

JONATHAN BRAY



A car-free future for visitor attractions

Not owning a car, or not wanting to use one, can make it difficult to get to tourist destinations. Good Journey wants to change that

► Is this the ultimate no brainer? Everyone agrees that leisure traffic is the growth market for public transport. So, how about the public transport sector works with visitor attractions to promote car-free travel? How hard can it be? Not so hard now we have the well-established non-profit company Good Journey to bridge the gap between the sectors. Cheap too, compared with just about everything else the rail industry in particular tries to do.

I declare an interest. I don't drive and I love a day trip (who doesn't?). I have plotted and schemed ways of doing innumerable trips by public transport - from walking the east coast of the country from Hornsea to Edinburgh, to ticking off remote Neolithic sites across the UK and to exploring the windswept islands of Scotland. It can go wrong; it can be nerve wracking waiting at some remote bus stop dependent on the bus showing up. But it adds to the sense of achievement. Driving flattens everything out - makes getting to the back of beyond too easy. Plus, circular walks are boring - as is not rewarding yourself at the pub after a linear walk.

The main thing I don't like about public transport day trips is feeling like a weirdo and pariah - particularly at a lot of the set piece visitor attractions outside urban centres. The National Trust's Sizergh House near Kendal is a good example. When we last went there the bus service was fine. But it dumped you at a bus stop where, in the absence of proper

signage, you had to follow the blue dot on google maps and pick your way across various channels of roaring traffic and up the drive whilst the vast majority of visitors purred past in their motors bound for the convenient car park. Am I missing something or should those of us who don't drive to visitor attractions be the ones who get the special treatment? Or at least equal treatment? Or at least not



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Nat Taplin, Good Journey

to be made to feel like a freak? Things are changing though. Bus travellers to Sizergh will now, at least, be able to lord it over the car borne visitors at the cafe by waving their bus ticket in order to secure a free hot drink.

Nat Taplin, the founder and director of Good Journey, points to places that have already gone much further than a free cup of tea. Blenheim Palace got religious about car-free access back in 2018 and is the poster boy for what can be achieved. Car-free visitors went up from 5,000 to 30,000 in just two years. It could be because they offer a whopping 30% discount to car-free visitors and that those visitors can also take advantage of a shuttle bus from nearby Hanborough station in the summer. And have a look at their 'getting here' page on the website. The getting there by car info is at the bottom of the page not the top of the page. Yes, you read that right.

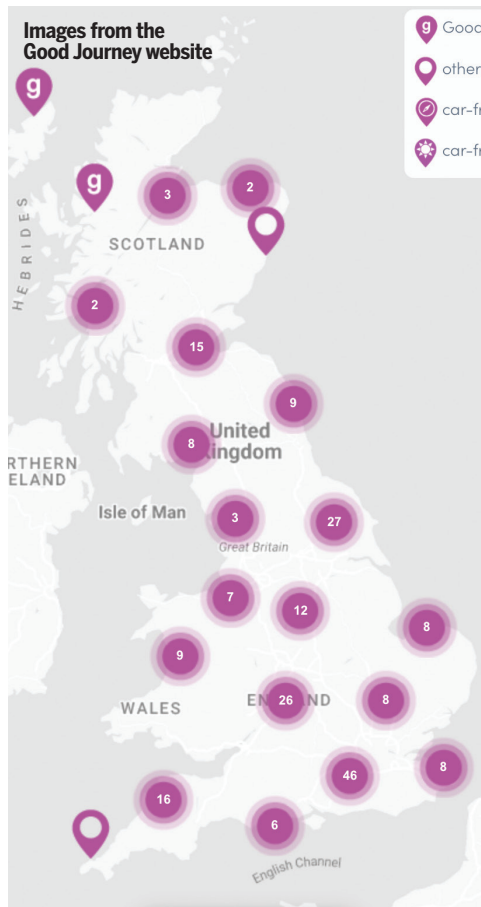
Also in the commended category is the Royal Horticultural Society with all five of the RHS gardens now offering 30% off to car free visitors and, from the summer, they will all have shuttle bus links too. The newest of the RHS gardens, Bridgewater in Greater Manchester, embedded green travel from the word go, including a dedicated traffic-free walking and cycling route. It also puts car-free access info first on its website - and car access information last. Visitors arriving on the dedicated shuttle bus also get priority access when the site is full.

I declare another interest. I am on the board of Good Journey (for which there is no financial reward whatsoever - though I have availed myself of some nice slices of cake at the board meetings). Though the credit for the progress so far is all down to Nat's determination, professionalism... and patience. I asked him how he got started. "I love car-free travel myself - sitting back and enjoying the view, a picnic, a glass of wine, a snooze - all the things you can't do if you drive. The journey becomes part of the experience. I want more people to be able enjoy that."

He added: "Cars spoil beautiful places. People go on trips to see these amazing landscapes and historic places and unwittingly, between them, spoil the very places they've come to enjoy."

There's also a practical reason. "The information on visitor attraction websites is often so poor; broken links, out-of-date

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timetables and useless information like saying the nearest railway station is seven miles away but with no further information. Good Journey’s key aim is to solve that problem and provide easy, reliable, door-to-door information.”

I highlighted Nat’s patience earlier - more than I’ve had at times with how long it has taken for the wider public transport sector to grab this opportunity with both hands. Or for some of the big visitor attraction groups (who profess concern for climate) to get behind it. And as for some of the National Parks - don’t get me started. But Nat’s been right to deploy his greater reserves of patience and diplomacy and it’s now paying off. The National Trust, English Heritage and Historic Environment Scotland are all about to pilot some significant car-free initiatives including some big-name sites like Stonehenge, Stirling Castle and Dunham Massey.

As for public transport operators, Nat says that in the early days the public transport sector was hard to engage with - partly because of its fragmented nature, but now there are

some exciting things happening. He points to Great Western Railway promoting car-free adventures extensively via its comms and marketing channels. And, a breakthrough is that they are using the Good Journey website and brand, rather than trying to invent their own way of doing it.

Imagine though if the wider industry took a break from the endless navel gazing, introversion and logo wars and got behind car-free leisure travel at scale? For example, you could start to retail combined tickets at scale for both visitor attraction entry and public transport travel to get there. You could promote it nationally, regionally and locally. It’s all there for the taking. I ask Nat if Good Journey is achieving ‘escape velocity’? He is reluctant to go quite that far but he’s clearly pleased with progress. “Not so long ago, nobody used the phrase car-free travel but now it’s cropping up more and more in newspapers and on the websites of attractions and train companies.” He also points to Norfolk which is about to become the first ‘Good Journey County’ - offering

discounts for car-free visitors and a suite of car-free itineraries.

So, what’s next for Good Journey? “Our mission is to get every visitor attraction in the UK to welcome car-free visitors. We want many more people to be able to enjoy car-free day outs - not least the 25% of households that don’t have a car. With the cost-of-living squeeze that’s more important than ever. Improving car-free access should be a requirement for visitor attractions, like access for disabled people and families.”

The day is coming when a car-free person like me can say ‘I am not a freak - I am a free man!’. What’s stopping the sector from making that day arrive sooner rather than later? ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.