

## “Tourism in Iceland” – 2<sup>nd</sup> edition

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“We are guests and the earth is our hotel” the Icelandic poet Tómas Guðmundsson said in his poem *Hótel Jörð* (*Hotel Earth*). Two key concepts appear here when it comes to tourism and most will associate directly with people's travels; guests and hotels. It barely gets more traditional in people's minds when tourism is mentioned. However, both terms entail a lot more than meets the eye at first glance. When it comes to travel and who is a guest; where, when and how matters as questions to be posed. It can be said that we are all travellers, always, all the time. When it comes down to it, existence itself is a journey, and the place we enact our existence is the earth in all its infinite diversity and beauty. These reflections give an indication of the point of departure for the book *Ferðamál á Íslandi* (En. *Tourism in Iceland*) (Huijbens, Jóhannesson & Ásgeirsson, 2024), which is now out in its second edition, updated and improved from the original published in 2013. This point of departure aside, the book is not about some existential reflections on travellers. It is a comprehensive work in the Icelandic language about tourism, where all aspects of people's travels and tourism in the Icelandic context are discussed. Originally the purpose with the book was to introduce tourism research into discourse on tourism in Iceland. In 2013, Iceland was at the verge of a rapid increase in tourist arrivals, an unprecedented growth that has since, transformed the national economy and affected the constitution of society and nature in various ways. At the time the book was the first attempt to discuss tourism conceptually and empirically in Icelandic in a systematic way and linking it to international research. Whilst a lot has changed in terms of tourism on the island, scholarly as well as public science debate on tourism in Icelandic is still scant.

As said, tourism and tourism industry in Iceland have developed rapidly since the first edition was published. Iceland has become one of the hotspots of Arctic tourism, quickly recovering from the halt of travel during the COVID-19 pandemic. Between 2010 and 2018 international tourist arrivals more than quadrupled and tourism accounted for 8,6% of the island's GDP in 2018 (Ferðamálastofa, 2020). In 2023 2.2 million tourists visited this only cold-water island sovereign state. This rapid increase in tourism has created various challenges for the sustainable development of tourism; and has prompted response from central authorities to invest more in policy, planning and infrastructure for tourism in Iceland. The updated version of the book still has sustainable development as a unifying thread and is



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intended to provide a critical support to efforts of various stakeholders to grasp and work with sustainable tourism development in Iceland. The book is structured so each of its three parts focuses on one of the key pillars of sustainability: Environment, economy and society. For the book's second edition the coverage of the economic side of tourism was enhanced to create more focus on tourism as a service industry. We believe that the current mix is appropriate in the book, since on the one hand, tourism is about an industry, while on the other, it is about everything that goes on when we perform as guests or hosts. Tourism is thus certainly partly an industry that needs to be understood with the theories and tools of business and economic studies. But tourism also affects all aspects and manners by which we constitute our nature and society. It affects our identity and ideas about society and culture as well as the environment; and it is therefore important to account for these as well.

### *On the Road or in the Air*

People are constantly on the move. As said, it is extremely important to understand what that means for the environment, society, culture and the people themselves; both those moving and hosting. Although going to work in the morning is certainly considered a journey, this does not mean that it is tourism. Yet buses, cycle paths and roadways are certainly considered services and infrastructure that form the basis of Icelandic tourism just as they serve those who need to get to and from work. Thus, it is important to be clear on what is meant and what precisely is delineated when the term "tourist" is evoked. It is precisely in how we define and draw these boundaries that the focus begins to shift to tourism in particular.

When you start to look into how the person who is called a tourist gets this label, it becomes clear what it is that sustains the phenomenon and comes to shape it. However, the tourism system is neither uniform nor simple. Tourism resists definition as it is part of the everyday lives of most people living in the northern hemisphere. Every effort to pin it down or to make it fit predefined categorisation enacts it in different ways. Tourism is therefore multiple, it entangles with other spheres of nature and society and as such affects and orders places (Jóhannesson, 2024). Take for example a visitor who comes to Iceland and is visiting someone with whom the visitor studied 20 years ago somewhere abroad. This guest will use a flight to the country, the same flight Icelanders use to get out of the country, which also supports the export of fresh fish for example. Then we can add the fact that flying is one of the main prerequisites for Icelandic tourism, but there are not many people who associate jobs in tourism with the jobs of pilots, aircraft maintenance and air traffic controllers. These jobs can barely be considered low-wage jobs so often associated with tourism in popular rhetoric. Not to mention that Icelandic air traffic controllers are perhaps the main managers in the international system of aviation; at least in the N. Atlantic. The boundaries of the tourism production system are thereby blurred and its dynamics not always straightforward.

