



Press Release

Tuesday 29th June 2010

Major European Seminar on Religious Heritage Tourism

Sixty western tourism businesses working with major European destinations

Sixty tourism businesses from across the West and North West regions met with five European best practice Religious Heritage destinations in the Museum of Country Life, Castlebar on the 29th of June last. The seminar, part of the European Union's Interreg Atlantic Area Programme, attracted over 100 participants including tourism businesses, local authorities, Ireland West Airport Knock, regional and local agencies and community groups.

The event was ran in conjunction with the regional tourism authority for the Santiago de Compostela region in Spain which manages one of the most significant pilgrimage trails in the world – The Camino.

Speaking about the event, Eva Dearie of Fáilte Ireland said –

"With such an important lead partner involved, Fáilte Ireland sees this as an important and complimentary learning initiative for itself and tourism providers in Ireland engaged in Religious Heritage Tourism. The European partners presented, in a very practical way, what their regions are doing to develop and promote their religious heritage tourism product. They also showcased sample packages from their region and provided information on how they manage pilgrimage routes and visitor numbers. The overall aim is that tourism businesses in the West can learn from European partners."

Throughout 2010 tourism providers in the region will undertake other development actions supported by the project including a best practice visit to The Camino. Emphasising the importance of Religious Heritage Tourism for the West region Ms Dearie stated -

"Since 2008 Fáilte Ireland has been very proactively developing the West's religious tourism product. We commissioned the development of a strategy initially and this told us of the huge potential of the religious heritage tourism market in the West of Ireland. Estimates on faith or pilgrimage tourism, reveal a burgeoning market. The World Religious Tourism Association (2008) estimated that 200 million visitors engaged in pilgrimage journeys in the 1990s and, by 2000, numbers had increased to 240 million. Other estimates state that faith based tourism serves some 300

million travellers and produces an estimated \$18 billion in revenue each year."

The opportunities lie within three segments. **Sacred tourists** - whose primary motivation for visiting a spiritual site is connected to their faith. **Christian and cultural tourists** - whose primary motivation will be to visit a spiritual site as part of a wider holiday experience. Their trip will include visits to other places of interest in a region, connecting with culture and heritage, and/or visiting family and friends. **Spiritual interest tourists** - whose primary motivation will be to connect with a region's landscape, culture, heritage, architecture, traditions, and values and to do this at the region's spiritual sites.

"We have wonderful religious heritage sites here in our region that are easily accessible by road, rail, regional airports and our international airport Ireland West Knock. This combined with a growing interest amongst many of our tourism businesses to package and sell this has prompted us to make this a priority. In 2009 we delivered a year long training programme to over 60 businesses in the region and are in the process now of delivering on a new brand for this niche area. Fifteen wonderful experiences have been delivered by the businesses and can be viewed on www.discoverireland.ie/christianheritage".

In 2009 Fáilte Ireland, in partnership with five other European regions, secured funding from the EU's Interreg Atlantic Area Programme. The theme of this project is ***'Sailing to St. James: Promotion of Sustainable Tourism along the Maritime Pilgrimage Routes to Santiago de Compostela'***.

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Note for editor

Fáilte Ireland, the national tourism development authority, was established in 2003 to guide and promote tourism as a leading indigenous component of the Irish economy.

The tourism and hospitality industry employs an estimated 200,000 people and generates more than €6 billion in revenue a year.

Further Information on the European Union Interreg Atlantic Area Programme

The lead partner is Secretaría Xeral para o Turismo – Consellería de Cultura e Turismo - Xunta de Galicia (Spain) the regional tourism authority for the Santiago de Compostela region.

Other partners include:

- Câmara Municipal de Valença do Minho (Portugal)
- Fáilte Ireland
- Conseil General de la Manche (France)
- Diocese de Beja (Portugal)
- Fundación para o Desenvolvemento Comarcal de Santiago (Concello de Vedra, Boqueixón, Ames, Teo) (Spain)

Further information on 'The Camino'

The Galician Regional Ministry of Culture and Tourism Spain manages one of the most significant pilgrimage trails in the world – The Camino. 'The Camino' is a series of pilgrimage routes which honour Saint James. The centre of the trail is Santiago de Compostela, reputedly the burial site of Saint James. Although only 140,000 pilgrims complete the route annually, an estimated 4.5 million visitors are attracted to the region annually because of the pilgrimage trail. Many people choose to walk a small section of the trail, whilst others build their holiday around this pilgrimage product.