

LEADER 2014-2020 NRN CASE STUDY

MID IRELAND ADVENTURE

Summary

Mid Ireland Adventure is a start-up company addressing the growing demand for adventure sport activities in rural locations. Company founder Jonathan O'Meara identified a gap in the market in the Offaly region, alongside strong natural amenities to base adventure sport activities. LEADER funding supported the development of Mid Ireland Adventure facilitating the purchase of essential equipment such as mountain bikes and paddle boards. This growing business now provides a range of adventure sports activities to a diverse local and international client base. This includes mountain bike tours in the Slieve Bloom Mountains and stand up paddle board safaris on the river Shannon.

Context

Set in the heart of Ireland, Mid Ireland Adventure is a start-up company providing a wide range of both land and water based adventure sports activities. These include mountain bike tours, guided walks, summer camps, stand up paddle board safaris and adventure races. The company has a base in Banagher and at Kinnitty Castle in county Offaly. Mid Ireland Adventure focuses its activities in the natural and heritage landscapes of the Irish midlands, including the river Shannon, Grand Canal, Offaly Way, Slieve Bloom Mountains and Kinnitty Castle. Adventure sports equipment rental, such as stand up paddle boards and mountain bikes, is another aspect of this businesses activities.

Project name: Mid Ireland Adventure

Date: Early 2017 to Early 2018

Local Action Group: Offaly LCDC

Implementing Partner: Offaly Local Development Company

Type of Beneficiary: Micro enterprise

Priority & Focus Area: Theme 1: Economic Development, Enterprise Development and Job Creation/Sub theme: Rural Tourism

Project Beneficiary Name/Organisation: Mid Ireland Adventure

Address: Banagher On The Shannon & Kinnitty Castle, Co. Offaly

Further information:

<https://www.midirelandadventure.ie/>



1



Company founder Jonathan O'Meara is a Banagher native who grew up immersed in water sports on the river Shannon. He is a long-serving, active member of the Shannonside Sub Aqua Club which Jonathan's father is a founding member of. Jonathan is also a journalist specialising in sports reporting. He has worked for the Longford News and continues to write for the Westmeath Independent.

"Availing of the LEADER grant was a huge help in the early stages, it allowed the business some breathing space in the first couple of years of operation."

Jonathan O'Meara, Mid Ireland Adventure

Jonathan identified a gap in the market and growing demand for adventure sports activities in a countryside location. The Offaly region has not fully capitalised on the potential for adventure sports based around local natural amenities. Mid Ireland Adventure works to address this gap. Jonathan has also invested heavily in up-skilling, gaining a number of instructor certificates in adventure sports and water safety. It was the LEADER programme funding that facilitated the business to move beyond this initial development phase. The grant supported Mid Ireland Adventure to acquire a range of essential equipment and begin providing adventure sport activities to a diverse client base.

Objectives

This project supported the development of Mid Ireland Adventure, an early stage start-up business through grant support to:

Facilitate the purchase of mountain bikes, paddle boards and wetsuits to use in adventure sports activities.

Assist development of this newly established business and commencement of its core adventure sport services.

Increase visibility of Mid Ireland Adventures through applying business branding to the company van.

Activities

Over the last number of years, Jonathan O'Meara has worked to develop his business idea for Mid Ireland Adventure. Drawing on his marketing, PR, design and IT skillset developed through his journalism career initial groundwork involved developing a website and company logo. Also central to Mid Ireland Adventure's development has been building a reputable, trusted and respected business that provides high quality adventure sport activities with safety at its core. To this end, Jonathan is a qualified Cycling Ireland MBLA Trail Cycle Leader and Academy of Surfing Instructors (ASI) Level One Stand Up Paddle Board Instructor. He is also a certified Remote Energy Care First Aid Responder and certified Water Safety Rescue Instructor. Mid Ireland Adventure is working towards becoming an ASI accredited school. This is considered to be among the world leading surf and paddle board education and accreditation organisations. Risk assessments of locations where adventure sport activities take place are also a vital part of their development.



Image Credit: Mid Ireland Adventure

An important next step for Mid Ireland Adventure was to invest in a range of adventure sports equipment. The LEADER project funding supported Mid Ireland Adventure with 50% funding to purchase equipment such as mountain bikes, paddle boards and wetsuits to use in adventure sports activities. Jonathan's knowledge gained through his extensive training informed the type of equipment chosen.



