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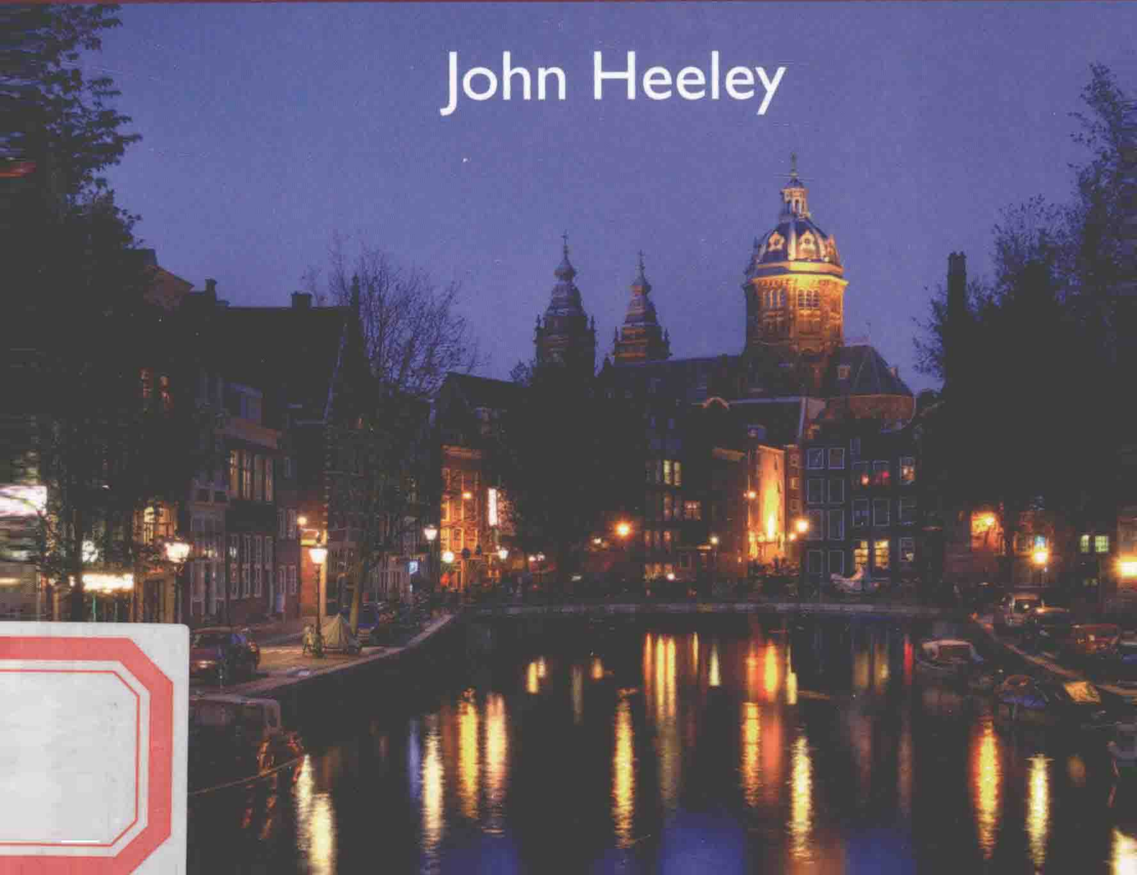
INSIDE CITY TOURISM
A European Perspective

John Heeley



ASPECTS OF TOURISM
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Inside City Tourism

A European Perspective

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To my late Mum and Dad

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In preparing this book, I wish to credit Wolfgang Kraus, Gillian Cruddas and her team at Visit York, and Bart van de Velde for their help with Chapters 4, 6 and 8, respectively.

The final acknowledgement is to my wife Alison and son Stephen who have assisted in all manner of practical ways with the writing of this book. Suffice to say, responsibility for content is all mine.

John Heeley
July 2010

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Robert Frost

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Preface: Why a Book on City Tourism?

