



ICELANDIC TOURISM  
RESEARCH CENTRE



# Iceland country report

Storytelling at the Settlement Centre of Iceland

Björg Árnadóttir

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# Iceland country report

Storytelling at the Settlement Centre of Iceland

## Background

In the next four chapters the background of the project here reported will be explained. This entails introducing the idea of storytelling and explaining how the tradition of storytelling in Iceland has its role in national culture, along with a general outline of tourism in the country and West Iceland in particular.

### 1.1 Introduction

The Settlement Centre of Iceland (I. Landnámssetur, [www.landnam.is](http://www.landnam.is)) is in Borgarnes, a town of two thousand inhabitants in West Iceland, approximately a 75 km drive from the capital, Reykjavík. The centre presents the story of the settlement in Iceland which was first permanently settled by people of Norse descent under the ninth century. It also tells the story of the Viking and Iceland's first poet Egil Skallagrimsson as told in Egil's Saga.

The story of the settlement in Iceland is remarkable not least for being the only example in the world where written contemporary sources exist of settlement in an uninhabited country. In the Settlement Centre stories from the past are lifted out of the parchment and told in manifold manifestations, both through the complicated visual and interactive mediums of today and the simple methods of the storyteller who captures his audience without the help of any tools. Both methods, and everything between, are used in the Settlement Centre to get tourists to understand and experience the island's history and cultural heritage.

In addition, many of those involved in tourism in West Iceland use story-telling in their business as there is a strong legacy of story-telling and many historic sites to visit in the area. This development has taken place under the terms of a co-operation effort by the Western Iceland tourist services. Their collaboration emerged from the introduction of cluster thinking by the Icelandic Trade Council, through a series of workshops around Iceland in 2005-2009. The first region to host the workshops was West Iceland and the result was a cluster called All Senses, working under the motto *Competition through Co-operation*.

In this report the methods used in the Settlement Centre to tell stories will be recounted as well as the vision of the entrepreneur's behind the Centre and their ways of furthering tourism in Borgarnes and the whole of West-Iceland. The aim of the report is to demonstrate the impact of storytelling evolution on tourism and destination development in the region.

## **1.2 Method**

This case study on storytelling in destination development in Iceland was made at the initiative of the Nordic Innovation Centre (NICe, [www.nordicinnovation.net](http://www.nordicinnovation.net)) in the winter of 2009-2010. Comparable studies have been made simultaneously in Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland. The Nordic tourism sector has strong potential for further innovation and development. NICe has through this research, initiated discussions on how the Nordic countries can collaborate and jointly develop the region in order to strengthen the Nordic tourism industry through the means of creative storytelling destination development.

Between the participating countries emphasis differ in accordance with the case study chosen in each country. In the Icelandic case the emphasis is on the literary heritage and how it mirrors the policy of the authorities – or lack of policy – and the day to day reality in the tourist business. Here the emphasis is on what methods are used to tell stories based on Icelandic cultural heritage and how the tourist business co-operates in using stories to strengthen local tourism.

The Icelandic case study looks into the Settlement Centre of Iceland, one of many storytelling destinations in West Iceland which have emerged in recent years and are using the Icelandic cultural and/or literary heritage to offer experiences to the tourist. The case is selected jointly by the author of the report and The Icelandic Tourism Research Centre (I. Rannsóknarmiðstöð ferðamála, [www.rmfi.is](http://www.rmfi.is)). However, before the writer of the report came into the picture, the Research Centre's attention had already been focused on the co-operation taking place amongst West Iceland tourist businesses and the rich cultural heritage which service providers in the area can work with to broaden the spectrum of tourist services and thus lengthen the tourist season.

### **1.2.1 A choice of a voice**

The definition of storytelling in this report is very broad and in fact covers whatever influences thought and creates experiences. According to this broad definition of the term, journalism is a way of telling a story and so is scientific research. I must admit I had some problems choosing the means to address my readers. Should it be the voice of the scientist as I am documenting a research project

or should it be the voice of the journalist and the storyteller since I am covering the subject storytelling?

Another dilemma is my closeness to the object of study and the closeness of Icelanders to one another. My approach bears the mark of having been written by an Icelander who takes an interest in the people behind the jobs. Throughout many a century a strong tradition of the Sagas in a formerly isolated island country has been coloured by man's interest in his fellow man or as expressed in the ancient poem Hávamál "Man is the joy of a Man". And man is also a man's subject in a story.

My approach has the markings of a small nation's belief that every person counts. The smallness of this island's community is the reason I know almost all of my interviewees and have a hard time trying not looking at them as persons and viewing them instead as nameless research objects. Therefore all subjects are referred to by name.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore it would have been impossible to write about the Settlement Centre without mentioning the names of the entrepreneurs behind it. The bond between them and their company is so strong that when my interviewees talked about the centre they made no distinction between the centre itself and the people behind it.

Since I had started to think like a journalist I encountered new problems with finding my voice. In my opinion the difference between journalism and qualitative research is that in research people become objects and the information all the objects give is mixed together in a bowl for analysis whence a conclusion is drawn. Journalism emphasises, on the other hand, the voices of individuals and records who said what. Since I have worked in both fields I wonder if quality journalism is less reliable than the methods of qualitative research. I did not come to a conclusion but I chose to use mixed methods. I use the voice of the story-telling journalist but honour the precision of the researcher.

### **1.2.2 A text is a tissue of quotations**

The French literary critic and theorist Roland Barthes has drawn an analogy between text and textiles, declaring that a text is a tissue of quotation drawn from innumerable centres of culture (Barthes, 1977). This description fits well with the reporting produced here, spun out of quotes from written and oral sources. For the writing of this study six in-depth interviews were conducted with selected members related to the Settlement Centre. Also 19 shorter interviews were snowballed as a consequence of these in-depth interviews and three participant's observations were undertaken. In-depth interviews were conducted with the following persons listed in table 1:

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<sup>1</sup> The Icelandic tradition will be followed by referring to people by Christian names instead of family names.

**Table 1:** The in-depth interviewees

Interviewed persons	Job title	Interview number	Page
Aðalsteinn Davíðsson	Nordic specialist and tourist guide	1	1-6
Bergur Þorsteinsson	Manager of Snorrastofa	2	1-10
Kjartan Ragnarsson	Head of the Board of The Settlement Centre	3	1-15
Kjartan Ragnarsson	Head of the Board of The Settlement Centre	4	1-20
Kjartan Ragnarsson and Sigríður Margrét Guðmundsdóttir	Head of the Board and manager of The Settlement Centre	5	1-11
Þórdís Arthúrsdóttir	Manager of All Senses	6	1-16

Behind each quote from the interviews there is a number in a bracket (e.g. 4:13) which indicates which interview and which page the quote comes from. Shorter interviews were made with the following persons listed in table 2.

**Table 2:** List of interviewees in shorter interviews

Interviewed persons	Job title	Number of interview	Pages
Bergþóra Andrésdóttir	Farmer and story-teller	7	1-2
Brandon Presser	Writer, photographer, adventurer	8	1
Eiríkur Þorláksson	Specialist, Ministry of Culture and Education	9	2
Guðrún Jónsdóttir	Curator, Museum of Borgarfjord	10	1-2
Helga Haraldsdóttir	Director of Tourism Department Ministry of Energy, Industry and	11	1-2
Hrefna B. Jónsdóttir	CEO, West Iceland Regional Office	12	1-3
Inga Dóra Halldórsdóttir	Manager, Centre of Life Long Learning, Borgarnes	13	1
Ingi Hans Jónsson	Story-teller	14	1
Kristín Einarsdóttir	Teacher, Borgarnes	16	1
Páll Brynjarsson	Mayor of Borgarnes	17	1-4
Pétur Rafnsson	Former Head of the Icelandic Tourism Association	18	1-3
Rögnvaldur Guðmundsson	President of The Saga Trail	19	1-2
Sigríður Margrét Guðmundsdóttir	Manager of The Settlement Centre	20	1-3
Sigríður Sigurbórsdóttir	Architect	21	1
Steinar Berg	Campsite and restaurant owner	22	1-2
Sumarliði Ísleifsson	Investigator and leader of INOR	23	1-2
Unnur Halldórsdóttir	Head of the Icelandic Tourism Association and hotel-keeper	24	1-3
Vífill Karlsson	Economist, West Iceland Regional Office	25	1-4

These interviewees were chosen through snow balling. The main in-depth interviews often revealed more than was expected and one interview led to another as can happen when applying journalistic

methods. All the in-depth interviews were semi-structured with answers being sought for those questions made by all the participating researchers in the NICe project and used in all their interviews in the different Nordic countries. In this report interviewees are not quoted directly contrary to the qualitative research tradition. Instead a journalistic method is used where the interviews are narrated for the purpose of clarity and readability. All interviews have been read and commented on by those interviewed together with the context they are used in.

**1.2.3 Participant observation**

Participant observations were undertaken in three locations (see table 3). A participant observation was made in The Settlement Centre one day in January 2010. Earlier I had experienced all parts of the activities and attended many of the shows of the Centre’s theatre and participated in a tour of Borgarfjord with a guide from the Centre. A participant observation was also made at a meeting and a work-session with the members of All Senses, in a visit at the farm Eyrarkot and by trying out the digital guide of The Settlement Centre. The services offered by the Settlement Centre are all detailed in the background report on the Centre.

**Table 3:** Sites of participant observation

Place	Number of observation	Pages
All Senses meeting	26	1-5
Farm Eyrarkot	27	1-4
The Settlement Centre	28	1-19

**1.2.4 Secondary observations**

Records are also kept in the form of informal conversations I have had with people about the Settlement Centre, All Senses and West Iceland tourism operators. In addition to that I incorporate a number of written, published and unpublished, documents as well as the websites of the parties covered, as mentioned in the references.

**1.2.5 Serviceability**

I have tried to write the following report in a way which best suits those whom are interested in getting acquainted with story-telling in tourism, be they scholars, public servants, tourism service providers, politicians or anyone interested in the field. One of the reasons for the interviewees being referred to by name is to make it easier for those who need to make further studies to find the subjects involved. For the same reason the urls to websites of all companies and institutions are given in parenthesis after first being mentioned. I hope the following pages will prove useful to those

interested in getting acquainted with culture-based tourism services in Iceland in general, and the role of story-telling in destination development in particular.

I want to thank Dr. Edward H. Huijbens and Bogi Bjarnason for assistance in writing in the English language and Dr. Edward H. Huijbens for mentoring in the making of the report. I also want to thank the Reykjavík Akademy, which I am a member of for the use of their facilities while working on this report.

## Storytelling

Iceland is an island in the North-Atlantic about two hour's flight westward from Scandinavia. Icelandair might be the only airline in the world where stewardesses greet passengers when touching ground with the words: "Dear Passengers. Welcome home".<sup>2</sup>

The reason for the stewardesses' homey or provincial manner might be the small population of the nation and the geographical isolation of the cold water island. Iceland's population of 319,000 predominantly resides along the coast with approximately 60 percent living in and around the capital Reykjavík. The island itself is however quite large or 103,000 km<sup>2</sup>, making the country sparsely inhabited since about four-fifth of it is unpopulated and/or uninhabitable. The territory is characterized by a rugged, volcanic topography, glaciated mountains, an uninhabited high-plateau desert interior and fjord coastal landscapes to the east and west.

Travel in Iceland can be rough, due to weather and poor quality of the roads. Trips between places often make for a memorable experience and the subject of a good story once back home. The country is full of stories – the nature is and the people are. A good guide with story-telling talent and environmental intelligence can change an uneventful drive on a foggy day to a treasure of tales of events, people and supernatural things.

I would like to start this coverage by telling a story. It stems from my field observations and it mirrors the views of the common tourist service provider of the term "storytelling", and really the whole of the "literary nation" as Icelanders sometimes call themselves.

On a freezing cold morning in early 2010 I drive up the road that spans the 75 km from Reykjavík to Borgarnes. In The Old English Fishing Lodge Guesthouse at the River Langá I meet with the majority of the members of The All Senses Tourism Cluster who gather six times a year to exchange experiences and information. During the work session they discuss the challenges and opportunities of their businesses and then they ask me to introduce the Nordic Study of Storytelling in Destination Development. I proudly accept but later find it difficult to explain to the group the broad definition of the term storytelling. The manager of All Senses has told me that 16 out of the 20 members offer their guests some kind of experiences through stories. Still it is hard for me to explain the concept of the storytelling study. Certainly the group accepts the idea of storytelling of the Icelandic case, The Settlement Centre because of the centre's storytelling sessions, the theatre stage and the traditional storyline of the exhibitions. But what has the consumption of shellfish, as in the Swedish case of the NICe funded project, to do with storytelling? In the minds of Icelanders the word storytelling paints a

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<sup>2</sup> In Icelandic of course.

picture of an eccentric old storyteller whose words and facial expressions enrich stories from the past. The Icelandic words *frásögn* (E. storytelling) and *frásagnarlist* (E. art of storytelling) are strongly linked in the minds of Icelanders with the spoken and written word since Icelandic culture has for centuries been built on the art of words and other art forms barely existed until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After a discussion about wording we manage though to agree that storytelling in tourism refers to tourist services that appeal to *all senses* and we agree that working with all senses fits well with another trend the All Senses cluster promotes – *slow travel* (26:1).

## **2.1 From product to process**

Another of All Senses slogans is *Experience the whole of West Iceland* (All Senses Group, 2008). According to the Slow Travel Community people experience a deeper type of travel by not rushing between all the must-sees and rather delve into one place, to intensively experience a community (slowtravel.com, 2010). A global trend in the experience industry is to “build an entire business or parts of businesses round a story. This might be a hotel, a restaurant, a tourist attraction, an event or a destination (Mossberg, 2008: 195-196). Like stories recounted in oral or written forms an experience narrative has to have a valued “point” as well as selections of events to the goal state, an ordering of events, causal sequences and demarcations signs (Mossberg, 2008).

Research indicates that tourism business development is moving from the products to the processes taking place around the tourist which leads the tourists to actively construct their own consumption experience through personalized interaction (Mossberg, 2007). This development from product to process can be compared to the forefront ideas in educational studies since tourism and education both provide the consumer and/or student with knowledge through experience.

Constructivist educational theories view knowledge and experience as a constructed entity made by individuals through learning processes. Knowledge cannot be transmitted from one person to another because it will always have to be constructed and reconstructed by every individual. According to postmodern approaches to educational issues knowledge is to be seen as relativistic i.e. nothing is absolute, everything varies according to time and space and therefore nothing should be taken for granted (Illeris, 2007, Vygotsky, 1978). That is why the role of the knowledge facilitator, may it be a teacher or a tourist guide, is to help the learner to get his or her own understanding out of the content of the given information.

