



Insight Department:
The emotional benefits of tourism and the
role of travel in the pandemic recovery

Topic Paper | April 2021

Welcome

As of Mid-March 2021, the Scottish Government announced the advisory roadmap to reopening the economy including the Visitor Economy. Following what has been almost 12 months of intermittent national and regional lockdowns, tiered restrictions, and uncertainties the tension within individuals and society is clearly visible. With the announcement of a measured and controlled relaxation of lockdown and as vaccine programs roll out, for many the thought turns to the prospect of travel.

One indelible mark the COVID-19 pandemic has left us with is the impact on our mental health. Recent research from VisitScotland (detailed later in this paper), looking at the reasons for taking a break in the latter half of 2020 found that, around quarter of UK resident respondents are motivated to take a holiday or short break to “protect their mental health” from the impact of Covid. The research also showed half of respondents defining reasons for a holiday were looking to *get away from it all and have a change of environment as well as connecting with nature and the outdoors.*

Within this paper we will examine the long-established relationship between tourism and wellbeing. Alongside the premise of tourism's emotional benefits, we will look at the recent trends, consumer insights and practical actions businesses can adopt in light of this phenomenon.

Residents of Scotland along with the wider UK have a long and established relationship with travel and tourism. Indeed 80% of overnight travel within Scotland comes from the domestic market, representing [13.8 million trips in 2019](#). Furthermore UK residents regularly contribute to the [top 5 international travelling markets](#) by value alongside residents of China, US, France and Germany. It is therefore indelibly associated with the national psyche to return to travel at some point and in some format.



Tourism as an emotional benefit

The [emotional and mental benefits of tourism](#) are well established within academic literature and trade press. Tourism has evolved in recent years to represent a transformational experience in the traveller where wellness, experiences and impact on communities and destinations have shaped the approach to planning, booking, behaviour and expectation in the consumer. Emotions are ubiquitous in tourist experiences and used within marketing to form positive connections between the traveller and destination. VisitScotland's brand messaging of Dream Now / Travel Later provided the [Absence makes the heart grow fonder video](#) and coordinated relationship and social marketing. Similar branding can be seen through the ["I feel Slovenia"](#) campaign which focuses on a mix of emotions, sensibility, and the Slovenian green colour at its core and identity.

Good mental health is an asset and is also linked to good physical health – both of which support positive social and economic outcomes for individuals and society. [The Office of National Statistics reported in June 2020](#) that more than two-thirds of adults in the UK (69%) report feeling somewhat or very worried about the effect COVID-19 is having on their life. The most common issues affecting wellbeing are worry about the future (63%), feeling stressed or anxious (56%) and feeling bored (49%). Within the same data release, it was noted that the most common impact was a lack of freedom and independence with almost 6 in 10 adults (58%) reporting this. Other common issues were an inability to make plans (52%) and personal travel plans being affected (50%).

Most Common Issues affecting Wellbeing during the Pandemic

- **Worried about the future (63%)**
- **Lack of freedom and independence (58%)**
- **Feeling stressed or anxious (56%)**
- **Personal travel plans being affected (50%)**

What are the key components that define travel as a contributor to mental, physical, and emotional health?



Alleviates stress – Travel promotes happiness, among many the planning, journey and change from the regular routine reduces stress. Travel has traditionally allowed time to reconnect with friends and loved ones or conversely restored a sense of independence through solo travel all of which reinvigorates the mind, body and soul. Indeed scientists have found that the psychological benefits of a vacation can last for up to a [month](#) after returning home.



Fosters resilience – Increasingly people seek challenge in their life. It may be to climb a mountain or complete a long-distance walk empowers many to gain control in other aspects of their life. Travel is not without its unexpected events, such as missed travel connections. These incidents, at the time may prove challenging but once overcome add to the stories and memories of a trip.



Increases creativity - It's been scientifically proven that new experiences, particularly ones that allow you to immerse yourself in a different culture increasing creativity and subsequently productivity. Rising interest in volunteering tourism (voluntourism) reflect this.



