

**NAVIGATING
THE FUTURE**

THE SOCIAL TRAVEL SUMMIT

2018

THINK TANK REPORT

the
**SOCIAL
TRAVEL
SUMMIT**

BELFAST, UNITED KINGDOM

THE SOCIAL TRAVEL SUMMIT

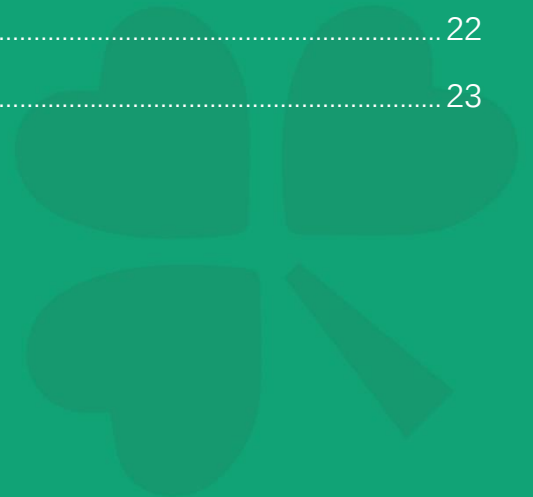
2018

BELFAST, UK



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ABOUT THE SOCIAL TRAVEL SUMMIT

The Social Travel Summit (STS) is an exclusive annual two-day gathering of travel & tourism professionals, leading travel bloggers & online influencers from around the world. Its purpose is to promote and curate high-level discussions about the future of online travel marketing.

Every year since the Social Travel Summit started, the event has attracted a high-calibre audience and leading speakers in their field to enjoy two days of networking, valuable educational sessions and an outstanding social programme.

The bloggers and influencers who attend the Social Travel Summit are specially selected based on the high quality of the content produced, online reach and track record in working with the tourism industry. The summit provides a unique opportunity for industry professionals to connect with them and build mutually beneficial relationships, and routinely attracts nearly 150 delegates from around the world'..

This year we celebrated the fifth edition the Social Travel Summit in Belfast, Northern Ireland.



The Social Travel Summit is an initiative of iambassador in collaboration with Travel Dudes and Reiseblogger Kollektiv.



<http://www.iambassador.net/>

ABOUT THE THINK TANK

BACKGROUND

The Social Travel Summit has become established as a leader in its field, attracting high-calibre attendees. Many of the travel industry representatives who attend have extensive experience in working with bloggers, while the bloggers themselves have travelled (literally) to the ends of the earth, working in an immense variety of destinations and cultural contexts. The Social Travel Summit seeks to capitalise on this collective experience for the benefit of the attendees and the wider travel industry by debating the hottest topics in travel and marketing today in a structured way, and releasing these insights in a report.

