Cultural/Walking Routes Case Study

St Olav Ways and other cultural/walking routes

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1. CONTEXT FOR THE CASE STUDY

Walking is Britain’s most popular outdoor recreation. It is popular among international visitors with nearly one quarter (24%) of overseas visits including a ‘walk in the countryside’ and 8% a ‘walk by the coast’ in 2011. The domestic market is also strong: 16.5 million overnight domestic tourist trips to GB involved a long walk, hike or ramble (minimum of 2 miles/1 hour) in 2015, rather more than “visiting a beach” at 14.91m trips. Numerous walking trails and routes are being developed aimed at showcasing the country’s wilderness, wildlife, natural environment and landscapes and there is a cause and effect relationship with the rising numbers of walkers.

Some key trends in longer distance route markets and users’ expectations have been identified in a Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) report on Longer Distance Routes. These include:

a. Increasing competition from domestic and overseas destinations – more national and international destinations are providing diverse activities and high quality recreational routes, supported by quality accommodation and visitor services (e.g. guided holidays, cycle hire between tourism centres).

b. A significant proportion of walkers, cyclists and other route users are seeking ‘softer’, more comfortable, experiences – the principal markets for longer distance routes are not self-sufficient, long distance walkers but those seeking multi-day, or day, trips from home or holiday accommodation, on well-maintained and signed routes, with readily available information and good places to stay, eat and drink.

c. Use of public transport – where suitable public transport services, including trains and buses which will transport bicycles, are available and convenient, walkers and cyclists will take advantage of such services to travel to the start of, or return from, a linear route - especially, where they wish to walk or cycle longer distance routes in day, or multi-day, sections.

Common factors identified as important to the success of Long Distance Routes include a credible, well signed route through iconic landscapes; visual variety; historic or other additional interest; easily accessible start and end points; clear signage and waymarking; readily identifiable well-spaced refreshments and accommodation; and availability of good route guides, packaged booking and luggage transfer services.

Cultural Routes

Walking provides an opportunity to discover the cultural offering of a destination. It is estimated that cultural tourism accounts for 40% of all European tourism with 4 out of 10 tourists choosing their destination based on its cultural offering. The importance of culture
as part of the European tourism experience is recognised and ‘the European Commission supports the areas of cultural tourism that have the greatest potential for growth’.6

For this reason, the Cultural Routes programme was launched by the Council of Europe in 1987 and ‘demonstrate, by means of a journey through space and time, how the heritage of the different countries and cultures of Europe contributes to a shared and living cultural heritage’.7 About 10 years later (1998), the European Institute of Cultural Routes was set up with the mission to ‘ensure the continuity and the implementation of the Cultural Routes programme in the 50 signatory countries of the European Cultural Convention, in close cooperation with the Council of Europe’.8 In 2016, the Cultural Routes programme included 32 certified routes.

Cultural Routes are defined9 as being ‘based on a historic route, a cultural concept, figure or phenomenon with a transnational importance and significance for the understanding and respect of common European values.’ They are not restricted to physical pathways but are a “network of sites or geographical areas sharing a theme”.10

The Institute proposes a categorisation based on the structure of their routes. It identifies three key types:

1. **Linear routes** which are based on one or several starting points and one end point - the physical route itself is often the thematic focus. The Camino de Compostela is an example.

2. **Network routes** are generally focused on a single theme and present a range of experiences or elements associated with that theme, rather than providing physical continuity with a specific start or end. Examples include The European Cemeteries Route and the Phoenicians’ Route.

3. **Territorial routes** where the cultural routes involve a large geographical area sharing a theme based on elements of civilisation and how these are integrated into the region’s culture and identity. An example is The Routes of the Olive Tree which links regions around the Mediterranean sharing the cultivation of the olive tree as a common element.
Camino de Compostela
European Institute of Cultural Routes

The Camino de Santiago is a large network of ancient pilgrim routes stretching across Europe, leading to Santiago de Compostela. The most popular route is the Camino Francés which stretches 780 kms starting near Biarritz in France, to Santiago. Some 1,800 buildings along the route, both religious and secular, are of great historic interest.

Santiago de Compostela is on the UNESCO World Heritage list and the Camino was the first European Cultural itinerary designated by the Council of Europe in 1987. Historically, it attracted pilgrims from all over Europe and Santiago de Compostela ranked with Rome and Jerusalem as one of the three great medieval pilgrimage destinations. The tradition of pilgrimage to Santiago waned in recent centuries. Since the 1987 designation, however, The Camino has been actively developed and promoted by the Galicia regional government as a means to develop rural tourism and it has resumed the spiritual role that it played in the Middle Ages.