When viewing tourism in this light the customers become co-producers in the tourism experience (Mossberg, 2007) and they are not merely interested in buying the products but rather in buying the stories and the experience behind the product (Mossberg 2007). Storytelling in destination

development revolves around the tourist service delivering the tourist the proper tools and the material to work with their own experience of the area's nature, history and culture.

## **2.2 Icelandic medieval literature**

Herein the main focus will be on the fountain that the Icelandic storytelling tradition is to Icelandic tourism, both the literature which educated men wrote on parchment in medieval times and the folk beliefs as it appears in fairy tales and folk arts.

### **2.2.1 The invisible cultural heritage**

As the cultural heritage of Iceland mainly rests in books it is not very visible or tangible. Archaeological remains are rare. The cultural heritage is mostly verbal and related to places, with vivid descriptions of the past in the old literature. Historical sites in Iceland are filled with memories instead of buildings. Hence, tourists can visit historical places without seeing anything at all until a storyteller or a tourist handbook recites the story to them. Promoting this basic part of Icelandic culture that is connected to one of the world's smallest native tongue, poses a veritable challenge to the tourist industry<sup>3</sup> (Olrich, 2001).

The ancient heritage, the manuscripts, can be viewed in museums, but old tomes on their own have little interest for the tourist. Culture-based tourism in Iceland therefore revolves around objectifying the Icelandic cultural legacy and making it visible. The author Andri Snær Magnason writes (cited in Olrich, 2001) that all nations must have their visible attraction and sign of their culture and names the Mona Lisa, the Great Wall of China, the pyramids, the Statue of Liberty, amongst others. He recommends that around the *King's Manuscript of the Poetic Edda* (I. Konungsbók Eddukvæða) there should be an environment that enables it to become the sign of Icelandic culture that attracts tourists who want to learn about Nordic mythology in the Edda which Snorri Sturluson put on parchment a thousand<sup>3</sup> years ago (Olrich, 2001) and Icelanders can still read.

The Poetic Edda is still kept in a locked vault at the Árni Magnússon Institute (I. Árnastofnun, [www.arnastofnun.is](http://www.arnastofnun.is)), where guests need special permission and an escort to see it. Yet a great awakening has occurred in tourist services all over the country around telling stories that relate to the cultural heritage. This is not least the case in West Iceland. It is not without a reason that the West Iceland Marketing Office (I. Markaðsstofa Vesturlands, [www.vesturland.is](http://www.vesturland.is)) uses the brand *The Saga Land* for marketing the area.

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<sup>3</sup> Icelandic is a North Germanic language. Its closest relatives are Faroese and some Norwegian dialects.

## 2.2.2 The story of the settlement

The story of the settlement in Iceland is remarkable not least for being the only example in the world where written contemporary sources exist of settlement in an uninhabited country.

Following information is sought from the Settlement Exhibition in Reykjavik which is a part of the Reykjavík City Museum:<sup>4</sup>

“Iceland was settled during the Viking Age, which is dated from 793 to about 1050 AD. Before that time, Europeans sailed mostly along the coasts and on inland seas. Better ships and navigational techniques meant that the Vikings could venture out into the open sea in search of new lands. The settlers came to Iceland from Scandinavia, the British Isles and other countries but in the 10<sup>th</sup> century Norse culture was predominant. Evidence of this is provided by the language, material culture, genetic research and social structures that developed in Iceland“.

This conventional version of history, tells of Ingólfur Arnason, who came to Iceland in year 874 as the first permanent settler and that the Norse settlers of Iceland wanted to escape the tyranny of King Harald Fairhair of Norway. Today many scholars doubt that this was the main reason for people to settle in a new island. They might have been looking for a better life due to overpopulation or war at home or simply in search of adventures. And the slaves of course, who may have comprised a considerable proportion of the settlers, did not come of their own accord.

It is noticeable that Icelanders do not use the words Viking and Viking Age when talking about the settlers and the Age of Settlement. A Viking society might never have been founded here nor were Viking expeditions entered into and that the aggressions perpetrated by northern men in mainland Europe and on the British Isles paint a limited picture of medieval Northern societies and an outright wrong one of the Icelandic one in its first centuries. On the other hand there can be no denying that Iceland is an offspring of the Viking era and that the expansionist drives of the western land discoveries of Greenland and America, which originated in Iceland, was of the same kind as the Viking expeditions themselves (Kjartansson, 2003).

What the Icelanders refer to as the Golden Age of Icelandic society lasted from the settlement until the middle of the 13th century. With the spreading of the Bubonic plague, the downfall of the Norwegian court that had been the target group for Icelandic writers and the transfer of the state

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<sup>4</sup> A Viking-Age longhouse, dated to around 930 AD was found in archaeological excavations in the centre of Reykjavík in 2001. The ruins of the longhouse and a part of a man made structure – a turf wall, have been preserved and are now on display “on site”. These are the oldest archaeological findings in Reykjavik. The Settlement Exhibition in Reykjavík is focused on the interpretation of the ruins, and by multimedia technique, guests can find out about life of the people who lived there and see a model of the long house.

power to Denmark, the interest for Icelandic literature dwindled (Guðmundsson, 2009) and thereupon the stimulus for writing. For seven hundred years the Icelandic nation lived in abject poverty and isolation and suffered from illnesses and natural disasters, but opinions vary as to what effect this had on Icelandic culture and will not be discussed here.

### 2.2.3 Eddas and Sagas

The myths and legends of the ancient Scandinavians survived better than those of any other Germanic people thanks to the most extensive vernacular literature of any medieval society, which was written in Iceland (Andersen, 2010). The literary treasure is unique in many ways but mainly because many forms of literature and studies that survived in Iceland have no contemporary equals in European culture. Some of the literature that was only documented in Iceland, shed light on Nordic and Germanic cultural history which otherwise would have been cloaked in darkness (Olrich, 2001).

During the first centuries of settlement in Iceland, before literacy, the only literature in a formal sense was in verse transmitted from generation to generation. Only a little of those verses were ever recorded. The first book in Icelandic is *The Book of Icelanders* (I. Íslendingabók) written by Ari the Wise (I. Ari fróði) in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century. At that time Latin was the learned language which means that with Ari the course of writing in the mother tongue was set. The Book of Icelanders is a historical work dealing with early Icelandic history; in addition to describing the story of the settlement, it includes a discussion of the conversion to Christianity, the development of the Althing, and lists all the law speakers until that time. Although in modern times the veracity of the history is in doubt it still is an invaluable source of knowledge about the development of Icelandic society in the first centuries of settlement (Kristjánsson, 2007).

The best known specimens of Icelandic literature are the *Eddas* and the *Sagas*:

*The Eddas* are a collection of Old Norse poems, songs, and some prose, containing stories about the Norse gods and legendary heroes most likely written in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century. It is known for a fact that Snorri Sturluson (1179 –1241), the most famous writer ever born in Iceland, was the author of the *Prose Edda*, a narrative Norse mythology, the *Skáldskaparmál*, a book of poetic language, *Háttatal*, a list of verse forms and *Heimskringla*, a history of the Norwegian kings (Kristjánsson, 2007).

*The Sagas* are prose histories mostly describing events that took place in Iceland in the 10<sup>th</sup> and early 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, during the so-called Saga Age, in all likelihood written on either side of the year 1200, and the last ones around 1350. Most of them are written during the 13<sup>th</sup> century though. Jónas

Kristjánsson, one of Iceland's most outstanding manuscript scholars writes about the remarkable development in the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century that took place when (2007: 22):

“Icelanders began to write Sagas; rich and expansive descriptions and accounts of people and events from different places and different times, ranging from the contemporary world to the remotest past, from the author's own valley to far-off foreign lands. The chief sources of these written Sagas were the oral traditions that were zealously cultivated, especially by those who had no book-learning. The first Sagas have typical twelfth-century features: dry information of the kind earliest historians provide, or incredible and didactic elements of the kind typical of hagiography. But gradually these two streams merge into one: sober fact and exaggerated fancy, the real and the imagined come together in a seemly coherence which is the hallmark of the classical Íslendingasögur, ‘Sagas of Icelanders’”.

The Sagas are the most popular of Icelandic medieval literature. There are forty of them, and together they form one of seven categories of the old Icelandic tales<sup>5</sup>. Their subjects are the people living in the country from the settlement era until the earlier part of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Usually they are about chieftains, but not as a rule as common people are also featured.

*Njál's Saga* is the best known of The Sagas. It is the only one that takes place in the southern part of Iceland. Other well known Sagas are *Egil's Saga*, *Laxdæla Saga*, *Gunnlaug's Saga* and *Eyrbyggja Saga*, they all take place in the Western part of Iceland. The Settlement Centre reveals The Egil's Sagas as well as The Book of Icelanders in its exhibitions and shows. For stylistic reasons it is thought that Snorri Sturluson wrote Egil's Saga but the authors of the Sagas are not known. Egill as well as Snorri lived in the farm Borg but his main literary achievements Snorri wrote in Reykholt, which has for a long time been a tourist attraction because of its history. In recent years the Culture and Research Centre Snorrastofa ([www.snorrastofa](http://www.snorrastofa)) has been built in Reykholt. The nation of Norway has especially shown great interest and support to the destination development of Reykholt, due to the fondness that Snorri Sturluson had for writing about the history and heritage of Norway (2:5).

#### **2.2.4 The reliability of the literary legacy**

There are various problems connected with telling the history of Iceland in a tourist friendly manner. The uncertainty about the age of settlement itself and longstanding disputes over the reliability of the literary legacy poses for example challenges.

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<sup>5</sup> Other include: Kings' Sagas, Bishops' Sagas, Contemporary Saga, Sagas of chivalry, Heroic Sagas and Saints lives.

The year 874 AD has long been carved in the Icelandic mind as the year when Ingólfur Arnarsson first set foot in Reykjavík as the first settler to reside permanently. The 1100 years anniversary of the settlement in Iceland was celebrated with great aplomb in year 1974, and on the occasion two of the ancient Icelandic manuscripts were returned home, by the Danes who had safeguarded them. Many scholars, not least the archaeologists, question nevertheless that date, and in recent years the theory based on archaeological excavations in The Westman Islands with new dating technology has shown that the history of Icelandic settlement can be stretched a 150 years further back. Therefore Icelanders might have to set the year 720 AD in stone.

There the accountability of the Icelandic literary legacy comes into question. It is not known what Icelanders of earlier centuries thought about the origins of the Sagas but we may be confident that most people accepted them as a valid history – as they continued to do to in our own time (Kristjánsson, 2007). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century a theory was launched that these Sagas were created and fully formed as oral narratives, which were subsequently recorded unaltered just as they were told. The theory has been called *Theory of free-prose* (I. Sagnfestukenningin) and includes an element of wishful thinking of the Sagas being reliable as historical sources. According to another theory, the so-called *Theory of book-prose* (I. Bókfestukenningin) the Sagas were composed by “creative writers on the bases of all sorts of material; old poetry, oral traditions, written sources, literary model and even contemporary events which the author transmuted to the credit or discredit of Saga-age men and women” (Kristjánsson, 2007: 205).

Today no one would expect to find much history in the Sagas written in the later stages of the genre’s evolution. But Sagas written in the early stage have customarily been regarded as reliable historical sources, almost to the present day. It is in fact evident that they are written as history – according to the standards of the time. Historians have now put them aside and for the most part ignore them as historical sources. The rejection creates a vacuum for Icelandic history in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> century” (Kristjánsson, 2007), which archaeologists are busy filling with their teaspoons, toothbrushes and tephrachronology.

## 2.3 Folk beliefs

“In recent years the notion has been entertained that Icelanders could be considered more superstitious than other European nations. Icelanders famously, or rather infamously, tend to believe in the existence of ghosts and premonitions, many of them are said to believe in the existence of unseen creatures and even learned men of the most modern of modern studies, engineers and other technical people, do not dear other than to consider the wishes of these unseen and their invisible lairs when they lay their rulers on the maps to plan residential neighbourhoods, roads and bridges” (Davíðsson, 2010: 1).

Each year Iceland is visited by many foreign tourists in search of information about Icelandic folk beliefs, not least their “fairy beliefs”. Ethnologists and others try to convince them that even if studies show that Icelanders do not outright reject the supernatural they do not see elves, ghosts and trolls behind every hill, but it is more complicated (Gunnell, 2007).

In a wide reaching study of beliefs in various supernatural things performed by the University of Iceland in 1974 it was found that, among other things, 5% of Icelanders had seen elves and that 65% thought that unseen creatures possibly, probably or definitively existed. The study was repeated in 2006, but since the response rate was only 44%, it was repeated a year later with a pool of 300 and a good response was produced which corroborated the 2006 study (Haraldsson, 2007, Gunnell, 2007). The result was that although scepticism about the existence of various supernatural things had increased in these 30 years a majority still believed that the unseen creatures existed or could exist. From the statistical findings of the 1974, 2006 and 2007 studies it can be claimed that a large group of Icelanders have had mystical experiences and that the instance of these experiences is high on an international level and that their supernatural beliefs are stronger than the Western average (Haraldsson, 2007).

A poll from the newspaper DV in 1998 roused international interest showing that the majority of a random sample of Icelanders answered yes when asked if they believed in elves. The poll had the restriction though of giving only strictly yes or no options. For many Icelanders the matter is not that simple (Hafstein, 2001). Ethnographer Árni Björnsson has posited the idea that people have always told fairytales for their own amusement but few people actually believed in them. Another ethnographer, Valdimar Hafsteinsson, however, thinks that folk beliefs are sincere and make a difference in people’s lives (Sigurðsson, 2002). Studies show that Icelanders share the beliefs of Prince Hamlet who 500 years ago said that there are more things in heaven and earth than are visible with bare eyes (Gunnell, 2007).

### 2.3.1 Origins and preservation

To its nature Icelandic folk beliefs are not very different from those of the neighbouring nations. They are tales assembled from new ideas brought here in the settlement era, both from Scandinavia and the British Isles, and their adaptation. "This cultural mix meshes well with what written accounts tell of the population's origins and the genetic research that shows that from the beginning here was a mixture of different nationalities"(Sigurðsson, 2002:1). Still Icelanders are exceptional among European nations in the maintenance of folk tales, as they started the collection six to seven hundred years ahead of their European neighbours, where the collection of folk tales only started with romanticism at the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It can be claimed with some certainty that the first local collectors of folk tales were those that penned *The Book of Settlement* (I. Landnámabók) at the time and among other things collected a lot of tales about local place names (Davíðsson, 2010).

