

Iceland

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Velkominn til Íslands!

Blue with a red cross outlined in white. The colours are symbolic for Iceland: Red represents the volcanic fires, white recalls the snow and glaciers, and blue is for the skies above, the sea and the mountains.



Key Facts about Iceland

Iceland is a country of extreme contrasts and dramatic landscapes. Widely known as “the land of fire and ice,” Iceland is home to a breathtaking landscape of glaciers, geysers, and volcanoes. In this geological wonderland, one encounters picturesque waterfalls, vast lava fields, and the enchanting dance of vibrant Northern Lights in the sky. Iceland is one of the most sparsely populated countries in the world, with a population count just under 390,000. Almost two-thirds of the inhabitants live in the capital area in the southwest, and the rest of the population is spread around the long coastline, mostly in fishing villages and farmland regions.



Capital City: Reykjavík

Type of Government: Parliamentary constitutional republic

Head of State: Guðni Thorlacius Jóhannesson (President)

Head of Government: Katrín Jakobsdóttir (Prime Minister)

Area: 103,000 km²

Population: ~390,000

Currency: Icelandic Króna (ISK)

Hálla Ísland! :)

The first semester of our Master's program in 'Tourism Development Strategies' commenced with a brief theoretical phase, marked by a general sense of excitement. This excitement amplified upon learning that our studies would include a trip to Iceland. The announcement of this trip brought a new level of enthusiasm among us, the students, and our professors. Our journey started at the university and continued with a bus ride to Berlin, signaling the beginning of our academic adventure. This travel was not just a physical journey, but also a precursor to a period of learning and exploration. We looked forward to immersing ourselves in the stunning landscapes of Iceland, ready to gather insights relevant to our studies.

A blurred photograph of an airport terminal. In the center, a white sign is visible with the text "BER FLUGHAFEN BERLIN BRANDENBURG" in red and black. The sign is positioned above a glass and metal structure, possibly a walkway or a train platform. The overall scene is out of focus, emphasizing the motion and activity of the airport environment.

BER FLUGHAFEN
BERLIN
BRANDENBURG



After a calm three and a half hour flight we landed at Keflavik airport at 4 pm local time, marking our official arrival in Iceland. After collecting our luggage, we embarked on a scenic 45-minute drive to Iceland's capital Reykjavik, immersing ourselves in Iceland's captivating landscapes. Upon reaching Reykjavik, we were warmly welcomed at Hotel Cabin, where we met our guide Thilo.

Accommodation arrangements with 2 - 3 people per room ensured a cozy stay. Eager to shake off the travel fatigue, we took a refreshing walk along the waterfront, invigorating ourselves with the crisp Icelandic air and the stunning views. The cityscape, framed by stunning coastal scenery, provided a captivating introduction to Iceland and its natural beauty. After dinner, the evening concluded on a cheerful note as we engaged in a spirited game night, fostering friendships and creating lasting memories.

Our first day in Iceland was filled with excitement, laughter, and the joy of discovery. The blend of travel adventures and heartfelt connections among fellow students set the stage for an unforgettable university excursion, promising many more enriching experiences in the days to come.

Fun Fact: Iceland might be one of the most sparsely populated countries on Earth (~ 1/10 of San Francisco's population), yet they publish more books per capita than any other nation in the world.

South Coast of Iceland

The first stop on the journey is Seljalandsfoss, a completely roundable waterfall on the south coast of Iceland with a drop of 60 meters. The highlight of this waterfall is that tourists can walk behind it and look through the haze of water to the landscape outside.

Only a 30-minute drive later lies the largest and most elegant waterfall in Iceland. Skogafoss Waterfall has a width of 25 meters and is about 60 meters high.

Only 15 minutes east of Vik lies another “must-see” destination. Like most mountains in Iceland, Hjørleifshöfði is of volcanic origin. Its formation began under the sea before it emerged as an island. The coastline was extended when the glacial water melted and carried sediments with it as a result of a volcanic eruption. This also explains the black sand beaches surrounding Hjørleifshöfði.



