



Sense of Place – Iceland’s Culinary Experience

Developing Stories Case Study Report

Iceland does things differently. Icelandair introduces travellers to some national quirks even before the plane leaves the ground. The safety demonstration is embedded in a short, contemplative film; and there is a wealth of other visitor information available on interactive screens.



The Blue Lagoon, Iceland’s most famous and busiest visitor attraction, is an odd mixture of magical experience and commercial focus. The lagoon’s accidental creation during test drilling for a geothermal power station is a fascinating story, and the potentially temporary nature of the asset is a possible reason for the place being on most visitors’ “must-see” list.

Dinner in the private dining room was quite exceptional: a local fish starter and beef steak main course were cooked to perfection, followed by an elegantly presented ice cream, fondant and fresh fruit dessert. Iceland does not produce its own wine, but there are several European-inspired native beers.

The landscape changed from lava field to mountain to moorland to farmland on the journey to Laugarvatn. The levels of amenity and comfort in the hostel exceeded those in some UK hotels. Breakfast was a fusion of traditional Icelandic fare (skyr, fruit, breads) and more continental influences (cold meats, cheeses) but tasty, well-presented and plentiful.





Laurgavatn Fontana is a smaller, more intimate and altogether more relaxing geothermal hot spring. The clear water and lakeside location

distinguish it from the Blue Lagoon; as does the specialty lava bread baked in tins buried for 24 hours in the sand on the beach. It is a sweet-tasting, doughy loaf that was served with smoked trout and traditional Icelandic butter, creating a quite delicious – and uniquely Icelandic – flavour combination. The tradition of baking bread in the hot sand has continued since the Viking settlement in the 9th century.

Lunch at the Efstidalur farm hotel was preceded by an informative and entertaining introduction by a member of the latest generation of the family who have lived here since the 1600s. Lessons in the production of dairy foods and organic beef were brought to life with a high-quality tasting lunch featuring home-produced meat, vegetables, whey, skyr, cheese and bread.

The waterfalls at Gullfoss are quite stunning and good infrastructure exists to manage large numbers of visitors to the site. There is a large commercial centre here, offering retail, food and drink; and other outdoor experiences from snowmobile tours to glacier trips on enormous all-wheel-drive buses. More interesting was the view of the Langjokull Glacier from the car park.



Geysir – the place that gave the world the word “geyser” is a bubbling and steaming hillside with hot water eruptions from Geysir and Stikkur every few minutes. A thriving business community is established here: food and drink, souvenirs, clothing and a new hotel to replace the accommodation at the old sports school. Still under construction, the new accommodation will comprise luxury rooms and suites, bars, restaurants and conference

facilities in response to demands from specialist tour operators, independent travellers and the market for business events outside Reykjavik. The architecture is dramatically metropolitan 21st century and the development represents a significant private investment in improving visitor facilities at a popular location. Dinner at the existing Geysir restaurant was a familiarly elegant affair, featuring lamb, roasted vegetables and a variety of breads.



Fridheimar is a food and horticulture experience, developed from a long history of growing tomatoes under glass. This is a family business that combines totally-controlled greenhouse production with a tomato-based menu and drinks list. The tomato soup and tomato beer are delicious, as you might expect from a limited produce portfolio and a demonstrable commitment to delivering quality produce and service. There is an expanding range of merchandise.



Hotel Fludir featured colourful, modernist landscapes that punctuated the interior space with clever allusions to the drama and diversity of the wider national picture. The Arctic char main course was a first for most people in the group, and was presented with characteristic style.



Fludasveppir is an organic mushroom farm that only uses Icelandic raw materials in cultivation (apart from the spores, which are only available for food production from a handful of suppliers worldwide). Our host delivered a humorous commentary on the production cycle, emphasising the importance of Icelandic fresh water, and a no-waste policy similar to that adhered to by Fridheimar. The mushroom soup was excellent: the chickpea and beetroot salads, and barley bread were even better.



The seminars at Haskolafelag Suderlands in Selfoss were illuminating: explorations of authenticity in food and drink production, consumption and visitor experiences were intertwined with the importance of storytelling at pre-arrival and on-arrival stages of the visitor journey. Questions that remained unanswered were:

- Is an authentic experience diluted or contaminated by accompanying narrative? Is a story necessary or desirable?
- Is an experience less authentic or less appealing if stories are limited to facts?

There was broad agreement that rich stories enhance the visitor experience and contribute to the authenticity of some experiences, depending on relevance, cultural connection and/or visitor management on site. The potential for site-specific, local, regional and even national stories to encourage business and destination development is considerable.



Hveragerdi is a pleasant, low-rise town on the edge of a geothermal park. Our visit to NLF Heilsustofnun Rehabilitation and Health Clinic coincided with noisy grounds-keeping works, but was an otherwise tranquil insight into alternative therapies for physical and mental conditions. The vegetable-based diet would be easy to convert to, based on the outstanding quality of produce and imaginative flavour combinations presented at lunch. The

management have expansion plans to accommodate more referrals from Icelandic practitioners and private clients from around the world.

The surprise visit to the Olverk geothermal brewery and pizzeria introduced the group to a brewing masterclass and a product that was a true masterpiece. Iceland is not immune from world influence, but manages to draw on Nordic traditions and values in its interpretation of food and drink favourites.

Dinner at Skyrgerdin was a gastronomic tour de force: chicken, lamb, potatoes and an eclectic but successful selection of salads and sauces created an extraordinary showcase of Icelandic fresh produce and culinary expertise. The demonstration of skyr production came after dinner, and was limited to a description and a glimpse through a window, but nevertheless emphasised the importance of local dairy production to menus – and public health – across the country.

The view from the offices of Islandsstofa – Promote Iceland – demonstrates the global growth of cruise tourism, and the sector's appetite for new and fulfilling destinations. The group learned about strategic growth ambition versus infrastructure and environmental protection, which has parallels with Scotland and other parts of the British Isles. The opportunity to explore Grandi – the harbour area – provided a lesson on regeneration and reutilisation of existing maritime infrastructure.





This harbour is still focused on Iceland's fishing industry, but most of the original packing and processing units along the quay have been converted to other uses – predominately seafood restaurants – but there is a growing variety of international eating and drinking experiences. Quayside new-builds include the Bryggjan Bruggbus brewery bistro where we had world-class fish and chips and the outstanding maritime museum.



The harbour experience appeals to all, and it is evident that local people regard the regeneration of this area as a positive leisure development, demonstrated by ongoing investment in food and drink establishments, waterside experiences and shops.

The Saga Museum and the Whale Museum are also located here, and Reykjavik Harbour has become the cultural centre of the city without sacrificing any of the rich maritime heritage that built and sustains the Icelandic economy. The appeal of eating freshly-caught seafood at the harbour is well understood, and tells a story of cultural continuity across international boundaries.

David J Adams McGilp
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