

FINANCIAL TIMES

Blackpool tries to turn with tide by saying less is more

The famous but faded British seaside resort is trying to lure higher-spenders, writes Andrew Bounds

Amanda Thompson, managing director of the Pleasure Beach, the most popular attraction in Blackpool, appears surprisingly sanguine about falling visitor numbers this year. They declined by a third to 20,000 a day. For Ms Thompson there is a silver lining: this was the first time visitors had been charged to enter the attraction, one of many that have made the English seaside resort famous.

"People were coming in [before] because it was free. Now they are coming in to have a fantastic time," she says. The £5 (\$8.20, €5.80) entrance fee was set in order to recoup some of the £3m spent on recreating the park's 1930s art deco glory days. "We're giving people a better experience. They used to come just for a picnic with only 21 per cent even buying a drink."

She says this year's visitors included high-spenders of the type who had avoided Blackpool of late, now finding shorter queues for the rollercoasters and ghost trains. "Our number

[of social class] Bs is way up. You have to beat expectations, not just meet them. We want to give people something they don't expect in Blackpool."

This focus on quality rather than quantity is a model many businesses in Blackpool are trying to replicate. While few towns would turn down new start-ups in these straitened times, the seaside resort with a reputation for donkey rides, surly landladies and marauding stag and hen parties, is doing just that.

Annual visitor numbers have dropped from 17m to less than 10m in the past 15 years, so the council is trying to deter the inexperienced from setting up new guest houses among those already struggling. "There are still lots of people whose retirement plan is to buy a bed-and-breakfast in Blackpool," says Alan Cavill, the council's head of regeneration. "Unfortunately, many have no experience running a business."

He tells of one bed-and-breakfast owner who wasted time and a fortune cooking huge breakfasts for guests – stag and hen

parties with hangers who failed to get up before lunch.

Consequently, many of the properties fail and become bedsits for benefit claimants who have moved from elsewhere and given Blackpool some of the highest alcohol and drug-related death rates in the UK.

In any case, says Natalie Wyatt, head of VisitBlackpool, the council's tourism arm, 60,000 bed spaces is too many in an age when tourists come for the day or the weekend. The latest figures, for 2006, showed that about half of tourists were

daytrippers and those that stayed paid an average of just £25 a night.

The town has to work harder in the face of growing competition from overseas and post-industrial cities such as Manchester that once provided Blackpool's visitors, she says.

Doug Garrett, chief executive of ReBlackpool, the publicly funded company charged with improving the town, says the business community has accepted the need to change.

That includes dropping its own accreditation scheme. "As

many could not meet national standards they simply created their own, replacing stars with diamonds," he explains.

Mr Garrett says £250m-plus of public and private investment is having an effect and bringing back the middle classes that make up less than 5 per cent of visitors. "Some 70 per cent of the adult population of Blackpool. We have them a reason to be here."

That requires grand thinking. Blackpool resort is mayor John Bicker's the Blackpool Tow on the Eiffel Tower in Paris. "The vision was overtaken by reality," says Mr G. "Leisure Parks, the tower as well piers and the Win is now investing improving and making it a better place to be. People don't realise is here," he says. attractions include

aquarium as well as the famous ballroom with its giant Wurlitzer organ. The tower still gets 500,000 visitors a year, with visitor numbers up 2 per cent on last summer.

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Moreover, these days, visitors have the option of retreating from the crowds to top-end hotels such as Number One St Luke's, a five-star plus boutique hotel that Mark and Claire Smith opened five years ago. It was named "B&B of the year" by Visit Britain in 2007. Mr Smith sold his old-style family-owned and run business to invest more than £1m in St Luke's and Number One South Beach, a 14-room hotel nearby. Occupancy rates for both hotels are about 90 per cent, against an average of less than half that in the town as a whole.

"I am not pretending everything is rosy", Mrs Smith says. "There are still pockets of joy and canyons of woe. But these are exciting times. Things are changing fast and every time I drive down the promenade there is something new.

"We couldn't have done this in Blackpool 10 years ago."



Blackpool rocks: Claire Smith at Number One St Lukes Warren Smith