Knowledge and advice on standards, good practice and safety features was put into practice when equipment was purchased. For example stand up paddle boards all have safety leashes and buoyancy aids are provided to clients.

The first season for Mid Ireland Adventure kicked off in 2017 with a mountain bike tour held on Good Friday. That summer, stand up paddle boarding safaris also commenced. The focus on water and land based activities provides a good balance for the business helping sustain activities year round. For Mid Ireland Adventure water based activities are more popular in summer months, but mountain hikes and bike tours are of greater focus in winter.

"I would certainly advise the LEADER process to anyone who was considering setting up a new business in rural Ireland. In my case, Offaly Local Development were able to give me a definitive answer at the first point of contact if my business model was eligible under the LEADER approach. Once we established that, Offaly Local Development was always on hand to assist and offer excellent support and advice over the course of the process."

Jonathan O'Meara, Mid Ireland Adventure

Part of the wider ethos of Mid Ireland Adventure is also to inform and inspire greater appreciation of the Offaly environment that activities take place in. During activities opportunities are availed of to enhance the adventure sport activity experience by providing information on local landscape, nature and heritage. For example, when activities are based on the river Shannon instructors also provide information to participants on the history of the river, its wildlife and the wider ecosystem. Mountain bike tours commence at Kinnitty Castle, move through the Slieve Bloom Mountains and finish in Kinnitty village. The tour includes the history of Kinnitty Castle, allows time to appreciate the landscape and nature of the mountains and finishes at a replica statue of the Pyramids of Giza in Kinnitty village. The educational element also extends to other areas such as improved water safety awareness.

Results

Mid Ireland Adventure serves a gap in the local market for a tourism product based around adventure sports. The business also taps into wider trends of active lifestyle and demand for rurally based weekend adventure sports activities. The business capitalises on and harnesses the untapped value held within the midlands environment to develop an adventure sports business.

Economic impacts include the new rural employment created. Jonathan is the main employee of the company and one seasonal position was created in 2018. As the company grows future job creation is expected. The mountain bike trails under construction in the Slieve Bloom mountains will also facilitate this, improving the local outdoors sports infrastructure.



Image Credit: Mid Ireland Adventure

Mid Ireland Adventure attracts greater visitor numbers to the midland's area, which does not have the visitor volumes of busier tourist regions. The company's adventure sport activities have attracted a local, national and international client base to the region. International clients have come from a diverse geography, such as Europe, the US and South America. Activities are also tailored to the needs of specific client groups and occasions, such as birthday celebrations, stag and hen parties.





Increased visitor numbers also have additional spin-off benefits to the local economy. For example, Mid Ireland Adventure's mountain bike tour finishes in Kinnitty village with coffee and scones at a local café. Visitors also use local retail, hospitality and accommodation services. A strong, supportive local business network also exists in the area. For example, tourist service providers help promote each others services helping build the local tourist economy.



Image Credit: Mid Ireland Adventure

The positive spill-over impacts of Mid Ireland Adventure's presence in the Offaly region go beyond economic benefits. Mid Ireland Adventure supports increased local environmental, cultural and historical awareness as part of its activities by also building an educational element into tours. It has also added new life to Banagher town.

Lessons

Businesses providing experiences for tourists are important to rural tourism development in less traditional tourism hotspots of Ireland. Mid Ireland Adventure has built a business driven by the specialist skill of its founder that also harnesses value from local natural assets.

The relatively slow LEADER funding timeframe, from expression of interest to approval and grant repayment, can slow the pace of start-up business development. In the case of Mid Ireland Adventure while a faster turnaround would have been more beneficial to this business, the funding was still crucial to this start-up and a vitally important support to business development. This benefit

could be increased and local impacts seen sooner if the application process was faster.

Because of going through the LEADER application process, Mid Ireland Adventure is now well connected to Offaly Local Development Company which has a good understanding of the business and its objectives. This has opened a communication channel with potential access to new networks, information and business promotion opportunities.

In relation to developing a start-up enterprise, lessons learned included being realistic about goals, having patience and perseverance. The importance of creating a digital profile for an adventure tourism business is also noted, for example through social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. This helps visualise and communicate the adventure sport experience to potential and return clients.



Image Credit: Mid Ireland Adventure

Contact details

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