

Quality not price

More than 150 coach tour operators, tour wholesalers and suppliers heard an expert view that coach tourists value quality above low price. Stuart Render was at this year's CTA Conference

The Coach Tourism Association's Coach Holiday Conference, held this year at The Imperial Hotel and supported by Visit Blackpool, brought CTA members together in a well-planned programme of events that combined business with pleasure.

Leading the speaker line-up was Debbie Marshall, a fluent and enthusiastic speaker who set up Silver Travel Advisor in 2011. This online portal provides a one-stop shop for travel information and advice for the over-50s. She reminded delegates that there are more than 23 million over-50s in the UK today, and that 17,000 people turn 50 every week.

She indicated that while use of social media site Facebook might be waning among the young, there was a surge of interest among older people. She explained that by 2050, there will be more than half a million people aged over 100.

She noted that with people living longer, the traditional three-point life model of education, work and retirement will change, with many people changing their career, and enjoying a two-stage retirement that may include a period of volunteering before settling down with the slippers. She reminded delegates that longer life presents new physiological challenges, pointing out that holiday styles might change as people work out how many healthy years they might have left.

Silver Travel Advisor produces an industry report, using research carried out among 1,000 members. A key finding was that quality and added value comes above price when choosing an operator and product. Debbie identified the opportunities that exist for products aimed at multi-generational family groups, and for single travellers who find themselves on their own through circumstances,

and who would benefit from the social and customer care elements that a coach tour can deliver.

She was also keen to see more 'care-assisted' tours, although she recognised that the move by government to ensure all coaches are accessible, rather than just one or two in a fleet, was a step too far. She reiterated a point that the Coach Tourism Association has made before that older holidaymakers are looking for certainty, safety and security, three elements that are at the heart of coach touring.

Going the extra Golden Mile

Representing Blackpool, Philip Welsh, head of visitor economy for Visit Blackpool/Blackpool Council, highlighted the investment that is transforming the town.

Speaking with a clear passion for the town, he explained how the town was re-positioning itself, creating a year-round resort. He pointed out that the aim was to protect the town's rich heritage and assets, preserving the Winter Gardens and Blackpool Tower, but investing in new projects.

He reminded delegates about the re-modelling of the sea-front, the building of a new shopping centre and business district, and the introduction of the new tramway. He said the tide is turning, with the perception of Blackpool as it was in the old days now being replaced by a new optimism, and private sector investment. Talking about the fleet of new trams, he revealed they have brought about a new interest in the heritage tram fleet. He said the trams were synonymous with what Blackpool is doing, giving something traditional a new twist.

He highlighted the £16 million development of a new rollercoaster at Blackpool Pleasure Beach as a great example of this new-found



Debbie Marshall: 'Old are getting younger'



Philip Welsh: 'Blackpool renaissance under way'



Simon Smith: 'CAZ is a real challenge'

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confidence. Commenting on the change he reminded the audience that people shouldn't believe what they might be told, or what they think they know, but for them to come to Blackpool and see the changes for themselves.

Looking ahead he gave details of new projects that will see the opening of a new five-star and four-star hotels to cater for the changing conference and leisure demographic. He also reminded delegates that rail electrification is nearing completion, offering improved connections to London from a new North Station.

"We have a very loyal audience," he said, "but we need to generate new audiences. We need to challenge perceptions and make Blackpool cool."

CAZs: some may pay

Simon Smith, the Confederation of

Passenger Transport UK's tourism and coaching executive, provided a valuable update on the plans to introduce Clean Air Zones. He explained that in addition to London, more than 50 other possible locations have been identified. These range from a single road to a town or city. He said five zones have been identified in the first tranche of the planning: Leeds, Nottingham, Derby, Birmingham and Southampton. In each case fines of £100 will be levied for all coaches that aren't Euro VI compliant.

However, he also pointed out that it is simply unreasonable to expect coach operators to retrofit all coaches to conform to the new regulations, and that, as a result, some operators will find themselves having to pay the financial penalties. Simon left the audience in no doubt that this would result in a likely increase in hire costs, and the costs of day trips and tours. He indicated that touring itineraries may end up passing through more than one Clean Air Zone, resulting in more than one fine for operators whose vehicles weren't compliant.

The presentation also touched on developments in London. Simon gave clear advice to visitor attractions to think very carefully about making their coach parking and driver benefits as attractive as possible to avoid tour planners looking elsewhere.

While the coach operators in the room will have been well aware of much of the content

of Simon's presentation, it was the industry suppliers in the room who left the conference with a greater understanding of the issues facing the industry.

Countryfile star reveals secrets

Anita Rani, a familiar face to viewers of BBC One's Countryfile, revealed some of the stories and secrets from behind-the-scenes of the popular Sunday evening programme.

Along with executive producer Tim Etchells, she offered delegates a glimpse behind-the-scenes. Topics covered included the importance of keeping out of the way of "poo and pee" when interviewing a farmer in a cowshed (it was the cow's poo and pee!). Anita also revealed that in each programme, the Countryfile weather presenter, in a live feed, changes from a suit into casual wear just before going on-air to link in with the countryside feel of the programme.

However, the main reason for her appearance at the conference was to remind delegates about BBC Countryfile Live, the group-friendly event now held at Blenheim Palace each August. In 2017 the event attracted more than 120,000 people and 10,000 dogs. For 2018, CTA member Encore Tickets is the main ticket supplier and there are special rates for coach operators and groups.

Blackpool entertains

A familiarisation visit hosted by Blackpool Pleasure Beach provided the opportunity to find out more about developments at the 42-acre park. Delegates also enjoyed a VIP reception on board Blackpool Transport's heritage trams.

The social activities included two dinners, one of which was gate-crashed by Sponge Bob Square Pants and friends, courtesy of the Pleasure Beach, and a very realistic waxwork of Ed Sheeran, courtesy of Madame Tussauds.

However, while the social elements gave delegates valuable opportunities to network, the two business-led activities undoubtedly delivered the real benefit of CTA membership.

The well-attended CTA Workshop held on the Monday morning provided a series of ten minute business-to-business appointments. Its an effective format prompting suppliers and coach operators alike to focus on their core business propositions. □



Tim Etchells and Anita Rani: lifted the lid on Countryfile, behind the scenes