

# **SITE-DOING: SENSE OF PLACE ICELAND'S CULINARY EXPERIENCE (SPICE)**



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# INTRODUCTION

- In 2019, a group of 25 tourism and food professionals visited southern Iceland as part of the Sense of Place Iceland's Culinary Experience (SPICE) Learning Journey
- We visited several locations and businesses in the region that focused on tourism and/or food and this report is a collaborative effort from the following participants:
  - Jared Bowers – The National Trust for Scotland
  - Cris Brown – Northumberland Tourism
  - Claire Donaldson – Scotland's Rural College (SRUC)
  - Stuart Fraser – The Oak Tree Inn
  - Deborah Macken – East Cambusmoon Holiday Cottages
  - Sandra Reid – Fare Consulting Limited
  - Sara Robertson – ScotBeer Tours
  - Angie Tait – A Tait Tourism Consultancy



# BACKGROUND - TOPIC

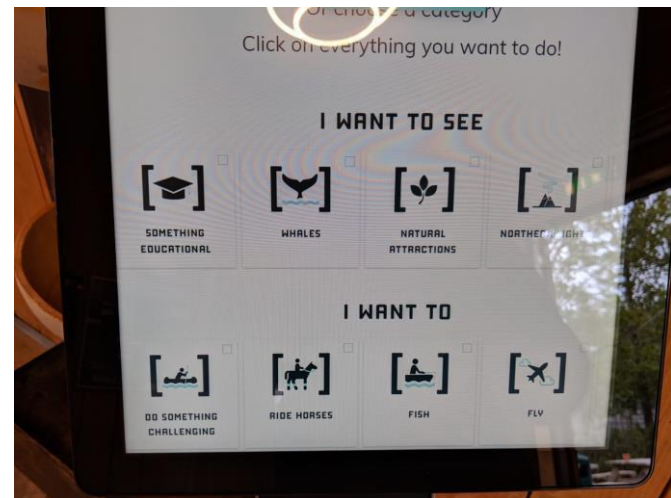
- Our group was given the below brief to address in our report:
  - *Experience is the buzz word in tourism and hospitality – visitors increasingly expect them and destinations and businesses seek to offer them. Some are getting it right while others are merely paying lip service. So what makes an experience memorable or meaningful when sight-viewing is no longer enough of a draw?*
- In our report, we have explored the definition of site-doing and examined what is meant by having meaningful/memorable experiences. We have then compared this with the various experiences we had in Iceland as well as other professional and personal experiences we've had in the field. Lastly, we conducted a short survey with everyone on the project and analysed these findings.





# WHAT IS SITE-DOING?

- Subjective to each individual tourist
- Actively participating, not spectating
- Degree of emotional engagement
- Educational benefits
- Active or passive activities
- Memorable experience
- Cultural connection
- Engagement with locals



MacLellan & Smith (1998) *Tourism in Scotland* state:  
**A key feature** must be that the tourist is a **participant** as opposed to being a spectator. The activity must be the **MAIN purpose** of the holiday and a significant motivator in the decision-making process.

# WHY IS SITE-DOING POPULAR? IMPORTANT?

- Tourists are craving an authentic experience
- Mass tourism no longer enough for many people
- Seeking provenance and to trust the source
- Lifestyle – mental health e.g. prescribing walking instead of drugs
- People are concerned about wider issues – environment, animal welfare
- Seeking sense of worth beyond physical goods and services



# WHAT IS A MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCE? A MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE?

