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Subject: Sally Balcombe CEO of Visit Britain tourism states Aldeburgh is the top destination (see final paragraph). Sunday Times 31 Jan 2021. NO TO SUBSTATION AT FRISTON!
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VisitBritain's CEO Sally Balcombe: 'Our vaccine progress gives us a big competitive advantage'

The tourism chief talks quarantine hotels, UK honeypots and her hopes for post-Covid recovery

Aldeburgh, on the Suffolk coast



Aldeburgh, on the Suffolk coast ALAMY

Interview by [Duncan Craig](#)
Sunday January 31 2021, 12.01am, The Sunday Times

What message are you trying to send to Britons holidaying at home this year?

I would encourage them to think local. Holidays don't always have to be big trips, long trips. Our analysis shows people are thinking about open spaces — the countryside, the seaside — but we also need to encourage them back to the cities. For me being a tourist in London, where I live, was fabulous last summer. We need to get people thinking beyond the honeypots.

Speaking of which, there was a fair bit of tension between local communities and incomers last year. How are you planning to counter that?

The underlying challenges in our tourism sector have not gone away and we still need to fix those. Some of those are around levelling up, and making sure the distribution and benefits of tourism are everywhere. One of our key learnings from last year was that the industry needs time and notice to reopen. Last summer it was like a switch that was flicked and everybody just rushed to the place they thought would be open and safe.

The world is on the cusp of a new age of domestic tourism, isn't it?

We see domestic recovering first, yes, and that's a pattern all over the world. In many countries that's being supported by stimulus packages or government diktats, like in China.

The "patriotic duty" line is being played up in several countries. Would you like to see more overt messaging around that in Britain?

That sounds a bit "government telling you what to do" and people on their holiday like to make their own decisions. But I think a lot of people are considering holidays in the UK.

So no Lord Kitchener posters with "Your country needs you to holiday at home this year!"?

Ha, I think not. But one of the things we try to emphasise when selling Britain is our humour and quirkiness, our irreverence. We're not just about the palaces and the castles. It's the people as well. So that sort of ironic approach is not wrong.

Given the past 12 months, selling Britain overseas has surely never been harder?

The flow of passengers inbound is at an all-time low: 93 per cent down, and that was before the quarantine hotels announcement last week. But the whole world is going through this and what we're seeing from countries such as the US is huge pent-up demand, a desire to come to the UK and a lot of credit in the system from bookings that didn't happen last year. Other countries are also looking at how we're dealing with the vaccine in an incredibly positive way. That is a competitive advantage for us.

So you remain positive?

There's a massive job to do — don't get me wrong. But I'm not saying it's impossible. There are other things in our favour that we can build on, including our Good To Go consumer standard, which 43,000 tourism and hospitality businesses have signed up to. Our job when the moment is right, and when borders are opening and Covid-19 in retreat, is to go out there and sell Britain like we've never sold it before.

Sally Balcombe, CEO of VisitBritain



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Britain has one of the highest per capita death rates in the pandemic and our mutant strain is notorious around the world. This will leave a huge reputational stain, won't it?

The lens is different in different countries. Europe views us less positively at the moment, but I know that other markets are looking very positively at us. Whatever a country's history and performance on Covid-19 so far, people are looking forward now. Most people in this country aren't tracking in detail what's happening in other countries and I think it's the same elsewhere.

Where do you stand on the issue of quarantine hotels?

It's a step up from where we were, but we were down 93 per cent anyway so it's not going to make a huge difference in the immediate term. If it helps get us through this and recover faster then it might be an appropriate thing to do. But we obviously don't want it to go on too long, to just continue into the future. And it is going to make it somewhat harder for tourism to recover. We'll need to be very good at telling the story that visitors are welcome as soon as that's the case. We can't have a legacy of confusion.

The 2020 target for inbound tourism was 40 million. When will we get back to that level?

Tourism has been a fantastic growth story over the past ten years in Britain. It's been a driver for the economy. It produces so many jobs. It's said that just 22 Chinese visitors equals one new job. So 40 million, which we actually hit early in 2019, was supporting a lot of jobs.

In December our forecast was 16 million visitors in 2021, but then we were expecting green shoots from spring. That will clearly be pushed back to summer and probably into the autumn. I think we're now looking at 2024 or 2025 to get right back up to those numbers. It's going to be slow and it's going to be hard. But we must get there.

Given those economic benefits to the country, do you think there has been enough targeted support of the travel industry?

The government has done a huge amount. There's been the VAT cut, the furloughing, business rate relief — and clearly they're pushing for extensions to those. The industry will always say there could be more and there are real problems out there.

We were one of the first industries to be hit by the pandemic and probably have been one of the hardest hit. Only a fifth of businesses have enough money to keep going for many more months. There will be widespread failures. But I would add that this is a glass-half-full industry. It's resilient and it's done a magnificent job adapting and dealing with the open, close, open, close of the past year. People forget that this industry has 200,000 SMEs [small and medium-sized enterprises], so some of these businesses are really little. They don't have huge balance sheets; they have to innovate.

Have you booked your summer holiday yet — and, if so, where are you going?

I have. And it's Britain as you'd expect: I'm going to East Anglia. I go regularly to Suffolk and to Aldeburgh. I love it. It has everything: a beach (a stony one, but I don't mind); great food and restaurants; things to do. I take a cottage. I'm one of the great renters, which is why I can speak with authority about how the quality of self-catering has improved enormously in the past 20 years.

Sent from my iPhone