



Glen Keen Farm Case Study

From zero to 55,000 visitors in five years

2013

Inheriting the family farm at Glen Keen in Louisburgh, County Mayo, spurred a return from living in the US for Catherine and Jim Powers. But they quickly realised that a second source of income was needed to support the sheep farming business. Growing up on the farm, tourism had always been a part of life. As a child, Catherine remembers being amazed when tourists stopped to photograph her father and her uncles cutting turf, so developing a tourism business on the farm seemed like the natural choice.

They first talked to Fáilte Ireland to understand what supports were available and also spoke with local tourism operators who shared their experiences of tourism as a growing sector. Discussions with bus drivers helped gain insights into what would appeal to the coach market, a market they knew would be essential to generate the volumes required to be sustainable. They also looked at Irish and international examples where farms had developed a tourism business alongside the working farm.

Drawing on her research findings and supports from Fáilte Ireland, Catherine developed a saleable experience pitch for overseas tour operators and attended Meitheal in April 2013 for the first time. She met with a number of tour operators and CIE Tours International expressed interest in sending a trial group to Glen Keen Farm in Autumn 2014.

2014

“Our timing was good,” says Catherine, “as we did our own research, the Wild Atlantic Way was being developed, so we set our plans in motion to have Glen Keen Farm up and running to coincide with the launch of the Wild Atlantic Way in July 2014”. Drawing on childhood memories of tourists’ interest in the farm, it felt right that the experience should tell the authentic story of life on the farm. “Linking the visitor experience with everyday farm life would mean that the day-to-day running of the farm could work alongside the new tourism business, and that was important”, Catherine notes.

From the outset Fáilte Ireland was a source of advice. The local team provided information and statistics, as well as signposting relevant customer and market data on the Fáilte Ireland website.

Catherine’s background in hotel sales and marketing also meant she understood what was involved in reaching her target market, and she describes Fáilte Ireland’s research

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 **Fáilte Ireland**
National Tourism Development Authority

on the Culturally Curious and Great Escapers segments as invaluable in helping her profile her target customers.

Participating regularly in Fáilte Ireland Wild Atlantic Way training also provided Catherine and her team with excellent direction and advice. Catherine describes the 'Taste of Place' training as particularly beneficial to the Glen Keen Farm chef, who has always endeavoured to incorporate local produce into the menu. She has also participated in Fáilte Ireland Social Media training in addition to attending a number of Wild Atlantic Way training workshops at various locations. Glen Keen Farm also hosted a workshop onsite.

In October 2014, Catherine successfully welcomed the CIE Tours International trial group and this was followed by a commitment from the tour operator for a weekly tour group from March-October 2015.

2015

Glen Keen Farm developed a range of 12 different experiences for tour operators. In all twelve experiences, tourists get the opportunity to get directly involved - be it cutting turf, touching a sheep's horns, feeling the wool, playing a bodhrán etc. "Feedback from tour operators helped us understand that this kind of immersive experience was really important" says Catherine, who also says that tourists love taking part in a Siege of Ennis dance.

Prior to attending Meitheal in 2015 for the second time, Catherine participated in Fáilte Ireland training to refine the sales pitch for the experience. With a testimonial from CIE Tours International included in her new pitch, she met many operators she had met in the previous year, and relationships began to build.

At Meitheal 2015, Catherine also met Geraldine Egan from Tourism Ireland and signed up for Tourism Ireland Industry Opportunities, which she used to secure a presence at Flavours of Ireland in London later that year. At this event she met a representative of ETOA (European Tourism Association), which subsequently led to an invitation to participate in the Britain and Ireland Marketplace in 2017.

2016

"The Tourism Ireland Industry Opportunities website, www.tourismirelandindustryopportunities.com, was great for finding out about promotional opportunities in the overseas markets", Catherine recalls. In 2016 she registered for World Travel Market on the website and took a table on the Tourism Ireland stand where she secured a number of appointments with overseas tour operators. The opportunity to network with other Irish tourism providers on the Tourism



Ireland stand also presented opportunities to develop cross-promotional relationships and Catherine continues to collaborate with those businesses today.

She attended Meitheal for the third time in 2016, resulting in relationships with tour operators being consolidated and commitments for additional group business in the following year.

