

SPORT, SUSTAINABILITY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: GOLF AND ST ANDREWS, SCOTLAND

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Introduction

In most cases tourist destinations become established because they possess one or more of a set of specific attributes or qualities. These have generally included factors such as specific environmental features (e.g. beaches, mountains, bodies of water), unique or distinctive cultural features (e.g. built heritage, or structures possessing associations with famous individuals), attractive climatic features (e.g. temperature, sunshine, snow), a high level of accessibility (e.g. by railway or airplane), or contemporary purpose-built facilities (e.g. hotels, theme parks). Once such destinations have become established and proven attractive to tourists, they tend to proceed through a general process of development, sometimes eventually declining and even going out of tourism, in other cases being rejuvenated through adding new attractions or revitalising existing ones. In a few cases, destinations become tourist attractions through uniqueness, accident, serendipity, or individual entrepreneurial efforts even though they may be lacking in what have been described as conventional resources noted above. One of these less common cases is that of St Andrews, a small community on the east coast of Scotland, some eighty kilometres north east of Edinburgh. While St Andrews does possess some of the attributes of a conventional tourist destination, its major claim to fame as a tourist destination is because of its sporting associations, in particular, its golf courses and related heritage. This paper reviews the reasons for the emergence of St Andrews as a tourist destination, evaluates the evolution and the significance of the role of golf in shaping the form and function of the town as a tourist destination and considers the sustainability of its appeal in the future.

The Emergence of St Andrews as a Tourist Destination

St Andrews in many respects is little different to many other similar small rural communities in Scotland and Western Europe, but it is visited each year by many visitors intent on deriving pleasure from its attributes. St Andrews first came to the notice of those outside its local boundaries more than a thousand years ago because of its religious connections. It was the ecclesiastical capital of Scotland, as well as being the site of the first of Scotland's universities, founded in 1494, and was thus a seat of learning as well as religion. St Andrews survived as a small market town, with a fishing industry, a university, and interesting ruins that attracted visitors. The beaches were not viewed as major tourist attractions until the middle of the 19th century and there was little indication, that the town would regain its international reputation and once more become an attraction to visitors in considerable numbers. The reasons for this transformation lie in improvements in accessibility and the growing popularity of the game of golf.

Transportation improvements came in the form of the development of a railway link to the main line from Edinburgh to Aberdeen. By 1852 St Andrews was already known as a significant golf centre, although the number of tourists who came specifically for golf appears to have been very small. The existence of golf at St Andrews is based on the sand dunes along the West Sands, which provide the "links" landscape in which golf first developed. Many other locations in Scotland and elsewhere have such attributes, and

thus the presence of these features alone does not explain the pre-eminence of St Andrews to golfers the world over. The explanation for this lies in the cultural and economic history of the town and Scotland.

Golf At St Andrews – Past And Present

There are few, if any communities as strongly related to sport as St Andrews is to golf. It is known world-wide as ‘the home of golf’ and represents an excellent example of both the positive and negative effects of being the centre of global awareness for a popular sporting activity. It has become, to all intents and purposes, a site of pilgrimage for aficionados of that activity. St Andrews’ reputation as the home of golf stems from two principal factors, one is that it is generally acknowledged as the oldest site of recorded golf, and second, that it is the home of the organisation (the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of Scotland) that sets the rules for the sport throughout the world (except in the USA and Mexico). The Town Council saw tourism based in part on golf as being a source of income for the town, and Jarrett (1995: 35) notes “The Town Council wanted people to come to St Andrews to boost the economy: the Royal and Ancient wanted them to stay away because their presence took up starting times, and larger numbers on the course meant bigger maintenance bills”.