"There is no question that Iceland's legendary material is of unique importance, not only for Icelanders but also foreign scholars. The key problem is, however, that unlike in other neighbouring countries which all have archives, the Icelandic legends have never been thoroughly indexed, catalogued and classified according to international systems" (Gunnell, 2004: 613). This has made all research on the topic problematic. Fortunately through the last years this has been changing through the pioneering work of constructing a *Stories Base* (I.Sagnagrunnur, [www.sagnagrunnur.is](http://www.sagnagrunnur.is)), the first complete on-line digital archive of written Icelandic legendary material (Gunnell, 2004).

### 2.3.2 Understanding folk beliefs

"Maybe there are some grounds for the rumours about our superstitions, but maybe they have sprung from a misunderstanding, or rather a lack of understanding of the culture and the land that has formed us Icelanders," writes Nordic specialist and tourist guide, Aðalsteinn Davíðsson (2010: 5). For him there is no problem involved in explaining Icelandic folk beliefs to foreign tourists. He prefers to talk about folk art, the art of storytelling and of the respect for the supernatural and the folk stories. He says Icelanders today get embarrassed when the topic arises, saying that they do not believe in the supernatural, but they can't refuse its existence. He tells tourists that he himself is neither proud nor ashamed of the folk beliefs. It is just a part of him and that it serves a purpose (1:1).

The practical use of fables, according to Aðalsteinn, is for example to warn of danger. Instead of explaining why to avoid certain places or behaviours an effective story is created to warn people. Stories about spots under a particular spell only recount various misfortunes if a spell was upset or disturbed. Likewise their child rearing value is that instead of cautioning kids morally they are taught

a story about the consequences of certain actions. Last but not least, the stories fill the function of helping people find their way, as nature's appearance changes when inhabited by stories that help people memorize the lay of the land (1:4).

“Once there were no roads in Iceland, but often the distances between farms were many kilometres or dozens of kilometres long with many hazards. There were no road maps, no one had a compass. The only hope was to identify markers, mountains, hills or even knolls and rocks when view of mountains and long stretches was obstructed. There were no signs or road markers. He who could not read the landscape would die from exposure. Landscapes cannot be learned without names identifying markers - like anatomy can't be learned without names for muscles and bones. A part of teaching the young generation the topographical names was to connect them with stories and memories, to fill them with inhabitants and life even to colour the stories in a hue that signalled what to expect in each location. In hazardous places dangerous monsters dwelt but benevolent creatures lived in the good ones. Artfulness and a love for storytelling then enriched the features so that many of the stories connected to geographical aliases are literary treasures onto themselves although lives do not depend on them as in the olden days”(Davíðsson, 2010: 2).

Aðalsteinn says that in most countries people want to protect places loved by the nation, such as old ruins and trees. Icelanders want to protect places that folklore has made memorable.–they want to preserve the myth. Even engineers fashion bends in the roads they draw because they respect the stories and want them to live on (1:4). In folk tales you can on the one hand find historical artefacts and on the other the fiction of national soul, as people have long believed that folk tales and folk poems were created without the aid of special authors, but spun by the nation itself (1:4).

### **2.3.3 The healing powers of stories**

Although some use stories as entertainment alone, tales are in the oldest sense a healing art. Storytelling is the simplest and most accessible ingredient for healing, says Clarissa Pinkola Estés, one of many scientists who study the healing powers of storytelling. Fairytales, myths and stories provide an understanding which can sharpen our perception of the path left to us by nature. The instructions found in a story reassure us that the path exists and can lead people deeper into knowing themselves (Pinkola Estés, 1992). Myths and other ancient stories are sometimes likened to the dreams of nations and evidently myths and dreams have many things in common. They are built on symbols and a creative “language“ that originate deep in our roots and consciousness, and which we all seem

to sense or understand in a similar way, wherever we come from in this world (Bjarnadóttir, 2010). Psychologists Krippner and Feinstein write that with the intricacies of individual identity and the myriad role options allowed by complex societies of today, we need guidance that is highly personal to our unique circumstances: “Weaving your memories into a meaningful sequence of stories about your past can deepen your relationship with your own mythology and place your self-understanding in a richer contexts” (1988: 78-79). Stories are therefore paths to self-awareness, they are mirrors for the souls of individuals as well as nations and they are collective. They help us understand the past and give us guidance for the future.

## **Capitalizing on culture**

All in all the intangible heritage of the Icelanders is a key component of the Iceland culture. In terms of tourism, there has been an awakening in the potentials of culture-based tourism the last decade or so. Below notions of culture-based tourism will be examined in an international and Icelandic context.

### **3.1 Culture and new trends in travelling**

The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS, 1999) operates under the assumption that the cultural heritage, both the palpable and non-palpable, belongs to all mankind. Each individual has the right to understand, respect and maintain all the encompassing wealth stored in monuments and sites. The resolution reckons that it is important to make joint memories for communities through such relics and they are furthermore considered valuable in the creation of jobs and income.

The term “culture” is complex and its definition varies within different fields of study. Cultural sciences, have broadened the term by rejecting the special status of high culture and point out that a negative stance towards any form of folk culture and other niches of culture have lead to key aspects of the cultural forming of individuals and cultural groups have been ignored (Eysteinnsson, 1999). Instead of focusing on the famous major works of art history, official history of mankind and statistical information, cultural studies look into cultural niches; the media, music, fashion and whatever influences thought and the spirit of the age. They do not only view the public as cultural consumers but as the creators of social values and cultural forms of expression

The term “heritage” was fashionable in tourism in the 90’s when heritage tourism was the branch of tourism which grew the most. The word covers valued legacy of previous generations, but also symbolizes an entity of material and symbolic elements. Although the term “cultural heritage” points backwards through the ages it is never really the past in and of itself but a part of the present. It really is what each age makes of its past, focuses on and chooses to maintain and promote. The past is therefore a source of wealth for modernity (Huijbens & Gunnarsdóttir, 2008). The effects of the past are in large sense picked by the values of the current age, making the picture of the past a distorted mirror image of modernity. Hence it is a misunderstanding that by maintaining the cultural heritage the past is being preserved because relics are always part of the present (Helgadóttir, Huijbens and Björnsdóttir, 2007).

Travel has for a long time been a large part of world culture and possibly the strongest cultural current in modern times. Tourism does not simply reflect upon culture and the environment, it also

serves to alter and re-create both (Chambers, 2009) which makes tourism an interactive cultural form. Travel, however, does not receive cultural recognition, neither amongst tourists themselves nor their hosts (Huijbens & Gunnarsdóttir, 2008), although travel and culture are closely connected (Robinson & Boniface, 1999) and all trips where people get to experience the lives of others can be classified as cultural travel. With an increased interest among travellers in all manners of culture and storytelling, there is an increase in destinations which can be classified as cultural (Smith, 2003).

While people travel in many different ways and for a wide variety of purposes every generation of tourists seem to support some trends over others. For the time being increased number of tourists are rejecting package tours and mass-tourism to seek out more individualized experiences with possibilities of self-improvement. Chamber (2009: 357) writes that

“trendsetters for the tourism of the near future are likely to be well-educated elites who are familiar with travel and comfortable in culturally diverse situations. They will have a fair understanding of the consequences associated with global economical development and will better realize that their participation in tourism come with a cost of communities and environmental sustainability, heritage preservation, cultural diversity, and human equality“.

The tourism of the future will include greater demand on the part of citizens of economically emerging nations, as well as on the part of a growing number of retirement age persons in many of the more developed countries and people who can combine business and recreational travels as well as young people who seek cultural competences and international experiences while travelling. This generation of tourists will have greater choice of travel venues and access to considerably more information on which to base their travel plans, and they will be more likely to expect travel experiences that have breadth as well as depth and that provide opportunities for self-improvement as well as leisure and entertainment (Chambers, 2009).

The reasons mainly mentioned for travellers increasingly wanting to experience the culture of the areas they visit are the common thirst for experience, the digitized life of the majority of Westerners which leaves a void and increases the thirst for discoveries based on “authentic” situations. Hence, more tourists show interest in the cultural heritage of the regions they visit because it mirrors the real spirit of certain place rather than the superficial man made entertainment associated with theme parks (Karlsdóttir, 2005).

## 3.2 Nature and culture in Icelandic tourism

In the year 2001 the Ministry of Transport and Communications,<sup>6</sup> published a report on the increased economic significance of culture and the development potential of culture-based tourism. The report, which covers opportunities and makes suggestions about steps towards culture-based tourist services, assumes that in the future the Icelandic tourism industry will stand on two main pillars, those of nature and culture (Olrich, 2001). Those two pillars are not opposites but two sides of the same coins since “the idea of nature contains, often unnoticed an extraordinary amount of human history” (Williams, 1980: 67).

The board behind the report agreed on a broad definition of the term “culture”, making the meaning of Icelandic culture

“the characteristics the nation has adopted for more than a millennium and is still developing. Thus a local hue is created which is coloured by the country’s geographic position, natural circumstances, history, the nation’s work and cultural life and foreign ties, but foremost the unique position afforded the nation by its language, which is both fountain and the ground bed of cultural values” (Olrich, 2001: 5).

In the board’s opinion the Icelandic cultural legacy is worth promoting in its widest form, contemporary culture as well as the ancient heritage, as it appeals to the market group for Icelandic tourism on both sides of the Atlantic and enjoys international respect in regards to its uniqueness. In the report the novelty of Icelandic medieval culture is stressed and it is pointed out that little has been done to use this heritage as a source for foreign currency.

## 3.3 The grass root paves the way

Helga Haraldsdóttir, the director of Tourism Departure in the Ministry of Industry, who was the board’s secretary, is of the opinion that the report has had great impact on the development of tourism in Iceland. In that time it was paramount to lay the foundations of an understanding that more is needed to be done for tourists than simply showing them waterfalls and volcanoes. With the report the term culture-based tourism was coined which, among other things, resulted in various domestic funds started advertising for projects in culture-based tourist projects (11:1). The report also had an influence in the making and confirmation of *The Icelandic Tourism Plan 2006-2015* which states that culture, in its broadest sense, shall be one of the foundations of tourism in Iceland. Thus culture-based tourism had gained public acknowledgement.

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<sup>6</sup> By that time Ministry of Transport and Communications was responsible for tourism. Since 2007 tourism is placed in Ministry of Industry, Energy and Tourism.

In recent years there has been a marked increase in all manners of small exhibitions and centres that can somehow be traced back to the report. The remarkable thing is that most of these revolve around telling stories, using either the Sagas or folk beliefs so rich in Icelandic culture. These storytelling destinations have been implemented by individuals and local people rather than the authorities. It can be stated that the build-up of cultural-based tourism in Iceland has therefore not been systematic but rather arbitrary (18:2). This individual evolution is a typical description of Icelandic governmental *laissez-fair* attitude to tourism (see Jóhannesson, Huijbens and Sharpley, 2010). Contrary to the authorities in many other countries the Icelandic government leave the grassroots to pave the way and then writes laws and regulations in accordance with the way the paving went. This arrangement has both flaws and merits. It ensures entrepreneurialism and its closeness to the government agencies. But it is also a hurdle for individuals in product development because of the lack of a bigger picture and infrastructure.

### **3.4 Icelandic Storytelling Association**

The Saga Trail – Icelandic Storytelling Association (ISTA, [www.sagatrail.is](http://www.sagatrail.is)) was founded in 2006. The objective is to be a forum for collaboration and consultation for those involved in history and Saga-related tourism in Iceland. The association also aims to increase co-operation on publicity, quality and professional standards. Members have increased steadily, and are now up to 70, among them museums, exhibitions, heritage sites, man-made structures, festivals and the sites of certain Sagas from all regions of the country. A few scholars are also members of the association.

The founder, Rögnvaldur Guðmundsson, explains how Sagatrail operates both inwards and outwards; inwards by creating an identity among members and outwards by bringing attention to the Saga sites and the Saga-based tourist services in Iceland, focusing on the period from the settlement until the reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore it can be said that the association connects the grass root to the regulations of the authorities and the loudspeakers of the media. Rögnvaldur considers there to have been a veritable revolution in Icelandic tourist services in the last ten years. He finds the co-operation between smaller tourist services around the country successful and based on bringing the nation's history and culture to tourists through the grass root with stories (19:2). These activities bring added depth to Icelandic tourist services and destinations and they bring life to locations for the benefit for both tourists and the locals.

### **3.5 Which reality applies?**

The recreation of the past is a challenging task. At the end of the Book of Icelanders author Ari the Wise writes the immortal words “what proves to be more true should remain said” which sounds

more chiselled in Icelandic “hafa skal það sem sannara reynist”. The quotation has inspired many in the telling of stories in their wider form even if it can be hard to discern the truth in our complicated, varied and scarcely understood reality where stories change rapidly with use and each person makes his own story of the information prepared to her.

Museum and exhibitions that promote stories must always present specific versions of them due to the stories multi-faceted nature (Karlsdóttir, 2005). To make a story accessible one must focus on a specific point and thus often ignore the bigger picture. This is tricky to do without losing accountability. In tourism rendering the manufacturing of truthfulness is liable to certain kinds of reproductions but the past holds the prototype. This is evident in the maintenance of the Icelandic cultural heritage. The Sagas are constantly being re-translated in various foreign languages as new generations do not assimilate with the older translations. Meanwhile the source material remains unchanged in manuscripts kept in museums, but yet their contents constantly needs to be put in new cultural context even for Icelanders.

The report on culture-based tourism (Olrich, 2001) has been criticized for inaccuracy in the view of history even if it is praised for the creative way of thinking and good ideas (Kjartansson, 2003). Historian Helgi Skúli Kjartansson (2003) means that historians are not really in demand by the tourist service “especially since they sometimes start to doubt what was once regarded true and how they sometimes view history in a more negative light than “the good news” that is easy to tell guests” (p. 138). He says the role of history within the tourist industry is important and it revolves around telling domestic as well as foreign tourists a story that survives on its roots in real knowledge and comes to life before the tourist by being told with affection and sincerity (Kjartansson, 2003: 138).

Between a real story and the way it is presented, knowledge and the entertainment value of the product there must be in equilibrium because for example, natives view museums and exhibitions with a different eye than foreign visitors. Foreigners focus rather on the presentation of an exhibition, but locals have opinions on their subject matter (Karlsdóttir, 2005). A well crafted mirroring of cultural heritage in modern times adds to the authenticity of storytelling in tourism.

