

Greenbox: How Green Can Ireland Get?

A country already famous around the world for being green has taken another step forward towards becoming even greener.

What is the Greenbox?

The Greenbox (An tEispéiras Glas) is Ireland's first ecotourism destination. A cross-border initiative located in the North-Western part of the Island. It comprises Counties Fermanagh, Leitrim, West Cavan, North Sligo, South Donegal and North West Monaghan. The membership based organisation is at the forefront of developing the Eco tourism product for Ireland.



Who makes up this new Eco Tourism Project?

Its 120 active business members most of whom were already involved in the tourism industry have embraced genuine ecotourism standards. They have embarked upon a programme that has included professional and academic training through two local colleges, got over 40 accommodation providers approved for the EU Flower, is currently delivering EU Flower training for Hotels in the Republic of Ireland for Failte Ireland and finally created its own Eco label for Activity based tourism.

Why is this significant?

The Greenbox as well as being a first in itself has established or co-facilitated many other firsts for Ireland:

The first EU Flower (A Europe wide standard for Eco accommodation)

The first National Certificated Eco Tourism Courses

The First Eco Standards for Activity based tourism

The first training programme for hotel EU Flower standards

The first delivery of capital grant to upgrade existing properties to Eco standards and develop new Eco Designed projects as Flag Ship projects.



One must remember that the Greenbox operates in a remote, rural, depopulated part of Ireland with until recently poor internet access, considerable geographic distances from major airports and has only just emerged from a prolonged period of political conflict. Its no wonder the area previously only received a tiny fraction of tourism business for Ireland North and South.

Why is the Greenbox significant to small scale tourism operators?

One such small business, Orchard Acre Farm, which operates in North West Fermanagh, was a recipient of Greenbox capital funding. The Greenbox provided funding, training and the all important networking. This has enabled the new eco tourism business Orchard Acre Barn to get off the ground and successfully operate year round eco based activities.

Although a small scale Eco tourism business, it has none the less created employment for 1 full time and 1 part time position and drawn down £200,000 pound sterling into the local economy. This is significant especially in the current economic climate.

Are the efforts by Greenbox members recognised beyond the Greenbox region?

In recent times the project has been recognised for its eco design when the owner Teresa O'Hare received Eco Awards for the Barn's Eco design. The award came from The Royal Town Planning

Institute for Ireland and RSPB (part of Birdlife International) for the best Northern Ireland Sustainable Building in February 2009. This was on the back of the Green Building Award for Ireland presented earlier in December 2008. At the beginning of April the owner herself added a further accolade to the Eco Tourism business when she received the NI Inspirational Business Woman's Award from the NI Business Women's Network.



Not enough to receive awards

Whilst these awards are indeed just recognition of the Greenbox initiative in Ireland, they will not be enough to put Eco Tourism in Ireland on the global map. The Greenbox is seen as a model of best practice and now other areas of Ireland aspire to developing the Eco Tourism model. To succeed the Eco tourism industry in Ireland will require the full support of mainstream tourism bodies North and South to promote what will become another part of the suite of "tourism products" on offer from Ireland.

A final word from a small scale eco tourism operator in the Greenbox Ireland Only Eco Tourism destination: "My eco tourism business is just that - a business. That said I don't conduct my business as if I am offering "a product". I work and live to a set of high environment standards. I embrace a way of life which is culturally rich and sensitive to the needs of my local community and local environment. I know I am not on my own when I say that the members of Greenbox Ireland, are clear we do not want to exploit our Eco tourism product, we only want to share it.

What is Ecotourism?

Ecotourism is travel which is small scale, low impact, culturally sensitive, community orientated, primarily nature based, educational and capable of broadening peoples minds and enlivening their souls by providing a unique experience, firmly grounded in sustainable principles and practices.

EU Flower Eco-label

The European Flower Eco-Label for tourist accommodation service was created in 1993 to reward accommodation services who respect the environment. It signals good environmental performance and gives an assurance of added quality for consumers choosing accommodation. To achieve the label, the tourist accommodation must satisfy certain standards. For example, at least 22% of the accommodations electricity must come from a renewable energy resource if available, the accommodation must separate and recycle waste produced on the premises and steps must be taken to ensure that the water flow from taps and showers has been reduced where necessary.

By Teresa O'Hare (Eco Tourism operator)

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