It's time to hit the road!

Fjaðrárgljúfur is a 100 meter deep canyon that became a really famous tourist destination when Justin Bieber shot his music video there in 2015. As a result, visitor numbers almost doubled in 2017. However, this is increasingly becoming a problem for the sensitive nature. Therefore, the trail at the canyon is repeatedly closed for longer periods of time to give nature recovery time and to improve the touristic infrastructure.

The traditional Icelandic lamb soup is the perfect end to an adventurous but rainy, cold and windy day in Iceland. Kjötsúpa embodies the rich cultural and culinary heritage of Iceland. It serves as a symbol of tradition, nourishment, community, and the importance of using local ingredients in Icelandic cuisine.

There is a legend that the first Viking in the area, Þrasis Þórólfsson, buried a treasure chest filled with gold behind Skógafoss. It is said that a local boy found this treasure years later. He has managed to find the ring on the side of the treasure box but lost the box again! Thus the legend says that the treasure is still waiting to be discovered.

Fun Fact: Because of the special opening of the cave, it is often called Yoda Cave.







Kjötsúpa

TRADITIONAL ICELANDIC LAMB SOUP

INGREDIENTS

- 2 to 2 1/2 lbs (1 kg) lamb
- 1 large rutabaga (swede)
- 4 large carrots, chopped
- 6 potatoes, chopped
- 1 onion, chopped
- salt and pepper

INSTRUCTIONS

- Place meat in a large soup pot and cover with cool water.
- Slowly bring the meat and water to a boil and then reduce the heat to very low.
- Simmer the meat for about an hour. Skim away any surface scum (if necessary).
- Add the chopped vegetables and simmer until they're tender, about 20 more minutes.
- Serve Kjötsúpa hot and enjoy!



Fjallsárlón Iceberg Boat Tours

We attended an appointment with Pawel, general manager at “Fjallsárlón Iceberg Boat Tours”. After a short yet thought-provoking presentation by Pawel, our group joined into a discussion with him about the development, future goals, challenges, and opportunities of the business. The key topics discussed include sustainability, staffing, safety, infrastructure, and activities.



Skaftárstofa Visitor Center

In the afternoon, we met with a ranger at Skaftárstofa Visitor Center in Vatnajökull National Park, learning about the tasks of a ranger and visitor management issues at the park. To experience this firsthand, we then went on a 1.5-hour hike in the area including a visit to Svartifoss waterfall.



TREX Travel Experiences

Our bus driver Helgi gave us an insight into his job driving tourists through his home country, as well as about the company he works for. We asked lots of questions and heard several adventurous stories, many of them related to extreme weather conditions or the transport infrastructure of the country and its relation to tourism development.

