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Author(s)	Cawley, Mary
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Chapter 36

Tourists' expectations and experiences in County Mayo

MARY CAWLEY¹

Introduction

County Mayo has a long history as a tourist destination, extending as far back as early medieval pilgrimage to Croagh Patrick, and even beyond.² Many pilgrims still visit but Mayo has many attractions as a tourist destination.³ The county's distinctive landscapes, from Achill Island to Nephin, Croagh Patrick to Clew Bay, Lough Cullin to Lough Mask, enjoy an international reputation. Some of these landscapes featured in the paintings of Paul Henry in the early twentieth century, which were used by railway companies in Britain and Ireland to promote holidays to the west of the country, and they remain evocative of the county.⁴ Westport has gained increased recognition during the last two decades.⁵ It has emerged as a major tourism destination in the west of Ireland. The town was voted 'the best place to live in Ireland', and also was winner of the 'top best cities or towns in Ireland' competition held by *The Irish Times* in 2012, and has continued success in the National Tidy Towns Competition.⁶ One could give many reasons for this success, including its scenic location on Clew Bay, its planned town centre design by John Wyatt in 1780, the continued conservation of its historic urban fabric, and the presence of a wide and varied range of accommodation options and quality dining establishments.

The county town Castlebar and Ballina in north Mayo have also grown in importance as tourist destinations. Both towns offer a range of quality accommodation and facilities. Castlebar has the National Museum of Country Life at Turlough House located nearby, and the recent investment and upgrading of salmon angling on the River Moy has had a positive effect on Ballina. The county contains many museums and visitors centres, including the multi-award winning Céide Fields Interpretative Centre in Ballycastle, which attracted over 25,000 visitors in 2012.⁷

The effect of the global economic downturn is evidenced by the decline in overseas tourism numbers to Ireland between 2008 and 2012. The overall overseas trips to Ireland by non-residents fell from a high of approximately 7.8 million in 2008 to a low of just over 6 million in 2010 to a

slight recovery to 6.5 million in 2012.⁸ In 2010, some 315,000 overseas tourists are estimated to have visited County Mayo and contributed €93 million in revenue.⁹ This fell slightly in 2012 to 245,000 overseas tourist contributing €67 million in revenue.¹⁰ Domestic tourism also makes important economic contributions but domestic visitor numbers and expenditure are currently not available for the county from the published statistics. Even since the onset of recession in 2008, Westport is reported to have continued to attract tourists, because of its reputation as a desirable holiday and short-break location and also because of the competitively priced accommodation packages available in the area.

Because tourism is a substantial contributor to the economy of County Mayo, both in terms of direct employment and through its multiplier effect, it is important to understand the expectations and experiences of visiting tourists because it provides insights into the perceptions of the county as a holiday destination. This information is pertinent to the future development of tourism in the county and to its promotion and marketing. Fr. Micheál MacGréil's most recent fourth report on Westport as a tourist destination provides extensive information relating to tourism in the town in 2011-12.¹¹ This chapter reports findings relating to tourist expectations and experiences in the central and western coastal and mountainous areas of County Mayo, based on survey work conducted in 2003-04 which has not been published previously in the detail presented here.¹² It is based on personal views furnished by the respondents and relates to the period prior to the economic recession and therefore forms an interesting comparative base for future research. County Mayo is increasingly being promoted as providing 'experiences' of various kinds, with reference to encounters with people and places, outdoor recreational activities and religious and historical sites. The tag line of the official county web site, *For All Things Mayo*, also promises diversity of experiences.¹³ Some of this diversity may be appreciated by a brief discussion of a number of key tourist destinations in the county where providers, staff, local tourism organisers and tourism agency representatives were interviewed during the research about the development and role of the destinations, in addition to the surveys of tourists.

