

Mizen Head

Visitor Centre

Mizen Tourism Co-operative Society Ltd. was registered in 1993 and took over the Mizen Head Fog Signal Station, at Ireland's most southwesterly point, on a lease from the Commissioners of Irish Lights in April 1993 when it was automated. With the support and funding of West Cork LEADER Co-operative, Murphy's Brewery, Cork County Council and the shareholders, Mizen Head Visitor Centre was developed and opened to the public in June 1994. Since then it has been a great success with around 50,000 visitors a year. However, the facilities were in a portacabin and the Committee of Management has worked for the last 6 years to get funding to develop a facilities building near the car park at the top of the cliffs. The new building is nearing completion and will be officially opened on March 2nd. The budget for this phase is £750,000; funding has been provided by West Cork LEADER Co-operative who funded the construction of the building for £200,000 (70% funding), Bord Fáilte/ERDF, who have sponsored the interpretation for £223,575 (75% funding). Cork County Council have given £75,000, the National Millennium Committee £70,000 and Ford (Ireland)Ltd. £1,000 towards the matching funds. The rest of the budget has been put into a loan negotiated with AIB.

Mizen Head Visitor Centre is developed on a theme of Safety at Sea. Modern technology has overtaken the old methods of the Lightkeepers. Mizen Head has been part of the whole history of marine communications from the first radio beacon built in 1931 to the DGPS (Differential Geo Positioning Satellite) mast, one of three in Ireland. The concept of the displays in the new building is to explain the use of modern technology in safety at sea. The modern way of collecting weather data unlike the manual methods used by the Lightkeepers is with a computerised Automatic Weather Station (AWS). Mizen Tourism have purchased a system from Mason Technology, with the assistance of Liam Burke of Met Eireann, who will ensure that the data collected is suitable for the use of Met Eireann in the coastal reports.

However, the most exciting development is the installation of a Navigational Aids Simulator from Charternav GPS Ltd. of Crosshaven, Cork. The system consists of eight computers and nine screens, installed by Pat Leonard of Thornhill Bros. Skibbereen with software developed in Russia by Transas, world leaders in navigational aids simulation. The simulator, fitted with an instructor station with exercise editor. is registered for accredited training purposes and will be used for specialised courses in all aspects of navigation. It is a fully functional ship's bridge with electronic charting, ARPA radar, GPS and all the functions necessary to take a ship through any water. It comes with real journeys which are visualised on three screens. The journeys bought by Mizen Tourism are Dublin-Liverpool, Dover-Calais, Folkestone-Boulogne and Glasgow and approaches. In the next budget the aim is to create a visualisation of a journey from Fastnet into Bantry Bay. For training, the screens can replicate any condition at sea - weather, currents, tides, other traffic are all reproducible. The own ships purchased by Mizen Tourism are a stern trawler, a passenger car ferry, a fishing boat, a

river/sea ship and an RIB, but there are about forty other types of craft that might be encountered on a journey.

Visitors to Mizen Head will see an ongoing journey, but the simulator gives the visitor centre a new dimension. During the winter and in the shoulder periods, specialised courses in navigational aids will be available. It is not intended that these courses will take anything from the existing training courses, but they will offer individually tailored training solutions on a small scale. The training will be organised by Gary Delaney of Charternav in conjunction with Mizen Tourism.

There is much more to Mizen Head Visitor Centre. The location at Ireland's most southwesterly point is dramatic with the 99 Steps and a spectacular Arched Bridge. In the former Keepers' quarters there are displays about the life of the Keepers and the environment of the Mizen. The new building has artwork by Jules Thomas who has created a stunning mural showing the Mizen landscape looking back from the Fastnet Rock Lighthouse. The 1/10th model of the Lighthouse has been made by Geoff McCarthy and Dave Otway. In the entrance Sheena Wood and Kurt Lynndorf of the Ewe Art Centre, Goleen have created three sculptures, Water on Rock, a water feature, Sky to Seabed, a tile mural and Lighthouse Crafts, five pairs of hands showing lighthouse keepers' crafts. In the tearoom John Eagle's photographs of the lighthouses from Old Head of Kinsale to Cromwell Point, Valentia dominate the wall alongside Richard Mills' exquisite photos of local wildlife, flowers and ancient monuments. On the gable is a mural by Russell Barrett of the Bridge and the Signal Station across the other side. There are a café, shop and toilets to give comfort to the visitor. Mizen Tourism are expecting great interest in their different and varied Mizen Head Visitor Centre.