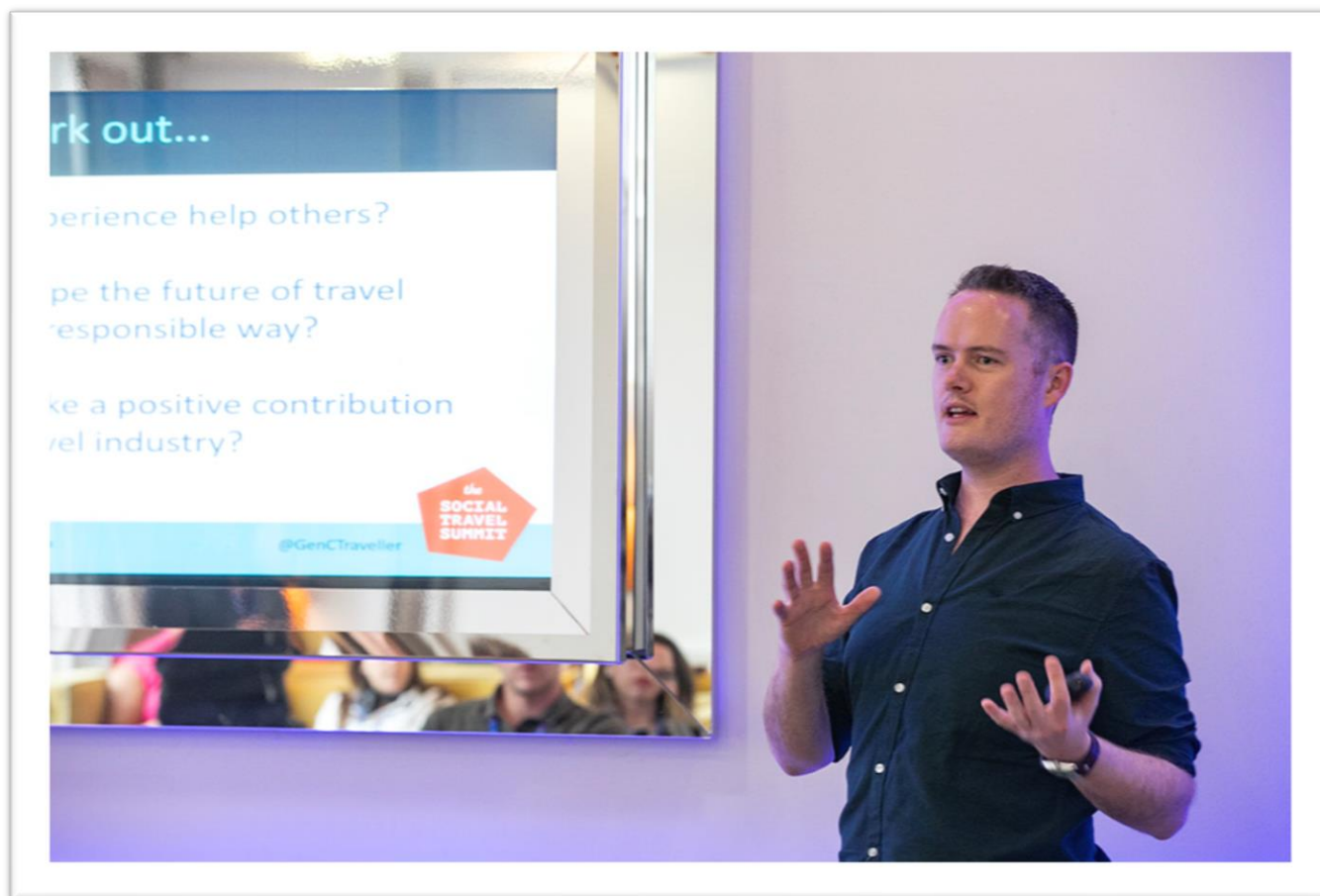
“Exploring how we can improve the relationship between travel influencers and the global travel industry”



THE STS THINK TANK: HOW IT WORKS

Prior to the event, all delegates were informed about this year's chosen Think Tank topics. In the 2018 edition, a total of 20 participants were invited, composed of an equal mix of travel influencers and industry representatives, notably DMOs. The total number of participants was capped to ensure that the two groups would be kept to a reasonable size and ensure a productive discussion.

At the start of the session, Peter Jordan, the Think Tank facilitator gave a presentation to introduce the two topics and provide some context for the discussions. Following this, the participants divided into two groups and discussed the questions put to them by their Topic Leader.



PREVIOUS EDITIONS OF THE THINK TANK

The Think Tank seeks to address the major issues in travel and marketing today. Delegates at all levels of experience participate in the Think Tank, bringing ideas and recommendations from around the world. The following table shows a selection of topics that have been debated in previous years:

Money and Budget	How to choose bloggers	Transperancy and ethics	Internal structurs of DMOs
Improving Client-Blogger communication	Tackling overtourism	The value of bloggers beyond stats	Working with local business
The future of travel blogging	Planning the perfect blogger visit	When bloggers move into consulting	Blogging and post-crisis recovery



Ideas and recommendations for all those in travel and marketing: The Think Tank Reports

Every year, the ideas and recommendations on the topics outlined above are summarised in a report for the benefit the wider travel industry.



Download all STS Think Tank Reports free of charge at:

www.thesocialtravelsummit.com/think-tank

TOPIC 1

HOW TO CREATE AUTHENTICITY?



BACKGROUND

Ask those in the travel industry why they like to work with bloggers, and one word consistently arises: *authenticity*. As “people like us” that consumers can relate to, bloggers are often highly regarded for their authentic opinions on the places that they visit and the activities that they do. However, things have changed.

As any Instagram user will know, with an attractive filter and a few edits, it's possible to make even the most boring photo look dramatic, and since social media users are bombarded with content and easily bored, both professional and amateur users are going to increasingly bizarre lengths to stand out and attract those all-important likes with ‘staged’ content in dramatic locations. At the same, time, it's impossible to ignore the cultural and political shifts that are causing the public to question ‘fake content and ‘fake news’, as well as the ethics of using ‘perfection’ to sell everyday products.

