



Case report

Sustainable Arctic Cruise Communities: from practice to governance

CASE ÍSAFJÖRÐUR

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Summary

This report regards the cruise destination Ísafjörður in the Westfjords in Iceland. Ísafjörður is located on the Westfjords peninsula, in the northwest of Iceland, in the fjord Skutulsfjörður surrounded by steep mountains. The municipality of Ísafjörður is Ísafjarðarbær. It consists of five towns and villages, Ísafjörður being the largest town with around 2750 inhabitants.



Figure 1: Map of Iceland highlighting Westfjords showing the location of Ísafjörður. Source: The Icelandic Times Magazine

In this area, the fishing industry has dominated the economy for centuries. However, the current situation is characterized by a contraction in the fishing sector, such as in fisheries and fish processing.

The tourism and service industry are growing rapidly and is today one of the main industries. Due to its location, transportation to Ísafjörður is challenging, especially during the winter months, as the town is remote and the roads in the Westfjords have not been developed at the same pace as in other parts of the country. Transportation costs are, therefore, high within and to other parts of the country. Ísafjörður has one operating airport that operates flights to and from Reykjavík.

According to the Icelandic Tourist Board, only 10% of international tourists that arrived via Keflavík airport in the year 2019 visited Westfjords, and only 14% of domestic tourists visited the peninsula that year. Land-based tourists are therefore not a substantial part of tourism in Ísafjörður, and cruise tourism is all the more important for the local tourism industry. Due to

hard winters and road conditions, the majority of tourists visit Ísafjörður over the summer months, June, July, August. The destination thus deals with high fluctuations in seasonality.

Cruise ships began sailing to Ísafjörður around 1990 and in 1994 the first organized cruise excursions were established for cruise passengers by a local tour operator. Since 2014 the number of cruise tourists has risen steadily, with nearly 100 000 visitors in 2019, the year before the Covid-19 pandemic. The majority of cruise ship passengers are from Germany, North America or the United Kingdom. Most of the ships are small luxurious expedition cruise vessels with less than 500 passengers on board, and many are members of AECO. Both so-called expedition ships and larger, so-called overseas cruise ships come to Ísafjörður. It is interesting to note that practices on land regarding these two different types of cruise vessels do not differ in Ísafjörður. These types of cruise ships use the same port facilities, cruise passengers are offered the same cruise excursions on land and local tour operators work with both types of cruise lines the same way.

The cruise ships usually tour around the whole of Iceland, and Ísafjörður is only one of the stops around the country. Ísafjörður port is the third busiest cruise port after the two largest cruise ports in Iceland, Reykjavík and Akureyri ports. Ísafjörður is conveniently situated between these two major cruise destinations, which is one reason why cruise ships choose to do a stopover in Ísafjörður. The cruise ships spend on average 8-10 hours in port, arriving early morning and leaving in the afternoon. In 2020 and 2021 there were hardly any cruise calls to Ísafjörður due to the global pandemic, but the industry was quick to recover. In 2022 passenger numbers had nearly reached the same number as before the pandemic, with 85 000 passengers arriving, and 260 000 passengers expected in 2023 (Figure 2), which is a major increase.