Bucket list: touch a glacier! ✓

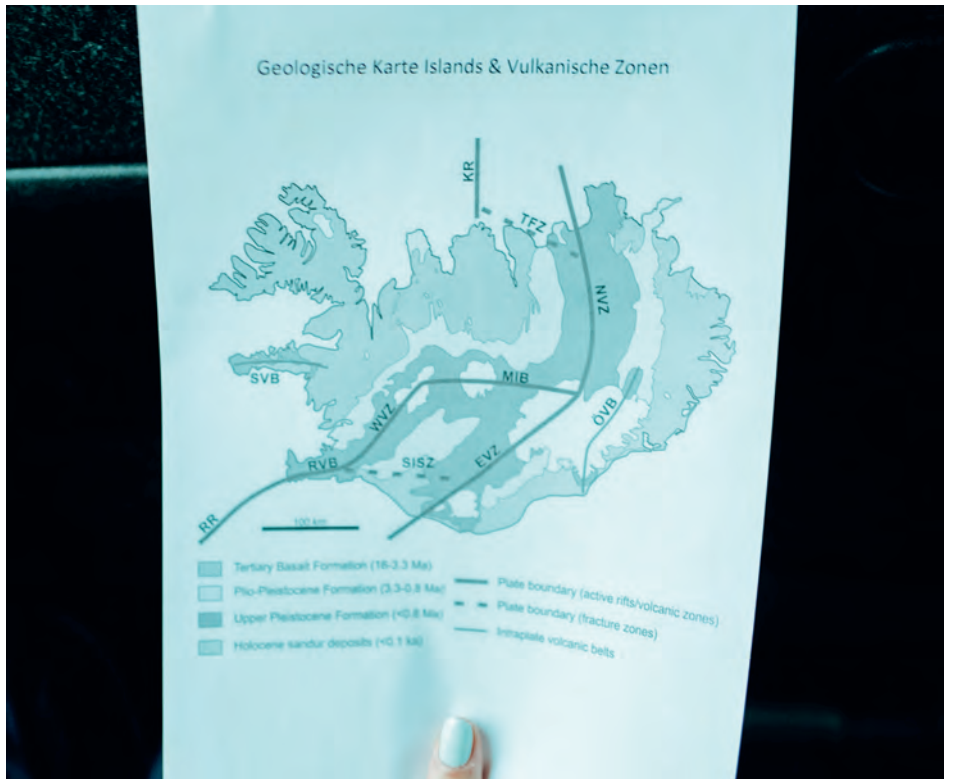
On Monday, we continued our journey along the south coast of Iceland heading towards our first stop of the day: Fjallsárlón Glacier Lagoon. During the bus ride, we learned about the landscape, old churches, bridge infrastructure, volcanic activity and - most importantly in the context of the day's itinerary - all about glaciers in Iceland: From interesting facts and events to their geology, developments, and their role in tourism.

When we arrived at Fjallsárlón, we enjoyed a boat tour on the glacier lagoon surrounded by a breathtaking environment in sunshine and blue skies. It was very interesting to learn about the glacier, different carvings and colors, and to pass by ice which had just reached the surface few days earlier. At the same time, it also opened our eyes towards the massive impact climate change has on the glacier, and in turn, the enormous impact the melting of the ice has on the Icelandic environment. Did you know that the complete melting of the Fjallsárlón glacier alone would raise the sea level by 1cm, according to our local guide?

Afterwards, we headed for a short visit of the famous Diamond Beach, followed by a stop at the nearby Jökulsárlón glacier lagoon where some of us could even spot some seals. To end the day, our fellow student Charlotte introduced us to her thesis on the "impacts of volcanic activity on tourism development in Iceland" which she will follow up in one of our lectures.



“CLASSROOM ON THE ROAD”



Our tour guide explained that after a volcano eruption, the lava follows the stream where the river originally flowed, creating new geological features. The moss on the lava fields grows slowly and retains its warmth inside for a good century post-eruption, which our student group found quite impressive.

As we continued our journey on the bus, we received a brief education on the myriad types of volcanoes and plate structures in Iceland. We also delved into the volcanic hotspots scattered across the country. Thingvellir National Park is situated where the North American and Eurasian plates meet. Volcanic outbursts are the result of plates moving apart from each other, as seen in the eruption of Eyjafjallajökull. Furthermore, Iceland is unique in letting you witness that it's the only country where the tectonic plates and ocean ridges can be seen on land. We discovered that eruptions in Iceland can happen underneath the glacier Vatnajökull due to the presence of several active volcanoes. Volcano eruptions occur roughly every 700 years, and the respective volcanoes stay active for another 7 to 10 years.

Trying to find Jon Snow . . .

Our third day of exploration in the land of fire and ice kicked off with some classic weather – rain and relentless wind. Despite the less-than-ideal conditions our group stopped at the famous Eldhraun lava field, where we experienced the cinematic view over the landscape. The Lava field, covering an area of 565 km², was formed during the eruption of Laki, that was one of the most massive eruptions in recorded history. The lava field is covered by moss which is highly sensitive to human disturbance. To preserve this natural wonder, it's crucial for all visitors and tourists to stick to the marked pathways.



