



The Travel Column

BY GEORGE KEEGAN

HOPES HIGH FOR 2014

Welcome to the first Travel column of the year. During 2013 among the locations reviewed were Derry, Belfast, Galicia and the Camino (Spain), Rhone Alpes (France), Basilicata and the ancient cave dwellings (Italy) and a river cruise around Venice. In the coming months there will reports on visits to wonderful Paris, historical Murcia in Spain and the charming duo of cities- Bristol and Bath. For 2014 most tour operators are quietly confident their overseas business will expand. A healthy sign too was the re-location by travel experts O'Hanrahan Travel in Carrick to a larger space on the Main Street. According to online travel company GoHop a new trend is developing this year in which holidaymakers are deciding more and more on taking multi-centre breaks. Stephen McKenna MD says "last year multi-centre were quite popular particularly with safari and beach combo offers such as Sri Lanka and the Maldives. People are looking to mix things up and make the most of their getaway by adding different destinations to the mix. Looking at the rise in figures we are quite confident that multi-centre options will be the number one choice for travellers in 2014".

In Ireland, the local community in Limerick, hosts of the first Irish City of Culture, are determined to make it a year to remember despite a controversial start to the proceedings. Events planned include 'Riverdance' 20 years on, Irish premiere of the best selling show Fuerza Bruta, a major Choral Festival and in visual arts 'The Haselbeck Collection'.

In Northern Ireland Belfast continues to attract large numbers of Irish and overseas visitors thanks to successful attractions such as the Titanic Quarter, Crumlin Road Gaol and the MAC. Derry/Londonderry was an excellent host of UK city of Culture for 2013 where visitor numbers exceeded all expectations and events such as Fleadh Cheoil na hEireann and the Return of Colmcille brought people from all over the world. Speaking to 'The Travel Column' Aoife Thomas, Business & Leisure Officer with Derry Visitor and Convention Centre told me, "2013 has been a fantastic year for Derry/Londonderry as the City of Culture where it delivered an outstanding programme of over 200 festivals, events and exhibitions attracting over one million visitors. The city has also undergone a major transformation having benefited from investment of over £100m in capital infrastructure including Ebrington Square, the restoration of the Guildhall and the new walled city lighting strategy—Derry/Londonderry is known throughout the world as a City of Song so it's fitting the theme for 2014 is 'Music City' and visitors can expect another action packed calendar of music festivals and events". For events in N. Ireland visit www.discovernorthernireland.com

The VAT reduction initiative in the Republic was of significant importance to the tourism sector here and meant renewed growth in overseas tourism numbers and earnings, plus an improved value for money perception among visitors. Figures recently released state there was a 7% increase in visitor numbers in 2013 partly due to 'The Gathering'.

For festivals and places to visit during the year in the Republic log on to www.discoverireland.ie

UPCOMING EVENTS HOLIDAY WORLD

The planning of holidays traditionally kicks off with the Holiday World Shows in Belfast and Dublin. Dates this year are – 17th-19th January (Belfast King's Hall Pavilions) and 24th – 26th for the Dublin event (RDS Simmonscourt) where a new Show format will be introduced whereby exhibitors will be grouped into 9 distinct regions. These are: Home Holidays, Africa & Middle East, Europe & Mediterranean, Caribbean, The Americas, Asia & the Pacific, Cruise Lines & ferries, Adventure Travel, Tour Operators and Caravans & Motor Homes.

