

Original Case Study

Sports Tourism

Special Olympics

The following is the essay which we wrote as an entry in the Global Travel and Tourism Research Competition 2009. The topic of this essay was sports tourism in Ireland, and we based our essay on the Special Olympics 2003, it being the biggest event to ever be held in Ireland in our lifetimes. This essay was eventually picked as the winner of the competition, and we were nominated to represent our country at the international GTTP competition in Nice, France.

“Let me win, but if I cannot win let me be brave in the attempt”

The motto of an event that has captured the world’s attention because of the courage and fearlessness of Special Olympics athletes worldwide. This adage very accurately sums up the hosting of the 2003 Special Olympics World Games in none other than our own Ireland.

Being such a small country, people may perceive Ireland as a nation limited in the area of sports tourism on an international level. This is despite the fact that Ireland has a great sporting culture in a vast array of sports, especially our own national sports, Gaelic football and Hurling.

Huge international events such as the FIFA World Cup or the Rugby World Cup have never or rarely been hosted in a country of Ireland’s size as it is thought to be difficult to accommodate such an event. However, 6 years ago, the Irish people had the privilege of hosting one of the most prestigious and well known events in the world; The Special Olympics.

In 1968 the Special Olympic World Games was founded by Eunice Kennedy Shriver in Illinois U.S.A. With headquarters located in Washington D.C., it is obvious how exclusive to America the games were up until 2003. The goals of the organisation is for all people with an intellectual disability to have the opportunity to represent their country on an international stage, to help people with a learning difficulty develop physical fitness, experience the joy of international recognition and, above all, make friends.

We are well aware of the Special Olympic Games and the impact it has on athletes, as a student in our own school competed in the games of 2003. In 2003, for the first time in its history, the Special Olympics were held outside of the United States of America. This was a huge honour to be bestowed on Ireland as a nation. Although Ireland lacked the same level of infrastructure and facilities as that of the U.S.A., the organisational members pulled together to make the 2003 Special Olympics arguably the most memorable of all time.

In addition to benefitting the athletes themselves, the Olympics aided the local towns through the host town system by holding various sporting

and other events designed to attract a wide range of tourists while contributing to the Irish economy as a whole. This evenly distributed the benefits of sports tourism throughout the country.

This was where teams from individual countries were taken in by ordinary Irish towns and people, and given the traditional "Cead Mile Failte". Each of the hosts also benefited greatly from the experience as they gained free training which now translates into potential qualifications if any of them decide that they want to work with disabled people in the future.

A major problem facing the Irish Government at this time was the lack of large, Olympic sized venues which could be used such as the Olympic villages in Berlin or the Beijing National stadium which played host to the Olympics in 2008. Sport venues around the country were upgraded to Olympic standard, therefore putting a large amount of money into the local economy, which led to huge benefits after the games for Irish sport enthusiasts, thus furthering our sporting capabilities as a nation. This also increased future tourism potential because of these new facilities.

The host town program was one of the most prominent aspects of the Olympics in Ireland as the locals from almost every town in the country were able to either interact with, or live with the athletes who competed in the games. Many schools received visits from the athletes of a host town near them which gave them an insight into the lives of the different cultures of one of the many countries competing in the games. The host towns brought publicity and potential tourists for the future to the vast majority of towns and cities in Ireland, for example, a Japanese tourist visiting Ireland may pass through Newbridge, and see a sign bearing the words "host town to Japan" and automatically take interest in this area as they can now relate to it. Such things like this injected vast quantities of money into local economies all over the island of Eire.

The host town program had a knock-on effect in the years following the Games. A huge number of towns throughout Ireland noticed elevated levels of tourists coming to visit the people and places where their close friends and relatives had stayed for a number of weeks during the summer of 2003. While in these selected towns, this new group of tourists used many of our top-of-the-range hotels, restaurants etc. As well as our now state-of-the-art and even world class sporting facilities such as the K Club located in Co. Kildare for facilities to accommodate a possible golfing hobby or even just to enjoy a beautiful meal. As well as availing of these facilities, most tourists took the time to visit some of Ireland's most beautiful historical or natural sites. Ireland is world-renowned for its natural scenic beauty, be it towering mountain ranges worthy of any painter's canvas, or beautiful trekking experiences such as that of Glendalough. Regardless of the facilities in use, all aspects of the tourism industry were utilised to their maximum potential. This new stream of tourists visiting Ireland created more demand in various aspects of the local tourism industry and thus, a need for many businesses to take on

new employees. The positive mood that went home with these people translated into individuals saying great things about Ireland and the Irish people, hence attracting more visitors than that of a country without this reputation. This again has the same effect on the local economy.

The opening ceremony was one of the most memorable events in Ireland's history, drawing crowds from across the globe. With huge international names and acts appearing, such as U2, Bob Geldof and the world-famous Riverdance, tourists poured into Croke Park to witness acts such as a record-breaking number of people performing Riverdance, which stretched the entire width of the famous stadium; almost 88 metres. An estimated 75,000 spectators looked on in awe, as millions more watched the historic event live on television worldwide. Each and every one of the 7,000 athletes had the privilege of striding into the stadium bearing their nation's flag on their shoulder, as 150 individual flags flew in the epicentre of the show that night, each one bringing close friends or relatives to support their country's team. With all the countries being led onto the stage of Croke Park alongside many familiar faces, crowds flocked from the four corners of the globe to see some of the most famous men and women in the world. Such familiar faces included Arnold Schwarzenegger and the iconic former world heavyweight champion boxer, Muhammad Ali. This created amazing publicity for Ireland as a tourist destination, and showed how willing huge numbers of celebrities were to get involved in, and promote the Special Olympics.

Since then, Ireland has played host to many large scale events which have brought in tourists numbers worthy of any World Cup. Examples include the 2006 Ryder Cup at none other than the K Club, and the 2008&2009 World Rally Championships with different stages held across a number of counties Nationwide. There have been, and will be a number of events which will help to expand the Irish tourist industry, just as the Special Olympics did. The development of a new stadium with world class facilities at Lansdowne Road, which will be open to all rugby and soccer, will undoubtedly attract sports fans from all backgrounds and groups. Also, other types of events which are held here on an annual basis, such as the international Tall Boats event, held in Co. Waterford, bring huge incomes for workers in the tourism industry. The London 2012 Olympic Games, much like these events, are expected to bring unprecedented numbers of tourists to the host country. Members of the Irish Tourism Board hope that this will have a knock-on effect on tourism in Ireland during the games. This could provide a much needed bonus to Irish tourism workers during these recessionary times.

Due to the scale of this event and how well it was carried out, Ireland's reputation as a venue used for world class events rose dramatically, as we now have proven our ability to host international scale events.

Our own rector of Knockbeg College in Carlow, Fr. Micheal Murphy, was hugely involved in a number of aspects of the event which included

the transportation of athletes who were based in the Carlow region to the various competitions of which they were a part.

The Special Olympics was an event which benefitted Ireland, and Ireland's tourist industry in multiple ways. It benefitted our economy, the local people, the host towns, and hosts themselves, and last but certainly not least the athletes who have memories to treasure for life. The tourism industry played a huge part in Ireland's hosting of the Special Olympics and thus has expanded rapidly since this world famous event. As a result of the reputation built up during the games, Ireland has been given the chance to host many more international events which provided huge benefits to the Irish tourism industry. This has proved nothing but success after success which means Ireland's reputation now rivals that of Japan, America and many many more.