Midlands can be the Tourism Playground for Irish and British Families

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Among the video clips I would regularly show my students to trace the historical development of tourism was one charting the evolution of the Butlins brand. The cheesy communal games and regimented meal-times seem a world-apart from today’s tourist requirements. Yet there are some similarities. Families have always seen the opportunity to take a holiday together as an important chance to catch-up and reconnect. Today’s time-pressed families are looking for more short-break options which offer weather-independent opportunities to engage in energetic, healthy activities together. And one company who have been perfectly attuned to this trend is Center Parcs.

The announcement of the arrival of the company to Ireland marks a significant development in Irish tourism, and particularly so for the Midlands region. With the Wild Atlantic Way project offering huge potential for the western seaboard counties, the Midlands has to find a niche that can offer a sustainable place in Ireland’s continuing tourism success story. Research has indicated an increasing trend for activity based, sustainable tourism products for families. Indoor and outdoor activities and premium self-catering accommodation are what these high-earning families demand, and Center Parcs have shown themselves to be well attuned to this segment’s requirements. The company’s brand proposition is highly differentiated, of unique scale and enjoys relatively few direct competitors. Given its central location, it’s likely that most of its customer demand will come from Irish customers - both north and south - who currently frequent domestic hotel resorts. Some demand will come from Irish families who have developed a fondness for the extensive facilities of continental campsites, and there is the potential to attract British families who are already familiar with the brand - the company claims more almost universal recognition in brand awareness studies there.

While the past few years have seen significant injection of investment into the Irish hotels sector, both by domestic and international interests, the company’s arrival marks an exciting vote of confidence in the Irish tourism market generally. While the location chosen is a clear pointer to the dependence of this project on demand from both sides of the border, the development offers the chance to attract a British family market that to date has not been a focus of promotional efforts at policy level. The recent Government Tourism Policy Statement - People, Place and Policy - Growing Tourism to 2025 market - has a clear focus on three ‘lifestyle’ segments - ‘Culturally Curious’, ‘Great Escapers’ and ‘Social Energisers’ - not ones normally associated with the core Center Parcs customer. However, the same report does reference the Tourism Recovery Taskforce (charged with reviving the GB market) and which specifically identifies a segment of customers who have a strong interest in ‘Getting Active in Nature - revitalising and energising experiences and activities in the spectacular outdoors’. Here, the opportunity to marry this motivation with a specific focus on UK families offers interesting prospects.

Traditionally the UK family market has not been seen as that lucrative, with access costs being a perceived barrier. But the Center Parcs proposition is one of premium pricing policy and price bundling, so the access costs become less of an issue. With imaginative packaging by ferry companies, there must be reason to be optimistic that more British families can be enticed to come to Ireland. Although not a core target market for Irish tourism generally, the British family market is one that tourism interests in the Midlands now have a realistic shot at developing further.