

Activity providers hopeful for a busy summer season

By MICHEÁL Ó DOMHNAIL

WALKING and activities providers in Sligo are hoping for a boom Summer of visitors if Covid-19 restrictions begin to ease, as expected, next month.

Depending on how and when the country opens up again, it is likely that people living in Sligo may decide to stay within the county for a well-earned break, and, as the situation improves, we can expect a large influx of people from outside the county to visit what has often been called one of Ireland's hidden secrets.

After what has been a very challenging year for the walks and activities sector, some of the local walking guides spoke to Sligo Walks about the challenges to keep their businesses afloat, and their expectations for the months ahead.

"The ongoing lockdowns are so frustrating," says David Bourke of High Hopes Hiking. "We planned and advertised so many hikes during 2020 only to find when the time came the government had implemented a change in policy and as a result we had to cancel at least 50% of all our intended hikes.

"We still managed to complete many memorable hikes in 2020 in spite of all. However since the start of 2021 we are at a standstill and no idea of when we can restart."

While the uncertainty has been a huge challenge, and made planning ahead difficult, many of the activity providers have used the experience to do some important work behind the scenes.

"We've added an online booking service to our new website which will allow people an easier and more efficient way of booking their adventure experience with us," says William Britton of Northwest Adventure Tours.

"Also, we're adding a calendar of events to our site, full of unique trips and tours such as our meteor shower night hikes, dawn chorus hikes and yoga hikes, to name just a few."

Sligo has many strengths, not least of which is its location along the Wild Atlantic Way. And it has its growing reputation as a county which offers many year-round outdoor activities.

Even in the depths of Winter, you'll see groups of surfers or swimmers take to the sea, and some of the local walks, in particular around Sligo town, are exceptionally busy for this time of year.

These strengths are seen as a major asset for walking guides, and by adding new experiences, there seems to be no limit to the range of outdoor activities they can offer in the county.

Auriel Robinson of Seatrails is another guide with new walks in development for when the county reopens.

She will add two new Mythology Trails to her list of activities, based around the historical sites of Knocknashee and Moytura in the south of the county.

She adds, that while she has been fortunate to have found work as an archaeologist while lockdown stopped walking tours, she really misses the company of the walking groups she provides tours for.

"On a personal level, it's not easy to keep going when there is no business income and I miss my tours and interacting with customers etc. I have gotten used to it now, but as soon as the weather improves, I will be itching to get out and I hope this lockdown will be over soon for all of our sakes. I am not giving up," she



Auriel Robinson (centre) of Seatrails.



Northwest Adventure Tours.

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adds.

We hope that the Summer will enable these and other activities providers in Sligo to open their doors to the public again, and to do what they do best - to highlight the many diverse, fascinating and unique features of our wonderful county. Our walking guides are great ambassadors for the county, and visitors will tell you that they come back to Sligo time and again due to the enthusi-

asm, knowledge and professionalism displayed by local guides.

Level 5 restrictions will remain in place at least until April 5th next and these prohibit us from walking any further than 5km from our homes.

Until then, it will be difficult for walking guides and others working in outdoor activities to plan or take bookings.

Once they are permitted to do so, all activities will have to follow strict Covid-19 protections and protocols to ensure that people remain safe while they explore the county.

Should restrictions ease to the point where hotels and other accommodation providers are

allowed to open up - still some way off, according to the Taoiseach - then Sligo is likely to be very busy with visitors.

But until then, there's a lot that we can do to support local. So, if you haven't already done so, find out about the walking guides working within the county - their details are on the SligoWalks.ie website.

Whether it's nature trails, archaeological and heritage tours, historical town centre walks, or anything else that appeal to you about the Great Outdoors, there are well-informed, interesting walking guides on our doorstep to help us get to know our own county a little better.