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REGGAE

STUDY VISIT TO SLOW ADVENTURE

REPORT

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Summary

During a project study visit to the West Highlands, Scotland, specifically the Ardtornish Estate, sustainable travel was explored through the concept of Slow Adventure, which aims to integrate tourism with local ecosystems and communities in a slow, contemplative and meaningful way, sharing many principles with regenerative tourism. Key challenges to sustainability included the remoteness and poorly connected transport schedules, necessitating advance planning and car rentals for visitors. Slow Adventure targets experienced tourists willing to make some of the travel arrangements independently, though this somewhat contradicts the idea of packaged tours. The business model, evolving from an Interreg project to a cooperative, and eventually to a for-profit business, encountered hurdles like securing travel insurance and balancing sustainability with logistical constraints. Intended benefits of the slow adventure model include aligning with local values, relying on local produce, extending tourist seasons, supporting local sustainability projects and contributing to the local economy. Successful slow activities, such as kayaking along scenic beaches, were highlighted, though challenges remain in explaining the concept to international guests and managing transfers. Our visit outcomes additionally reiterated the importance of local involvement and stakeholder cooperation in promoting sustainable tourism.



Introduction

The world is amazing, and it's natural for us to seek exploration, making travelling an attractive leisure pursuit. But how should we go about satisfying the need to discover without causing negative effects on the environment, nature, and local cultures? How can tourism become an integral part of the local ecosystems and social networks, rather than taking place in an isolated enclave or a bubble? There are some good examples around the world where actions have been taken and new methods have been tested, offering opportunities to learn from each other and find inspiration and motivation. Through the REGGAE project, we seized the chance to do just that during week 17, 2024.

The project partners had established connections with the founders of what is now Slow Adventure (www.slow-adventure.com), a company specializing in creating sustainable travel experiences in regions facing similar challenges as those in northern Sweden and Finland. Slow adventure was born as a concept based on the article "Nordic Slow Adventure: Explorations in Time and Nature" published by the Scottish researchers Peter Varley and Tristan Semple in 2015 in the Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism (www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15022250.2015.1028142). The concept of slow adventure was inspired largely by the Nordic concept of *friluftsliv*. This article, in turn, became the foundation for an EU-funded project "Slow Adventure in Northern Territories" (saint.interreg-npa.eu) implemented between 2015-2018, which included universities and businesses from the regions of the northern periphery in Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Ireland, Finland, Northern Ireland, and Scotland, of which Mid Sweden University was also part of. This project's outcomes were directly used to create the Slow Adventure business model. In other words, this is a great example of academia-business cooperation and cross-cultural pollination. This collaboration facilitated invaluable insights into both successes and challenges encountered in crafting sustainable offerings that not only reduce environmental impact but also contribute positively to local communities.

During the planning stages of our journey, we were confronted the dilemma of balancing sustainability with factors such as time constraints, available modes of transportation, and budget considerations. While initial considerations leaned towards train travel, logistical constraints prompted us to opt for a flight from Stockholm to Glasgow, with a layover in Amsterdam. Trains however were taken for the travels within Sweden (Norsjö><Stockholm, Östersund><Stockholm).

Day 1

Upon arrival in Glasgow, we were introduced to James Blount, a new partner in Slow Adventure, eager to participate in our study trip to gain deeper insights into the company he now represents. Our journey then continued by car towards the West Highlands, where our destination awaited at Lochaline and Ardtornish Estate (<https://ardtornish.co.uk>).

Ardtornish Estate provided a rich backdrop for our explorations. Here, Jane Stuart-Smith, the co-founder of Slow Adventure and our guide for the ensuing days, warmly welcomed us. Following a restful pause to recover from our travels, we gathered for an enlightening evening at Jane's residence—a meticulously restored medieval defensive tower. Over the dinner, we received an introduction to Slow Adventure, as well as engaging in insightful exchanges of experiences.

Learnings from day 1

- Remoteness and transportation challenges

The West Highlands region faces similar challenges to the REGGAE territory in terms of travel (and not surprisingly both these regions are considered to be part of the Northern Periphery of Europe). The place is remote, and transportation is not well adjusted for tourism. Travellers have to plan in advance, with transport schedules that do not connect well (plane, bus, ferry).

Sustainable travel is possible, but due to the remoteness of the area, it requires a long travel time, which is not encouraging. The easiest way for a traveller to reach Ardtornish is by renting a car.

