

Far from harpoons, whales star in Iceland ecotourism boom

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Whales are now the stars of Iceland's flourishing ecotourism scene

Iceland's whales have traditionally ended up as steaks on a plate. But times are changing, and as tourists stream to the North Atlantic island, whales are now the stars of a flourishing ecotourism scene.

"Minke whale at two o'clock, about 200 metres out!" shouts Spanish tour guide Alberto Alejandro, microphone in hand as a boat of whale watchers cruises slowly up the coast.

The sighting is fleeting: only the tail fin is visible when the whale resurfaces for air, but it's enough to take the 60 passengers' breath away, as they "oooh" and "ahhh" in delight.

"It's one of the things we absolutely wanted to do on our first trip here," says Joachim Holm, a Swedish tourist. "We don't get many opportunities to see live [whales](#)."

Animal rights activists opposed to whaling argue that whale watching boats disturb the majestic mammals in their natural habitat.

But the activists nevertheless concede that it is still better to pester the whales than to slaughter them.

In Husavik, a bay in the north of the country, or in the Faxafloi Bay near the capital Reykjavik, more than 355,000 people went whale watching in 2016 in the hopes of catching a glimpse of the animals in the North Atlantic.

That's an increase of 30 percent over 2015 and four times more than a decade ago.

Tradition vs green tourism

Fleets of whale watching boats navigate regularly through Faxafloi Bay—the very same waters where [minke whales](#) are hunted.

Iceland resumed whaling in 2003, turning its back, along with Norway, on a 1986 international moratorium.



From their meagre beginning in the 1990s, whale safaris in Iceland have grown to attract tens of thousands of visitors

Japan also allows whaling. Officially, it is for scientific reasons, even if a large share of the whale meat ends up on the market.

Iceland hunts minke whales, not an endangered species, and one whose stocks are estimated at around 32,000—considered stable by the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

Iceland suspended its fin whale hunt last year, after Japan, its main market, introduced restrictive regulations. Second only in size to blue whales, the fin whale has been listed as an endangered species since 1996 and its worldwide population has declined by more than 70 percent since 1929.

Alessandro Rosa, an Italian tourist, said he respected Iceland's whaling traditions, which have been a part of life here since the 13th century.

But, he added: "I've never eaten whale meat and I don't intend to taste it."

Icelanders themselves consume little whale meat. So the country's whale hunt is primarily aimed at satisfying demand from tourists, with more than two million people expected to visit the island this year.

Whalers have in recent years consistently failed to meet their quotas of kills—typically around 200.

They blame poor weather and warmer waters, which is pushing the whales to follow the mackerel, their main source of food, closer to Greenland where the water is colder.

IP-Utgerd Ltd, the Icelandic company specialising in hunting minke, harpooned 17 whales in 2017, down from 46 in 2016 and 52 in 2012. A record 81 were killed in 2009. This year's quota was 224.

Whale on the menu

In Reykjavik, the restaurant Thrir Frakkar has offered whale meat on its menu since it opened in 1989.



Animal welfare activists say attitudes to whaling are changing and what has been a part of Icelandic culture for 400 years could die out.

Asian tourists are those who are most keen on it. "They're more used to whale meat, it's more a part of their culture," said the restaurant's chef, Stefan Ulfarsson.

Sarah Krieger, a tourist from Florida, had no objection to a nibble of whale meat, as long as stocks are managed "responsibly".

"Humans are at the top of the food chain," she argued.

Together, whale hunting and whale watching reel in revenues of about 100 million euros (\$117 million) a year, in a country where gross domestic product ticked in at 20 billion euros in 2016.

According to the Ice Whale Association, [whale watching](#) is believed to bring in around three billion kronur (23 million euros, \$28.5 million) per year.

For whaling, the latest figures date back to a 2010 study by the University of Reykjavik, which estimated the country's revenues at \$94 million. But that figure includes the country's fisheries sector, which is boosted by more mackerel, cod, haddock and capelin being available in the ocean as a result of not having been eaten by the hunted whales.

Whale hunting remains a profitable business, according to industry statistics, with an average of 43 kills per year since 2003.

The price of whale meat has more than doubled in 10 years to 2,500 kronur per kilo (20 euros, \$24), making it more expensive than both chicken and pork.

Yet tourists to Iceland are eating less whale [meat](#) than before.

In 2016, only 12 percent of tourists said they had tasted [whale meat](#) during their visit, compared to 40 percent in 2009, studies by the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) show.

The head of the Icelandic branch of IFAW, Sigursteinn Masson, said attitudes were changing and he expected to see an end to whaling in the near future.

But Gunnar Bergmann Jonsson, the head of IP-Utgerd Ltd, disagreed, seeing no need to end the practice as long as minke stocks remain strong and it's not an endangered species.

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