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Social Media's Tourist Gaze and Tourism in Iceland

Along the south east coast of Iceland, even before parking and walking towards Seljalandsfoss waterfall the large crowds of visitors standing along the paths can be seen in the distance beyond an almost full parking lot of rental cars, camper vans and large tour company buses. Up close, almost every person has some form of photographic device in their hands or on their person, snapping photos every second. If this was September of 2018, some of these would surely account for the over one hundred million photos or videos uploaded to Instagram everyday, but being June of 2024, they likely account for a portion of an even larger amount of digital media produced every day (Campbell, 2019). Tourism is seemingly dominated by a digital and social media catalyzed model of information - especially visual sharing. This cultivates social and personal impressions of what places around the world look like, their identity on a global scale, and gives an element of desirability for personal visitation. It is the modern model for curating the tourist gaze, and instrumental in generating demand for a wide variety of locations and tourism types. Nature-based tourism is a main tourism format being influenced by this phenomena, and one highly vulnerable and subjective to perceived desirability. Today, the perception of vulnerable nature-based tourism destinations, particularly Iceland, have been strongly formed by the digital generation of the tourism gaze and the sustainability of their nature-based tourism is threatened by this evolving trend and social fad phenomena.

The tourist gaze was an idea first introduced in 1990 by John Urry and, through its development over time, has helped define how humans interact with nature and places that are not their homes, notably in the context of leisure travel experiences (Campbell, 2019; Karlsdottir, 2013). The tourist gaze is dependent on the idea that as people travel and return they not only share stories and impressions of places but photographs and knowledge on where they visited to create desirable tourism products, mostly by word of mouth or institutionalized tourism platforms (Campbell, 2019; Karlsdottir, 2013; Pálsdóttir, 2019). Historically, this information exchange had been done with the romanticization of locations by curating a distinction between someone's ordinary and an extraordinary experience they could have (Karlsdottir, 2013). This coincided with pushes towards scenic, natural or wild tourism, as these descriptions elicited unique and exciting experiences that were distinctly separate from an urban and mundane normal life (Karlsdottir, 2013). Nature began to become romanticized in the context of wilderness and landscapes that are anything other than the conceptualized normal or modernized city life (Karlsdottir, 2013). As leisure tourism developed the push to have experiences that could not be replicated inside homes or local places has grown, and the distances traveled for leisure and tourism has also increased (Fredman, Wall-Reinius and Grudén, 2012). The tourist gaze and expectations of what travel could be were both individual in what a person wanted or could expect and societal in the sense of group-agreed-upon destinations, activities or identities perceived of a place (Campbell, 2019; Karlsdottir, 2013; Pálsdóttir, 2019). People want experiences that are exotic compared to their place of residence, and ones that can give them a sense of individuality and accomplishment for getting to or seeing. The tourist gaze dominated the idea of pretty and untouched landscapes, free from the human-caused impurities that have consumed society and started to define destinations by their purity potential. This strong desire

for difference and the romanticism of landscapes helped form the idea of nature-based tourism and cultivated a tourist gaze around natural-based tourism interactions. Tourism was no longer just a movement of people or money, but a quest to find - shaped by the knowledge of other travelers - and return to something any individual could dream up within their mind and paired with the knowledge of other travelers.

Nature-based tourism relies on the tourist impression and definition as to what is deemed as natural or wild enough to be separate from urban life (Fredman, Wall-Reinius and Grudén, 2012). Therefore, nature-based tourism can be highly subjective and multifaceted as to the extent of naturalness, by person or groups of people, just as the tourist gaze is subjective to the individual or social definitions. When defining naturalness and wilderness spaces, a main consideration is the extent of human influence that has occurred on the landscape and the potential for future degradation (Fredman, Wall-Reinius and Grudén, 2012; Karlsdottir, 2013). Additionally, the proximity to modern amenities or the remoteness of a place influences how likely a person would be to go there based on their desired wilderness experience ranging from: natural with modern elements, to off grid remote, to a complete absence of traces of society (Fredman, Wall-Reinius and Grudén, 2012; Karlsdottir, 2013). The graduation of naturalness and potential for wild nature-based tourism gives an array of nature-based tourism types and products to meet each level of wilderness desire and trip adventures. However, human demand for what is desired out of a set location or location type is also crucially important for making this determination and influenced by the place identity of somewhere and the tourists' gaze towards an environment or trip. Some of these demands are based on the location to begin with, while others are curated with human infrastructural developments, in response to the tourist gaze formulated set of expectations.

