

Beautiful gardens to soothe the soul and lure the visitor

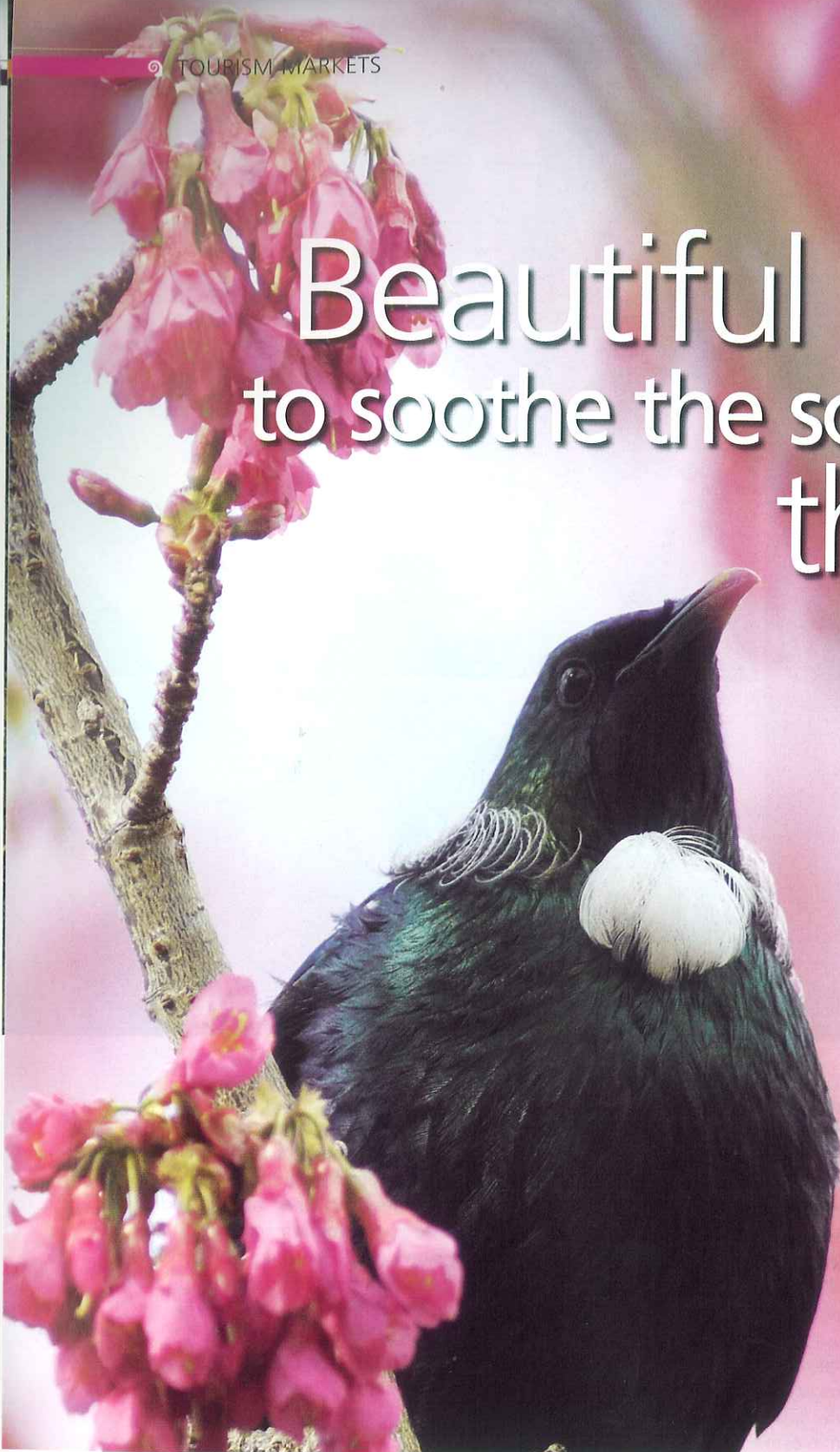


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Is the wider tourism sector squandering the opportunity to grow more business on the back of an upsurge in interest in garden tourism? RUTH LE PLA points to missed opportunities, unexplored synergies and a lack of co-ordination.

FORGIVE the pun, but garden tourism is a growing business. That's blooming good news for the wider tourism sector.

The bad news is we're squandering many opportunities to grow more business. That's the view of many people in the garden tourism sector.