For a long time tourism and cultural activities were for many considered separate issues and the feeling was even prevalent within museums that guests disturbed the museums task of preservation. These views are changing and cultural institutions compete for guest with recreational businesses (Karlsdóttir, 2005) even to the extent that expectations are lowered so that they “reveal contempt for those ordinary people who are the target of cultural and educational institutions” (Furedi, 2004: 138).

What is revealed above is a certain tension between cultural institutes and tourist service providers because of their different approach to culture and cultural legacy. Culture-based tourism in Iceland has been met with certain scepticism from the intellectuals who tend to view culture that is prepared for tourists as an artificial culture (11:2) using words as Disneyfication, MacDonaldization and theme parks. There are no formal milestones for how a nation’s history should be told to tourists and privately enterprises have in fact no obligation whatsoever to tell the “truth”. They can draw vivid and entertaining pictures of things and events which possibly illuminate certain aspects but their purpose is to get tourists to stop, enjoy themselves and spend money. This should not be seen in a negative way according to Eiríkur Þorláksson at the Ministry of Culture, as it follows the nature of the presentations in question, but he still thinks that such storytelling is rarely based on critical historical reviews or puts focus on the darker periods in a nation's history, but rather focuses on glorifying its best moments (9:2).

**3.6 Icelandic museum policy**

Exhibits, museums and mini-museums have multiplied in Iceland while museums for example in Denmark and Norway have been conjoined to reduce overhead and to put expertise to better use. In year 2009 there were in Iceland 18,8 full-fledged arts-, natural, and culture museums per 100.000 inhabitants, and 207 museums, centres and exhibits, that do not belong to common definitions of museums, or some 65,7 per 100,000 inhabitants. Combined total of museum and other exhibits are 83,4 per 100.000 inhabitants (9:2)

Just over half of the state museum budget of total approx 9,4 million EUR went to state owned museum while the rest went to other museums and centres. The state’s museum budget for 2009 is shown in table 4:

**Table 4:** The division of public funds between state-owned and private museums

Legal form	Budget
State-owned	Approx 4,9 million EUR
Private museums, exhibits and mini-museums	Approx 4,3 million EUR

It is notable that 52% of the 4,3 million Euros of state funds that are awarded to private museums and exhibitions are decided within the annual state budget directly according to proposals tabled by the Appropriation Committee of the Althingi based on applications that the Committee receives, and thus bypass any and all professional peer-review, that applications to funds and foundations or the Ministry are subject to. This makes policy development within the field difficult at best, and

undermines policies already in place and expressed by the establishment of such funds as the Museum Fund, the House Restoration Fund (9:2).

The Icelandic National Audit Office (Ríkisendurskoðun, 2009) criticizes the development in museum matters and urges forcible joining of related museums close to each other, or an increased co-operation for lower cost and better use of expertise and the setting of a clearer path for the development of museums and centres. Therein there can also be found advice for Althingi about

- the setting of a long term strategy for funding
- increased Ministry of Education oversight on museum matters
- the simplification of the funding system
- the setting and overseeing of strict rules.

The ministry is currently working on a new museum legislation urging co-operation and unification through project funds for joint projects. One of the objectives of the new legislation would be to ensure to the extent possible that all public support for museums and exhibitions be awarded through established funds, with an open application process and professional peer-reviews, and that such funds would also be responsible for the administration and oversight of the awards. The Ministry of Culture would then be left with the role of policy making, general oversight and budgeting rather than the practical hands-on administration that it handles at present (9:2).

## **General trends in tourism in Iceland**

Below general trends in tourism industry in Iceland are outlined as well as the country's economy in volcanism and crises.

### **4.1 Visitors to Iceland**

Tourism in Iceland has grown remarkably in the last twenty years and is now one of the fastest growing sectors in the Icelandic economy. Tourism arrivals have more than multiplied in the recent years, more than doubling, for instance, in the ten years period between 1997 (201,000) and 2007 (459,000) (Jóhannesson, Huijbens and Sharpley, 2010). Assuming an annual increase of 6,8%, as has been the case in Iceland for the past ten years, one million visitors can be anticipated in 2020. However if the forecast of the UN Tourism Organization (UNWTO) as regards the increase of travellers globally is followed (3,8%) 760,000 visitors can be expected to visit Iceland in 2020 (Icelandic Tourist Board, 2010).

The average tourist in Iceland is a little more likely to be male (53,6%) than female (46.4%) (Icelandic Tourist Board, 2009). He is around forty (average age 41) with average or high income (80%). He might come from Central or South Europe like 31,8 % of foreign travellers in Iceland did in year 2008, thereof 12,2% German, the single nation that most frequently visits Iceland. Some 25% of visitors come from the Nordic countries 11,9 % from North America, 11,8 % from the United Kingdom and 19,8% from other parts of the world:

The vast majority of visitors in Iceland are on holiday. More than 70% obtain information about the country from the Internet. Surveys show that nature is a key factor in attracting foreign visitors to Iceland. Approximately 2/3 mentioned nature as the reason for visiting the country. However, more and more visitors arrive because of culture and history. In 2007, 40% mentioned that culture and nature is among the reasons for visiting Iceland (Icelandic Tourist Board, 2009).

### **4.2 Volcanic stories**

Island destinations have for a long time enjoyed certain popularity among mainlanders. Island tourism has always called upon extraordinary emotions, like the amalgamation of the physical, cultural and climatic features with the less tangible characteristics of 'island-ness', such as sense of distance, isolation, separateness, tradition and 'otherness' (Jóhannesson, Huijbens and Sharpley, 2010). Islands "often capitalize on their apparent remoteness in time and space to become popular destinations and they often slake the modern thirst for the authenticity which seems to become in short supply on the mainland" (Jóhannesson, Huijbens and Sharpley, 2010: 2).

From a tourism perspective Iceland enjoys the benefits of frequent volcanic activities apart from being conveniently remote and exotic. Volcanic eruptions are an extraordinary experience for visitors and can bring money to the till. The other side of volcanic activity is not as positive and can adversely affect tourism as the Eyjafjallajökull eruption demonstrated in the spring of 2010. In March 2010 a moderate eruption started in Fimmvörðuháls, adjacent to the Eyjafjallajökull volcano in South-Iceland. The tourist industry looked positively at this event as it was thought to further enhance the already bright outlooks for the 2010 tourist season due to the weak Icelandic Krona. The quiet and picturesque eruption in Fimmvörðuháls was labelled a tourist eruption as it attracted tourists and was not thought to have any detrimental consequences for the country. This changed however overnight when a forceful eruption started underneath the Eyjafjallajökull glacier three weeks later. The eruption started with violent explosions when the molten magma came in contact with water from the melting glacier above the crater, creating a plume of fine volcanic ashes that extended 20 km into the atmosphere. The giant cloud of ashes did not only shut down air traffic over Europe for days and weeks, it also caused massive cancellations of travel bookings to Iceland for the coming summer season. Instead of substantial increase in tourism the outlooks looked bleak for the summer. As the possible loss for the authorities would be extreme if the flow of tourism decreases significantly, the Ministry of industry has put about 4.250.000 Euros towards minimizing the damage by promoting rational news coverage (saf.is, 2010a). Within the tourist industry people concur that although this extreme and free coverage Iceland has received throughout the world in the month of April 2010 has bad short term effect, the long term effect will be broad and positive (Pálsson, 2010). Eyjafjallajökull finally put Iceland on the map.

### **4.3 Economy and crises**

From the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century on Iceland's economy has been heavily dependent on fisheries for export. During the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century systematic efforts were made to diversify the economy through the development of other industries. Predominant was the emphasis on aluminium production which represents, in effect, the indirect export of the island's plentiful supply of geothermal energy and hydro power. In 2008 aluminium and ferrosilicon for the first time exceeded fisheries as the largest source of foreign currency, 29,6% as opposed to 26,2%. Third was tourism accounting for 18,5% of the foreign currency (Státice, 2010)

Economic conditions in Iceland have been harsh since the autumn of 2008. Influences of the financial crash will be observable for example in a dramatic decrease of foreign investment, unemployment and in the decline of general living standards. The export trades can nevertheless gain from the

recession not least the tourism industry (saf.is, 2010b)<sup>7</sup>. In the current economic state and with the nation's dependency on fish and the aluminium industry, tourism would appear to be an obvious choice for economic diversification (Jóhannesson, Huijbens and Sharpley, 2010).

#### **4.4 Spatio-temporal concentration**

The rapid growth in arrivals to Iceland in the last decades indicates that the destination offers many things that modern travellers seek. The main problem of tourism development in Iceland however is seasonality. For most of the year guest nights of foreign tourists are less than 100,000 but in three summer months they come up to 700,000 (Jónsson, Friðbertsson and Ásbjörnsson, 2006). Tourism is also spatially concentrated to too few areas mostly in the South-West, the so-called Golden Circle region with popular destinations like Þingvellir, Gullfoss and Geysir, the Reykjanes peninsula with its Blue Lagoon and the capital area. Second in visitor numbers, although much more concentrated in the summer months, is the region around Mývatn in the North (Jóhannesson, Huijbens and Sharpley, 2010).

Changing this, primarily by increasing winter tourism, is the main challenge of the tourism industry today. Erna Hauksdóttir, the manager of The Icelandic Travel Industry Association (I. Samtök ferðapjónustunnar (SAF)), explains that the current financial crisis can be met by a further emphasis on health and culture-based tourism, conferences and adventure trips. "When investments, hotels, cars and more are in place to be put to better use during the winter time it is obvious that there are many paths to increased income and value" (Hauksdóttir, 2010). Culture based tourism plays a large role in the attempt to increase off season tourism. Culture is more profitable than nature because in Iceland it costs nothing to gaze at nature. By pointing tourists to areas that are culturally interesting they can be spread over more areas and it guards sensitive natural treasures from the onslaught of tourists (11:2).

In the general meeting of The Icelandic Travel Industry Association in April of 2010 amongst things covered were the Finnish emphasis on winter tourism to help get out of the 90's crisis. The Finns built up storytelling destinations, spas, a Santa Claus Land and marketed the northern lights. The Icelandic Travel Industry Association calls for co-operation with the government on the "most important project for the future which is product development and marketing of winter tourism" (saf.is, 2010b).

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<sup>7</sup> The reason is that the fall of the Icelandic Krona makes Iceland a more affordable option for foreigners. Another positive effect of the financial crisis is that because of unemployment it has become easier than in prosperous times to staff service jobs. On the other hand the fall of the Krona makes foreign debt unmanageable and the collapse of the banks means that funding for tourist service business expansion will be hard to come by in the coming years (Jóhannesson, 2009).

## 4.5 “Competition through Co-operation”

In spite of the rapid growth and the opportunities that might consist in further growth in the field, tourism has not until recently been prioritized in policy making at the national or regional levels. The tourism authorities in Iceland are complex and an overview is lacking in policy making as well as the marketing of regions and the whole country as everyone does things according to their own taste (Huijbens & Gunnarsdóttir, 2008). Here, mainly based on a report from Huijbens & Gunnarsdóttir (2008) an attempt will be made to draw a simple picture of regional marketing in Iceland.

In the end of 2007 tourism was moved from the Ministry of Transportation to the Ministry of Industry, thereby underscoring that the tourist industry is a business, not only a positive side effect of transportation. Tourism is however not a well defined issue, but one that touches all aspects of society, almost all twelve ministries handle tourism in some way or another along with the Althing Appropriation’s Committee (Huijbens & Gunnarsdóttir, 2008).

At the municipal level tourism is managed differently in different municipalities and regions. In some places development agencies, marketing offices, tourism officers and government regional growth agreements all play part in the development of tourist services in the area, but in other places one party or two. The Icelandic Tourist Board (I. Ferðamálastofa, [www.ferdamalastofa.is](http://www.ferdamalastofa.is)) was established by law in the year of 1964 and has since functioned as a channel for state support for tourism, mainly in the form of marketing and promotion of Iceland as a tourist destination and in sponsoring infrastructure development (Jóhannesson, Huijbens and Sharpley, 2010).

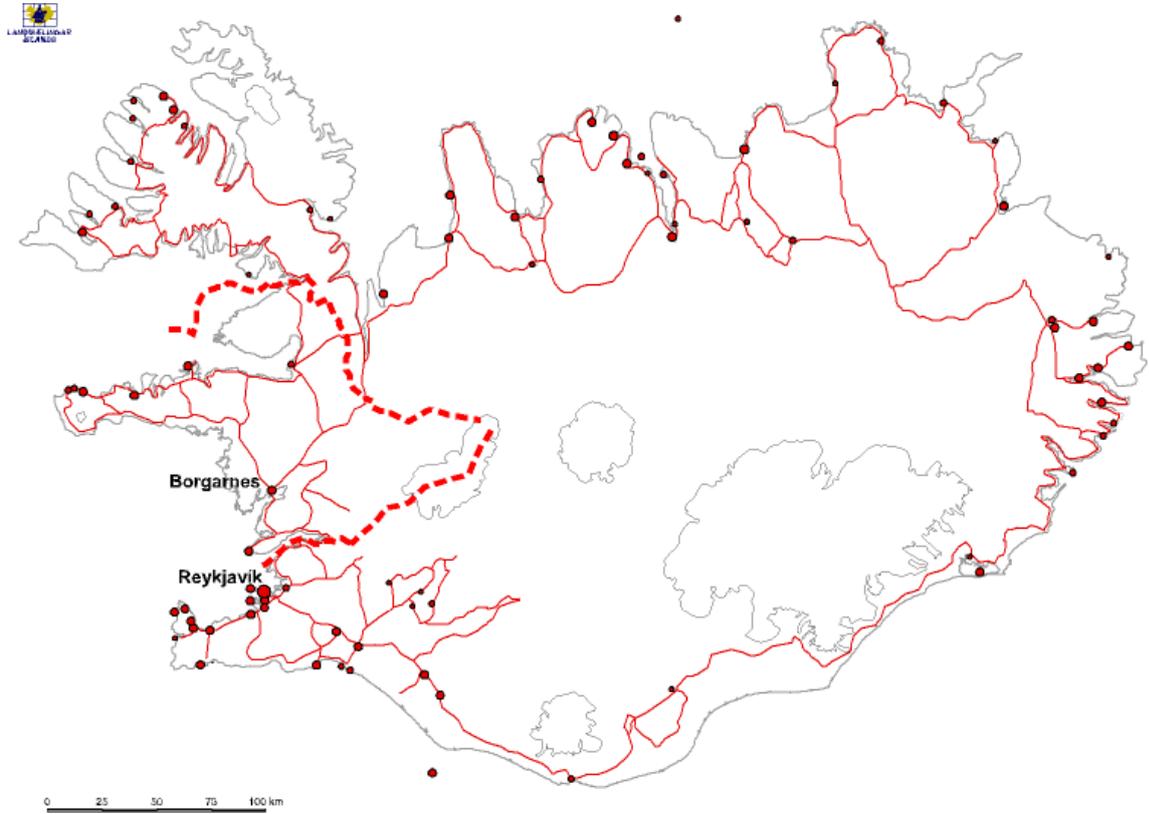
At organizations and companies, or the business itself, there are amongst others at work the Icelandic Tourism Association (I. Ferðamálasamtök Íslands), which is an umbrella for regional organizations, all of them varyingly active. The Icelandic Travel Industry Association (I. Samtök ferðapjónustunnar, [www.saf.is](http://www.saf.is)) is an association of businesses in tourist service which make quality standards policy and fight for the interests of their members. Businesses in tourist service also co-operate in a lot of different ways. There can be named everything from formal co-operation with help from the authorities to tourism industry inventions like the All Senses Cluster.