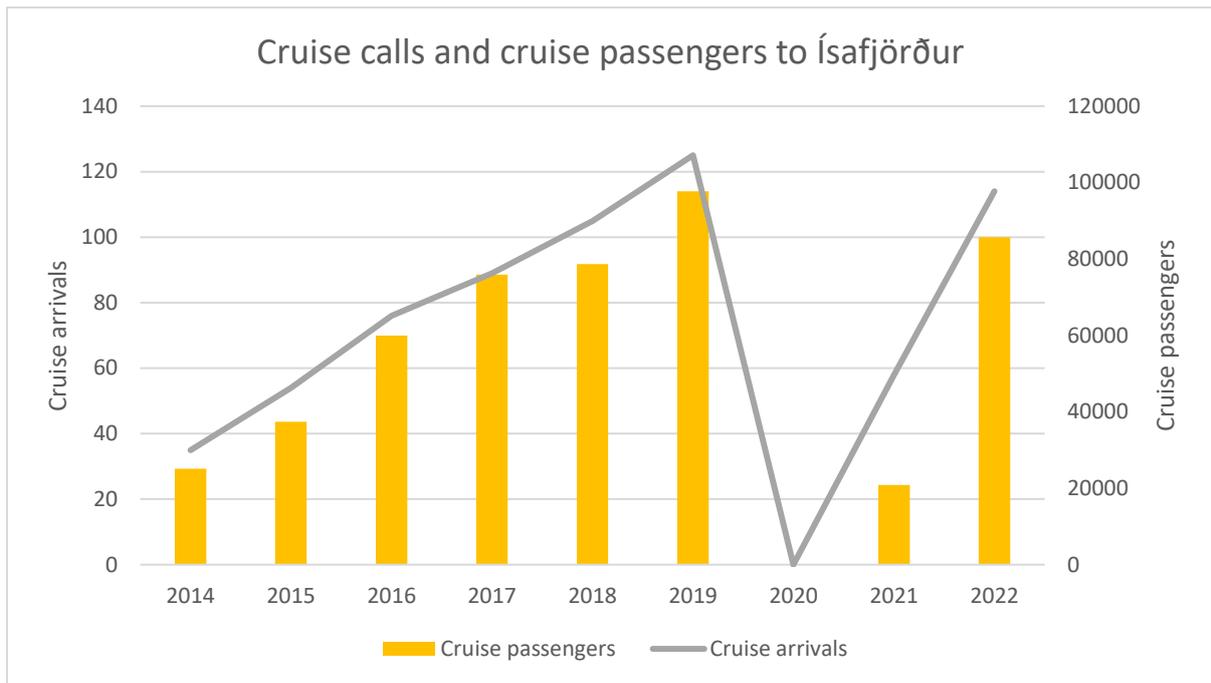


Figure 2: The number of cruise calls and passengers in Ísafjörður from 2014-2022. Source: numbers from the Icelandic Tourist Board.

Ísafjörður port has four accessible piers for cruise ships, but ships can also drop their anchor at a designated anchorage area at the entrance point to the port when all piers are occupied. The port does not contain a terminal building for cruise passengers and transportation possibilities are limited, with no shuttle service or public transportation on site. The town is however easily accessible by foot, only 300 meters away from the cruise piers. Rental cars and taxis are available for passengers at the port area and excursion bus pickups are available at



Figure 3: Tourist information office guiding cruise passengers

the port, only a few meters from where passengers disembark.

The tourist information office, which is run by the municipality, operates a booth at the port and welcomes and guides cruise guests that have chosen to walk around town independently, without tour operators' involvement, where to go, figure 3.

Each cruise guest receives a map of the area, figure 4. In town, cruise ship passengers can visit the old town, local shops, museums and cafés.



Figure 4: Map of Ísafjörður. Source: Eyþór Jónsson

There are various options to choose from for cruise visitors while on land. Many cruise tourists join pre-booked cruise excursions, and the main local tour operator is West Tours. The majority of cruise excursion bookings from cruise lines are managed by two major tour agents in Iceland, that is Atlantik and Iceland travel, which collaborate with local tour operators and tourism businesses. The tour agents recruit a local staff member for every cruise season to make sure tours run smoothly. The tour agents and the major tour operators in Ísafjörður work closely together. There are also few independent tourism businesses that operate outside of the pre-booked excursions or guided walking tours without the cruise lines' or tour agents' involvement. Those businesses skip the middleman and avoid paying extra commission.

Local tour operators greet cruise passengers that have pre-booked an excursion, where to go, which group to follow or which bus to join. Many cruise passengers hop on a bus right after

disembarking and are driven outside of the town to neighbouring towns or nature attractions. Others that join a guided tour without joining a pre-booked activity, join some of the local companies who advertise their tours at the disembarkation area, and leave as soon as enough tourists have joined their tour.

Key cruise stakeholders in Ísafjörður

Tour agents	There are two major tour agents in Iceland, Atlantik and Iceland Travel, that manage pre-booked cruise excursions for the cruise lines. They serve as a middleman between cruise lines and local tour operators and tourism businesses.
Local tour operators	Manage and operate cruise excursions in Ísafjörður. The largest one is West tours. The majority of local businesses are shareholders. Some of them operate their own buses while other collaborate with the local bus company.
Local tourism businesses	The great majority of local tourism businesses are involved in cruise tourism in Ísafjörður since the majority of tourists are cruise tourists.
Port of Ísafjörður	The port services all cruise ships that arrive to Ísafjörður. Most bookings go through cruise agents that manage cruise bookings in Iceland.
Municipality of Ísafjörður	The port is part of the municipality. The municipality does also manage the tourist information office and therefore makes sure cruise passengers are welcomed.
Community of Ísafjörður	The great majority of the community are involved in the industry in some way. The residents of Ísafjörður are directly involved in the cruise industry by sharing their town's services and attractions with cruise guests. Many of the local companies not involved in tourism do benefit economically by selling services and products to cruise visitors.
Bus companies and guides	The local bus company that services most of the cruise passengers, West Travel, does also operate a public bus service for locals. The tourism industry tries to use only local guides in cruise excursions.