They point to missed opportunities, unexplored synergies and a basic lack of co-ordination. At a time when New Zealand's economy is less than rosy, that seems wasteful indeed.

But let's start with the facts. Tourism New Zealand says the number of international visitors to New Zealand gardens has been climbing steadily. Overall, 26 percent of all overseas visitors check out a garden while they are here.

They're pretty happy with what they see, too. Satisfaction with garden visits increased to an average of 8.2 out of a possible 10 for all visitors in the year ended March 2007.

But here's where the numbers start to crumble. As Tourism New Zealand also points out: "a significant portion of visitors – 16 percent – said they would have liked to visit a garden, but for whatever reason (for example, time, cost or lack of knowledge) did not do so."

A country-by-country breakdown, for example, shows 18 percent of visitors from Australia checked out our gardens: and a further 16 percent wish they had.

A cool 36 percent of visitors from Europe – other than those from the UK – meandered down our garden paths. Another 10 percent say they would have liked to.

When it came to the Canadians, the figures were 34 percent visiting gardens: 12 percent thinking about it.

These are clear signals of fertile ground just waiting to be explored.

At the top end of the scale, garden events can mean big business. The Ellerslie International Flower Show, for example, is tipped to bring an additional \$12 million worth of regional spend into its new home, Christchurch.

Christchurch & Canterbury Tourism chief executive Christine Prince says up to 70,000 people are expected to check out the show. The wider Christchurch community is pitching in with additional attractions to encourage them to stay longer and spend more.

The Garden City will be themed up from late February through March, incorporating the city's annual Festival of Flowers, extended for its 20th anniversary season from 20 February.

Prince says the i-SITE Visitors Centre, the tram, and the entire Cultural Precinct from Cathedral Square to the Botanic Gardens



Christchurch is gearing up for the Ellerslie Flower Show which is tipped to bring \$12 million worth of regional spend into its new home.

will be themed with the distinctive Ellerslie logo.

"Art exhibitions, music concerts, dining and visitor attractions are all embracing the Flower Show theme. And a new Botanic Garden Tours will be launched in time for the show."

The town's major hotels are already heavily booked for the March event.

Pity, then, there are not more Ellerslies to rake in the dollars from local and international visitors alike.

Prince reckons garden tourism fits in well with

New Zealand's positioning as 100% Pure, visually green and forever young. "Christchurch, as a city within a garden," she adds, "is well placed to leverage the experiential-based travel sector."

Many others in the industry echo her thoughts. Liz Morrow is executive officer of the New Zealand Gardens Trust. Set up by the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture, it assesses and lists some of our country's most spectacular gardens.

"Local tourism operators," says Morrow, "need to recognise the potential of garden visiting which fits so well with the clean and green image of New Zealand."

Morrow suggests combining winery and garden visits. It's a version of companion planting that many find appealing.

For the past 12 years, Mike Maran has been running his own business, Mike's Garden Tours, from his base in Auckland. He suggests garden tours could be promoted alongside other educational activities such as visits to gardening schools.

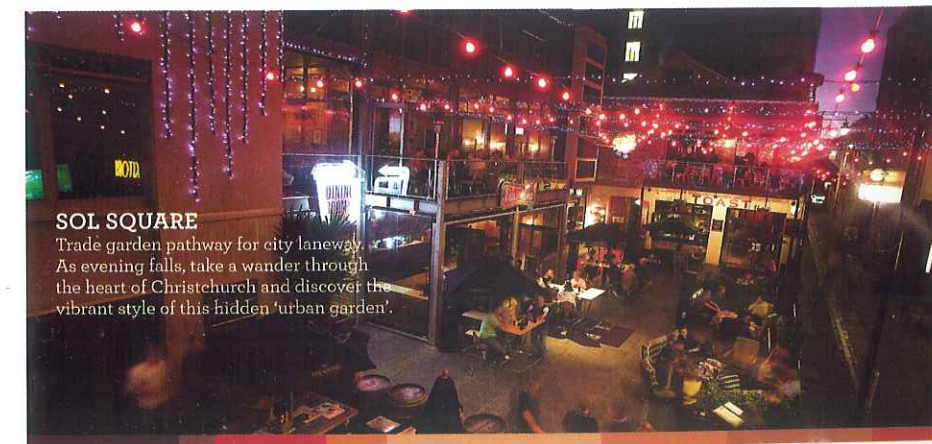
Or think of it from another angle: tourism operators could include a garden visit when they take people to visit New Zealand's other highlights.

