



## Northern Ireland Annual Tourism Statistics 2017

Published 07 June 2018



**4.9m  
trips**



**16.9m  
nights**



**£926m  
spent**

The key points are:

- In 2017 there were an estimated 4.9 million overnight trips in Northern Ireland. This includes trips by external visitors to Northern Ireland and domestic trips taken by local residents. Estimated expenditure associated with these trips was £926m. These are the highest estimates on record;
- Within this, overnight trips to Northern Ireland by external visitors was estimated to be 2.7 million. Expenditure associated with these trips was £657m;
- An estimated 2.1 million hotel room nights were sold in Northern Ireland. Hotel room occupancy was estimated to be 73% in 2017;
- A total of 112 cruise ships docked at Northern Ireland ports in 2017. This was an increase compared to 93 cruise ships in 2016 and a marked increase from 33 cruise ships in 2011;
- When all sources are considered together, the statistics point towards an upward trend in overall tourism activity in Northern Ireland between 2011 and 2017. The three headline measures above (trips, nights and spend) show no statistically significant change between 2016 and 2017. However, there have been statistically significant increases over the longer term.

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Theme: People and Places

[Click here for definitions of  
tourism statistics common terms  
used in this report](#)

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## National Statistics Status

National Statistics status means that official statistics meet the highest standards of trustworthiness, quality and public value.

All official statistics should comply with all aspects of the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*. They are awarded National Statistics status following an assessment by the Office for Statistics Regulation. The Office for Statistics Regulation considers whether the statistics meet the highest standards of Code compliance, including the value they add to public decisions and debate.

It is NISRA's responsibility to maintain compliance with the standards expected of National Statistics. If we become concerned about whether these statistics are still meeting the appropriate standards, we will discuss any concerns with the Office for Statistics Regulation. National Statistics status can be removed at any point when the highest standards are not maintained, and reinstated when standards are restored.



## Tourism Trend

Table 1 shows the trend in the three headline statistics (estimated overnight trips, nights and expenditure since 2011). Overnight tourism statistics are survey based estimates and, as such, they are subject to associated confidence intervals (see [background](#) note 9).

Users should note that there were no statistically significant changes in the key variables in the table between 2016 and 2017. However, 'Indicator 30: Total Spend by External Visitors' of the draft Programme for Government shows a significant increase from the baseline year (2015) to 2017.

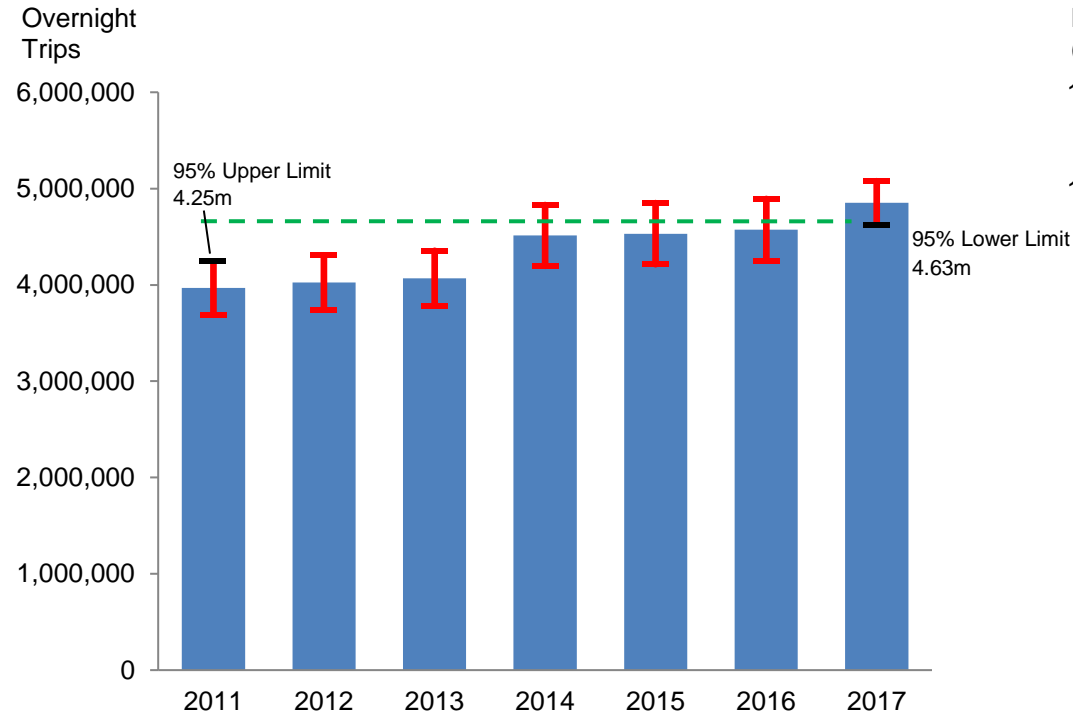
**Table 1: Estimated number of overnight trips, nights and expenditure in Northern Ireland 2011-2017**

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	% Change (2016-17)
<b>Overall Trips (000s)</b>	<b>3,968</b>	<b>4,025</b>	<b>4,069</b>	<b>4,513</b>	<b>4,532</b>	<b>4,571</b>	<b>4,851</b>	<b>+6%</b>
<i>Domestic (000s)</i>	<i>2,036</i>	<i>2,018</i>	<i>1,980</i>	<i>2,335</i>	<i>2,230</i>	<i>1,984</i>	<i>2,193</i>	<i>+11%</i>
<i>External (000s)</i>	<i>1,932</i>	<i>2,006</i>	<i>2,089</i>	<i>2,179</i>	<i>2,301</i>	<i>2,587</i>	<i>2,658</i>	<i>+3%</i>
<b>Overall Nights (000s)</b>	<b>14,690</b>	<b>13,858</b>	<b>14,394</b>	<b>15,082</b>	<b>15,471</b>	<b>15,175</b>	<b>16,866</b>	<b>+11%</b>
<i>Domestic (000s)</i>	<i>4,698</i>	<i>3,906</i>	<i>4,577</i>	<i>5,049</i>	<i>4,791</i>	<i>3,814</i>	<i>5,220</i>	<i>+37%</i>
<i>External (000s)</i>	<i>9,992</i>	<i>9,952</i>	<i>9,817</i>	<i>10,033</i>	<i>10,680</i>	<i>11,361</i>	<i>11,646</i>	<i>+3%</i>
<b>Overall Expenditure (£M)</b>	<b>641</b>	<b>686</b>	<b>715</b>	<b>745</b>	<b>764</b>	<b>850</b>	<b>926</b>	<b>+9%</b>
<i>Domestic (£M)</i>	<i>178</i>	<i>201</i>	<i>192</i>	<i>238</i>	<i>219</i>	<i>237</i>	<i>270</i>	<i>+14%</i>
<i>External (£M)</i>	<i>463</i>	<i>485</i>	<i>524</i>	<i>507</i>	<i>545</i>	<i>613</i>	<i>657</i>	<i>+7%</i>

