

Where do the tourists in Iceland go?

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Introduction

Tourism remains a seasonal phenomenon and each destination experiences some kind of seasonal imbalance, financial or physical (Bigović, 2012). Destinations can be affected by different number of peaks in seasonality and it is important to distinguish between the true seasons of the year (Butler, 2001). Knowing the number of visitors is the basic unit for measuring tourism seasonality (Lundtorp, 2001). The importance of knowing how many tourists visit destinations is well known by managers and good and accurate visitor data are valuable for planning and managing the destinations (De Cantis et al., 2015).

Tourism has increased greatly in Iceland in the last few years. In 2010 490 thousand foreign tourists arrived annually but in 2015 the number had risen to 1.300 thousand. The tourism industry has now become one of the three pillars of Icelandic economy together with the fishing industry and the power intensive industry. The bulk of this increase has been in the capital area in and around Reykjavík. Even though a considerable increase has occurred outside the traditional summer season, seasonality and uneven distribution of tourists around Iceland is considerable. Both the government and the tourism industry see this as a major problem which affects businesses and stops tourism from becoming a whole year occupation in all regions of Iceland. It is therefore important to have accurate data on tourist numbers and how tourists distribute around Iceland. This is important for tourism operators when planning their business, for the managers of the destinations when planning local infrastructure and service, as well as for the government when taking actions on how to distribute the tourists better around the country. As stated by Eagles (2007) *“Any phenomenon that is not measured and reported does not exist politically. Governments, societies, communities and individuals place more value on that which is documented”*.

The aim of this work is to measure where the tourists go at different times of the year. The numbers that visit the destinations will be compared with the number of tourists departing from Keflavík International Airport. Iceland is a unique destination in that Iceland is an island with practically only one access point, Keflavík International Airport (KEF), where 97% of the visitors pass through so tourist visiting the country can be quite accurately counted. The airport is in the capital area 45 minutes from the centre of Reykjavík.

Methods

A common way of computing visitor numbers and seasonality is to use regional overnight stay data. These are available in Iceland collected by Statistics Iceland as well as border surveys collected by the Icelandic Tourist Board. This data describes well where tourists stay, but not which destinations they visit. The difference is pro-

nounced in Iceland now as a large number of tourists visit the country for a few days, staying in Reykjavík and take day trips from there.

Counting vehicles that arrive at a destination is a common method of obtaining the number of visitors that visit a destination. Most of the important Icelandic destinations are unique in that they have only one access road. Using proper methodology it is therefore possible to count the visitors to the destinations with considerable accuracy (Ólafsson and Þórhallsdóttir, 2015). The number of visitors computed from vehicle counters in four destinations will be used and compared with data on departing visitors in Keflavík International Airport to analyse where foreign visitors in Iceland go at different times of the year.

The destinations

Four destinations were selected for this presentation and the results are shown in Figure 1. Þingvellir is a UNESCO destination 50 km from Reykjavík. It is both an important historical site and a geological site showing continental drift. Þingvellir is on a very popular tourist route, the Golden Circle that includes Geysir a geothermal area with a hot spring, the most visited nature destination in Iceland, and Gullfoss the most famous waterfall in Iceland. Sólheimajökull is an outlet glacier on the South coast 100 km from Reykjavík, popular for ice climbing and glacier walks. Jökulsárlón is a glacier lagoon on the South coast about 400 km from the capital area. There are scheduled daytrips along the South coast from Reykjavík to both Sólheimajökull and Jökulsárlón every day of the year. Hraunfossar is a picturesque waterfall in the West about 100 km from Reykjavík.

Results

Figure 1 shows the percentage of the foreign visitors that arrive through Keflavík Airport that visit each particular destination each month of 2015. Approximately 50% of the visitors that visit Iceland each month go to Þingvellir. The seasonality at Þingvellir is not high. From April to September a similar number visits Jökulsárlón but the seasonality is considerably higher reflecting the longer distance from Rey-

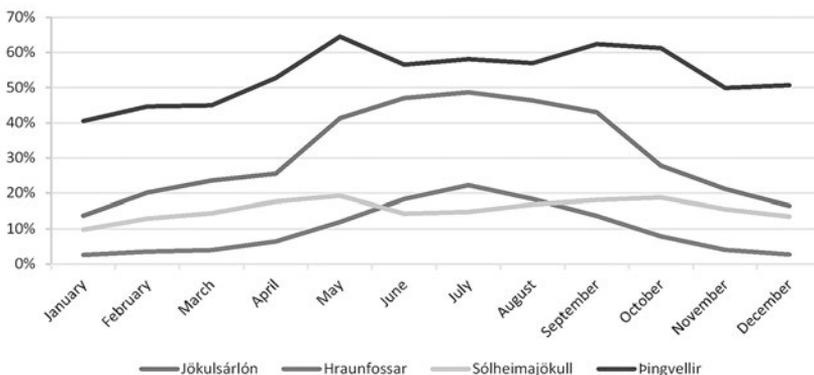


Figure 1. The ratio of visitors to destinations compared with departures of tourists from Keflavík Airport

kjavík and sometimes difficult travel conditions during the winter. The number of visitors at Sólheimajökull is lower than at Jökulsárlón during the summer, but similar during the winter. Hraunfossar are visited by similar number of visitors as Sólheimajökull during the summer, but considerably fewer in the winter. This probably reflects the fact that Hraunfossar is not on a popular day trip route as are the other destinations.

Conclusion

Work is now in process to acquire visitor numbers from the typical tourist destinations in Iceland. With data on the number of visitors from destinations around Iceland it will be possible to analyse the distribution of visitors in Iceland and the seasonal difference in visitor distribution. Knowing the number of visitors is one of the important factors that can make it possible to distribute the visitors more evenly around the country in all seasons. Distributing the tourists more evenly around the country will contribute to make better use of infrastructure, increase profitability for local operators, help creating whole year employment, as well as make the travelling experience of tourists more satisfying.



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