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Karl Benediktsson
Katrín Anna Lund
Taina Anita Mustonen

Viðskiptafraðideild
Ritstjóri: Ingjaldur Hannibalsson

Rannsóknir í félagsvísindum XI. Erindi flutt á ráðstefnu í október 2010
Ritstýrð grein
Reykjavík: Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands
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The eruption in Eyjafjallajökull in early 2010 was of great concern to the Icelandic tourism industry. The disruption of air traffic throughout Europe created a transportation problem on an unprecedented scale. At the same time it brought the volcanic nature of Iceland into sharp focus. Many international tourists cancelled flight bookings they had already made and there was a sharp drop in arrivals during and immediately after the eruption. To counter what the tourist industry believed to be possible long-term adverse effects, an expensive image campaign was launched under the title ‘Inspired by Iceland’. Unfortunately however, no systematic research was undertaken about the extent of cancellations or the reasoning leading to that conclusion by those who cancelled.

Yet there were also many tourists who were undeterred by the eruption and visited Iceland nevertheless. For a certain group of visitors the country seemed to have become an even more exciting destination as a result of these events. As the tourist high season progressed, the sector seemed to recover considerably.

In this paper we present some selected results of a survey undertaken in the summer of 2010 among international tourists in Iceland. The central purpose of the survey was to find out whether the eruption had really had much impact on those visitors, either in terms of their actual travel plans before and during the Iceland trip or their overall assessment of Iceland as a tourist destination, as well as their awareness of risks and special precautions they might have taken.

Risk and tourism

Substantial disagreement remains over what is risky, how risky it is, and what to do about it


The air traffic debacle in Europe in April and May 2010 brought with it a realisation of a new type of risk – one that could potentially be devastating for the tourism sector. But it is not always possible to pinpoint what ‘real’ risk consists of, let alone how tourists perceive it and how it influences their decisions about travel. Sheller & Urry (2004) have pointed out that travelling, as a form of modern mobility, has always been accompanied by risk in one way or another. Not only are there risks such as getting mugged or attacked, but also simply being in a foreign place, not speaking the local language or knowing the culture, can give a feeling of being in a risky situation (Elsrud, 2001). Any situation of vulnerability may count as a risk in itself. But risk is not merely inherent in travelling: ‘[r]isks themselves are mobile’ (Sheller & Urry 2004, p. 5). As such they may travel independently. Examples of this could be the global spread of a virus, or an ash cloud disrupting airspace. Risks thus exceed the mobility of the traveller and could be seen as an independent force that affects him or her from the outside.
But risks are also incorporated into the decisions, practices and performances of the tourist in a more positive way. In fact, they play a large part in creating the attractions of travel destinations, at least certain types of destinations. This is especially so in the case of ‘adventure’ tourism, which is, as Bell & Lyall (2002) have argued, premised on the age-old notion of the sublime, albeit in a modern and ‘accelerated’ form. The aesthetic category of the sublime plays on the tension between danger and safety; on risk that is under control (Brady, 2010). At least since the development of the romantic version of the Grand Tour tradition (Urry, 2002), this has been part and parcel of tourism.

In Icelandic tourism, certain versions of the sublime have of course been a centrepiece. The country has for a long time been presented as the epitome of ‘wild’ nature, where the visitor can experience both the sweeping vistas associated with the classical sublime and the excitement of various kinaesthetic activities performed in natural surroundings (Cater & Cloke, 2007). Thus, in ‘[r]isk is also opportunity’ (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982, p. 22) and the tourist who seeks adventure is not necessarily deterred by it. It depends on what kind of a tourist one is. A great number of those who visit Iceland seem to be seeking exactly the challenge of taking control of the risks they see as inherent in the country’s natural environments. Most international tourists in Iceland are ‘nature tourists’, interested in ‘gazing at, playing in and enjoying nature’ (Sæþórsdóttir, 2010, p. 29).

It would have been highly interesting to listen to the reasoning of those who cancelled their flights to Iceland in April and May 2010, to get a sense of their particular calculations of risks and what exactly made them abandon their plans. Lacking the tools and means to do so, we decided instead to follow those who did visit Iceland despite the eruption. Or perhaps because of it?

The survey and the respondents

A self-administered questionnaire was designed, containing both pre-coded and open questions. A random sample of tourists was drawn from locations around Iceland in late June and early July 2010. The respondents were approached by one of the authors (Taina Mustonen) at various popular tourist places, both in towns and in the countryside. The purpose of the survey was explained and the respondents were asked to fill out the questionnaires individually, with the researcher at hand to clarify the questions if needed. In a few cases, partners consulted each other and handed in identical or near-identical answers, but these were treated as separate respondents. The questionnaires were available in English, German, and Spanish translations, but by far most of the respondents filled out the English version.