Galicia’s regional government promotes the Camino as a tourist activity, particularly in Holy Years. Following their considerable investment and successful advertising campaign for the Holy Year of 1993, the number of pilgrims completing the route has been steadily rising. More than 272,000 pilgrims made the trip during the course of 2010 (a Holy Year) and numbers were over 200,000 in 2014. It shows considerable growth from the start point of investment in 1985, when just 690 pilgrims received the “compostela” – the certificate confirming completion. Over the course of 30 years, the Camino has become a global and genuinely iconic tourism experience.

The Camino receives considerable exposure and distribution through the travel trade which has been essential in achieving its global reach. There are specialist operators such as CaminoWays.com who offer walking and cycling tours on various routes across Spain, Portugal and France. They offer both self-guided and guided tours for FITs, groups and special interest groups such as walking clubs and church groups. The Camino is also featured by general interest walking and trekking operators such as Macs Adventures who offers 9 trips on different routes of varying length from 5-nights, to the full 40-day trip starting from £2,750.

http://www.macsadventure.com/camino-tours/
Great Ocean Walk, Victoria, Australia

The Great Ocean Walk is Victoria’s premier multi-day bushwalking experience. The trail stretches for more than 100km between Apollo Bay and the iconic Twelve Apostles, traversing coastline and forest; it is managed by regional tourism organisation, Great Ocean Road Regional Tourism Ltd and Parks Victoria.

The trail offers walkers the option of short walks of a few hours, to one-day hikes through to seven-night/eight-day camping experiences using “hike-in” campsites. The proximity to local towns also allows for visitors to stay in ‘off-walk’ accommodation and enjoy a variety of independent or packaged services, such as tours, guides, transport providers, food and wine.

The Great Ocean Walk website aims to help visitors ‘Plan and Prepare’ for their walking experience and suggests that visitors can choose to travel independently, use a licensed tour guide or mix and match. In terms of bookability, the call to action is to contact the Great Ocean Walk partners direct. The website lists the licensed tour operators and transport and services partners. A short overview is provided on each with full contact details and a ‘Call now’ button with their phone number.

Overnight hikers wishing to use the purpose-built Great Ocean Walk hike-in, campgrounds are required to make a booking and pay a fee in advance. Full, individual and group area Great Ocean Walk campsites can be booked online at www.parks.vic.gov.au/stay.

The Great Ocean Walk offers the opportunity to experience the area’s cultural heritage, nature and landscape. To enhance the experience, they provide a Great Ocean Walk Audio App for audio accounts from guides, historians and fellow Great Ocean walkers to bring “the voices of history and nature alive for you, building a bridge for your mind and soul to connect with the country you visit”. An official ‘Information Guide and Map to the Great Ocean Walk’ and an official walkers map booklet have also been produced and are available for sale from Information Centre, but not sold from the website.

High season is spring to autumn with an emphasis on school terms and group-use of facilities.

The Walk opened in January 2006 and in 2009 the Walk already provided an estimated annual impact of $15 million (including marketing, visitor expenditure and flow-on expenditure) and more than 100 full-time jobs. In 2013, the Great Ocean Walk involved more than 40 marketing partners.

Source: www.greatoceanwalk.com.au/
2. ST OLAV WAYS

1. Overview

- Short project description, including rationale

The pilgrim ways through Scandinavia are historic routes through Denmark, Sweden and Norway, the remnants of pilgrimage routes leading to the 11th-century Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim where Norway’s patron saint, St Olav lies buried. The city of Trondheim in Norway was a popular destination for pilgrims dating from 1030 when Norway’s Viking King Olav Haraldsson died and was declared a martyr and a saint. Since the 1990s, the ways have been improved and signposted, in order to establish a network of walks through the spectacular landscape of Scandinavia. These pilgrim paths have been developed based around their authenticity: historical routes leading through outstanding natural heritage, agricultural landscapes and heritage destinations and attractions. A very personal experience is promoted, with opportunities to meet and stay with local people, enjoy traditional food and use simple, often unusual accommodation. The ways are managed by the publicly funded National Pilgrim Centre in Trondheim. More than 5,000 kms along the recognised routes have been branded with the pilgrim logo.

