Kilkenny hoteliers tackling downturn together

The city's hoteliers have organised the introduction of a new free culture card offering discounts and benefits to visitors to the city, writes Michelle Devane.

The ash cloud is causing difficulties for the tourism sector, but Kilkenny hoteliers are determined to keep business in the city.

A group of the city's hoteliers has organised the introduction of a new free culture card offering discounts and benefits to visitors to the city. Liam Anthony Griffin of the family-run Griffin Hotel Group and a member of the Kilkenny Tourism Board is the chairman of the group, the Kilkenny Hotels Joint Marketing Committee.

The card was instigated by the committee to bring more people into the city. It is available to guests at many of the city's hotels and through Kilkenny Tourism.

"People are looking for extra value for money everywhere they go and we want people to come and stay in Kilkenny and spend money," said Griffin, whose family run Monart House, Hotel Kilkenny and Ferrycarrig Hotel.

"The initiative has been brought together by the hotels in the city. Unlike other countries, where hoteliers have had a rates race to the bottom, we are trying to market Kilkenny as a destination, and not have a race to the bottom in terms of rates," he said.

"It's very important that Kilkenny is seen as a top destination and that we can help each other to promote ourselves to the Irish market."

The other participating hotels are the Club House Hotel, Days Inn, Killford Arms, Kilkenny Hibernian Hotel, Kilkenny Ormonde Hotel, Langtons Hotel, Lyrah Estate, Mount Juliet Hotel, Newpark Hotel, Pembroke Hotel, Rivercourt Hotel, Springhill Court Hotel and Zum.

The card gives visitors a 20 per cent discount on entry fees to heritage attractions such as Rothe House, St Canice's Cathedral and Castlecomer Discovery Park.

Many of the craft shops and jewellers in the city are also offering a discount on work by certain craftspeople.

The Kilkenny Tourism Board and the marketing committee are also working on introducing a family card, where families can take in the sights and benefit from a reduction in entry fees.

The Griffin Hotel Group was founded by Liam's grandfather in Rossolare, Co Wexford, more than 50 years ago. Since then, the family have been a strong presence in the hospitality industry.

"It's a long-established family business. My grandfather and grandmother opened the first hotel in Rossolare, but really our roots in the hospitality business can be traced back to the 1920s when my great-grandmother had a farm house in Gorey. Her husband died of pneumonia, so she began a guesthouse to bring in an income," he said.

In 2006, the group invested €30 million in the development of Monart House in Enniscorthy into a five-star destination spa.

It was recently awarded runner-up in the Best Spa-Retreat Worldwide by Condé Nast Traveller.

Griffin began working in the family business after graduating from the UCD Michael Smurfit Business School. Since joining, and occupying the role of group sales and marketing director, he has co-project managed the redevelopment of Hotel Kilkenny in 2006.

In the past few years, Griffin said the group had diversified its business model in order to expand without the necessity for an injection of capital.

He said it had begun using its hospitality background to venture into operating food and bars at the Wexford Opera House, for example. "We have to branch out and find new ways of doing business without spending capital."

Griffin has also made links with Smithwicks brewery in Kilkenny in recent months. The St Francis Abbey Brewery, which dates back to the 13th century, is owned by Diageo.

The drinks company has decided to begin visitor tours of the brewery in partnership with the Griffin Group.

"We'll begin the tours at the Cat Laughs Weekend and they will run throughout the summer. It's a whole new initiative for us. We're hoping that it will become a major attraction in Kilkenny, that people will want to go see a real live working brewery. There is a lot of these brewery towns that are doing very well across Europe."

Griffin said the three hotels had been trading well since the start of the year, despite the ash cloud and the continued economic downturn.

"Monart has been doing very well. We were worried last year, but people are now at a level where they are very stressed and they want stress relief. Monart hits the spot, and repeat business is going very well," he said.

Hotel Kilkenny, which is celebrating its 25th year in operation, is doing well thanks to conferencing, while the wedding season has kicked off in Ferrycarrig.

"We're not terribly worried about the ash cloud because about 95 per cent of our business is domestic. Our target market is mainly Dublin. We're not relying on the international market."

"2009 wouldn't have been the best year for us. But we've had an established product and a market that is loyal to us and saw us through the bad patch. 2010 started out with two weeks of really bad ice and snow, but from February onwards, it's been better and we're showing growth signs in the last two months. People are more willing to go out and spend. They want to get on with their lives," Griffin said.
Liam Anthony Griffin of the Griffin Hotel Group: ‘People are looking for extra value for money everywhere they go’