Of the 326 questionnaires returned, 168 (52%) were from female respondents and 156 (48%) from males. The median age of respondents was 37 but the age distribution was somewhat uneven, with the largest age cohorts in the late 20s and early 30s on one hand, and early 50s on the other. A broad range of nationalities was reported, but the largest group by far were Germans (74) followed by visitors from France (45) and the USA (40). On the whole, the sample concurs reasonably well with available information about the origin of visitors to Iceland during the summer high season (Rögnvaldur Guðmundsson, 2010), with North America and Southern Europe somewhat overrepresented however and fewer visitors than expected from the British Isles.

The respondents were asked about their income, relative to average incomes in their country of origin. Nearly half (45%) reported average income, but a third (32%) reported incomes a little over the national average. The list of occupations confirms that the majority of respondents consisted of white-collar, professional people, with
tertiary education. Again, this indicates that the sample mirrors rather well the spectrum of international tourists in Iceland during the summer months.

Organisation of travel

For most of the respondents (82%), this was their first trip to Iceland, but 18% had visited the country before. Most people plan their summer vacation well in advance. The decision to travel to Iceland was in many cases (43%) made already in 2009 or earlier and further 40% made the decision in the period from January to March 2010, before the Eyjafjallajökull eruption started influencing air travels (Figure 1). When the disruptions started in April, fewer people made the decision to come to Iceland, which is not surprising. In May and June the interest seems to have risen again. It should be noted that the survey was started in the middle of June.

![Figure 1. The timing of the respondents’ decision to travel to Iceland](image)

By far most of the respondents had arrived by air, or 89%, but 11% had arrived at Seyðisfjörður on the ferry Norröna. The most usual travel mode is by car, with no fewer than 54% of the respondents travelling in rental cars and additional 14% in their own vehicles brought over on the ferry. Some 22% made use of public buses and 19% went on organised bus tours. It should be noted that people could report more than one mode of transport.

The trips varied in length, but most (approximately 65%) were between one and three weeks. The median value is 14 days. This is a little longer than other surveys have found for summer tourists (Rögnvaldur Guðmundsson, 2010), and could be explained by the fact that a large part of the sample was approached in locations out of Reykjavík. Those travellers who stay only in Reykjavík and the southwest probably tend to stay for shorter periods in Iceland.

The respondents were asked to indicate on a simple map the routes they had travelled or intended to travel during their trips, and to check whether they visited several common tourist destinations in Iceland. Of course the routes chosen were quite varied. Many travellers follow the Ring Road around Iceland, whereas others stick to the southwest or concentrate on particular areas elsewhere, such as Mývatn and the north. The eruption does not seem to have deterred many people from
travelling along the south coast, with 68% reporting that they had passed through Vik í Mýrdal. This is particularly interesting because the car rental firms had issued warnings about driving through the ash-affected areas. Those warnings were strongly criticised by tourist operators in the south as being ill-founded, and in any case they were not heeded by many tourists.

**Impact of the eruption**

To our surprise, only 10% of the respondents gave a positive answer to a question about whether the eruption had made them change their travelling plan. Those who did so mentioned mainly that flights had been delayed; people who had been planning to go to Þórsmörk were not able to do so; or that people had changed their routes or plans slightly – not in order to avoid the area affected by the eruption, but to see it for themselves. For example, a couple that had arrived with *Norrøna* early in the summer decided to take the southerly route to Reykjavík so that they could get close to the still-erupting volcano at the beginning of their trip, before heading north. Thus these rather few responses indicated that for many of those visitors the eruption was a source of excitement and fascination rather than something to be avoided.

This became evident when asked about whether the Eyjafjallajökull eruption had affected the interest in coming to Iceland. Some 24% of the respondents answered positively, and an examination of their reasoning reveals interesting things. Only one couple said they had tried to cancel their tickets, but their Norwegian travel agency had advised them against it. The majority of the responses indicated that the eruption had in fact increased the attraction of Iceland as an adventurous destination:

> I decided to come because of the eruption.
> I booked my ticket after the eruption even though it was a possibility that it might start again. I just hoped it wouldn’t, but my mother thought I was slightly mad.

Most of our respondents had, however, planned their trip before the eruption and in most cases the event had only made the trip more exciting:

> I planned the trip before the eruption, but it got more interesting of course!
> I was hoping it would still be erupting when we got here.
> I wanted to see the volcano because it rocks!! Ash and and everything.
> I’m more interested in hiking around Eyjafjallajökull, now that it has erupted.
> Made Iceland even more exciting – the adventure and saga-Iceland

In fact, what came through was that for many of the respondents it was important to somehow feel that they were an actual part of what was happening. As they drove past Eyjafjallajökull, two Dutch men who gave Taina Mustonen a lift whilst she was travelling to gather questionnaires actually claimed that they were seeing steam coming up from the crater, even though the eruption had been over for some time then. They emphasised that it was important for them to be *part of the eruption*. A woman working for a German travel agency told us that an older man she had convinced to go despite the eruption had called her after his visit to thank her. Having seen the eruption added special value to his trip. It had been a long-standing dream.
This was also reflected when we asked people whether they had experienced any impacts of the eruption directly during the trip itself. Of the 20% who said that they had, most reported some experience relating to ash: having to wear masks; walking or driving through an ash cloud; or walking on ash. For some this added an extra value to the trip:

More than 30 cm of ash above ice and snow as hiking between Skogar and Thorsmörk. Amazing!!

