

CORONA CRISIS BOOSTED DOMESTIC TOURISM IN ICELAND



For years, the number of tourists coming to Iceland skyrocketed. Then, came Corona - with immense consequences for the Icelandic travel industry. Nevertheless, Icelanders do not despair.

In April 2019 more than 120,000 travelers came to Iceland - in April 2020, there were exactly 924. After years of immense growth, **tourism in Iceland has practically come to a standstill during the Corona crisis.**

For the North Atlantic island with its 360,000 inhabitants, this means a loss of billions this year. But the small Viking nation in the far north remains optimistic - even if the road back to the tourist figures of previous years will be a long one, as people in Reykjavik are well aware.

The figures have been rising steadily and steeply for almost a decade. The eruption of the volcanic glacier Eyjafjallajökull in 2010 suddenly brought the island into international awareness, and by 2018 the number of foreign guests had shot up from just under 500,000 to more than 2.3 million. In 2019, the figure was around 2 million - a stable number that the Icelanders wanted to keep in the long term in order to be able to sustainably develop tourism in Iceland around their geysers, waterfalls and hot springs.

But then came Corona. Because of the pandemic and the restrictions, flight cancellations and closed borders associated with it, hardly any passengers landed at Iceland's international airport in Keflavik near Reykjavik in the spring. The 924 guests in April was the lowest number of visitors to Iceland since 1961, according to calculations by the radio station RÚV. May was also a slow month: just 1035 travelers arrived to Keflavik in that month, a drop of 99.2 per cent compared to the same month last year.

"There were actually very good signs for 2020 - if only COVID hadn't struck," says Sigríður Dögg Gudmundsdóttir, head of the Icelandic tourist board Visit Iceland. It is already considered impossible that the 2019 figures will be reached this year. "In the past few months, we have fallen to virtually zero," says Gudmundsdóttir.

"We don't know how many tourists will come to Iceland this year. I'm not even sure if we can reach the 600,000," says Icelandic Tourism Minister Thórdís Kolbrún Gylfadóttir. She added that recent concerns about the maximum number of travelers that can be allowed at particularly popular sights on the island have been expressed. "At certain places, we were worried about possible over-tourism. Now we're more concerned about under tourism."

After the particularly harsh corona months of spring, however, there is a modest hope that tourism in Iceland will pick up again in Reykjavik. On one hand, there have been virtually no new infections among Icelanders for weeks, and on the other hand, international travel is picking up speed again.

"This has been a shock, but we know that we will get back on our feet," says Minister Gylfadóttir

confidently. Iceland is also dependent on the fact that the corona situation is getting better in other places, such as the USA - US citizens are the largest group of travelers every year, ahead of the British and Germans.

On arrival, the Icelanders have found a way to keep their island as corona-free as possible without keeping tourists away from the island as well as the virus: Since mid-June, visitors can have themselves tested for corona on arrival in Keflavik and thus escape the 14-day quarantine that otherwise applies. The cost to the traveler is between 57 and 70 euros.

Gudmundsdóttir of Visit Iceland assures that after entry, everything from hotel accommodation to car rental and restaurant visits will be as normal as possible during Corona times. One could travel around without restrictions and take advantage of the fact that Iceland is more sparsely populated than any other country in Europe. "Our population is comparatively small, but Iceland is the size of one third of Germany. **It is very easy to experience nature here all alone without large crowds.**" After a short thought, she says: "It is the perfect place for social distancing."

But the industry is not only relying on foreign tourists, but also on the changed travel behavior of the Icelanders themselves. Before Corona, these only accounted for about one in ten travelers in their own country. Gudmundsdóttir now sees a larger increase in domestic travel - and this is one of the few positive effects of the crisis. "All of a sudden, we are travelling through our own country in larger numbers than before. And at the same time, we are discovering what tourism has brought in terms of services and infrastructure," she says, "It's good that we value our country more.

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