The rain had become more intense after the afternoon rolled on, but that didn't deter us from our next stop, the Black Sand Beach Reynisfjara. Despite the moody weather, the students were impressed by the towering waves crashing on the beach. The beach holds a significant role in culture due to the fact that folklore and local legends are associated with it. Nevertheless, the different warning levels (green, yellow, and red) advise tourists and visitors about the dangerous and treacherous side of the sea.

Have you ever thought about trying shark?

Next up, our tour guide surprised us in the Rústhellir Cave (also known as Cave of Rútur and Hrúzzshellir Cave) with a culinary adventure. Here, we dared to taste the infamous fermented shark, which, to our surprise, wasn't as disgusting as we had imagined.

To wrap up our day, we visited our driver's hometown, where we had the chance to unwind in the Secret Lagoon (also known as Gamla Laugin) in the geothermal village Fluðir. According to the owner, it's the oldest natural pool in Iceland and can reach temperatures around 38 to 40 degrees celcius. Besides the hot pool the area of the Secret Lagoon offers green landscapes and geysers, that erupt regularly. Intriguingly, Iceland has harnessed geothermal energy to grow its own tomatoes in greenhouses with imported bees. Notably, the nearby restaurant (Friðheimar) got its fair share of attention when the Kardashian family dropped by to savour their diverse tomato dishes. Iceland's heavy reliance on greenhouses contributes to its natural resources and freshwater supply.





Discover the enchanting world of Icelandic folklore

Our journey through Iceland took us through breathtaking landscapes and myths that are thousands of years old. The many myths still play an important role in the daily lives of Icelanders today. Among the supernatural sights are the Álfhól, small wooden houses dedicated to the elves, as well as tiny churches supposedly used to convert elves to Christianity. The legend of the trolls of Vík tells of petrified trolls that now shine in the sunlight as basalt formations called Reynisdrangar. These stories still influence daily life today and can even affect building projects. For example, a road construction project through the Gálgahraun lava field, which is considered home to elves and dwarves, was stopped as a result. Sometimes, however, problems that occur during construction projects are attributed to possible annoyance on the part of local elves. The unique legends and myths add a fascinating depth to the landscape and culture of Iceland.

This trip not only allowed us to learn about tourism in Iceland and explore nature, but also to immerse ourselves in a rich mythological history that has a lasting impact on the lives of the people. Iceland presents itself as a place where reality as well as myth blur and offers a unique cultural experience.



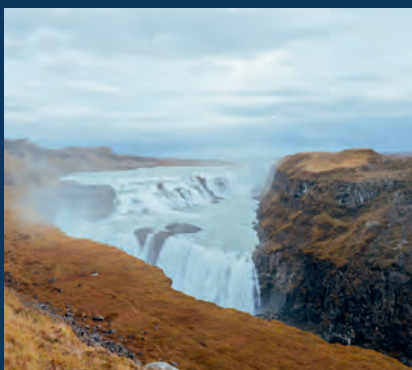
The Magic of the Golden Circle

As tourism students it is essential to experience the most famous tourist route in Iceland: the Golden Circle. The scenic route connects the three primary stops: the Gullfoss waterfall, the geysir geothermal area and the Þingvellir National Park.

At our first destination, the Gullfoss Waterfall, we took an easy hike around the cascade which gave us beautiful panoramic views of the stretch of water. Gullfoss is Icelandic and means “golden waterfall”. The name is originated in the fact that the sun gets reflected in the mist of the water.