Boosts confidence – As we emerge from lockdown the act of indulging in travel can be an empowering act of self-care. A concern for some is [lockdown anxiety](#) and the worry about the return to 'normality' or not wanting to return to a faster pace with busier daily lives, and less downtime to ourselves. Leisure travel, especially to familiar places enables you to do what you want and practice living in the moment.



Encourages empathy – Travel opens our eyes to new destinations, communities, cultures, and experiences. For many travel is an opportunity to engage and contribute to something bigger. The COVID pandemic has resulted in cases of loneliness and isolation and in others an increased respect for others such as key workers in health services to essential retail. Travel breaks down barriers and provides a shared connection between those it touches which is all for the better.

Consumer Trends during the reboot of tourism:

Evidence is emerging from interpreting social impact studies that as we emerge from lockdown and cautiously seek to embrace the next normal, we will be seeking wellness, mindfulness, life-enhancing experiences, nature, culture and challenge or adventure. Always conscious of legislation and standards of hygiene, many will ultimately value quality time with friends and family. Time will become a commodity and we will approach the return to travel at a slower pace and we might not want to venture far from home at the moment. Trends tend to develop slowly, but over the last few months many have been planning, dreaming, and preparing. We may expect to see the following develop amongst the emergent travelling public:

Experiential Tourism – We have seen pre-pandemic that we were evolving into a time when tourists just travel for travelling sake is in decline. Travellers now embark on different leisure breaks to gain different experiences. They travel to know the heritage and cultures of other people and destinations to enrich or enhance knowledge. This allows a deeper more meaningful connection to the travel experience which develops stronger emotional connections and memories. Food and cultural tourism are strongly connected to this trend as is the opportunity to meet and engage with locals and other travellers making tangible social connections.

Emotional Tourism – For some there may as a result of living through the pandemic feelings of anxiety, loss, even loneliness. Emotional tourists are inspired to drift around without direction, being motivated to be carried along by exploring new experiences and sensations.

Opportunities for Awe - According to a [study published in the journal Emotion](#). Awe, a positive emotion triggered by an awareness of something much larger than the self – such as nature, art or a collective act from concerts and festivals – can enhance feelings of generosity, wellbeing and humility.

[According to researchers at the University of California](#) and Trinity College, Dublin, scientists found weekly ‘awe’ walks led to more positive emotions among those studied. Older adults who took weekly “awe walks” reported increased positive emotions and

less distress in their daily lives. Awe is a component of Scottish brand differentiation as we discuss later.

OOO or AAO? (Spontaneous Travel) – Changes in lifestyle such as home working have opened opportunities for planning and booking at short notice or as the whim takes you. With the greater distribution of broadband and Wi-Fi throughout Scotland and across a range of accommodation types, home workers can now be Out of Office (OOO) or At Alternative Office (AAO) if they desire. The freedom to capitalise on good weather to go camping or take an extended city break away to reinvigorate and have fresh outlook but still log on at work is increasingly attractive, particularly among the younger workforce, with the more mature workforce also becoming aware of the possibilities.

Interest in the outdoors, nature and voluntourism will continue to grow due to the preference currently to visit clean, pure, open space. For many, established exercise regimes during the pandemic will open up opportunities to exploit levels of stamina not previously available before through adventure tourism activities. For others emerging from a winter lockdown may see detox, fitness and weight loss holiday offers from providers an attractive proposition.

[The Global Wellness Summit](#) held in November 2020 saw experts predict that the demand for wellness may surpass that for medical treatments. This all leads to the role tourism will play in the collective recovery of society as we journey post pandemic.

