

Sense of Place, Iceland's Culinary Experience Learning Journey, 2-8 June 2019

The art of storytelling in Iceland's tourism development

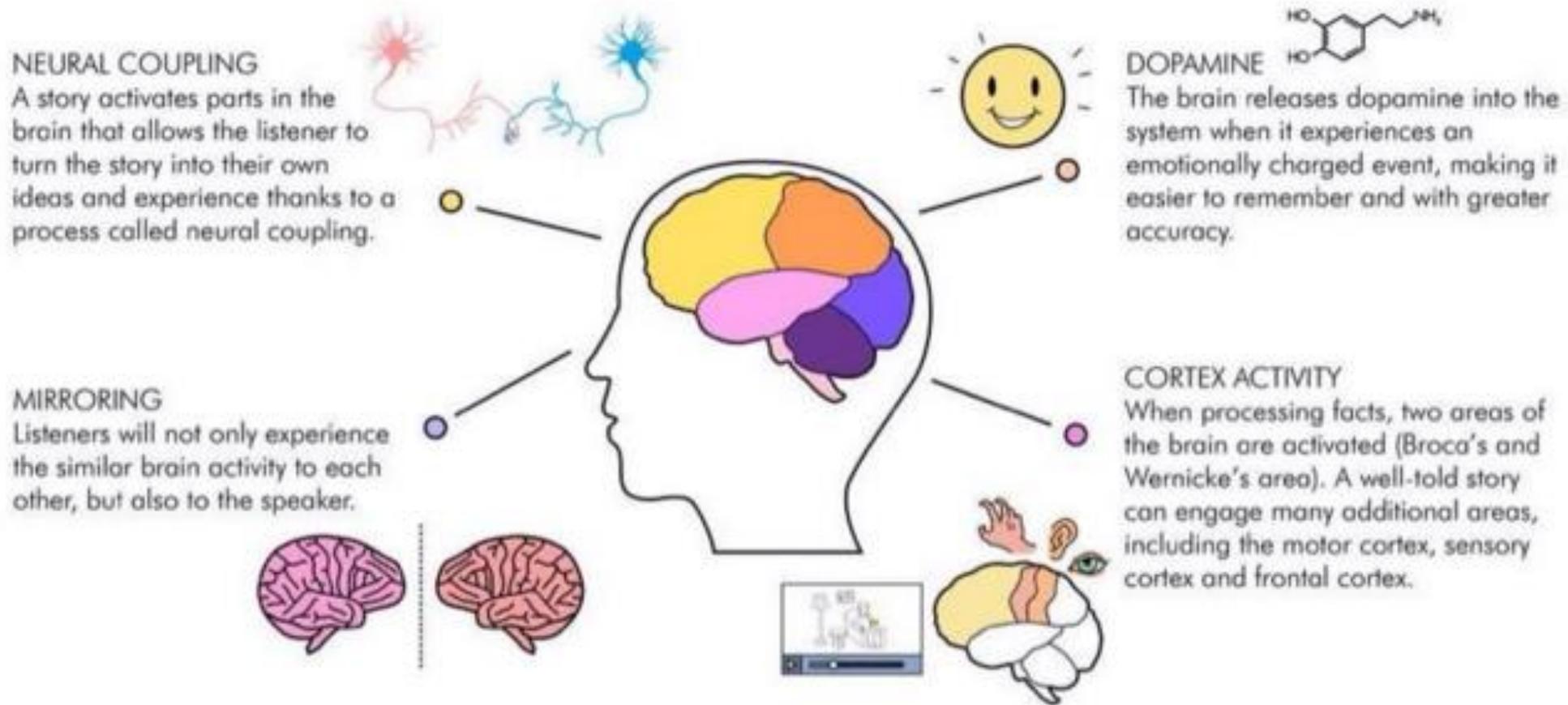


Contents

Why is storytelling so powerful	3-5
Benefits of storytelling for businesses & destinations	6
Iceland- a shared national story	7-11
Best practice examples	12-25
Conclusions	26
Key takeaways	27
Contact	28

Why is storytelling so powerful?

HOW STORYTELLING AFFECTS THE BRAIN



A good story can truly influence a visit to a tourist attraction in a significant way – it's what you will always remember

Why is storytelling so powerful?

