

Editorial: Q. What can we learn from Sunderland AFC about the future of tourism? A. Absolutely everything.

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Sunderland: a football city and a city that is about football. A place where the epicentre of life is the football team – and that team is Sunderland Association Football Club (SAFC). Those born in Sunderland talk about Sunderland AFC at the pub, endlessly play out Jimmy Montgomery’s double save from the 1973 FA Cup final and regard Bob Stokoe as a god. This city has only one team that matters and a visceral hatred of Newcastle United which is not only restricted to the Tyne–Wear football derbies. As a passionate Sunderland AFC fan and someone who was born in Sunderland, I grew up with the greetings of “Ha’way the lads” and the music of “Dance of the Knights”. So, what has this got to do with the future of tourism? (I will tell you in a moment.)

For those who do not know where Sunderland is, the city is located on the northeast coast of England, approximately 300 miles (485 km) north of London, 12 miles (19 km) southeast of Newcastle-upon-Tyne and 70 miles (113 km) south of Edinburgh. The city evolved from three small settlements around the mouth of the River Wear. Monkwearmouth to the north of the river was established around the monastery of Saint Peter in 674 CE. The city was once renowned for shipbuilding and coal mining, but these industries have long gone. Nissan is now the largest employer and Sunderland is the centre of the company’s car manufacturing activity in Europe.

This is a place where life evolves around the football team. On days when Sunderland AFC loses at home, the resultant anger, frustration and depression among supporters is known to increase the risk of acute coronary and cerebrovascular events, including sudden death (Kirkup and Merrick, 2003). So, Sunderland AFC is a team that comes with a health risk, especially given the team’s most recent performance, resulting in relegation from the Premiership (tier 1) to League One (tier 3). The local rivalry is confined to Newcastle United (no disrespect to Middlesbrough, Hartlepool United, Darlington, Carlisle United or Berwick Ranger fans). Our arch rivals are owned by the Saudi Arabian government, and as they say, “it can be pure torture watching the Magpies” (Hird, 2021).

It was a great pleasure that Professor Stephan Pratt (University of the South Pacific) reviewed the documentary series *Sunderland ‘Til I Die* (Pearlman and Turner, 2018–2020), published in this issue (Pratt, 2022). Such a nice chap isn’t he? This is a critically acclaimed series and must-see viewing. So, what do Sunderland AFC and the future of tourism have in common? Here are 50 ideas:

1. As a futurist, I (Ian Yeoman) can see Sunderland AFC winning the UEFA Champions League in 2050. So, this is about vision and the future of sports tourism. Just think about all those fans visiting the European capital cities to see AC Milan, Juventus, Bayern Munich and Barcelona.

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2. When you are at the Stadium of Light (Sunderland AFC's home ground) you are transported emotionally from reality to fantasy. You are focused on the game. This is just like the role of tourism in society: a get-away from the everyday, an escape from drudgery and the mundane. A place to chill out or to experience the adrenaline of adventure (Novelli, 2007; Pearce, 2005).
3. Sunderland is a massive, massive footballing city (Pratt, 2022), just like tourism is a massive, massive global industry.
4. Sunderland was a city based on the coal mining industry, an industry of pollution. Will tourism end up as a dying industry because of climate change (Masson-Delmotte *et al.*, 2021)?
5. Sunderland was a city of shipbuilding, an industry that died because of high production costs and competition. Is this the future for many western tourist destinations as they cannot compete with South East Asia, the beach and cheaper destinations (Čėsniėnė, 2017)?
6. Sunderland AFC is a lifeline for the city. This is what tourism is to many regions. A saviour, a way forward and an alternative to poverty.
7. Sunderland AFC creates a sense of "family, passion and pride" amongst the fans. These are the features of community tourism (Hall *et al.*, 2020).
8. Sunderland AFC fans will live and die for their football team. Some are diehard, just like Bruce Willis (McTiernan, 1988).
9. *Sunderland 'Til I Die* is a must-see series. Even better than VisitScotland's a must-see, must-visit campaign (Durie *et al.*, 2006)?
10. Sunderland AFC fans are about identity and fandom as Dr Ina Reichenberger (Reichenberger, 2021) writes about in *Science Fiction, Disruption and Tourism* (Yeoman *et al.*, 2021).
11. Sunderland AFC creates a sense of "us" versus "them", played out on the pitch but lived through identification with the team. This is the nature of tourism – competition between destinations.
12. Sunderland AFC is about sacrifice for a better society, just like the role of regenerative tourism (Cave and Dredge, 2020).
13. Fans of Sunderland often share the successes and (more often) failures with the team and by extension, with other Sunderland fans (Pratt, 2022). This is about the management of tourism, success and failures.
14. I buy the Sunderland AFC home and away kit every year from www.safcstore.com. This is about loyalty and familiarity. Like many tourists, we go to the same place every year.
15. The devoted Sunderland AFC fan will travel hundreds of miles to away games whatever the weather is. This reminds me of the serious leisure user and their devotion to their hobby with travel components (Frash and Blose, 2019).
16. Every weekend, football fans are traversing the country to support their team. In the same way, food and beverage places, and particularly pubs, are populated with visiting fans (Pratt, 2022).
17. Sunderland AFC fans are domestic tourists (until we get into the Champions League).
18. Those born in Sunderland are loyal to their football team. They would never ever support another team, especially Newcastle United (did I forget to tell you the story