### *Guests Abound*

If we turn back to the visitor who comes to visit his old school mate, she is probably using roads to get to her destination and thus, just like other users, contributing to their wear and tear along with the services necessary for it to be held in place. Suddenly, the Icelandic Road Administration (Vegagerðin) and the Icelandic Transport Authority (Samgöngustofa) have become members of Icelandic tourism system, and maybe not many people realize that. The visitor undoubtedly wants to see all that Iceland is famous for. Then the history of the country and its people, visitor arrivals over the years, and what has spread by word-of-mouth about the country and those who live in it come into play making for tourism. Geysir and the Golden Circle, which are destinations created by many factors, including their definition as unique natural phenomena, their marketing and image promotion that have been shaped by Iceland as an island at the edge of Europe are interwoven. What it is that makes a place a destination is thus also something that can be examined carefully to understand what contributes to the idea,



access to it as well as the experience of it. If we continue to follow our visitor, it is safe to assume that she needs to lay her head to rest somewhere. As a guest visiting a school friend, she may be allowed in their home, but it is just as likely that the guest wants her own space. Maybe the former school friend lives rather cramped and precariously, as housing prices are high, and credit terms are not the best. The guest finds an Airbnb and thus contributes to the problem of housing, which has become associated with this particular accommodation broker (Mixa & Loftsdóttir, 2024). On the other hand, the visitor is bringing foreign currency into the country. This strengthens the position of the local currency (the króna) and might thereby improve credit ratings for banks and lenders in the country, which in turn might impact mortgages and opportunities for housing. In this way, people's travels are also a major economic issue, not only in relation to the turnover and activity of companies in the tourism industry, but also due to various side effects in relation to the extent to which the destination's economy and market starts to adapt to tourism. When almost every homeowner starts thinking about how to rent out part of their own home, or even buy another property solely to rent to potential guests, it's clear that other people than short term visitors who need housing are headed for trouble.

### *The Society of Travellers*

The above is just a fast and loose example, a slice through the potential visit of an imaginary guest, taken to make two points. Firstly, the social and cultural importance of tourism in our society is such that it is difficult to identify who is a tourist; where and when. The visitor we followed might be classified as a mass tourist, and independent traveller, someone visiting friends or relatives (VFR visitor) or an adventure tourist just to mention a few common categories used to grasp tourism activities. We prefer to use the word travellers and guests in our book and point out that we are actually all travellers at all times. Secondly, and related, is that the boundaries of actual tourism and what constitutes tourism are very difficult to draw. However, tourism starts to take shape when these boundaries are drawn while scholars and others contribute to such boundary makings in different ways. How complex the image of tourism that gets drawn up in the process is explained by the fact that travel and tourism do affect all areas of human life and society. Moreover, and what needs special attention, is the way in which tourism in popular debates is often governed by specific interests that are important to critically analyse to understand the development of the industry and its impact on society, culture and nature.

Travel and tourism are thus all-encompassing and in everything we can see a journey from one thing to another. Acquiring the skills and developing an understanding of tourism is particularly important for Icelanders and Icelandic society. Not only are Icelanders strong consumers of tourism, but Iceland is a tourist country. The southwest corner of the country has a permanent stream of visitors all year round, and in some places around the country it gets pretty crowded during the summer (Sæþórsdóttir et al., 2020). Under these circumstances, it is especially important to understand the many facets of the world of tourism. The book *Tourism in Iceland* (Huijbens, Jóhannesson & Ásgeirsson, 2024) is meant to give the reader the tools and ideas on how best to do it.

### *Arctic Tourism Relevance*

As a contribution to understanding Arctic tourism, the book provides a resource for coming to terms with tourism development in Iceland. The island is a sub Arctic cold water island destination, but provides a gateway to several Arctic tourism attractions (Huijbens, 2015; Lund et al., 2017). The island is thereby an integral part in the development of Arctic tourism. Be it as a gateway for cruises operating in the Arctic, an aviation hub or simply as part and parcel of the Arctic allure (Huijbens, 2022), Icelandic tourism development is important to understand as many places across the Arctic region look towards its successes in numbers of tourism on the island both as an example to follow or to avoid (Ren & Jóhannesson, 2023; Ren et al., 2024).



Tourism in Iceland shares many of the characteristics of tourism in other parts of the Arctic and sub-Arctic, including weak and limited infrastructure, seasonality, and nature being the key attraction (Rantala et al., 2019). Tourism operations are heavily concentrated on urban centres that function as gateways and basecamps for tourist activities in the rural hinterlands (Huijbens & Jóhannesson, 2020; Müller et al., 2020). Furthermore, due to limited infrastructure and the sparse population tourism development is prone to create condition of overtourism (Jóhannesson et al., 2022). Arctic tourism research is growing but is not keeping pace with the fast-growing industry in the circumpolar region. The rapid climate and societal changes taking place in the Arctic further underscore the need to invest time and resources in research on tourism in the Arctic and Iceland can serve as a solid example thereof.

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