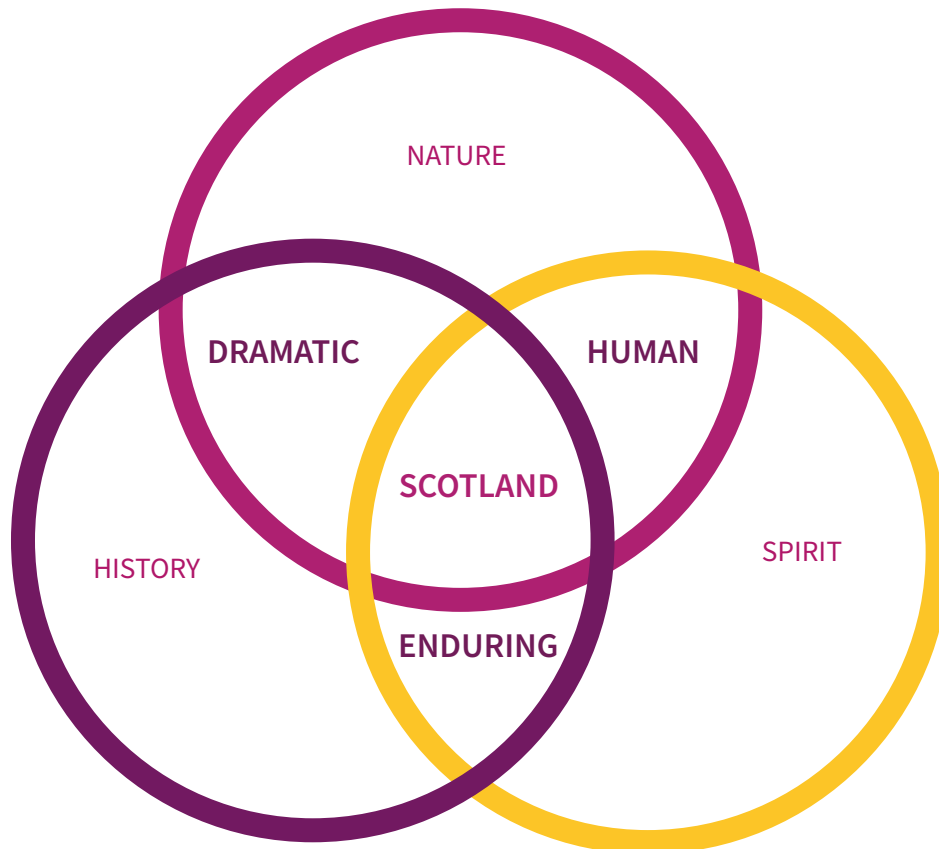
Scotland as an Emotional Destination

VisitScotland research provides evidence that experience tends to exceed expectation in Scotland – the inclement weather becomes ‘four seasons in one day’ and adds to the personality of the destination. The landscape outshines all expectations, seen with ‘awe’ and offering a ‘dense variety’. The warmth and welcome of Scotland’s people and their down to earth nature also add to the sense of authenticity and connection to the place.

The core of Scotland’s brand has long since been identified as a combination of Nature (Dramatic), History (Enduring) and Spirit (Human). There are clear rational and emotional benefits for visitors who choose to spend time here. Whether that is hard facts about the product on offer or things that people feel about a destination without necessarily asking themselves why and it is the latter which gives a break in Scotland some of its most distinctive qualities.

When we talk about being in Scotland we talk about a ‘powerfully enriching personal experience’ – Scotland is an **emotional destination**.

Scotland Brand Essence



The Scotland brand promises an emotional experience and words that people have used to describe the way they have felt are welcome, special, enriched, rejuvenated, inspired and ‘in awe’. Interactions with Scotland’s citizens and communities contribute to the emotional magnitude of the experience.

Emotional benefits: how tourists expect to feel when they come to Scotland

The promise of an emotional experience is critical for today's tourist; it's a powerful differentiator when selecting one destination over another. That sense of connection and enrichment is often what people will remember most about visiting a country... and it's certainly one of the things they'll tell their friends about when they get home. Remember that places can be photographed – experiences have to be lived!

Awe

Visitors and potential visitors imagine that a holiday in Scotland will be an intense experience with the potential to move them at a profound level.

Their feelings of awe may emerge from connecting with the landscape, being caught up in the history or exploring the culture of Scotland and there's a perception that Scotland may offer a more enriching experience than other destinations.

“Goose bumps all over at the sheer splendour”

Spirit

The individual spirit of one country cannot be easily reproduced by any other and VisitScotland's research highlighted a perception of mysticism and passion in the spirit of Scotland which sets it apart from other destinations.