I have spent 19 years of my working life in city tourism (1990–2009), and in that time set up 'from scratch' four city marketing agencies and then consolidated their ongoing development. It began with Sheffield (1990–1996) and Destination Sheffield, and there followed Coventry (1997–2001) and Coventry and Warwickshire Promotions, Birmingham (2001–2003) and Marketing Birmingham, and finally Nottingham and Experience Nottinghamshire (2003–2009). Prior to that, I had been an academic specialising in tourism at Strathclyde University, Glasgow (1978–1990). While lecturing there, I had been especially struck by how Glasgow was seeking to revive its economy, boldly using tourism to create new spending and jobs and to raise the city's profile. The substantive focus of this book – albeit from a pan European perspective – is the city tourism I studied in Glasgow and subsequently 'practised' as the creator and founder chief executive officer (CEO) of the four aforementioned city marketing agencies.

After over 40 years as a tourism researcher, academic, practitioner and consultant/writer, it is my considered view that the fundamental way in which cities market themselves effectively in early 21st century Europe is through the attraction and servicing of tourists. To be sure, there are forms of urban marketing taking place alongside that which targets tourists. Universities and colleges compete for prospective students and a part of their marketing activity focuses on the advantages of the city as opposed to the various courses and other on-site amenities. The same is true of promotional activities undertaken by local government designed to reinforce 'sense of place' amongst residents (the old-fashioned term was 'civic pride' and the new ones are 'place making' and 'place shaping'). Likewise with local government inward investment campaigns aiming to persuade companies and other occupiers of property to locate themselves in their particular city. Organisations representing the professional services sector also unite from time to time to promote their city's prowess as a hub of law, accountancy and property development, and similarly 'the sell' here emphasises at least in part the wider city offer.

Notwithstanding these and other manifestations of city marketing, I reiterate my conviction that at the core of effective city marketing lies the activities undertaken by city tourism organisation, especially when these are discharged alongside an overarching city branding campaign – as discussed in Chapters 7 and 8 of this book. It was during my tenure at Glasgow as an academic, studying and reflecting upon the role of the local tourist board there, that the following realisation struck home: if a city gets its tourism marketing right, attracting the leisure visitor and the conference delegate in what are surely the most competitive of all market places, then the infrastructure for just about everything else is more or less likely to be in place – be it good environment, accessibility, 'evening economy', shopping, resident 'feel good', prowess as a business centre or winning 'footloose' inward investors and students. Glasgow served as a laboratory, enabling me to witness firsthand the transformational effect on city image and reputation occasioned by tourists coming, seeing, liking and then telling numerous friends and relatives that the city was indeed (like Glasgow's slogan said at the time) 'miles better'. To be sure, the tourists injected money into the place directly – I liken tourism to a helicopter flying over the city dropping pound notes – but of even greater significance was this 'street level' repositioning of attitudes and perceptions, with all its positive 'knock on' effects for inward investment, civic pride, business development, attraction and retention of students and, of course, further tourism.

The motivation to now put pen to paper is sixfold.

First and of least importance, there is my own passion for cities, particularly for the one in which I was born and brought up, and in which I still to this day live – the northern English city of Sheffield. Cities creep under your skin and take a hold of you. As Kafka said of Prague 'This little mother has claws'. Another writer, Donleavy, eulogised Ireland's capital saying 'When I die I want to decompose in a barrel of porter and have it served in all the pubs in Dublin'. I would not go as far as this, but there is no denying the hold that can be exerted by cities (and for the author by one city in particular). As the politician and writer Roy Hattersley (1978) said 'Oscar Wilde believed that "when good Americans die, they go to Paris". There is no doubt where good Sheffielders go. They go to Sheffield'.