SHORT BREAKS

Offers From Hilton HHonors: Hilton HHonors, Hilton Worldwide guest loyalty programme currently has an offer of 33% off week-end bookings made in January. There are more than 300 hotels to choose from across Europe, the Middle East and Africa which operate under the following brand names – Waldorf Astoria Hotels & Resorts, Conrad Hotels & Resorts, Hilton Hotels & Resorts, DoubleTree by Hilton and Hilton Garden Inn & Hampton by Hilton. It might be a Burns Night in Princes Street Edinburgh, a Valentine's break in Istanbul, taking a spring time tour of London staying in Westminster, or visiting Dublin for St.Patrick's Day in style by booking a room in the award winning Conrad Hotel close to St.Stephen's Green. For details on becoming a Hilton HHonors member visit www.news.hiltonhonors.com

Go Green At Disneyland: Local travel experts O'Hanrahan Travel chosen as Travel Agent of the Year have an exclusive family offer at Disneyland Paris to celebrate St.Patrick's day. The prices include a 3 night stay in the Disneyland Santa Fe Hotel on a B&B basis, flights, transfers and a 2 day Park pass. Adults €499 and children (between 2yrs & 11yrs travelling with adults) €299. T & C apply. To book call 0818 282020 or e-mail sales@ohlie

TOUR OPERATOR OFFERS

Contiki Holidays: This company is a world leader in youth travel for the 18-35 age group and they

recently launched a new programme for Europe with several exciting new tours and a greater emphasis on the 'Backstage Pass' initiative introduced in 2013. The backstage Pass ensures guests do not have to queue at popular attractions such as the Vatican Museum in Rome or the Eiffel Tower in Paris. Early bookings for 2014 the company states are up 25% year on year. Highlights for 2014 include a new Greek sailing itinerary where guests sail the Saronikos Coast on a yacht for 8 days with trained skipper (without a tour guide) giving a hands-on sailing trip including visits to popular places along the way including Hydra, Nafplio and Aegina. Now all Contiki coaches have WiFi available and some 90% of the hotels on their list also offer wireless connections. Trips are available from short breaks of 3 days to epic journeys as long as 6 weeks. Pick up the 2014/15 from a travel agent or visit www.contiki.com

Thomas Cook Specials: Thomas Cook Ireland has special offers this month in Tenerife (7 nights with self catering accom from €627pp) and Gran Canaria (from €471pp). In February 7 nights in Egypt costs from €689pp staying in the 5* Savoy Sharm Hotel in Sharm el Sheikh on a B&B basis. If planning a trip to the US for St Patrick's Day they have a break in Chicago the 'Windy City' from €739pp including flights plus accommodation for 3 nights. To kick start the celebrations Chicago will for the 52nd year be turning it's river green again. The Downtown Chicago official St.Patrick's day parade attracts up to 400,000 spectators. Call the Thomas Cook team on 01 5140328 or visit www.thomascook.ie or see your travel agent.

Joe Walsh Pilgrimages: Joe Walsh Tours who have been organising pilgrimages for over 50 years last week released their Pilgrimage Tours brochure for 2014. One of the new additions this year is a Shrines of Spain programme inviting pilgrims to follow in the steps of St.Teresa of Avila which includes stopovers in Avila and Madrid and taking in Salamanca, Toledo and Segovia. Favourite destinations such as Lourdes, Fatima, Medjugorje Italy and the Holy Land are all included as well. Pick up a copy at a travel agent or view it on line at www.joewalshstours.ie

Topflight To Italy: Leading Irish tour operator Topflight has added more choice in cruising, camping, city breaks and child friendly holiday options in their 2014 Italian brochure. Introducing the new brochure Tony Collins MD at Topflight commented "as Ireland's Italian specialist we know Italy from top to toe and I am delighted with our 2014 brochure which has more choice than ever before - it also reflects the change in demand from our customers, with an emphasis on added value with added tours, special offers and great family deals throughout. We have an extensive flight programme from Dublin, Cork and Belfast so we can offer clients an excellent 'Topflight Service' and generous luggage allowances".

Call into a travel agent or tel 01 2401700. From N. Ireland tel 028 97521168.

TOURISM NORTH NEWS

Events - Titanic: Windows On Emigration at The Ulster American Folk Park, Omagh - until 26th Jan.

'Beyond the Blue; A Stargazing Journey' at Armagh Planetarium - 18th & 25th. A seasonal tour around the night sky as viewed from Ireland. Note age restrictions apply.