Tour operator business is essential for Glen Keen Farm as they need volume business. "Our FIT business is slowly growing, but for us, the medium-term sustainability of the business needs coach tours". Catherine again stresses the importance of developing and nurturing relationships with tour operators; "Changing a tried and tested itinerary or adding you as a new feature of their programme is a big ask. They need to have absolute confidence and trust that you will look after their customers and that you will be there for the long-term. Meeting tour operators face-to-face is essential - one trip to Meitheal or the ITOA Workshop won't do it - the same person needs to be there every year to nurture relationships and reassure them you have staying power", she adds.

Since its launch, Catherine and Jim have invested heavily in the business, both financially, and through time and energy. Hosting tour operators and journalists in association with Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland has also delivered results for Glen Keen. "I have confidence in the experience we offer and I know I'll get a return on my investment from hosting visiting travel trade and media", she adds.

2017

The ETOA contact Catherine met in 2015 invited Glen Keen Farm to attend Britain and Ireland Marketplace (BIM) in 2017. At BIM, Catherine met with the Chinese National Tourism Agency and was subsequently invited by the agency to attend a World Bridge Tourism Organisation event in China. This organisation is focused on supporting the flow of Chinese travellers to rural and 'off the beaten path' areas of the EU.

Cognisant of not becoming overly dependent on any one market, the business is proactively working on diversifying. "We get a lot of business from the US but I want a balance to our mix of business so we have prioritised China, Canada and Germany for growth in the coming three years", she says.

Having participated in the Fáilte Ireland China Ready programme in 2017, Catherine gained an understanding of how to create a rewarding experience for Chinese visitors and has already been on two promotional visits to China. The first visit resulted in 150 Chinese visitors in the same year and Glen Keen hopes to grow business from this market and benefit from the launch of new direct flights from China in 2018.

When entering new markets, Catherine underlines the importance of collaborating with other tourism providers. "Together we achieve so much more for the local area than any one of us can do alone", she says. On her promotional trips to China, Catherine brought

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“Mayo.ie Itinerary”, published by Mayo County Council to the event so she could sell Mayo and not just Glen Keen. Tourism Ireland China was very supportive and made introductions to a number of DMCs who have since programmed Glen Keen. “I sell the wider area when I’m promoting Glen Keen Farm to overseas operators, as this gives them context to a new destination and helps them see how programming the area will work for them.”

2018

Since opening in 2014, Glen Keen Farm & Visitor Centre has welcomed 55,000 visitors and the future business looks very promising.

Their dedication to long-term relationships with tour operators will see an additional 90 tour buses (5,000 tourists) in 2018. “Tour operator business doesn’t happen overnight and when starting out, it’s important to manage your expectations” cautions Catherine. “We’ve always engaged in B2B marketing since our launch, and the additional orders for 2018 are down to the fact that we continually work to strengthen relationships with the trade”.

Consolidating the existing business is the priority, but they are also working hard to extend the season. “Our ambition to keep the business open year-round will benefit ourselves and have a significant impact on the local economy”, Catherine believes. “Looking beyond leisure tourism, we are currently exploring opportunities for educational tourism by developing an academic programme in collaboration with educational providers that would see demand in the shoulder and off-seasons.”



Parting advice

Catherine's top tips to anyone interested in growing overseas business are:

1. The Wild Atlantic Way is an integral part of their business – Glen Keen Farm uses the brand on all promotional material and when tourists arrive at the farm, Catherine talks about the Wild Atlantic Way in her welcome address, “particularly if the weather is wild and windy at the time!”
2. Research, research, research – you need to know if there are customers out there for the tourism experience you offer, and once you identify them, you need to know everything about them
3. Engage with Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland and use their platforms as a springboard to do your own marketing and promotion. Both agencies offer a huge range of promotional opportunities, but it is up to us, as tourism providers, to optimise the potential in those opportunities. It is important to ensure that both agencies have all the practical information about your experience (Saleable Experience Template) and that you proactively get involved in opportunities like hosting fam trips - nothing will sell the experience like a tour operator experiencing it for themselves!
4. Network and collaborate with other tourism providers – you never know when a contact can open a door for you down the line. You can also learn from each other, and together you have a much better chance of putting your local area on the map
5. Get involved in training supports available from Fáilte Ireland, your Local Enterprise Office and Leader. There is no limit to what you can do in terms of educating yourself, particularly for online promotion which is where so many visitors look for information when planning their holiday
6. Understand that developing international group business takes time; relationships with tour operators need to be cultivated and they may start slowly with small numbers, but if you deliver consistently for them, the business will grow solidly
7. If something is not working, don't be afraid to stop and make the necessary changes to get you back on track again.

<http://glenkeenfarm.com/>