Margaret Baker, director of the renowned Larnach Castle Garden on the Otago Peninsula, divides garden visitors into two distinct groups. There's the 'born again garden visitor': a niche group with specific interests in all things garden.

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Christchurch
THE GARDEN CITY



SOL SQUARE

Trade garden pathway for city laneway. As evening falls, take a wander through the heart of Christchurch and discover the vibrant style of this hidden 'urban garden'.

Then there's a far broader group that could be enticed into our nation's gardens. Here, says Baker, garden visiting is becoming mainstream. It's part of a broader mix alongside any number of other attractions such as boat or train rides.

"It represents a spiritually refreshing experience where the visitor connects with the creator of the garden through their passion for, and connection with, the natural world."

Beside leveraging some of these synergies, how can New Zealand as a whole tap into garden tourism with more vigour?

Baker reels off a list of suggestions. Our top priority should be for Tourism New Zealand to run a stand at the Melbourne International Flower Show, she says. She also suggests exhibiting at the San Francisco Flower Show to raise the profile of New Zealand.

"There are flower shows in Japan that could be looked at and why not China? Dunedin now has a Chinese Scholars' Garden [which is] largely a gift from its sister city Shanghai. These bonds could be built on."

And we could bring garden writers to New Zealand through the visiting media programme.

This line of thinking chimes with Christine Prince who suggests we look at other leading international shows like Chelsea and Hampton Court.

"These are enormous visitor drawcards [and] we can learn effective ways of producing something similar in the southern hemisphere. We can start looking at the long-term development potential for what we are starting here [with the Ellerslie International Flower Show in Christchurch.]"

Morrow says regional tourism operators should encourage and support the endeavours of private garden owners in their areas.

Beverley McConnell is the driving force behind one of our country's best known gardens, Ayrilies, to the east of Auckland city. She suggests garden owners improve their visibility by creating their own websites.

McConnell says the hallmarks of successful garden tourism are lots of personal attention. "Where possible the creator [of the garden] should be available."

Mike Maran pinpoints a sound working knowledge of plants and local nous about the best gardens. The gardens, he says, should have good facilities -- including toilets -- be well maintained and have the 'wow' factor.

Christine Prince highlights the need for a personal dimension: for someone who can bring the gardens to life, through stories and interpretation.

"People want to be touched on an emotional level and hear the journey of the garden and its creation."

Overall, the garden tourism operators we spoke to are upbeat about their sector's prospects.

"We can see trends in the Australian domestic markets which show garden tourism to be resilient and growing," says Prince. "Organic gardening, sustainability, and the spiritual and lifestyle nature of gardening are growing trends worldwide."

Ruth Le Pla is an Auckland based business writer. She is a former editor of Management Magazine.

A backlash against materialism

The spectacular Larnach Castle Garden on the Otago Peninsula is one of only four gardens rated by the New Zealand Gardens Trust as a Garden of International Significance.

Director Margaret Baker sees the garden as a separate tourist product to the castle although there is much crossover between products.

"Most of the special interest garden tours buy our other products, such as a castle visit, accommodation in Larnach Lodge or the Stable Stay, or meals in our ballroom café."

We asked Baker for her views on the wider New Zealand garden tourism sector:

What's driving growth in local Zealand garden tourism?

- Visitor numbers from the UK are high. This could be a result of the Tourism New Zealand exhibitions at the Chelsea Flower Show.
- The New Zealand Gardens Trust website will have had an impact.
- Magazine articles have helped. New Zealand has a great product which has been coordinated by The New Zealand Gardens Trust.
- We believe that the UK workshops held by Tourism New



Zealand over the past three years have also contributed to increasing garden visitors.

Do you expect garden tourism to continue to grow in a declining economy?

- Garden tourism has grown this season against the general trend. I expect this to continue as the trend. Having been in the tourism business for more than 40 years I have a nose for these trends.
- There will be a return to things natural -- and to beautiful creations such as gardens -- as a backlash against the materialism which has resulted in the worldwide recession.
- I'm [also] aware of books and articles coming up overseas which will stimulate interest in New Zealand's gardens.

What defines a good garden tourism operator?

- Hospitality in its broadest sense: great hosts with a warm welcome, food and drink, and user-friendly gardens.
- The pursuit of excellence in the service and facilities as well as in the garden product.
- At Larnach Castle, the visitor is told the story of how the garden was created and has evolved over 130 years. The vital experience is the personal connection.