In the year 2005 All Senses sprang out of a seminar on local economic growth initiative hosted by the Icelandic Trade Council (I. Útflutningsráð (now Íslandsstofa), [www.icetrade.is](http://www.icetrade.is)). Companies in tourist services found a need to co-operate as the government-sponsored West Iceland Tourism Association had for a long been inactive (10:1). Although many tourist services providers are outside the cluster, All Senses seems to have become a symbol of unification for tourist services in West Iceland. Its leading position is brought about by a growth agreement contract between the Icelandic

government, local authorities and local companies. The co-operation of All Clusters is funded by membership fees and grants without governmental funding. Today 20 parties that offer year round services make up the cluster but more businesses are involved as small companies are invited to join four as one. Thus the small businesses can handle the commitments that go with membership and are able to benefit from and contribute to the co-operation round the development of tourism in the area. The cluster's main slogan is *Competition through Co-operation* and the ground for the co-operation lies in the activities of the members themselves, their will to work professionally, and understanding that co-operation pays off when needed to make an area attractive (All Senses Group, 2008). As an example of co-operation it can be mentioned that members of All Senses work together on the operating hours of hotels and restaurants during low season in order to always keep open somewhere in the area (26:3).

### 4.6 Tourism stories from West Iceland

West Iceland is one of the country's eight geographic regions. It spans 9,500 km<sup>2</sup> from Reykjavík through Borgarfjörður, to the west of Snæfellsnes and north up through Dalasýsla (figure 1). Its population is a bit over 15.000, within ten municipalities.



**Figure 1:** Map of Iceland showing roads, glaciers and major towns and villages. West Iceland is delineated with Borgarfjörður and Reykjavík named. Source: E. Huijbens, 2010.

The region can be split in three ways geographically and from an industry perspective; Borgarfjord, Snæfellsnes and Dalasýsla. Snæfellsnes is based on fishing industry while Dalasýsla, like Borgarfjord, are traditional agriculture communities, although the latter has a strong manufacturing base as well.

In regards to tourism the area also differs. Borgarfjord sees a lot of traffic as Iceland's main motorway, ring-road number 1, runs through and it is also a service area for a large summer house and second homes community in the Borgarfjord valley. It has many historical sites and lately extensive work is being put into keeping the stories alive through various means. Snæfellsnes is known for natural beauty and it could be said that one role of the recently founded Snæfellsjökull National Park (I. Snæfellsþjóðgarður) is to shroud nature with stories.

In the wake of the recession 2008, unemployment has increased greatly in West Iceland, like elsewhere in the country. Unemployment hits the blue collar work force the hardest and hence the rate is the greatest in Borgarnes where unemployment was 6% in April 2010. Country wide unemployment measures 9,0%, which is striking compared with e.g. 1,1% unemployment in April 2007.

People working within the tourism sector in the area seem to agree that the access to tourist places is not satisfactory. Þórdís Arthúrsdóttir, manager of All Senses, says that municipal boards in the region understand the needs of the traditional industries and know when and how capital needs to be pumped into them, for example that harbours need to be built to receive the catch that creates an influx of foreign currency. But the municipal boards lack understanding of the "harbours" needed for tourism to receive revenues (6:6). Some other interviewees also mentioned the "lack of harbours" using just those words naming for example the lack of signage to tourist attractions, parking lots, trails and so on (6.3, 26:4). In my participant observation on a working session with All Senses the lack of access and signing was discussed and the fact that tourism staff often has to act as living sign posts and even guides, but a young seasonal employee is unlikely to be able to handle giving out such information, which, furthermore, absorbs a lot of the staff's work time (26:2).

Kjartan Ragnarsson, the Chairman of the Board of the Settlement Centre and its entrepreneur, tells about when he pointedly asked foreign travel bureaus why they sent their people to the south instead of the west, which is equidistant, famous for beautiful landscapes and the setting for myriad stories. The answer was simply that the west was lacking in the access available in the south; parking spaces, signing, paths, toilets, restaurants and souvenir shops. "Tourists to West Iceland must be physically fit climbers," says Kjartan. He compares the 80,000 visitors to the crater Eldborg in Grímsnes in the south to the 6,000 who are paying visits to Eldborg in Mýrar in the west even if the

latter is considered a more interesting geological phenomenon. This is because tourist development in the south is a step ahead of the west (3:3).

Þórdís feels that the tourism industry in West Iceland is taking its very first steps and that it is in dire need for support and infrastructure. The tourist industry in West Iceland has all the ingredients needed to create an experience to sell to the tourist: “We have nature and we have history and culture. But we lack the authorities’ understanding and the funds to co-ordinate”. Þórdís also points out the lack of research and development and thinks Iceland is far behind its neighbouring countries in that respect. She points out that people that are used to working in fishing or farming might not be willing or ready to work in service jobs. It is hard to change ways of work and thought but with education, and education takes time (6:3).

The head of The Icelandic Tourism Association, Unnur Halldórsdóttir, who also is a hotel-keeper in Borgarnes, sums up the main problems and challenges for the Icelandic tourist business: “The seasonality is the main problem. The tourist season, mainly in the rural parts, spans only the three summer months. Staff turnaround is therefore rapid, a large part of the staff changes jobs in the fall and does not return in spring. This leads to a lack of professionalism and problems with training and educating staff. There is little interest in investing in this field as profits are low, and when investments are made they are mostly in buildings, rather than in ideas for how to put the buildings to use in order to lengthen the season” (24:3).

#### **4.7 Possibilities and Challenges**

The growth in arrivals over the last twenty years has prompted rapid expansion in the tourist sector, invoking questions with regards to both the opportunities tourism presents and the challenges that will need to be addressed in the near future (Jóhannesson, Huijbens and Sharpley, 2010). In spite of this rapid growth and the opportunities that might consist in further growth in the field, tourism has not until recently been prioritized in policy making at the national or regional levels. The activities of various entrepreneurs have been the principal driving force behind the emergence of Iceland as a tourist destination (Jóhannesson, Huijbens and Sharpley, 2010). The organizational structure of the industry is characterized by few large companies, for example the country's major airline, Icelandair, that has been a leader in the development of tourism in terms of the obvious element of travel, but also in tour operating and various cooperative deals with the individual operators and many small entrepreneurial firms (Hagen-Grant, 1998). The tourist industry straddles a gap in interest between few large and dominant firms concentrated in the capital and many small, mostly family-driven businesses around the periphery (Jóhannesson, Huijbens and Sharpley, 2010).

The rapid growing tourism poses serious challenges and it may be argued that Iceland has already reached a critical state in its development as a tourist destination. These challenges both relate to the growing numbers of tourist arrivals and their spatio-temporal concentration as well as the framework of entrepreneurial activity. If these are not tackled effectively, the costs may, in a longer term, outweigh the benefits of expanding the tourism sector (Jóhannesson, Huijbens and Sharpley, 2010).

Some of my interviewees (6:5, 26:3) mention the lack of knowledge, researches and structural backing as the greatest concern in the development of tourism in Iceland. Edward Huijbens, the director of the Icelandic Tourism Research Centre, places emphasis on the gap in knowledge "which can only be addressed by more effort and resources which, in turn demands more active engagement by both private and public stakeholders in the tourism sector. While this gap exists, planning and policy making in the sector remain constrained. A key challenge is thereby to enhance research in the field of tourism in Iceland" (quoted in Jóhannesson, Huijbens and Sharpley, 2010: 21)

## **Summary**

In spite of tourism's remarkable growth in Iceland the sector faces serious challenges. Tourist services are volatile in a country where nature often trips the tourist, spatio-temporal concentration is of great concern as well as the lack of research and structural backing of the authorities. The main reason for tourists visiting Iceland has for long been the nature but the interest on history, culture and heritage has in recent years been growing as heritage tourism has become a global trend. Authorities as well as individuals have responded to this in various ways. The build up of storytelling destinations has been great around the country but rather haphazard and small scaled as often is the case in Iceland. This build up is almost solely around the traditional storytelling culture of the Icelanders, be it based on the medieval manuscripts or fairytales.

The next five chapters deal with how and why the Settlement Centre came to be, how stories are told there in various ways and what impact the Settlement Centre has had on the build up of other tourist services in West Iceland.

## The Settlement Centre of Iceland

“There is a couple of museums in town, but far the best is the modern, well-designed, Settlement Centre of Iceland down at the far end of the Borgarbraut”  
(Leffman & Proctor, 2008: 167).

### 5.1 What is to be seen, heard and experienced?

The Settlement Centre, as the above quotation from the Rough Guide indicates, has garnered international acclaim because of its techniques of telling stories about the settlement of Iceland. The Settlement Centre, which was opened on the 13<sup>th</sup> of May 2006 with the financial assistance of the Borgarnes municipality, is the creation of the entrepreneurial couple Kjartan Ragnarsson and Sigríður Margrét Guðmundsdóttir. Kjartan is a renowned actor and playwright. His wife, Sigríður Margrét Guðmundsdóttir, is also a well-known thespian, television-reporter and PR-person. The couple have told stories in manifold manifestations all their working lives. All coverage of The Settlement Centre casts Kjartan’s role as an ideas man and Sigríður’s entrepreneurialism in the foreground.

In table 5 the activities of The Settlement Centre will be specified; exhibitions, the theatre for solo-plays and other storytelling, the guided tours and all the development projects and future dreams.

**Table 5:** The activities of the Settlement Centre

Activities	Present	Future projects
Permanent Exhibitions	The Settlement Exhibition in Borgarnes The Egil’s Saga Exhibition in Borgarnes	The Gylfaginning Exhibition by the Deildartunguhver The Saga Age Exhibition in Þingvellir
Guided tours	Nine cairns telling stories of historical sites Guided tours to historical sites	
Smart guide: Computerized guiding	Three guided tours (seven hours) in Borgarfjord in four languages	24 hours guided tour through all of western Iceland
Courses in Medieval Studies	Courses and study-circles for locals	On-line courses for Icelanders and foreigners
The Saga Loft Theatre	Solo-plays, monologues, stand-ups, music, meetings	Solo-plays, monologues, stand-ups, music, meetings
The Medieval Baths	Fund-seeking, designing	A large-scale project of erecting medieval baths and exhibitions by Deildartunguhver, the world’s largest thermal hot-spring
Restaurants	Búðarklettur (Borgarnes)	Restaurant (Medieval Baths)
Gift shops	Hlaðhönd (Borgarnes)	Gift shop (Medieval Baths)

## 5.2 The housing

The Centre is located in two of the oldest buildings in Borgarnes, with a con-joining building between them serving as a main-entrance. The permanent exhibitions are housed in the Warehouse, which is built in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The restaurant house was originally a trading store. Those two buildings are two of the finest examples of heritage architecture in Borgarnes today. They have recently been completely refurbished. The connecting annex functions as a reception hall that houses ticket sales and provides access to the other buildings. It also serves as a souvenir and merchandise outlet. With approx. 140 square meters of floor space, it backs onto the rocky outcrops behind the building. The design, by architect Sigríður Sigurþórsdóttir, pays particular attention to complementing the architecture of the existing buildings. By connecting the two old buildings with a glass construction to the rock behind them the architect wants to associate the stories told in the houses to the history of the earth itself (21:1).

## 5.3 The exhibitions' story-line

In two permanent exhibitions The Settlement Centre reveals the stories documented in two ancient books *The Book of Icelanders* and *Egil's Saga*.

*The Settlement Exhibition* tells of the first men to set foot on the island and how the land was settled up to the establishment of the parliament in the year 930. It depicts how Iceland was discovered, how the Vikings navigated the high seas and why they abandoned their homelands in Norway. Based on the records from *The Book of Icelanders* it tells of the first men to set foot on the island and how the land was settled, up to the establishment of the parliament in the year 930.

Situated in a stone-walled, partially sunken, and renovated basement with rough-hewn stonewalls, *The Egil's Saga Exhibition* leads the visitor through the twists and turns of *Egils Saga*. It profiles a person that both appears as a violent Viking and sensitive poet and the story of his family's pioneering and the settlement in the Borgarfjord region which provides an insight into the tumultuous years of settlement.

The exhibitions are open all year. Visitors pay separately for each exhibition. Interactive models and audio-visual displays are used and audio guides in nine languages<sup>8</sup> are available as well as an edition for children in Icelandic.

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<sup>8</sup> English, Norwegian, German, French, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Polish and Japanese.

## 5.4 The concept of the exhibitions

The Vasa Museum in Stockholm, Scandinavia's most visited museum according to its web-site ([www.vasamuseet.se](http://www.vasamuseet.se)), was a great inspiration to Kjartan and Sigríður. Although the warship Vasa itself, which set sail in 1628, will probably rot and disappear, there remains an interesting exhibition about the Stockholm community in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It is the same with The Settlement Centre even if there never have been any ships or other artefacts. It tells the story of the people. That is why the Settlement Centre is not a museum but a centre. Ancient artefacts are not being preserved, but an attempt is being made to bring the past alive in accordance with descriptions in ancient texts. And that is why Kjartan and Sigríður always speak of lifting the Sagas out of the parchment (3:7).

The playwright Kjartan Ragnarsson wrote all the exhibition texts himself, but their content was often created during the couples conversations at the breakfast table. A preparatory group was founded, comprised of professionals, included Kjartan and Sigríður themselves, the architect, an exhibition designer and a history expert (5:7).