Employee engagement research shows that one of the most important sources of **personal engagement and motivation** is the need to do work that is **'meaningful'** or **'counts'**

If a business can help employees to understand their **connection** to their work, and the employee feels they are part of the story, then they will be a natural advocate. They will **take on the stories** of the business and **make them their own**. This is **particularly important for visitor economy business who are selling experiences**



A famous example of employee engagement

President John F. Kennedy was visiting NASA headquarters for the first time in 1961. While touring the facility, he introduced himself to a janitor who was mopping the floor and asked him what he did at NASA. He replied, "I'm helping put a man on the moon". The janitor 'got it'. He understood the vision, and his part in it. He had a purpose which engaged him in the delivery of the organisational goals

Benefits of storytelling for businesses & destinations

Brand-building/development

Differentiation in a global market

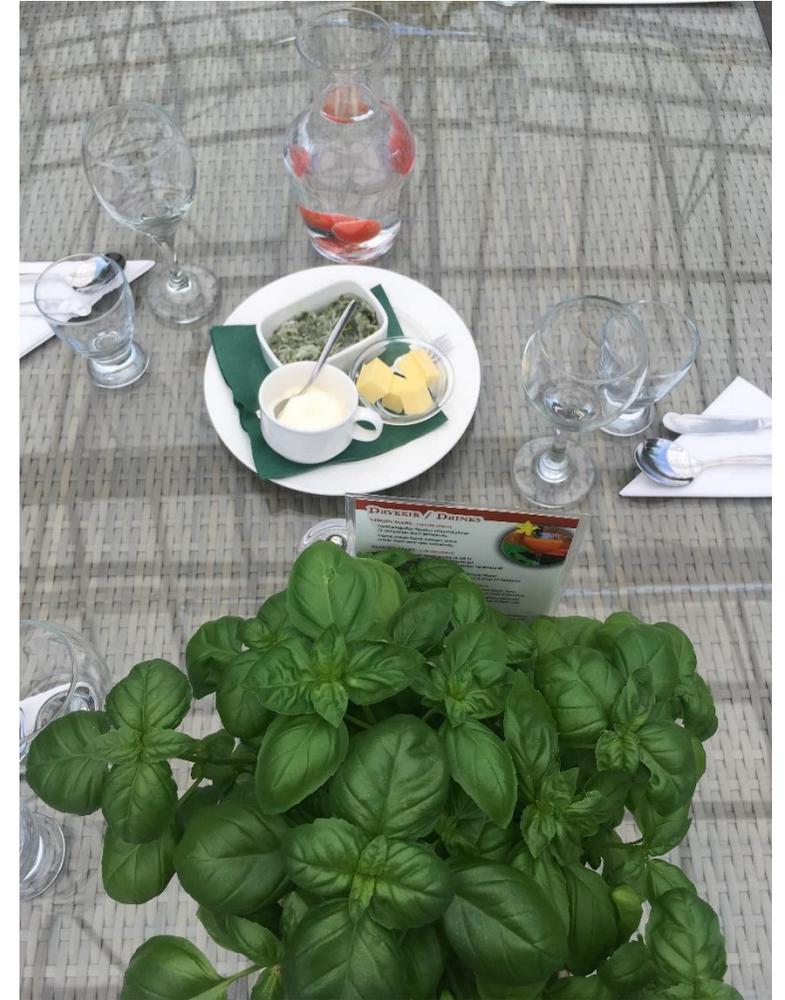
Building **customer loyalty**

Word of mouth marketing

Repeat visits and recommendations

Employee **engagement & satisfaction**

Increased sales



Why is storytelling so powerful?