Everybody is talking about it and I heard there is ash in Thorsmörk. We are going too.

Risk awareness and precautions

Not surprisingly, all those who answered the questionnaire were aware of the presence of volcanic risks in Iceland. The respondents were asked to indicate on a map those regions of Iceland where they thought active volcanism was to be found. Scientifically speaking, parts of all regions except the Westfjords, Eastfjords and the central Northland can be considered as volcanically active, although the most recent eruptions have been confined to a few sites in the south (e.g. Hekla, Surtsey, Heimaey), northeast (Krafla) and the subglacial sites in the Grimsvötn area. This ‘true’ distribution of recent volcanic activity is reflected in the awareness of tourists (Figure 2). Some 85% correctly identify the South with volcanism. It could be surmised that the remaining 15% simply have a very limited geographical understanding of the country or the location of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano. The central highland area is (correctly) considered volcanic by some 60% and the Northeast by 40%. However, only 32% think that the Southwest is volcanically active at the present time, even if lavafields and craters are very visible in the landscape of Reykjanes and the vicinity of Reykjavík. At the other end, the Westfjords are almost universally – and accurately – understood to be free of active volcanic activity.

![Figure 2. Perception of volcanism in various regions of Iceland. The numbers show the percentage of respondents who thought the region contained active volcanoes](image-url)
Given this reasonably high degree of awareness of volcanic risk and knowledge about its geographical distribution, it is perhaps surprising that only 38% of the respondents said they had looked for specific information about volcanoes or volcanic hazards before they arrived. Given the amount of publicity the eruption got in foreign media, this is not very high: one could have expected that people were more worried about the possible dangers of coming to Iceland at this time. Those who had made the effort to seek more information had looked for a variety of things: effects on aviation; possible health hazards; and the condition of the roads and hiking paths in the vicinity of the volcano, to name a few. A British male (age 28) stated somewhat frivolously that he was hoping for something much bigger:

I was hoping Katla was going to erupt while I was here. Cause that would be cool.

In Iceland itself, one much-discussed aspect of the eruption was the possible health risks involved in being exposed to excessive concentrations of airborne volcanic dust. The car rental companies obviously considered this a real risk to the health of their cars, but this was not really something that the tourists themselves were too worried about. Some 6% had specifically looked for health advice related to the eruption before embarking on the trip and only 3% had taken some precautionary measures. Mostly these measures consisted of taking along some dust masks. A handful of visitors had brought goggles for eye protection and some people suffering from respiratory diseases had made special medical precautions. But on the whole, the tourists seemed to be rather blasé about health and other possible hazards relating to the eruption.

**Conclusion: On risks and tourism**

What do the results of our survey tell us about the impact of the Eyjafjallajökull eruption on Icelandic tourism, and perhaps in more general terms about risk and tourism? First, we have to repeat the previous warning that the survey did not cover those (potential) tourists who probably were most affected by the eruption: those who cancelled their trip. But for those who did come, the impact of the eruption was not very great. Few people reorganised their travels or took specific precautions.

In fact, the risk associated with the eruption seems to have been almost entirely of the positive kind: the sort of risk that works to the advance of the destination rather than the reverse, making it more rather than less exciting. The old idea of the sublime is still at work here, if anything reinforced by the recent geological event. And the tourist experience is for most people more than a search for ‘scenic views’: it is a multisensory experience that establishes an affective relation with the landscape that is traversed. One of our respondents, a German student (24), said for example that the eruption had

sharpened [his] senses for bizarre landscape and volcanic activity.

Large sums of money are now being spent for marketing Iceland as a tourist destination, as a response to the eruption. We think that a more balanced assessment would have been needed of the complexity of ways in which risk is constructed in the minds of tourists, before the ‘Inspired by Iceland’ campaign was launched. Risk does not only mean possible danger: it is invariably also connected to the sublime experience. And tourism still feeds on that age-old aesthetic idea.
Acknowledgements

We owe a large debt to a number of people for assisting with data collection, logistics and the like. Saara Toikka receives special thanks for accompanying Taina Mustonen on her travels for data collection. Sigurður Atlason, Sigrún Inga Sigurgeirsdóttir, Sara Eik Sigurgeirsdóttir, and several others who shall remain unnamed, also deserve a generous dose of thanks. Finally, thanks to Edward Huijbens and The Icelandic Tourism Research Centre for supporting the research.
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