When looking specifically at how Iceland fits into these ideas of the tourist gaze and nature-based tourism structures, the uniqueness of Icelandic geography and the context around the generation of a tourism industry in Iceland are at the root of this entire dynamic. Iceland holds a collection of landscapes and climatic conditions basically not seen anywhere else globally. Iceland is positioned atop both the mid-atlantic ridge divergent plate boundary and a hot spot in the earth's crust, resulting in elevated amounts of active volcanic and geothermal features, unique igneous rock formations and a fractured landscape (Hazen Lecture 2024; Perlan Museum Volcanism Display Board, 2024). Additionally, approximately 11% of Iceland's surface area is glaciated with large quantities actively melting, giving Iceland both glaciers and waterfalls scattered across the landscape (Hazen Lecture 2024; Jökulsárlón Glacier Lagoon Guide 2024). Iceland is also positioned longitudinally north, resulting in both majorly biased seasonal day and night light cycles but also cool summers and harsh winters (Perlan Museum Board, 2024; Gössling, 2006).

These are geographic features at a density unique to Iceland, and vastly different from Europe and North America, making it an enticing travel destination. These features fit within the romanticized tourist gaze for desired tourism but also nature-based tourism of varying levels due to being perceived as wilderness and untouched land, and lacking development across much of the land in Iceland. However, the landscape of Iceland has also been argued as being the complete opposite of what should be or may first be considered a glamourized landscape due to the extremes in temperature, climate, and geology it holds especially when compared to that of warmer or tropical island landscapes (Gössling, 2006). These extremes do contribute to people's desire to connect with nature and, despite being extreme conditions, allow a particular set of tourists to meet this romanticization of landscapes and adventure. Iceland has capitalized on its

natural lands, seeing a market of tourists interested in visiting and getting in touch with these otherly landscapes.

The distribution of Iceland's natural wonders is to its benefit in creating a diverse spread of tourism types, but also something increasing tourism numbers and travel information spread threatens. While most of the tourism activities Iceland offers are considered extremes, a choice of how to encounter these extremes exists in part by their location and the tourism infrastructures in place to cater to a diverse nature seeking tourism market. For instance, the location of the Golden Circle of Iceland allows easy self-drive or day-package trips to see natural features while being relatively removed from the physicality of the actual landscape. This includes water falls like Gullfoss having paths and stairs to access viewing predominantly from above, with a cafe and expansive parking lot for a more rapid but amenity-included turnover of visitors. Other places in the Golden Circle such as Thingvellir National Park have these amenities but also have more expansive and less polished walking paths to access harder-earned views of waterfalls and access to rigorous activities including Silfra snorkeling. Jökulsárlón glacial lagoon is along the southeast coast, but much harder to make a day trip from Reykjavik, and therefore, is a destination more amenable to self-driven travelers likely seeking to access more of Iceland. Yet, the lagoon tour companies serve a number of tours along the lagoon, some for people who simply want a gentle viewing of the near parts of the lagoon and others for people who really want a sense of adventure and thrill that travel very close to the glacial wall in a zodiac speed boat. The geography and distance traveled in Iceland dictates some of how people interact with the nature presented, while other experiences are dictated by the tourist's desired level of engagement with the environment they seek out. The ways in which destinations and features

have become and continue to become popular in Iceland is due to several marketing and social information chains, all of which have maximized the tourist gaze Iceland elicits and fits into.

