



## OH WE DO LIKE TO BE BESIDE THE SEASIDE!

**In the Second regular GFG Magazine column, AGTO's chief executive, Mike Bugsgang, looks at issues affecting the group travel market**

Or do we anymore? That's the question that might be posed in the wake of the much publicised decline of some British coastal resorts in recent years. Couple this with the growth of innovative countryside and city destinations, and you have an intriguing scenario. Can seaside towns fight back to attract groups, particularly in the off peak months?

You would think the answer would be a resounding 'yes'. Surely organisers' appetites have been whetted sufficiently when seeking ideas for their itineraries with the barrage of television programmes highlighting the appeal of our coastline? Coast, Coast to Coast, Coastal Path and Caroline Quentin's Cornwall, are just some of the travelogues that have been aired of late. Add to these the fictional shows featuring coastal locations such as Doc Martin and the popular food programmes spotlighting the skills of chefs like Rick Stein and you would have thought, excuse the pun, the case was watertight.

Inherited from our Victorian ancestors, the seaside is in the DNA of the mainstay of the out-of-season 55+ groups visitor. Fish & chips, ice cream, a stroll on the prom and a paddle were all essential ingredients of a trip to the coast. But with the arrival of affordable overseas short breaks and increasing demand for more experiential trips, Britain's coastal resorts are finding it difficult to compete.

Enter the National Coastal Tourism Academy (NCTA). Established in 2013 with funding from the Coastal Communities Fund, the NCTA's role is to create a centre for excellence, share best practice and analyse the nature of coastal tourism to boost jobs and economic growth in the visitor economy.



Within a relatively short period, the NCTA now has an in-depth knowledge of the visitor economy on the coast including some interesting research into off peak coastal tourism and the potential for growth in the 'Empty Nesters' over 55s market.

By 2024 Empty Nesters will be the biggest sector of the UK population. This age-group has considerable financial flexibility, recently helped by pension reforms giving them access to more disposable cash. They therefore represent a significant market for boosting off-season holidays to the coast. New research undertaken by NCTA of 1800 adults aged 55 to 75 has generated thought-provoking results leading to the development of six distinct market segments. These 'Pen Portraits' offer analysis of the travel behaviour, aspirations and lifestyle to enable coastal destinations and businesses greater insight into this key group.

Key findings of the NCTA research in to the Empty Nester market included:

- Empty Nesters have all kinds of reasons for taking short breaks and the coast meets some of their needs better than others
- The most common motivations for visiting the coast specifically as opposed to other destinations are to 'escape/relax' and 'to revisit a place'
- Empty Nesters would generally prefer to visit a coastal harbour town – 86% found this appealing
- Traditional seaside towns are less popular
- Half of all Empty Nesters agreed that the coast in England was on a par with other coastal destinations around the world, however only one third felt that each individual destination had something unique to offer and very few agreed that the coast was becoming more modern
- Four in ten prefer the coast for an off-peak break because it would be less crowded and just under one third were not deterred by poor weather

- The most significant barrier for visiting the coast off-peak is the weather (62% of respondents). There was also a perception among 4 in 10 people that the accommodation and attractions would be closed and a third were concerned that shorter days would mean less time to sightsee

According to the NCTA, some of the barriers expressed by respondents need to be overcome and perceptions altered in order to attract empty nesters in off-peak and particularly winter months. The positives of less crowding and challenging the view that the coast is open for business could be key drivers and should be highlighted more widely. Clearly this is food for thought for group organisers in their marketing of trips to the coast. On the subject of marketing, GTOs will find a new tool developed by the NCTA helpful in itinerary planning trips to England's east coast. A tailor-made trip to England's east coast has now become radically simpler to create with the launch of a new Coastal Pass – an interactive tool which allows you to design your own itineraries and explore this coastline at the click of a button. The Coastal Pass [www.coastalpass.com](http://www.coastalpass.com) showcases the diverse beauty of England's east coast with interactive video spanning five counties, from Yorkshire to Essex taking in favourite resorts like Skegness and Cleethorpes but also hidden treasures like Sutton-on-Sea, spreading across Norfolk's 90 miles of expansive coastline, from Great Yarmouth and Cromer to the sweeping stretches of the Suffolk Coast.

Whilst it is apparent there are challenges relating to tourism development in Britain's coastal resorts, there are also some bright spots for organisers to consider such as last year's arrival of AGTO member British Airways i360 in Brighton. It is the world's tallest moving observation tower and the world's first vertical cable car. Located at the foot of the West Pier on Brighton beach, visitors can glide gently up to 450ft to enjoy breath-taking 360° views of 26 miles across the Regency city, surrounding South Downs and beautiful Sussex coastline. For more information on the NCTA research visit: [www.coastaltourismacademy.co.uk](http://www.coastaltourismacademy.co.uk)



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