

Mass, crass tourism proposed for deserted island

Star Wars-style tourist facility competes with Council's mainland visitor centre for Dursey Island in West Cork

by Tony Lowes

'Irish tourism now faces a crossroads. It remains confused as to whether the country should aspire to be a cheap mass-market destination, or expensive high-end niche market.'

'Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape'
Cork University Press

CORK COUNTY Council got a rude awakening this month when they saw for the first time what their proposed €7m Dursey Island Cable Car and Visitor Centre had wrought.

The Council is about to apply to An Bord Pleanála for permission to replace the current 1960s six-person cable-car with two new cars capable of taking 200 to 300 visitors in each direction to and from the island per hour. They

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are targeting 80,000 visitors a year to an island that has had – to date – every protection European environmental and Irish planning law can provide. The 6km access road at the end of the peninsula, a designated walking route, will have 16 passing bays constructed to facilitate the tourist buses.

A 7km island at the extreme end of Beara Peninsula, Dursey is popular with walkers and bird watchers. Protected under European Natura 2000 designations it supports the largest

breeding population recorded nationally of Choughs, a Red Data Book species of international importance, as well as Fulmers, Shag, Herring Gull, Lesser Black-Backed gulls, Razor-bills and Black Guillemots. Rare plants abound.

Abandoned in the 1980s, there are three villages on Dursey where the dwellings remain set in fields that have largely not been subject to modern farming intensification. Many earth and stone banks and walls, remnants of formerly more intricate enclosed field systems, remain here though the typologies have been lost on the mainland.

The Council and Fáilte Ireland have commissioned Scott Tallon Walker to build the €7m Visitor Centre – on the mainland – with “proper departure points for the aerial lift service” which “will allow the impressive views of Dursey Sound to be enjoyed with an external viewing deck, glass-clad panoramic lift and south-facing glazed façades”.

But they were caught by surprise when a returned émigré applied for an alternative “tourist facility” on the island itself - in fact a private four-bedroom guest house and café. The modern design, by an Australian firm, became the *Southern Star's* front-page headline in August: 'TOURIST BUILDING IS “MORE SUITABLE FOR STAR WARS” THAN FOR DURSEY ISLAND'.

Without the benefit of pre-planning, and aided by four of the public-consultation five-week period passing without any details being posted to the County Council's planning website, the



Émigré's proposed private tourist facility in Special Protection Area for Birds

development's “stacked modules of reflective plate glass” are proposed for an elevated site some distance from the existing contained settlements and smack in the middle of the Special Protection Area for Birds, where even the 2017 Local Area Plan prohibits any development.

The private proposal violates every County and Local Development Plan and Strategy published since 2010, when the Island's Strategy called for the old schoolhouse to be sensitively adapted for tourists' needs. Clearly the new centre cuts across the likelihood of that. That strategy also called for a study to be done to determine the capacity of the island for walkers, given the problems that erosion has led to on Carrauntoohil and MacGillycuddy's Reeks – and the excrement now fouling the latter. The study was never done.

Butler's Cycle of Tourism demonstrates that tourism begins with back packers. Hostels follow; modest guesthouses become mini-hotels; full-scale hotels follow on. More leisure time, increases in disposable income, and greater ease of air travel – at the expense of the global environment – mean mass tourism will destroy the very attractions people were seeking.

While even the Council may be shocked by this proposal it will be hard put to deny its paternity. 

Council's proposed mainland visitor centre