

**REPORT ON THE**  
**The 2nd EUROPEAN CONGRESS ON RURAL TOURISM**  
**September 26 - 28, 2005**  
*from Harriet Dean*

This report is written as the outcome of a training grant (VTS) from DEFRA and contains

1. general and specific personal views on the conference (conference details at [www.europeanrtcongress.org](http://www.europeanrtcongress.org))
2. as well as the post conference tour
3. some general conclusions on themes and thoughts that could be pursued by my business and other rural tourism operatives.

The attendees from the North West Region were:

- Harriet Dean, Low Byres, Talkin, Bramton, Cumbria [www.talkinhead.co.uk](http://www.talkinhead.co.uk)
- Pam Copeland, Bailey Mill, Longtown, Cumbria  
<http://www.bbonline.com/vt/baileysmills>
- Iona Frost Pennington, Muncaster Castle, Ravenglass, Cumbria  
[www.muncaster.co.uk](http://www.muncaster.co.uk)
- Rachel Boothman, Blakey Hall Farm, Colne, Lancashire  
[www.blakeyhallfarm.co.uk](http://www.blakeyhallfarm.co.uk)
- Carole Mitson, Higher Wanless Farm, Colne, Lancashire.  
[www.staylancs.co.uk](http://www.staylancs.co.uk)

All are well established rural tourism operators and are members of Farm Stay Uk ([www.farmstayuk.co.uk](http://www.farmstayuk.co.uk))

### Venue

The Conference was held at Yalta in the Ukraine.



Location



View

### Context

The organisers are Eurogites (the European Federation of Farm and Village Tourism <http://www.eurogites.com/>); it received the patronage of Gunter Verheugen, Vice President of the European Commission responsible for Enterprise and Industry and was sponsored by the National Tourism Organisation of the Ukraine; the Union for Assistance to Green and Rural Tourism Development in the Crimea; the Ministry of Resorts and Tourism and Council of Ministers of the Autonomous Republic of the Crimea. It was held in the Yalta Hotel, Yalta and a post congress tour was organised around rural tourism developments in the Crimea.

### Objectives

The main purpose of the Congress was to bring together anyone involved in rural tourism activities across the whole of Europe: EC and potential EC countries (Israel was also included).

### Audience

27 different countries were represented and there were three distinct sectors in the audience:

**academics**, most from Universities with departments specialising in economic development, tourism and rural tourism. Some of the presentations were

specifically aimed at this audience.

**NGOs, economic development agencies and government sponsored tourist boards**, these varied in level and size from the equivalent bodies like CTB, CREA, NWDA and DCMS. Unlike CTB, though, none of them seemed to understand private sector involvement and often were baffled as to why business operators should even be consulted!! (on my return home I supplied a great deal of information on the CTB, its structure, involving partnership working and especially the role of commercial members, to help the Hungarians look at models for rural tourism development.)

**rural tourism operators**, many marketing membership organisations, such as Stayfarm UK and Cartwheel, because they represent Gites in the countries across Europe. Also, there were the 5 business representatives from the DEFRA training mission, other independent operators as well as Ukrainian businesses. Businesses represented included B&Bs, self-catering, attractions and activity providers.

### Programme

Despite a certain lack of organisation which caused the occasional problem with speakers failing to turn up, or the translation service not working very well, or sessions starting 2 hours late, or discussions being hijacked by Ukrainian politics, the main themes were:

- sustainable development
- eco tourism
- green certification
- cycling/rural activities
- communities/villages
- economic value of units of tourism. This last presentation by Pascal Boulet- Gercourt of Gites de France entitled "The impact of direct and indirect spending on the local economy - Empiric Evidence in France" was of great interest to many as a way that could be used to justify investment in Agri/rural tourism product. His final paper will not be published till Christmas but should be read by all.
- major trans Europe tourism themed projects such as the Silk Route

There were other levels of presentations, especially those from individual countries ie Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey, Israel etc. which were mostly a tourist board travelogue.

