

Media Release: New Tourism Leader for Ashburton District Tourism

The key to survival for Ashburton tourism operators might be looking for customers closer to home, the district's new tourism leader says. Tourism faced challenges, with many international visitors closing their wallets, but there were many opportunities for domestic tourism.

Nigel Birt, who takes over the reigns of Ashburton District Tourism next month, knows first-hand how tough the industry has become.

Mr Birt has been at the coal-face of tourism as an owner and director of Back Country New Zealand and Exclusive Events along with wife Myriam. The past few months he has watched the cancellations from his international clients hit almost 80% on the back of the global credit crunch.

That has meant the company has been split, divided and reshaped into smaller units. The Birts now run the base company from their Alford Forest home.

With change came opportunity, and when a one year contract arose to allow tourism CEO Michelle Bungard to take maternity leave, it seemed little like fate stepping in. Mr Birt says he is excited by the opportunities for the district, and he would work with the district's great operators to maximize the tourism potential. "I'm confident, Ashburton district has great resources" he said. And there were opportunities to better market those key features.

With 10 years in his own business and a raft of experience in the ski industry, heliski operations and a tourism and recreation degree to boot, Mr. Birt is relishing the opportunity to use his knowledge and experience in a different sector of the industry.

"It is something of a natural progression of my training and life experience. Also, living here for the past seven years, I'm not an outsider; I have that much less to learn: he said.

The years ahead will be a tough one for tourism operators across the board, Mt Birt said. "We have some challenges ahead and my job will be to help reduce the impact on the local operators. We're seeing dramatic downturns in international tourism, but an increase in domestic foot traffic"

For many that will mean a change of focus to take advantage of new opportunities, and he sees this as one of his major task.

Date Released: 20 December 2008



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