## **What is memorable? – the takeaway, the thing we remember**

- Based on personal feelings that are influenced by activities
- Experiences are very personal; the consumer is engaged with an event on an emotional, physical, mental and/or intellectual level – an organoleptic approach
- Authentic experiences have become mainstream in tourism and according to Cornelisse (2010), authenticity is not a physical object, it is an activity related phenomenon

## **What is meaningful? – in the now, feeling experienced at the time**

- Yeoman et al 2005 associate the following with meaningful experiences:
  - Ethical – principles of community, sustainability and ethical consumption
  - Natural – not tainted or manufactured; associated with destination and region
  - Honest – don't promise what you can't deliver
  - Simple - contrary to a world full of complications
  - Beautiful – magnificent view etc.
  - Rooted – sense of the past
  - Human – living and people-focused

# 10 TRENDS THAT ARE SHAPING SITE-DOING (YEOMAN, BRASS, MCMAHON-BEATTIE 2007)

- Global network – revolutionising social boundaries via digital/social media but drives desire for genuine human contact
- Ethical consumption and volunteering e.g. rebuilding stone dykes (NTS)
- Affluent consumer
- Educated consumer
- Trust in the past
- Individualism
- Multi-culturalism
- Resistance to marketing
- Time pressures
- Increased competition





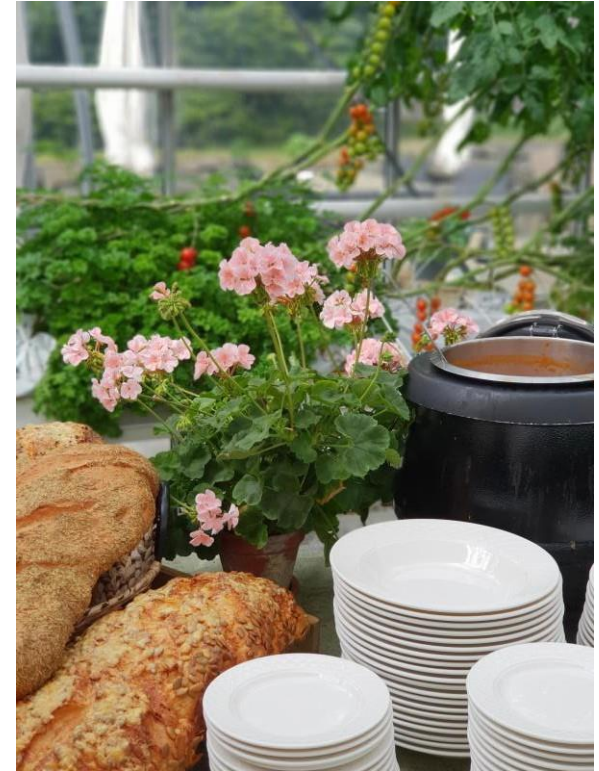
# ICELAND OVERVIEW

- Size – 103,000 km<sup>2</sup>
- Population – 350,000
- Capital City – Reykjavik
- Government – parliamentary constitutional republic
- Natural resources – fish, hydropower, geothermal energy
- Approximately 2.3 million visitors to Iceland in 2018, a significant increase over the past 10 years



# LOCAL EXPERIENCE REVIEW

- Visited several locations and these are structured/reviewed below within two main categories
  - Geothermal spas
  - Farm to table initiatives
- Review includes an overview about the business/location, conversations with local people/guides/business owners/employees and then an analysis of our experience which will be showcased through photos



# GEOHERMAL SPAS

- Blue Lagoon
- Laugarvatn Fontana
- Secret Lagoon



# BLUE LAGOON - OVERVIEW

- Geothermal hot springs / spa with high silica content that helps turn the water blue
- Most frequented tourist attraction in Iceland
- Average of 3,000 visitors per day
- Accidentally created from discharge from geothermal power plant, health benefits then discovered for those suffering with skin conditions
- In 1999, facilities for visitors opened



*'An otherworldly wonder in the heart of a volcanic landscape.'*

*'Geothermal spa within the volcanic earth'*



# BLUE LAGOON – SITE DOING



# BLUE LAGOON – CONVERSATIONS AND KEY THEMES

- Main site doing activity is relaxing in the geothermal pools, which is very memorable due to stunning beauty of the site and the surrounding landscapes
- History of attraction and personal story from host enhanced experience however this arose out of conversation and not from direct information presented on site so there's an opportunity to create a more meaningful experience there
- Also onsite is a bar offering drinks and an area providing mud masks, both of which form part of the site doing experience
- On the whole, a very smooth operation which has a highly memorable impact with visitors and an instantly recognisable brand across the world

