

Tourist Guides: The Ambassadors of Iceland



Tourist guides are ambassadors of a country, region or a city. They possess the power to make or break the visitor's experience. This is why tourist guides in Iceland undergo rigorous training before applying their art of guiding. Since 1976 more than 1,200 tourist guides have graduated from a one year professional tourist guide course and 160 are expected to graduate in spring 2010 just in time for the busy tourist season.

Tourist Guide Education in Iceland

The tourist guide profession and tourism employment is today more attractive to job seekers than ever before due to economic reasons. Unemployment went up from less than one percent one year ago to close to eight percent. At the same time the local currency depreciated by 50 percent making Iceland more affordable.

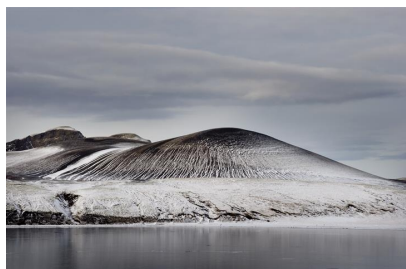


The Iceland Tourist Guide School was established in 1976. It was the first of three schools in the country to offer professional tourist guide education and training. Tourist guide courses last one year and are specifically organized to accommodate adult learners. Classes are taught from 17:30 to 22:00 three evenings a week and field trips take place on Saturdays. Subjects include; tourist guiding techniques (the art of guiding), geology / geography, history, industries and farming, tourism, society and culture, arts, botany, ornithology, mammals in Iceland, 20 hour first aid course, area interpretation and presentation skills in the student's elected foreign language.

Course evaluation is strict as students must pass all individual subject exams with an acceptable result. Students must pass a language exam that includes the entire content of each one of the subjects covered in the course. They must also pass an oral language area interpretation exam and two practical oral exams on a coach. The coach oral exams include a four-hour city tour, and an eight-hour tour to Gullfoss Waterfall, Geysir Geothermal Area and the Parliament Plains (Pingvellir) Iceland's most popular day tour for tourists.

The European Committee for Standardization (CEN) adopted a minimum standard for education of

professional tourist guides in 2008 (EN 15565). The standard stipulates member state's minimum education requirements for professional tourist guides ⁹ aiming at improving the quality of professional guiding in Europe. This standard has been accepted by the Icelandic Standards Agency (IST) but it has not yet been incorporated into a law. Until then tourist guide education in Iceland remains unregulated.



Iceland Tourist Guide Association

The Iceland Tourist Guide Association (ITGA) was established in 1972 and has 540 members. Most members work as tourist guides part-time. The ITGA is a professional association for tourist guides as well as a labour union for all tourist guides and tour managers who work in Iceland. It is a member of the Icelandic Confederation of Labour (ASÍ) which means that it has the exclusive nationwide right to negotiate wages for all tourist guides working in the country. Icelandic labour law clearly states that the association's wage agreement represents the minimum salary payable to all tourist guides working in Iceland ⁹ regardless of nationality or for which company they work.



Common European labour law

Tourist guides and tour managers, from outside the European Economic Community (EEC) or the European Union (EU) who accompany groups in Iceland, must apply for a temporary residence permit 90 days before their arrival in the country. The residence permits are based on temporary shortage of labourers and can only be renewed once. Tourist guides and tour managers coming from any of the EEC or EU member states must register after three months in the country with the Directorate of Immigration and the National Registry as well as pay tax in Iceland.

By Stefan Helgi Valsson

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