

destinations : wellbeing tourism

# detour

A person is sitting on a wooden pier that extends into a calm lake. The lake reflects the surrounding mountains and the sky. The mountains are steep and covered in green vegetation. The sky is clear and blue. The overall scene is peaceful and scenic.

## IO2 Wellbeing Tourism Destination Audit, Iceland

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## Introduction

There is no consensus around a single definition of wellbeing. The World Health Organization (2006) defines health in its basic constitution, as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or

infirmity. Wellbeing is a multidimensional state of being describing the existence of positive health of body, mind, and soul.

Wellbeing is an



individual issue, but it manifests only in congruence with the wellbeing of the surrounding environment and community (Anne-Mette Hjalager, 2020). Wellbeing is not only a state of being healthy; it entails an active moving towards a state that is termed wellbeing. Herein lies the distinction between health and wellbeing (Huijbens, 2010).

## The Regional Context

Wellness tourism has its roots in the long history of spa resorts, and in that sense is not a new phenomenon but more recently wellness tourism has been evolving around facilities for medical treatments, as well as pure leisure and relaxation sites.

Iceland's resources and strengths for wellbeing tourism are mainly clean air, unspoiled nature, food, clean and good water, and the hot springs that Iceland has. The nation's high educational level, well-educated health professions and good health care system are also important resources.

Iceland is slightly set apart from the rest of many other countries when it comes to the amenities associated with the aspiration towards wellbeing. The only establishment that can be counted as a wellbeing destination, that has any kind of history is that of the Nature Health Association of Iceland, but that is also involved in health and physical healing. They set up a rehabilitation and health clinic/retreat in the town of Hveragerði near Reykjavík in



1955 (see: [www.hnlfi.is](http://www.hnlfi.is)). Still this facility is subsidized by the government and is mainly for those seeking treatment and rehabilitation (Valdís Björg Friðriksdóttir, 2020).

### The Wellbeing Market

It is estimated that wellness visitors spend, on average, 178% more than the average domestic tourist (Global Wellness Institute, 2017), with business opportunities for catering for both these high-spending tourists for whom wellness activities are the principal motivation for their stay, and the other travellers for whom some form of wellbeing or wellness activity is part of their visit.

### Wellbeing Trends for Icelandic Businesses

Since the turn of the century, there seems to have been a certain awakening in Iceland regarding opportunities for wellbeing tourism. Around the year 2000, the number of visitors wanting to experience the country's rich bathing culture had a noticeable increase. Now the natural spas and swimming pools are the most popular things to do among tourists in Iceland. In 2010 the Association of health tourism was established with the aim of making Iceland known as a unique destination for wellness and medical tourism (Iceland of Health, 2011).

With this awakening the increase of spa related businesses has been drastic over the years and with over 15 businesses across the country specializing in geothermal spas and more in development, that is not counting the swimming pools



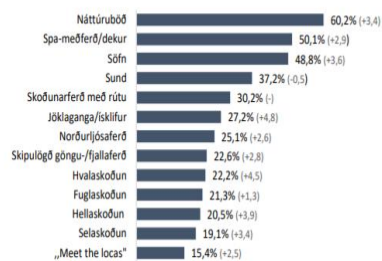
that are in almost every town in Iceland. This new emphasis on spa related businesses has a lot to do with the increase of tourists to the Island that want to experience Icelandic culture as well as the untouched nature of Iceland. These outdoor geothermal spas capture both these elements as they are mostly built in and developed within a nature setting and captures the rich bathing culture Icelanders have.

Iceland's specialty in terms of wellbeing tourism is its nature which happens to be one of the main reason tourists visit Iceland, the geothermal energy, the unspoiled nature, and the purity of the water makes for many possibilities when it comes to the development of wellbeing tourism in Iceland (Valdís Björg Friðriksdóttir, 2020).

## Attitudes to Health and Wellbeing of Potential Icelandic Visitors

The Icelandic tourist board does a yearly visitor survey on travel behavior and trends. In the year 2018 the results

Hvaða afþreyingu nýttu ferðamenn 2019\*



Náttúruböð voru vinsælasta afþreyingin 2019. Þar á eftir komu ýmsar konar spa- og dekurmeðferðir og safnaferðir.

Niðurstöður eftir helstu þjóðernum og markaðssvæðum má sjá á bls. 39 og frekari úrvinnslu í nethluta könnunar undir skránni „Afþreying“:

- Náttúruböð (línur 2-49),
- Spa-meðferð/dekur (51-98),
- Söfn (100-147),
- Sund (149-196),
- Skoðunarferð í rútu (fyrir utan norðurljósaferðir) (198-245),
- Norðurljósaferð (247-294),
- Jöklaanga, isklifur (296-343)
- Fuglaskoðun (345-392)
- Skipulögð göngu-/fjallaferð (394-441)

showed that the most popular leisure activity when visiting Iceland was natural baths and spa related activities, 58,6% of travelers visited natural baths, 47,2% visited spa's and 37,7% went to a swimming pool. They do a similar survey yearly for travel trends and behaviors for Icelanders and turns out going swimming is also the most popular activity among Icelanders. These number increased the following year, to 60% of visitors going to nature baths, 50% visiting spa's and 37, % visited a swimming pool. This implies that wellbeing tourism in the field of nature baths and spa related activities is increasing in popularity among visitors to Iceland and that the opportunities for wellbeing tourism are certainly there (Icelandic Tourist board, 2019).