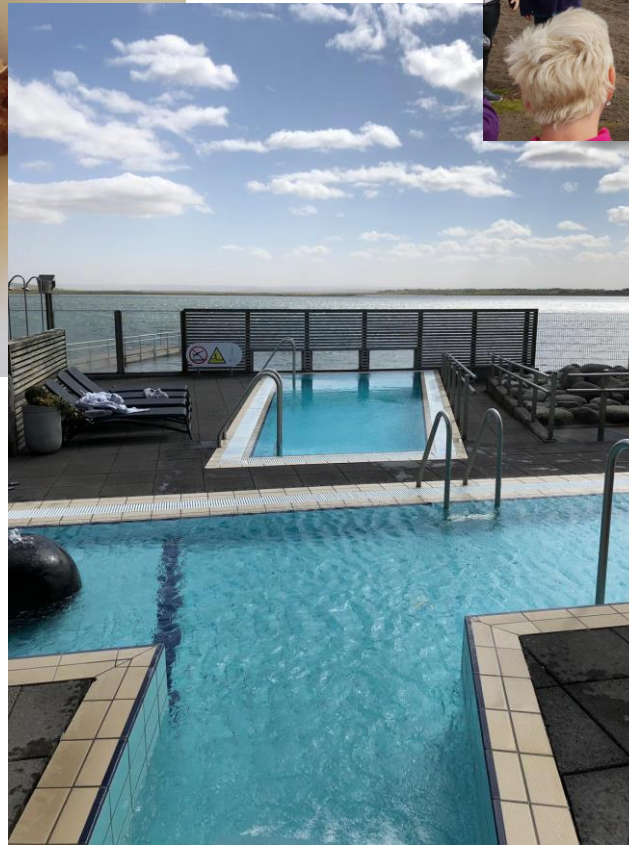
# LAUGARVATN FONTANA - OVERVIEW

- Geothermal bath and bakery
- Historically visited since the settlement of Iceland
- Laugarvatn means a 'water to bath in' and baths are located by the Laugarvatn Lake, which offers spectacular views
- Includes steam rooms built over natural springs
- Part of the experience includes a geothermal bakery, where twice a day you can see bread being taken from the ground and then sample it
- Local people have been baking rye bread in the hot springs for decades





# LAUGARVATN FONTANA – SITE DOING





# LAUGARVATN FONTANA – CONVERSATIONS AND KEY THEMES

- We first went with our guide to dig up the bread that was baked in the sand and sample it
- Guide was very engaging and good at story telling and helped make the experience more memorable
- While we didn't make the bread, we got as close to the experience as we could
- The geothermal hot springs were again memorable and the pools were less polished than the Blue Lagoon, which some liked while others liked less
- Good storyboards/interpretation around the building highlighting the experience as natural, simple, etc
- While some may debate whether or not the bread aspect was site doing because we didn't make the bread ourselves, we still considered it to be an authentic site doing experience as we were as close as we could be to the experience otherwise and the smells, taste, sights and feeling made it memorable and meaningful



# SECRET LAGOON - OVERVIEW

- ‘The Secret Lagoon’ at Hveraholmi, the geothermal area near Fludir, was made in 1891 and is the oldest swimming pool in Iceland’.
- Kept natural and unique - natural surroundings.
- Small Geysir erupts every 5 minutes.
- There are walking paths so visitors can take a closer look at the surrounding hot springs.