Popular attractions for cruise visitors are Ísafjörður downtown area which cruise passengers can reach by foot, Ósvör museum and Dynjandi waterfall, which the majority of cruise passengers visit by bus, Hornstrandir nature reserve and Vigur Island, which cruise passengers can access with a local boat transfer company from the port of Ísafjörður, and more.



Figure 5: Cruise passengers visiting Ósvör.

For excursions in nature areas surrounding town, it is necessary for tour operators to consult with landowners regarding the traffic of people on private land and are expected to treat nature and wildlife with respect. All cruise ship masters receive a guideline on regulations and environmental conservation acts developed by the Environmental agency, Icelandic transport authority and the Icelandic coast guard who have the authority to make sure all laws and regulations are followed. Specific rules apply to the Hornstrandir nature reserve which is located north of Ísafjörður. All vessels are prohibited to go any closer than 115 meters in order to protect seabird habitation areas and no vessels with more than 51 people on board are allowed to go ashore. However, there are no rules on the limit of people allowed at the reserve

at the same time. This prevents passenger ships with more than 51 persons on board to go directly to the nature reserve, as was the previous practice, and they must now anchor in Ísafjörður and use the local boat transportation to the reserve. However, since the limit on 51 passenger regards the transportation to and from Hornstrandir, and not how many tourists can be there at the same time, the practice is on busy days to have several groups of 51 people at Hornstrandir simultaneously, and the local boat transportation must go back and forth a lot. This local boat transportation is also used by locals to reach their cabins and summer houses on the peninsula and by hikers and campers.

The port of Ísafjörður is currently under construction, to build a 300 m extension of the existing pier Sundabakki, to a total of 500 m. The total cost of this project is estimated to be 1 billion Icelandic krónur. This project was launched to meet the needs of the cruise ship industry and to increase the port's revenue. With the extension, the port will be able to welcome large cruise ships that have up till now not been able to dock at Ísafjörður port and also more cruise ships at the same time. Cruise lines pay a higher docking fee to the port if they dock at the pier instead of anchoring out in the bay. The port's revenue is expected to increase by 40 million a year with the extension. Today, a bit more than 50% of the port's revenue comes from the cruise ship industry. This project is funded by the port of Ísafjörður with subsidies from the Icelandic government. There is a plan to invest in electrification infrastructure for small and medium-sized cruise ships with the extension which will reduce emissions while cruise ships are docked at port. The core businesses located at the port area are related to fishing activities. Other type of businesses and institutions are the University of Westfjords, educational centres, tourism businesses, tourist information office, museums, shops, restaurants and bar, car rentals and car repair shops.

2 Practice bundles

2.1 Hosting tourists

Cruise ships are important for the tourism industry in Ísafjörður since the majority of tourists that visit Ísafjörður are cruise tourists. The cruise ships bring tourists to the town who would otherwise not come to the Westfjords at all, due to its remote location and bad road infrastructure. The cruise arrivals to Ísafjörður enable local stakeholders to operate scheduled tours. These can be planned, the volume is known, and therefore create economic stability to

offer products also to land-based tourists, who are unplanned and hence unpredictable for the companies. The companies can also plan the volume of offerings so there might be spaces also for possible unplanned land-based tourists joining. Cruise tourism is thus seen as an enabler for other forms of tourism, through the infrastructure and financial security it brings. Cruise tourists and land-based tourists are kept separate in their tours in most cases. Since the majority of cruise ships arrive early morning, tours for cruise visitors are scheduled early and tours for land-based tourists scheduled in the afternoon. Cruise lines are also operating on a tight schedule and cruise excursions often times shorter and faster-paced than tours offered for land-based tourists in the afternoon. Majority of tour operators do also prefer to keep these two types of tourists in a separate tour group because of differences between these groups, the way they travel, demographics, and the fact that working with cruise tourists is in general a more streamlined practice. In some instances, land-based tourists and cruise tourists are in opposition to one another because excursions may be fully booked by cruise lines, with no open spaces for other tourists. There are simply practical and infrastructural limits to the possible volume of offerings, and cruise tourists have priority, both because cruise lines book much longer in advance than land-based tourists, and because it is considered too risky not to prioritize cruise; the ships might then never come back if their guests get an unpleasant experience of not having anything to do while ashore or not enjoying their visit. Also, it is important to make sure every cruise passenger is back on the boat by a certain time so there is less space for unforeseen circumstances and therefore it is important that every tour runs smoothly. In a way cruise tourists are therefore seen as more important clients and practices catered more to the needs of the cruises even though many local tourism stakeholders express that they prefer receiving land-based tourists over cruise tourists, sort of a necessary evil.