A story provides the **context** for a business strategy, making it meaningful and allowing it to connect with other stories, feelings and emotions about the company that people already have

Top tips:

- Use your **own words** and real, relevant examples
- Use **everyday language** and not ‘business jargon’
- It needs to cover the **‘bad bits’** not just the good bits—no ‘Pollyanna’ stories ever succeed
- **Keep it simple** - own it – express your **own feelings, emotions and anecdotes**



Iceland – a national shared story

The national, shared story creates a powerful, emotional connection with **‘brand Iceland’**

A majority of people involved in Iceland’s visitor economy tell their version of the same story, which makes it clear and compelling

The story centres on the **natural environment**, the principal reason that people visit

Emphasis is placed on an **island nation** and the **contrasts & extremes** created by location, climate & geological origins



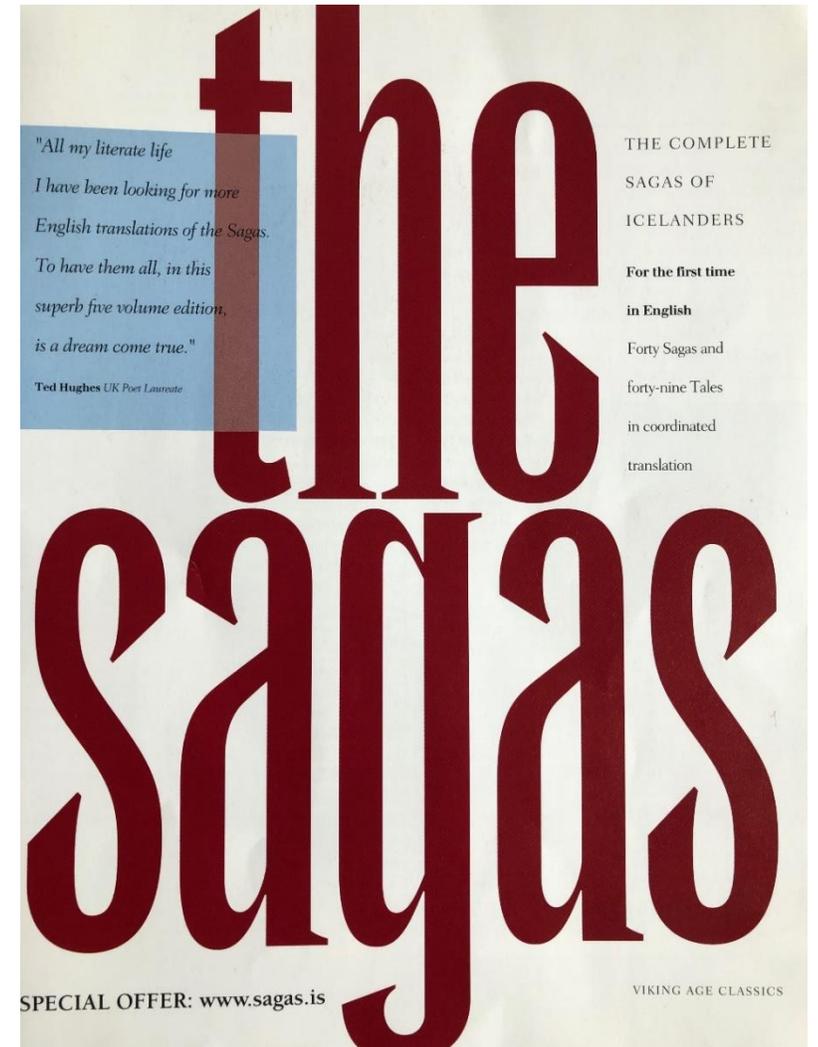
Iceland – a national shared story

The Icelandic people are **natural storytellers** with a cultural heritage rooted in Icelandic sagas

The nation tells a **common story**, based on and inspired by the natural environment which people feel very connected to

It **inspires their way of life**, what they eat, how they live, their pattern of work. It is all shaped by the landscape (above and below) and their history

Article from The Guardian, [here](#), about the Icelandic sagas



Iceland – a national shared story

Melanie Sensicle, on behalf of the group, shares her perceptions of the Icelandic shared story, in this short video clip



Iceland – a national shared story

Story telling starts before the visitor arrives with the **Icelandic Pledge** (displayed in businesses across the island too)

The pledge content draws attention to the natural landscape and what you can do in it – adventure, exploration - as well as important themes of respect for the environment and responsible behaviour

Promote Iceland and its partners have created a series of campaigns & initiatives, under the umbrella brand, 'Inspired by Iceland'. Campaigns focus on natural assets and are communicated in a creative, engaging & humorous way. The latest campaign is about Iceland's tap water
www.inspiredbyiceland.com