Secondly, during the 20 years I worked as a city marketer a remarkable paradigm shift occurred. From the mid-1990s onwards one way of seeing and making sense of the job – based on print, letters, pens, overhead projectors and heavy, unwieldy desk phones – gave way to another. Fifteen years ago there was no email, Google, iPod, generation Y, PowerPoint, social media, user-generated content, blogging, mobile phones with multimedia access and video footage, netbooks, CTR (click through rates), Facebook, Trip Advisor, viral marketing, interactive news releases and web 2.0.

Nowadays, internet and web activity with all their attendant trappings and paraphernalia are the medium through which the art and science of city tourism is practised. This quite fundamental transformation has occurred in what is historically a relatively short space of time – some 15 or so years is not a long time – and such a paradigm shift in tourism is something which I felt was important to 'bottle' and convey in writing.

Indeed, it may well be that we are currently on the cusp of a paradigm within a paradigm shift in respect of social media, and how it is lately being used in city marketing. From Reykjavik to Valencia, and with precious little strategy or criteria of success, city tourism and marketing organisations have, over the past two years, begun experimenting with social media: pages have been opened on Facebook, Twitter and Flikr; YouTube presences have been fastidiously developed; websites have been overhauled to incorporate multimedia; and partnerships have been struck with Trip Advisor, Google and others. Moreover, a handful of city marketing organisations, in a quintessentially 'learning by doing' fashion, have begun to use social media as an integral component of mainstream marketing campaigns. In such campaigns, social media is used alongside 'traditional' advertising and mailing activities. A good example is a short break campaign being undertaken this year by the Stockholm Visitors Board in conjunction with the national tourist organisation (Visit Sweden) and the Scandic Hotels group. The campaign addresses the neighbouring Norwegian and Danish markets, cleverly playing on Sweden's 'big brother' reputation in these two countries; one advertising image, for instance, shows a speed boat excursion set against a stunning Stockholm backdrop with the caption: 'Real Vikings come from Denmark of course, but we volunteer to act as your shipmates'. A campaign website offers advice on things to see and do in the Swedish capital, as well as a direct bookings link to Scandic Hotels. To drive traffic to this site, a combination of advertising mediums are called into play, majoring on the use of social media, but supplemented by advertising on Google, Facebook itself and outdoor posters. Uses of social media, for instance, include a 'flatter chart' on Facebook which seeks out Swedes willing to act as ambassadors of their country by persuading their Danish and Norwegian friends to take advantage of the short breaks on offer. Another Scandinavian city tourist organisation, Wonderful Copenhagen, is using Facebook to drive visits to its portal website, and is then measuring the conversion rate in terms of bookings. Also this year, the Vienna Tourist Board began to target bloggers as part of its media relations activities, and at the time of writing was developing an integrated social media strategy.

Using social media in these and other ways transforms the manner in which city tourist and marketing organisations communicate with their various audiences; the process becomes 'two way' and 'bottom up', as opposed to 'one way' and 'top down'. Over the next decade, the author anticipates a paradigm within a paradigm shift occurring in which social media will come to dominate the manner in which city tourist and marketing organisations reach and interact with their audiences. All of which seems light years away from the summer of 1990 and the pen, pad and burgundy leather briefcase with which I commenced my city marketing career as Director of Tourism for the City of Sheffield.

A third aspect I felt it important to reflect in the book is the debate and practice centred on the issues of tourism's sustainability. As a tourism researcher and academic in the 1970s and 1980s, I became aware of tourism's potential to 'kill the goose that lays the golden egg'; the very environments, cultures and host communities on which tourism depended were at one and the same time threatened by it. Cities such as Oxford and Venice were by then already capitulating in the face of mass tourism, and in the early 21st century reference is being made to the 'de-marketing' of such places (Coccossis & Mexa, 2004).