Many local tourism enterprises in Ísafjörður and surrounding towns are fully dependent on cruise ships, some saying that 85% of their revenue comes solely from the cruise industry. Some have expressed that they are able to offer tours of high quality to land-based tourists, their ideal clientele, from the revenue they make from cruise tourism. Other local tourism actors have expressed a feeling of guilt making easy money from cruise tourism, considering some of the negative environmental effects of the industry, like pollution. Some tourism stakeholders claim though that cruise tourism helps nature conservation, as the larger part of visits to nature areas comes through organized cruise tours, which can be controlled. The

operations to adjust the number of visitors to environmentally sensitive nature areas while respecting environmental regulations are run by local tour operators, bringing the maximum numbers to and from nature-sensitive areas by boat or bus, as explained above.

Many local stakeholders in Ísafjörður believe that cruise tourism helps create a lively atmosphere in town, which without cruise tourism would be rather empty and deserted. However, other tourism stakeholders feel that some of the cruise ships provide the “wrong” kind of tourists, the kind that does not even know where they are or what to expect at this type of destination. This in turn is felt to sometimes result in tourists not knowing how to behave in a type of place like this, expecting facilities which are simply not there. Other stakeholders think that both cruise and land-based tourists that choose to visit a remote place with a harsh climate like Ísafjörður, which has an average temperature of around 12 degrees in summer, are different from other tourists, like, for example, mass tourists who take a cruise in the Caribbean looking for an easy-going relaxed holiday. Travelling to a place like Ísafjörður is then felt to require a certain mindset, preparation and determination from the visitors and therefore tourists are willing to spend more while in town because they look at it as a once in a lifetime experience with no plan to visit ever again.

2.1.1 Sharing of cruise spaces

In harbor

The cruise operations are competing over the physical space in the harbor with the fishing industry. The harbor was initially planned only to deal with fishing boats and fishing activities, and many think this poses a problem now that the cruise tourism industry is using this space as well, while others say that these logistical challenges can be dealt with by proper planning. Some think this poses real risks to accidents with cruise tourists, as the operations go on simultaneously, without enough physical space to accommodate both. Cruise tourists need to walk through the work area of the fishing industry to reach the town which some stakeholders stress is dangerous as the fishing industry works with heavy machines. Big trucks and heavy machines do also have to make their way through the disembarkation area. There are however plans to re-organize the port area in the future after the port extension has been finalized and then the cruise industry and fishing industry will be separated.



Figure 6: Heavy oil truck making its way through the disembarkation area.

Fish farming is a growing industry in the Westfjords. The port of Ísafjörður services some of these farms' boats. This development was criticized by some of the stakeholders as they believe fish farming will destroy what draws tourists to the fjords, the beautiful nature scenery. The fish farm pods are visually polluting and environmentally polluting for nature, which is what draws tourists to the Westfjords. Figure 7 shows fish farms in the fjord Ísafjörður is located and surrounding fjords. Already established fish farms in use are colored blue, fish farms not in use are colored red and planned fish farms are colored green. These fish farm plans are some located right in the middle of the shipping route of cruise ships and other ships which can potentially cause a problem for both the cruise industry and the aquaculture industry.