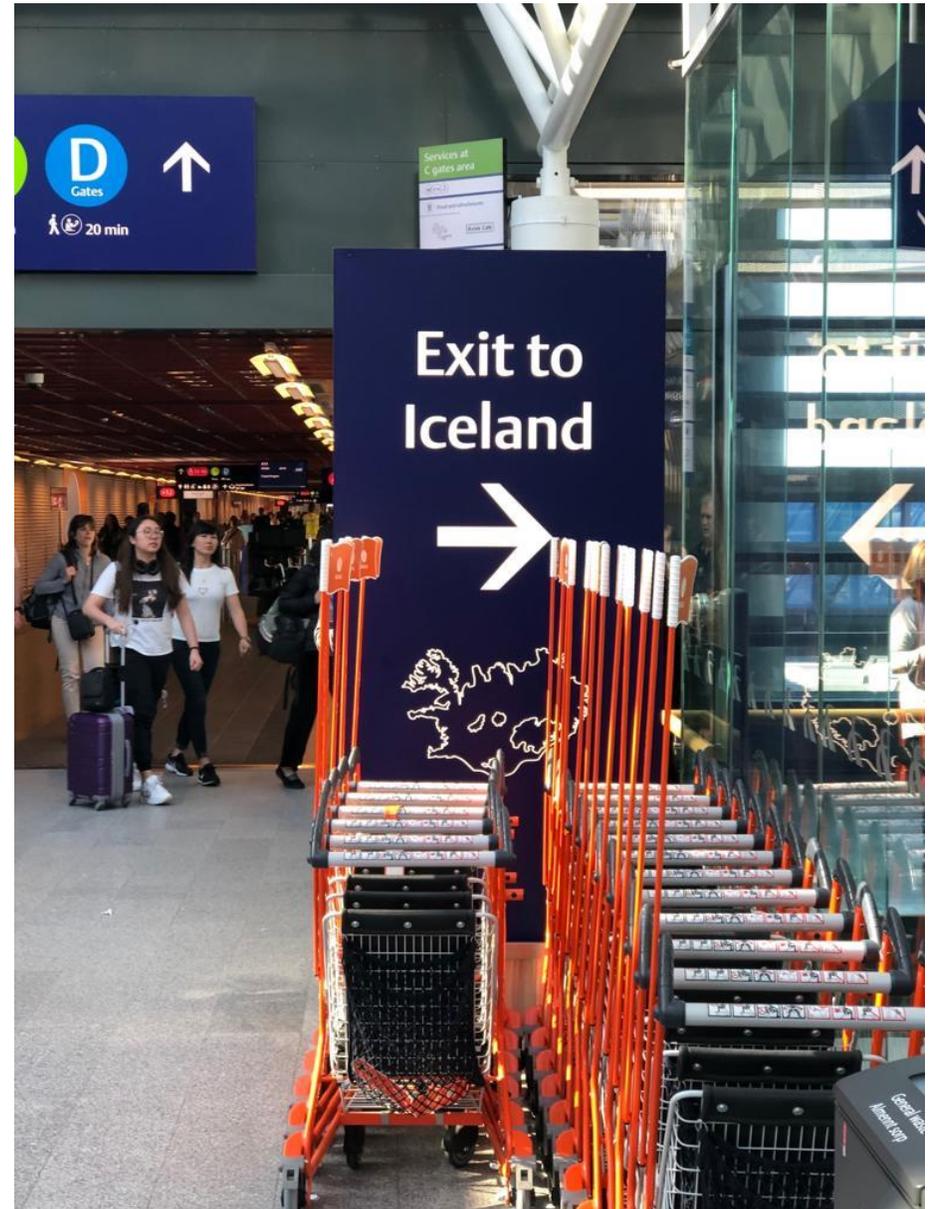


Iceland – a national shared story

The **national tourist board** website highlights key elements of country's story particularly the influence of land on national life and what you can do in the landscape (www.inspiredbyiceland.com/about-iceland)

Icelandic Air tells the story in its inflight magazine on its inflight video channel & even the 'airsick bag' – visitors become immersed in the story from their point of departure

