

ABSTRACT

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The experience economy in an island region: More than just for the tourists

On first appearances the Outer Hebrides (off the west coast of Scotland) seems like an unlikely place to find an exemplar region capitalising on an experience economy. The region, a rural archipelago on the fringe of Europe, has suffered historically from underemployment, depopulation and a fragile economic base dependent on a small-scale agricultural system called crofting as well as fishing but through development of the experience economy a change has begun. This change is bringing with it economic development to the islands but perhaps equally as important is the crucial impact on the positive esteem held by the islanders about their own lands. This is perhaps most evidenced by the fact that it is local residents who have set up a steering group to develop the Outer Hebrides brand and a coordinated marketing campaign as a result of the realisation that others will pay a premium to experience a slice of island life. Islanders are now seeing a value both culturally and economically in what was previously considered a hindrance to getting on in life, such as the Gaidhlig language and a strong Celtic culture.

The Outer Hebrides offer some interesting insights into an alternative island perspective on what it is to 'stage' a holistic tourist experience, and one that can be positively associated with authenticity. The islands offer both residents and tourists many authentic experiences that remind the individual they are present in the Celtic heartland of Scotland. Importantly, there is very limited commodification of culture unlike many other destinations in the Western world. One hears Gaidhlig in the shops, on public transport and in peoples' homes; it is not a tourist curiosity. One can experience a performance of traditional Scottish music in local pubs that do not charge an entrance fee. One can visit Celtic monoliths equal to, if not surpassing, Stonehenge without being charged or being forced to 'exit through the gift shop'. Unlike Gilmore's postulations about the necessity of charging for experiences the Outer Hebrides offer an insight into an island method of profiting indirectly through creative marketing alongside community support and involvement in the 'island experience', therefore blurring the line between 'staging producers' and 'guest consumers'.