

Our strengths: - Purity, authenticity a



By Elin Heinesen, Managing Director of SamVit – Faroe Islands Enterprise.

Tourism is now the fastest-growing industry in the Faroe Islands. We therefore need to prepare to meet increasing demands. Our strategy is to build on our strengths and to focus on developing a lucrative tourism which at the same time is sustainable and does not affect our nature and culture in a negative way

As part of a new political strategy the Faroese Government decided to merge the Trade Council and Tourist Board in the beginning of this year. This was done in the realisation of the fact that development of trade and tourism can depend on each other in many ways. This new organisation was named SamVit – Faroe Islands Enterprise, and in May they appointed me, Elin Heinesen, as managing director of the organisation.

Unspoiled Territory to Explore

What advantages do the Faroe Islands have as a travel destination? The fact that our country is a small archipelago in the middle of the big ocean in the periphery of western society makes us quite unique and special. Many consider islands in the ocean to be exotic and romantic by default. And being special means a lot these days where we see tourists looking more and more for special activities and cultural, adventurous or spectacular experiences rather than just lazing in the sun. It seems that people are starting to turn their eyes to the north rather than the south. Maybe it is because people feel safer travelling north than south these days. And since the northern countries have seen far less of mass tourism, there is more unspoiled territory to explore.

We Mustn't Throw the Baby Out with the Bath Water

So in a way, the Faroes sell themselves as a tourist destination, but since we have



not really developed a real tourism industry yet, it is essential that we do our best to meet this ever-increasing demand. However, it is also very important that we emphasise sustainable tourism and avoid the negative impact of mass tourism. We must be very careful not to 'lose our soul' in our efforts to build a lucrative tourism industry, because it is our purity, authenticity and uniqueness that gives us a competitive advantage.

Tourism Creates Ground for Other Industries

In the Faroe Islands today we are very dependent on our export of fish products, but we cannot go on counting solely on fishery as a main source of income. The fishing industry can be very unreliable. World market prices vary a lot and right now we are experiencing that some species of fish, which have been important resources, are simply disappearing from the sea. The question whether it is because of global warming or something else remains to be answered.

Under any circumstances we really need to stimulate growth in other fields and develop other kinds of industries. Opening up the Faroe Islands as a tourist destination is one of our goals, because the tourist industry can lead to so much more and create grounds for other industries as well.

A New Course for the Tourism Industry

It is very important to organise and improve the services on offer in this country and try to inspire and develop ideas for more services. On the one hand we must develop new services and activities and, on the other hand, increase bed capacity, because demand is surpassing the amount

of activities and accommodations on offer for visitors. The Faroese do not have a long tradition for a travel industry as such, so we need to make people in the Faroes more aware of the fact that they can earn a living from tourism. SamVit has set out to improve this and many other things that affect our international relations.

The Internet Plays a Vital Role

In order to achieve our goals, Internet marketing should play a vital role. People are no longer so dependent upon travel agencies to plan their trip; this can now be done in your own time on your computer screen by means of the Internet. And more and more people seek such information of their own accord. It is essential that we work more thoroughly on market segmentation and make relevant interactive functions available on the internet in our future marketing efforts. We are working right now on developing portals on the internet which will target both local networks in the Faroes and potential customers.

The Faroese travel industry needs to start thinking of the Internet as an integral part of their marketing strategy and show the world what they have to offer. At the moment, a wealth of information is out there in the middle of nowhere, but it should be in the middle of everything. That is why we're already working on developing various new internet marketing strategies. In principle, a Faroese website carries the same weight on the internet as, for instance, an American one. Until recently, you were unlikely to find any material about the Faroes at your local travel agency. Today the Faroes, like everything else, are just a click away.

But to make people in the outside world aware of our websites we, of course, have to have effective strategies. This is a very small country and our budgets are equally small – so we must know how to get attention in a way that is not too costly. We have to rely heavily on editorial mentioning, so we work very hard to build up a contact network with journalists all over the world that might be interested in the Faroe Islands – and give them something to write home about.

Inspired by the Irish Model

As for strategies regarding the strengthening of tourism as an industry, the Irish tourism model has been a good source of inspiration for us. At the FlyFaroe 2007 convention this spring, travel writer Eoghan Corry spoke about the recent rise of Irish tourism. He explained how the primitive folk image of Ireland was turned into a strength. The Irish simply realised the potential of what they could offer and they soon started utilising these strengths. As an example, Irish folk music and dance, which once was heard and seen only in the country, are now lucrative global industries. But what exactly did they do? In 1987, the Irish Government started an economic reform in which corporate taxes were reduced from 33% to 10%. This immediately attracted foreign investment, which in turn acted as a catalyst for Irish tourism. One consequence of this reform was that people started opening their homes to foreign travellers and making a business out of it. This led to a great increase in bed capacity in hotels and B&Bs, and tourist numbers started rocketing. The fact that people could get in contact with the local people in this way, along with the slightly primitive image

the Irish projected, has led to a lucrative tourism industry, which now contributes greatly to the national economy.

Our Cultural Heritage as an Attraction

The Irish people themselves also received input from the visitors, so everyone was a winner. Expanding the range of B&Bs also proved essential in breathing new life into the smaller, peripheral villages. For many years, Irish tourism had seen mainly backpackers with limited travel budgets. In order to attract the more wealthy travellers, the tourist board set up campaigns aimed specifically at mature and wealthy people. By utilising their rich cultural heritage they managed to attract more differentiated demographics. It seems obvious to me that the Faroes can benefit from doing this too. We share many of the Irish characteristics in this respect, and we can easily make this an industry where many local people can earn a living just like the Irish. So we are working on making an advertising campaign next year informing people about the benefits of housing tourists in their own homes. Simultaneously we're trying to influence the political system so that these people will receive some tax incentives by doing so.

The Real Picture is Rough and Dramatic

For many years, a visit to the Faroe Islands meant peace and tranquillity, or at least that's what the literature indicated with its sunny, peaceful and polished landscape pictures. But it seems that peace and tranquillity – or polished landscape pictures – are not always the best selling points in tourism marketing campaigns