Keflavik Airport – performs gateway function by directing passengers with the sign 'Exit to Iceland'



Best practice examples



The Blue Lagoon

Key facts – www.bluelagoon.com

- Iceland's most popular visitor attraction
- Main activity bathing in natural geothermal waters
- Up to 4000 visitors a day in high season
- Pre-booked tours available for groups
- On site restaurant/café servicing local produce and shop selling spa products

We were welcomed by Nicholas, a Londoner, who fell in love with a local girl & has made Iceland his home

He **delivered his stories in a relaxed, heartfelt way**, whilst sipping some coffee with a stunning slide of the Blue Lagoon behind him with 'welcome' in bold letters. He constantly referenced the **beauty & power of land**, the healing properties of the water, and the heritage of the site, discovered by chance by local power station workers

The lagoon speaks for itself but **the stories he told added a whole new dimension** to the experience – felt personal and genuine. This was all the more impressive given the huge scale and commercial nature of the business – **this personal, human touch keeps the experience real**



Laugarvatn Fontanta – geothermal breadmaking

Key facts – www.fontana.is

- Spa and wellness centre on the Golden Circle tourist route, the most popular in Iceland
- Main activity bathing in natural geothermal waters
- Geothermal bread making tours available to pre-book
- On site restaurant/café servicing local produce and small shop selling spa products
- Owned by the local community and shareholders (including The Blue Lagoon)

Our host told the story of the local tradition of baking bread using a natural outdoor oven powered by geothermal heat and demonstrated by digging a loaf out of the ground. We were then invited to taste. The tradition continues: next to ‘our’ oven was one belonging to a local person baking for a special occasion.

Staff training involves observing others and then individuals are encouraged to use their **own language & stories** and **make their delivery personal**, adapting stories to fit the audiences. Our host talked about travelling from the Czech Republic and choosing to settle in Iceland as a lifestyle choice. Her **genuine connection & commitment** to the location enhanced our visit – the **story felt personal**



Laugarvatn Fontanta – geothermal breadmaking

We tasted the bread with local butter and smoked fish and then bathed

The attraction has grown dramatically in the past ten years, from a ‘shed’ changing room and simple pool to the more sophisticated and modern set- up of today

Our host was adept at setting up excellent **photo opportunities** encouraging visitors to post on social media platforms, buy products and eat in the restaurant

Storytelling at Fontana connects visitors to the community and supports the attraction brand, as well as repeating the national shared story about how the landscape shapes life in the country



Efsti-Dalur – dairy farm

Key facts – www.efstidalur.is

- Hotel and refreshment stop on the Golden Circle tourist route, the most popular in Iceland
- Main activity restaurant, food tours and tastings based on farm-to-fork philosophy
- Ice cream parlor
- Family farming cooperative diversified into tourism

Our host was Linda, the youngest of four siblings living on a farm established by her grandparents and now run by the third generation of the same family

The family have embraced tourism in an **innovative way**, with a true **farm-to-fork** philosophy evident throughout the restaurant, ice-cream parlour and food tours/tastings

She delivered a warm, engaging presentation of her family & the business, with a **tutored tasting of skyr & whey**



Efsti-Dalur – dairy farm

The restaurant experience involves a dining room **overlooking the cow barn**, a menu that features their home made skyr, a feta-like cheese and a national obsession, beef and other products. There is no mistaking that visitors are on a busy working farm

The four siblings, parents, grandparents, animals & family heritage are featured heavily their marketing and interpretation materials and family memorabilia is on display too

TripAdvisor features many rave reviews about the enterprise in every aspect, including the local food and warm welcome. A very powerful example of farm-to-fork and family enterprise that is **truly evidenced and brought to life at all times**



Hotel Geysir – tradition & heritage meets innovation

Key facts – www.hotelgeysir.is

- A contemporary, design led hotel on the site of a former sport school
- 71 rooms, 6 suites, opening on 1 August 2019
- Part of the Geysir-Centre, a complex that includes a smaller hotel, restaurants, souvenir shop, snack shop, design centre and camping area
- Located a five minute walk from the Great Geysir
- Hotel is family owned

Our charismatic host, and driving force behind the hotel development, was family member, Mabel, who brought it to life with a personal tour

