

Letter from Scotland



Too many Nessies

Right in the middle of the holiday season, worries are beginning to emerge that we are over-doing our tourism industry. The numbers of tourist trips last year – by overseas visitors and UK visitors combined – grew by 12.8 per cent. Our cities and tourist hot-spots are in danger of being overwhelmed. And one of the attractions of Scotland is being lost – its sense of wilderness and quaint calm.

This week I've been making my way through the throngs of tourists staring into the waters of Loch Ness at Drumnadrochit looking for the monster that never was. They say 200,000 people come here every year in the hope of seeing Nessie. Further north, the new 500 mile route round the north coast of Scotland has attracted 29,000 visitors in the first year of its promotion. There's now a campaign to have a whisky trail around Morayshire and the North East.

Inverness is expecting 20,000 people to flock into the city this weekend for the Highland Games, the town Gala Day and a pop concert. Over in Skye, the islanders are demanding a "strategy" for dealing with the locust-like invasion of tourists. They object to being turned into another Disneyland.

Back here in Edinburgh, the number of tourists has grown by a third in the last five years and there's an official target to boost that by another third by 2020.

The Edinburgh World Heritage Trust is now warning that the city is in danger of becoming another Venice, "a hollow city museum". It wants a limit on the number of tat shops and licensed premises, a ban on late-night noise, a clamp-down on holiday flats, and a better street cleaning and waste

management service.

Don't get me wrong, tourism is a good thing. I do it myself. It broadens the mind, gives us a sense of adventure, of discovery, of being on a pilgrimage with others. But it looks like we're going to have to manage it better in Scotland.

That probably means a tourist tax to pay for more street-cleaning, more toilets, more park-and-ride facilities, more nature trails, better visitor centres. The licensing authorities will need to think more carefully about shop and pub licenses, to think about taste as well as money. And we need to move away from the honey-pot culture that has been allowed to develop over the last 20 years. There's more to Scotland than Edinburgh Castle, the Isle of Skye and Nessie.

The growing tourism trade has helped us register some astonishingly good economic figures this week. Unemployment has fallen to 3.8 per cent, the lowest for 25 years and well below the UK rate of 4.5 per cent. We've also managed to escape an official recession, with growth in the last quarter running at 0.8 per cent. We're still however in a fragile state and these figures have a habit of varying wildly from month to month.

The Royal Bank is still in a fragile state. It's having to pay £4.2bn to settle just one of the cases brought against it by the US Federal Housing Finance Agency. There's still one more case to go. All the result of its past greed in the mortgage miss-selling scandal.

We've also suffered some bad news this week from the banks of our salmon rivers. Nasty American pink salmon have appeared in the River Ness for the first time. It's feared these invading "humpbacks" will out-compete our native Atlantic salmon, with devastating results for our angling and tourism industry. The local fishery board has issued an appeal to anyone catching a pink salmon to report it immediately. The

board doesn't say what will happen, but I imagine the outcome will not be a happy one for these American visitors.

We also had bad news from SW19, the fading lawns of Wimbledon. Our national hero had to bow out at the quarter-final stage with a hip injury. Andy Murray soldiered on into a fifth set against another American visitor Sam Querrey but, in the end, he had to concede defeat.



Photo by Dan Hunt

Oh dear, even our Old Man of Hoy, the pride of Orkney, was taken over by a foreign visitor this week. A German high-wire artist Alexander Schulz managed to walk across to the rocky sea stack from the mainland on a cable suspended 130 metres above the water. He said he'd overcome his fear by seeking inner calm. Now that's the sort of tourist we should be catering for.