There are six nominated pilgrim trails. The “St. Olavsleden” (St Olav path) itself is an ancient, 564 kms (est. 28 days) long pilgrim path which runs from coast to coast - through two countries, starting in Selånger, Sweden. Many travellers take just a week and only complete the 100 kms stretch between Stiklestad and Trondheim, popular for its diversity and proximity to the main pilgrimage high point: Nidaros Cathedral. Transport access is also good to and from Trondheim.

The principal route however, is The Gudbrandsdalen Path stretching from Norway’s capital, Oslo to Trondheim: 643 km (est. 32 days) of well-marked trail in stunning and varied countryside. The capital provides an appealing start point, with good transport access and a medieval history. A major landmark is Lillehammer, host city of the Olympic winter games in 1994; the Dovre mountain stretch north of Lillehammer in particular presents a severe physical and mental challenge – there was still snow on the ground in June 2016.

Those who can show their pilgrim passport as proof of walking at least 100 kms receive a certificate of completion at the Nidaros Cathedral.
Key challenges and solutions

How to integrate and bring some conformity to such an extensive route network?

- Critical to solving this issue has been the creation of six Regional Pilgrim Centres, which have built local connections with rural businesses. The staff members walk the route, talk to walkers, work with volunteers, engage with the local businesses and are the public face of the St Olav’s Ways at local level.

- The National Pilgrim Centre, a small, not-for-profit organisation, co-ordinates activity and leads on strategic level initiatives, including national and international marketing and promotion.

- Seasonality is a challenge that they have learned to live with in Norway – the season is short: June to September, but they have realised that walkers do not heed the warnings of harsh mountain conditions and therefore they focus on this limited period rather than risk danger from the elements.

- **Budget and sources of funds**

St Olav Ways is funded as a national initiative. The National Pilgrim Centre has until recently been a division of the Directorate for Cultural Heritage and has now been moved to the Ministry of Environmental Affairs. The Centre has the overall responsibility for the publicly supported work on pilgrimage in Norway and particularly for the approved routes.

The National Pilgrim Centre current annual budget is 13m Krona (around £1m). They employ four staff in Trondheim and eleven staff members at the six Regional Centres. Maintenance of long distance paths is an issue faced by all managers of such infrastructure. In the case of St Olav, much of the maintenance is carried out by an extensive network of local private and small business volunteers who take "stewardship" of their stretch. Contractors are seldom required.
2. History, development and performance

- Project history from start to current status, and the roles of different stakeholders in funding and delivery

The historic trails have been used by pilgrims and other travellers since the year 1032. Although their use had largely stopped post Reformation, the St Olav Ways were re-energised in the 1990s, initiated by the Norwegian government seeking to grow the rural economy. They had observed the growth in use of the Camino de Santiago de Compostela and sought to emulate this success using their pilgrim assets. Paths were built between 1992 and 1997 when they were first launched, but they did not gain real traction at this stage, which was put down to a lack of local, grass roots interest.

In 2007, the Minister of Culture re-energised a development process and started a pilot project improving waymarking and featuring regional centres of pilgrimage which serve both to support local business engagement and as a local information centre for walkers. Each regional centre employs a full-time member of staff. Critical too, was the development of small scale hostels by local farmers at intervals of around 20 kms, (a day’s walk) to increase accommodation capacity and provide farm diversification opportunities through conversion of possibly redundant buildings. The friendly welcome by hosts and companionship of other pilgrims/walkers is very much part of the pilgrim experience.

St Olav Ways received the status as a European Cultural Route through the Council of Europe’s Cultural Route programme in May 2010.

The National Pilgrim Centre, funded by the Directorate for Cultural Heritage and the Ministry of Environmental Affairs in Norway, is a small, not-for-profit organisation responsible for management and logistics, but almost everything is outsourced to local partners through the Regional Centres. For example, each parish maintains an information board at the point where pilgrims arrive, with updated accommodation options, events schedules, maps and practical advice. Local residents may offer to lodge pilgrims and if so they wish are given essential tools including the means to refresh trail markers in the vicinity, after the harsh winters.
The National Pilgrim Centre has developed a Pilgrim’s Passport for the St. Olav Ways, with space for personal details, messages to the pilgrim and room for visit stamps. On arrival in Nidaros Cathedral, those who have walked more than 100kms receive the Olav letter as a proof of their completed pilgrimage.

St Olav Way: Key Components

✔ A severe physical and mental challenge providing a real sense of achievement on completion. Other than in the distinct mountain stretches, the gradient is not particularly steep, but the path is a “natural” walking path – uneven and unmade – which can be slippery in wet weather. Most of it is in rural areas on forest paths.

✔ A spiritual journey, not just a walk.