Figure 7: fish farms and future fish farm plans surrounding Ísafjörður. Source: Kveikur, RÚV

In town

Many cruise tourists visit the old town of Ísafjörður after their back from their excursions if time allows. There are also some cruise tourists that choose to skip excursions outside of Ísafjörður and spend time in town instead. Some residents who live in the old, picturesque part of town express dissatisfaction with cruise tourism, that cruise tourists do not always behave properly and disrespect their privacy by peeking into windows or entering their gardens and so on. This may be because tourists do not realize that these are private homes and people actually live there, as the houses look like picturesque heritage sites, rather than housing facilities. The municipalities initiative to deal with these challenges and accommodate the locals of Ísafjörður was to publish a guideline for cruise tourists on how to behave while in town in a humorous way, figure 8. The guideline was published in 2017 and was based on AECO's guidelines and criteria. Later in 2022, AECO published a community guideline for Ísafjörður. Since these guidelines have been published there have been fewer complaints from residents although there are always some unhappy voices within the community and there are residents that follow the cruise ship schedule and avoid going out on busy cruise ship days. For a small town like Ísafjörður the major increase in people is a rather dramatic change. Some people express unhappiness with needing to wait in line for services like the pharmacy, bakery

or the local supermarket on busy cruise ship days, something that they usually do not encounter during off season. Other residents do not see any problems with the cruise tourists downtown, rather that cruise tourists make the town livelier and nicer.

WELCOME TO ÍSÁFJÖRÐUR



Part of Ísafjörður
Hafnarvegur 1, 400 Ísafjörður | 420 88001 | heildisafjorður.is | safjorur.is

DEAR GUEST

The town of Ísafjörður welcomes you and we sincerely hope you will enjoy visiting our town. We consider tourism a great way of learning about, promoting and creating tolerance between people of different backgrounds and cultures. Here in Ísafjörður cruise tourism has been rapidly increasing in the past few years and some of the bigger ships carry more people onboard than live in the town. This can cause some complications. We ask you to take time to read carefully just a few guidelines we would like you to follow during your visit.

1. **Be safe.** Our harbour is a working harbour and you may encounter equipment and trucks working in the area. Please be careful to use sidewalks on your walks around town when possible or keep to the side of the street where there is no sidewalk. Rule number one is that you must always pay attention and follow the instructions given by guides or staff.
2. **Respect privacy.** Please note that although some of our houses may look like museums most of them are residential houses and we ask that you do not look or photograph through private windows.
3. Please **leave no lasting signs** of your visit. Do not leave litter, build cairns, rearrange stones or in any other way leave visible signs of your visit.
4. The town of Ísafjörður offers public toilets in several areas in town. Please look for wc signs on the map below. We also remind visitors that the cafes and bakeries in town offer WC facilities for their paying guests. Other places than marked on this map do not offer free WC facilities.

Thank you for your visit to Ísafjörður




Figure 8: Guideline published by Ísafjarðarbær

In nature areas

Nature areas have various types of ownership. Some are privately owned, some publicly owned, while others involve many different actors, both private and public, therefore regulating and controlling the traffic of tourists is not so easy. The owner of one of the most popular excursion areas for cruise and other tourists, an island close by, the entrepreneur running the tour business operating there with guided tours and a café on the island, decided to close down completely for 19 days during the cruise season in 2022 for nature-protective reasons. This was done during the peak of bird nesting season, to let the birds nest without disturbance from tourists. This of course had big economic consequences, with a lack of revenue for the already short season. Still, this tourism operator found it more worthwhile to ensure the sustainability of the natural systems. So, in this instance, nature protection got

higher priority than offering this product to cruise tourists. However, they do rely on nature and wildlife thriving since that is their number one selling point, and what makes them an attractive destination, the nice scenery. The owners used the time while the island was closed to collect down which is a side business and something they educate their visitors on as well. So, nature protection is in this case a practice that embraces tourism instead of creating a land-use conflict between the two.

The tourism business operating on another very popular site for cruise excursions, also a nature site, has not yet taken any such measures for nature conservation, because they feel pressured by other local stakeholders to take on tourists. There are multiple tourism businesses involved in cruise excursions and simply closing off or regulating the traffic affects every tourism business that relies on these tours for economic gain. So, to close one excursion site is seen as a rather extreme measure, over which people have mixed feelings. Some think a closed destination could eventually endanger cruise ships to come to the destination at all (if there would be nothing for the tourists to do), so not all are happy about such actions. Not to mention that it is simply not possible to close off nature areas in many cases because of the freedom to roam and the involvement of many different actors.