After a very short drive, we arrived at our second stop. There we got to witness one of the greatest natural attractions of Iceland. In the past the geyser in the Haukadalur geothermal area was among the most notable geysers in the world, such as those in Yellowstone Park and New Zealand. It has been dormant since 1916, but the area surrounding it is still geothermically very active with many smaller hot springs and geysers. The main attraction is now a geyser called Strokkur (The Churn). It erupts at regular intervals at approximately every eight minutes, shooting a water column 25 to 35 meters into the air.

Another highlight of the day was the visit of the Þingvellir National Park. In this area, the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates meet. The erosion of the world's crust has built a unique landscape that is marked by huge gorges and cracks. The place is not only a geological wonder but also fundamental for the Icelandic history. In the national park, the first parliament of Iceland was established in 930 and regularly met until 1798.







Vatnshellir Cave

After discovering the cave, we had time for a Q&A and our guide answered all our questions. He explained how he and his father started the cave tour business and told us about the special circumstances of having a business located in a national park. Furthermore, he shared some visions for the future of the business.



Glacier Paradise

The next appointment was with Vignir, owner of Glacier Paradise. The 20-year-old family run business operates tours on the Glacier Snæfellsjökull with snowcats. It was interesting to learn about the history of the business and about restrictions of operating tours on the glacier. The manager also explained to us the difficulties of climate change and the need to find new lines of business. He pointed out that the glacier will shrink in the next few years and that there won't be much left by 2050.

Let's discover Iceland's Underworld

In the morning we were greeted with a beautiful rainbow directly over the water, which slightly compensated for the lack of northern lights the night before. From our accommodation in Grundarfjörður we did not have to go far to see the first waterfall of the day – Kirkjufellsfoss. After a quick photo stop, we got back on the road heading south. On our way to the next stop we learned about the importance of fishery in Iceland. An industry which contributes a large share to Iceland's exports and even caused a war against Great Britain in the past to negotiate fishing rights.

When we arrived at the Lighthouse of Malarrif it was quite windy and big waves were splashing against the shoreline. We still made our way to the foot of the lighthouse and enjoyed the view along the coast. From the lighthouse it was not far to our next stop – the Vatnshellir Cave. We were equipped with helmets and torches and the adventure under the ground began. The spiral staircase led us down in another world. We were amazed by the looks of the 8000-year-old lava cave. We learned how the tubes were formed a long time ago by a volcanic eruption and heard some stories about the trolls living as well as having meetings in the caves. After getting back to the surface we went to have a walk along the coast in Arnarstapi. Especially the rocks in the water looking like two kissing trolls who were hit by the sunlight and therefore became stone were great to look at. The Bárður Saga Snæfellsás Statue was another highlight of the walk.

After this adventurous day we headed to Reykjavík. Our hotel for the next two days was Hotel Klettur where we prepared ourselves for the upcoming meetings on the next day.

Hotel Management of Hotel Ör, Klettur & Cabin



After breakfast, we met Geir Gígja, the Manager of Hotel Klettur, where we stayed, along with Hotels Cabin and ÖRK during our journey. Hotel Klettur is a nice 3-star hotel, while Cabin is a budget hotel in Reykjavik, and ÖRK is a 4-star hotel in the southern countryside of Iceland. Mr. Gígja shared general information about the hotels, discussed their decision-making process for expansion, and highlighted challenges, such as rising staff costs due to strong unions. Further we discussed difficulties like dealing with online travel agencies (e.g. booking.com) but also implementing more sustainable practices (e.g. reducing water and chemical usage).

Ministry of Culture and Business Affairs



Another appointment of the day, we headed to the Ministry of Culture and Business Affairs. We got some insights about tourism as one of the most important parts of the Icelandic economy and how they want and need to develop tourism in a sustainable way for the ecological environment and the Icelandic economy. But that goal seems pretty challenging as they try to reach a certain balance between the economy, the environment, the community and the visitors, as they try to avoid overtourism at the same time.