She told the story of her ancestor, Sigurdur Greipsson, who founded and ran a **sport school** on the site for 40 years, the fire that caused irreparable damage to the building, and the preservation of the original two main walls which are incorporated in to the development. This story is central to the hotel and strikingly conveys how old meets new



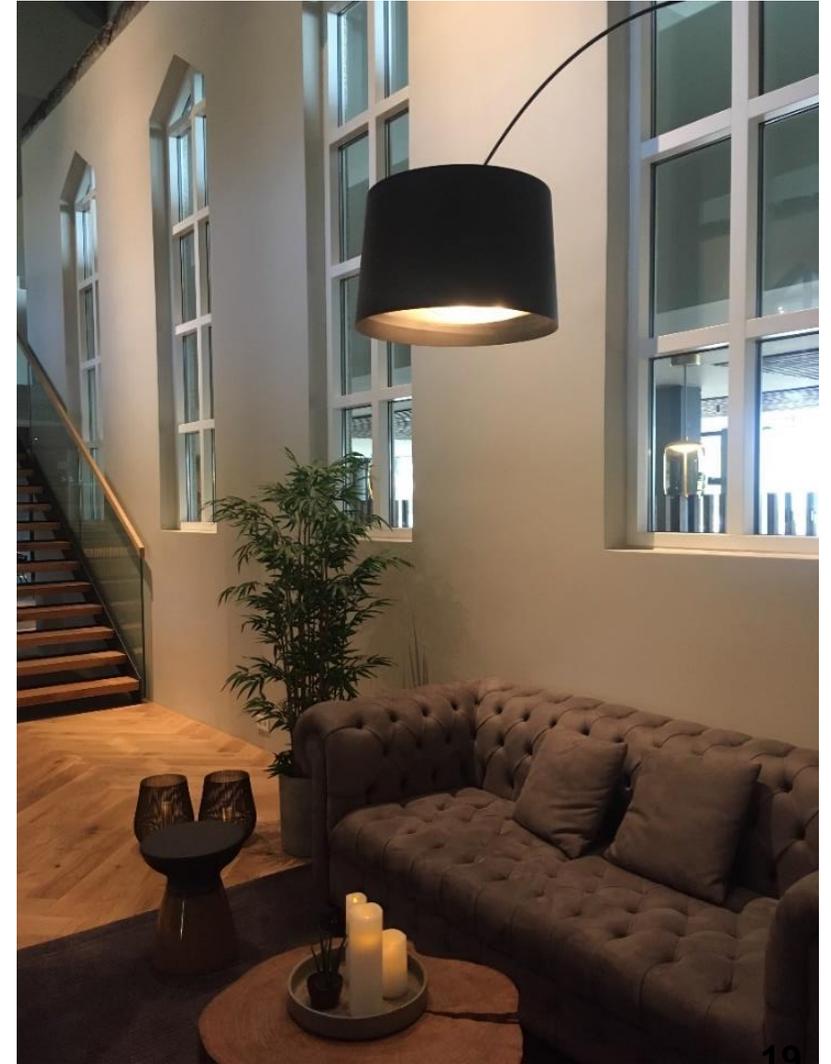
Hotel Geysir – tradition & heritage meets innovation

Colours & textures of the bedrooms have a strong connection to the land (stone walls; wood finishing; aqua textiles)

Local, seasonal produce sourced throughout – linked to land & sea

Promotes a visitor connection to the family & its fascinating story, linked to the natural environment. **Family pictures** proudly adorn the walls of the entrance and a montage of black & white gym photos, together with a framed list of former students are beautifully displayed on two gallery walls. The new reception, will feature a **family portrait** above the impressive fireplace

Greater communication of the story on social media and website would be a powerful means of inspiring & engaging visitors yet further and enhancing their experience when they visit



Fridheimar – tomato greenhouse project

Key facts – www.fridheimar.is

- A tomato farm and equestrian centre
- Restaurant (open midday to 4pm), bar, shop, online shop, horse shows, stable visits
- Guided greenhouse tours for groups (pre-booked)
- Family farm, all members including the children involved

Our hosts, owner Knutur and master chef Jon, told the story of the business from its origins to the present day

