



EUROPARC Atlantic Isle' October Seminar - a beginner's view!

Anne Webster, EUROPARC Consulting, reports on her first seminar experience with EUROPARC Atlantic Isle at the October seminar "Making sustainable tourism a foundation of the rural economy" in Belfast.



EUROPARC
Atlantic Isles

As a newcomer to EUROPARC Consulting I blew into Belfast airport in the teeth of a gale, unsure of quite what to expect. Having worked on projects for some months from the Yorkshire Dales my only contact with EUROPARC colleagues had been by phone and email. Here was a chance to put names to faces, and get an idea of the 'bigger picture'.

A first look at the hotel, the Europa, and then a dizzying whirl of meeting and greeting; a kaleidoscope of names and workplaces – how would I ever remember who everyone was? Clambering aboard the bus for the field trip it seemed odd that I had been concerned about finding someone to speak to! Swishing by coach through the rainy, cloud draped approaches to the broad sweeps and dips of the Antrim coast the enticing landscapes still tempted despite the wet. Enthusiastic and dedicated people introduced us to the charms of country parks, walled gardens and breezy beaches, backed by lush green glens and scattered ancient settlements. Even a brisk walk into the gentle hills rising above the coast that ended in a downpour only confirmed people's impressions that they would love to see more and explore further.

For the remainder of the trip, and the evening dinner that followed everyone was busy comparing and contrasting what they had seen with their own protected area, business or enterprise, encouraged by where they felt they were more advanced; frustrated by limitations – political and budgetary that hindered progress. Debates arose about the balance between pure tourism provision (the march of concrete and tarmac) and sensitive development that complimented and protected the special qualities of the landscapes tourists came to discover.

On Friday everyone convened for the formal sessions of the programme. During time with EUROPARC Consulting colleagues behind the registration desk welcoming the delegates I saw a well prepared machine at work, handing out packs whilst I put more names to faces. The day flew by, with enthusiastic and informative presentations interspersed with lively group discussions and feedback sessions. In no time at all it was all over; conclusions were reported and folk were gathering to make their goodbyes. Lots of new friends to say farewell to!

On reflection it's not the formal programmes that stay with you, but the people and places, lives and landscapes that linger. I recall the tireless EUROPARC Consulting organisers, Regina Green bustling amongst her ranks of delegate packs, micromanaging the timetables for the day; Lucy Galvin darting amongst guests – notebook in hand - to glean their views and opinions; the facilitators who balanced the sessions and summed up so calmly and objectively; the hosts from the local Trust and the NI Tourist Board; and many other wonderful characters.

So what did I think of the experience? It was a great opportunity to meet colleagues and explain what EUROPARC Consulting does; a useful chance to see practical schemes on the ground; and most importantly a chance to hear inspirational speakers and meet dedicated people working towards a common aim.

Anne Webster, November 2008

For more information on the seminar and EUROPARC Atlantic Isle please contact Dan Bloomfield at dan.bloomfield@europarc-ai.org or visit www.europarc-ai.org