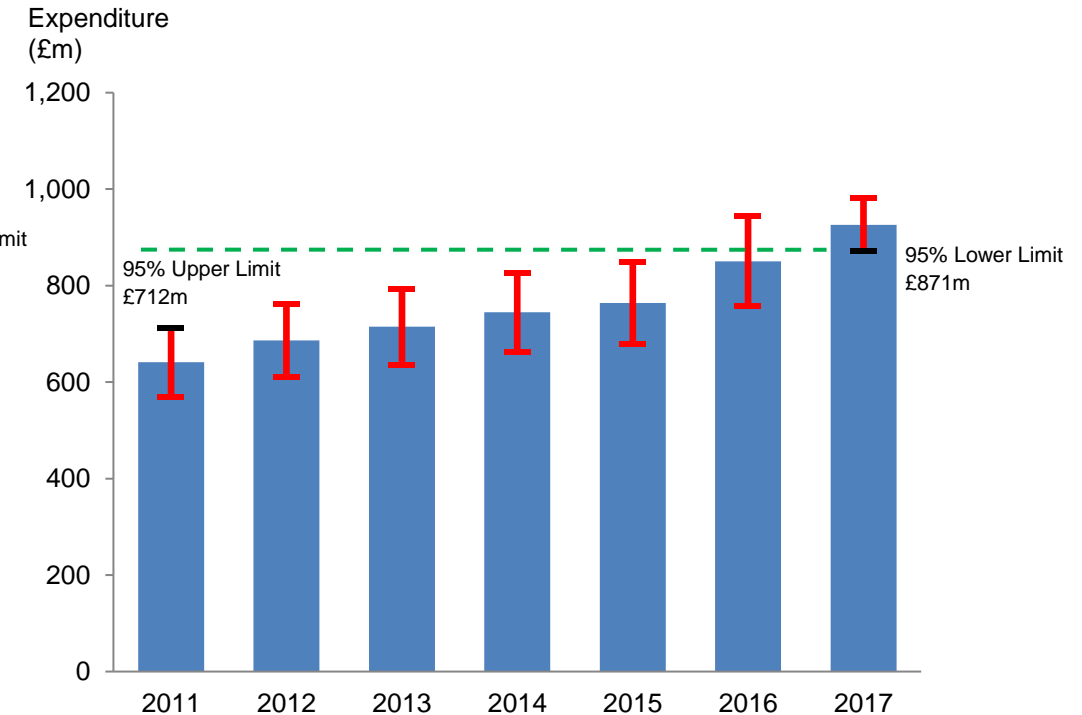
Figures derived from Northern Ireland Passenger Survey (NIPS) conducted by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), the Survey of Overseas Travellers (SOT) conducted on behalf of Fáilte Ireland, the Household Travel Survey (HTS) conducted by Central Statistics Office (CSO) and the Northern Ireland Continuous Household Survey (CHS) conducted by NISRA.

Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the estimated number of overnight trips and associated expenditure in Northern Ireland from 2011 to 2017. The graphs also show margins of errors around the published estimates.

**Figure 1: Estimated number of overnight trips in Northern Ireland 2011-2017**



**Figure 2: Estimated expenditure associated with overnight trips in Northern Ireland 2011-2017**



**What you can say....**

**Whilst there has been no statistically significant change in the estimated number of overnight trips and expenditure between 2016 and 2017; the sources point towards a general upward trend from 2011**

**What you cannot say....**

**There was a definite increase from 4.57 million to 4.85 million overnight trips in Northern Ireland from 2016 to 2017, with associated expenditure increasing 9% from £850m to £926m over the same period**

Further information regarding confidence intervals can be found at this [link](#).

Full information on External overnight trips to Northern Ireland can be found at the following link: [External Visitors to Northern Ireland](#)

Full information on Northern Ireland domestic tourism can be found at the following link: [Domestic Tourism](#)

## Introduction

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Due to the complexity of tourism, no single statistic can provide a definitive measure on how the tourism industry is performing. This report provides a picture of Northern Ireland tourism in 2017. A variety of statistics are presented, such as estimates of the number of people staying overnight in Northern Ireland, rooms sold in local accommodation, cruise ship visits and visits to Visitor Attractions.

**The report points towards steady growth in overall tourism from 2011.**

The report informs the Assembly and Executive, tourism bodies, the tourism industry and the public on data relating to tourism in Northern Ireland. A primary aim is to provide information on progress towards the Programme for Government tourism targets.

Tourism can be influenced by a number of factors. Initiatives from government, tourism agencies and events can have an impact on tourism. From March 2016, Ryanair started operating from Belfast International Airport and has since added numerous routes to various destinations in the UK and Europe, including a direct flight connecting with Germany. Additional routes and passenger capacity of such volume will provide for an inflow of external visitors whilst encouraging NI residents to take trips elsewhere.

Visitors may be influenced to come to Northern Ireland by local visitor attractions, such as the Giant's Causeway and Titanic Belfast. The local film industry with Game of Thrones showcasing local locations may also have an impact on tourism. However the legacy of the Troubles with less positive images around civil unrest can counter these positive pictures.

The economic situation also influences tourism expenditure. The value of sterling against foreign currency, which was very strong at the beginning of 2016 has decreased significantly. This will have influenced levels of tourism last year for local residents.

All these factors will influence the volume, type and nature of local tourism.



Giant's Causeway\*



Titanic Belfast\*



The Dark Hedges – Game of Thrones\*

\*Copyright, Tourism Northern Ireland

## Overnight Trips in Northern Ireland (Domestic & External)

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Two key measures of tourism activity are the number of overnight trips and the associated expenditure. To estimate these measures two sets of rolling annual sample surveys of passengers and households are undertaken.

- (i) Firstly, **sample surveys of passengers** at air and sea ports in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are undertaken to identify overnight trips to Northern Ireland by people living outside the island of Ireland.
- (ii) Secondly **household sample surveys** in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are undertaken to identify Northern Ireland based overnight trips of Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland residents.

