



Rita Marques, President of Livraria Lello Foundation and ex-Secretary of State for Tourism and Rachael Milne (Rachael Milne Consulting).

3rd IPBN Tourism Conference the challenge of attracting tourists to other parts of Portugal

Vila Nova de Gaia’s immersive, multimedia World of Wine visitor attraction in Porto was the backdrop of this year’s 3rd Irish-Portuguese Business Network Tourism Conference attended by 72 people in November.

TEXT CHRIS GRAEME

This year’s conference looked at the challenges of encouraging tourists to explore parts of Portugal other than Lisbon, Porto and the Algarve, and looked at how Ireland largely solved its problem of tourists concentrating on Dublin and Cork with a case study for its wild, rugged and dramatic West Coast – the Wild Atlantic Way.

The conference also revealed how Portugal’s ground-breaking Covid-19 travel and tourism health and safety

campaign ‘Clean & Safe’ was successfully adapted to Irish realities by Ireland’s National Tourism Development Authority, which launched a Covid-19 Safety Charter initiative designed to boost public confidence in the safety of businesses as the tourism sector reopened.

Opening the conference, IPBN Chair Geoffrey Graham, now in his third year in the role, welcomed the attendees and speakers, and thanked the co-host of the event, Adrian Bridge, the CEO of the

Fladgate Partnership who created the World of Wine (WoW).

At the first edition of the IPBN Tourism Conference in Lisbon three years ago, the then President of Turismo de Portugal, Luís Araújo, had said that Portugal looked towards Ireland for how to pursue an excellent tourism strategy that markets the country as a whole, despite being two countries.

“We have tried to replicate that strategy for this conference, since tourism in

Portugal is not just about the Algarve and beach and hotel holidays. There is a huge diversity in the tourism-travel experience in Portugal,” he said, adding that Porto and the North of Portugal and Vila Nova de Gaia were prime examples of this.

TOURISM - ABOUT CONTENT AND EXPERIENCE

Adrian Bridge, the mastermind behind the WoW experience in Porto and the iconic Yeatman Hotel in the Douro Valley, provided an overview of the €110 million, 40,000m² WoW project whose genesis was 15 years ago when the Yeatman was opened.

“We built the Yeatman because lots of people were interested in Port wine, and as a family company dealing with Port for 332 years, we felt if we put a small hotel there then our customers who come from 100 different countries around the world, they could come to this place and get a sense of what is the soul of Portugal,” he said.

Bridge argued that he strongly believed that one of the most important factors when visiting a country or a region is growing sustainable tourism; tourism that will repeat and continue to grow and attract new investment, and this meant providing good content and a variety of things for tourists to do and places to explore.

“We have moved away from this word ‘tourist’, which is a very passive concept, whereas today we want travellers who come to learn, discover and interact,” he said, adding that the World of Wine was a “cultural district” born out of this philosophy of providing dynamic, informative and interactive content that provides an immersive experience.

TOURISM IN PORTO AND THE NORTH - A WELL-DESIGNED STRATEGY

The first keynote speaker, the President of Porto and the North of Portugal Tourism Office, Luís Pedro Martins, discussed the tourism strategy for Porto and the North of Portugal region and said it was a well-designed strategy developed with public and private partners.

“Our vision is to position ourselves as an internationally recognised organisation dedicated to promoting Porto and

the North of Portugal in an innovative and competitive manner, adding value to the region’s economy, while respecting the principles of sustainability, and providing exceptional services to our visitors.”

The strategy rested on four well-defined lines of action: 1) Introduce innovation and competitiveness; 2) mobilise various connections towards sustainability within the regional tourism value chain; 3) enhance and expand the sector’s activities as they relate to the aggregation and distribution of products, services and knowledge throughout the regional tourism chain; and 4) to reinforce the regional reputation of Porto and the North of Portugal by promoting tourism around Porto and fostering joint strategies and partnerships that achieve this sophistication and diversity, and the enormous potential of the entire region which is diverse and sub-divided into four distinct destinations – Porto, Douro, Trás-os-Montes and Minho.

The North had, he said, the only Demarcated Wine Region in Portugal – the Douro Valley –, five national parks, 40km of Atlantic coast, five UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and the Santiago Way. “I always say to my colleagues that Portugal was born in the north and the rest is conquest,” he joked.