The exhibitions' co-authors are the brothers, and experts of literature and Icelandic, Örnólfur and Guðmundur Andri Thorsson, who read, criticized and brought new ideas to the texts. Örnólfur had been a consultant at the creation of the large *Viking Exhibition* at the Smithsonian Museum in the year 2000. He brought with him an idea from a Hollywood director who worked on the Viking Exhibition and was wont to talk about "edutainment". The director suggested that the focus should not be the needs and interests of Nordic scholars. In the design of The Settlement Centre the idea was that a child that had neither an interest nor understanding of the subject before visiting would walk away with a burning interest in learning more (3:7). Kjartan says the popular modern museum practice is to provide guests with a lot of options, but to aid their choice through editing, to avert ambling and difficulty of choice. He thinks of the exhibition for tourists as a theatrical performance where the author delineates the storyline and leads the guest onwards with his story (4:5). Kjartan and Sigríður emphasize that they are not scientists but ordinary people who tell stories. They ignore the scholarly debate between book-prose and free-prose because they believe that in medieval times people did not make a difference between history and tales. The tales are the result of oral memories, which was a very strong tradition in an illiterate community. Kjartan believes that the history, the tales and the Sagas go hand in hand: "Up until now mostly historians told these stories, but they do not enjoy the same freedom as we. We're not trying to tell the truth, we are telling stories. Even if everything written in the stories is proven false we won't change our shows, because they are about the stories, not the facts. We are storytellers who present things in our own way" (5:11).

## **5.5 The exhibitions' techniques of storytelling**

The nature of the two shows is quite different, and hence their presentation differs. The *Book of Icelanders*, which the Settlement Exhibition is grounded in, purports to being history, and as the show covers "hard facts" the presentation technique is likewise straight forward and features a lot of screens, models and maps. At the beginning of the show there is a digital interactive map of the settlement of Borgarfjord as described in the Book of Icelanders. Therein can be seen the locations of 20 settlement farms and pictures of these farms as they are today, all of which are still inhabited.

At the exhibitions' design Kjartan started off with 30 items which were to be stopped at for a minute a piece. Thereby the exhibits lasts a total of 30 minutes, which is considered the average attention span for people at this practice. Later Kjartan started co-operating with people he used to work with in the theatre at writing a story line and fitting it into the space (3:8).

Egil's Saga is more of a literary work and is therefore presented in the spirit of the arts. After the exhibition text had been composed and the space designed, ten artists were offered to do installations for the 30 different stations. All the material the artists used are natural, such as leather and wood. The Egil's Saga environment, in an underground basement, is dramatic, which the lighting underscores. Guests descend into a labyrinth in the stone-walled cellar and know not what is waiting for them.

## **5.6 Egil's Saga Revealed: Guided tours in and around Borgarnes**

Dotted in and around Borgarnes, nine large cairns have been erected on some of the most significant sites from Egil's Saga. The purpose of the cairns is to draw attention to the rich story of this area not least for local people to enjoy. A leaflet has been published with a brief description of Egil's Saga and the events that took place at each of the sites. Guided tours are given to groups and individuals by Sigríður, Kjartan, or one of the receptionists.

## **5.7 Courses in medieval studies for local people**

The Settlement centre in co-operation with Snorrastofa and The Centre of Life Long Learning in West Iceland (Símenntunarmiðstöð Vesturlands, [www.simenntun.is](http://www.simenntun.is)) have developed courses in medieval studies for local people in Borgarfjord. Such courses have for many a year been one of the most popular leisure activity courses in the Reykjavík area. Six courses and four study circles have been offered in West-Iceland, some of them featuring a special Saga, other working on themes like women

in the Middle Ages. The attendance has been satisfactory, “but always the same 17-18 old ladies“, according to a laughing Kjartan (26:11).

The purpose is to get well known, knowledgeable and entertaining scholars and storytellers to enlighten people on the history of their environment, but also to make sure that The Settlement Centre’s and Snorrastofa’s programmes interest not only tourists, but locals as well. Local knowledge is important in and of itself, but in the context of tourism its import lies in that locals can provide tourists with information and enlightenment.

## **5.8 The Saga Loft theatre**

The Saga Loft is a performance space with 80 seats in which storytellers perform and theatrical events are staged, with an additional space for meetings and small conferences. Behind old rafters the technology needed for theatrical shows and conferences has been installed. Kjartan says that he was certain from the beginning that the centre needed an ace in the hole in the form of living theatre shows and oral storytelling, which proved correct, since the theatre keeps the centre afloat in the winter. The theatre couple themselves are the initiators of every show staged and as can be seen below, well-known storytellers and actors were approached (20:10).

Two solo-plays have sold out the Saga Loft since the opening of the Centre. The shows target audience is Icelanders of all ages, but although the shows are in Icelandic only, foreign tourists do attend from time to time.

*Mr. Skallagrímsson* is a comedy monologue written and performed by actor Benedikt Erlingsson and directed by the Swede Peter Engström sponsored by The Ministry of Culture, Education and Science and The Nordic Council Funds. The monologue debuted in co-operation with *Reykjavík Art Festival* on the Centre’s opening day on May 13<sup>th</sup> 2006 and has been sold out until last New Year when Benedikt no longer was able to continue. A total of 226 shows were staged and watched by 22.643 guests.

*Brák* is the tale of Egil’s enslaved nanny. The play is written and performed by the actress Brynhildur Guðjónsdóttir especially for The Settlement Centre. Based on 11 lines in Egil’s Saga the author ponders the nanny’s Þorgerður Brák’s effects on Egil, and reflects on the status of women and slaves during the Age of Settlement but makes connections with modern slave trading as well. In the play Brák the sole right of the “straight, white, middle-aged male” to record human history is abandoned and an old, enslaved woman given a voice. A total of 145 shows have been staged since the beginning of 2008, which 9.977 guests have attended.

*Storms and wars* is a recent example of storytelling which has been performed in The Settlement Centre since 2009. Therein writer Einar Kárason re-tells the *Sturlunga Saga* in simple and clear manner which appeals both to those that know the story and those who do not, but are interested in familiarizing themselves with one of the most dramatic turn of events in Icelandic history. The writer has in recent years delved deep under the surface of *Sturlunga Saga* and presented the story in a novel manner in his books *Óvinafagnaður* and *Ofsi*. In these he lets the dramatic personas in *Sturlunga Saga*, the witnesses to the events and protagonists tell the tale in the first person. With this style Einar brings us closer into the turn of events and casts them in a new light. The audience meets the involved parties and hears their point of view, because everybody has their reasons after all. It is a bit like hearing about the events of yesterday, listening to interviews with people that were in the midst of the events. It could be argued that this form, the author reciting the material of his books, is a modern novelty, although this was probably the manner in which authors like Snorri Sturluson used to present their work to their contemporaries.

Some other theatre shows and storytelling performances have been conducted, amongst them *Brúðarræninginn*, which is about the adventurous life of a great entrepreneur, priest and fisherman in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *Mýrarmaðurinn*, where a renowned journalist, stand-up comedian and inhabitant of Borgarfjord does a comedy act about himself in the role of the Bogman, *Homo Palustre*, which is a race on to itself and unlike other men, and *Pönnukakan hennar Grýlu*, a puppet show by the German puppeteer Bernd Ogrodnik, who recently moved to Borgarnes.

Two new shows debuted in February of this year, *Jón Gnarr Alive*<sup>9</sup>, which is stand-up act by a famous stand-up comedian that covers Icelandic mentality and humour throughout the ages, and *Gunnar's Stories*, wherein a beloved musician tells stories in between singing his own songs (landnam.is, 2010).

## 5.9 The restaurant and the gift shop

The restaurant and the gift shop make a significant difference in the running of the Centre especially during the winter months. The restaurant is mentioned in main international travel literature on Iceland and many guests arrive with the *Lonely Planet* in their hands saying that *Búðarklettur* is “Borgarnes’s best bet for food in this bright and airy restaurant at the Settlement Centre. ... The large windows, striped wooden floors and modern furniture give it a wonderfully contemporary style, while the menu features a tempting range of lamb, fish, pasta dishes as well as lighter snacks and cakes” (Parnell & O’Caroll, 2009: 155). The comparison to other restaurants in Borgarnes does not however say much about the quality of *Búðarklettur*, as there is no tradition for gourmet eateries in

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<sup>9</sup> The comedian Jón Gnarr ran in the municipal elections for a seat in Reykavík City Council in May 2010 with his amock political party, The Best Party (I. Besti flokkurinn). Jón Gnarr is now the Mayor of Reykjavík.

this low income area where people seldom dine out. Some people tend to claim that the food is not always too delicious depending on the different *chefs du cuisine* coming and going in Borgarnes. But still Búðarklettur offers friendly and relaxed atmosphere with menus for individual as well as groups at reasonable prices and operating hours daily all year between 10 AM to 21 PM.

In the joining glass building between the old houses there is the Hlaðhönd gift shop, which is named after Thora hlaðhönd, Egil's handy mother in-law. The shop is the only handicraft shop in the area that focuses on Icelandic design, ingenuity and a selection that caters both to domestic and foreign tourists as well as locals interested in modern design steeped in ancient tradition. There has been some discontent voiced by other local shopkeepers because the municipality sponsors an institution that competes for business with independent merchants. No one has filed suit though (17:5), maybe because the gift shop selection varies considerably from that of other Borgarnes stores.

## **Ownership and operations**

Here the focus will be on the operations of the Settlement Centre but first the advent of its foundations is described.

### **6.1 Roots of storytelling in tourism in Borgarfjord**

The people of Borgarfjord have long been aware of their historical legacy. In the main town, Borgarnes, most of the local streets and public places, for example, bear names appropriated from Sagas set in the area. The crown jewel of Borgarnes is for instance the Skallagrim Public Park, which was constructed around 1930 surrounding the pagan grave of Skallagrimur, father of Egill Skallagrimsson.

At the turn of the millennium the town council of Borgarnes allocated funds towards the preparation of the so called Egilsstofa and had a house designed which was to merge in an aesthetic way with a rock wall at the river Hvítá which is frequently featured in Egil's Saga. The project was found to be too expensive and was not entered into.

The beginning of tourism in Borgarfjord might be traced back to the priests and patrons in Reykholt who were great storytellers and who greeted guests with stories of people and events in ever more organized ways. Among incumbent priest duties are telling visiting school-classes local history (2:4). The opening of Snorrastofa in the year 2000, whose activities can be split into two main categories, medieval research and hosting tourists, had great influence on the local mindset as well as interest in the area's cultural significance and heritage through the Sagas. Thus it can be claimed that Snorrastofa paved the way for the Settlement Centre (17:1).

Those two companies work with recreating the cultural legacy in fairly different manners, as Snorrastofa covers the scientific aspects while the Settlement Centre focuses on the dramaturgy of storytelling. "These two places are nevertheless like two sides of the same coin", says Kjartan (5:3) : "The proximity to Snorrastofa lends added weight to the Settlement Centre. We make use of all the expertise available at Snorrastofa and run our ideas by the curator. At the beginning we explained to him that we did not intend to encroach on their field of study, but considered ourselves laymen in that topic, but professionals at designing exhibitions and the presentation of material. We are professional producers with the sense to seek out professionals that know better than we do" (5:3).

Professionals at Snorrastofa and The Settlement Centre co-operate well, and the heads of both say they offer the other to get in on every project, as it is to the benefit of all to engage in as much co-operation as possible (26:5). Both institutions work actively with the tourism cluster, All Senses. The

co-operation between the two is however greatest in making medieval culture courses for locals and on-line courses for foreigners.

## **6.2 Eureka!**

For twenty odd years the Reykjavík thespian couple Kjartan and Sigríður had spent their holidays guiding foreign tourist going horseback riding all around the country. They soon discovered how pleased tourists are when their experience with the surroundings is enhanced with tales of people and events. Thus they started reciting the Sagas along their journeys and subsequently noticed how accurate the literature was in its geographical description.

But they also discovered that foreign tourists are unable to relate to the Icelandic Sagas without the inclusion of the history of settlement. This remarkable history is documented in museums in Iceland, but nowhere in a manner which allows people to take part of history without any foreknowledge, according to Kjartan (3:11). In the summer of 2003 the couple had the opportunity to travel the country's settlements and delve into the culturally inspired tourist services that had started to take root at the time. They were duly impressed, but asked themselves the question (3:11):

-What is left for us to do?

At home by the breakfast table one July morning the answer revealed itself to them:

-Eureka! We can tell the history of settlement!

## **6.3 The share of the town council**

The entrepreneurs of The Settlement Centre claim that the report on culture-based tourism (Olrich, 2001) guided them and opened their eyes for possibilities in cultural-based tourism (11:2). The couple, who could have selected many places in Iceland for their Settlement Centre chose Borgarnes for three reasons (3:4):

- Egil's Saga is more geographically accurate than any other Icelandic Saga
- The site is in a comfortable distance from Reykjavík
- Borgarnes needed a tourist attraction

The couple's original ideas for the evolution of The Settlement Centre were too large in scope for the municipality. But when council members saw the cautious local inhabitants clapping their hands for the couple's ideas at the initial introduction meeting it sparked the authorities' interest in further reviewing the matter. A decision was made to co-operate on evolving the project and the council

offered a year's salary and expert assistance for the making of a business plan. The Mayor of Borgarnes, Páll Brynjarsson, pointed out to the couple that original artists needed firm ground under their feet, and that a solid business plan was just such firm ground (3:7, 17:2).

The mayor says things really started moving after that. The effort was spearheaded by the entrepreneurs and supported by the politicians, to the benefit of all. The initial idea to make the island Brákarey, the southernmost part of Borgarnes, into a medieval village, was cut out of the business plan. On the other hand the municipality was restoring The Store House (I. Pakkhúsið), the oldest building in town, which they offered the project free of charge. In another adjacent building there was a restaurant by the name of Búðarklettur. The owner decided to join his business with the Settlement Centre. The idea soon emerged to erect a conjoining structure between these two oldest buildings in town. This construction was paid for by the municipality (17:2).

When the owner of the restaurant later quit the business and sold the building, it was bought by a holding company called *Hvarf*, owned by the descendants of a well known couple from Borgarnes. The company gave use of the building to The Settlement Centre for a nominal fee in order to aid life and culture in Borgarnes. The holding company still has a member on the board of the Settlement Centre (4:4).