**Overnights:** Headline overnight trip statistics are measured using standard UN definitions, the UN use the concept of “overnighting”. This is broadly defined as staying away from your usual place of residence for one night or more. This does not need to be for holiday, it can also relate to visiting relatives, business etc. As well as overnighting of visitors to Northern Ireland, the statistics also include overnights of local residents within NI. Note overnighting excludes day trips, which will be a significant part of the local tourism market.

The headline statistics for overnight trips are:

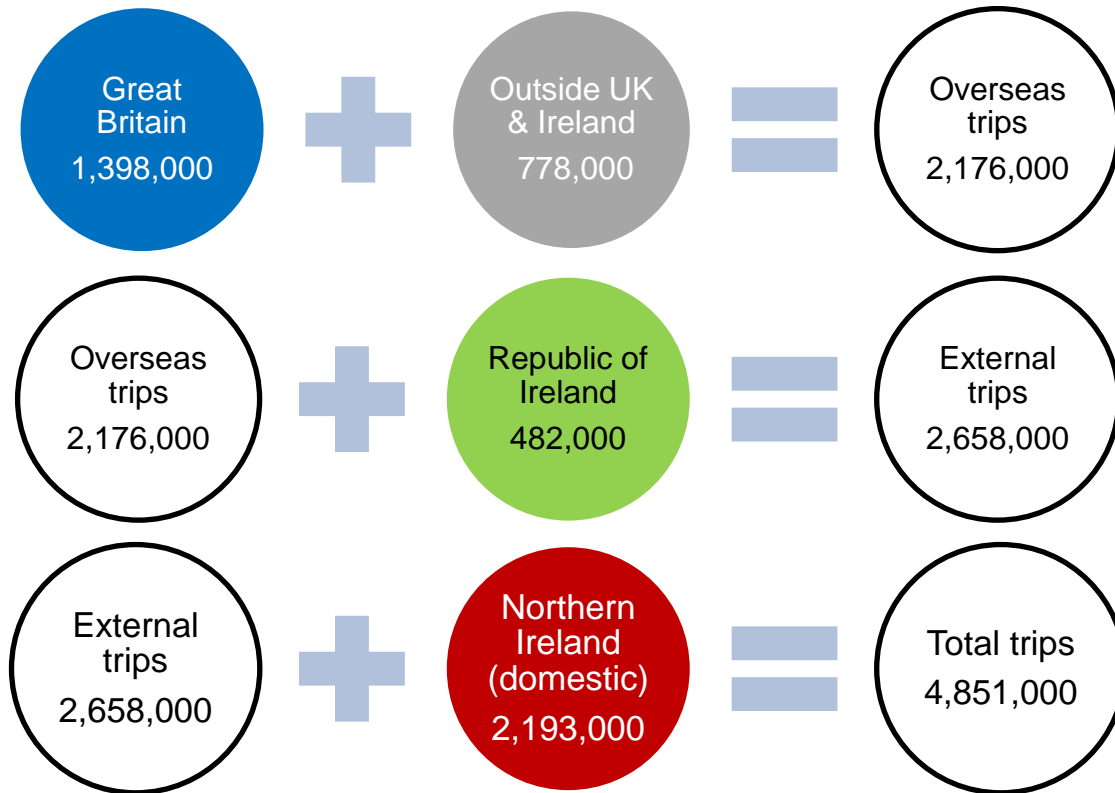
- In 2017, there were an estimated 4.9 million overnight trips in Northern Ireland;
- During 2017, estimated expenditure associated with all overnight trips was £926 million. To put this annual expenditure in context, the 2016 estimate for Northern Ireland Gross Value Added stood at £37.2 billion indicating that in monetary terms spending on overnight trips broadly equates to over 2.5% of the local economy;
- Associated with the 4.9 million overnight trips, an estimated 16.9 million nights were spent in Northern Ireland; and
- Although none of the estimated overnight tourism statistics 2017 displayed statistically significant changes since 2016; taken together, the data sources point towards an upward trend in tourism activity in Northern Ireland.



## Place of origin

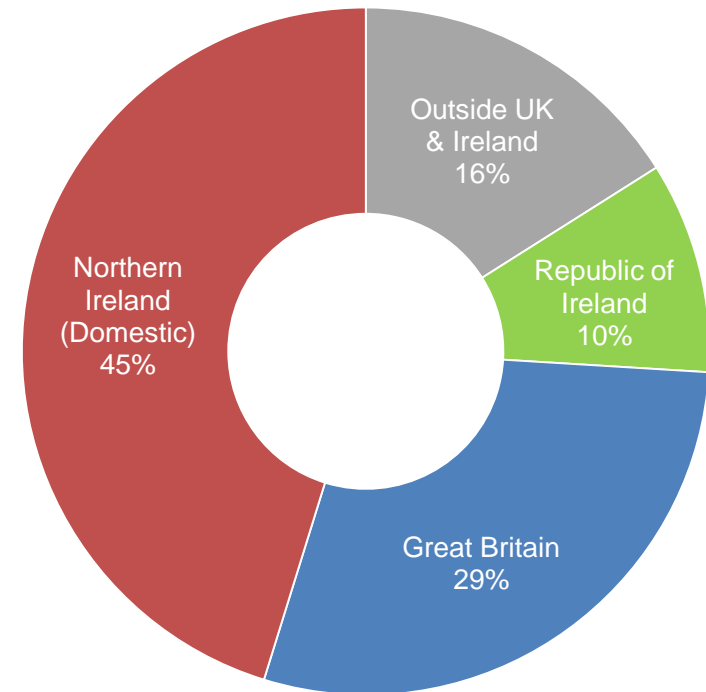
A further important part of the assessment of tourism is the place of origin of visitors to Northern Ireland. Figures 3 & 4 give some detail on this for 2017.

