

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF TOURISM

Speech
by
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President of Iceland – my dear husband
Minister for Foreign Affairs and Madam
Ladies and gentlemen:

It was almost midnight on a crisp, clear August evening nearly twenty years ago when I first stepped foot in Iceland. Upon leaving the confines of Keflavik International Airport, the first thing that strikes many visitors, including me, is the air. Even in such proximity to diesel-spewing aircraft, the most apt word to describe it is pristine. I ventured a few steps into the open-air car park, took a few deep breaths and filled my lungs with oxygen rich air. A stiff breeze whipped my hair. It was about 5 degrees Celsius, an average summer evening temperature. There were few people around, and other than the airport complex and the nearby American military base, few signs of urban living. It was exactly as I had imagined it would feel to be on a remote island in the North Atlantic.

Here I was, finally. In Iceland. It felt distant. And exotic. As my boyfriend – now my husband – drove us from the airport through the capital to the Snæfellsnes peninsula 150 km away, I gazed at the landscapes that now almost – but never quite completely – seem everyday to me – the moss-covered lava fields, the green, windswept mountains, buoyant seascapes, the virtually empty roads.

Guðni and I spent three whirlwind days exploring the Snæfellsnes peninsula, snapping photos underneath the towering but narrow Kirkjufell mountain, listening to thousands of birds congregating at Arnarstapi, and strolling along numerous sandy beaches. When I flew to New York City at the end of the adventure, the humid, polluted mid-August air there was in such stark contrast to my Icelandic days that I barely wanted to venture outside.

Little did I realize then the permanent connection I would have to Iceland. Like many, I was captivated by the landscape – and that clean air! – but I chose to make Iceland my home more because of the society and the way of life in Iceland. (And because I chose to marry an Icelandic man!) Needless to say, it is now an immense privilege to have the opportunity to help showcase my country abroad.

At the time of that first visit, almost two decades ago, the tourism industry in Iceland was not exactly fledgling, but it was certainly far less mature than it is today. Visiting the country during the winter season was not easy, exploring Iceland's nature was for many reasons harder than it is now, and there was little emphasis placed on visiting the country in general for reasons beyond natural wonders.

But now we have come a long way since almost the only meal you could enjoy outside the capital on an off-season evening was a hot dog at a village's local petrol station. I like to say that because I chose to make Iceland my home, and was not born there, I get to brag a little bit more about it. We are proud to showcase many things to visitors. Many dimensions of what we emphasize to tourists are connected to our values as a nation overall: sustainability, tolerance, gender equality, friendliness, and a respect for nature. I suspect that these are values that harmonize very well with Swedish thinking, which is probably one of the reasons why so many Swedes like to visit Iceland, just like many Icelanders enjoy visiting Sweden.

Recently I had the honour of being asked to serve as a United Nations Special Ambassador for Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals. My role as special ambassador is to support the efforts of the United Nations World Tourism Organization to champion sustainable tourism as a tool for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and the UN's global 2030 Agenda. Sustainable tourism has the potential to help reduce inequality and increase tolerance around the world, especially in regions emerging from conflict.

In Iceland, we value and promote sustainable tourism that benefits both host country and visitor and creates long-term opportunity. We are now a destination not only for our unique nature, but also for our rich cultural heritage.

For example, promoting our nation's deep literary heritage has been a sustainable way of increasing tourism to Iceland and of promoting Icelandic

heritage and culture abroad. Reykjavík is a UNESCO City of Literature, the world's first non-native English speaking such city. In recent years, we have made a concerted effort to have even more Icelandic books translated into many languages – including, of course, Swedish.

In the musical world, our musicians and composers are making waves on the international scene, from pop groups such as Monsters and Men and Kaleo, to classical performers such as Víkingur Heiðar Ólafsson.

Our Design March festival of design, which attracts people from around the world, will be held for the tenth time in two months, while in the culinary sphere (a growing sector of the global tourism industry) a restaurant in Reykjavík was awarded the country's first Michelin star last year. We are also garnering increasing attention in the field of our use of sustainable energy sources.

And finally, thanks to the good-natured, family-friendly football fans we have, and the underdog success of our men's and women's teams, we have increased our reputation as a friendly and welcoming country.

It's part of my job as the first lady to put a positive spin on things – though with this subject that is not difficult – although I would be remiss not to point out that our rapid growth in visitor numbers has also led to challenges, not least of which is how to minimize the damage to our fragile nature as thousands more each year trod the same paths to waterfalls, drive our mostly two-lane Ring Road, and seek the best locations to put up a tent. Our tourism professionals are aware of these challenges, and are taking steps to reduce or eliminate them. I know you will hear more about that later this morning.

But I want to end on a high note. This last year, 2017, was declared by the UN General Assembly to be the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. In connection with this, the UNWTO has launched a campaign entitled “Travel, Enjoy, Respect”. These words can well apply to Iceland. I invite you to visit my adopted country, to enjoy your stay, to respect nature, your fellow visitors and the locals, and most of all, to discover what we all gain from travel: encounters with people from other cultures and languages, experiences of new traditions and sights, and the exchange of ideas and friendship.

I hope you enjoy this breakfast and find it productive and hope to see you in Iceland soon.