# SECRET LAGOON – SITE DOING



# SECRET LAGOON – CONVERSATIONS AND KEY THEMES

- No story communicated to the visitor although we still had a site doing experience by relaxing in the geothermal pools
- The venue seemed to be a local facility and not a tourism experience although enabled the visitor to immerse itself within the local community
- Later learned that the owner wasn't able to secure finance from the bank to open the Secret Lagoon and so worked abroad to raise the funds over a period of time. The pool was regenerated by hand by the owner and since its opening despite prior opinion has been a great success and strengthened the offer of Fludir as a whole
- Felt a bit more 'authentic' in the sense that it seemed more local and site-doing wasn't as flashy as the other two places
- Little details like the small geyser and trail around the hot springs added to the experience
- This experience was more divisive in terms of preference as some preferred this hot spring while for others it was their least favourite
- Perhaps more meaningful to some because it wasn't as busy and felt more intimate and like you were literally in on a 'secret place'



# FARM TO TABLE INITIATIVES

- Efsti-Dalur
- Fridheimar
- Farmer's Bistro



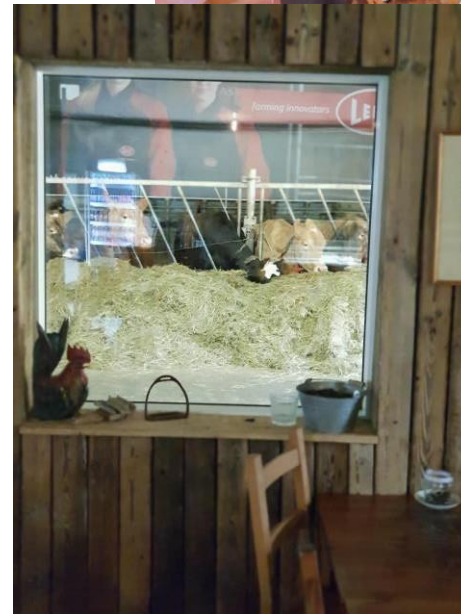
# EFSTI-DALUR - OVERVIEW

- Dairy farm
- Run by four siblings and their families
- 7th generation living on the farm since about 1750.
- Since 2002 developed with a tourism focus
- 2013 opened the restaurant and began to make products from their own milk.
- Farm to fork. Restaurant built at the end of the barn with large windows at one end so visitors can eat meal and watch the cows.
- The farm makes dairy products including ice cream, cheese, butter and skyr and also uses beef for the restaurant





# EFSTI-DALUR – SITE DOING



# EFSTI-DALUR – CONVERSATIONS AND KEY THEMES

- Good example of farm to table food with high quality food and a business which showcases its relationship to food production and family life
- By highlighting the family connection and history along with views and proximity to the cows, it creates a memorable experience that goes beyond most restaurants
- The business has created a high quality attraction with good interpretation, a sense of heritage, ability to view dairy cows, eat the produce from the farm or the neighbours farm which produces vegetables.
- Site doing was mainly about eating the produce, although we luckily had a skyr making session with our host, but again, without actually milking the cows, we felt this was an intimate and memorable experience
- There may be an opportunity to do more site-doing here, particularly with the animals (e.g. feeding, petting, interacting with them – examples of this from the UK outlined further below)