### Post Congress Tour

This was an experience all of its own. Sufficient to say that it ranged from seeing good quality new converted accommodation with gardens and beach access to the worst *Holiday Camp* type cabins complete with dirt and uncleanness not seen in the UK since the 1950s!



Chalets

Earth closets which are only a vague childhood memory are still de rigueur in the Ukraine. Bus transport which would give any H&E officer a stroke was standard. We were shown countryside which was vast, beautiful, unspoilt, full of birds and other wildlife, geologically fantastic but on the other side we were shown the



Countryside

most strikingly awful battery-farmed quails by a Russian "mafia farmer"! However, where-ever we went we were met with the most lovely hospitable people who genuinely wished to show us their homes, culture traditions etc.



Cultural Tourism

### Comments

In my view the themes of the congress listed above were chosen because they are very relevant and important to tourism from micro businesses to government and EC treasury level. In the UK and particularly in the Northwest we often seem to define Farm Tourism as a problem solving activity for failing agricultural businesses rather than a crucial economic driver for the future of rural areas. We separate farm tourism from the wider and arguably more relevant rural tourism which would include villages and even small towns.

Many speakers were concerned that to keep attractiveness in the market was to preserve culture and tradition in the communities, villages, small towns and regions, so there was not seen to be a "motorway-service" approach to tourism development. I could not but feel that in the UK that is exactly what we have done by the urbanisation of our rural communities and the indiscriminate commercial development of areas by unscrupulous multi-national one size fits all businesses.

It is only in the last few years that local foods and crafts have been regarded of sufficient value to warrant direct government subsidy. The questions that the

Congress raised in my thoughts were:-

- How can small farm tourism products keep pace with market demands and is it possible without subsidy and grant? Are these businesses genuinely sustainable?
- How does quality relate to fashion? (quality inspections and green audits)
- With such heavy state intervention across "new Europe" how does the entrepreneurial spirit innovate, lead and generate growth?
- Where is the balance between differentiation of culture or tradition and mummified museum?
- European Gites provide a good brand image and strong competition for us in the UK, how can we improve our working together in order to keep up in the front?

### Conclusions

I cannot say that any of these knotty problems were answered in Yalta but it was enough for me to take some actions on my return to home and my business.

- Working actively through partnerships; cooperative marketing initiatives, tourist boards and local authorities is still very important, especially on marketing nationally or internationally but that one should try to influence the style of activity to some of the crucial themes of GREEN, HEALTH, FITNESS, FOOD, TRADITION, RURAL EXPERIENCE & CULTURE.
- To become active in rural conservation activities - so I have joined the Tourism Conservation Partnership and become a Board Member
- To refurbish the 7 self-catering cottages with environmental issues to the fore. ie heating, water, sewage and energy generally. To maintain a 3 star quality in order to provide visitors with a feel for the natural building materials and to keep the character of the 16th century farm buildings and to remain within the natural spring water limitations. Please note NO GRANT.
- To encourage CREA, NWFTI, DEFRA, NWDA, CTB and Stayfarm UK that we should try to attract the 3rd Congress to the Northwest UK to showcase our rural product, organisational skills, overwhelmingly good hospitality and also to show that despite our high standard of living compared with a lot of new EC and potential EC that we have genuine sustainable tourism rural product.

- To query why there are so many blocked rights of way in Cumbria especially since 2001 and FMD proved the importance of the link between tourism and countryside access. Perhaps it is time to campaign for structural support which would benefit all (ie resident, visitor and business), with clearing the backlog of blocked footpath and bridleway access. (400 blockages currently reported in Cumbria alone) rather than an arbitrarily selected few businesses.
- To try to maintain some of the contacts made in with delegates from other European countries especially Hungary, Poland, Estonia and Holland. In particular the Estonians wanted to organise an exchange of Farm Tourism operators for training purposes.

1<sup>st</sup> December 2005.