Selected tourist destinations

Croagh Patrick has attracted pilgrims for some 1500 years. Since 1907, the last Sunday of July (known locally as Reek or Garland Sunday) has been designated as the day for the organised annual pilgrimage to the summit (764m), in honour of St Patrick's reputed fast of forty days there.¹⁴ Between 20,000 and 30,000 people are estimated to take part in the climb annually. Facilities were extended at Croagh Patrick with the opening of a visitor centre in 2000 which attracted some 200,000 leisure climbers and non-climbers in 2012. So great has been the increase in the number of climbers that erosion of the pathway is a matter for growing concern.¹⁵ The 13th century Ballintubber

Abbey, located on a traditional pilgrimage route to Croagh Patrick¹⁶, attracts smaller numbers of conventional tourists and pilgrims annually. The Abbey has developed a series of retreats for adults and young people and an adjoining visitor centre- the Celtic Furrow- celebrates the history of spirituality in Ireland over 5000 years.¹⁷

The international archaeological significance of the 6000 year-old field system at Céide Fields is documented in the chapter in this volume by Seamus Caulfield. The part limestone, part peat-clad, pyramidal, Visitor Centre, with a glass lantern and viewing platform near the top, was opened in 1993 and attracts those with specialist interests in archaeology, tourists visiting the north Mayo coast, school tours and other groups. Céide Fields is primarily a seasonal site but groups are accommodated during the winter season when visitor numbers are low and the building is closed to the public more generally.

The National Museum of Country Life at Turlough Park House, near Castlebar, was opened formally in 2001 to exhibit the Irish Folklife collection of the National Museum which had hitherto been stored at Dangan, County Offaly. The modern museum's location in an extensive parkland estate, alongside a high victorian gothic style house, makes it a popular visitor destination for local people, apart from the broader appeal of the collections that it contains. These collections include a wide range of tools and implements associated with cultivation of the land, fishing and rural occupations more generally, household furnishings, forms of transport, music, leisure and sporting activities. An annual programme of events and demonstrations, including special events for children, attracts locals as well as tourists. Turlough Park received 99,682 visitors in total in 2012.¹⁸

Westport's many attractions, including its role as a starting point on the Greenway which extends north on the former railway line to Achill, are enhanced by the presence of Westport House and the many visitor facilities within its grounds. Westport House was the first estate house in Ireland to be opened to the public as a commercial venture, in 1961.¹⁹ The house provides examples of work by the 18th century architects, James Wyatt and Richard Cassels, and contains furniture and furnishings of historical interest, a collection of family portraits, and Irish landscape paintings by the early 19th century artist James A. O'Connor. Since 1961, the range of leisure facilities developed in the grounds of the House has contributed significantly to the appeal of Westport as a day-trip and holiday destination. These include caravan and camping sites, a zoo park and children's playground, a nine hole golf course, pedal boats on the lake and, more recently, a log flume on the Carrowbeg River. Major investment has taken place since 2010 to repair the roof and extend the visitor attractions, including a themed experience based on the 'pirate queen', Gráinne O'Malley, from whom the Browne family is descended. Unlike many other destinations, the number of visitors increased at Westport House, between 2008 and 2013, from 80,000 to 130,000.²⁰ The

reopening of an entrance to the estate from Church Lane in the centre of the town, in 2012, has been welcomed by the townspeople. A feature of the Westport estate has been the expansion of the range of experiences offered over time to appeal to different visitor segments, with a summer music and food festival being a recent addition in 2012. Westport House is a source of significant full-time and seasonal employment locally.

Salmon angling on the River Moy, particularly in Ballina, is a specialist type of tourism that is limited by the seasonality of the sport, restrictions on the catches permitted and by licensing. The highly productive Moy Fishery was purchased by the state in 1987 and is managed by Inland Fisheries North West.²¹ Thanks to a €3 million development programme in the early 2000s, new angling spaces were created which permitted some expansion. The Fishery is divided into eight separate ‘beats’ (defined areas on the river where designated numbers of anglers are permitted to fish at any one time) and all but one of these must be booked in advance. Foxford is a second established salmon angling location of note on the Moy.

Achill Island’s reputation as a tourism destination dates back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries when several small hotels served a seasonal clientele. Heinrich Böll, the German Nobel prize-winner for literature, who spent periods of time in Achill between the 1950s and the 1970s, helped to attract a niche tourist market from Germany to Achill through his published *Irish Journal*.²² Since the late 1990s, Achill has been promoted for a range of new outdoor activity pursuits including surfing and bird watching.²³ Because of its Gaeltacht status, the eastern part of Achill Island receives students who come to learn Irish during the summer vacation. The island’s role as the setting for many of Paul Henry’s works has been used as a basis for developing painting classes. Belmullet has for long attracted emigrants home at the time of its traditional festival season focused on the 15th of August but was later in developing non-diasporic tourism than was Achill, possibly because of its more peripheral geographical location.²⁴ Nature based tourism has been promoted during the last decade, as have water sports and walking, and investment in a new hotel and highly rated links golf course has provided much needed tourist infrastructure. Because of its Gaeltacht status, Belmullet also receives Irish language students.