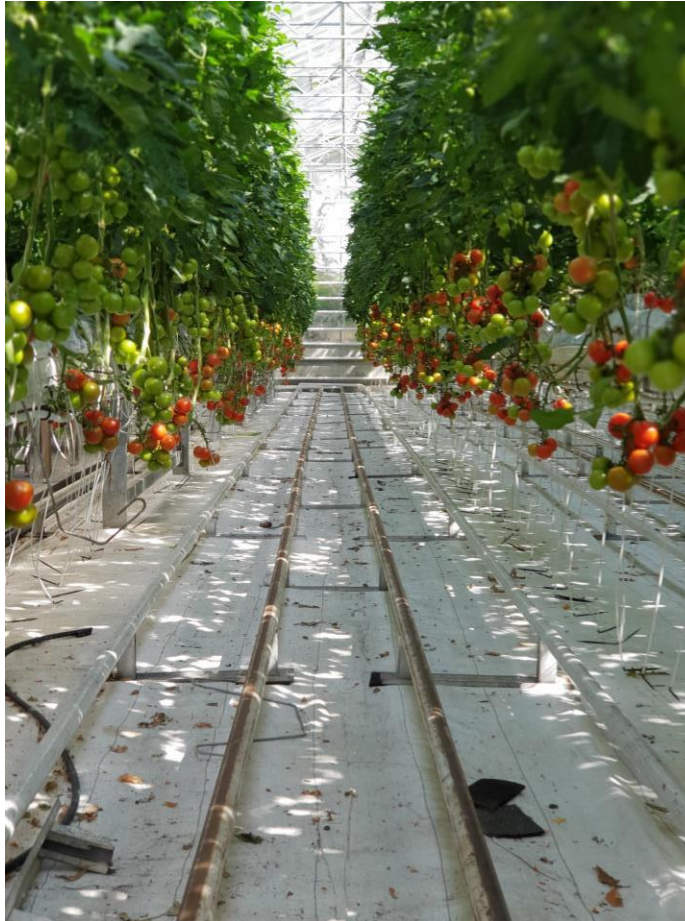


# FRIDHEIMAR – OVERVIEW

- Greenhouse specialising in tomatoes along with horse stables
- 10 years ago they opened the farm up to the public with a small restaurant and a horse show and stable visit
- Visitor numbers have grown from 900 in 2008 to 176,000 in 2018 Greenhouse - pick and grow throughout the year (every day)
- No advertising, 60% word of mouth
- They offer group tours to anyone who wants to learn more about the farm



# FRIDHEIMAR – SITE DOING



# FRIDHEIMAR – CONVERSATIONS AND KEY THEMES

- Most site doing was themed around tour of tomato farm and eating at the restaurant, however the location within the greenhouse and hearing the story from a team that is invested in the business made it quite meaningful and inspiring
- All visitors receive the story of the farm and are encouraged to look round the greenhouse.
- An immersive experience as you eat lunch within the greenhouse itself, which made it both more meaningful and memorable as there was a direct connection and indeed 'sight' to the food again
- The experience appealed to all senses
- Little details such as basil cutting at the table and the myriad of tomato products on offer enhanced the site doing
- Also the stories, postcards, energy of the staff and the simplicity of the site doing were all successful in our opinion
- They highlight the short time from farm to table and emphasise the line between farmers and food
- Perhaps there is scope for more site doing here through a cooking school
- It will be interesting to see how the business evolves as it is already at capacity and has lots of potential

# FARMERS BISTRO - OVERVIEW

- Family run business and is the only mushroom farm in Iceland (white mushrooms, chestnut and portobello)
- Also part of a larger vegetable farm
- Restaurant opened late July 2017
- Already had 60% more visitors than last year
- Pre booked tours of the farm are available





# FARMERS BISTRO – SITE DOING



# FARMERS BISTRO – CONVERSATIONS AND KEY THEMES

- Site doing was centred around dining experience and farm tour
- Similar experience to the tomato farm, but the restaurant / tour were more of a side business as the farm itself is quite large and the main income source
- Ability to see the workers in their environment picking the mushrooms.
- Tour was not as structured and will need refining in terms of layout and content, but overall another good experience and it's great to see another farm to table business in operation on the Golden Circle


