A series of Acts of Legislation changed the nature of the organisation of golf at St Andrews, the ownership of the links and the courses, and the rights of local residents. The local residents lost many of their privileges and rights, including freedom from charges to play, while the organising body gained the right to close the courses when major events were being played, and to remove limits on the level of charges and discounts for locals. While the ancient right of the public (really the citizens of St Andrews) to walk over the links on Sunday was maintained, the institution of limits and charges for locals were fiercely opposed but in vain. Control over the operation of the courses, the setting of charges for play, and the maintenance of the courses passed from the St Andrews Town Council to the St Andrews Links Trust in 1974. This transfer of control was made in an effort to retain control of the links and golf in local (St Andrews) hands in the face of local government reorganisation which threatened to replace the Council as the local authority with a unitary authority in the form of Fife County Council. This arrangement remains in force today, although disagreements between local residents and the Links Trust over the organisation of golf on the courses are frequent local political issues.

Today there are six public golf courses (99 holes in all) on the links and driving and practice grounds and this constitutes the largest golfing complex in Europe. Two clubhouses open to the public which have been constructed in the last ten years stand in addition to the famous clubhouse of the Royal and Ancient Club (the latter being strictly private for members only). Up to 250 people are employed in the high season and just under 200 year round. In addition, approximately 250 licensed caddies find employment on the Links courses. Plans for a seventh course to be developed were presented to local residents for consideration in July 2003. The presence of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club, and the relatively frequent holding of The Open Tournament at St Andrews serve to keep the town in the international golf audience’s mind. In the past decade several other developments have strengthened this association and reflected the importance of golf to tourism in the town, marking the most recent era of golf tourism at St Andrew.

Golf and Tourism in St Andrews – Relationship

Today St Andrews has an economy which is surprisingly healthy for a small town. The oldest surviving leg of the traditional economy is the University, which remains the largest employer in the town. Ten kilometers away is one of a small number of front line RAF bases in the United Kingdom, and a second leg in the economy of St Andrews. The church and the harbour offer little employment compared to a millennium ago, but serve as attractions to the third leg of the economy, which is tourism. While St Andrews is an attractive medieval town, its market square and old street layout surviving still, the main attractions for conventional tourism are clearly the beaches. These and related facilities still attract tourist visitors at weekends and holidays, but few tourists stay for a traditional ‘bucket and spade’ holiday.

Golf is now the major focus of tourists staying overnight at St Andrews, almost entirely so for the international tourists who visit the town. The pre-eminence of golf is seen in the location of tourist facilities, as well as the nature and number of those facilities. There is, quite clearly, a version of a Recreational Business District (RBD) (Stansfield and Rickert 1970) in St Andrews which is similar in many respects to the classic form of an RBD, with the Old Course replacing the traditional pier in classic seaside resorts. The retail and service functions within the RBD of St Andrews relate closely to golf, even in terms of the names of establishments, the facilities are spatially concentrated, and access is highly pedestrianised. On the other hand, while there is a distinct summer peak in visitation, golfers visit St Andrews throughout the year, and all of the retail and accommodation facilities remain open year long, as do all of the restaurants and bars.

Given the fact that golf has been an integral part of the life of St Andrews for almost six hundred years at least, it not unnaturally has strong support from the local residents.

Conclusions

St Andrews is most certainly, therefore, a tourist destination, and golf has become the major factor in the expansion and maintenance of the tourism-related development. The economy of the town is diverse but of all the elements, tourism based on golf seems to have the greatest potential for continued growth, given the increasing global popularity of the game and St Andrews’ unique position. This is not only the greatest asset of the town as far as tourism is concerned but it is also the greatest problem. The Old Course in particular is at capacity for much of the summer and cannot accommodate more rounds at that time. The natural limits on development of facilities and a market that shows no sign of reaching its peak would seem to suggest that not only is St Andrews likely to have a successful future in tourism based on golf over the long term, if carefully managed, it should be a sustainable future also. However, as in many popular tourist destinations, local attitudes present a diverse range of opinions about the future expansion of golf and tourism, and the resolution of such differences will reveal how feasible it is to achieve sustainable development in a multi-functional destination. The town represents an interesting case in which to apply the concepts of sustainable tourism and to explore the practicality of implementing these principals.

References

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