about a Professor of Tourism at Victoria University of Wellington who was born in Sunderland but supports Newcastle United [...] [...] well, disappointment is an understatement).

19. If you visit the Stadium of Light, the chants and stadium music are enthralling. This reminds me of music tourism.
20. Watching Sunderland AFC is the original experience economy, before [Pine and Gilmore \(2011\)](#) invented it.
21. Watching Sunderland AFC is an authentic experience, well before Professor Michael Hall wrote about it ([Hall, 2007](#)).
22. If you watch Sunderland AFC at the Stadium of Light, the highs of scoring a goal, the lows of conceding a goal, the travesty of having a player given a yellow or red card, would be a unique experience ([Pratt, 2022](#)) – something that extended reality technologies cannot yet replicate ([Buhalis, 2019](#)).
23. Watching Sunderland AFC is not for the faint-hearted. The language can be very coarse and blue, especially about the referee at times. Not a place for family-friendly tourism ([Schänzel and Yeoman, 2014](#)).
24. The meat pies and Bovril are an authentic food tourism experience ([Haven-Tang and Jones, 2005](#)).
25. Given that Sunderland AFC has become an international spectacle, followed by millions around the world, globalisation of the Sunderland game will drive tourists to experience first hand the Stadium of Light ([Pratt, 2022](#)).
26. Sporting documentaries, such as *Sunderland 'Til I Die*, are just a form of tourism advertisement.
27. *The Mags and The Mackems* (nicknames) take the rivalry between Newcastle United and Sunderland AFC to extremes, but in the end supporters of both teams are likely to stand shoulder to shoulder to defend the north-east of England against the world ([Gregson, 2021](#)). Like all destination leaders, researchers and stakeholders, we are passionate about our place and it is tourism that binds us all together.
28. Perhaps the most unusual and the most explicit statue is to be found outside Sunderland's Stadium of Light. Here is a statue to the fans themselves: a man, a woman and two children. The inscription below the statue is extensive and poignant: All generations come together at the Stadium of Light ([Gregson, 2021](#)). Just like tourism, it is our bond.
29. The Stadium of Light is an architectural experience. Just like being on holiday in Rome or Paris, with its wonderful architecture.
30. A Sunderland AFC game acts like a tourist attraction: large numbers come to eat, drink, shop, visit museums and take tours of the stadia themselves ([Pratt, 2022](#)).
31. Many come to a Sunderland AFC match just to look. This is known as gaze theory ([Urry, 2011](#)).
32. The best photographs are those of Sunderland AFC fans focused on the game. It is thrilling just watching the fans. This is known as intra-gaze theory ([Samarathunga and Cheng, 2021](#)).
33. The Sunderland AFC shop (www.safcstore.com) is like a department store and hence mimics retail tourism (Ian [Yeoman et al., 2017](#)).

34. Sunderland AFC is a training ground for future leaders of the tourism industry, take Jordan Henderson (Captain of Liverpool FC) and Jordan Pickford (England Goalkeeper) as examples.
35. Sunderland is not an overtourism city (Koens *et al.*, 2018) in fact the opposite is true.
36. Sunderland is not a cruise tourism destination (Ford, 2021) but has the potential to be one. In fact, only two cruise ships have ever visited the city in 100 years.
- 37–50, is for you to decide.
- Simply put, Sunderland AFC is the future of tourism. Are you convinced?

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