## Perceptions of Wellbeing Tourism in Iceland

Wellbeing tourism is like formerly mentioned not something new to Iceland, regarding baths and spas, there are a lot of them throughout the country with more coming each year. Icelandic people have been using bathing in hot springs and swimming pools for a long time, so one could say that wellbeing tourism is a big part of Icelandic culture. You can find geothermally heated swimming pools in almost every town in Iceland, no matter how big or small, these swimming pools are very important for the people as they are a source of physical workout as well as a place people go to unwind, relax, socialize. Bathing culture is therefore a very important and rich part of what Icelandic culture has to offer (Edward H.

Hujibens, 2011). A big part of the bathing experience is being outdoors or even being in the nature, as the nature also serves as a big part of Icelandic's culture. Being outdoors in a nature setting makes for a relaxing experience and that is exactly what Iceland has to offer



and why tourists visit Iceland, the nature. People from big cities want to unwind, disconnect from their busy lives, and experience the vast unspoiled nature. 91% of travellers visiting Iceland come there for exactly that reason, to experience the nature and 60% of them want to experience it because of the untouched purity of the land (Icelandic Tourist Board, 2020). With the above-mentioned elements, Iceland certainly is an ideal destination for wellbeing tourism in the context of nature. The southern part of Iceland is especially versatile regarding nature related leisure and has great potential in the field of wellbeing tourism.

But in many ways the industry is not quite aware of the potentials, especially regarding nature related activities, the activities are there but not necessarily presented as wellbeing products, but with all the potentials of being exactly that.

### The Wellbeing Tourism Business Landscape

The spa industry in Iceland has taken a dramatic turn in recent years with increasing demand from travellers both domestic and foreign for those kinds of services. With quite a diverse range of businesses offering such activities, everything from hotels with a full spa service to scheduled bus tours to an all-natural hot spring in the highlands. There are also several companies offering a variety of



wellbeing products, such as yoga retreats, mindfulness walks or slow tourism produce such as kayaking through a glacier lagoon or a hike through the wilderness with outdoor cooking. A number of businesses offer some kind of wellbeing products, some do it intentionally but others don't categorize themselves as a wellbeing tourist company but are certainly able to do so if given the information and right tools. A lot of these businesses are in the south of

Iceland, some are currently in development others have been there for many years.

Following are some of these companies operating in the south of Iceland:

**Laugarvatn Fontana-** Since 1929, locals have been enjoying the healing powers of the natural steam baths by Lake Laugarvatn. Hot, healing steam simmers directly from the ground through grids in the cabin floors of the three traditional steam rooms. The temperature of the steam varies depending on the temperature of the hot spring and weather, usually between 40°C (104°F) and 50°C (122°F). Humidity is very high in the steam room cabins. Grids in the floor of the steam rooms allow guests to hear and smell the boiling natural hot spring right underneath, creating a natural and unique experience. See more here <https://www.fontana.is/>.

**Friðheimar-** Located on the Golden Circle, Fridheimar is Iceland's most unique tomato farm, offering lunch right in the greenhouse. Guests can sit down to a feast of tomato soup served with freshly baked bread and cucumber salsa. Visitors can visit the stable where they get a presentation about the horse and a one horse show of the gaits. The stable is welcoming, offering tea/coffee. During the summer months, Friðheimar offers its own horse show: A Meeting with the Icelandic Horse. Available in fourteen different languages, with an accompaniment of lively Icelandic music. The display is followed by a visit to the stable, where visitors can enjoy a hot drink, meet the riders and their steeds, and take photographs. See more here <https://www.fridheimar.is/en>

**Traustholtshólmi-** is a sustainable and private island. It is a place of stunning beauty, untouched by modern development, it is an island within an island where you get a complete, all-included, experience where you'll stay in a Mongolian yurt, and connect to nature, with wool insulated walls and heated by a oven. Hunt for salmon and learn how to cook it, all along hearing stories and exploring the island. See more here <https://thh.is/>

**Höfn Local Guide-** is locally-owned family business that operates in the field of Slow-Adventure Tourism and Wellbeing tourism. The focus is on nourishing experience through moderate movement in beautiful nature, peaceful environment, and personal communication with the locals. Höfn - Local Guide follows the policy of *Leave no Trace* as a part of sustainable tourism and as an attempt to minimise environmental impact, groups are kept small. See more here <https://www.hofnlocalguide.com/>

**Icelandic bike farm**- small, family run, locally based adventure tour company. That specializes in mountain biking, located in the mountain biking paradise of Kirkjubæjarklaustur, South-East Iceland. With the perfect trails in their backyard, made by the sheep for many centuries of roaming, we offer a selection of day tours and multi-day tours from beginners' level to advanced level of riders. On the farm they offer glamping huts, sauna, and a yoga studio. See more here <https://www.icelandbikefarm.is/>

## Findings from the IO2 Stakeholder Survey

The IO2 survey gathered six responses from the Iceland region with all six responders describing themselves as wellbeing tourism businesses.