WORKING NEW MARKETS

Luís Pedro Martins highlighted ‘On Strategy 2023’, the most disruptive tourism strategy campaign in the history of Portuguese tourism with the promotional film the Majestic Adventures of Ofelia de Souza and her catchphrase “Trust me Darling, I know”, which won the campaign for the best tourism video in the world after receiving first prize at many international festivals.

Porto’s airport had enjoyed growth of 18% over the past year with 15 million passengers, while Porto had made a commitment to developing a viable smart digital destination strategy which has led to the creation of the first tourism experience marketplace from a tourism organisation in Portugal. (<https://booking.visitportoandnorth.travel/pt/>)

As for the strategy for 2025, Luís Pedro Martins said it would be about approaching new markets such as Mexico, Argentina, Japan, South Korea and China, starting a joint promotional programme with neighbouring Galicia in Spain – one cluster, two countries, one brand.

Porto and the North of Portugal Tourism will also be targeting the LGBT tourism segment for the first time, as well as products related to art, surfing, architecture, and sports.



“I DON’T THINK PORTO HAS REACHED A PEAK IN TERMS OF QUALITY, AUTHENTICITY AND SUSTAINABILITY. I FEEL IT HAS NOT REACHED THE DESIRED PEAK, WHICH IS WHY WE ARE STILL ATTRACTING INVESTMENT TO THE SECTOR AND NEW AIRLINES AND ROUTES.” - RITA MARQUES, PRESIDENT OF THE LIVRARIA LELLO FOUNDATION.

“Today, tourism has a very strong and positive impact throughout the region, not just in the city of Porto, and we will continue with our objective to have tourism 365 days per year in the region,” he said.

PROVIDING OTHER REGIONAL POLES OF ATTRACTION

IPBN board member Rachael Milne spoke to the event’s second keynote speaker, Rita Marques, former Secretary of State for Tourism and currently Invited Faculty Member and Programme Director at the Porto Business School and Champion of the Innovation Tourism Hub, and President of the Livraria Lello Foundation – the Porto bookshop attracts 1.2 million visitors a year and has been voted the “Most Magical Place to Visit by Trainee Wizards” thanks to it being made famous by one of the Harry Potter films.

In fact, after Jerónimos Monastery in Lisbon and the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Sintra, this iconic Art Nouveau bookshop is the third most visited attraction in Portugal.

“It’s a family-owned business [Centro Empresarial Lionesa, in Leça do Balio] – and they have several businesses – and their idea is built around talent and attracting and retaining it in Portugal,” she said.

“They have actually bought a monastery – Mosteiro de Leça do Balio, HQ of the Livraria Lello Foundation. We don’t have many national monuments that are owned by the private sector in Portugal and they have invited the Pritzker Prize-winning architect Álvaro Siza Vieira to revamp the place,” continued Rita Marques.

Calling it a “cultural hub” and saying it was a privilege to work there, Rita Marques said they had been exploring synergies between the bookstore and the monastery because it was “important to provide other poles of attraction for

tourists in order to encourage them to visit other places in the North of Portugal” other than Porto and the Douro Valley.

“We are trying to create a new cultural hub and it takes advantage of the fact that it lies in the middle of the Santiago Way, so we attract a lot of visitors who are on their way to Santiago de Compostela,” she added.

Livraria Lello has also launched a new expansion project, inviting architect Álvaro Siza Vieira to do an extension after the next-door building was purchased, since the existing space was confined to an area of only 300m².

HAS PORTO PEAKED IN POPULARITY?

And while some may feel that tourism had reached a peak in Porto in terms of numbers, there were still many dreams to attain in terms of quality and experiences.

“I do not think Porto has reached a peak in terms of quality, authenticity and sustainability; I really feel it has not reached the desired peak, which is why we are still attracting investment to the sector and new airlines and routes, such as Jet2,” said Rita Marques, pointing out that 85% of tourists to Porto and the region arrive by plane.

“Tourism is a people-to-people sector and we really have to retain talent, work on the teams that are hosting and serving tourists, and remember that these teams are locals, and so it’s a win-win to create jobs and a wealthier standard of living,” said Rita Marques, glossing over the fact that tourism in Portugal pays some of the worst salaries in the country, let alone Western Europe.