Synergies

Some interviewees point out the possible synergies that could potentially be made between different industries, like local food and drink production, which could become part of the offerings to cruise tourists to a much larger degree than is now the case. Cruise tourists show interest in the local gastronomy and some stakeholders see a missed opportunity. Some food processing companies and other types that originally were not involved in tourism have exploited this, offering successful tours of their facilities or products to cruise tourists earning extra income. As we have seen, some also point out other synergies between cruise tourism and other forms of tourism: cruise tourism enables operations to have high-quality products available for land-based tourists as well, as mentioned above, and can get the bulk of their revenue from cruise tourists, and still be able to provide services to land-based tourists. Without cruise, they might not be able to operate at all. So, cruise tourism seems to affect the whole community of Ísafjörður. In one way or another everyone seems to be involved in the industry.

2.2 Governing

Limiting cruise calls

Many of the interviewees believe that, even though they are positive towards cruise tourism, there is a need to limit the number of cruise ship arrivals or cruise tourists, and that such a limit is crucial in order for Ísafjörður to become a sustainable cruise destination. One reason mentioned by the majority of interviewees is that the destination simply does not have resources (buses, guides, tours etc.) to serve all these visitors, making people's experiences, both visitors and practitioners, unpleasant on busy cruise ship days. Such unpleasant experiences might risk that cruise lines decide to take Ísafjörður out of their itinerary for next seasons because their customers expressed unpleasant experiences from their visit. When there is a risk of too many cruise ships arriving at the same time in Ísafjörður, the harbor master reports this to the cruise ships arriving that day, to give the cruise line the option of not showing up, choosing another destination instead, to delay their arrival, or at least knowing what to expect when in town. But since most cruise ships are following a strict schedule this is not always possible but they at least get notified. The smaller expedition ships seem to have more flexibility to change their itinerary than the larger and can change shipping route if they like to.

Some local stakeholders believe that the Covid-19 cruise-free season gave the residents of Ísafjörður the opportunity to experience a summer without cruise ships and many thought it was a nice change, and this experience made people realize that cruise tourism has reached its limit. Others argued that having a cruise-free season made people realize how important cruise tourism is for local businesses and the community as a whole. While some thought the cruise-free season could be a great opportunity to rethink the industry in Ísafjörður and plan for the future, others thus thought it an important reminder of how crucial cruise tourism is to the community.

Although the majority agree that there should be a limit put in place, people do not agree on who should decide what the limit is and how it should be put into practice. Many think it is the municipality and the politicians, based of course on the opinions of the inhabitants, who should make sure that the number of cruise ships are limited, but that local businesses should

also be part of the conversation. Others think it should be the tourism industry, which knows how many cruise guests they can handle, that should take the lead in deciding on the limitation. However, the majority of cruise stakeholders believe there is a risk in limiting cruise arrivals as saying no to a cruise ship might mean that the cruise line might not come to Ísafjörður ever again. Yet others think it would be unlawful to refuse a ship to come ashore, according to the old seaman's code of conduct to provide a safe port to everyone.

When asked why cruise limitation has not been put into place the reason mentioned is that the destination is a small community, where people depend on one another and do not want to step on anyone's toes. So, to raise one's voice and argue for a limit is thought of as something risky for the individual, and therefore they think "someone else" should initiate it. Many also do not know how a limit to cruise ships would be put in place, because they do not know how the system works, and who would have the mandate to enforce such a decision. Some point out that regulations regarding what cruise ships can and cannot do are unclear, and that AECO could be a great support in this. Others point out that regulations in general in Iceland are unclear, and not always followed, which makes the control of the cruise industry difficult.

The major tour operator in Ísafjörður, West tours, a communal organization owned by the member companies, all local companies in Ísafjörður. The local tourism businesses, of which many are shareholders, express different opinions about this tour operator. Some think that since it is a major collective, it could have a say in limiting cruise ship visits and should work towards this. Some think they would do better without having it as a middleman, others think that it is needed as it is able to negotiate with the cruise lines, and yet others recognize that the organization and the ownership of the organization is too complex.