✔ Close connections with local people.

✔ Outstanding cultural and religious heritage.

✔ Effective partnerships with local communities, parishes and small rural businesses

✔ Effective and professional marketing, much in partnership with VisitNorway.

✔ Good assistance to help tour operators mostly brokered through VisitNorway. The regional centres advise tour operators on routes and itineraries, and suggest but don’t book, accommodation.

✔ An attractive website with good mapping tools and topical content on e.g. weather conditions that is mobile friendly.

✔ Good mobile signal and reduction in roaming tariffs, allowing ready access to the website from smart phones.

✔ The basics: good walking routes, clear signage, outstanding scenery.

✔ Accommodation has been provided where it is most needed – but gaps remain.

✔ Regional centres have been essential to build visitor and business engagement.
Pilgrimage tourism

Travel to sacred places is the oldest form of discretionary “tourism” and much of the travel within Europe and the Middle East has been religiously motivated since medieval times.

Such pilgrims used a variety of forms of transport, and – then as now - required food and lodgings along the way. For many it was the trip of a lifetime, and so considerable expense could be justified on entertainment, sightseeing, buying local memorabilia etc.

Pilgrimage remains popular, perhaps because it resonates with today's tourist as a form of “mindfulness” – many on the St Olav Ways report being on a life journey, not just a walk. It is a good example of “slow tourism”.

The St Olav Experience.

The authenticity of the long and challenging journey is crucial, and is enjoyed through a mix of spirituality from the many churches – ancient and modern, many very elegant or dramatic – the stories of St Olav and the natural and local heritage. Food and drink is part of the experience, often shared and the Social Media channels are full of comments from pilgrims on the pleasure of meeting people along the way. It is enjoyed as a spiritual rather than religious journey by people looking for something that enables them to break off from their stressful lives.

2014 research of 600 walkers revealed that the primary reason for walking was “nature” (80%) followed by “history/cultural heritage”, then “reflection and spirituality”.

- Use of Technology

The St Olav Ways\textsuperscript{12} website is attractive and sophisticated in comparison to other walking route websites. It has useful and interesting content in 3 languages, a good blend of interpretation and practical information including weather warnings. The website is the main channel to initiate bookings and it links well with social media platforms which are regularly updated. It makes use of advance mapping technology, and includes an intuitive and much used trip planning tool that facilitates individual route planning, suggesting accommodation, heritage and supplies/food between chosen points. The maps are better for planning purposes than for printing to use during a walk.

Accommodation details are provided (price, location, facilities, contact) but no online booking. Properties selected can be instantly added to compile an itinerary, adding points of interest along the way, which are also pictured and detailed.
An App has been developed in the past, but is no longer in use due to the difficulty and hence cost, in regularly updating the content. It has been replaced by investment in the responsive website to make it fully mobile friendly, with a content management system that makes it easy to update in-house by the small staff team. There is good mobile coverage throughout Norway allowing the website to be accessed even in remote areas. Reduction in data roaming costs allows walkers from different counties to use the website as they walk, without fear of high international roaming costs.

Individual maps can also be downloaded (printable if required) for specific stages in different formats including GPX.\(^1\)

Local guidebooks are also available. Sold at the regional centres, they are popular with the German market. In contrast, in Norway there is high adoption of the digital platforms.

Information technology is an essential component of the management system. All those involved, from managers of pilgrim hostels down to local guides, are in regular contact with the National Centre, providing feedback “from the front line”. This technology is not cutting edge, but is sufficient to maintain constant contact and ensure the rigorous attention to detail that is the watchword of the St Olav Ways.

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\(^1\) GPX is a common GPS data format for software applications. It can be used to describe waypoints, tracks, and routes. The format is open and can be used without the need to pay license fees (from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GPS_Exchange_Format](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GPS_Exchange_Format)).
Project ambitions – what was it expected to deliver?

Development of the trails was seen as both a rural economic development tool, and as a way of supporting the sustainability of a living cultural heritage which includes important historical churches, a range of heritage assets, local art and architecture, plus accommodation and food products.

Measurement of success

Success is measured using a range of methods:

- Statistics on accommodation occupancy
- Monitors on the trails to measure numbers of walkers
- Number of certificates issues
- Metrics around digital volume: web visits, downloads etc.
**Project achievements, by time period – footfall and sales, RoI, any other key metrics (including economic impact)**

The international reputation of Saint Olav Ways has grown markedly and numbers of walkers along the trails have been increasing by around 20% - 30% annually, although numbers remain small. The (regional) Pilgrim centre Dale-Gudbrand Gård reported 1000 pilgrims passing through the centre in the 2016 season, in comparison to 740 in 2015 (growth of 35%). Those pilgrims generated 2100 overnight stays in the immediate catchment area.