- Slow Adventure is not for everyone

The target group for the slow adventure raised some questions. The target group is experienced tourists, able to make a lot of travel arrangements themselves and enjoy unplanned adventures. This, to us, appears to a bit contradictory, since this target group would tend to plan everything on their own (e.g. a road trip), rather than to opt for a packaged tour. For example, in the case of Ardtornish, the slow adventure experience includes not only independent arrival to the destination but also self-catering while staying at cottages equipped with kitchens. That could potentially be problematic, as not all travelers interested in a packaged tours would have access to a car and therefore would not be able to drive around to buy their own groceries. In other words, this concept does not really match the target group of packaged tour buyers, as this is in a 'half-packaged' tour of sorts. Alternatives to explore:

- Detailed guidelines describing the different ways to travel to and within the destination
- Include meals, even if it means preparing meals at the private accommodation (e.g. the host provides groceries for own cooking\pre-made meals, as we have experienced ourselves).

Day 2

During the morning session we got a more in-depth presentation of Slow Adventure's journey from a project to a cooperative and eventually a full-fledged company. Slow Adventure's mission revolves around creating sustainable travel packages in collaboration with local partners worldwide, showcased and bookable through their platform that they developed to suit their specific needs. The price for each package is split as follows: suppliers' price for the package (accommodation, food, activities) + 15% margin to the local supplier + 15% margin to Slow Adventure (+ 5% to the local Impact Project at the booking, see below). The local partner, who keeps in contact with the local

suppliers and oversees the experience on site, must have lived at the destination for at least 2 years. The main benefits that the partners get from the Slow Adventure are the platform, marketing and travel insurance. All the suppliers also use the slow adventure brand.

When booking the trip, guests also contribute 5% of the package price to a local sustainability project (called Impact Project by the Slow Adventure), usually there are four different projects connected to each destination and the guest can choose which of these four to support. This applied to our trip as well, supporting the oyster reintroduction project. It is interesting that this 5% emerges at the last step of the booking, i.e. it is not included in the advertised price. According to the managers, no one ever cancelled their trip or complained about this feature.

Transitioning to a for-profit entity proved challenging, necessitating significant investments in technical solutions and facing marketing hurdles due to limited product range and high costs. One aspect that Slow Adventure had identified early on in the process is the difficulty for local partners to get the correct insurance and therefore Jane and co-founder Sarah made sure that Slow Adventure would offer insurance coverage as well as visibility, and networking opportunities, everything to make the decision to partake in Slow Adventure packages easier.

In the afternoon, we got to meet with Fee Zanke, a marine biologist and representative from one of the local projects benefitting from the Slow Adventure. Fee works for an organisation called CAOLAS (Community Association of Lochs and Sounds) and she shared insights into their European oyster (*Ostrea edulis*) reintroduction project. It was nice meeting Fee and seeing for ourselves what our 5% contribution helps to restore. Jane mentioned that Fee is a potential supplier to Slow Adventure, both for activities where people get an increased understanding about the marine environment but could also for diving activities as she is a licensed diving guide.



Back at Ardtornish, we met up with Kathryn McLaughlin (Operations Manager), and Hannah Collins (Events & Accommodation Coordinator). Ardtornish Estate offers accommodation of various kinds and is soon becoming a Slow adventure supplier. Ardtornish's appeal lies in its location, history, local products and the beautiful surroundings. Ardtornish Estate offers around 100 beds but catering is not provided. However, catering can be organized in case of special events (e.g. weddings arrangement is

an important product for Ardtornish). Most of their guests are from the UK, mostly due to the rural location, and the Brexit-related added difficulties of traveling across borders.

Other challenges include marketing complexity and costs. It is interesting that marketing through Booking.com proved to be counterproductive for Ardtornish, so sales through this platform were ditched. The main reason was that Booking.com tries to straitjacket and standardize all accommodation parameters and available services and this could not accurately capture what Ardtornish is about. For example, they had guests showing up in the middle of the night expecting to be checked in and waiting for catering, while this is not possible. So the main marketing channels are through social media and the website. Kat and Hannah believe that to be a part of Slow Adventure means new opportunities such as new target markets, new seasons and in the long run the possibility to add more on-site activities, such as hiking trails.

Then we visited the Ardtornish gardens where the local gardener with his family were working. The gardener told us about the variety of crops he is responsible for, and the vision for future garden development. The garden is an important part of the sustainable food production at Ardtorsnish.



Learnings from Day 2

- Finding the right business model

Slow Adventure started as an Interreg project, SAINT. Approximately 9 participants / suppliers were willing to continue as a cooperative.

Biggest problem when selling as a cooperative: travel insurance.

- Slow Adventure's operational model
- The regenerative effect of the Impact Projects
- Circular economy and ecology thanks to the gardens

Food is produced on the estate, then sold to the visitors in the local farm shop or directly at the accommodation / cottage as vegetable baskets and pre-made dishes. Then the rests are collected and made into compost used in the gardens.