Tourists, their expectations and experiences

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines tourism as ‘the activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes’.²⁵ This definition recognises tourism as comprising a broad range of activities, and goes beyond the common perception of being limited to holiday activity only. It is designed to permit arriving tourists to be counted and comparison of numbers to be made at an international scale. For the purpose of this chapter, the term ‘tourist’ includes day visitors because

both use facilities and contribute expenditure, albeit to differing extents. The reasons for going on holiday, whether for a day or a longer period of time, are many and varied. Returning to known places is a motive for some tourists but visiting new places and learning about unfamiliar cultures are central motives for going away on holiday for others. Many people also go on holiday to practise sports and recreational activities, such as golfing or surfing, for longer periods of time than would be possible during the working week. Activity holidays of this kind are of growing importance in Ireland and internationally.

Tourist expectations are usually divided into those of a practical nature relating, for example, to playing a particular sport, and those which relate to forms of personal psychological fulfilment such as relaxing, although both practical and personal dimensions can be interrelated. The personal expectations are often sought in surveys because of the additional insights that they provide into the more practical expectations from a holiday. The expectations and the extent to which they are met are important indicators of how a destination lives up to its promoted image and have implications for repeat tourism. In order to gain understanding of the expectations and experiences of tourists in County Mayo, interviews took place with tourists at the key sites discussed above (Figure 36.1).

Study method

International research illustrates that large scale, mass tourism that is promoted by external investment is likely to be accompanied by significant flows of profits from the local area. By contrast, smaller scale activities that are based on and in the local environment, society and culture are more likely to contribute to the local economy.²⁶ The research on which this chapter is based, focused on types of tourism that are sympathetic to the local environment, society and culture. These forms of tourism are most likely to contribute to the future economic sustainability of rural areas and small towns. The information presented relating to County Mayo is taken from a larger study. That larger study included interviews with businesses, tour operators, organizations that provide resources for tourism, organizations involved in policy and planning for tourism and members of local communities not involved in tourism in County Galway and County Mayo. It was designed to identify the reasons that tourists travel to the region and their experiences whilst there. Quota sampling of the tourists by country of origin, group type and age category was conducted, based on information available from official statistics relating to the types of tourists who visited. Relatively small numbers were interviewed at each site in County Mayo but in aggregate they reflect the broad profile of the tourists to the West Tourism Region at the time of the survey.



Figure 36.1: County Mayo: tourist interview sites

The tourists interviewed were required to have spent at least 24 hours in the region at the time of the interview, if first time visitors, or to be returning visitors who had some familiarity with the region. Large coach tour groups were not included because they were more likely to be involved in what might be described as forms of ‘mass tourism’; however, their impacts were captured in other aspects of the research. Thus, the sample was selected in a deliberate way so as to provide insights into the experience of small scale tourism which includes touring by car, minibus or public transport, motor cycle, bicycle or on foot, visiting historical, cultural and religious sites and taking part in outdoor recreational activities. The research was conducted before the recent recession commenced and prior to the opening, in April 2010, of the 42km long Great Western Greenway from Westport to Achill Island. The interviews took an average of twenty minutes to conduct and all were digitally recorded, with the permission of the interviewees, which meant that answers to open questions were recorded verbatim and could be transcribed later. This information provided a rich set of texts which were analysed in depth to identify key themes in the narratives. The topics

discussed here relate to the image held of the region before visiting, the personal and practical expectations from the visit, if, and the ways in which the image had changed following the visit, the activities undertaken during the visit, the aspects of the visit that were enjoyed and any dissatisfaction experienced. The respondents were encouraged to elaborate on these topics during the interview.

Interview results

The profile of those interviewed reveals some interesting insights into the Mayo tourist. Eighty six tourists were interviewed in total during the main tourist season (March to September), sixteen (18.6%) of whom were first time visitors and seventy of whom (81.4%) were returnees. The proportion of first time tourists is lower than the Fáilte Ireland estimation of 29% of visitors to the West Region more generally but that proportion is likely to be lower in Mayo because of the importance of diaspora tourism in the county.²⁷

Some 47% of returnees were domestic tourists, a proportion that aligns with the representation of domestic tourists at a regional level. Repeat tourists from overseas came from various EU countries and the UK, followed by other sources. Almost one-third of the returnees were emigrants or had family links with the county. Reflecting their family connections, some 23% were staying with friends and relatives. A similar proportion were staying in bed and breakfasts or guesthouses and 19% in rented accommodation, which was linked to the growth in self-catering provision in County Mayo in the late 1990s and the early 2000s. The majority of the remainder were staying in hotels or in a range of different types of accommodation.