Figure 3: Estimated overnight trips by place of origin (2017)



Rounded to the nearest thousand

Figure 4: Breakdown by place of origin (2017)



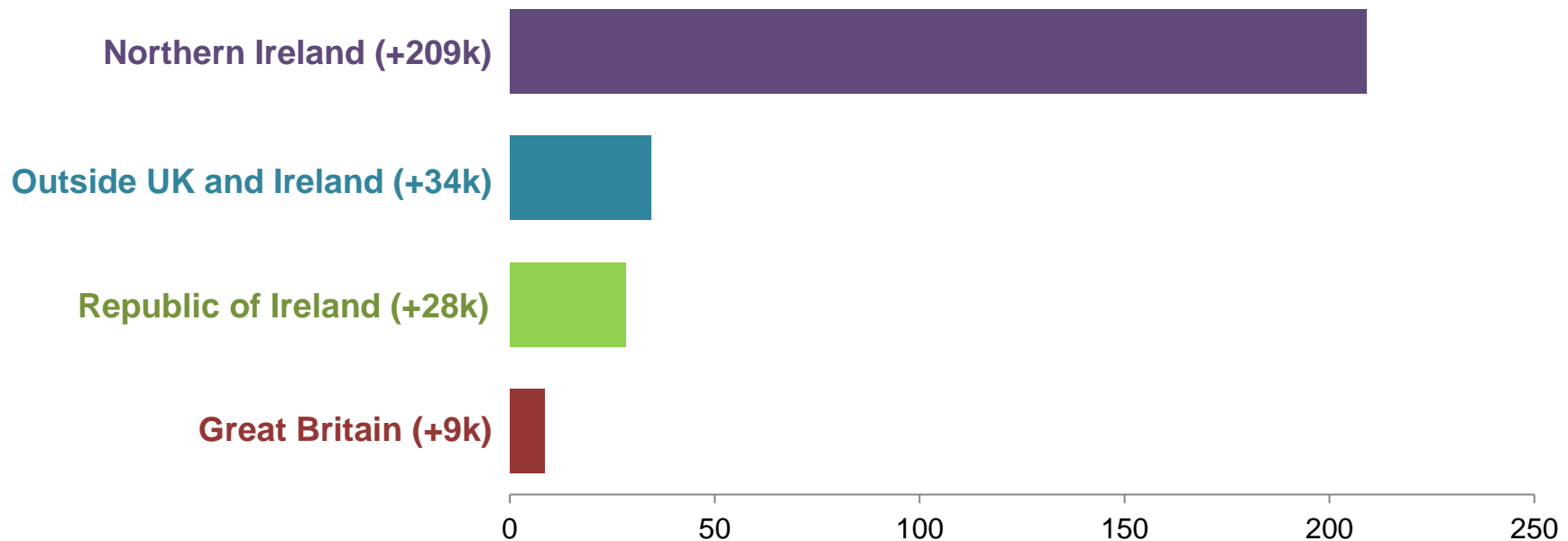
In total, it is estimated that, 45% of all overnight trips (2.2 million) were made by local residents (domestic trips), for example, someone from Belfast going to Fermanagh for the weekend either on holiday or to visit friends/relatives. A further 29% of overnight trips (1.4 million) were made by people living in Great Britain, 10% (0.5 million) by people from the Republic of Ireland and the remaining 16% (0.8 million) by people from outside the UK and Ireland.

Approximately 45% or 2.2 million overnight trips to Northern Ireland were made by people who live outside the island of Ireland (Great Britain and Outside UK & Ireland – labelled overseas trips in Figure 3). The vast majority of Great Britain visitors (91%) arrive through Northern Ireland ports, whereas almost two thirds (60%) of visitors from Outside UK & Ireland come through Republic of Ireland ports.

Figure 5 shows the change in the estimated visitors to Northern Ireland in the last year.

Looking over the longer term, the estimated number of visitors to Northern Ireland from Great Britain and those from Outside UK & Ireland has been increasing consistently from 2011.

**Figure 5: Change in estimated number of overnight visitors (thousands) 2016-2017**



Full information on External overnight trips to Northern Ireland can be found at the following link: [External Visitors to Northern Ireland](#)  
Full information on Northern Ireland domestic tourism can be found at the following link: [Domestic Tourism](#)



## ***External Overnight Trips***

A major focus of the tourism industry is external visitors (resident outside Northern Ireland). Estimates for 2017 indicate 2.7 million external overnight trips to Northern Ireland. This compares to an estimated 2.6 million external overnight trips for 2016. This 2.7 million external overnight trips is the highest estimate on record. Associated with these external overnight trips was an estimated expenditure by this group of visitors of £657 million.

When assessing change in the number of external overnight trips, a longer time trend can be informative. Figure 6 shows the estimated number of external overnight visitors by year from 1959 to 2017. The graph shows the impact of the start of the troubles, as well as the impact of the worldwide great recession in 2007-9. This second factor was not unique to Northern Ireland as it had a similar impact globally.

