

RISKING IT IN REYKJAVIK

Wild beauty and a sense of danger are attracting groups to explore Iceland's sustainable MICE offerings

WORDS HANNAH BRANDLER



Headlights on, and nerves on edge, we clambered down the crevasse into the 900m-long dark underbelly of Iceland. We were visiting a 2,000-year-old lava cave located in the lunar-like landscape of the Reykjanes Peninsula. Its name – Leidarendi – translates as ‘the end of the road’, but thankfully our down-to-earth (pun-intended) tour guides from Iceland Travel were practised at putting us at ease. Soon enough we were confidently crouching and using our senses to navigate the jagged and slippery terrain, passing by stalactites and even a sheep skeleton along the way.

“We inspire awe when we bring people out here,” project manager Mathieu Tari explained, before convincing us to turn off our headlights and soak in the absolute blackness and solitude of the subterranean tunnels. Since the pandemic there has been an increase in such requests, with these experiences proving popular with incentive groups keen to distance themselves from screens and return to Earth’s roots. “It’s much more about experiencing the country as a natural object. People want time to breathe in the nature,” he adds.

FAR LEFT: Geothermal activity across the Reykjanes Peninsula
TOP LEFT: Exploring an ancient lava cave
TOP RIGHT: Soaking up the mineral goodness of the Sky Lagoon

We warmed our hands on steam rising from the moss while gazing silently at the landscape

We subsequently jumped on quad bikes and drove across the wild terrain (described as ‘the playground’) to reach Eldvorp, a 10km row of craters located northwest of Grindavik on the Reykjanes Peninsula, where we warmed our hands on steam rising from the moss while gazing in silence at the landscape. Our

faces were clearly very expressive, however, with Tari telling us that “experiencing [Iceland] through visitors is amazing”.

If the notions of caving and being thrown around in a jeep don’t excite you, Reykjavik also has plenty to offer to the risk averse. With its volcanic terrain comes hot geothermal springs, where you can take a break from daredevil activities. Instead, enjoy a cleansing mud mask and a pint of Gull beer in the mineral-rich waters of the well-known Blue Lagoon, or its recent deluxe addition the Sky Lagoon, which offers a seven-step ‘Ritual’ – recommended for those recovering from one too many late-night shots of the Icelandic spirit Brennivin.

The jewel of the city

Iceland is widely regarded as a bucket list destination, though the locals tell me that this interest blew up, quite literally, with the famous Eyjafjallajökull eruption in 2010 – Iceland’s best “PR stunt” yet, the tour guides joke in their typically dry Icelandic humour. Prior to this event, the country saw approximately half a million tourists annually, but by 2017 this figure had surpassed the two million mark.

This rapid growth in visitors begs the question as to whether Reykjavik is prepared for large-scale meetings, conferences and events. Harpa, the state and city-owned cultural and conference centre, has “really been a gamechanger” in terms of putting Iceland on the MICE map, according to its director, Svanhildur Konradsdottir.

Open since 2011, the scintillating geometric structure, inspired by the country’s basalt landscape, hosts approximately 1,200-1,400 events per year, 700 of which are cultural events. It is home to the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra, Icelandic Opera and Reykjavik Big Band, and its post-pandemic calendar is looking incredibly busy. “There has really been an avalanche of events and we have a very strong booking position →



Harpa is entirely heated and cooled by geothermal energy

comes to energy costs. At the moment, at least, it's not an issue that we have in Iceland," explains Konradsdottir. The city is powered by 100 per cent sustainable energy, with all homes and businesses heated by hydro and geothermal energy.

Its location between mainland Europe and North America also makes it a prime meeting place for international companies, with the added benefit of fewer air miles. "Iceland is definitely a very valuable and interesting location for international events that are transatlantic," Konradsdottir tells me.

Beyond this, the country ranks highly in matters of equality and human rights, achieving first place in the Global Gender Gap Index and the Global Peace Index among other important titles – further enhancing its attractiveness to high-level officials and businesses. Many of the events held at Harpa "are associated with issues close to the Icelandic heart". This includes annual events such as the Arctic Circle Assembly, which sees 2,000 participants discuss the future of the Arctic and the planet, and The Reykjavik Global Forum, which focuses on gender equality.

A place to stay

The final hurdle for the city is the provision of suitable accommodation. It has made strides in this department, with the recently opened Reykjavik Edition (a Marriott brand) marking a new era for luxury stays in the Icelandic capital.

TOP: The stunning exterior of Harpa features thousands of glass panels

throughout the year and next year as well," says Konradsdottir.