People imagine that a holiday in Scotland will allow them to connect directly to this spirit - bound up in landscape, history and culture - rather than merely witness it.

“It gets into your soul.”

Connection

An expectation of making a connection to Scotland runs through all the emotional benefits that VisitScotland's research uncovered.

Visitors expect to feel re-centred and re-connected with their own lives as a result of a Scottish holiday – and they also expect to make a real connection with Scotland – to feel a true involvement rather than a superficial engagement. Some imagine that they will feel 'at home' and connected to Scotland's people and passionate spirit.

“... a feeling of connection – being part of it...”

Escapism

Needing a place to escape to is a common priority for tourists right across Europe.

There is an expectation of experiencing real space on a Scottish holiday – this may come from the openness and vastness of the landscape as well as simply being away from everyday life – and de-stressing is also seen as one of the key benefits of taking a holiday in Scotland.

“You can feel your shoulders drop”

Scotland Visitor Experience during the Covid-19 pandemic

The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic have only heightened the need for the emotional benefits that Scotland can offer the visitor. A recent VisitScotland survey (January 2021) of those who had a holiday or short break during 2020 highlighted the reasons why a break in Scotland was just what was needed.

As might be expected the key reasons were to get away from it all and have a change of environment as well as connecting with nature and the outdoors. Significantly a quarter of respondents said that they wanted to protect their mental health from the impact of Covid and this was even more important amongst younger age groups. The full survey results can be seen here [Impact of COVID-19 on our UK and Ireland Markets - Research | VisitScotland.org](https://www.visitScotland.org/research/impact-of-covid-19-on-our-uk-and-ireland-markets)

MOTIVATION TO TAKE A HOLIDAY OR SHORT BREAK



Respondents aged 45 and under were particularly likely to say:

- To connect with nature/outdoors (64%)
- To get away from it all (62%)
- wanted something that would protect my mental health from the impact of covid (42%)
- looking for an active holiday (28%)
- looking for an adventure and challenge (22%)

The pandemic has also resulted in people seeking types of destinations to provide specific benefits as well as a perceived lower risk. The research identified the most popular destinations were rural coastline/islands, countryside, and mountains/hills.

TYPES OF DESTINATION



Cities and urban locations are lower in the list of popular destinations for travel; however this represents comparability to rural and coastal destination at this particular point in time of the pandemic. City breaks traditionally represent higher volumes of trips in terms of leisure breaks and Scottish cities proximity to rural locations (Glasgow – Loch Lomond and Edinburgh – Lothians, Fife and Borders) are increasingly perceived as open green spaces rather than conurbations that other global cities may be defined as.

When asked about what they gained from the trip the majority were very satisfied. Many stated how happy they were with the ‘Welcome of the Local People in Scotland’ and were also impressed with the levels of hygiene and cleanliness in the accommodation in particular. It was also clear that people felt substantial benefits from their time spent in Scotland.

“The ability to get away for even a short break to an accredited place was a necessity after the current year and restrictions. A break has been very helpful for my MENTAL HEALTH.”

“Isle of Skye is gorgeous, I was there for long enough this time to explore the island fully and let nature and the scenery CALM me.”

“Welcoming, friendly people, excellent adherence with covid hygiene, masks and distancing, good quality local food, helpful people always happy to help or advise.... we loved the small villages each with their own distinct heritage and how information is readily available on the history or story of the place...the scenery is just amazing with good access ... I’ve been coming to Scotland for over 30 years and it never fails to impress and delight me and SOOTHE MY SOUL”

“It was a nearly perfect vacation. Every single person we encountered was friendly and charming, as usual. I felt the coronavirus health and safety protocols were top-level, and well-communicated and executed. Food was excellent, scenery was stunning, lucked out and had amazing weather, etc. We felt both AT PEACE AND STIMULATED there.”