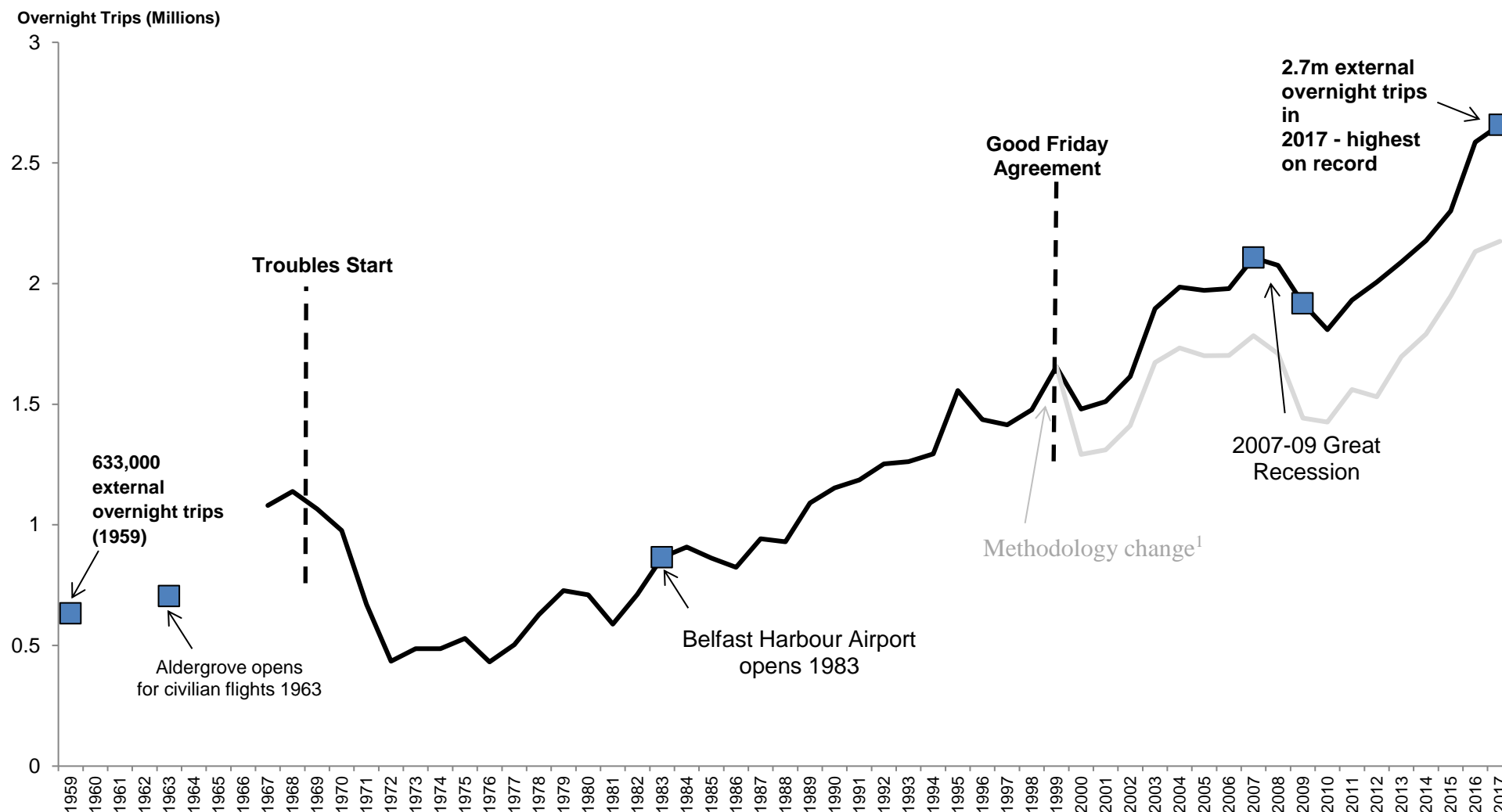
## ***Domestic Overnight Trips***

The number of domestic overnight trips (local residents taking overnight trips within Northern Ireland) was estimated to be 2.2 million in 2017, with an associated expenditure of £270 million.

Looking at the long term trend, the estimated number of domestic overnight trips (local residents taking overnight trips within Northern Ireland) has been fluctuating annually since 2011. Expenditure on domestic trips has had a general upward trend since 2011.

Further information can be found in the [Northern Ireland Domestic Tourism 2017](#) report.

**Figure 6: Estimated annual external overnight trips (millions) to Northern Ireland (1959-2017)**



Note: There have been minor changes to the methodology and sources used to measure external overnight trips to Northern Ireland, but the graph still paints a representative picture of the trend over time. Figures for residents of the Republic of Ireland have been included from 2000 onwards (RoI made up approximately 13% of the total external overnight trips in 2000 and 18% in 2017).

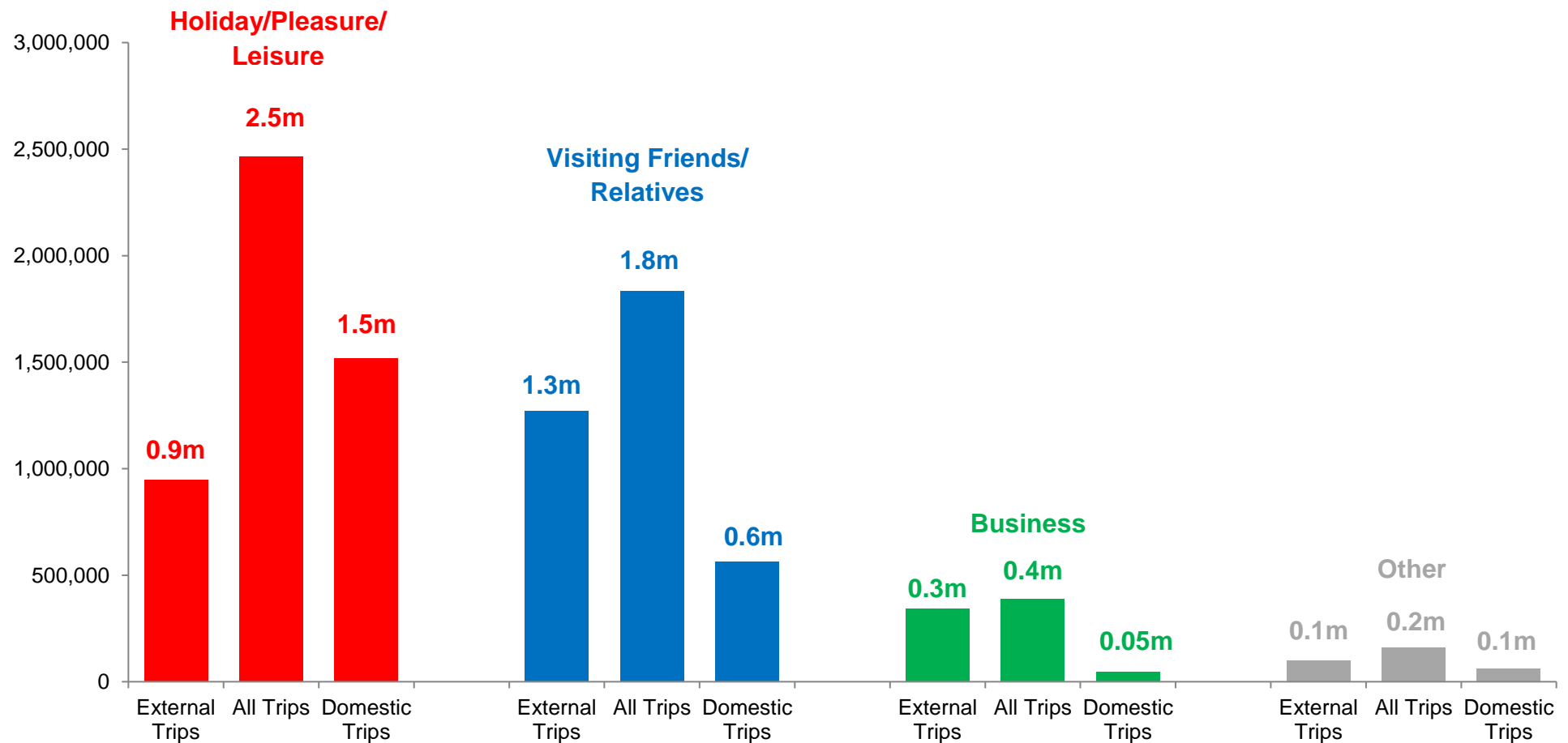
<sup>1</sup>The faint grey line shows the trend had the figures for residents of the Republic of Ireland not been included; users can see that when the overnight trips from the Republic of Ireland are removed the volume of estimated external overnight trips to NI drops; however, the general upward trend remains the same. This is the longest timescale available as data for NI tourism begins in 1959.

