



Skye high

Hugh MacLeod took over responsibility for the family's estate on Skye, including Dunvegan Castle and Gardens, in 2008. Here, he outlines the estate's success, gives his views on the increasing popularity of the island and highlights the challenges that remain to be met

Over the past 20 years, visitor numbers to Dunvegan Castle & Gardens have followed a peak and trough pattern. Estate Director Hugh MacLeod believes this reflects external geopolitical and economic factors, from currency fluctuations to foreign wars that have reduced the number of safe international tourism destinations.

He said: "In 1997, we welcomed around 130,000 visitors, which fell to a low of 89,000 in 2008 when I assumed responsibility for the estate. However, we rebranded and introduced an effective marketing strategy along with major capital investments to upgrade visitor facilities and transform the visitor experience. This resulted in us being awarded a 5* grading by VisitScotland last year, during which we attracted a record-breaking 168,000 visitors."

Over the past four years, visitor numbers to Skye in general have grown steadily. Hugh added: "The natural beauty and diversity of the island has captured people's imagination and they are sharing their experiences in increasing numbers on social media and by word of mouth."

The Isle of Skye has become a brand

recognised across the world and this success has its roots in the 1950s when a few notable local families, including Hugh MacLeod's, started Skye Week to put Skye on the tourist map, create more jobs for local people and arrest the declining population.

Dame Flora, the 28th Chief, was one pioneer who travelled the world to encourage her clan diaspora to return to their roots and find out more about their shared ancestry. More recently, the island's renown has been fuelled by print and social media coverage and the marketing efforts of local businesses, destination management organisations and VisitScotland. High-profile feature films, TV series and music videos have also boosted visitor numbers.

Dunvegan Castle & Gardens, which is at the heart of the MacLeod Estate on Skye, is vital to the island's economy. As the ancestral home of the Chiefs of clan MacLeod for 800 years, it is a major heritage attraction and key driver of economic growth.

Hugh said: "Last year, Dunvegan was ranked 18th out of the Top 20 Paid Attractions in Scotland. We are one of the island's largest private sector employers with about 50 employees, 17 of whom are permanent. Our total capital expenditure and repairs from 2009 to April 2017 was £2.98 million.

Annually, the estate contributes an average of £690,000 to the Skye economy, and since 2008, it has contributed in excess of £5.2m to the Skye economy and more than £9m to Scotland's economy."

As Hugh outlined, delivering a gold standard service to visitors involves a number of challenges: "The estate's mission is to preserve the heritage of the MacLeod Estate by being commercially successful in all we do to enable continuous reinvestment and develop and share Dunvegan Castle & Gardens' unique history with our visitors.

"Our remote island location is a challenging place to run a business from a logistical and staffing point of view, especially when it is only commercially viable for us to be open between Easter and mid-October.

"However, Skye's remoteness is part of its USP and we do our best to capitalise on this during the season in order to reinvest the proceeds and further enhance the visitor experience. The secret of our gold standard service is the estate team's hard work and commitment to keep the show on the road and 'hold fast', despite the numerous challenges of living and working here."

Like other rural areas of Scotland, Skye has to cope with changing infrastructure and services. One example is a reduction in



Clockwise from main image: Dunvegan Castle & Gardens; Dunvegan Castle entrance hall; the castle in winter; the castle dining room; view to the Cuillin mountains



local banking facilities. Hugh believes this is a concern for local people and businesses, but part of the inextricable move away from a high-street presence to online platforms.

"Banks have closed more local branches and earlier this year applied a cap on our deposits with the mobile banking van. This forced us to employ G4S, at significant additional cost, to collect deposits. The reduction in banking services has made life more difficult for everyone who lives in the Highlands and Islands."

Equally important is the maintenance of good transport links. Despite the bridge to the mainland, the ferries at Glenelg and Mallaig continue to provide a more traditional 'over the sea to Skye' route for visitors, and are critically important to the local businesses and communities based in Sleat in southern Skye.

Hugh is in no doubt that scheduled flights from Edinburgh and Glasgow would be a boon to Skye's economy. He said: "Skye remains the missing link in the Highland and Islands' chain of airports and the MacLeod Estate has long been an active supporter of Skye's lobby group Fly Skye [www.facebook.com/FlySkye.co.uk]

"Many people who live and work here desperately need flight links to Edinburgh and Glasgow, as do our visitors. The time saved in

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transit would mean more time spent enjoying the island and its unique offerings, which would, in turn, boost the local economy."

Closer to the ground, though they are part of Skye's charms, the island's remaining single-track roads may not be fit for the 21st century. Hugh acknowledges improvements of the 1970s and 1980s, when many main A and trunk roads replaced single-track roads. However, he said the pressure on the council's capital budget has led to a lack of regular road maintenance and the 'Pothole of the Week', a weekly spot in the *West Highland Free Press*.

"Single-track roads will always be a constant feature of Skye, but there must be

major improvements to widen some sections, increase and enlarge the number of passing places to accommodate the growing popularity of motorhomes and higher traffic volumes we receive in peak season," said Hugh.

He recognises that the Highland Council is a well-meaning, if hamstrung, partner to Skye's tourism industry.

"With limited resources, the council does what it can, but badly needed infrastructure investment for public transport, roads, parking and WC facilities at Skye's numerous natural beauty spots takes too long to happen, if at all," commented Hugh.

He emphasised that a more joined-up approach between the public and private sectors is needed if Skye's success is not to be torpedoed by a lack of investment and clear vision.

Despite any challenges, Hugh remains optimistic. He said: "Having been continuously inhabited by my family for 800 years, the clan MacLeod motto is 'Hold Fast'.

"I hope that in 2037, Dunvegan Castle and the MacLeod Estate will continue to Hold Fast to its vision of becoming an even larger private sector business offering greater employment opportunities to local people in what has been a fragile economic area historically."