

# Emerald Isle Seeking More Tourist Rubles

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Ireland is hoping to attract more travelers with its cultural entertainment. **Igor Tabakov**

Ireland, one of the countries worst hit by the financial crisis, is looking to boost its economy by attracting Russian tourists to its shore, and Wednesday the Irish Embassy presented a sales pitch for its country to local tourist firms.

"Tourism is central to the government in its plans for economic growth," said Irish Ambassador Philip McDonagh at the reception, which saw him offer to give tourist companies tips on county Connemara, his favorite destination in his home country.

"We have beautiful scenery, castles, first class hotels, but the best thing is the hospitality of the people," McDonagh said, adding that the Lonely Planet guidebook voted Ireland the friendliest country in the world.

Despite an annual St. Patrick's Day parade in Moscow and an Irish dancing scene, which

the ambassador said is second only to the one in Ireland, the number of Russian tourists is surprisingly small — an estimated 20,000 of the 7 million tourists who visited Ireland in 2011.

Three years ago Ireland had 9 million tourists a year, but the crisis hit the industry hard. Initially the tourist organization, Tourism Ireland, focused on Britain, Germany, France and the United States, which make up 80 percent of the tourists, said Jim Paul, director of new and developing markets at Tourism Ireland, but they are now looking to developing countries.

"The biggest growth is with China, India and Russia," McDonagh said.

As part of its tourism drive, the Irish government has reduced value-added tax on goods associated with tourism and introduced in 2011 a visa waiver system to allow those with British visas to visit Ireland without getting an extra visa.

Tour companies have taken advantage by adding tours to Ireland from Britain, said Valeria Krasilnikova, head of the British and Irish section at the PAC Group tourist company.

Russian tourists who go to Ireland are generally experienced travelers, over 35, looking for cultural entertainment such as literary walks and visiting historic homes and "to try good Guinness."

However, there is currently only one direct flight to Russia on S7 Airlines and that only flies between April and October. Aeroflot is inquiring about a flight to Dublin, Paul said.

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