Rita Marques said that there was too much talk about sustainability and not enough action. “For me, sustainability is about empathy, and businesses in the sector have to understand that everything

they do has to be done in a responsible way, while countering churn in the tourism sector which is not good.”

Looking back to her time as Secretary of State for Tourism during the Covid-19 crisis, Rita Marques said that the strategy was to retain focus. “I didn’t just want the sector to survive, I wanted it to thrive and take the initiative.”

The result was the Clean and Safe campaign, where Portugal was the first country in Europe to promote ‘Safe Travels’ badges recognising the commitment of tourism and travel sector companies to providing safety for all.

“Most of the tourists that we host in Porto are customers who have already visited the city, so we do have a lot of people coming back,” concluded the former Secretary of State for Tourism, Rita Marques.

Former UK ambassador to Portugal, Chris Sainty pointed out that the sheer quantity of tourists coming to popular destinations like Venice, Barcelona and Lisbon was experiencing a push-back, particularly in Sintra.

“You can really feel this push-back beginning to build in Sintra, with people putting up protest posters on the outside of their houses,” he said, and asked what was the answer to “such high numbers of uncontrolled tourists?”

Rita Marques said that, as an engineer, she liked to look at maximum capacities and try to work on a strategy to manage demand. “If I were the Mayor of Sintra, I would start from there,” she said.

A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

In the panel discussion that delved into the opportunities and challenges related to exploring and developing tourism in Portugal’s interior regions with similarities between Ireland and Porto and the North of Portugal, Francisco Calheiros, President of the Association of Friends of the Portuguese Santiago Way,



Francisco de Calheiros, President of the Association of the Friends of the Portuguese Santiago Way, Mariam Kennedy, Head of the Atlantic Way (Fáilte Ireland), John Paul Prior, General Manager of Musicmaker Dublin, Chair of the IPBN in Northern Portugal, Co-founder of 21 Drums.

admitted that the greatest concentration of tourism was in Porto and that the challenge of expanding interest to other places in the North “was very real”.

However, he added that there was some success in raising the profile of some of the region’s other highlights, such as the Camino de Santiago and the Gerês National Park.

Miriam Kennedy, Head of Wild Atlantic Way at Irish tourism board Fáilte Ireland, outlined the problem she and her team were trying to solve in opening up the North-West Irish coast to tourism.

“It all started in 2011 during the global crisis we all endured, and in Ireland it was particularly bad for tourism on the West coast. It was decimated, and tourism is responsible for 1-4 jobs and visitors had stopped coming,” she recalled.

“At one stage, we had 1,000 people a day emigrating from Ireland, businesses closing, a season of just 4-6 weeks, and as a tourism authority, we had come to the conclusion that we had to do something.”

The idea was a “drive” that would unite all of the counties on the West Coast of Ireland, but ended up as a “way” so as not to alienate cyclists and hikers.

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The project did in fact become a success and transformed the amount of tourist interest in that part of the country.

IPBN Porto Chair and moderator John Paul Prior talked about “surprising Sligo” in North-West Ireland, with its lakes, dramatic coastline, surfing, William B. Yates the poet and the famous boyband Westlife who came from the picturesque town that, until fairly recently, wasn’t that well known until the ‘Wild Atlantic Way’ initiative put it on the map.

“What that did for our region and the whole Atlantic Coast in terms of how

tourism and its economic and social impact grew, and the similarities I see here in the North of Portugal with parks like Gerês which absolutely blow you away,” he said, referring to the success of the ‘Wild Atlantic Way’.

The conference was rounded off by highlighting some successful business stories in the interior of Portugal, with Teresa Guimarães and Paulo C. Graça Moura, Owners and Managers of Quinta do Rapozinho at Cabeceiras de Basto, talking about their experiences building up a charming boutique hotel comprising rural hotel houses near Porto.

Mafalda Ricca, Founder and CEO at X-Plora (now VisitAR), talked about her experience as a tour builder for virtual and augmented tours that employs AR/VR, Gamification, AI and utility NFTs to improve the visitor experience.

Last, Claudia Pereira Reis from Quinta Vale de Lobo Douro, discussed the challenges and joys of producing olive oil in the Trás-os-Montes region in a panel of discussions moderated by Isabel Vellozo Ferreira, Partner at Vellozo Ferreira e Associados and also an IPBN Executive Partner. ■