Their multifaceted estate harnesses geothermal energy to head their greenhouses and produce high-quality tomatoes all year round. The business uses technology, that can be controlled remotely by mobile, to ensure optimal growing environment. They have a zero-waste policy

Their story is **fully integrated** throughout the visitor journey: **welcome signs** in car park; **storyboard** in entrance with photo of the whole family; **illustration & family story** on products and packaging; **recipe cards**; **tomato-themed menu** (right down to tomatoes in water jugs) and promotional leaflet



Fridheimar – tomato greenhouse project

Everyone is involved in telling the story and staff are trained & encouraged to 'own' it

Focus is on the **aesthetic beauty & quality** throughout, which encourages & inspires guests to **take & share photos on social media, creating**

This **highly integrated, focused and consistent** approach to communicating the story has paid off, with the business enjoying a **huge increase in visitor numbers** and strong forward bookings for the restaurant

They don't need to pay for marketing: **word of mouth** is their key tool. Surveys show 60% of visitors hear about the experience from others



Mushroom farm & Farmers' Bistro

Key facts – www.farmersbistro.is

- Iceland's only mushroom farm
- Farmer's Bistro (open midday to 5pm)
- Introductions and tours available for groups (pre-booked)
- Located in Fludir, in the Golden Circle
- Family business

Our charismatic host, a **family member**, gave an engaging & entertaining talk about the business. The goal is **“to be true to ‘Slow Food’ thinking, to raise awareness of the importance of food knowledge, traditions & geographical origin of food”**

Story boards displayed in reception, a simple mushroom-themed menu - soup, pickles & dips and homemade bread – plus products available to take home & a promotional leaflet all told the shared story

The **integrated storytelling** approach connected visitors **with the experience**. It was **personal & memorable**



Skyrgerdin, Hveragerdi

Key facts – www.skyrgerdin.is

- Café, bistro, accommodation (13 rooms), arts/community centre
- Farmer's Bistro (open midday to 5pm)
- Factory tour with film and tastings for groups (10+)
- Located in Fludir, in the Golden Circle
- Family business

The story of the historic building, Iceland's oldest Skyr and yoghurt factory, is at the **heart of the business**, enabling visitors to learn and appreciate, in creative ways, how important Skyr was and still is to the island and its people.

Our host was fun, charismatic & entertaining too. He explained how **heritage & history** is honoured and kept alive by means of **old photographs** on the walls; a mini **museum** with old skyr-making equipment; a dining hall/theatre space; **tastings** comparing old-fashioned skyr and how its enjoyed today & tastings and **film screening** about the building/products

Bistro menu specialises in local, organic lamb and Skyr products



Reykjavik – Grandi Harbour

Key facts - www.guidetoiceland.is; www.grandimatholl.is

- Former fishing district, regenerated to become a cultural hub of the city
- Features street food market, restaurants, museums, including in converted fish processing units
- The city's first independent brewery, which offers tours & activities, plus a bistro featuring local produce www.bryggjanbrugghus.is

Grandi Matholl, indoor street food street food market in a revived fish factory – guests watch Icelandic fishing vessels landing fresh fish whilst they enjoy traditional & modern Icelandic food plus international cuisine – story & provenance is clearly highlighted on the website & social media

We enjoyed fish & chips in Bruggjan Brugghus overlooking the harbour. Décor mixes old and new, with historical artefacts from Icelandic fisherman culture & menu features local seafood & traditional dishes with their own craft beers – a true sense of place



Reykjavik – Grandi Harbour

The harbour experience has a **wide appeal**, and it's evident that local people regard the regeneration of this area as a positive leisure development, demonstrated by ongoing investment in food and drink establishments, waterside experiences and shops

The **charm of eating freshly-caught seafood** at the harbour is well understood, and tells a story of cultural continuity across international boundaries

There is a genuine **sense of place**, with the area's experiences, not least the culinary ones, connected with the harbour's rich maritime history

David Adams McGilp, regional partnerships director, VisitScotland, shares his thoughts on the harbour experience



Conclusions

The Icelandic visitor experience **exemplified storytelling as a tool for tourism development & promotion**, driven by outstanding national marketing and business innovation