Tourism in Iceland began booming after both the 2008 financial crisis and the 2010 eruption of Eyjafjallajökull which put Iceland on the global travel radar and served as a means for local economic recovery (Sheivachman, 2019; Sorrell and Plante, 2021). The images and media exiting Iceland at the time of the eruption, in pairing with world travel disruptions due to expelled ash, helped direct the gaze of tourists towards Iceland, as it was somewhere many had known little about before (Sorrell and Plante, 2021; Sheivachman, 2019). Iceland was being displayed on a global scale as a relatively close destination for Europeans and North Americans, a place with exciting geology actively occurring, and as people looked into the tourist marketing Iceland already had or was actively generating, saw many possibilities within the country for a dramatic and different destination than destinations or vacations they had already exhausted (Sorrell and Plante, 2021; Sheivachman, 2019; Sigurdardottir, 2024). Cheap initial prices also helped get early travelers there (Sigurdardottir, 2024). Additionally, the perceived newness of Iceland as a travel destination gave prospective tourists the idea that if they went there, they were somehow special and accomplishing something they thought few had done (Karlsdottir, 2013). In 2010, less than 500,000 tourists visited Iceland per year, still more than the number of residents; by 2018, 2.3 million were visiting (Sorrell and Plante, 2021). This feeling of potential accomplishment and individuality people initially perceived, directly relates to ideas of the tourist gaze and connecting with nature beyond the ways groups or individuals already have.

The more attention that turned towards Iceland, the more media Iceland based companies put out to gain traction, with an emphasis on the visual appeal of images and showcasing diverse landscapes (Karlsdottir, 2013). The Icelandic based campaign “Inspired By Iceland” was

launched in 2010 alongside growing interest in the eruption and utilized these marketing and tourism beckoning strategies (Sorrell and Plante, 2021; Karlsdottir, 2013). Icelandic companies were feeding the world an idea of what Iceland could be for them, what they could individually achieve there, and what a different idea of tourism could be. In response, tourists flocked to Iceland and have increased in numbers every year - except in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns - bringing rising prices of food and housing, increased foot traffic at natural sites and infrastructure that can only attempt to meet demand (Sorrell and Plante, 2021; Sheivachman, 2019; Sigurdardottir, 2024). Yet, not all of this boom in numbers and the popularity of Iceland as a travel trend is due to the initial events or the first and domestically based tourist grabbing advertisements such as “Inspired by Iceland”.

Social media dominates much of modern life in how people stay in touch with long distance friends, get news, entertain themselves and increasingly is a place to find anything travel related. Alongside Iceland’s self-driven tourism campaign explosion came a boom in social media platforms as part of what is considered the expansion of online programs and Web 2.0; the birth in 2010 of Instagram in particular would change the course of tourism information exchange (Campbell, 2019; Pálsdóttir, 2019). Instagram caters to photo sharing, with editing capabilities, multi-photo posts, geolocation tagging, and the ability for every user to curate a profile of their desired public image (Campbell, 2019; Pálsdóttir, 2019). It is the perfect place to show off accomplishing an epic trip, and to share the photos of and location of a place to boast a person made it there before others, or is keeping up with the trends of travel (Campbell, 2019; Pálsdóttir, 2019). It has become a catalyst for destination image circulation, and due to the inherent social status deemed towards travel, casual online travel photo sharing results in other’s jealousy to travel to places shared as well to try and keep up with others.

The original tourist gaze theory proposed that the more personal and intimate sharing of travel stories and images was crucial for setting expectations of places and trips, and formulated an individualistic desire towards traveling and accomplishing a destination's offerings. Current sharing being done online in a less personable way that instead emphasizes the aesthetic and leaves an individual feeling they must recreate a travel experience, turns the travel desire towards replication and societal habituation within the context of a destination. Places become a fad, and the goal of travel shifts from connecting with landscapes and exploring ones different from someone's home, to instead achieving the perfect images within a destination at specific places to attain a theoretical social standing (Campbell, 2019; Pálsdóttir, 2019). With applications like Instagram that allow for location tagging, specific places easily get marked as must see locations, increasing the tourists going there, which then threatens the sustainability of these places.