## **6.4 Ownership and board**

Kjartan and Sigríður's original idea was for the Borgarbyggð municipality to own the Centre, but the municipality rather wanted to become incorporated. The municipality's share was initially 80% against the entrepreneur's 20%. Now the tables have turned so that the limited holdings company *Sígildar Sögur (E. Classics Ltd.)*, owned by Kjartan and Sigríður controls 80%. The percentage of board members has also reversed. Earlier four out of five members were politically elected, but now it is the other way around. This has however made little difference on the board's composition as a part of the politically elected remained on board on their own merit and their understanding of the project's workings. On the other hand, two board members were added, and Kjartan became head of the board. Sigríður is the manager of the Settlement Centre (4:10).

## **6.5 Attendance, operation and target group**

Attendance has been beyond expectation since day one. The business plan estimated an attendance of 10.000 in the first year, but from the start in 2006 there have been a relatively steady attendance of approx. 25.000. The number of staff varies according to the seasons and has also varied in the four years that the centre has been operating. In the beginning permanent staff number was eight, along

with ten summer employees. The permanent staffs have since been reduced to six. Summer employees are now 16 and will increase in the summer if attendance is good (see table 6). High staff turnover plagues the Icelandic tourism industry, but the Settlement Centre has been lucky to hold on to the same summer staff for many consequent summers (5:8).

**Table 6:** Staff development and annual turnover at the Settlement Centre

Staff development	2006	2010
Permanent staff	8	6
Summer employees	10	16

The target group is comprised of domestic and foreign tourists, children as well as adults. No information is available on which nation visits the centre the most, but it is known that a great increase occurred in Swedish and Norwegian visits as one travel agency in each country started to offer visits to the centre. During the summer months the guests are mostly foreign, but in the low season parties arrive from Reykjavík and other places to dine and watch the performances in the theatre. The Settlement Centre puts much emphasis on always remaining open, even when business is slow. Before they started, Kjartan spoke with an experienced tourism entrepreneur, who told him: “Establishing oneself in the tourist business takes a long time. You must be patient and ready to lose money. You must always remain open although there is no business. If you start keeping the doors closed you send the message that something is wrong. The tourist business requires stamina” (4:11).

The number of staff at the centre is great seeing that it is a self-explanatory exhibition, which people walk through with headsets through which commentary is given. Sigríður says that many of the staff work on development projects, among them the acting head of the board, but most of his time goes into the development of the centre’s future projects and co-operation with others on the development of tourism and employment in the area. She also says that initially they made many mistakes due to lack of experience, for example that of over staffing. Through the years though they learned efficiency. For example, having a buffet at the restaurant instead of a waiter delivering food from the kitchen in the basement. She also says the attendance numbers are not entirely correct as they do not include the restaurant’s guests (20:3).

Since its inception, The Settlement Centre has applied for grants from the Althing Appropriations Committee. The grants have been awarded, all though the amount varies from year to year. The centre aims to be included in the national budget so as to secure its running since its hard for museums to survive entirely on their own in a small country. Kjartan and Sigríður are of the opinion that they have been profited from the unfocused way that museums matters are run in Iceland and

that by the will of certain board members they have been awarded funds that they might not have been under stricter rules, and thus not have had the opportunity to develop their center (5:11).

## **6.6 Home page, advertising and marketing**

Local and international media coverage of The Settlement Centre has, according to the couple, been beyond their wildest dreams. Abroad, the coverage has been the broadest in Scandinavia and Germany, but the centre has not kept tabs on it (3:15). Coverage has been especially wide in Germany, as the Icelandic information officer in Frankfurt shows the centre a lot of interest. “He brings group upon group to us, television people, reporters and travel planners. We have had a lot of coverage in the German media because of his work”, Sigríður says (5:11), but it bears mentioning that the aforementioned information officer, Arthúr Björgvin Bollason was the first head of the first exhibit on the Sagas, *The Njála Exhibition* (I. Njálusýning, [www.njala.is](http://www.njala.is)) in the southern part of Iceland. He still is enthusiastic in spreading the word on Icelandic medieval literature.

The centre’s name often echoes in Icelandic radio and thus reminds people of its existence as the theatre shows are advertised a lot. The couple claim that they use every opportunity to promote the centre and have often needed to do things that challenge them, like addressing experts at foreign congresses in a language that they barely speak on subjects such as the growth of tourism and employment development in the dispersed population of Iceland (4:5).

The Settlement Centre will feature in the latest 2010 edition of the Lonely Planet guide to Iceland. “They are listed as one of the highlights in West Iceland and, at the beginning of the book we have “Top Highlights in Iceland” of which one of them will be a feature called “Living The Sagas” which focuses on cultural and historical tourism in Iceland based on the Sagas,” says Brandon Presser at the Lonely Planet (8:1). The Iceland book is already complete and will be in the bookstores in May 2010.

The Centre’s web site is in Icelandic, English, Norwegian, German and Polish. The reason for the Polish version is that until the 2008’s recession 400 Polish people lived in Borgarnes and the centre wanted to get their attention. They never came but gave the reason: “We are here to earn money, not to spend money” (3:16). Visits to the Icelandic site are about one hundred a day, but rather few to the foreign ones. The Icelandic site is a living web with blog, news and fresh information about the theatre shows and on-line booking available while the foreign ones are static as printed brochures (20:1).

## 6.7 The Icelandic Sagas on-line project

As can be seen by Table 5 the Settlement Centre is very active in all kinds of projects but also it has great plans for future projects. In future there are plans for the development of Medieval Baths, a health and culture based tourist service at Deildartunguhver by Reykholt, which is the largest thermal hot-spring in the world. Another future project is building more permanent exhibitions that convey great events in Icelandic history in the places which they occurred. Here, on the other hand, the third project which has been entered into will be shortly covered.

The Settlement Centre, in co-operation with Snorrastofa, The Life Long Learning Centre and Nepal Software ([www.nepal.is](http://www.nepal.is)), a local computer company in Borgarnes, has been at work for a few years on evolving an idea for international distance studies in the field of the ancient Icelandic literature. The aim is to design a teaching site on the Icelandic cultural legacy for use at home and abroad. Use will be made of the technological expertise of Nepal, the methodology and pedagogic knowledge of distance learning of the Learning Centre, the creative approach of the Settlement Centre and the scientific knowledge of Snorrastofa.

The idea is that the first course will cover the life of Snorri Sturluson, as one of the employees of Snorrastofa at Reykholt has recently published a biography of Snorri in Icelandic, which is being translated into Norwegian and German (Guðmundsson, 2009). Plans are to commence teaching in Iceland and Norway in the fall of 2010, and then to add German and English speaking countries and further subjects, although initially only subjects pertaining to the West-Iceland cultural legacy (13:1).

Bergur Þorsteinsson, the curator of Snorrastofa, thinks that Icelanders are home blind to the importance of the cultural legacy: "We do not realize that Icelandic and Icelandic studies are taught in almost 100 universities all over the world because literature like ours was only written in Iceland. We ought to spend much more money on the teaching, translating and researching of Icelandic medieval history" (2: 10).

Grants are being sought for the project, which has manifold aims. The main aim is to present the medieval literature heritage of Iceland to Icelanders and other nations, but a spin-off effect is expected to be seen in increased tourism in West-Iceland because of study-visits. Thus the project presents educational as well as touristic goals to a target group consisting of Icelanders as well as foreigners (13:1).

## **Spin-off effects**

The founding of The Settlement Centre has had various spin-off effects in Borgarnes, Borgarfjord and the whole of West Iceland. To start with the entrepreneurs have taken the initiative together with other people to create cultural activities in Borgarnes that do not have to do with their business.

### **7.1 The Brák Festival and the Nativity Play**

*The Brák Festival* (I. Brákarhátíð) has been celebrated in the summers of 2009 and 2010. Such town festivals have become traditional in many Icelandic towns in the last few years. All have their own features, but the feature of the Brák Festival is Egil's Saga. The Festival intertwines traditional aspects of such town festivals that need to cater to as broad a base as possible, like a handicrafts market, sports, and various kinds of culture and entertainment, not the least for kids. The defining aspect of Borgarnes is the focus on local stories and storytelling (landlif.is, 2009).

The last couple of Advents a large and popular *Divine Nativity play* (I. Hinn guðdómlegi helgileikur) has also been staged under the supervision of Kjartan Ragnarsson and Unnur Halldórsdóttir, the head of the Icelandic Tourism Association. Most of the local choirs, theatre groups and school kids have participated in the play and highland rescue teams have staged torch parades.

### **7.2 Centre for Puppets Arts**

Mayor Páll Brynjarsson says the founding of the town's new *Centre for Puppets Arts* (I. Brúðuheimar, [www.bruduheimar.is](http://www.bruduheimar.is)) can be traced directly to The Settlement Centre (14:2). Bernd Ogordnik, mentioned above, directs the theatre *Figura - The arts of puppets* (figurentheatre, 2010). Together with his Icelandic wife he has lived sporadically in Iceland for 24 years. The couple have long shared the dream of founding a Centre for Puppets Arts in Iceland and when it came to pass, the choice was Akureyri in the north or Borgarnes. They chose Borgarnes mostly because of the proximity to The Settlement Centre. The municipalities sold them an old house for reasonable price and the 20<sup>th</sup> of May 2010 The Puppet Centre with an exhibition, puppet-workshop, a stage and a café opened. The Puppet Centre and the Settlement Centre are combined with a trail which the municipalities paid for (17:2).

### **7.3 Educational impact**

Culture-based tourism is not just meant for foreign travellers, but also the local community. In Borgarnes more weight might be put on reading ancient literature and educating about the settlement than in other schools in Iceland. The teachers are close proximity to the centre and can

make use of it to bring their teaching to life. The children in Borgarnes are aware of their cultural legacy and the school tries to shape and conserve traditions that are connected with the settlement and the stories that take place in the area. Students in the second and fifth grade are taken on field trips to see the Egil's Saga Exhibition and the seventh grade visit the Settlement Exhibition. Teachers say that the Egil's Saga Exhibitions caters better to children as some parts of the Settlement Exhibition are too long. They say the kids like the variation, although the youngest ones can get scared, as the story's material is brutal at times. The teachers would like to see more pedagogic extra material though, since kids do not just want to watch but also to touch and play roles. Therefore some of the teachers try to change this experience to the student's own creation once back in the classroom. The teachers talk about how well received special needs students are, but also point out the lack of access for children or travellers with special needs (16:1).

## **Pride and prizes**

Around 2 million people are estimated to travel through Borgarnes annually, but most of them only drive through the outskirts of town or stop at highway diners. No statistics exist on the increase of tourists into the town, but people say they notice a marked increase which reflects in sales and other services, for example visits to other museums and the swimming pool (17:3; 10:1). Other aspects not easily measured are the psychological ones. The museum is a jewel of the town's architecture and the people of Borgarnes are proud to have one of the most popular theatres in the country and now the Centre for Puppets Arts (17:3). The locals are simply happy with, and positive towards, The Settlement Centre and its positive effect on the town's image (Jósefsdóttir, 2009).

### **8.1 Out-of-towners and locals**

In the beginning, not all the inhabitants were convinced though that "these theatre people, who are not even from the area, should really be founding any tourist service" (Jósefsdóttir, 2009: 14). Guðrún Jónsdóttir, curator of The Museum of Borgarfjord describes the predominant mind-set in the region as individualistic and one lacking in drive. "Somehow we are better divided than joined and we tend to snatch at the heels of those who succeed... The Settlement Centre has succeeded in doing what has been talked so much about through the years, drawing on the Sagas for business while shedding the heel snatchers" (10:1).

Þórdís Artúrsdóttir of All Senses thinks that the people of West Iceland have been lucky that many people in the local tourist business are outsiders, people in their second career having worked on different fronts earlier who bring new ideas to a small community, large minded and open people with great knowledge and contacts. Among them she counts the people running the Settlement Centre: "These people bring such an amount of energy into the trade and they have rekindled the legacy of the Sagas which had lain dormant. Now the Saga related tourist industry in Borgarfjord is a magnet which attracts tourists to the whole of West Iceland. And the proposed Medieval Baths is not really a small business. These kind of ideas spark people's hopes and help others to spot opportunities" (6:15).

Mayor Páll Brynjarsson is content with the development of the Settlement Centre's. He reckons the co-operation between out-of-towners and the municipality has been a success. He recommends the model that the municipality chose in their co-operation, which consists of allowing entrepreneurs to work passionately through the force of their interest, knowledge and networking skills with the backing of the power of local authorities and their knowledge of the needs of the constituency. Páll reckons the people of Borgarnes fell for the entrepreneur's wealth of ideas, their knowledge and

wide networking - but not least for their will to work with the locals which seems to be the main reason for their success in business. The entrepreneurs moved to the town and participated in local activities. But first and foremost it is their positive attitude that matters and the fact that they never encroach on other people, but their first thought is always (6:15, 10:2, 13:1; 23:1, Jósefsdóttir, 2009: 14): “How can we co-operate?”

## 8.2 Nominations and prizes

In table 7 below nominations and prizes the Settlement Centre has accrued since 2006 are listed.

**Table 7:** Settlement Centre prizes:

<b>2006</b>	IceMark (Icelandic Society of Advertisers)	Best Logo
	Icelandair The Tourist Industry	Innovation Award Innovation Award
<b>2007</b>	The Icelandic Women’s Entrepreneur Award	Entrepreneur Award
	FCEM International Business Women’s Entrepreneur Award	Entrepreneur Award
	Gríma Award	Mr. Skallagrimsson: Best Actor
	Gríma Award	Mr. Skallagrimsson: Best Production
	Gríma Award	Mr. Skallagrimsson: Best Manuscript
Morgunblaðið	Mr. Skallagrimsson: Most interesting Show of the Year	
Fréttablaðið	Mr. Skallagrimsson: The Educator of the year	
Honorary Architecture Award	The Architecture of The Settlement Centre and The Blue Lagoon	
<b>2008</b>	Eyrarrós	Outstanding Cultural Projects In Rural Iceland Award.
	Gríma Award	Brák: Best Actress of the Year
	Gríma Award	Brák: Best Production of the Year
	The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture	Special Acknowledgement for endorsing the Icelandic Language

## **The sixth sense in operation**

Like previously mentioned, the cluster thinking of the All Senses Organization is the basis for the co-operation of the main tourist service providers in West Iceland. The storytelling heritage is rich in the area and many have employed all the senses, also the sixth sense that Icelanders are famous for. West Iceland tourist service providers have increasingly made use of the folk beliefs that are connected with the area's sites.