There is a **shared story**, fundamentally connected with the island's natural environment across land & sea

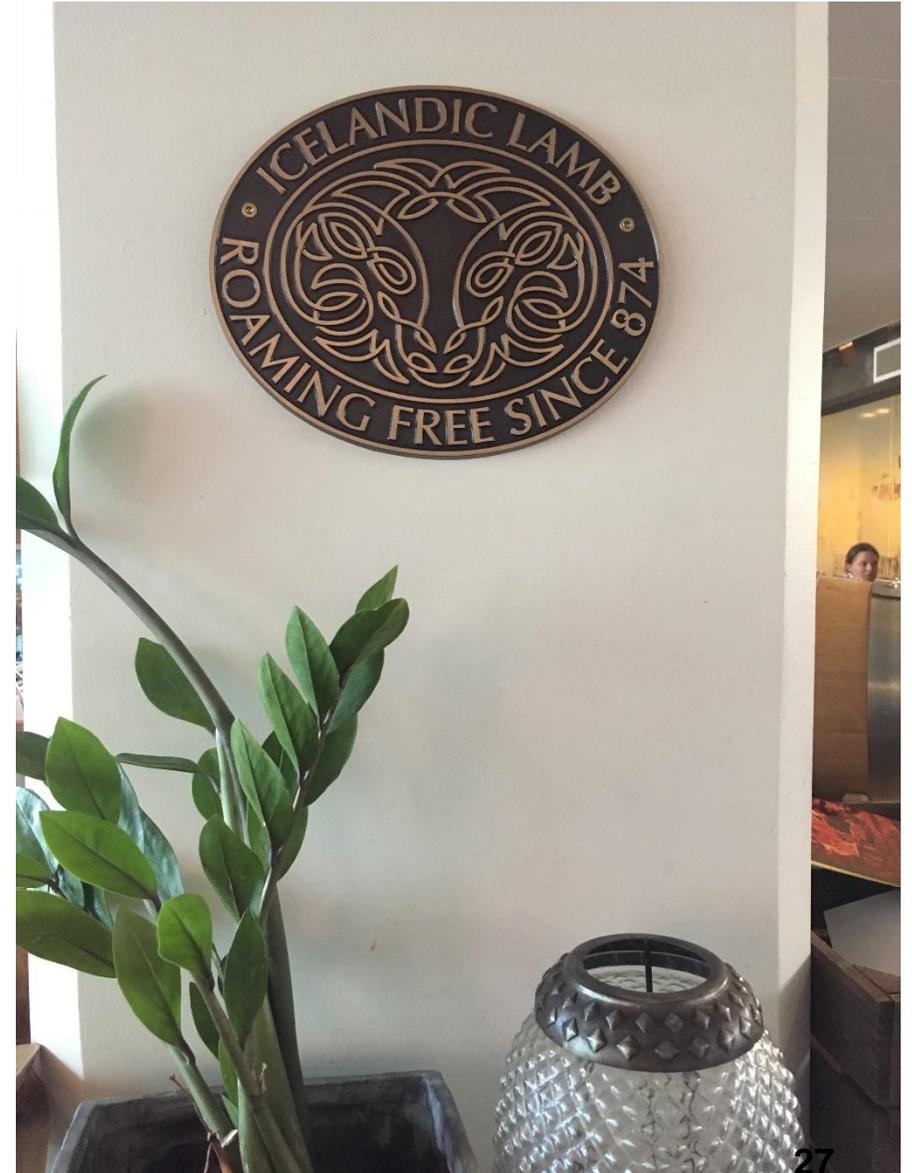
The businesses visited excelled at telling **personal & engaging stories in creative ways, both verbally & visually**, to drive visitor numbers, memorable experiences and connection with their brands



Key takeaways

Storytelling can be a powerful tool for business success, boosting sales, visitor numbers & online engagement:

- **Involve everyone in the storytelling** – all staff have a role to play in being ambassadors for the business and its vision, so empower them to tell it.
- **Be consistent** – the story must be a shared one and be fully integrated across the business.
- **Be creative** – think of innovative ways to tell the story.
- **Make it personal** – people relate to real, human stories, not artificial ones so include the personal touch.



The storytelling team

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