

AHI article (Autumn 2022)

Bitesize 2 – What do you want from a visitor centre?

Visitor centres come in a variety of forms and sizes from converted sheds, modified spaces in existing buildings to state of the art, purpose-designed facilities, but in whatever form they exist, what is required by visitors is often very similar. This piece of research undertaken by Philip Ryland tested this by asking visitors at a range of cultural and heritage sites the question ‘What do you want from a visitor centre’?

Sixty groups of visitors were approached, of these: 12 were visiting on their own; 23 were with a partner and 25 were with family and/or friends. They were asked if this was their first visit to the site and for 41 groups it was. A breakdown of this information as it links to their social grouping is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of visitors

Social grouping	Is this your first visit to the site?
Alone = 12 (20%)	Yes = 8 (19%)
Partner = 23 (38%)	Yes = 11 (27%)
Family &/or friends = 25 (42%)	Yes = 22 (54%)
Total = 60 groups	Total = 41 groups

Fallon & Kriwoken (2003) in exploring the purpose of a visitor centre identified a range of roles including providing visitor information services and orientating the visitor whilst on site. They further suggested that a centre would typically offer a range of displays and exhibits, often with some form of audio-visual presentation, provide the location on-site for visitor services staff as well as the starting point for guided walks, events and other activities. On most sites, the visitor centre would also offer ancillary services including toilets, a restaurant and a gift shop.

Gross & Zimmerman (2002) suggested that the design of a visitor centre can be significantly important in establishing and/or influencing a ‘sense of place’ by being in harmony (visually, culturally and ecologically) with the site itself.

A successful visitor centre therefore is a place which physically, mentally, and potentially even spiritually, prepares the visitor for their experience on site.

In this study, the visitor groups were asked if they had sought out the visitor centre on arrival or came across it during their visit. Their responses are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Finding the visitor centre

Social grouping	Sought out the centre on arrival	Came across it during the visit
Alone = 12 (8 of whom are first-time visitors)	Yes = 5 (17%)	Yes = 7 (23%)
Partner = 23 (11 are first-time visitors)	Yes = 10 (35%)	Yes = 13 (42%)
Family &/or friends = 25 (22 are first-time visitors)	Yes = 14 (48%)	Yes = 11 (35%)
Total = 60 groups (41 groups are first-time visitors)	Total = 29 groups	Total = 31 groups

In all three groups, the highest proportion of visitors who sought out the visitor centre on their arrival were first-time visitors. This is pleasing as a key role for the centre is to promote awareness of the site, by informing the visitor of what to expect as well as encouraging them to explore. This guidance and orientation on arrival is important, particularly for the first-time visitor who is more likely to fully engage with the site if they feel comfortable, secure and relaxed during their visit.

In exploring the actual role of a visitor centre, six main themes emerged from the visitor groups, which are summarised in Table 3 below:

Table 3. What do you want from a visitor centre: main themes identified (as reported by total ranking score, where a score of 3 would be the best possible score)

Access to activities and events on site (n=7)	Get information about the site (n=8)	To view displays and exhibits about the site (n=10)
Chat to friendly and helpful staff (n=11)	Buy brochures, guides and other souvenirs (n=13)	Get information about the local area (n=14)

In addition, the visitor groups were asked about the importance of the provision of toilets and refreshments on site. In terms of their responses, for toilets: 84% of 'alone'; 78% 'with partner' and 96% 'with family and/or friends' agreed. Whilst for refreshments: 83% of 'alone'; 87% 'with partner' and 84% 'with family and/or friends' agreed.

In considering the ranking of these six main themes by the different social groups, Table 4 summarises the results.

Table 4. What do you want from a visitor centre: ranking of the six main themes (as reported by visitor group)

Theme	Alone	Partner	Family and/or friends
Access to activities and events on site (n=7)	2 nd	4 th	1 st
Get information about the site (n=8)	1 st	5 th	2 nd
To view displays and exhibits about the site (n=10)	3 rd	2 nd	5 th
Chat to friendly and helpful staff (n=11)	4 th	1 st	6 th
Buy brochures, guides and other souvenirs (n=13)	6 th	3 rd	4 th
Get information about the local area (n=14)	5 th	6 th	3 rd

So, what do these results suggest about the role of a visitor centre?

1. *'Activities and events on site'* proved to be the most popular response for families which is encouraging and suggests that visitors want to engage fully with the site: its history; local communities and artefacts. Opportunities exist for guided walks and living history experiences, self-guided trails, events and demonstrations and family-orientated activities clearly form an important part of this offering. These activities and experiences can also be used to manage where visitors go, helping to reduce visitor pressure in fragile areas as well as enabling a visitor experience in locations which are normally 'off limits' to the public or sites with features scattered over a wide area.
2. *'Get information about the site'* proved a popular response for those 'visiting alone' or 'with family and/or friends'. Whilst many visitors will typically access information on the internet prior to their visit there is still a demand for high quality, tailored information on arrival. This information should 'bring the site to life' by creating a sense of meaning about it. The material produced should also be geared towards extended families as well as specifically for those visiting with children.
3. *'Friendly and helpful staff'* was the most important role for those visiting 'with a partner'. Providing opportunities to talk to staff is a powerful way of helping visitors to understand the importance of, and therefore create a personal connection with, the site.
4. The range of responses for *'viewing displays and exhibits'* reinforces the need for visitors to be able to access and then discuss their experiences through tailored materials which re-create the site (physically, mentally and even spiritually) thereby enabling them to appreciate the whole story. When designing exhibits, it is also important to provide opportunities for families and their children to interact with each other as well as with the site. Displays and exhibits should be updated regularly (or by using temporary displays) to encourage and support repeat visits.

A visitor centre therefore plays an important role in providing core site information, enhancing the visitors' on-site experience, providing access to staff, activities and events and ultimately, helping to create a memorable visit.

References

Fallon, L.D. and Kriwoken, L.K. 2003. Community involvement in tourism infrastructure: the case of the Strahan Visitor Centre, Tasmania. *Tourism Management*, 24, 289-308.

Gross, M. and Zimmerman, R. 2002. *Interpretive centres: the history, design and development of nature and visitor centers*. Stevens Point, WI; University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.

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Next issue: What do visitors want from a self-guided trail.