

Selling the New Zealand experience: what inbound tour operators need to know about your garden

*Jim Monahan*¹

The garden tourism market

I am an inbound tour operator and my company, Travel Time South Pacific Ltd, is a full member of the Inbound Tour Operators Council of New Zealand (ITOC). I have been in the New Zealand tourism industry for 40 years. I am one of the fortunate few who have had the experience of working for our national tourist office, the New Zealand Tourist and Publicity Department for 22 years, where, among other appointments, I worked in the USA and in Australia. I have also worked in regional tourism as the first director for Tourism Waikato (1985-1989), and for the past 15 years I have worked in the private sector as a self-employed inbound tour operator.

Firstly, I want to congratulate you all on the initiative that has been taken to form the New Zealand Gardens Trust. From my viewpoint as an inbound tour operator this is an important step. I applaud the objectives of the Trust and vision you have to promote and profile the interests of member gardens, encourage professionalism, monitor performance standards, and grow your relationship with the tourism industry. This is wonderful because the gardens we have in New Zealand, both public and private, are a significant feature of our country, and an integral part of the product that is Destination New Zealand.

Like any other product we have got to get it right. What you are doing is a big step down the pathway to

ensure that garden tourism will both contribute towards, and benefit from, tourism growth in the years ahead. The most recent international visitor survey shows that currently about 300,000 visitors to New Zealand each year report that they visit a garden or a botanical attraction while in the country. That is about 17% of all overseas visitors to New Zealand and is significant, ranking gardens/botanical attractions in the Top 10 activities for visitors.

The international visitor survey shows us that there are six main off-shore markets for New Zealand's garden tourism (see table below).

Around 23% of visitors in the holiday/vacation segment say they visit gardens/botanical attractions, which is a higher proportion than for overall visitors to New Zealand and includes people coming here for business or family purposes.

These are important statistics for inbound tour operators (and for you) as they tell us what the scale of garden tourism is for New Zealand

and people in which markets are most interested in visiting our gardens.

The Inbound Tour Operators Council of New Zealand (ITOC)

ITOC is the trade organisation for inbound tour operators. It has been in existence for more than 30 years, representing the interests of its full and allied members who collectively handle most of New Zealand's holiday visitor arrivals. There are currently 56 full members and over 200 allied/supplier members, such as hotels, sightseeing attractions, and transport operators.

Members are at the cutting edge of our tourism industry since full members process tour arrangements for more than 50% of holiday visitor arrivals in New Zealand (80% of the world's international travel business is processed by the travel agent/tour operator distributor system.)

Australia	~68,000	22%
UK	~56,000	18%
USA	~30,000	15%
Japan	~20,000	7%
Korea	~18,000	6%
Germany	~15,000	5%

¹ Managing Director, Travel Time South Pacific Ltd, PO Box 6 Hamilton; inbound@ttnz.co.nz

Our members also contribute significantly to the marketing of Destination New Zealand overseas in a variety of ways. These include making regular sales calls overseas to wholesalers and travel agents to encourage them to include more New Zealand product in their various tour programmes. Many of us have staff/representatives overseas on our payroll knocking on doors, and undertaking a variety of promotional activities that might include participation in trade shows, running seminars and film evenings, and distributing brochures to drum up business. We attend overseas travel shows such as ITB in Berlin, the World Travel Market in London, and a bunch of others all around the world some of which are costly to be involved in.

We spend significantly on advertising either directly to the consumer or the travel trade. We often subsidise the brochure production costs, advertising and/or promotional costs of the overseas tour companies for whom we are the New Zealand inbound tour operator, for which there are no special incentives or tax concessions provided by the government.

We also get involved in staff training for our overseas agents, including hosting them (with the help of our industry partners) on familiarisation tours of New Zealand. And most of us have websites that are there either as sales aids for our overseas trade partners, or for direct marketing to consumers. ITOC members are required to meet certain standards of professionalism regarding staffing and tour operating, and financial criteria which require us to submit our accounts each year to an independent assessor to check our financial viability. I mention this as most of you who operate gardens will no doubt be handed vouchers by tour guides that say "trust us we will pay you". If the voucher is from an ITOC member you should not have any problems getting paid.

Thoughts from overseas garden tour operators

Over the 15 years my company, Travel Time South Pacific Ltd, has been in existence we have operated quite a few garden tour groups. I hasten to say we are not a specialist garden tour operator: we might operate 2 or 3 garden tour groups a year. But during the same year we may also operate 100 other group tours that are not garden tours although some of these will also visit a garden or two (or more). We have two particular garden tour operators in the USA who bring garden tour groups down to New Zealand every year. I contacted them for their thoughts.

This is what Jan Coyle, who has lived on the west coast of the USA now for over 30 years but who is actually a kiwi with degree in botany from the University of Auckland, had to say:

"Great news about the formation of the New Zealand Gardens Trust! Well, of course, the first thing I think they need is to have links to specialist New Zealand garden tour operators in the USA (like Pacific Pathways) on their website to make it easy for interested people to find a tour.

Most of the people that come on our general (escorted) garden tours are retired, professional, and relatively well-off couples or single women.

I'd say when I bring a group of 12 people, maybe 2-4 of them are true gardeners, i.e., want identification of plants and details of their cultivation, want to learn about new plants, and New Zealand natives etc. Half are somewhat interested, and then there are the spouses who don't know the difference between a daisy and a daffodil, and don't care, but enjoy looking and wandering through the gardens.

The groups have to have plenty of time and not be rushed, and a good host and knowledgeable guide who will spend time with them (Bev McConnell is, for example, a model host)."