## Reason for Overnight Trip

Survey respondents are also asked the reason they stayed overnight. Figure 7 shows estimated overnight trips split by reason for overnight trips. The two main reasons to take an overnight trip in Northern Ireland are holiday/leisure and visiting friends/relatives, accounting for an estimated 2.5 million and 1.8 million all overnight trips respectively in 2017. The chart also shows the variation in reason for visit between the external and domestic markets.

**Figure 7: Reason for Overnight Trip, 2017**

### Overnight Trips

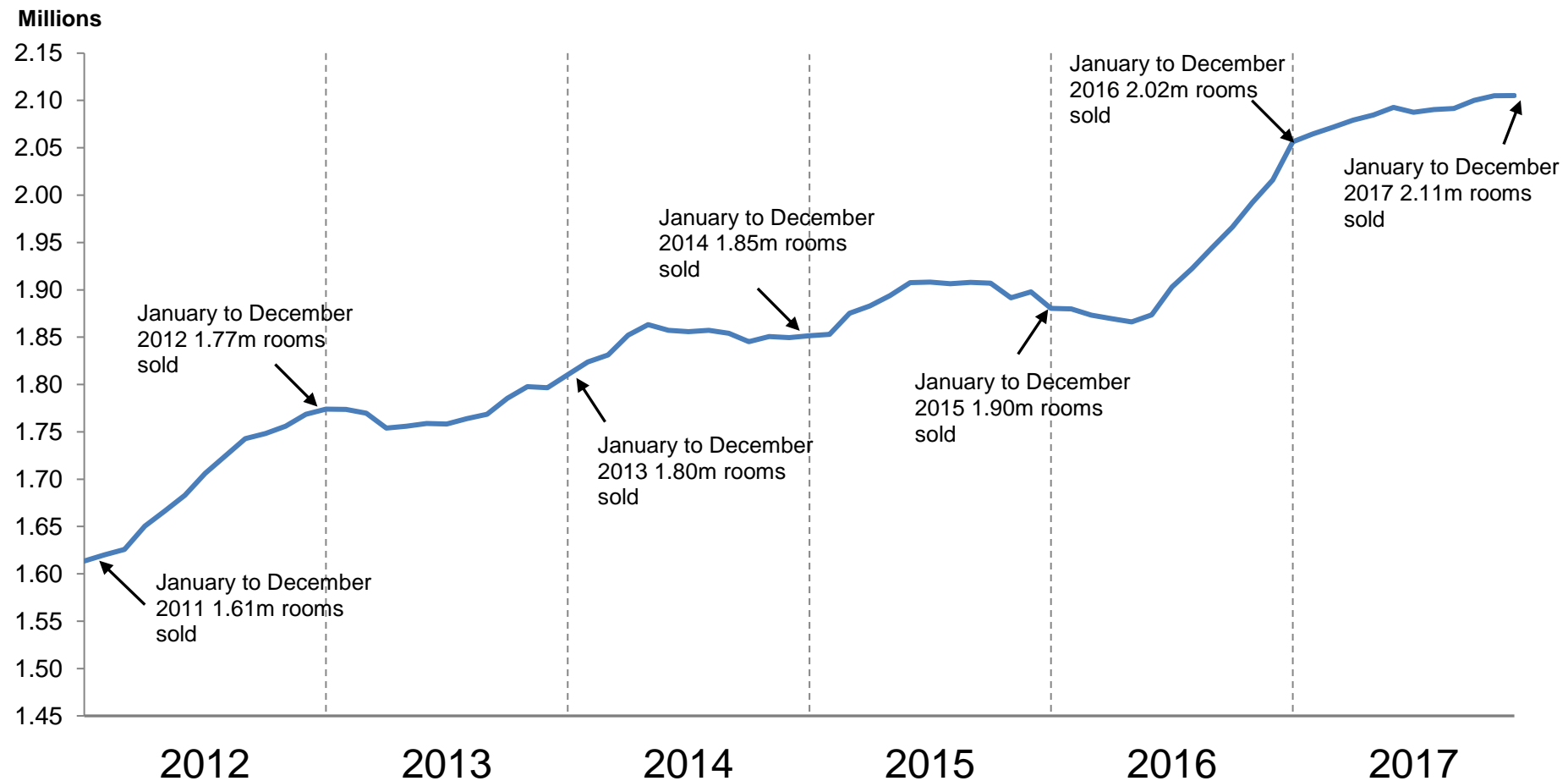


Full information on External overnight trips to Northern Ireland can be found at the following link: [External Visitors to Northern Ireland](#)  
Full information on Northern Ireland domestic tourism can be found at the following link: [Domestic Tourism](#)

## Hotel Accommodation Occupancy

Alongside passenger and household surveys, NISRA conducts a monthly occupancy survey of local hotels (and commercial accommodation e.g. bed & breakfasts, guest houses and guest accommodation). Figures for 2017 show the estimated number of hotel room nights sold was 2.11 million; or 73% of all hotel rooms were occupied – see Figure 8 for the rolling twelve month trend in this market from December 2011. The trend suggests an increase over the period in the estimated number of rooms sold in Northern Ireland hotels, which follows the same trend in the estimated number of overnight trips to Northern Ireland.

**Figure 8: Estimated rolling twelve month hotel room nights sold, December 2011- December 2017 (non-zero axis)**



## **Guest House, B&B & Guest Accommodation Occupancy Survey and Self Catering Occupancy Survey – Official Statistics**

To provide a further picture of tourism supply in Northern Ireland, NISRA run monthly occupancy surveys of Guest Houses, Bed & Breakfasts and Guest Accommodation and an annual survey regarding the occupancy of Self Catering establishments.

Response rates to these occupancy surveys can be low. Collection methods for the estimated number of visits in the Visitor Attraction Survey differ - more information can be found in the [satellite reports](#).

Results from these surveys are classed as Official Statistics, further information on [Official Statistics](#) can be found on the [NISRA website](#).

The results of the occupancy surveys show that:

- estimated room occupancy for Guesthouses, Bed & Breakfasts and Guest Accommodation for 2017 was 37%; and
- estimated Self Catering unit occupancy for 2017 was 34%.

## Visitor Attraction Survey – Official Statistics

To provide a further picture of tourism in Northern Ireland, NISRA run an annual survey to collect information on visits to all Visitor Attractions in Northern Ireland. Just over 400 visitor attractions were surveyed at the end of December 2017, with 242 providing data for analysis. The key findings from these 242 responses are:

- a reported 19.8 million visits were made to visitor attractions during 2017;
- visits to the headline attractions (Giant's Causeway and Titanic Belfast) increased by 10% between 2016 and 2017;
- 38% of attractions indicated that revenue had increased in 2017;
- a reported 62% of visits were made by Northern Ireland residents; and
- Country Parks/Parks/Forests accounted for 38% of all visitors reported in 2017.

