday in Northern Ireland*, Northern Ireland Tourist Board Study, May, 1978

3. *Northern Ireland Tourist Marketing in the Irish Republic: A Qualitative Survey*, Adelaide Market Research, Dublin, July, 1990.

4. "The Main Factors Influencing Success and Growth Small and Medium Sized Hotel Sector in the British Isles," Report of Cardiff University/The Queen's University of Belfast. *Survey of Hotels* (March 1990).

5. *Tourism 90*. Northern Ireland Tourist Board (February 1987), pages 1-45.

Table 1
Average Room Occupancy

	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Avg.
1995	46												
1994	36	48	50	49	54	57	44	54	60	55	55	44	51
1993	37	51	49	48	53	62	47	52	55	50	43	32	48
1992	34	46	46	46	51	54	49	56	56	49	43	34	47
1991	37	42	44	48	56	57	55	59	59	50	47	33	49
1990	33	45	53	49	59	62	40	58	62	53	46	34	50
1989	37	47	49	53	56	55	50	56	59	51	53	34	50
1988	35	44	46	46	45	52	47	48	53	46	47	32	45
1987	33	49	46	49	51	52	46	54	58	53	45	32	47
1986	31	42	41	42	47	50	44	53	51	48	41	30	43
1985	37	42	45	49	51	51	51	54	48	50	42	28	46
1984	30	41	42	44	49	51	44	54	52	49	43	34	44
1983	29	34	42	41	42	45	41	47	44	40	40	31	40
1982	25	30	35	32	38	37	33	40	40	39	32	28	34
1981	30	37	38	33	34	34	33	31	36	38	31	26	33
1980	32	33	34	35	36	41	36	40	43	35	34	25	34
1979	28	33	33	35	42	42	37	40	43	35	34	25	36
1978	30	38	38	33	40	37	37	39	41	37	36	25	36
1977	26	34	37	30	29	38	33	37	38	35	34	26	33
1976	31	24	32	34	37	35	35	32	32	29	32	23	32
1975	31	34	33	36	37	39	42	40	38	32	32	26	35
1974	30	32	32	35	25	32	38	34	35	34	36	26	32
1973	30	29	27	27	30	36	36	37	38	33	33	36	32

(Source: NITB)

public relations, research, the development of infrastructure, registration of premises and special initiatives. This document also signalled the start of a more professional approach to marketing and planning by the NITB.

Special initiatives included targeting conference business, special product packaging and the promotion of Regional Tourism Organisations (groups of councils to promote a region rather than an individual council area).

Table 2
Comparative Occupancy Rates

1987 Hotel Bed Occupancy Rates

Northern Ireland	England	Scotland	Wales	Republic of Ireland
31.6%	43.9%	38.1%	40.9%	38.0%

(Source: Tourist Board Statistics)

Tourism figures for 1994 indicate that the largest number of tourists to NI came from Great Britain, with the second largest coming from the Republic of Ireland.

Northern Ireland tourism has been on a slow, but steady upward curve, with or without the cease fire. As an example, CIE tours has found that the North is selling surprisingly well. However, it is still a long way from the South (out of 60,000 visitors to Ireland in 1993, only 200 wanted to cross the border to the North).⁶

In the past, the major types of holiday package tourism that have been available include: (1) golf packages; and (2) fishing packages; to a lesser extent, (3) walking packages; (4) cycling packages and (5) bird watching packages. These have been marginally successful. The NITB's figures indicate that the majority of tourists to NI are Visiting Family and Relatives (VFR), which accounted for about 41% of total tourists in 1993.⁷ This type of tourist spends much less on accommodations and internal travel than do tourists on holiday, or even the business person on a business trip. However, VFRs spend more on entertainment (including drinks) and shopping than do their counterparts.

In 1989 the Department of Economic Development produced a planning document *Tourism in Northern Ireland - A View to the Future*.⁸ This document took a critical look at the contribution of tourism to the Northern Ireland economy. Some of the most worrying facets to emerge were:

- In spite of record figures in 1987, the Northern Ireland tourist sector was the weakest in the British Isles in terms of both GDP and employment provision (see Table 3):
- In addition, the overall improvement in "tourist" figures was still dogged by the lack of real holiday makers staying overnight in Northern Ireland:

Table 3
Northern Ireland Tourism Contribution
to GDP and Employment

	1987 Contribution to GDP	1987 Tourism as % of Total Civil Employment
Northern Ireland	1.57%	0.9%
Great Britain	4.2%	4.7%
Republic of Ireland	50.3%	6.2%

(Source: NITB/Bord Failte)

6. Kathy Sheridan "Northern Ireland Tourism has long road to travel" *The Irish Times*, Sep. 10, 1994, Page 6.

7. *Tourism Facts-1993*, Northern Ireland Tourist Board, Belfast, April, 1994.

8. *Tourism in Northern Ireland, A View to the Future*. Department of Economic Development (June 1989), pages 1-24.