Travel bloggers are expected to create outstanding content and keep clients happy, while giving an accurate representation of what they see and do. In order to make sense of this complex issue, the group sought to answer three main questions: if bloggers’ authenticity is their major asset, then what does this mean exactly, how could they communicate it better and can they preserve it?

HOW TO DEFINE AUTHENTICITY?

When it comes to the experience of travel and documenting it through images and video, defining what is authentic and what is not, is not as easy as it may seem. Standing on a clifftop in a gala dress and high heels for a dramatic photo may be clearly staged, rather unrealistic and unappealing to do, however it is not necessarily *fake*. However, using software to paste your own image onto a background image of a place that you've never visited is deceiving and demeans the hard work that committed travel bloggers do. The group decided that content could be considered 'authentic' if:

- It is relatively well adjusted to reality; a grey sky may be edited to look more dramatic or stormy, however it is realistic for the time and place where the image is taken.
- It was created by an individual travel blogger using their own basic equipment (phone, camera, tripod) as opposed to a team of people and more professional, technical equipment (lighting and heavy editing)
- The content is supported by articles which include useful, realistic and educational insights (as opposed to a standalone image with little useful insight)
- It is a realistic representation of a view or atmosphere that one might typically find when visiting the same place

“If someone else is having the experience that you're selling, then what you're doing is authentic”

– Shivya Nath, The Shooting Star

CHASING LIKES

The group agreed that the term 'staged' content did have a negative connotation, however staged content is not necessarily inauthentic. Ultimately, travel bloggers seek to inspire their followers and provide them with useful travel advice, either from their own initiative or on behalf of a client. They should also be transparent in telling their followers about how much an image is staged, or how difficult it was to obtain if it's in a remote or dramatic location.

"Instagram is the headline, it's not the entire story"

– Rachelle Lucas, The Travel Bite

At the same time, the increasing presence of staged content can partially be blamed on the rise of Instagram and its algorithms that prize certain hashtags and styles of photo, as well as the ever-shortening attention span of social media users. This has given rise to a certain type of professional Instagrammer who will go to ever-more extreme lengths to generate likes through using their physical appearance, props or dress. The bloggers present agreed that this underlines why professional bloggers should not be judged by the number of likes alone, but other metrics such as engagement, page views and time spent per page, etc.

THE DESTINATION AS THE STAR OF THE SHOW vs. THE BACKDROP

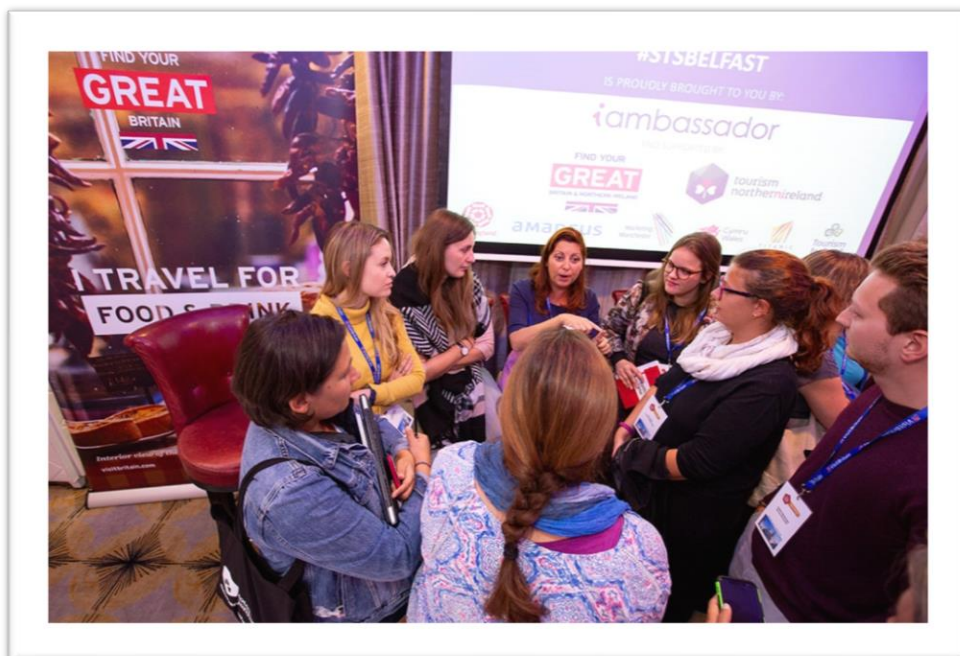
It is often tempting for destinations to work with lifestyle bloggers (whose primary focus is fashion, design or similar) who can be effective in certain cases. However, some destinations have learned to their cost that the destination may be used merely as a backdrop for staged photos with little information provided



about the destination, while the blogger uses the content to model items of clothing,

merchandise or equipment. This underlines the importance of reaching a basic agreement about the type of content that will be produced during a visit.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES



While bloggers and their clients usually seek to use social media to influence travelers' behaviour in positive ways, sometimes social media can shape visitors' behaviour in unintended ways. One destination in Switzerland reported how one iconic photo tweeted by a celebrity who visited a tranquil rural location resulted in that same

location becoming quickly swamped by visitors, causing damage to the local environment and angering local people. Furthermore, visitors sometimes do dangerous or idiotic things (such as standing on cliff edges) in order to get the 'perfect' photo. Destination marketing organisations will have to become increasingly vigilant of this and intervene where necessary, and be careful not to encourage such behaviour as a result of the projects they do with bloggers.

HOW TO PRESERVE BLOGGERS' AUTHENTICITY, AND HOW TO COMMUNICATE IT MORE EFFECTIVELY?

- Remind current and potential clients that as opposed to Instagrammers who can be effective for instant reach, travel bloggers usually produce their content in more diverse formats, curated and packaged for release in a planned way. As one participant said, "bloggers can tell the whole story, rather than just a quick snapshot"

- Remain focussed on the objective of encouraging followers to not just like what they see, but to click through and learn more, thus increasing the opportunity for exposure and retention.
- Bring value to followers by fulfilling the travel blogger's role as an interactive travel expert, rather than simply being a content producer
- Bring value to clients by fulfilling roles beyond content production; for example by running training workshops for local businesses, giving advice on product development or testing new services.

NOTE: Extensive information on the role of influencers in training and product development can be found in the 2017 edition of the Think Tank Report.

TOPIC 2

**THE IMPACT OF TOURISM ON
DESTINATIONS
AND THE ROLE OF
TRAVEL BLOGGERS**



BACKGROUND

Across the globe, more and more people are travelling further and more frequently than ever before. In developed countries consumers are prioritising leisure experiences over buying material things, while in developing countries travel is becoming more accessible and affordable to more sectors of the population. The effects of this growth are becoming noticeable in destinations of all types, however it is most acute in large, attractive cities, especially when the ongoing process of urbanisation and gentrification are taken into account.



In some locations this growth in visitor numbers has resulted in 'overtourism', a form of overcrowding which puts pressure on local infrastructure and degrades the quality of life for local residents as well as the overall visitor experience. However, even where this is not the case, it is important for destinations to be vigilant about tourism growth and the way that local residents feel about it. For many decades, the travel marketing community has

been judged by the growth in visitor arrivals and spending, assuming that the benefits to destinations were universal and unquestionable, however they are discovering that this is not always the case.

Yet the story of tourism growth is not entirely negative. Throughout the year, travel bloggers and industry professionals meet people whose livelihoods have been transformed by working in the tourism sector. In an increasingly uncertain and introspective world, travel has an unequalled power to open hearts and minds, so how do we navigate this delicate situation?

The organisers of the Social Travel Summit take seriously their role in capturing delegates' knowledge for the benefit of the wider travel community, as well as the principle of using their influence responsibly. This year the second of the two Think Tank groups discussed their observations on tourism growth, and where travel bloggers fit into the picture.

TOPIC 2: THE IMPACT OF TOURISM ON DESTINATIONS AND THE ROLE OF TRAVEL BLOGGERS

The causes and consequences of tourism growth are numerous, and affect destinations differently. Rather than performing an exhaustive analysis of the situation, the industry representatives and travel bloggers in this Think Tank group discussed their own observations of how tourism growth has evolved in recent years and how they, or their organisations are dealing with it.