The overall number of pilgrims is currently 10 – 12,000 per year, varying from those on 1-day excursions to a 6-week end-to-end journey. As is often the case with long distance walks, people do St Olav’s in stages from 3 to 14 days, and return over time to complete the task.

**Prospects and projections**

The long-term target is to distribute 42,000 'St Olav letters' (proof of a completed pilgrimage) in 2030, with an economic impact of 700m Krone (around £67million.) Slow but steady growth has been anticipated from a mix of religious and secular visitors who enjoy the varied cultural heritage assets. The immediate success of the St Olav Ways has exceeded expectations and on some occasions is becoming a problem.

The annual, week-long St Olav Festival in Trondheim, which starts with a service in Nidaros Cathedral on 29 July (the day of Saint Olav) generates such a peak in demand on the approaches to Trondheim.

3. **Key lessons**

**Critical success factors**

- The authenticity and quality of the route, supported by the natural environment and features of genuine heritage interest.
- Good maintenance and waymarking.
- The interaction with local people helps deliver authenticity, and provides a unique experience with a strong sense of place that is much valued by walkers.
- Getting the local farmers and small businesses onside, backing the St Olav Way. This has been vital. Developing small scale accommodation on farms has helped the sustainability of fragile rural enterprises and is aligned with the pilgrim principles.
• Relationship building with the local communities. The regional centres, staffed year-round, have been game-changers in this respect.
• Involvement of volunteers to keep maintenance costs down.
• The provision of hostels at least every 25 kms.
• Churches open to explore and admire.
• Regular resting points, encouraging people to take time out and enjoy the nature around.
• Extensive press and TV coverage. This has raised the profile nationally and internationally at low cost. The experience seems to lend itself to media attention at the moment.
• St Olav Ways' pilgrimage experience is well aligned to recognised trends for the wish to discover wild and remote places, explore lesser-known destinations, create unforgettable memories and push the comfort zone boundaries.

**Which aspects have proved problematic?**

• Regional co-ordination. This has not been easy, because the geography covered is considerable and different areas have different interests and policies.

• Issues around carrying capacity. These are now emerging due to the rapid growth, and there is a shortage of accommodation and places to eat in some locations. The challenge is to stimulate further sustainable growth, while retaining the authenticity, high environmental standards and personal touch that is such a feature of the journeys. An accommodation audit is in progress, to plan future growth.

• Fulfilling the needs of tour operators. There is increasing interest from tour operators, but the bed-stock they require is only available in the bigger towns. The Camino in Spain has embraced mass tourism with many service providers but the small scale of accommodation provision on St Olav Ways is proving a barrier to working with the travel trade.

• Provision of food service on some of the remote stretches – walkers must carry all their own provisions for 2 or 3 days.
What are the implications for projects delivered through the Discover England Find?

There are clear differences between the development of St. Olav Ways and possible pilgrimage or cultural walking routes in England. These include: the extremely short season, the small and remote nature of the rural communities through which the route passes, the sheer scale of the project (London to Edinburgh is approximately equivalent to the length of the Gudbrandsdalen) and finally, the population of the domestic market is just 5 million. All such factors limit the potential throughout and economic impact.

However, these are challenges that have been faced head-on and some are shared to some degree by parts of England. Important, transferable lessons include:

- Public sector led initiatives need to build strong connections with “grass roots” operators and communities, building trust and enthusiasm.

- The watchwords that stand out from the St Olav Ways visitors experience are: personal, distinctive, authentic, and natural. It is a good example of slow tourism.

- Walkers are not put off by a hard physical challenge, if there are appropriate support services in terms of welcoming accommodation.

- Local food is part of the sense of place, and an important strand of rural tourism.

- Meeting local people makes the St Olav Ways a live cultural experience.

- The outstanding cultural and religious heritage is valued as a spiritual work-out; the purely religious aspect appeals only to a minority.

- Effective mobile friendly websites can be preferable to apps, particularly if good mobile coverage is assured. The requirement to download apps from different app stores may be a barrier to some potential users and the development costs are higher, particularly for “native” apps which must be coded for both iPhone and Android platforms.

- Effective mapping techniques should be adopted, including GPX.

- Press/media coverage and blogging is a powerful tool to attract interest.

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