

TOURISM IN ICELAND: PHASE TWO VOLUME TWO, BOOK TWO

VISITOR CENTER

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I. THE CONCEPT

A. Purposes of a Visitor Center

There is an increasingly apparent need in Iceland for a facility solely organized to service the information and orientation requirements of visitors and tourists. This is not to imply that visitors cannot and do not obtain such information today from a variety of sources -- both prior to and after their arrival. The point is, however, that there exists no single source, conveniently and centrally placed, that ministers to visitors in a complete, imaginatively conceived and operated program with sufficient scope and impact to draw a significant number of these visitors. The underlying consideration must be that however informed individual visitors may think they are, or however capable and assertive one may be in seeking out the diverse sources of information, a tourist information program should not rest on the facile assumption that the job of information dissemination is being adequately performed, for there are valuable insights on Iceland being denied the former and a gross misapportionment of time in the latter case; in the case of the many tourists who are neither pre-informed nor assertive in their seeking of information and assistance, there is a grave loss in both quality of experience and optimum allocation of time. What is therefore needed is an orientation center, which becomes the visitor's first stop in Iceland. Here an overall view of the historic, cultural, and physical attractions in Iceland can be conveyed through the extensive use of both visual and written aids; and a suitably planned program of visitation to particular points of interest can be formulated and developed by placing the visitors in direct contact with the major elements of the local tourist industry.

The main intent of a visitor's program is, of course, to assist the visitor in meeting his own objectives in visiting Iceland. But the orientation program can enrich the visitor's experience in ways he might not expect. In addition, the center provides a vehicle through which the government and the tourist industry can affect and shape the direction of development and thus better meet some of their own objectives: e. g., stimulate visits to the lesser-known attractions around the island; encourage more slack period visitation to key tourist attractions; and serve as a major data collection point for surveys of the tourism industry. All this, of course, is secondary to the primary mission of preparing and orienting the

visitor to make fuller and more enjoyable use of his time and resources while in Iceland.

At present, there are three major elements (two of which are private/commercial, not public operations) which provide information and assistance to tourists: Iceland Tourist Bureau (ITB), Hotel Loftleidir Bus Terminus, and local travel agencies. The ITB, a governmental agency which operates to a large extent on revenues generated by its commercial activities in the tourism/travel sector, has the primary responsibility for promotion and assistance to tourists. Since, however, most tourists are not oriented or guided to its facilities and services, those tourists usually seek out information from other sources (e.g., the Hotel Loftleidir Bus Terminus), particularly downtown travel offices and agencies. These latter agencies, most of which are essentially geared to serving the needs of the approximately 50,000 Icelanders who travel abroad annually, accept these duties hospitably but somewhat reluctantly as the dissemination of tourist information and general aid to foreign tourists is basically incompatible with the agencies' commercial goals and orientation. It should be noted that none of the three current sources of tourist information provide anything approaching the scope of the total service and display program envisaged for the Visitor Center, but restrict themselves to distribution of written material and tour reservations.

B. Nature of the Orientation Programs

The Visitor Center should provide the visitor with the information necessary to see, understand, and appreciate the attractions which Iceland has to offer. This requires that the visitor be provided with substantive, interpretive information and other information required to locate and visit the various attractions. The number, variety, and widely dispersed nature of visitor attractions in Iceland necessitate carefully developed information systems. The programs should include as much interpretive information as is necessary to provide the general perspective in which attractions should be viewed. On the other hand, the programs should provide only the information necessary for proper introduction to the more detailed visitor programs that should be offered at the specific attractions themselves. Therefore, some coordination between the Center and the attractions will be necessary to ensure the complementarity of programs.

There are three basic themes or messages that the Center can provide which will enhance the value and understanding of visits to the local attractions around Iceland. These themes can be categorized under the general headings of: (1) historical perspective, (2) natural or physical phenomena, and (3) identification of specific visitor attractions. The first two categories would provide the background information, desirable and necessary for the full appreciation of a trip to Iceland in general and of the specific attractions in particular.