Sunday Afternoon Tea at Titanic Belfast - every Sunday. Treat the family in the Titanic suite which features a replica of the famous ship's staircase.

Upcoming at Derry 'City of Song', Other Voices - 7th-9th February; Pan Celtic Musical festival - 22nd-27th April and Jazz & Big Band Festival - 1st-5th May.

ON LINE SPECIALS

Gohop Offer Multi-Centre Holidays: Gohop.ie is offering multi-centre holidays to Sri Lanka & the Maldives, Cancun & Las Vegas, Kenya Safari & the Seychelles and South Africa & Mauritius among others. They are a fully bonded and licensed with IATA. For full details click on www.gohop.ie

Festivals On The Camino: Cycling and walking holiday specialists CaminoWays.com have a range of unique festivals on offer taking place along the Camino in 2014. These include - Holy Week in Ferrol & Seville (April), St.James Celebrations in Santiago de Compostelo (July), plus many others featuring food and wine, street concerts and even horse racing. Prices include accommodation (half Board), luggage transfers from hotel to hotel plus a holiday pack. Note that travel insurance, flights & airport transfers are not included. Trips vary from 5 to 8 nights. Full details on www.caminoways.com or tel 01 5252886.

Safety Tips From SkiDirect: With a number of high profile skiing accidents occurring in recent weeks the directors of Ireland's successful low cost ski company Directski.com have been offering some advice on how to stay safe on the slopes this winter. Top of the list is keeping to controlled and groomed pistes whenever possible, especially if you are visiting for the first time or returning following a long period without skiing. Protective wear and water resistant thermal clothing are essential for skiing and boarding they point out and protecting eyes and skin from the reflective glare of the light on bright snow is important. Travel insurance with special winter sports cover is also essential. These are just a few of the points mentioned. DirectSki.com organises holidays for over 20,000 British & Irish skiers each season and the company accounts for 25% of the Irish ski market. Check their range of holidays on www.directski.com

AIRSIDE UPDATES

Etihad Increase Numbers: Etihad Airways the national airline of the United Arab Emirates recorded a record breaking year in 2013 carrying 12 million passengers and marking a significant increase of almost 16% in comparison to 2012. Bangkok was again the airline's busiest route with Manila in second place. Six destinations were introduced to their network last year including Washington DC, Amsterdam and Belgrade. On it's Dublin route Etihad carried over 240,000 passengers an increase of 8% on the total amount carried in 2012.

SAILING AWAY

Lower fares At Stena Line: Leading ferry company Stena Line who operate several crossings between Ireland and the UK are celebrating the start of 2014 with lower fares. Book early online (60 days in advance) to take advantage of their lead-in fare from just €79 single for car and driver. Subject to availability and T&C apply. Check with a travel agent for details or log on to www.stenaline.ie

New Irish ferries Route: The new direct passenger car ferry service linking Dublin with Cherbourg in France is due to commence on Saturday. The service will operate once weekly year round leaving Dublin at 15.30 with arrival next morning at 11.30am. Return times are Sundays at 17.00 arriving Monday morning 11.00am. Irish ferries point out that because of a more limited range of cabins and passenger attractions on the 'Epsilon' compared to the Oscar Wilde cruise ferry, it is an opportunity to offer customers an economy style service. Full details at your travel agent or visit www.irishferries.com

A Grand Voyage With MSC Cruises: Cruise Company MSC has announced a new and exclusive

'Grand Voyage' on their ship MSC Orchestra for 2015. Setting out from the United Arab Emirates the journey includes visiting iconic sites of Asia before reaching and exploring the coastlines of Australia. Sailing date will be 21st February 2015 and the cruise lasts for 33 nights. The final destination will be Fremantle (Perth). Prices will be announced shortly and the company will offer three carefully tailored all-inclusive packages. Up to date info on www.msccruises.ie/ieen/about-msc-cruises/news/msccruises-journey-dubai-australia.aspx

COMING UP: ENJOYING THE GREAT OUTDOORS IN BEAUTIFUL PARIS