2.3 Developing infrastructure

The municipality of Ísafjörður is currently extending the dock Sundabakki. Many of the local cruise stakeholders believe the extension of the dock is necessary because, in the current state, larger cruise ships cannot dock at the port and have had to anchor out in the bay, transporting cruise passengers via tender boats. Not all cruise lines, operating larger cruise ships, have seen Ísafjörður as a viable cruise destination because of this, as they do not

transport cruise passengers via tender boats. The tender boat transportation has also caused problems on harsh weather days, making passengers seasick which impacts scheduled excursions. With the extension, the the municipality of Ísafjörður together with an engineering firm has a plan to re-organize the port area making the port facilities appropriate for different industries which until now have had to share port facilities. The sharing of the harbor space has been problematic, causing chaos on busy cruise ship days, and poses a risk of danger involving cruise tourists. Some miss a strategy for the whole construction project though and see the re-planning of the port area as a good opportunity for creating a tourism business hub down by the new dock but notice a lack of dialogue between tourism actors. Others are not positive about the extension of the dock as they think the location is not appropriate, so rather than solving the problem, it will just be perpetuated. According to them, a real solution would require more substantial changes. Others are happy about this project as the port area is today missing a well-organized designated cruise tourism area. People are however unsure when this project will be finalized as it is still in its early stages.

Many informants mention the need for more and better infrastructure, like better roads for driving around the whole of Westfjords. Besides better roads, people also mentioned the lack of public toilet facilities and lack of buses, and the need for port electrification to reduce emissions while cruise ships are docked at port. Otherwise, without better infrastructure, having many cruise tourists could cause serious environmental problems and unpleasant experiences for the tourists and local residents. Lack of infrastructure is a major issue in the Westfjords and seems to be the major point of discussion among cruise stakeholders when discussing the increase in cruise tourism and the serious need to limit cruise arrivals.

2.4 Planning and preparing

Planning for the cruise season starts at least a year prior to the call, including booking buses and recruiting guides. One challenge mentioned is that cruise lines prebook a lot of tours well in advance, so the tourism companies do not have free spaces for other types of tourists, while it may still happen that in the end, not all spaces booked by the cruise lines are used, but by that time it is too late for tourism companies to offer them to other tourists. As other types of tourists are important to some companies, they see this as a serious problem that may prevent

the development of land-based tourism. Some companies are investing in new infrastructure with the expectation that the new pier will result in more cruise tourists, buying more buses or hiring more guides.

Seasonality is mentioned as a serious challenge for local businesses, causing difficulty to maintain a business that can only operate a short period of the year. Another major challenge has been the covid-19 pandemic, which had great impact on the destination. Some are worried that even more seasons will be disturbed due to the pandemic or other crises, while others say they are happy they got at least part of the planned cruise visits in 2021-2022, and mentioned the increase in domestic tourists in 2020 who saved their business, covering for some of the loss in cruise visits. The year 2020, which had no cruise arrivals, made some people realize how dependent Ísafjörður actually is on cruise ship visits as mentioned above. This was a positive effect of the pandemic, resulting in a more positive attitude towards cruise tourism. Others report how the pandemic forced them to be flexible and creative, which, although it was tough at the time, in the end, helped them develop their business, which is another positive effect of the pandemic. Some also reflect on the mechanisms of the pandemic, when the planned arrivals did not happen, as actually something that is always part of operating a cruise tourism business. For example, sometimes bad weather makes it impossible for planned ships to come. Companies operating outside of the pre-booked excursions booked by the cruise lines report that in these instances, they do not want the end customer to suffer from this, to have to pay for tours they did not attend and that this is something the companies need to deal with, as it will benefit them, in the long run, to not let tourists be disappointed by being charged for a trip they did not attend. Even though the company has spent time and manpower into the scheduled tours or activities that was then cancelled last minute

2.5 Skills and competences

The need for local knowledge is emphasized by many, for example, when it comes to guides and guiding, and using local staff rather than staff from Reykjavík for cruise handling in the port. Seasonality is mentioned as a challenge when it comes to guides. The guides work as guides only in the summer and have other jobs in the winter, like teachers or students. Even though these are good and experienced guides well received by cruise tourists, they may lack the formal training and guiding license for working full time as guides. So, they have local

knowledge but lack formal training. As there are no formal requirements for guides to have formal training, the companies can decide themselves on a script for what should be communicated to tourists and who to hire to communicate this. This allows, according to the above, people with other jobs in winter to work as guides during summer. Some indicate that this may result in companies letting less skilled people work as guides. Although many are happy with this flexibility, allowing more people in Ísafjörður to be part of the cruise tourism industry. Many international students, studying at the local university, work as guides between school semesters. As they know foreign languages, the companies find them very suitable as guides and are seen by the local tourism businesses as a great asset. This allows foreign students to stay over the summer months in Ísafjörður, earning income from the cruise industry, and some have decided to stay in Ísafjörður after graduation.

