National treasure

The National Trust provides access to some of the most beautiful and breath-taking places in the world. But despite record membership levels, the conservation charity knows it cannot afford to rest on its laurels.

The National Trust has never been more popular. In 2018, membership rose to a record high of 5.2 million people, an increase of one million in just five years. Additionally, there were 26 million individual paid-for entry visits, and an estimated 200 million free-to-access visits over the same period. That’s more people than at any time in the National Trust’s 124-year history, stresses Chief Financial Officer Peter Vermeulen.

“This surging interest and passion for the countryside, coast and historic houses we look after is overwhelmingly driven by domestic tourism – both from day trippers and staycationers, who come for a break at our camp sites, cottages, pubs and hotels,” he explains. “Amongst those who join, visit and stay with us, we’re also seeing significant growth in the number of younger people and families.”

What’s the secret?
The 248,000 hectares of land looked after by the National Trust boasts attractions including four World Heritage Sites, 778 miles of coastline, Britain’s oldest nature reserve and world class artwork and collections.

Beyond the timeless appeal of these places, there are multiple reasons why more people are spending more time both visiting and holidaying at the Trust’s sites.

“Part of our success has been down to offering a broad range of experiences and activities to suit different ages, tastes and interests,” says Peter. “We have listened to what people want from the Trust and reflected their changing needs and expectations.”

“The investment is worth it because we know we cannot afford to stand still.”

Investing in social media, websites, apps and direct emails has helped the Trust enhance its engagement with supporters, improved its understanding of what they care about and what they want to see more (or less) of, he says. It’s also opened the door to new audiences and helped changed perceptions.

Open for business
“Most of our historic houses are now open 363 days a year, opening for longer and at times of the day that better suit our supporters,” says Peter.

“As more people want to enjoy the outdoors, we’re increasing the amount we invest in facilities like cafés, cycle hire and trails,” he adds. There’s also a growing range of activities and events held at Trust properties, with regular entertainment programmes including open air cinema, theatre, music performances, book and food festivals.

Partnerships play an important role in providing this wide range of activities, stresses Peter. As the biggest host of weekly parkruns, for example, the Trust welcomed 400,000 people to its properties in 2016-7.

A place to escape
“Our founding principle of offering everyone access to green space and fresh air remains as relevant today as it was when the Trust was founded in 1895,” he states. “In the busy, noisy digital world we now live in, it’s never been so important for people to find a place to escape to.”

Perhaps it’s no surprise then that the Trust’s fastest growing visitor group is families and younger people looking to recharge and refresh in beautiful surroundings. Although they want different things from their visits than older visitors, they still value the peace, the tranquillity and that sense of freedom.
Multigenerational needs
When it comes to holidays, the Trust offers a broad range of different options to reflect its audiences and, according to Peter, demand is now high throughout the year. There’s a choice of more than 400 unique cottage and self-catering lets, from luxury-end hotels, to glamping pods, yurts and the basic, dormitory-style bothies and bunkhouses that are a big hit with millennials.

Trust sites regularly appear on hit TV shows and Hollywood blockbusters, which may have also helped boost demand among younger people. *Game of Thrones, Harry Potter and Poldark* have been filmed at Trust sites and fans flock to stay in the same places as their favourite characters.

Invest and adapt
Keeping up with demand both in terms of maintenance and the rising customer expectations is expensive, however. Last year the Trust spent £138m on conservation, including £100m on historic houses and homes.

“We also announced plans to spend an extra £20m a year on expanding, improving and upgrading facilities as well as tackling a backlog of repairs to farm buildings, homes and modernising holiday cottages.”

“But the investment is worth it because we know we cannot afford to stand still. Our mission remains the same as ever – to ensure everyone can enjoy the beauty of our places,” Peter concludes.

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