The richness of Icelandic history and cultural development is well-known. It is this resource that must be tapped for further elaboration in the Visitor Center; most effectively, the emphasis should be placed upon some of all of the following: (1) Viking explorations and the settlement of Iceland, Greenland and Vinland; (2) Commonwealth Period of early Icelandic development, the evolution of parliamentary government (Althing) and the extraordinary legal development; (3) Sagas and other literary accomplishments both locally and by Iceland's poets and scholars in the employ of foreign rulers, (4) distinctive habitation patterns, viz., turf-built farms, and (5) a brief chronology of major historical events in Iceland, perhaps relating the periods with events and activities occurring in selected other countries for the purpose of providing perspective and comparisons for foreign tourists.

Iceland, as the Land of Fire and Ice, provides a unique opportunity for viewing the interplay of some of the Earth's rare, most powerful physical forces and activities, including volcanism, glaciation and glacial rivers, aurora borealis, geysirs and waterfalls. These natural phenomena, although familiar in general to everyone, have been seen and understood by few of the visitors to Iceland. An orientation program that explained, in graphic laymen terms and, perhaps, with working models, the physical processes underlying these geologic phenomena would immeasurably increase the enjoyment and understanding levels of visitors to the sites of these natural wonders that abound in Iceland.

Finally, the principal visitor attractions should be identified and described in general terms (not duplicating the detailed information to be made available at the site itself) and information on operating hours prominently displayed. Many visitors, upon arrival, may already know one or more of the attractions which they wish to visit. Most visitors are usually unaware of the number and variety of attractions available, however, and they should be advised soon after their arrival so that they can schedule visits likely to be of most interest to them. This is particularly true of attractions in the

outlying regions of Iceland, for the Visitor Center may well be the only local source of reliable, up to date information on these sites. To supplement the description of all attractions, directional guidance, transportation and accommodations information (where appropriate) should be made available.

II. THE SITE

Potential sites for location of the Visitor Center were evaluated using three general sorts of criteria. The first related to the market access and exposure to be expected from the site; the second, to the construction potential inherent in the site; and the third, to the potential for designing a complete tourist orientation and service program at the site. Each of these was, in turn, subdivided to analyze more closely the separate elements of attractions, construction and program necessary to a full Visitor Center. The particular questions asked were, thus, as follows:

I. Market Potential

- A. What are the existing attractions at the site?
The potential attractions?
- B. How good are the access and exposure to the foreign tourist market?
- C. How good are the access and exposure to the local tourist market?
- D. Is the use of the site for the Visitor Center in conformity with current land use plans?

II. Construction

- E. Can the Visitor Center be integrated harmoniously with existing or planned structures on site and nearby?
- F. How suitable is the site for required new construction, both as concerns construction costs and possible difficulties.

III. Program

- G. If the Center were located on the particular site, would the visitor have access to commercial establishments and travel organizations? Restaurants and cafeterias? Could the Center present a program of films and other orientation programs for the visitor?

EXHIBIT II-1

EVALUATION OF SELECTED SITES,
VISITOR CENTER

| | SITES | | | | |
|--|-----------------|------------------------|---------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| | <u>Keflavik</u> | <u>Water Tanks</u> | <u>Harbor</u> | <u>Krisuvik</u> | <u>Downtown Mall</u> |
| <u>I. Market Potential</u> | | | | | |
| A. Existing and Potential Attractions | 0 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| B. Access & Exposure to Foreign Market | 3 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| C. Access & Exposure to Local Market | 0 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| D. Continuity with Land Use Planned | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| <u>II. Construction</u> | | | | | |
| E. Possibility of Integration with Existing Structures | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 |
| F. Suitability for New Construction | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| <u>III. Program</u> | | | | | |
| G. Potential for Orientation Program | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| TOTAL | 4 | 7 | 9 | 11 | 16 |

| | |
|---------|---------------|
| Legend: | Excellent = 3 |
| | Good = 2 |
| | Fair = 1 |
| | Poor = 0 |

The final question is felt to be important; the Iceland Visitor Center is not to be just an information office, but a central facility for cultural orientation. Its program must imaginatively blend the artistic, social and historic aspects of Icelandic life into a multi-media show, both instructive and appealing to tourists, especially to those new to Iceland. It should develop into an attraction in its own right and, therefore, have on-site or nearby other tourist services such as stores, restaurants and travel agencies. These, in turn, give the Visitor Center exposure to the local market.

