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Life beyond Reykjavik

Mark Smulian discovers that some of Iceland's more remote regions are bidding to attract new airlines

Wanted: airlines willing to fly to two somewhat obscure airports in Iceland that receive almost no international flights at present.

In return, joint work by airports owner Isavia and local government bodies means the airlines can expect heavy discounts on landing fees, guaranteed marketing support to attract tourists and – given the kind of tourism being promoted – passengers wealthy enough not to need rock-bottom fares.

There are of course plenty of international scheduled flights to Iceland, but with one exception they all serve Keflavik, in the extreme south-west of the country about an hour's drive from the capital Reykjavik.

Most tourists who stay for more than a few days make a complete circuit of Iceland from Keflavik by road. Isavia's thinking is therefore that such round trips could start from the under-used airports at Egilsstadir and Akureyri, both of which are nearer to mainland Europe and also in areas that want to attract more visitors.

Akureyri is in northern Iceland, a few kilometres below the Arctic Circle, linked weekly in summer to Copenhagen by budget carrier Iceland Express. The success of this flight has led local businesses and local government to collect a fund to finance discounted landing fees and the costs of marketing to tour operators and the public.

Akureyri is, obviously, not Alicante. It will never be a mass tourism destination, not least because even after its 2008 banking crisis Iceland remains a relatively expensive destination and will attract a discerning type of visitor.

Two or three flights a week from the UK, Germany and Scandinavia would be sufficient to meet the local community's goal of generating a sufficient stream of visitors to sustain a larger tourism industry, says Arnheidur Johannsdottir, project manager of Akureyri's marketing organisation Nordurland. "We have to get the knowledge out that there is another entrance to Iceland besides Keflavik" she says.

"We are bringing together companies in tourism, plus those in export and import, the municipalities and larger companies to raise money to offer airlines a reduction in fees and marketing support."

She will not say how much Nordurland hopes to raise, but suggests it would be enough to give airlines a 100% reduction on landing fees in their first year, and 75% in the second.

Isavia's airports all charge international flights \$8.15 per 100kg maximum take off weight, except at Keflavik, where the charge is \$10. There would also be enough in the fund to advertise the area abroad, mainly in travel magazines and to specialist hiking, skiing and nature trip operators. UK school groups are also a target for skiing trips. "Enough money can be raised for three years' marketing support,"

Johannsdottir says. "We do not need big numbers of tourists, we do not want the place to be crowded when what we are selling is peace and quiet and the chance to be an explorer."

So, why might visitors want to come to this remote spot, especially in winter? Nordurland's managing director Asbjorn Bjorgvinsson explains: "We are looking at specific target groups. Talking to passengers on the Copenhagen flight, their interests are nature, nature and nature, so that is what we will emphasise." Northern Iceland has an abundance of dramatic nature. It is hiking country, through a landscape that changes quickly from green to jagged rocks to lava field, with vast volcanoes and strange geological formations constantly coming into sight.

It also offers the chance to see wild reindeer, and probably Europe's best whale watching at Husavik where, unusually, multiple species can be seen including the rare blue whale.

The town also boasts the curious attraction of the world's only museum of phalluses. Around Akureyri there is riding on Iceland's unique native breed of horse, bird watching of species rarely found in Europe, and the chance to take off into the lunar-looking wilderness in peace and quiet.

These attractions have brought plenty of summer visitors, but would any airline think it viable to fly people there in winter, when there is only some five hours of daylight? Bjorgvinsson says the area can offer tourists a lot even then.

The greatest winter attraction is the Northern Lights, of which sightings are frequent. Indeed, one way to see this phenomenon is while lying in one of Iceland's numerous natural or artificial swimming pools, all of which are all heated by geothermal water and so pleasantly warm even in the depths of winter.

“We want to attract people coming for nature and relaxation and also for adventure,” he says, “In winter there is snow but it is generally dry here. You can ski, go horse trekking, as the horses have special ice shoes, and there is heli-skiing from near here.”

Johannsdottir points out that ski slopes and swimming pools are floodlit in winter and that skidoo safaris can be easily done in darkness by headlight. Bjorgvinsson says Iceland Express has considered a London-Akureyri flight, and there has been some informal discussion with Jet2, German Wings and Norwegian.

Despite Akureyri’s relative proximity to the USA, it is looking mainly to the European market, though a party from Delta was due to visit this summer; the airline began serving Keflavik from New York in June. Bjorgvinsson says: “Americans expect more expensive hotels than we have, four or five stars. “But if a US flight came directly here within a very short time we would have that kind of accommodation as the big hotel chains would become interested.”

Ryanair at one time considered Akureyri, but it rejected it because of the ‘turn’, a manoeuvre in which pilots must be trained for take off or landing from the south, where there is a fjord tapering among mountains.

Airport manager Sigurdur Hermannsson says Ryanair did not want to pay to train all its pilots in this, nor to serve an airport where only certain of its crew could be used.

Apart from that, the airport presents no problems, he says. Akureyri is kept open all year and has a runway of 2,400m, and pilots can often avoid the ‘turn’ by using the open northern direction. “They can train on a simulator to turn because of the mountains, but it is not technically difficult,” Hermannsson says.

Akureyri has occasional charter flights to Greenland, and may try to develop these routes as an unusual attraction for tourists. They are flown mostly by Norlandair’s Twin Otters taking up to three hours, but a larger aircraft would make it a feasible exotic day trip.

On the east coast at Egilsstaðir there are similar, though slightly less advanced, promotional plans.

Asta Thorleifsdottir, director of the East Iceland Marketing Office, says local businesses will organise to collaborate with Isavia in the autumn. Egilsstaðir is

Iceland's nearest airport to the European mainland and the area offers some different attractions to the north.

The hiking, riding and skiing are all there, but the east is near to a range of picturesque coastal fjords and not far from the ice caves and national park of the Vastnajokull glacier.

There are also numerous cultural and folklore festivals. "I'm marketing Egilsstadir as the perfect place to explore the jewels of Iceland, three hours from the glacier lagoon, less than two hours from Myvatn lake and Dettifoss waterfall, and near the fjords," she says.

Thorleifsdottir says there will be promotional marketing support for the area, and as in the north this will stress "that you can still experience the solitude of nature and the vastness of the wilderness here".

She adds: "You can still feel like an explorer here so our marketing will be mainly aimed at outdoors activities magazines, and tour operators who want to offer hiking and nature trips".

Thorleifsdottir says the area's tourism infrastructure would have "no problem in accommodating a plane of 150 people a day", and hopes marketing to tour operators would see them taking about 50 seats on each flight, leaving airlines to attract only the remainder.

Egilsstadir airport manager Jorundur Ragnarsson has experience of handling international flights, as Wizzair had regular flights from Poland until 2007 to cater for construction workers building a nearby dam.

It then handled 160,000 passengers a year, but by 2010 Egilsstadir was down to 100,000 passengers from Air Iceland's domestic flights.

"What we are trying to do is get more planes in the airport because we are cheaper than Keflavik and faster, we can finish a plane in a short time, and we have a 2,000m runway," he says.

The airport is kept continuously open as it substitutes if bad weather closes Keflavik in winter, since conditions are rarely the same at the two places.

There is one Icelandic airport that might look an obvious budget airline destination, but whose use is hampered by political wrangling. Reykjavik airport is in walking distance of the city centre, with a 1,570m runway and a 1,500 square metres terminal.

Unfortunately, neither can be extended because of the opposition of the city council, elements of which would like the airport moved further away, says airport manager Jon Baldvin. For any airline willing to try Akureyri or Egilsstadir though there will be a warm welcome, and a fair sum of cash to back up the venture.