

Why Sites of Merit?

Between 2010-2018, there was a rapid increase in the number of foreign tourists in Iceland. Despite a temporary downturn, everything indicates that the number of tourists will continue to increase in the long term. Major steps therefore need to be taken to shape the framework of destination management in Iceland.

Model tourist sites were one of the tasks covered by the **Road Map for Tourism** published in 2015. The objective of the Road Map was to lay solid foundations for the successful and sustainable development of the sector in the future. According to the Road Map, model sites need to be defined and prepared according to the best international standards. The project has since been named Varða/Sites of Merit.

The development of infrastructure at tourist destinations throughout the country has been a priority in recent years with contributions from the Tourist Site Protection Fund and the National Plan for Infrastructure Development. The main emphasis has been on nature conservation in light of the increased strain caused by tourism, as well as enhancing safety. There is a need to continue on that path, but with a new integral approach, which focuses more on the value of the visitor's experience and the spirit of the sites.

With an integral approach to destination management, development is conceived on the basis of the uniqueness of each site with a long-term plan rather than the smaller and more diversified projects under the current scenario. This encourages a proactive rather than reactive approach to destination development.

The Varða/Sites of Merit project is in line with the priorities of the *Future Vision for Icelandic Tourism until 2030*, which are: to promote a unique visitor experience, environmental conservation, benefits for local communities and profitability.

There is valuable experience to be gleaned from comparable projects overseas, such as in France, Norway and Finland. The French labelling system of the [Grand Sites de France](#), which has a 20 year old history, was a source of inspiration when shaping Varða/Sites of Merit.

More detailed information can be found in the [Varða/Sites of Merit policy document](#) as well as at www.varda.is.

What sites can become Sites of Merit?

Sites, whether publicly or privately owned, which are considered to be unique at a national or global level, may be eligible to become Sites of Merit. Sites of Merit are popular destinations which attract tourists all year round. Their main attraction is their natural phenomena and/or cultural-historical monuments.

Their administration aims to ensure sustainability in all areas: environmentally, socially and economically.

- On one hand, Sites of Merit can be places where substantial infrastructure is already in place. At such locations there may be limited opportunities to change

what has already been done, as well as established patterns in travel behaviour. There may be considerable economic interests which have developed over a long period of time. It can therefore be more challenging (technically, financially and culturally) and time-consuming to develop them as Sites of Merit, but at the same time important because of their popularity and status in the minds of tourists as key destinations in Iceland.

- On the other hand, Sites of Merit can also be places where limited or no infrastructure is in place. These sites offer opportunities to steer development towards sustainability from the earliest stages and to build a diversified experience that is in tune with the spirit of the site. Such sites are often not as popular as the former, but at the same time they are likely to benefit from the promotional power of the new Sites of Merit label, by being placed in a comparable category to better known and more popular sites.

How does a site apply to become a Site of Merit?

It will be possible to apply through the Varða/Sites of Merit website, www.varda.is, as of 2022. During the development and implementation phase of the project in 2021, the focus will solely be on the first four pilot sites (Thingvellir National Park, Geysir, Gullfoss, and Jökulsárlón glacier lagoon), but the aim is to open up for general applications, which can be from public as well as private entities, in 2022.

It is a good idea to start off by evaluating the status of the site according to the definition and criteria to be found in [the policy document](#) at varda.is. When it opens for applications, the project management board of Varða/Sites of Merit will select the sites that can initiate the Sites of Merit process.

The goal is to establish Sites of Merit in all parts of the country.

Which sites will be the first Sites of Merit? Why were they chosen?

The first destinations that are in the process of becoming Sites of Merit are Thingvellir National Park, Geysir, Gullfoss (Golden Circle), and Jökulsárlón glacier lagoon.

Varða/Sites of Merit is a development project, which is why the project has started with sites owned by the state. These are popular sites and therefore encompass all the principal elements that fall under the Sites of Merit criteria. Thingvellir National Park is an example of a site that is close to becoming a Site of Merit and is therefore well suited for the project to be swiftly developed and to reach a common understanding of its nature and goals.

It is clear that the Varða/Sites of Merit label has limited promotional value for these popular sites, which most, if not all, tourists already know. But precisely because of how famous and popular they are, it is important to ensure that their management is exemplary for Iceland as a destination. This approach also helps to maximise the promotional value of the new label for lesser-known destinations, as they then join a group of well-known and popular sites, which have established the label and given it important status.

The sites on the Golden Circle are examples of sites that are more developed with considerable infrastructure already in place. It can be more of a challenge to develop them

towards Sites of Merit. These are the most visited destinations in the country, which form a whole, and it is important to ensure that they are capable of receiving a large number of guests in a satisfactory manner.

Jökulsárlón glacier lagoon is an example of a state-owned site which is less developed, even though it is one of the most popular destinations in the country.

These kind of places offer opportunities to steer development towards sustainability from the earliest stages and to build a diversified experience that is in tune with the spirit of the site. A new local plan for Jökulsárlón was approved earlier this year and future plans for the area are being laid out by the Vatnajökull National Park.

Can “man-made” sites, such as bathing lagoons and museums become Sites of Merit?

There are no provisions to enable companies or man-made sites to become Sites of Merit. A quality and environmental certification, Vakinn, is in place for tourism companies that, for example, operate leisure facilities (such as bathing lagoons) in addition to other international quality standards such as the Swan ecolabel and ISO.

The policy document mentions visitor management. Are there plans to restrict public access to natural sites?

There are no plans to restrict public access to sites. There are many ways to manage visitor flows. Most of them are mild, such as through education, signage and how infrastructure is designed. Registration systems would be classified as more intrusive.

The application of visitor management measures varies according to the circumstances at each site, in consultation with stakeholders and other destinations in the vicinity, if applicable.

Two things need to be considered here: on the one hand, to strengthen the major attractions, which will always be popular and, on the other hand, to accommodate the emergence of spontaneous sites. The destination management organisations in each region need to prioritise the areas to be developed and lead the discussion about spontaneous sites which in time could apply to become Sites of Merit.

Is the Varða/Sites of Merit label free?

Yes, at the moment.

How long does it take to become a Site of Merit?

That depends on the situation at each site. Sites have reached varying levels of progress in their development. But it can be assumed that it will take most sites between 2-3 years to go through the process. Part of the process involves workshops and an analysis of the area's strengths and weaknesses and where there are opportunities for improvement, in order to be able to formulate a strategy and action plan for the site and work on getting the label granted or renewed.

How will the project operate?

Sites that are to become Sites of Merit must fulfil or work systematically towards fulfilling the set criteria and demonstrate a long-term commitment to implement them in their management and planning.

The management of the project is currently handled by the Ministry of Industries and Innovation and the Ministry for the Environment and Natural Resources. The project's administrative structure is still being defined, including performance evaluations and other practical issues.