Family groups or couples dominated among the interviewees with smaller numbers of individuals or groups of friends and colleagues being represented (Table 36.1). First time visitors were younger than returnees (56.2% were under 40 years of age, versus 31.5%) and had higher levels of formal education than the former. These educational differences are explained in large part by the relatively lower access to upper second and third level education available, in the past, to older emigrants who were returning on holiday.

The representatives of the tourism businesses, tour organizers and tourism organizations who were interviewed in the larger study identified Knock Airport as one of the advantages enjoyed by County Mayo as a tourist destination. However, of thirty-eight tourist interviewees who had arrived in Ireland by air, twenty-one came through Dublin Airport and ten through Shannon with only small numbers arriving through Galway, Knock and Cork Airports. A hire car was then used for travel in Ireland in the majority of cases. Small numbers entered through the ports of Rosslare, Dublin, Dun Laoghaire and Belfast and brought their own car. The numbers are too small to generalise from them but they point to Mayo being part of a wider tour, often of the west coast of Ireland, for first time tourists in particular. Domestic

tourists used their own motor transport. Only small numbers travelled on private minibuses and they were part of a student group. Use of public bus and rail transport was limited and poor synchronization of rail and local bus timetables was identified as a major problem by those who wished to use public transport whilst travelling in Ireland.

	Tourists			
	First visit (n=16)		Return visit (n=70)	
Group type	Number	%	Number	%
Alone			5	7.1
Couple	7	43.8	21	30.0
Couple with children	2	*	10	14.3
With other family members	2		18	25.7
With colleagues or friends	3		13	18.6
Other	1		3	4.3
Age group				
<20	-	-	2	2.9
20-29	5	31.2	7	10.0
30-39	4	25.0	13	18.6
40-49	2		22	31.4
50-59	4	25.0	15	21.4
60+	1		11	15.7
Education				
Primary	-	-	2	2.9
Secondary	3	18.7	32	45.7
Third Level	13	81.3	36	51.4

*% values are omitted where the numbers are very small

Table 36.1: Socio-economic profile of tourists

With reference to duration of trip, the findings illustrated a dominance of short breaks and week-long holidays in County Mayo, a feature of the region more generally: some 25.6% of the interviewees were on a break of 3-5 days and a similar proportion reported a holiday of one week's duration; 18.3% were spending two weeks in the county; 14.6% were on a day trip; 11% on a two day trip; and small numbers were spending three or four weeks in the county. Two-thirds of the sample planned to stay in one place and the remainder, with the exception of the day visitors, were travelling around the region. Those who intended to base their holiday in one location and take day tours reported not having a pre-defined itinerary. Their holiday was planned day-by-day and in many cases was determined by the weather conditions. The range of visitor and interpretative centres available provided options when the weather was unsuitable for outdoor activities.

Tourist images of County Mayo, reasons for visiting and expectations

Imagery used for promotional purposes in both digital, film and print media is known to influence the tourist in deciding to visit a particular location. The main sources of information used by first time visitors pointed to formal media being of most importance: namely, the internet, tourist board brochures, guidebooks like the *Rough Guide* and the *Lonely Planet Guide*, angling magazines for anglers and ‘word of mouth’ information from family and friends. For return visitors, the main sources were, not surprisingly, their own experience during previous visits, information from relatives and friends, the internet and guidebooks. All of the interviewees were asked about the image that they held personally before they first visited County Mayo. First time visitors reported images relating to a scenic but somewhat rugged and barren landscape and referred to elements such as the coastline and beaches, mountains and lakes. An American student, studying in Ireland, who visited with friends held an idyllic image of a bucolic landscape, ‘I thought it would be small and quiet. Green and out in the country with farms.’ A returning angler at the Ridge Pool in Ballina referred to an image expressed more widely among returnees, of Mayo being, ‘Wild, beautiful, quiet, peaceful, somewhere to get away from the hustle and bustle’. Negative imagery among first time and return visitors related to the possibility of rainfall. Overall, Mayo emerged as being perceived as a natural environment of considerable beauty which possesses almost therapeutic qualities as a place of relaxation.