Collection methods for the estimated number of visits in the Visitor Attraction Survey differ - more information can be found in the [Visitor Attraction Survey](#) satellite report.

Results from this surveys are classed as Official Statistics, further information on [Official Statistics](#) can be found on the [NISRA website](#).

Figure 9: Top Ten Visitor Attractions 2017 (excluding country parks/parks/forests/gardens)



\*Estimates are based on ticket sales

\*\*Estimates are based on other counting methods



## Cruise Ships Docking in Northern Ireland Ports

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The number of cruise ships docking in Northern Ireland has increased markedly over time. In 2011, 32 cruise ships docked in Northern Ireland with up to 58,000 passengers and crew on board. In 2017, there were over three times the number of ships (112) with up to 168,100 passengers and crew on board. Of these ships, 93 docked in Belfast, 9 in Londonderry and 10 in other ports. Although there is no data available on the number of passengers or crew who disembark, or their associated expenditure, total capacity has more than doubled (see [background](#) note 11 for further information).

## Jobs in Tourism Related Industries

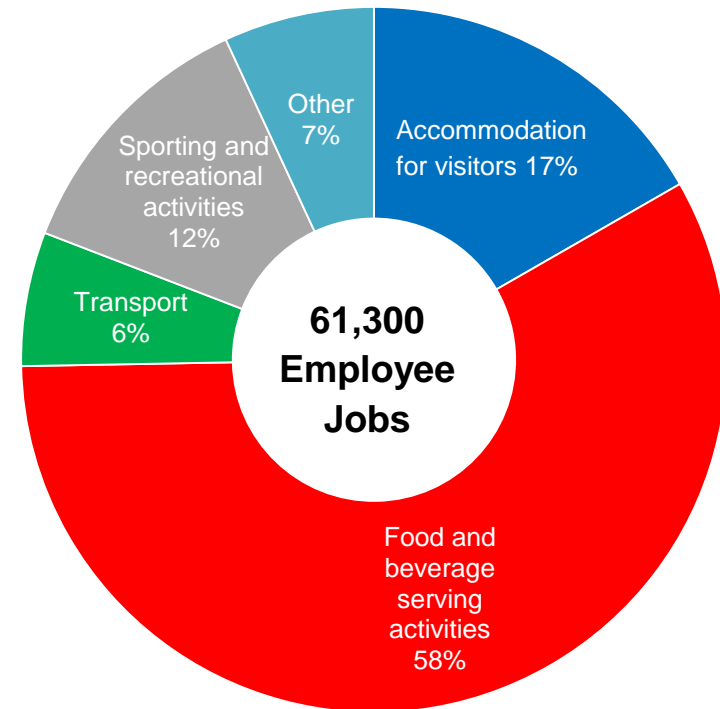
The most recent NI Census of Employment (2015) figures estimate 61,300 employee jobs in tourism related industries in 2015 (Table 2). Around one in ten of all employee jobs are in tourism related industries. A breakdown of these 61,300 jobs is given in Figure 10.

**Table 2: Employee jobs in tourism related industries 2015**

<b>Broad Tourism Sector</b>	<b>Full Time</b>	<b>Part Time</b>	<b>Total</b>
Accommodation for visitors	4,900	5,400	10,200
Food & beverage serving activities	12,500	23,000	35,500
Transport	2,700	1,100	3,800
Sporting & recreational activities	3,800	3,700	7,500
Other	2,300	1,900	4,200
<b>Total</b>	<b>26,200</b>	<b>35,000</b>	<b>61,300</b>

Rounded to the nearest hundred

**Figure 10: Employee jobs in tourism related industries 2015**



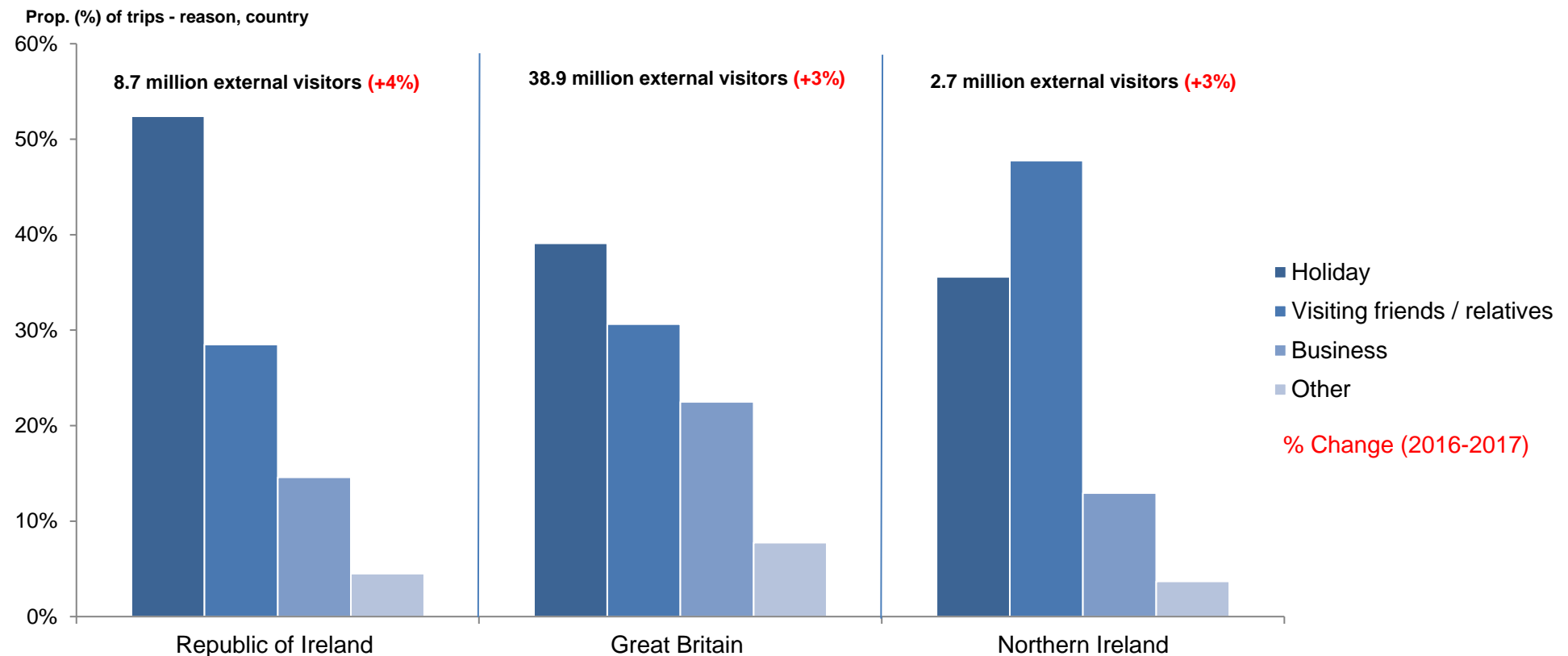
Full information on early indicators can be found at the following link: [Early Indicators](#)