As destinations become marked as must see and a part of social travel trends, visitor numbers to them rapidly increase, threatening effects and damages of overtourism. When too many visitors go to one site, especially under the guise of nature-based tourism, they damage the location with foot traffic, garbage, vehicle pollution, and overcrowd the once remote or untouched destination (Sorrell and Plante, 2021). Oftentimes tourists are there for relatively short time frames, to see the attraction, take some idealized images with little regard for the paths or environment around them, and then move on to the next hit-list destination (Sorrell and Plante, 2021; Pálsdóttir, 2019). The rapid movement of people from destination to destination is especially common in Iceland, where attractions are relatively spread out, and people do not spend very long at any one attraction due to lacking genuine interest in the place itself and focusing more on seeing them all. The speed of tourism in Iceland is encouraged by the vast quantities of media people see about how to be the ideal tourist in Iceland, leaving people feeling

they must accomplish it all in order to have the perfect trip or see the best destinations (Sorrell and Plante, 2021). The disregard for a place was personally exhibited at Seljalandsfoss waterfall when a woman had stepped over the roping along the path and gone past a sign clearly stating it was restricted for environmental protection, to take as she put it “just one good image.”

This woman is not the only tourist there or at other destinations across Iceland for “just one good image” without regard for local rules or conditions and not the only one contributing to overtourism harm and sustainability challenges. However, this does seem to disproportionately occur based on the location of an attraction relative to Reykjavik. The Golden Circle and areas along the south coast, particularly those along the Ring Road, are close to Reykjavik and popular enough to have mass amounts of tourists. However, this decreases their naturalness simply due to human presence and begins to blur the lines on if this is still natural enough to be nature-based tourism (Sorrell and Plante, 2021; Fredman, Wall-Reinius and Grudén, 2012). This dynamic also inspires tourists motivated to actually connect with the landscapes, who are not there just for the photogenic hotspots, to travel further to areas that are more challenging to reach to achieve travel more along the lines of the origins of the tourist gaze. The northeast town of Bakkagerdi is not along the Ring Road but rather an hour each way removed and basically one of the furthest places across the country from Reykjavik. When at the only campsite in the small town, the campsite host said, “we have never reached capacity. It grows a little each year but not substantially.” He also mentioned most people “come out to spend a few nights, hike or go watch the puffins” with a non-directly-verbalized emphasis that tourism to this town was very genuine and slower paced compared to most places.

The duality between tourism locations helps define that the effects of social-media-formed tourism gazes are not threatening all landscapes across Iceland and instead

are a result of both distance from Reykjavik and social media tourist gaze popularity. Instead, it hints that as more and more places in close proximity become overrun and damaged, people motivated and independent enough are spreading out their tourism. The potential for future and more expansive harms do exist as social media continues to be popular within tourism in nature-based tourism contexts and people adapt their travels based on how this affects their travel desires. Tourism is no longer controlled by a genuine tourist gaze or adventurous mindset, but instead is victim to the influences of what gets shared on social media and what becomes internet popular. These chosen landscapes have yet to be fully cast aside as sustainability failures, but have yet not proven to have a resilient present or sustainable future for themselves or other soon to be chosen landscapes, if this fad model of tourism continues.

The tourist gaze held up nature-based tourism for people to explore landscapes they were unfamiliar with, and exchange travel stories in a personable verbal way and with visual photography aids. As nature-based tourism destinations became defined by landscapes of interest that fit the romanticized and exotic qualities, Iceland became one country that initially thrived. Iceland had diverse and dramatically different landscapes than was typical for this model, making it popular and seen as a great brag point to explore, especially paired with volcanic eruptions spurring an interest in Icelandic bravado and tourism. Iceland promotions utilized ideology of the tourist gaze to draw attractiveness towards tourism, but this was quickly overrun with the personal usage of social media to curate Icelandic tourism into a social fad and digitally romanticized and aesthetic experience. Now Iceland faces disproportionately placed overtourism ramifications and a subset of continued adventure tourism expansion. This has left the country in a continual cycle of unsustainable tourism expansion - traffic, pollution, environmental

degradation, wait lines, ignorant, inconsiderate and impatient tourists - which are all a byproduct of the influences on travel of social media promotion.

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