When queried about their reasons for visiting County Mayo, the majority of first time visitors cited a wide range of factors including the scenery, getting away from the city, the influence of friends, the influence of an Irish television programme which featured Mayo (*No frontiers*), and seeking to support Irish tourism (even before the recent recession). In the latter context, a parent from Cork explained, ‘We wanted to go on an Irish holiday for a change, spend money at home’. Her next statement suggested that an overseas holiday had become the norm for the family: ‘We usually go to Italy but it is too hot for the children’. For returning visitors, family links with Mayo, warm memories of previous visits and the opportunities to engage in particular sports activities were of particular importance. A Galway farmer who was interviewed in Belmullet said, ‘We like Mayo because we used to come here with my brother-in-law (from Belmullet). The people here are so friendly, they always salute you. It’s a different world really’. In Westport, a Northern Ireland bank official’s response illustrated the appeal of the town and its environs for visitors: ‘We passed through en route to Galway before and wanted to come back. We had heard of the wonderful golf club on numerous occasions and Croagh Patrick’. An angler from Westmeath was quite specific in his reason for visiting Ballina, illustrating the short term nature of some visits to that town: ‘I booked at Christmas and got the day on the Ridge Pool’, i.e. a day’s salmon fishing on the River Moy.

In order to gain further insights into the reasons for holidaying in County Mayo, the practical and personal motivations for visiting were explored. Experiencing the scenic landscape was the single most frequently mentioned practical expectation for first time visitors, reflecting the importance of landscape imagery in their perception of the county and its presence in promotional materials. Other tourists revealed newer niche images associated with Mayo. A respondent from the Netherlands, at Céide Fields, said that he came 'To see the coastline, nature and birds' illustrating the successful promotion of north Mayo as a place of ornithological interest. An Irish male social worker pointed to Mayo's potential to attract young Irish people as a new place to explore on a short break. He and his friends visited 'Just as a kind of weekend break out of Dublin. I certainly haven't been so we just heard that it was nice. It wasn't due to any specific reasons as such'. A female student from San Francisco cited awareness of Westport's reputation for traditional music in pubs as an influence on visiting with friends: 'To have fun and a few drinks and hear some music'. First time visitors did not always differentiate between their practical and personal, more psychological, expectations from their visit but when they did 'relaxation' emerged in first place as a personal expectation.

Returning visitors are of particular importance in County Mayo, make valuable contributions to the tourism industry and offer some security of income for accommodation and recreational providers as an assured source of trade. The majority of the returnees had visited at least twice in the past and some had been coming annually for up to thirty years. Interviews with the tourism providers in the broader study showed that regular returnees booked the following year's holiday at the end of a visit. By virtue of the fact that a visitor has returned to an area or accommodation premises at least once, their expectations must have been met to a large extent. It is nevertheless important to understand these expectations because of their implications for tourism planning. For returning visitors, the most important practical expectations from the visit related to encounters with people and places and participation in outdoor activities, corroborating reasons cited with some frequency for visiting. Outdoor activity pursuits such as access to high quality angling and golfing were mentioned as practical expectations by approximately one-third of the respondents. Enjoying landscape and scenery, often associated with relaxing was mentioned by another one-third, some of whom also referred to enjoying food and nightlife, as in the case of a male Italian sales representative who referred to 'Scenery, food and good atmosphere in pubs'. Visiting family as part of an annual return was ranked slightly below engaging in outdoor activities as a practical expectation which also has personal connotations. A middle-aged female tourist from Wexford, who was interviewed in Castlebar, referred to 'coming back to roots. All my family come from here and we came to visit family ... My uncle who is back from America is with me as well'. Spending time in a second home was mentioned

by several interviewees on Achill Island, including a sales representative from Scotland who said that ‘The family came from the area and still have a house here. I come to relax’. Overtly practical motivations underpinned by cultural interests related to visiting cultural and historical sites, especially Céide Fields, Turlough Park House, Ballintubber Abbey, Croagh Patrick and the Michael Davitt Museum. A number of older visitors included a pilgrimage to Knock Shrine in their holiday expectations, linking into traditional religious practices. A female teacher from Northern Ireland who was interviewed at Turlough Park House cited the wide range of activities that were available in Mayo: ‘I feel that tourism here is much better developed. There are so many things to do’.