Íslandsstofa - Business Iceland



We visited Visit Iceland, where Thorleifur Johnson, Senior Area Manager, shared insights into Iceland's marketing strategies. From 2010 to the latest campaign, they capitalized on Iceland's appeal as a global tourist destination, leveraging the increased interest following the Eyjafjallajökull eruption. Successful online advertising for the American and British markets led to fully booked seasons in Reykjavik. To enhance Iceland's overall appeal, Visit Iceland launched the #askgudmundur campaign, encouraging people to ask locals about hidden gems. Despite the pandemic, they ran a creative "scream – to let it out" campaign for global attention. Visit Iceland's future focus is on sustainable growth, aiming to improve infrastructure, distribute tourists across all regions, and prevent overtourism.



Iceland Pro Travel

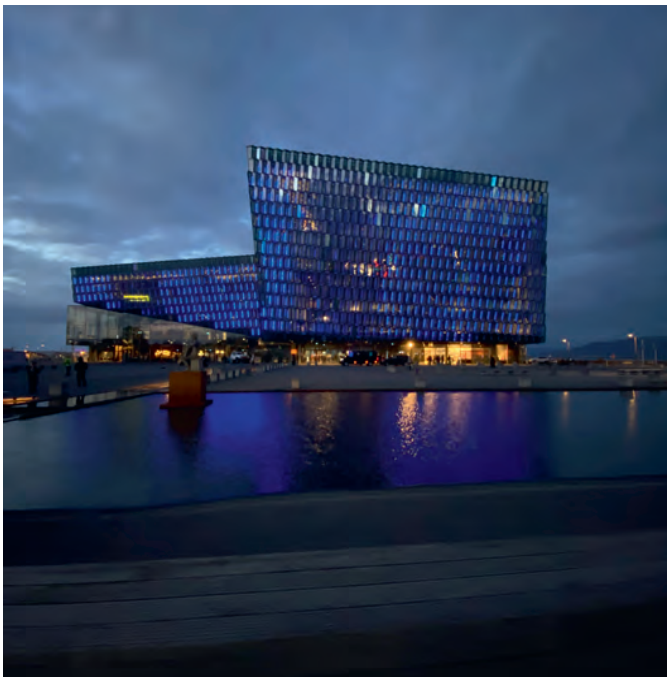
Afterwards, we met with Jessica Sól Helgudottir from Iceland Pro Travel, a company that provides individual journey through Iceland i.e. as group tours, incentives, and self-drive tours. Flexibility and a high degree of team work are required to meet all the demands by customers to create a unique experience. Of course, the weather conditions can always cause a change in plans!

A Day in Iceland's Vibrant Capital!

On Saturday, 21st October, our day began with an independent exploration of the charming Reykjavik Old Town. Beyond the picturesque streets and charming shops, we discovered the city's unique cultural diversity and its creative energies. It's worth noting that Reykjavik has a vibrant arts scene, deeply intertwined with the city's identity. Next on our itinerary was a visit to the iconic Hallgrímskirkja, Reykjavik's most recognizable landmark. Not only is it a religious symbol, but it also stands as a prime example of modernist sacred architecture. Its sleek elegance reflects Iceland's penchant for functional design. This modernist church's architecture, designed by Guðjón Samúelsson, showcases the nature of Iceland. Some of us also ascended the tower to witness breathtaking panoramic views of Reykjavik and its surroundings.

One of the day's highlights was our experience of Icelandic geothermal pool culture at Nauthólsvík. Iceland's location on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, a deep tectonic fault line, provides an abundance of hot springs and geothermal activities. Soaking in this water isn't just relaxing; it offers health benefits thanks to the rich minerals present in the water. The geothermal water in Nauthólsvík is a unique blend of hot geothermal water and cold sea water. This combination allows for both warmth and a refreshing sea breeze, creating a one-of-a-kind bathing experience, while being surrounded by a stunning view of the city. It's also a place to meet locals since hot pools and bathing are very much integrated into the Icelandic culture. It was a perfect way to unwind from the week filled with many new impressions and experiences.