- Potential benefits of being part of Slow Adventure according to the accommodation
 - Matching values and local spirit
 - Target group corresponding to their new target group, opens the company to a new audience
 - Good way to lengthen the seasons and sell off-season
 - Travel insurance is included, no need for the accommodation to take care of it

- Limits according to the accommodation
 - Difficulty to explain the concept to international guests because of the remote location
 - Brexit has had a big impact on the European market
 - Huge international competition

Day 3

On the third day of our visit, we had the opportunity to try out a Slow Adventure activity – kayaking! The journey from Lochaline was quite lengthy, winding through narrow roads before reaching our destination. There, we were greeted by Chris from Rockhopper kayaking company – our guide for the day. Despite none of us having prior kayaking experience, Chris was experienced and patient, making it a smooth experience. We were provided with rain gear, life jackets, and advised to apply sunscreen, which was essential as the sun was shining brightly! However, considering some guests such as ourselves lacked experience, a clearer description of necessary equipment would have been beneficial before departure from Sweden. The long car journey was somewhat challenging, and without a driver accustomed to left-hand traffic and narrow winding roads, it would have been much more difficult, if not impossible, to get to this activity if we had been “normal” visitors. Overall, it was a pleasant experience – a picnic on a beautiful beach with white, fine sand, and turquoise water was a great reward for physical exercise, and we can see why this would be a good Slow Adventure activity for those in good health.

Upon returning to the cottage, we were treated to a delivered meal – a delicious pre-made curry using lamb from Ardtornish Estate, accompanied by rice and bread. We found this to be a perfect ending to such a lovely day. Including this service in a Slow Adventure package could prove to be a success!

Learnings from Day 3

- Discovering an example of “slow activity”
- Success of a pre-made meal that guests warm up at their accommodation
- Transfers between accommodation and activity locations can be challenging as they ‘break’ the slow experience

Day 4

The final morning at Ardtornish Estate was bittersweet as we packed up and bid farewell to the charming cottage with its breathtaking views. Accompanied by Jane, we set off towards Fort William, a small town approximately a 2-hour drive away. Fort William is a self-proclaimed outdoor capital and

was about to host a world mountain biking championship. Fort William is the gateway to Ben Nevis, the highest mountain the United Kingdom, which provides a guaranteed flow of tourists to the town. We were told that Fort William was an unattractive city, a notion we completely disagreed with upon arrival. In our eyes, it was a picturesque town with a wide selection of shops and restaurants. It was a reminder of how easy it is to become accustomed to one's surroundings, and that something considered unattractive by some can be beautiful to others.

In Fort William, we had the pleasure of meeting Dr. Steve Taylor, Director of the Centre for Recreation and Tourism at Northwest Highland College, who has been involved in the development of the Slow Adventure marketing concept since 2014. Also, we met Sara Belshaw, co-founder of Slow Adventure, and discussed the company's origins and the challenges facing sustainable travel businesses. Slow Adventure also managed to attract investors and one of the key selling points was that in Slow Adventure products around 65% of the 'tourist dollars' stays in the local area.

After the meeting, we made a quick visit to the Highland Soap factory, a fantastic store where they produce soaps with a local touch. These soaps were used at our next accommodation, Tirindrish House, which is also part of Slow Adventure, a small family-owned B&B in a house dating back to the 18th century. Tirindrish House, run by Lucy and Jim, offered exceptional hospitality. Lucy and Jim are also involved in Glen Spean Brewery, our next activity. Located just a stone's throw away from Tirindrish, Glen Spean is a local brewery that has won awards for its excellent beer. The brewery's owner, Peeps McDonald explained the brewing process and their efforts to use local ingredients as much as possible, as well as their initiatives to reuse waste and by-products. Some of the by-products are sent to local farmers, as cows love to eat them! Peeps emphasized the importance of local consumption, stating that since if it's brewed locally, it should be drunk locally. We had an opportunity to taste all beer varieties and learn about the history behind the brand. The historical overview and beer-tasting experience provided by Peeps, in fact, is not a tourist product, and there is no active tourist-oriented activities. There is, however, a shop offering beer and brand merch right at the brewery.



The evening concluded at the home of Slow supplier Anja Boom, who, along with her husband, runs Great Glen Charcuterie. Anja shared insights into their business, where they produce various venison charcuterie products. Venison comes from locally hunted deer, who need to be periodically culled due to the absence of predators. We were treated to a delightful 4-course dinner and pleasant

conversation. Dining in someone's home and enjoying a fantastic meal felt truly authentic and valuable.



Learnings from Day 4

- More insights in the building of the Slow Adventure company and its model
- Importance of the locals' implication in such tourism
- Local food suppliers can also be activity suppliers
- Importance of cooperation between stakeholders

Dag 5

Travel back home, train from Fort William to Glasgow was a great experience, offering wonderful views over the highlands