Five sites in particular exhibited varying mixes of the above factors: the airport at Keflavik; the water tank area situated on the hill overlooking the Hotel Loftleidir, housing the City of Reykjavik's hot water supply; the labor-housing project to be torn down on the harbor front in Reykjavik; at Krisuvik, where the multi-purpose resort mentioned in Book One may be built; and on the downtown shopping mall just completed in Reykjavik.

As the exhibit on page II-6 demonstrates, the last of these five sites is evaluated as the best site for location of the Visitor Center; all five are discussed below in increasing order of preference. A numerical rating system has been used as shorthand to summarize our opinions of each site relative to the evaluation criteria.

A. Keflavik

Location of visitor centers or tourist offices at the principal point of foreign tourist entry is a concept that has been successfully tested in many major tourist destinations in Europe, particularly at train stations and airports. As almost all foreign tourists arrive in Iceland by plane, a Visitor Center at the airport would have much to offer by way of quick and convenient access to the foreign market.

For other reasons, however, Keflavik suffers in comparison with other possible sites. There are few existing or potential tourist attractions located there; indeed, it is hard to conceive how the airport and immediately adjacent areas could be altered to include new attractions. Even the exposure to the foreign market is limited by the fact that few tourists will have the desire to spend more than a few minutes in the Center after deplaning. Encumbered by baggage, tired from a trans-Atlantic trip, and maybe a little confused, most tourists would probably prefer to get to their hotel and just relax

before actively beginning their vacation. Access and exposure to the local market is poor, since few local tourists pass that way to begin with. There is also a risk of conflicting with the current use of the land, a risk increased by the currently intensive use of the land in the immediate vicinity.

As for construction, it is probable that extensive new construction will be required, as there are few structures on the site at present suitable for use as a Visitor Center. Because of the nature of surrounding buildings, however, there is little chance of harmonious integration of modern construction with existing structures. By the same token, the congested nature of the area around the airport raises questions as to the suitability of the area for any kind of construction.

Finally, there is little possibility of presenting the kind of full program desired for the Visitor Center at Keflavik. Tight space makes the inclusion of areas for boutiques and travel agencies questionable; the problem of visitor fatigue obviates a full slate of movies and other orientation programs.

In sum, Keflavik is probably the least desirable site of those evaluated for location of the Visitor Center.

B. Water Tanks

One thing that any Visitor Center must do is provide an introduction to the country visited: because of its panoramic view overlooking the capital city of Reykjavik, the hill outside the city housing the municipal hot water supply is another possible location for the Visitor Center. Airport busses currently drop all arriving passengers at the Hotel Loftleidir, which is at the foot of the hill, giving good access and exposure to the Center by the foreign market. While not especially good, the area is still accessible to local tourists, although a location nearer the city would be preferable.

Because extensive new construction would be required to convert the summit of the hill into a Visitor Center, it would not be difficult to design new structures with the Center's programs in mind. The presence of the water tanks, however, limits the type of construction possible and therefore to some extent the innovation and ingenuity of the presentations. The location of the hill is too close to Reykjavik for stores and travel agencies to open much new space, but too far from Reykjavik to be convenient to tourists. All in all, the program here would be adequate, not spectacular.

Technical reasons militate against the use of the hill as a Visitor Center. The concept is obviously in conflict with the planned use of the land for hot water storage; integration of the tanks into a Visitor Center presents certain design problems as well. New construction risks to be a difficult proposition if blasting is required. Although none of these problems is sufficient to rule out categorically the use of the hill for a Visitor Center, the effort required to convert the sow's ear to a silk purse is probably not worth it if other alternatives are available.

C. Harbor in Reykjavik

The potential site near the City of Reykjavik's reception building on the waterfront near the downtown shopping area has the opposite mix of strengths and weaknesses. Its market potential is limited: there are few existing or planned attractions in the area, although there is a fine view both of the harbor and of Esja. The attraction of the foreign market is likely to prove especially difficult as the area is not on most tourist itineraries nor near any hotels; local tourists, more familiar with the area, may not find this such a problem. While this is an area undergoing some change at present, there are no foreseeable conflicts with existing land use plans.