Albeit in a rural as opposed to urban context, the poet Wordsworth embodies the issues and paradoxes raised by tourism and sustainability. On his return to the Lake District from France in 1799 he was 'much disgusted' by the tourism developments that had occurred during his absence. He famously led a partially successful campaign in the 1840s which resisted the 'opening up' of the Lake District to rail borne tourists (Heeley, 1989). In letters and sonnets to the local newspaper, he opined that the beauty of Lakeland would be spoiled by the railway line itself and by all the development that would follow in its wake. He implored 'Is there then no nook of English ground secure from rash assault?' (de Selincourt, 1981). Wordsworth's entreaty was as much social and economic as it was environmental. He considered that only 'persons of taste and feeling' could properly appreciate the Lakes, and that meant well-to-do incomers like himself and the rich upper class travellers who visited the area each year. When the railway eventually came in 1847, the contradictions and tensions became ever more acute. Though on the side of the 'common man', Wordsworth did not wish to share with him his beloved lakes, hills and dales. Moreover, Wordsworth profited from the very 'opening up' of the Lakes that he had so steadfastly campaigned against. The sales of his erudite tourist guidebook multiplied, earning him more money from this source than from the poetry which represented his life's work (Davies, 1980). There were sales, too, of his sculptured bust, and even a hint that he took out shares in the railway he had denounced as 'the loathsomest form of devilry now extant' (Heeley, 1989). In his daily life, Wordsworth was disturbed and otherwise inconvenienced by the visitor influx to the Lake District, yet at the same time he was flattered that visitors sought him out, wishing to catch a glimpse of the great man he had become. The predictable postscript was that the poet's homes at Dove Cottage and Rydal Mount and his grave at Grasmere have become tourist shrines; the latter within close proximity to the Wordsworth Hotel and Spa. A further postscript is that so much of the 'development' that Wordsworth despised (the railway, the hotels, the steamboats plying the lakes, etc.) is now 'heritage' and the focus of contemporary conservation work.

While Wordsworth may have lost the battle in respect of the railway line, he can be seen as having won the war in the sense that he laid the foundation for a local conservation movement whose efforts helped spawn the National Trust in 1893. In 1951 the Lake District became a national park, endorsing his view that the Lakes were 'a sort of national property'. The attitudes Wordsworth embodied condition the extent and manner in which heritage is exploited for tourism purposes, and are reflected in the work of planning authorities, official environmental agencies, and the voluntary amenity lobby and in a host of other urban as well as rural conservation designations. The end-product is regulatory frameworks which nowadays control the nature and pace of tourism development, so that projects and proposals are only approved where they are judged to have minimal adverse impact on the host economy, society and environment. Tourism, therefore, exists somewhat uneasily alongside the green and sustainability agendas which are of such critical importance today. A further reason for writing the book was therefore to put this 'on the record', particularly the sense in which to date the tourist industry (and in that I include city tourism organisation) has so far paid only lip service to these vital agendas, a matter to which I return in the conclusion to this book.

Fourthly, another motive for putting pen to paper is the gap between the 'theory' of city marketing as evidenced in the academic literature and its 'practice'. Standard texts – from Kotler's *Marketing Places* (1993) to Morgan's *Destination Branding* (2004) and latterly Maitland and Ritchie's *City Tourism* (2009) – do not resonate with my 19 years of industry experience. This is even the case with texts written by former practitioners (notably Pike, 2004, 2008). So the third and perhaps heroic intent behind this book, is to try and blend academic theory with industry practice – to 'tell it like it is' as the 'sixties mantra went. A corollary of this is that the book is not written in the form of a conventional academic text with copious references and an ostensibly balanced and comprehensive assessment of the existing literature. Much of the raw material for this book is experiential and ultimately subjective, drawn from 'on the job' experience; directly as I plied my profession in Sheffield, Coventry, Birmingham and Nottingham, and indirectly as I shared experience with peers, particularly through the medium of European Cities Marketing (ECM). The latter is a network of European city tourist offices and convention bureaux who meet on a regular basis to exchange information and benchmark themselves in a spirit of trust, openness and camaraderie. Having said all of this, where relevant I have referred to key texts, articles, reports and presentations, and only Chapter 5 on setting up and leading city marketing agencies is overtly autobiographical. The remaining chapters are written in a more or less conventional academic style. Moreover, throughout the book I have set out conceptual frameworks within which it is possible to understand and otherwise make sense of city tourism and city tourism organisation. For these reasons, I believe the book has both empirical and theoretical value as an academic text.