As I toured the centre it became clear why this was the case. Aesthetically, it is mesmerising. Designed by Henning Larsen Architects and Icelandic-Danish artist Olafur Eliasson, the façade features 10,000 glass panels in various shapes, pieced together like a jigsaw puzzle – the idea being that the exterior reflects different vistas as the atmospheric sky changes. It also has state-of-the-art acoustic technology ('Harpa' translates to harp) and there are a variety of spaces to choose from – whether that be the impressive concert hall, the 'pizza slice' rooms with mountain views, or the split-level space at the pinnacle of the building with views of the city's lively harbour.

Spend on sustainability

The challenge facing companies is the cost. How can businesses justify

such an expensive location for MICE? That's where the country's environmentally friendly credentials come in. Most companies are looking to reduce their carbon footprint and Iceland is a great destination to fulfil such criteria.

"I think Harpa is in a very strong position even though it costs a bit more to get here than having your event next door," explains Konradsdottir. Harpa is entirely heated and cooled by geothermal energy, and recently received the Nordic Swan accreditation for its event operations. LED lights were installed in the halls and public spaces in 2021, while heat from the halls is rechannelled towards the front of the building to warm the open public spaces.

"We are looking at the situation in Europe and we are concerned like everyone else about the economic situation and the challenges when it

A unique scene for magical moments in Reykjavík

Harpa Concert Hall and Conference Centre is located in the heart of Reykjavík, Iceland. This unique architectural artwork is situated in the city centre, on the picturesque Reykjavík harbour, and features stunning views of the surrounding mountains and the North Atlantic Ocean.

Harpa's Conference Department has received the **Nordic Swan Ecolabel** and hosts international events and conferences of all sizes. Harpa's goal is to reduce the environmental impact of events and be as environmentally friendly as possible in the process. Event organizers at Harpa can receive an Event Impact Report after their event.

harpa.is



HOTEL EVENT SPACES

**Hotel Reykjavik Grand**

This 311-room hotel is part of the Islands Hotel collection, which comprises 18 three- and four-star hotels across the country. This property offers over 1,950 sqm of event space, which includes 11 meeting rooms and a total capacity of 800 people. It is currently undergoing an expansion,

which will see the addition of 120 guest rooms and ten function spaces within a new eight-storey tower. The collection has six further hotels in the capital. islandshotel.is

Hilton Reykjavik Nordica

This 251-room hotel in central Reykjavik has 17 function spaces with a wooden chalet feel, including a 530 sqm conference hall and a 440 sqm pre-function/exhibition space. It can host meetings of up to 650 guests

in the main function space and banqueting area. Further facilities include an executive lounge, along with excellent seasonal Nordic cuisine – particularly the lunch buffet at Vox restaurant, and an on-site spa. hilton.com

Iceland Parliament Hotel, Curio Collection by Hilton

This 163-room hotel opens on December 20, and is located next door to Althing, the Icelandic Parliament. The property offers over 790 sqm of event space across six meeting venues, while further facilities include an executive lounge, spa and restaurant. hilton.com

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT: Hotel Reykjavik Grand, Iceland Parliament Hotel, Curio Collection by Hilton; Hilton Reykjavik Nordica



ballroom with a pre-function space and a separate entrance. The hotel's maroon-hued Sunset nightclub is also currently for event-use only and offers a pool table, retro arcade machines and a photobooth.

Additionally, the hotel's suites with floor-to-ceiling glass windows can also be used as meeting rooms – recommended is the Ocean View Corner Suite with views of a working harbour, a sure way to quell your writer's block.

"Iceland has everything to easily answer the needs of clients," Tari concludes. As the trip came to an end, it was difficult to find flaws in his conviction. Experiences here don't feel manufactured, but rather draw on the country's natural resources all the while respecting them.

As put by one of our tour guides, "we're on an island that seems ready to explode at any moment. It puts some salt on the experience". Indeed, our visit came after the eruption of Fagradalsfjall in August, which marked the first of its kind in the Reykjanes Peninsula for almost 870 years. "We run towards danger," Tari says. The only question left to ask is: will you? I certainly recommend it. **BT**

ABOVE: Roof terrace at The Reykjavik Edition

USEFUL CONTACTS

- Meet in Reykjavik meetinreykjavik.is
- Business Iceland businessiceland.is
- Harpa harpa.is

Located opposite Harpa, this is the first five-star hotel in the city, boasting a sleek Scandi-style design, the first hammam in the city, and a rooftop overlooking the harbour. It has played an important role in providing the conference centre with the opportunity to attract a new kind of clientele. "Icelanders initially thought that luxury [clients] would come and then we would bring the properties. But first you need to have the product and then the clientele will arrive," the hotel's director of group sales Sigrun Gunnarsdottir

explains. This required training, too, to bring staff up to speed on the standard expected by luxury clients, notably those from North America who are members of loyalty programme Marriott Bonvoy. "The biggest differentiator between us and the competition is the service we offer. Icelanders are quite informal, not used to much service, but the extensive training has taken the experience to a new level," she adds. In terms of event venues, the property has over 500 sqm of space, including three studios, a boardroom and a



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