She noted that she has given up going to certain gardens not because the gardens are inferior, but because the gardeners/owners did not measure up in as gracious hosts.

"As for gardens I want to show them as wide a variety as I can. They should be interesting and well maintained, but certainly not perfect. It helps if they are easily accessible. If they are too far off the beaten track they have to be very good to be included.

Clean toilets are a must. Morning/afternoon teas or just a cup of tea and a biscuit at the end of a tour goes down really well, and lunches in a garden are always enjoyed.

If it is a specialist horticultural group, e.g., a dahlia or daffodil tour, the participants tend to be younger and on a budget, and want to spend ages with propagators.

As an operator/guide I just know that once we arrive and I let the group loose in the first garden I'm home free: the New Zealand gardens sell themselves. My people love the gardens and the gardeners we visit on our trips. Say hello to Gordon and Bev for me."

Richard Lyon is the president of a company called Garden Adventures. He is also a New Zealander, a landscaper who now lives and works in Delaware, and who brings a garden group down here to New Zealand every year. He offered the following thoughts:

"The reason the garden was created is very important. If it has been created as an obvious money making venture, it isn't for me. My people do not come to New Zealand to see famous gardens. They come to see gardens which reflect the warmth, sincerity and personality of the owners and gardeners. Their creativity, vision, enthusiasm, and energy are something so many of my tour groups comment so favourably on.

I do not like to take my groups to gardens, which have a sign out front and are overly commercial. My people

like the idea that they are being taken into someone's private garden, somewhere not crowded with other tourists, which they think has been especially opened for them. A look inside the host's house is a big plus, and adds to their feeling that they are getting special treatment.

It is important to me that my group members are not hurried, and that they do not see any money (or vouchers) being handed over. I think that having stores on site selling plants is a negative as it underscores the commercial aspects. Having said that though, it is essential that there be good toilets on site, and if they can be provided with a cup of coffee or a meal in the garden that is a real bonus."

Nuts and bolts

As an inbound tour operator one of the problems - shall we call it a challenge - we have had over the years is finding the really good gardens that are consistent year after year. Most of the group tours are planned a year or more in advance. The question for us is: How do we know that because a garden is good this year it is going to be just as good next year?

Over the years we have certainly found some that are just as good, ones that can always be relied upon to deliver a top product: Bev McConnell's Ayrli's continues to be one of the very best, and we never have any concerns about the groups we send there. Indeed Bev and most of the other garden hosts make us look very good indeed. Thank you for that. It is good for repeat business for all of us.

On the subject of prices, I don't think you should undersell yourselves. Typically, a lot of time, effort and money has gone into developing a top garden. In my view a fair price to view that garden is appropriate. As a guide it costs about NZ\$25 to visit Kelly Tarlton's Underwater World in Auckland, or for a guided tour of Waitomo Caves. Keep in mind that anything that is sold too cheap is

not usually perceived as being of much value, or very good. It is a balancing act, as you do not want to price yourselves out of the market either. Maybe there should be one price for guided tours, and another for self-guided ones.

Like other inbound tour operators we work huge hours every week (all year round too) sitting at a desk or in front of a computer. It is very, very hard to find the time to actually get out of the office and go and look at new product, whether they are hotel and lodge accommodations, new sightseeing attractions, and new gardens, especially when these things are some distance away.

In the past we have usually found out about good gardens by word of mouth, from watching Maggy's Garden Show, reading the New Zealand Gardener and other magazines, or by calling the regional tourism offices (RTOs). I think it is very important that you all ensure that your RTO knows about your garden, as many of the tour operators call on us or we see them at travel trade shows, such as TRENZ.

I also think that the garden owners who want to receive business from inbound tour operators should take the initiative. They should provide the inbound tour operators with whom they want to work with an information pack about their particular garden, which should include information about the history of the garden, its features and special plants, the best times to visit, information about its physical address, directions and contact details, whether the tracks/pathways are wheelchair passable, the opening hours, toilets on site, tea/coffee etc. availability - and the entrance fees (guided and unguided) for the next 18 months ahead (retail and wholesale).

And they need to commit to updating this information and distributing it to inbound tour operators at least once a year.

Much of what I have had to say is about group tours. However, most visitors to New Zealand do not travel on group tours. The challenge is to

get the fit, self-drive traveller to visit your gardens - and spend money doing so. I am not sure how best to achieve this but suggest you might like to consider producing a best gardens guide to New Zealand listing those NZGT member gardens which are open to the public. Such a publication could be distributed through the overseas offices of the New Zealand Tourism Board, the visitor information centres in New Zealand, and through inbound tour operators and rental vehicle operators. It could also be placed on a website, with links from the Pure New Zealand website and others.

Conclusion

I hope that the new Gardens Trust will gradually add to its portfolio of approved gardens, and, with a programme of regular site visits/inspections, we tour operators will be able to sell the gardens concerned confident in the knowledge that they come with the NZGT quality assurance stamp of approval. This is a great step forward. I want to conclude by again congratulating you all on the formation of the New Zealand Garden Trust and for the initiative you have taken. I know I speak for all my fellow inbound tour operators when I say that we are keen to work with you in the years ahead and together build garden tourism to this country.

Jim Monahan has spent 40 years in the New Zealand tourist industry. The first 22 of those were with the NZ Tourist and Publicity Department working in various roles in Rotorua, at Head Office in Wellington, as Private Secretary to Minister of Tourism, as Manager Tours Division New York, and as Travel Commissioner in Brisbane. He then worked as Assistant Director Marketing Services in HQ, and Secretary General of the Pacific Area Travel Association until he resigned at end of 1985. He was the first Director of Tourism Waikato until he started Travel Time in 1989.