## Comparisons

According to the latest UNWTO World Tourism Barometer, international tourist arrivals across the globe grew by an estimated 6.7% to reach a total of 1.3 billion in 2017. Europe (+8.4%) led growth in absolute and relative terms. There was also growth in Africa (+7.9%), Asia and the Pacific (+5.8%), the Americas (+2.9%) and the Middle East (4.9%).

It is informative when assessing tourism to compare Northern Ireland to the United Kingdom as a whole and the Republic of Ireland. Figure 11 shows the proportion of external overnight trips in 2017 by country and reason for visit. Between 2016 and 2017, external visitors to NI increased by 3%, similar to the RoI (+4%), with a lower increase for the Great Britain (+3%).

**Figure 11: Estimated proportion of external overnight trips by reason in UK, Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, 2017**



## Background Notes

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1. This report presents a summary of tourism statistics. More detailed data are available at this [link](#). The next tourism statistics release will be in August for the year ending March 2018; users should note that it is recommended estimated tourism statistics should be looked at over a twelve month period to give a more robust picture of tourism in NI over a period including all four quarters of the year to the latest statistics available. These results will be made available online in a tabular format only.
2. Tourism data is derived from a variety of sources, more information on these sources can also be found at this [link](#). Tourism estimates are designed to provide timely data on tourism activity in Northern Ireland. The estimates may be subject to revision due to improvements to the survey/analysis methodology or the inclusion of data returned after the publication date. The figures in this document are the most up-to-date available at the time of publication. Northern Ireland Tourism statistics have undergone a series of organisational changes and revisions to methodology. Information on the sources, the data quality of each source and any revisions or changes in methodology can be accessed at this [link](#).
3. The production of tourism statistics is conducted in line with the UK Statistics Authority [Code of Practice for Official Statistics](#). This means that the statistics
  - a. meet identified user needs,
  - b. are well explained and readily accessible,
  - c. are produced according to sound methods, and
  - d. are managed impartially and objectively in the public interest
4. Tourism statistics have recently undergone an assessment by the UK Statistics Authority. In May 2017 the Office for Statistics Regulation completed their review and confirmed the designation of new National Statistics on:
  - Northern Ireland Annual Tourism Statistics*
  - Northern Ireland Quarterly Tourism Statistics*
  - External Overnight Trips to Northern Ireland*
  - Northern Ireland Domestic Tourism*
  - Northern Ireland Hotel Occupancy*
  - Northern Ireland Local Government District Tourism Statistics*

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5. NISRA uses the Survey of Overseas Travellers run by Fáilte Ireland to gain information on the visitors who took overnight trips in Northern Ireland and exited through Republic of Ireland ports. Information on Northern Ireland overnight trips is also now collected through a separate survey carried out by Central Statistics Office Ireland. NISRA researched the two sources and presented and agreed the findings at the All-Ireland tourism statistics meeting with all relevant providers and users of the data. The findings can be accessed at [link](#).
6. Due to the nature of household surveys in Northern Ireland, users should be aware that statistics on overnight trips in Northern Ireland residents aged under 16 are excluded. NISRA has also increased the sample size of the underlying survey used to measure domestic tourism from April 2017.
7. While the statistics are produced in as timely a way as possible, it is realised that early indicators would be useful. Early tourism indicators are published at this [link](#) and are updated monthly.
8. Tourism statistics systems are designed to collect information for Northern Ireland as a whole. However, respondents do indicate where they stay during these overnight trips allowing for some analysis at Local Area level. The most recent (2016) results published at this level can be found at this [link](#). The 2017 Local Government results will be published in summer 2018.
9. The estimates in this bulletin are derived from sample surveys and are therefore subject to sampling errors. Sampling errors are determined both by the sample design and by the sample size. Generally speaking, the larger the sample supporting a particular estimate, the smaller the associated sampling error. Confidence intervals around the estimates of all overnight trips in Northern Ireland stands at +/- 5% for the year (associated expenditure at +/- 6%). Note: based on the survey design confidence intervals for domestic tourism trips stands at +/-9% and external trips at +/-3%. Information on confidence intervals in Northern Ireland tourism statistics can be accessed at this [link](#).
10. This report includes estimates from Census of Employment on the number of jobs in 'tourism characteristic industries'. The latest tourism characteristic industries breakdown available is for 2015 as the Census of Employment is carried out every two years. More information on the Census of Employment, the timing of the release of 2017 data and the associated methodology can be accessed at this [link](#).

11. The vast majority of cruise ships visit Northern Ireland on a single day basis, docking in the morning and then leaving in the evening. Thus under UN definitions cruise ship visits are considered day-trips and excluded from the overnight trips figures outlined in section 1. To address this statistics from [Visit Belfast](#), [Cruise North West](#) and Newry & Mourne Council relating to Warrenpoint port are included. Cruise ships can also drop anchor and tender passengers ashore at other parts of Northern Ireland (Bangor & Portrush).
  
12. NISRA has also started to use the Continuous Household Survey to measure the number of trips Northern Ireland residents take outside Northern Ireland. These statistics are not presented in detail in this report but they do give some context. As noted in Table 1 the number of domestic overnight trips (that is Northern Ireland residents spending a night away from their home within NI) is estimated to have fallen by 4% over the period 2014-15. However, there was an equivalent increase of 3% in the number of trips taken by Northern Ireland residents overseas.
  
13. External overnight trips figures from January 2012 to December 2015 were revised on 12<sup>th</sup> August 2016 due to a revised weighting mechanism for the Household Travel Survey, conducted by Central Statistics Office regarding overnight visitors to Northern Ireland from the Republic of Ireland. The HTS data for 2016 was revised in 2017 due to a weighting revision. This caused minimal change which was less than 1%.  
  
Full information on the revision of tourism statistics can be found at [Tourism Statistics Branch Revision Policy](#).  
  
A quality report on Tourism Statistics can be found at this [link](#).
  
14. Follow NISRA on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

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