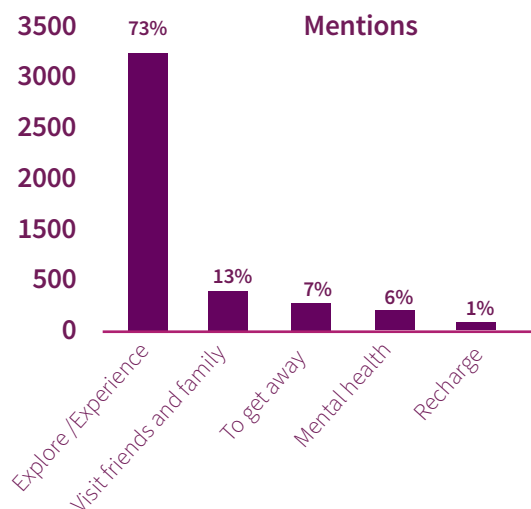
Holiday Intention and the emotional connection for travel

Social listening as a tool for research gathers data on specific topics of online conversations to allow us to capture first-hand insight from visitors and potential visitors to Scotland. Understanding their interests and expectations, their experiences and feedback, helps us observe how Scotland is viewed as a destination and to spot tourism trends too.

VisitScotland uses public-facing sites, such as Twitter and Instagram, as well as articles and comments in blogs, forums, and review sites, to gather our social listening data. Facebook isn't part of the sites analysed as it's a private platform, and as we're looking for unique visitor conversations, we also exclude news sites and retweets.

Between 1 January and 17 March 2021 there were 43,000 conversations about holiday intention (people expressing intent or desire to go on holiday), a 33% increase in "chatter" compared to the previous three-month period.

The main topic themes were about wanting to plan a holiday as well as debating whether it is safe/responsible to go on holiday as the situation moves from lockdown to reopening. There were also conversations where users **explicitly mentioned** their intention to visit friends and family, get away, enjoy an experience or mentioned their mental health.



- In 73% of these conversations, people expressed their **desire to experience something new**, have an adventure, enjoy landscapes etc. This suggests people see a holiday trip as an experience to enjoy.
- 6% mentioned their mental health or wellbeing as the reason to take a holiday. These people mentioned that the lockdown had impacted their mental health.

Business Response to Emotional Tourism

What can tourism operators do in response to the consumers need for travel and leisure at this time?

Scotland is superbly placed to capitalise on its landscape and variety of product. The rich culture and heritage alongside quality food and service all provide a strong foundation to respond to a customer that has a diverse set of emotional and practical requirements. To highlight some of the key areas for consideration:

- Personalisation - Customers increasingly look for bespoke experiences that reflect the experiential tourism they are undertaking. Personalised welcome notes, perhaps highlighting exclusive offers or speciality menu offerings are an example of subtle engagement.
- Regular communication post booking and pre arrival detailing any information the visitor will need, such as local guidelines. It's also an opportunity to cross sell other tourism businesses, highlighting if attractions, retailers and activity providers are operating and if booking in advance would be required.
- Develop Emotional Intelligence – we have been through a significant event over 2020 with the pandemic. As we start to travel again there may be a variety of emotions experienced and we cannot assume that behaviours we expected before will remain. Retaining rigid standards of service among a clientele with a recently developed shorter tolerance and attention span won't create a convivial atmosphere. Instilling self-awareness amongst staff and encourage listening to the guest will generate a feel-good factor and promotes a culture of empathy not only in the service an operator delivers but also from the customer in return.
- Reinforcing positive visitor engagement. Initiatives such as VisitScotland's [responsible tourism campaign](#) and subsequent industry support through [itineraries and advice](#). Empowering and engaging visitors not only allows the tourism industry to recover it also adds additional depth and dimension to visitors' experiences which contributes to the transformation experience of tourism and travel.
- Providing opportunities to give back to communities through volunteering and local engagement. Contribution and constructive behaviour through rewilding, volunteering in conservation and heritage restoration are increasingly seen as popular activities during travel. Providing information and opportunity for visitors to participate in local activities will, particularly during the intra & post Covid periods is a positive stimulus which is comparable to achieving a goal or becoming successful in a challenge.



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