Afterwards, we went back to the city centre and had a private tour through Reykjavik's government district, the harbour, and the impressive Harpa Concert Hall and Conference Centre. This tour offered us insight into how Reykjavik participates on the international stage and enlightened us on Iceland's political and cultural significance. The architecture of the Harpa Centre was inspired by Iceland's natural basalt columns, and its glass façade reflects the play of light on the country's landscapes. We ended our day with dinner at Hotel Cabin, before taking the bus to our guesthouse near the Keflavik airport.



Fun Fact: One thing that you're unlikely to find in Iceland is a Big Mac and Starbucks' Pumpkin Spice Latte!

McDonalds used to have a few restaurants in Reykjavik from 1993 - 2009 but they vanished after the financial crash in 2008. And while Icelanders love coffee (One Icelander drinks ~5.4 kg per year!), you won't find a Starbucks in Iceland either. Coffee enthusiasts will find plenty of local coffee shops instead!



Bless Ísland! :(

The day began in the early hours, with groggy students preparing for the journey ahead. The flight provided a peaceful atmosphere, allowing everyone to rest and reflect on the multitude of experiences from the week in Iceland. Upon our arrival at BER airport, we swiftly collected our luggage, eager to begin the final leg of our journey back to Stralsund. A small bus awaited us, carrying a group of tired yet content travelers. The exhaustion from the eventful week, combined with the long travel day, was palpable among the students. In the evening, the bus pulled into into Stralsund, marking the end of our incredible journey. Everyone reminisced about the many new experiences and adventures shared during the excursion. Our return journey from Iceland was a blend of weariness and satisfaction.

The excursion, filled with unforgettable moments, diverse cultural encounters, and the natural beauty of Iceland, had left a lasting impact on each participant.



Learning Outcomes

In the end, considering the multitude of experiences on this study trip, we can say with a clear conscience that Iceland's relatively young tourism landscape really offered us a unique opportunity to gain insights into the up-to-date practices within the tourism industry. As students at a traditionally practice-oriented university, it is particularly exciting for us to be able to see, feel and thus understand the theories on which we are based both in our undergraduate studies and now in our master's degree through a directly tangible reference on site.

The Icelandic local interplay of contemporary challenges, be it in areas such as sustainability or economic as well as infrastructural framework conditions, created a particularly clear picture of how often young companies deal with the potential of such a special country and at the same time ensure long-term growth. One good example of this is the way Iceland's relatively new DMO uses the wonderful tool of storytelling to deal with the challenges posed by the country's specific environmental conditions, true to the motto "turn challenges into opportunities, make a snowball and make it roll!". If you look at the development of young companies such as Fjallsárlón or Glacier Paradise in recent years, we can see how these companies, despite their limited economic resources, are keen to ensure that they operate in an environmentally sustainable manner and therefore leave a minimal environmental impact at these special locations. We also recognized through the way in which these tourism companies have grown and are planning to grow in the future, how they are gradually adapting to specific environmental conditions, e.g. the melting of glaciers, or the lack of infrastructure at touristic spots.

By meeting with different tourism players from the industry, we were able to reflect on what we had learned through discussions as well as to consolidate and deepen our knowledge on the spot by means of professional dialogue.

The close contact with Icelandic people and their way to handle their businesses gave the students the chance to practice and develop their intercultural skills. Furthermore, we had the chance to grow closer as a group during the trip. All in all, the excursion has broadened our horizons beyond witnessing the truly outstanding natural attractions and unique culture that Iceland has to offer.



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All pictures (with the exception of the two lower photos on p. 17; they come from Ben Stewart and Steve Smith on Unsplash) and contents are contributed and designed by the students of the the master degree course Tourism Development Strategies. In addition, the homepage (www.hochschule-stralsund.de/tds/) provides an article as well as a creative video about the excursion to Iceland.