The construction side of the picture is brighter. There is every possibility of integrating the Visitor Center into the general scheme of nearby buildings, and new construction should be relatively easy.

The program presentable at the Visitor Center would not be particularly strong. Because the harbor location is near the city, it may not be reasonable to expect travel agencies and commercial concerns to open new space in the Visitor Center; by the same token, the location would be too far from the downtown shopping area to expect tourists to find it convenient. Movies and orientation programs are no problem in such a setting, however.

In general, the harbor site for the Visitor Center seems to be too far from the main tourist action to expect it to fulfill its main functions, and it does not appear to possess natural attractions that would make tourists seek it out for itself.

D. Krisuvik

If indeed a multi-purpose resort were constructed at Krisuvik, inclusion of the Visitor Center with the resort's activities would have much to recommend it. With thousands of foreign and local tourists stopping at the resort, the Visitor Center would have a natural audience and market, although its location away from Reykjavik may limit somewhat its drawing power in the local market. The area is rich in natural attractions and the resort will be home to many foreign visitors during their stay in Iceland.

Construction presents no problem, as special space could be planned for the Visitor Center during construction of the resort. This would enable the Visitor Center to present a superb program of orientation movies and other attractions using the hotel and micro-climate as part of the show. Association of the Visitor Center with the resort certainly offers the greatest potential for effective sound-and-light shows, graphics and so forth.

For all these reasons, the location of the Visitor Center at Krisuvik seems an attractive proposition; the distance from population centers is the only drawback.

The biggest problem of planning the Visitor Center for Krisuvik, however, is the uncertainty surrounding the resort. The Visitor Center should be constructed immediately and cannot wait for construction of the resort.

E. Downtown Shopping Mall

Construction has just been completed on the conversion of one of the main streets of downtown Reykjavik, the Austurstraeti, into a shopping mall. Filled with bookstores, small shops and restaurants and with the main post office at one end, the mall has quickly become a popular spot for strolling and shopping for tourists and residents alike. It is our opinion that this area offers the greatest potential for construction of the Iceland Visitor Center.

The potential is all the greater if the mall is lengthened to include the second block of the Austurstraeti, as is currently under consideration by the City of Reykjavik.

A Visitor Center at this site is accessible to all tourist markets in Iceland, foreign and local. Busses from the airport could bring tourists directly to the Center, and it is convenient to all hotels in Reykjavik on foot or by bus. As part of the city's central shopping district, serving one-half of the country's population, the Center would attract the curiosity and, therefore, the visits of many of the local population, even non-tourists. This is all the more likely with the inclusion of special shows and orientation features as part of the Center's program.

Particularly relevant to the choice of the mall site is the fact that the City of Reykjavik has in the past operated a small tourist information office at the end of the mall across the street from the Prime Minister's residence. Therefore, a precedent has been established, and there is an existing structure which could be improved and enlarged for the expanded services and programs of the new Visitor Center. All requisite tourist services not included in the Center can be found nearby: shops, restaurants, cinema, travel bureaus, post office, hotels and so on. It is a natural place to begin one's trip to Iceland, and a place to which one can easily return as new information is needed.

Finally, there are no major problems in construction, although extensive renovation of the existing information office and much new construction would be required. All infrastructural necessities (utility and water lines) are in place; because of its downtown location, new construction may cost more than at other sites, and certainly more than if the Center were to be incorporated into the resort at Krisuvik.

It is our recommendation that the Visitor Center -- for reasons of market potential, ease of construction and program potential -- be located at the end of the new shopping mall in downtown Reykjavik. Because of the unique nature of the resort at Krisuvik, plus the large number of foreign tourists expected to vacation there and the numbers of local travelers who will stop there, a small branch of the Visitor Center should likewise be included in the multi-purpose resort, although this facility would be subsidiary to the main installation in Reykjavik. The two branches would thus cover most of the foreign and local tourist markets in Iceland.

It is thus our firm recommendation that for reasons of market access, ease of construction and program potential, the Visitor Center be built on the downtown mall.