Fifthly, I felt it was important in writing this book to provide a portrait of that very special breed of urban organisation which over a 19-year period provided me with a profession, livelihood, and so much travel, enjoyment and satisfaction! As we shall see in the next chapter, for the past 150 years urban authorities in Europe have responded to the growth of city tourism by setting up specialised marketing agencies. I will henceforth in this book refer generically to these bodies as either city tourism organisations (CTOs) or city marketing organisations (CMOs) – see the typology set out at the beginning of Chapter 1. As such, CTOs and CMOs are local-level destination marketing organisations (DMOs as these bodies are commonly referred to in the tourism business). CTOs and CMOs are to all intents and purposes the local scale counterparts of national tourist organisations (NTOs) such as Atout France, Czech Tourism, VVV Nederland, the Finnish Tourist Board and Visit Britain, and of regional tourist organisations (RTOs), for example Welcome to Yorkshire (formerly known as the Yorkshire Tourist Board), the Pori Regional Tourist Agency and Fjord Norway – the RTO for western Norway.

The rationale underpinning the existence of CMOs and CTOs everywhere – and for that matter NTOs and RTOs – is to lead and coordinate programmes of activity designed to raise destination profile, create more tourists (especially those staying overnight), and to then service visitor needs (especially for information) in order to increase length of stay and generate repeat custom. All of this activity is undertaken with a view to maximising the local economic gains associated with more visitors and enhanced city profile. However, despite having become nowadays more or less ubiquitous in cities, relatively little is 'known' about CTOs and CMOs in both popular and academic senses. Indeed, there is much confusion and ignorance surrounding their purpose and modus operandi, which is often controversial – no more so than when it embraces the branding of cities, as we shall subsequently see in Chapters 7 and 8. So the fifth motivation underpinning the writing of the book is to remedy this particular deficiency in the academic literature and in popular understanding, and to hopefully spread a little light on this much misunderstood and frequently undervalued and underloved form of urban organisation.

A sixth and final reason for writing the book is to deliver a European perspective. In 2002, I visited Turin to attend my first ever meeting of European Cities Marketing. I subsequently served on the ECM Board and became its Treasurer, and latterly I have acted in a private capacity as its

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Internal Management Advisor. As I write, ECM has just appointed me to the position of Interim Chief Executive. Though I have done all of this good work, it remains the case that I have drawn far more from ECM than I have put back in, and one manifestation is this book's European perspective. In a nutshell, ECM acquainted me with how city tourism organisation is structured and managed outside of the United Kingdom.

The European perspective underpinning this book is important for two main reasons. First, it avoids parochialism and the blinkered and thoroughly complacent belief that we in the United Kingdom are somehow or other 'better' at city marketing than our mainland counterparts in the rest of Europe. On the contrary, we have much to learn from them, and as conveyed in this text the 'best practice' in city tourism organisation arguably lies less in the United Kingdom and more in Ireland, Scandinavia, Holland, Germany, Switzerland, Austria and Spain. Secondly, a European overview brings home the sense in which the similarities and continuities across national boundaries dwarf the differences and the discontinuities. The enduring needs which give rise to city tourism and city tourism organisation cross geographical boundaries, and the form and content of the organisational response to those self-same needs is much the same throughout Europe. Even the jargon and the proliferation of acronyms which characterise city marketing are shared; a 'bednight' in Iceland is literally a 'bednight' in Croatia; and MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions) in Luxembourg is MICE in Copenhagen!

With all their imperfections, the nine chapters that follow reflect and hopefully do some justice to all six of these motivations. As ever for the reader, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating!

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