# COMPARABLE EXAMPLES


- There are many similar examples in the UK which our group has encountered. This includes:
  - Monachyle Mhor – Boutique lochside hotel in Trossachs that has a great farm to table ethos, sourcing everything but fish from their farm. The hotel side of the business could be an interesting concept for several of the farm to table businesses we met in the Golden Circle. <https://monachylemhor.net/farm/>
  - Craigie's Farm – Located outside Edinburgh, family owned, animals on site, pick your own fruit events all year round as well as an amazing farm shop with their own authentic produce. The farm restaurant is a good example of 'eat the view' and 'field to fork'. <https://craigies.co.uk/>
  - Cream o Galloway – Another dairy farm in Scotland with farm tours, cheese and ice cream tasting as well as children's activities. Big on ethical farming, calves stay with mothers for 6 months. <http://www.creamogalloway.co.uk>
  - Whitmuir The Organic Place – Organic farm in Scottish borders, offers a bakery and butchery courses. Community ownership with volunteer participation in growing. Farm visits are for interest groups or individuals. <https://www.whitmuir.scot/>
  - Low Sizergh Barn – Based in Cumbria, they have daily milking of the farm's cattle in view from the café in the barn itself. The café has very strong farm to table messages, there are also farm trails, ample information and interpretation boards, a farm shop with onsite and local produce and it has become a significant and popular destination in its own right. <http://www.lowsizerghbarn.co.uk/>



# PARTICIPANT SURVEY

- As part of our exploration into site-doing for this report, we undertook a survey with all 25 individuals that were part of this trip
- The quick survey asked participants to rank their top 5 experiences out of everything that we did and listed their options
- These results were then compared with objective and subjective criteria to look for any relationship with site-doing

Rank	Choice	Distribution	Score	Times Ranked	Times n/a
1.	Greenhouse - (Friðheimar)		59	17	0
2.	Blue Lagoon		40	11	6
3.	Hot River (if applicable)		35	9	7
4.	Laugarvatn Fontana (Bathe & Bread)		27	11	5
5.	Dairy Farm		25	9	8
6.	Geysir		15	6	11
7.	Secret Lagoon		14	4	12
8.	Waterfall (Gulfoss)		13	6	11
9.	Skyrgerðin Restaurant		9	4	12
10.	Mushroom Farm		8	4	12
11.	Ólverk (Brewery & Pizza)		6	2	14
12.	NLF (Health Centre)		3	1	15
13.	Bryggjan Brugghús		1	1	15
14.	Family & Friends		0	0	17
15.	Grandi (Harbour Area)		0	0	16

Lowest  Highest





# SURVEY RESULTS

	Objective Criteria				Main Purpose of Holiday	Subjective Criteria		Total Score	Scored Rank	Survey Rank
	Active Participation	Connection with Locals	Educational Benefit	Cultural Connection		Memorable	Emotional Engagement			
Greenhouse - (Friðheimar)	1	1	1	1		1	1	6	1	1
Blue Lagoon	1			1	1	1	1	5	2	2
Hot River (if applicable)	1					1	1	3	4	3
Laugarvatn Fontana (Bathe & Bread)	1	1	1	1		1	1	6	1	4
Dairy Farm	1	1	1	1		1	1	6	1	5
Geysir	1				1	1	1	4	3	6
Secret Lagoon	1			1		1		3	4	7
Waterfall (Gulfoss)					1	1		2	5	8
Skyrgerðin Restaurant		1	1	1		1		4	3	9
Mushroom Farm		1	1	1		1		4	3	10
Ölverk (Brewery & Pizza)		1	1	1				3	4	11
NLF (Health Centre)	1	1		1				3	4	12
Bryggjan Brugghús								0	7	13
Grandi (Harbour Area)	1							1	6	14

The survey results show a strong connection between site-doing and personal preference. Activities with a higher degree of site-doing tended to rank well. There are some exceptions such as the hot river. This didn't check all the site-doing criteria but it could be that the elements it did check were very strong. The results also show us that the quality of execution is important. Activities such as the mushroom farm and Skeyrgerdin Restaurant scored well on the criteria but not in the subjective survey. In conclusion, it appears from this limited assessment that site-doing is preferred to site-seeing when the site-doing elements are well executed. The tomato green house was ranked by all 17 survey respondents in their top 5. This indicates that even though site-doing is subjective to each individual, it is possible design an experience that is memorable and meaningful for a broad range of visitors.

