



MIKE BUGSGANG CEO OF AGTO

What a showcase!

AGTO Chief Executive **Mike Bugsgang** reports on the organisation's recent Showcase Weekend

MORE THAN 100 delegates, comprising AGTO Member group organisers and suppliers from around the UK, gathered at the Q Park Royal Hotel in Warrington, Cheshire for a series of business sessions, networking and fam trips aimed at boosting group tourism to the region.

Opening the business sessions, Rachel McQueen, Director of Tourism at Marketing Cheshire, highlighted some of the reasons why the region's seen a 7.7% increase in visitor numbers, contributing over £3 billion to the local economy. Major attractions, such as Chester Zoo, Jodrell Bank and the city of Chester had continually invested huge sums to ensure a high quality visitor experience. She added Cheshire was an all-weather destination, with excellent transport links, making it ideal for year-round visits from both domestic and international visitors.

EXPERIENTIAL GROUP TRAVEL

Introducing the panel discussion on 'Experiential Group Travel', I took the opportunity to highlight the considerable changes that have taken place in the group travel market over the years using

the hilarious Marty Feldman 'Lightning Coach Tours' sketch as an example. The days of a quick trip to the seaside for fish and chips and a paddle are now long gone, with customers requiring a more boutique, tailored experience.

Panelist Sarah Goldsbrough, National Sales Manager for Groups at Warner Leisure Hotels, explained how her company had responded to the changing needs of customers. Her hotels had seen a marked increase in groups seeking more interactive experiences during their stay. The company was arranging participative activities for groups, such as visiting local gardens for hands-on sessions in plant management, instructed by experts.

AGTO's Kent Branch Chairman, Jim Silvester, flagged up the numerous opportunities available to organisers involving sporting pastimes. As a keen golfer he has organised trips for the veterans at his club in Kent to play the equivalent veteran golfers of clubs in Devon and Cornwall.

The third speaker on the panel was Alex Clifton, Artistic Director of Chester's new £37 million attraction, Storyhouse – a theatre, library and cinema that's home to a

year-round programme of touring theatre, along with a host of activities across its considerable public spaces. Alex outlined the exciting programme of events taking place at the attraction in 2018 that would be perfect for groups, many of which could be tailored to a particular special interest.

Members reported high levels of enquiries from GTOs on their stands during the Showcase that followed the business session presentations.

FAM TRIPS

As part of the weekend, Marketing Cheshire arranged fam trips for delegates to the surrounding area, themed Stately Homes and Gardens, Waterways and Heritage and City Sightseeing.

The weekend ended on a high note at dinner with a powerful performance from West End theatre star Ashleigh Gray, who entertained delegates with songs from the musical *Wicked*, in which she starred for several years as Elphaba. Ashleigh's appearance was courtesy of the Showcase headline sponsor, made tourism marketing. [GTV](#)