The personal expectations from the visit elaborated on the practical expectations envisaged and highlighted relaxation, enjoyment (associated with more active outdoor pursuits), meeting with family, friendliness and returning to a familiar and loved area. Meeting friendly local people was a valued expectation of visiting Mayo for several overseas tourists, including a young French male teacher in Castlebar, who was travelling with a group of students learning English, ‘It’s my third time in Ireland. I like this country, people are very friendly’. Many salmon anglers on the River Moy referred to the camaraderie associated with angling. For one man, the company of friends compensated for a lack of fish: ‘It’s enjoyable. The fishing isn’t great this year so it’s meeting the people’. High quality golfing was expected in Westport and Belmullet but the personal expectations related more to playing golf per se than associated congeniality. Small numbers of respondents referred to ‘escape’ from Northern Ireland around the 12th July as a personal expectation and one referred to the sense of getting away from Limerick City.

Experiencing a sense of being ‘at home’ in an area on holiday was adverted to by second home owners in Achill Island in particular. A young woman from Castlebar, who had a mobile home in Achill explained, ‘We have a mobile home on the island so are here all the time...love it...come every weekend for relaxation and outdoor activities. We love the people and know the locals’.

Change in perception and evaluation of the experience during the visit

The tourist’s evaluation of the holiday experience influences whether a return visit will take place and whether a destination will be recommended to others. Information in this regard contributes to the on-going management of tourism by business owners and tourism agencies. Twenty-seven visitors said that their perception of County Mayo had changed following their visit, most of whom were repeat visitors and most of whom referred to positive changes. Some first time visitors among them found the landscape more beautiful or more rugged than they had anticipated. The changes mentioned most frequently by returnees related to physical developments which had taken place from the late 1990s, associated with investment from EU structural

funding in roads and other infrastructure. Growth in the number of hotels and self-catering accommodation premises was commented on favourably, as was resort renewal in Achill and Mulranny. A transport manager from Northern Ireland, who was interviewed in Ballina, linked the change in the image that he held of the town to ‘New developments and better infrastructure. EC money is now to the fore. Look around, you can see new apartments’. Mayo was also viewed as being a place where an increasing number of interpretative centres enhanced the range of experiences available to the visitor. Westport emerged as having a positive image for quality dining and activities for children at Westport House whilst increased traffic congestion in the town was identified as a negative change. One angler associated his changing image with ‘pollution of Lough Conn and Lough Cuillin’, an issue that has been addressed by the fisheries authorities and local angling clubs.

Rank	Activities undertaken	Rank	Activities planned
1	Touring and sightseeing	1	Touring and sightseeing
2	Fishing	2	Fishing
3	Visiting historical and cultural sights	3	Visiting historical and cultural sights
4	Visiting relatives (and sightseeing)	4	Various outdoor physical activities
5	Various recreational activities		
6	Shopping associated with other activities		

Table 36.2: Activities undertaken during the visit and planned

In order to monitor the extent to which the expectations in advance of the visit had been met the interviewees were asked about the activities undertaken and their plans for the remainder of their holiday. The responses are ranked in importance according to the number of times they were mentioned (Table 36.2). Touring by car to view the scenery with stops to visit scenic, historical and cultural sites- a more traditional type of holiday in the west of Ireland- was most popular overall. Respondents who were staying in Westport referred to visiting Achill Island, Croagh Patrick and other parts of Mayo and Galway, pointing to the role played by the town as a base for touring. The ranking of fishing in second place as an activity undertaken and planned is related to the presence of anglers in the sample interviewed in Ballina, but Mayo is also an important destination for trout angling during the Mayfly season and for sea fishing in Clew Bay and off Achill and the north coast. Visiting historical and cultural sites reflects interest expressed in history and culture and bears witness to the wealth of such sites in the county. The relatively low ranking of visiting relatives is surprising, given the expectation of meeting relatives and friends and may be related to ‘activity’ being interpreted as a sightseeing or a

recreational activity by the interviewee. Also, almost one-quarter of the sample stayed with relatives and friends and meeting them may have been taken for granted following arrival. Most reported taking part in more than one type of recreational activity during their holiday and some women referred to shopping. A range of specialist outdoor activities, including golfing, walking and diving were cited in fourth place as activities planned.