### Defining Wellbeing Tourism

The understanding of the term “wellbeing tourism” appears to be similar for those wellbeing tourism businesses. Environment is an issue in two answers, and ways to rejuvenate and nourish in broad sense is a part of the other answers. The definitions were:

- *To make our guests feel good in our area, by showing them that we respect the environment and do our best to give them the chance to "log off" and enjoy.*
- *Environmentally friendly*
- *Fresh products.*
- *Tourism that has a long-term positive effect on the tourist's emotional and/or physical state.*
- *The type of products tourist's companies offer that helps customer to increase their overall well-being through practicing healthy activity that nourishes and rejuvenates both body, mind and social interaction.*
- *Biking, hiking, enjoying, Relaxing.*

### The Stage of Wellbeing Tourism in Iceland

When asked about the stage of wellbeing tourism in the region all answered that it was developing, only one added in what way and stated that *“Some activity in the region has a history of being wellbeing opportunities and the geothermal heat plays a role there. Quite a lot of hiking activity in remote areas are offered but it involves a lot of driving in many cases.*

*“Mindful activity like yoga and mindfulness is slowly growing and you can find some health restaurants in the region.”*

When asked how well the region is branded/ marketed in terms of wellbeing tourism the six answers are divided; three say *good*, two say *pour* and one is *not sure*.

### Wellbeing Visitors to Iceland

In terms of who are the respondent's visitors, there was a range of answers with the most popular being *“couples”* and *“families”* followed by *“solo-”* and *“luxury travellers”*. One



mentioned *“millennials”* and in terms of others one comment added *“Groups – friends and colleges”*.

Geographically, they were mainly listed as coming from *“Europe”* and *“N-America”* followed by *“national”*, *“Australia”* and *“Asia”*. One mentioned *“S-America”*.

The most important reasons wellbeing visitors come to the region of South Iceland were listed as *“scenery”*, *“walking/outdoors”* and *“mountains”*. *“Adventure activity”*, *“food”* and *“craft activity”* was also mentioned.

When asked if wellbeing events happen in the region of South Iceland, three said *“yes”* and two gave example of regional festivals, without explaining the context of the wellbeing part. Two said *“no”* and one was *“not sure”*.

### **Barriers and Opportunities**

Some of the potential barriers or constraints to growth of wellbeing tourism in the area were listed as *“lack of marketing/branding”* as the most common, then *“Existing infrastructure”*. *“Lack of funding”* and *“shortage of skills”* was also mentioned. One comment included: *The focus has been more on adrenaline-based activity, but I think it is slowly changing.*

On the other side of this, some of the biggest opportunities for growth of wellbeing tourism in Iceland had commonalities, with all six respondents answering *“marketing/branding”* and four answered *“collaboration between businesses”*. Two answered *“business support”* and *“policy support”* and one answered, *“infrastructure development”*.

Being seen as the most important skills in the wellbeing tourism sector all six respondents answered, *“customerservice”* and five answered *“marketing”* and *“project development”*. *“Cross selling/collaboration”* and *“wellbeing qualifications”* were mentioned by two and one answered, *“presentation skills”*.

### **Skills Requirements**

When asked what the current skills needs are of the wellbeing tourism sector are, no one answered but three respondents answered what areas of training would help wellbeing tourism businesses to develop and prosper. These statements were:

- *Information about the opportunities that lie in fast growing group of travellers that want to slow down and use their vacation to nourish them self's.*
- *Introduction on what might be categorised as wellbeing tourism offers.*
- *Help with developing ideas into a product.*
- *Help with getting visible on the market.*
- *Help is needed to awaken the conciseness of wellbeing.*
- *Help to find and scout remoted places.*

### **The Policy Context**

When asked what national or regional policies or strategies Icelandic respondents were aware of that support/encourage the growth of the wellbeing tourism sector, the responses suggested a lack of clarity on this as four didn't answer, one answered, *“food*

*awareness” and one “I’m not aware of any support or encourage aimed at the growth of wellbeing tourism in my region. There is encouragement on both national and regional level for wellbeing activities for people living in Iceland but not for the tourism business, not to my knowledge.”*

## Discussions and Conclusions

Iceland has quite some way to go in developing and promoting wellbeing tourism but has all the opportunities to do so. With awareness about wellbeing tourism within the tourism industry along with an increase of travelers visiting Iceland to escape the hectic big city lifestyle and to immerse into unspoiled nature and disconnect, Iceland has all the potentials to becoming a successful wellbeing destination. This project is a good steppingstone and guideline for tourism businesses to incorporate the opportunities that come with wellbeing tourism.

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