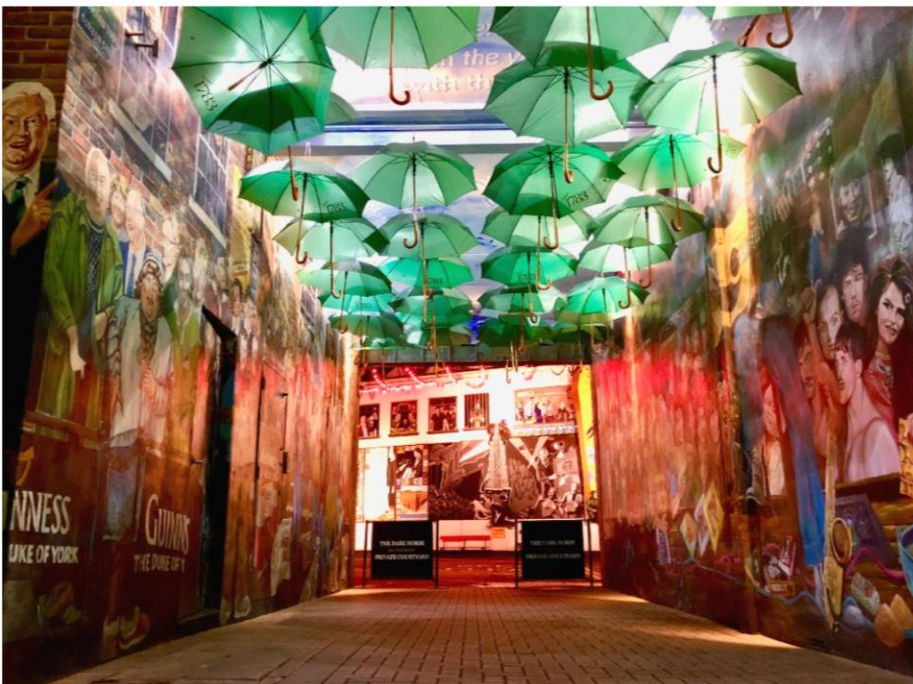
“We’re preparing emerging districts for dispersal in the future, and we’re using bloggers as part of that strategy.”

- Suzanne Höller, Tourism Graz

Two years ago, the Think Tank at STS Inverness (2016) discussed this topic and most of the destinations present (from UK and Ireland) at the time agreed that it wasn’t an issue for them. Since then the situation has changed, with representatives from both VisitBritain and Tourism Ireland identifying parts of their respective countries which were judged to be suffering from congestion. These, and other European destinations confirmed that they were looking ahead

and questioning how tourism growth might affect them in the next five to ten years.

Given that their remit is destination marketing, their current approach is to identify new areas – be they districts or whole towns that could make attractive alternatives to destinations that are already popular, and in collaboration with the local authorities



market these to international visitors, often with the help of travel bloggers.

In addition to this approach, what other steps are being taken?

ARE ALL YOUR TAPS ON ALL THE TIME? TAKING A SELECTIVE APPROACH TO DESTINATION MARKETING:

Seasonal peaks in arrivals, and the saturation of certain destinations has led some DMOs to reduce or stop the promotion of certain places. In the summer season of 2018, one capital city in northern Europe reached full capacity leading the DMO to stop all paid promotion activities towards its inbound European markets. Other cities are focussing only on promoting events in the low season, or in focussing solely on external suburbs, and not the city centre. For example, the Austrian city of Graz is already using bloggers as part of their strategy to attract visitors towards up-and-coming suburbs.

EDUCATING VISITORS ON ALTERNATIVES:

Raising awareness of alternative destinations is a crucial part of encouraging visitors to disperse away from traditional tourism hotspots. This involves working with bloggers to produce new content focussing on alternative destinations and, crucially, investing in SEO to ensure it is seen by potential visitors. Examples include titles such as “Great cities to visit only one hour from London”, or “Why Graz makes a charming alternative to Vienna”.

“We should remember that journalists and mainstream media follow what bloggers produce, so bloggers can really help lay the ground work for journalists taking notice of new destinations and itineraries”

- Sarah Lee, LiveShareTravel

DEVELOPING NEW ROUTES:

As part of their strategy of dispersal, more DMOs are developing routes and suggested itineraries that take visitors to places that they may otherwise have missed, and travel bloggers can play an important role in raising brand awareness of these routes. In fact, bloggers have been crucial to routes such as Ireland’s Wild Atlantic Way, and Scotland’s North Coast 500 becoming widely known.

GO SOMEWHERE DIFFERENT:

Sometimes, dispersal and creating awareness of alternative locations can be as simple as DMOs taking their visiting travel bloggers by the hand and going for dinner or on a quick visit to somewhere entirely different to their normal routine.