The satisfaction or enjoyment gained from the holiday also clearly has important implications for the capacity of a destination to retain visitor loyalty and encourage positive referrals. The most enjoyable parts of the visit and the reasons provided suggest that the practical and personal expectations were met (Table 36.3). Enjoyment of all aspects of the holiday was mentioned most frequently and was associated with the sense of relaxation gained, with some interviewees elaborating by including the beauty of the landscape and sense of peace. The experience therefore corresponded closely with the personal expectations held in advance of the visit. Several respondents simply replied with one word ‘relaxing’ conveying a sense of disengagement from everyday life or, in the words of a female respondent from the Isle of Man, who was interviewed in Ballina, ‘It’s a lazy time and that’s what you do on holiday’. Scenic drives and particular locations emerged in second place as sources of enjoyment. A German respondent in her fifties explained that she enjoyed visiting Achill because, ‘Where we live in Germany it is totally flat. Here it is great, cliffs going down to the sea. At home you can’t see the clouds, just a grey sky. The weather changes slowly there.’ Visits to cultural and historical sites were appreciated as conferring learning opportunities. Thus a male history teacher from Dublin, interviewed at the Foxford Woollen Mills, enjoyed, ‘the cultural side and visitor centres like here and the Davitt Museum’ because ‘that is what I like’.

Rank	Activity (and attributed reason for enjoyment)
1	Everything (the sense of relaxation, scenery, beauty and peace)
2	Scenery in general and specific places (particularly in good weather conditions)
3	Cultural and historical sites (for people with interests in history and culture)
4	Angling (salmon fishing per se and meeting friends)
5	Friendly people (welcoming atmosphere) Meeting family (renewing contacts and seeking roots) Golfing (excellent facilities) Beaches (sense of space, diving and surfing) Relaxing

Table 36.3: What was enjoyed about the holiday and why?

Personal enjoyment was expressed strongly by male salmon anglers, interviewed in Ballina and Foxford. Although angling for salmon was first of all a sport, they almost most invariably associated a visit to the Moy with meeting friends, exchanging stories and socialising together in the evening. Enjoyable personal experiences more generally were highlighted as meeting friendly people who provided a welcoming atmosphere, visiting family and renewing contacts. A retired male French university professor found pleasure in the 'Irish atmosphere... difficult if you are Irish to know what it is. It is a kind of welcome. Irish people are full of gaiety and pleasant'. Golfing facilities in Belmullet and Westport, diving opportunities at Purteen and surfing at Keel were identified by people interested in sports; more general tourists referred to the pleasure obtained from walking on open beaches in Achill and Lecanvey. Fine weather featured as enhancing the visit and rain as having the opposite effect, although the scope to use indoor recreational and interpretative facilities during inclement weather conditions was commented on favourably.

Almost 60% of the respondents reported that they were not dissatisfied with any aspect of their holiday. Of those who were dissatisfied, the main sources of complaint related to narrow roads in some parts of northwest Mayo (a problem that has now been remedied in the environs of Belmullet, because of road widening associated with the construction of a gas terminal at Pollathomais), poor signposting and poor driving. Notwithstanding the lapse of time, it is of interest to note that similar issues were still mentioned by tourists interviewed in Fr. MacGréil's recent study which points to a need for attention to be given to them.²⁸ Rain which interfered with sightseeing came next but people, and especially return visitors, were generally philosophical about the Irish climate. Small numbers of people complained about high prices and poor service in restaurants and about a lack of cleanliness in some locations.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed views expressed by tourists relating to their visit to County Mayo at a number of key sites in the early 2000s. Mayo emerged as a county with a strong image as a scenic location, with welcoming people, a rich archaeological, cultural and historical heritage accompanied by high quality interpretative facilities and visitor centres, many opportunities for outdoor recreational activities and a well developed accommodation infrastructure. Many of the interviewees combined encounters with people and places as part of a relaxing holiday which involved touring and visiting cultural and historical sites. Westport emerged as being a destination in itself and an important base for wider touring. Day trippers tended to focus on visiting particular sites such as Céide Fields, The National Museum of Country Life at Turlough Park House, Westport House and the recreational

facilities available there, and Foxford Woollen Mills, among other destinations. Salmon anglers paid relatively short visits associated with getting time slots to fish on the River Moy. They, however, expressed expectations and outcomes that highlight salmon angling as not just pitting wits with the fish but also a sociable activity associated with meeting friends. The golfers interviewed referred to the high quality of the courses in Belmullet and Westport and were combining their sport with touring as part of a more general holiday rather than being on a golfing holiday per se. Apart from Croagh Patrick which has wide appeal because of its iconic status, visits to pilgrimage sites were a feature of the holiday of mainly older returning tourists. The Great Western Westport to Achill Greenway was not open when the research was conducted so its role in the expectations and experiences of tourists is absent from the discussion but it is clearly a dimension that should be investigated.