### **9.1 With elves in trolls in their employ**

The farm Eyrarkot ([www.eyrarkot.is](http://www.eyrarkot.is)) and the campsite Fossatún ([www.fossatun.is](http://www.fossatun.is)) are two of the All Senses members that have employed the services of elves and trolls. They find the co-operation within All Senses important as the small members can get ideas, education, connections and chance to run their little businesses under the wings of larger members (7:1).

Like many other tourist business providers in Iceland the couple at Eyrarkot stand at the intersection of traditional farming and tourist service. Eyrarkot is also a part of Icelandic Farm Holidays (I. Ferðapjónusta bænda, [www.farmholidays.is](http://www.farmholidays.is)), a countrywide chain of nearly 140 farmhouses with 4000 beds in total. Although it is efficient to use the available space all over the country to accommodate tourists, one of the problems of the Icelandic tourist business is the smallness of the operators and that the business did not originally develop as main business but as a side line (6:14).

Recently the farmers at Eyrarkot have added stories from the farm's surroundings to their business. They have let a psychic woman map the elves' inhabitation which supposedly surrounds the farm and had an artist make a map onto which elves are drawn. The map also has information about the specifics of each elf. Guests are invited on walks through the elves' territories which most guests find very interesting (27:2). Another example of storytelling in the farm Eyrarkot is a lot more tangible than the elves. In an unheated, badly lit, manure smelling old barn loft the couple has stashed old things they have accumulated throughout the years. This is not an exhibition, as the inventory is not catalogued, marked or displayed in a dramaturgical way, but rather they are just there, where they can be viewed, handled and played with. The experience guests have here is a total opposite to the thought-out, modern, artistic and didactic experience offered to the guests of The Settlement Centre.

The Fossatún campsite, has on the other hand, focused on trolls. On a hill by the salmon fishing river Grímsá, by the campsite, there is a cliff reminiscent of a troll, and more trolls are being cast in concrete and placed around the surrounding nature. Footpaths are also being laid and spots marked where stories have taken place, all of it being found in living stories, books and topographical names. As the campsite is popular with young families they try to keep the story path, which is under

development, child-friendly and game-related. The campsites owner, Steinar Berg, has also written books about the local trolls which have been published in four languages (22.1). It can be claimed that folk beliefs are gaining new life through storytelling in destination development.

## **9.2 Folk beliefs at the Settlement Centre**

When asked how the Settlement Center makes use of the folk beliefs the entrepreneur Kjartan Ragnarsson says that belief is a big word. "Icelandic folk beliefs cannot easily be categorized. Although we at the Settlement Center do not exactly cover folk beliefs in our shows I can say we make a big deal out of folk beliefs as I believe that the Sagas themselves are the strongest folk belief in Iceland. For instance, my grandfather shed tears hearing scholars say that our Saga heritage is pure fiction." Kjartan believes that the Sagas are neither truth nor fiction, but the product of oral safekeeping and therefore stories of heroes, just like Greek mythology: "The heritage of the Sagas that was kept by the nation for 200 years before it was documented on skin is the strongest folk belief we Icelanders have. Even if scientists might somehow one day prove that Egill Skallagrímsson never existed, he will always exist with the nation."

As noted in the background chapters of this coverage, stories have a healing power for nations as well as individuals. Kjartan definitely thinks that the Sagas have had healing effects on the Icelandic nation. Nevertheless he adds that they also might have had some sort of a "infectious effect": " In Egil's Saga a farm boy up in Iceland becomes the equal of the king of Norway. Maybe throughout the centuries the Sagas have kindled the pride of the Icelandic nation and lead to our over sized self image."

## **Summary**

Storytelling destination development can be a vivid interplay between local culture and tourism services as is the case with the Settlement Centre. The Icelandic literary heritage is recreated in a way that gives visitors an insight into the story of the Borgarfjord region but also activates the local's innovative creativity in many ways. The Settlement Centre tells stories in manifold ways but emphasis is on the fact that this is not a museum where artefacts are on display. Instead sources are lifted out of old manuscripts to make an experience for modern people. The entrepreneur behind the Centre make a point of that they are not scientists, but storytellers that have more freedom to tell their stories than scientists do. Their exhibits are grounded in the truths manufactured by literature. The running of the centre has taken on various forms and great lengths have been taken not to put

all the eggs in the same basket. Hence the Centre offers permanent installations, theatre shows, storytelling sessions, guided tours and educational programs.

The idea for the Settlement Centre came to a well-known, thespian couple living in Reykjavík some seven years ago when they had travelled the country experiencing the incipient culture-based tourist services currently sprouting in manifold forms across the country. For various reasons the couple chose Borgarnes but both the local people and the municipal authorities received them openheartedly. In the co-operation with the municipality the entrepreneurs lead the way with professionalism and passion with the fiscal backing and local knowledge of the authorities.

Many of those involved in tourism in West Iceland use story-telling in their business as there is a strong legacy of story-telling and many historic sites to visit in the area. This development has taken place under the terms of a co-operation effort by the Western Iceland tourist services. Their collaboration emerged from the introduction of cluster thinking by the Icelandic Trade Council, through a series of workshops around Iceland in 2005-2009. The region to host the workshops was West Iceland and the result was a cluster called All Senses, working under the motto *Competition through Co-operation*. Countrywide the Settlement Centre participates in network of storytellers and storytelling destinations called the Icelandic Storytelling Association. They operate both inwards and outwards, inwards by creating an identity among members and outwards by bringing attention to storytelling based tourism services in Iceland. It can be said the association connect the grass root to the regulations of the authorities and the loudspeakers of the media. The participation in local and countrywide activities brings added depth to Icelandic tourist services and life to locations.

## **Findings**

The Icelandic case demonstrates the growing interest in and varied manifestations of culture-based tourism in Iceland. In the past decade there has been a shift in the interests and experiences of the tourist driving through the Icelandic countryside.

Tourists in Iceland to date cite an interest in nature as their main reason to visit (Icelandic Tourist Board, 2009). This means that the bulk of people visiting the island mainly stop to gaze at the beautiful nature, waterfalls and mountain vista. From tourist promotion material such as pictures in Icelandic postcards and brochures it is hard to imagine that there is a nation living here as the pictures show only the magnificent nature and all though the weather varies the postcards show endless sunshine. But in the last decade a growing interest has been noted in historical sites but to begin with hardly anything was to be seen in most of these. Now there have sprung forth large and small destinations making an effort to make the barely visible Icelandic cultural heritage palpable all over the country. In these places the history of the country and its people is told to tourists in various ways. The findings of this project demonstrate that the development of one site seems to summon the need for others. This development of culture-based tourism seems to continue unabated and one of its driving forces is the prospect that it can lead to a crucial lengthening of the tourist season and alleviate the pressure on popular natural wonders by creating more destinations throughout the country.

As this development is in the opening phases in Iceland, this might be the time to stop and ponder how tourists are told the history of Iceland and what kind of assistance tourist service providers need to build up culture-based tourism in general and storytelling businesses in particular. Are people content with the current development and willing to continue on the same path or is there a reason to rethink? The aim of this report is to demonstrate the impact and role of storytelling in destination development in West Iceland, but as Iceland is a small country with a homogenous nation results should be easily transferred to other regions and destinations around the country.

## 10.1 Stories are reality

The case presented and similar culture-based tourism and storytelling destinations in the country almost all build on the rich cultural heritage found in the medieval literature, recounting the Germanic and Icelandic Sagas as well as stories of the Settlement of Iceland, and the country's folklore. Both strands form the basis of the wealthy vernacular culture of Iceland which maintains a well-spring of stories which have vivid resonance in Icelandic contemporary culture. The Settlement Centre tells the very first story of Iceland, the story of the settlement itself as recounted in the Book of Icelanders, and the story of the violent Viking and sensitive poet Egill Skallagrimsson as told in Egil's Saga.

A story's role in destination development is on a par with the destination's physical environment, the destination's staff, other tourists at the destination and the products offered to guests. Together these form the overall destination experience, but;

... a theme or a story (real or fictive) about the organization or the destination can give tourists a more meaningful experience. Themes and stories can communicate the core values in an understandable and memorable way (Mossberg, 2007: 71).

A storyteller adage is that a good story may never suffer from the truth. The relation between stories and the truth is interesting:

"One of the greatest secrets of storytelling is that everything you hear in a story is real – even though it might never have happened. That's the magic of stories – characters and events wake up and take on a life of their own while the story is being told and when it's finished, they fade away again. But remember, in a world of stories they are still there waiting for someone to find them and tell their story" (Matthews, 2009: 14).

Although you can dispute the factual truth of a story the core values they communicate is indisputable because even tall tales hide an element of truth. Stories – and thereby the truth – are always being re-shaped. Whoever experiences a story, whether it be a story told with oral or visual methods, travels with it home where (s)he recreates it for others. Hence stories are always travelling and every time they are told a new version is created. Stories mirror the individuals that tell them, they bind communities to a place and they are etched in the memory of nations. Therefore stories bear witness to a shared human consciousness; they

can heal individuals as well as communities. But above all stories make for a more meaningful and memorable experience of a destination.

## **10.2 The image of Iceland**

Icelanders have a treasure in the heritage of the Sagas and the folk beliefs which have lived with the nation from the beginning and been kept safe and re-shaped throughout the centuries. Research as well as experience show that modern tourists are tired of manufactured experiences, they want to experience authentic things as close to the reality of the locals as possible. The Icelandic Saga heritage is a brilliant source material for creating an experience for tourists of the Icelandic national psyche and the stories also help tourists to better understand nature as there is a strong bond between the country and its people in Icelandic stories. The heritage of the Sagas can thereby at the same time be a source of foreign currency, self-awareness and a crucial knowledge of the past.

Icelanders are a young and recently independent nation which long has had an image problem which may be shown both through inferiority and superiority complexes. Official publications in prosperous times show superiority built on inferiority, for example a controversial report issued by the Prime Minister's office in March 2008 by the name *The Image of Iceland* (Grönfeld, 2008). In an effort to strengthen the country's outward image it was said important that Iceland remains "the best in the world" and Icelanders were described as "hard working, positive, venturesome and in possession of a natural force, a free spirit and an initiative which characterises the country's work force and culture". The Icelandic nation has also been eager to define itself as hip and cool modern people as can be clearly seen in a recent promotional video released by the Ministry of Industry showing Icelanders in all walks of life prom dancing. But the ever increasing interest in making culture palpable, e.g. through storytelling bears witness that people want to display inner worth and realize that ancient Icelandic culture applies to modernity although in a re-shaped form that modernity can understand. The cultural heritage needs to be worked with from an inner need or else the end result will be superficial. By making the stories visible one is working both inwards and outwards. The self image is strengthened inwards while the image is outwards.

### **10.3 What can be learned from the Settlement Centre?**

Tourism entrepreneurs in Iceland have considerable freedom to interpret and develop destinations from the sources available, as tourism in Iceland functions in a considerable public and private policy vacuum. This weak institutional framing has resulted in a plethora of destinations and service offerings of disputable quality. The same applies for storytelling destinations in Iceland, they have mushroomed, but much at the whim of individual entrepreneurs. Most of these sites are small and they are centred round a particular place where stories of events, people or the supernatural unfold. The quality of these sites and their framing with storytelling, which have been developed from varying means, obviously differ.

The Settlement Centre is an example of a successful storytelling destination. What the case demonstrates is the necessity of expertise in both storytelling and the uses of material necessary to make stories come alive. Installations, theatre shows and storytelling sessions are well worked out, artistic, original and manifold. It might be said that the authenticity of the stories told at the Settlement Centre do not pass muster with scientists familiar with the newest research on the Icelandic settlement, but that is not of concern as the entrepreneurs do not hide the fact that the truth they present is the truth of the literature and the stories. Although all the stories center on the Age of Settlement they are told with differing means for different target groups. Hence care is taken not to put all the eggs in one basket and a variety is added to the running of the Centre insuring business all year round even through the darkest winter months. Another key aspect of the entrepreneurs behind the Centre is that their interest is not only in their own project but in tourism in West Iceland as a whole as they put the Centre's success in context with the success of other tourist service providers in the area.

Contrary to the authorities in many other countries the Icelandic authorities leave the grass root to pave the way and then write policy, laws and regulations in accordance with the way the paving went. This method often makes development hard as the authority's stance is not clear but it has the merit though that it enables die-hards to get their ideas into action as the case of the Settlement Centre demonstrates. The Borgarnes municipality's co-operation with

the Centre has been exemplary with the entrepreneurs leading the way with professionalism and passion and the fiscal backing and local knowledge of the authorities.

The findings of this report show that many tourist service providers have little stories they want to tell their guests, but don't find themselves able to prepare them in an interesting way and don't know anybody who can help them. Therefore I posit the idea that a series of classes could be held all over the country where tourist service providers are taught to find the stories within themselves and in their surroundings, find an angle that would appeal to a tourist and present them in a tasteful and dictatic manner, whether it be visually or orally. Thereby three goals are achieved:

- The public all over the country is enabled to work with the heritage
- Stories are made visible in a tasteful manner
- An increased co-operation between storytelling tourist service providers in each area would be realized and hence a unified vision of the stories being told.

The Icelandic case demonstrates the need for a consensus to be reached with the local community on the development of the destination and the stories being told. In addition to the community consensus to be reached the storytelling destination entrepreneur must demonstrate an active interest in regional tourism services and collaborate with the tourism industry in the region in order to secure resonance of the story telling destination in other tourism services offered in the region. This active interest has produced spin offs and others interested in tapping the cultural resources of the region under study in Iceland, therefore I argue for the regional and nation-wide collaborative frameworks to be set up for storytelling destination development, one that is in active communication with other tourism service offerings.

#### **10.4 Epilogue from the author**

After having lived with this project for months, storytelling in destination development has become dear to me. From writing this report I have learned a lot about tourism studies and the position the industry holds in Iceland, its culture and economy. At the end I want to mention two things that surprised me, one in a positive way and the other in a negative one.

Both my positive and negative experiences have to do with chapter 4.5, which I chose to call "Co-operation through competition", after the All Senses motto. This is the chapter that I found the most difficult to write. Getting information was difficult and understanding the structure of the Icelandic tourism industry was hard; who does what, who is responsible for what and who is supposed to co-operate on what? A broad vision of tourist services in Iceland is clearly missing, as well as research. I hope this study inspires further ones on storytelling based tourist services in Iceland, as the subjects for study are myriad and important for the development of tourist services.

My positive experience also has to do with chapter 4.5 Co-operation through competition. It was a nice surprise to experience how tourist service providers in West Iceland co-operate to make the area visible, not the least through stories, as the area is rich in them. I wish the West Icelanders all the best in their future development of storytelling based tourist services in the region.

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