Table 4
1987 Staying Visitors Reason For Visit

Reason	Republic of Ireland	Great Britain	Northern Ireland
VFR*	21%	20%	50%
Business	18%	23%	22%
Holiday	49%	44%	13%
Other	12%	13%	15%

* VFR = Visiting Friends or Relatives
(Source: NITB/Bord Failte)

The only conclusion that could be drawn from these figures was that "the vast majority of those visiting Northern Ireland make the visit because they have another reason for doing so". The report pointed out that tourism only contributed a revenue of c.£15m per year and delivered between 1,000 and 1,500 jobs - a poor return for an investment by government of some £6m per annum. The report suggested "an agenda for action" which included:

- a drive to improve the image of Northern Ireland as a tourist destination;
- an attempt to address poor integration and presentation of the tourism product;
- identifying gaps in the market;
- improving the marketing of the product;
- improving the structure of the industry;
- improving the provision of amenities;
- improving the transport linkages to the province;
- and finally and most importantly, developing a new tourist organisation.

The report recognised fundamental weaknesses in the structure of the NITB and in its staff and suggested ways of addressing these weaknesses.

By 1990, restructuring of the NITB was well underway with the organisation tasked with the objectives of aggressively marketing and developing tourism in Northern Ireland. Their targets included increasing the number of tourists to about 1.6 million per year by 1994 (an increase of about 70% over 1988 figures) and that half of the increase, i.e. 300,000 should be holiday visitors.

There has been a move over the past few years by NITB and Bord Failte (The Republic of Ireland's tourist board) towards encouraging tourists to come to Ireland, not just the South or the North, but to both parts of the island.

Investment in tourism for 1995 was £6.3m for the entire island of Ireland. Only £200,000 is coming from the North, with over £3m coming from the European Union (EU) and some money coming from the International Fund for Ireland. Information on the number and types of sleeping accommodations that were available in NI as of March 31, 1995 suggests that there are enough rooms to satisfy the increase in demand for tourists that would come after the cease fire.

However, the majority of these beds are not in the types of accommodations that many tourists want. For example, there are only 4 four-star hotels with 365 total bedrooms in all of Northern Ireland. During the Christmas 1994 buying season, there was an acute shortage of available rooms in the Belfast area.

It appears that visitors from the South were shopping in Belfast for their Christmas gifts. Due to a shortage of suitable hotel accommodation, the Craigavon area has not been able to develop to its full potential⁹. In addition, many bedrooms are located far from the cities in rural bed and breakfast type accommodations. Much of the tourism building that has taken place over the past few years was done on speculation, because of grant funding from the European Union. As an example, a new conference centre is being built in downtown Belfast. The conference centre will have two halls; the main hall will have seating for 2,200 and the minor hall will have seating for 500.

Hilton Hotels have also planned a four star hotel with 187 bedrooms right next door to the conference centre. However, concerns about the lack of additional hotel space available near the conference centre, as well as the small size of the seating capacity of the centre, have already raised questions about its viability before it is even open.

There is a definite need for additional rooms throughout NI. This could be accompanied by either the building of new hotels, or adding rooms to currently built hotels.

Hotel and restaurant employees have not been trained adequately to be able to handle international tourism. Service standards in NI are below the rest of the United Kingdom. For example, a very large percentage of employees in the restaurant industry only work part-time. Tipping of employees is not something that is expected in NI, rather, it is done only for extraordinary service. Consequently, there is little incentive for service standards to be high. Another example is one that happened a few years ago, when a hotel chain looked into the possibility of training their employees. The owner of the large chain would not permit funding for the project, as it was felt that the employees would be trained, then work for a short period of time and leave for another company.

The North simply does not have enough tourist attractions for visitors to spend their entire holiday in NI. With the NITB and Bord Failte having agreed to market the island of Ireland as a single unit, tourists can now enjoy the attractions of both the North and South of Ireland in one package.

CONCLUSIONS

Northern Ireland has had 25 years of bad publicity and overall low tourism numbers mainly due to the troubles. NITB has pretty much been on its own in promoting NI to

9. "Welcoming to visitors - hunt on for hotel sites," *The Newsletter*, 16 May, 1995, page 12.

the rest of the world, without a great deal of success. There are a limited number of tourist attractions in NI, making it difficult to promote NI as a stand alone holiday destination.

These issues have been dealt with through the cessation of violence and the joint promotion of the entire island of Ireland between Bord Failte and NITB. This should go a long way towards increasing tourism numbers in NI.

However, the lack of enough bed spaces and adequate training for tourism industry employees can lead to long term disastrous results for NI tourism. These are areas that need to be improved as rapidly as possible, in order to encourage repeat tourism, as well as helping the tourist take home positive images of NI to their friends and relatives.

Northern Ireland tourism is on the right road, however, it is not moving fast enough and may well be overtaken by other more popular tourist destinations.