Other work tasks are mentioned to be suffering from the seasonality of tourism, and that it is difficult to provide people with full-time jobs in the tourism industry as the season is rather short. Although the majority of tour operators in Ísafjörður do not require guides to have completed formal training, they do require all tourism businesses they work with to hold a valid license from the Icelandic Tourism Board and do not work with unlicensed actors. This has resulted in people in Ísafjörður to wear many hats. Many people that operate tourism businesses in the summer have other types of responsibilities in the winter. Some are, for example, involved in local politics, or have a job in a completely different field during the off season. The fact that people wear many hats is considered to be an asset for the community. People can jump into different roles if needed and people might have a more holistic idea of how things work within the community.

3 What is perceived as sustainable cruise tourism?

The ability to plan is mentioned as a key dimension to make the cruise tourism industry desirable to the local community. Different cruise lines make it easier or harder to plan according to some stakeholders. What many of the stakeholders perceive as the larger more mass-tourism cruises are said to be more difficult to work with. They describe many of them as unorganized. The smaller, luxurious expedition ships are preferred by many local actors as that reduces the number of cruise guests per day, the cruise lines are very well organized, and

operations run smoothly. Stakeholders believe that receiving cruise ship visits is crucial for local companies to survive, so from that perspective cruise tourism has positive effects, and the cruise industry is an industry that the majority of local stakeholders like to see continue for the future of Ísafjörður. When asked about the ideal future scenario for Ísafjörður stakeholders express that they would definitely like Ísafjörður to continue being a cruise destination but there needs to be a good balance, not too many cruise passengers, otherwise the industry will have bad environmental and social consequences for the town and surrounding area.

“Cruise ships are always going to part of Ísafjörður. My dream is that Ísafjörður has a framework, that its ok to say no and if its full its full.”

What is referred to by interviewees when asked about sustainable cruise tourism is vague. People were rather unsure how a sustainable cruise industry would work in practice. Some companies report that operating greener cruise excursions is starting to be demanded by the end customers even though those tours may be more expensive. Traveler’s mindset is changing, and people are willing to pay more to travel more responsibly. Some say that this type of end customer choices might make it easier and push companies to focus more on sustainable practices, and more exclusive and expensive tours. Some see Svalbard as a good example, a destination that has enforced restrictions. Others say that the most important sustainability challenge is carbon emissions from ships, and that cruise ships as well as other ships, like fishing boats, should turn electric or hybrid.

4 Conclusion

As mentioned above, attitudes towards cruise tourism are rather positive, but still, most see a need for a limit to cruise visits. How this is to be enforced seems to be one of the biggest challenges; local stakeholders either do not know how this could be implemented or who would be entitled to do it, while others would see it as a personal risk taking in a small, tight-knit community to raise such a critical voice. So, there is a somewhat paradoxical situation in that “everyone” asks for a limit to cruise visits, and there is a need for “everyone” to get involved in such a discussion, while no one initiates this discussion. So, from one perspective,

a big sustainability challenge seems in a sense to lie within the community itself. Potentially it would have a simple solution – start talking about it – but this seems to be one of the most difficult things of all. From another perspective, the issue lies far beyond the level of the community itself. Cruise lines are powerful players in the cruise industry and it is difficult for small cruise communities, dependent on cruise tourism, to negotiate with them. The industry involves many different actors and being the first destination in Iceland to enforce a limitation on cruise numbers might be daunting for a small community like Ísafjörður.

4.1 Future directions

At the beginning of 2023, a new harbor master has taken over in Ísafjörður. In an interview conducted in March 2023, he informed us he had a few days prior taken initiative, at a local harbor committee meeting, to enforce a limit to the number of cruise passengers, a carrying capacity limit. He was still uncertain what body could make such a decision, municipal or other, and about what types of factors to take into consideration, as well as what actors should be consulted. But he has taken the initiative and was hopeful that a decision about a limit would be in place before the season starts. He got the idea after having visited a cruise conference and spoken to local cruise stakeholders. His primary concern was to avoid a situation where too many cruise tourists come and there is nothing for them to do. So, what he was first and foremost thinking of was the limit in what the tourism companies and their infrastructure can manage, not the harbor itself, and therefore the primary stakeholders to consult were the local tourism companies, to his mind. Putting such a limit in place will take time and will not be enforced until the next year 2024 or the year after in 2025, seeing that cruise lines book long in advance. How this process unfolds remains to be explored.