# INSIGHTS – ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

- Being physically active isn't the equivalent of active participation
- Active participation can be created with minimal alterations
- Example
  - Photo taken at the dairy farm
  - Skyrr was distributed unsweetened and not pre-mixed with milk
  - This enabled the guide to illustrate the skyrr making process and cultural traditions associated with buying it
  - Guests were then invited to sweeten, add milk and mix their own Skyrr
  - The combination of the elements elevated the experience making it more memorable and meaningful.



# INSIGHT – CONNECTION WITH LOCALS

- Locals don't need to be native to be meaningful and memorable
- Actively sharing their personal story supports connection with locals. Simply being present isn't enough.
- Further exploration needed to assess whether personal stories be included as standard or organically surfaced during interactions?
- Example
  - At Fontana the guide was not a native Icелander
  - Guests asked her about herself and she shared her story
  - People felt a strong connection with the guide after hearing her story
  - The activity was more meaningful and memorable as a result



# INSIGHTS – EDUCATIONAL BENEFIT

- Information presented without creating a degree of emotional engagement can make it less rather than more meaningful and memorable
- The level of detail and style of presentation needs to take account of the guest's prior knowledge and experience.
- o Example
  - At the tomato greenhouse we learned about tomato production and consumption from energy supply, bee pollination to baking and waste minimisation. The information wasn't delivered with a high degree of technical detail.
  - The beer tasting contained a high degree of detail but was less meaningful and memorable





# INSIGHT – CULTURAL CONNECTION

- Experiences that provide a high degree of cultural connection can be overwhelming for guests
- If guests don't expect cultural connection from the activity and it isn't present, it doesn't necessarily make it less meaningful or memorable
- Example
  - The 3 spa experiences had different degrees of cultural connection.
  - The Blue Lagoon was more highly rated even though the level of cultural connection was lower.
  - The Secret Lagoon had a higher degree of cultural connection but was ranked less well.



# INSIGHT - MAIN PURPOSE OF HOLIDAY

- Must see and do activities ranked well
- Unexpected experiences were also highly meaningful and memorable
- A sight-doing activity doesn't need to be the main purpose of the holiday to be meaningful and memorable
- Example
  - The hot river was not a scheduled activity and only some participants experienced it
  - Despite this, it ranked as one of the top experiences
  - The quality of the experience as well as the sense of discovery and exploration may well have contributed to this ranking



# INSIGHT – MEMORABLE AND MEANINGFUL

- Some activities received a high ranking from all participants, others received a low ranking from all participants
- Some activities received a mixed reaction
- Effectively introducing elements of sight-doing increases the range of guests who find it appealing
- Activities only need to be meaningful and memorable to the target audience not all
- Example
  - The tomato greenhouse contained well executed elements of sight-doing and was in the top 5 for all 17 respondents



# CONCLUSIONS

- Site-doing is subjective, means different things to all tourists
- Lots of great examples of site-doing in Iceland, debatable whether all of the places we visited in this report were site-doing, depends on the person
- The farm to table initiatives reminded our group of several similar businesses back in the UK and there were several lessons to be learned on both sides
- For example, some of the farms in the UK had a wider range of activities available (e.g. pick your own fruit, butchery courses) that could enhance these similar experiences in Iceland and add to the site-doing factor
- While being able to demonstrate where the food is coming from in their cafes, the businesses we visited in Iceland could further the connection / emotional engagement of their visitor's experience through more hands-on activities
- For the hot springs, the main act of site-doing is being in the geothermal pools themselves. However, the experience could possibly be enhanced via better storytelling and defining of the product for each location
- Each site was vastly different, but the essence was the same and enjoyable at each location. However, it is recognised that preference out of three locations is very subjective



# CONCLUSIONS

- We felt like each of the above experiences were site-doing in their own way and were each memorable and/or meaningful for various reasons
- However, there were of course different opinions of quality/success for each attraction according to each person in our group and while one person might have enjoyed the tomato farm and found it a great example of site-doing, others might have preferred the Blue Lagoon or Secret Lagoon



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