The evidence from the study highlights the importance of conserving the scenic landscapes and environmental resources that characterise County Mayo, nurturing the traditional welcoming attitude and maintaining high quality interpretative and recreational facilities in order to ensure that tourists' experiences meet their expectations.²⁹ The decision to go on holiday and the destination selected draw on knowledge gained from various sources and are motivated by both practical and personal factors. The tourism experience in particular places has implications for return visits and future visits by new tourists who will be influenced by reports received from others directly or, increasingly, through on-line evaluations in Trip Advisor and other web sites. Studies such as that reported here are pertinent to protecting an important contributor to the economy of County Mayo. As a study which preceded some recent developments in the county, the research provides a benchmark for assessing changes, if any, in tourist expectations and experiences.

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¹ The research on which the chapter is based was conducted as part of a collaborative, six-country, EC funded FAIR5 programme on Supporting and Promoting Integrated Tourism in Europe's Lagging Rural Regions (SPRITE). Professor Desmond A. Gillmor, Trinity College Dublin, was a member of the study team based at NUI Galway. His contribution to the original research is acknowledged as is that of Róisín Kelly, researcher on the project, Carol McLoughlin and Elizabeth Muldowney who conducted some of the interviews with the tourists in County Mayo. Colleagues from Teagasc Rural Economy, Dublin, conducted parallel research in the north Midlands. The author is responsible for the current analysis and the text. Dr Mary Cawley is Senior Lecturer in Geography, School of Geography and Archaeology, National University of Ireland Galway.

² Griffin, K., 'The globalization of pilgrimage tourism? Some thoughts from Ireland', in Raj, R. and Morpeth, N.D. (eds) *Religious tourism and pilgrimage festivals management: an international perspective* (Wallingford, 2007) pp 15-34.

³ Information sheet from Fáilte Ireland, from responses to the ‘Visitor Attractions Survey, 2012’. Accessed 30 Jan 2014

http://www.failteireland.ie/FailteIreland/media/WebsiteStructure/Documents/3_Research_Insights/1_Sectoral_SurveysReports/Visitors_to_places_of_pilgrimage_2012.pdf?ext=.pdf.

Visitors include people who may not qualify strictly as tourists who are defined officially as spending 24 hours or more, but less than one year, away from their home for purposes other than employment. In the discussion in this chapter the terms are used interchangeably to refer to the number of people visiting County Mayo and particular locations within the county without reference to the time period involved. It should be pointed out, however, that only twelve of the interviewees were on a day trip; the majority were tourists, strictly defined. The most recent statistics available from Fáilte Ireland regarding visitor numbers to places of pilgrimage in Mayo in 2012 are Marian Shrine in Knock (1.6 million visitors), Croagh Patrick Visitor Centre (220,000 visitors) and Ballintubber Abbey (35,000 visitors). Because of the focus of the study on small scale tourism in coastal and mountainous areas, interviewing did not take place at Knock Shrine because of its location in east Mayo. Knock also deserves special study because it involves features of both small scale and mass tourism.

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⁸ *Statistical Yearbook for Ireland 2013* (Dublin, 2013), p. 251.

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¹¹ MacGréil, op.cit.

¹² The summary results of the survey were made available to all of the participants immediately on completion, including the tourism providers, local tourism groups, local development groups, Fáilte Ireland, the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism, and Ireland West Tourism. Various findings from the research have also been published but not in the format discussed here.

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²³ Personal communication from tourism representatives in Achill Island.

²⁴ Personal communication from tourism representatives in Belmullet. The 15 August is the feast day of the Assumption of Our Lady into Heaven and the official date of the main pilgrimage to Knock Shrine.

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²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18

Note: Pagination and details of the text may differ from the published chapter

Dr. Mary Cawley, School of Geography and Archaeology, National University of Ireland Galway