“If a blogger is keen to visit somewhere that’s already pretty crowded, it’s important for the DMO to be realistic and manage the blogger’s expectations from an early stage”

- David Stock, Divergent Travelers

BRING TRAVEL BLOGGERS AND LOCAL PEOPLE TOGETHER:

In order to help local people understand their work, mobilise support and spark innovative content, some DMOs have involved local people in their projects with travel bloggers. In Latvia, a campaign was run on local radio to invite local residents to host and accompany local bloggers as they did their work, while in Lausanne, Switzerland, local people have been invited to contribute to the official destination blog with their own tips, in different languages. Such efforts demonstrate to local people that DMOs are considering them in their work, and helping local people to understand their role better.

THE CHANGING ROLE OF DESTINATION MARKETING ORGANISATIONS:

The nature of destination marketing organisations to take on other roles in destination development and management is constantly evolving. As DMOs get called upon to manage visitor growth, as well as to support local businesses with training and product development, staff roles are changing internally. Meanwhile, the DMO's external audiences are changing too.

In fact, those traditionally used to communicating with visitors are also having to use their communication skills to convince local residents, politicians and businesses about the value of tourism to their destination and asserting their own role in its future. As we have documented in previous editions of the STS Think Tank report, it is important for the DMO's strategy to form part of every discussion that they have with travel bloggers, in order to ensure that their work is aligned with the DMO's overall objectives and to help travel bloggers to improve their pitches in general too.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to offer our sincere thanks to the following participants:

Moderator: Peter Jordan, Founder, Gen C Traveller

Topic leaders: Janicke Hansen, letsgetlost.no

Manuela Mörtenbäck, Tirol Werbung

Participants: The organisers would like to thank all of the participants in the STS Think Tank 2018 for their insights offered during the session

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Peter Jordan is a consultant, researcher and strategist, specialised in the curation and interpretation of travel trends for diverse clients from inside and outside the tourism industry. With a background in industry education, as well as marketing and communications at various tourism industry associations, he has gained a panoramic view of global travel helping him to focus on translating diverse insights into practical solutions. His professional background involves working with the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) in Madrid as well as the Pacific Asia Travel Association in Bangkok.

Today he is based in Amsterdam, and pilots a number of research and strategy projects focussing on consumer trends and growth markets. He has also become established as a global thought leader in the field of LGBT tourism.

SOCIAL TRAVEL SUMMIT 2018

PARTNERS

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to the following partners

of the Social Travel Summit 2018:

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CLOSING WORDS



The fifth edition of the Social Travel Summit was held in Belfast, Northern Ireland, in September 2018. This year, we welcomed 142 delegates from 20 countries, including 47 travel influencers from around the world. I'm especially proud and grateful to have worked with two outstanding partners: VisitBritain and Tourism Northern Ireland, who raised the bar for STS yet again! As the Organiser of the Summit, I see our role as a facilitator who creates the right framework and conditions in which all delegates feel like friends (or family)

and where they can be honest in their opinions and feel free to share. By means of informal networking sessions and fun events, we succeeded in creating a unique brand of STS camaraderie – the excitement and eagerness among the delegates to learn from one another was palpable. It was an amazing experience for me to witness the thought-provoking discussions and insightful presentations, and see the issues and recommendations expertly summed up in this report.

Since its inception in 2014, the Social Travel Summit has established itself as *the* platform where travel influencers and industry gather to learn and help shape the future of digital marketing. This year, delegates scored the conference 4.8 out of a maximum of 5 points! I'm proud of this achievement and the excellent work of the STS Organising Team, the iambassador Management Team and our partner networks. A special thank you goes to the STS Team: Janice Waugh, Tracey Nesbitt, Melvin Boecher and Nicholas Montemaggi. I would also like to thank our supporters, VisitBritain, Tourism Northern Ireland, Visit England, Amadeus, Marketing Manchester, Visit Wales, Titanic Belfast and Tourism Ireland - STS Belfast would not have been possible without you! Another special thank you goes to Peter Jordan for his exceptional work in moderating the Think Tank and compiling this report. Last but not least, I would like to thank all the influencers and delegates for helping to make STS Belfast a great success!

See you in 2019!

Keith Jenkins

CEO, iambassador

Head of the STS Organising Team



THE SOCIAL TRAVEL SUMMIT

2018

FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE SOCIAL TRAVEL SUMMIT:

Leipzig 2014: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQch_6zXIH8

Hamburg 2015: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WRt39AZ9A4c>

Inverness 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q0Mhqa6qFLg>

Kitzbuehel 2017: <https://youtu.be/pQ2aqPXhUoE>

Belfast 2018 : <https://youtu.be/cl4GXGllu8Q>

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