

PLACE

To say Iceland has been going through a difficult time of late would be something of an understatement. In spite of last years economic collapse, the people of Iceland, including Björk, are rallying. Last year she organised Náttúra, a music festival that raised money for a fund devoted to supporting environmentally sustainable start ups. The festival attracted ten percent of the country's population, demonstrating the wealth of feeling against the continuing corporate interests in Iceland. Against this backdrop Vatnavinir emerged. An environmentally sensitive project whose multidisciplinary team includes architects, designers, branding and marketing strategists, business directors, tourism experts and philosophers. I met Jörn Frenzel, a German architect and one of the founding members, to find out more.

Formed from conversation, community and the strong social networks in Iceland, the Vatnavinir project has given birth to Wellness Country Iceland. A strategy that will utilise the abundance of water and geothermal energy “to promote and develop health related, sustainable tourism.” This unique resource exhibits itself in a myriad of forms: fresh springs, hot springs, flowing water, falling water, geothermal water, glacial water, oceanic water and in all its states from steam, to liquid to glacial. Wellness Country Iceland hopes to use them all.

There is a long history of outdoor bathing in Iceland. Using and building upon this existing fabric, Wellness Country Iceland will manifest itself in three initial forms, named Main Stations, Satellites and Hidden Gem's. The Main Stations, like the long established Blue Lagoon, will provide a full range of services and facilities including accommodation, slow food, treatments, therapies and bathing experiences. Each local region will also feature smaller Satellites, offering local pools in distinct settings, basic accommodation and refreshments. As Jörn explains, they will be built with “simple, honest, thought-out design and minimal intervention to the existing environment,” making “what already exists, better”. Lastly, there are Hidden Gems. Here, natural or semi-man made pools located well off the beaten track, will simply be made safe for the adventurous. They are currently researching suitable locations for all of the centres and are looking for sites where they can create close relations with the existing social fabric, local economies and environment. All the centres intend to be fully integrated in their locality and enriched with culture, outdoor activities, education and training courses.

The project will be treading carefully, operating with respect and sensitivity for local natural contexts and heritage. The locations spread across the country in semi-urban, rural or natural settings, by the shoreline, in the countryside or the mountains. Each centre will be unique in both nature and the experience offered, “unique natural settings, demand unique responses” says Jörn.

North-Eastern Iceland, well known for whale watching, is a potential site for their first Satellite. This area is already in the public eye, as it has been targeted for the next aluminium smelter. Jörn knows their Satellites “are not strong revenue generators that can provide real alternatives to the big quick money solutions like aluminium smelting, but these centres will eventually form the arteries and glue for the long-term life of the country”. Vatnavinir does not see their project as simply Wellness Centres, but a series of suggestions, ideas and strategies that can assist the future economic regeneration of Iceland, as well as providing a working example in what he calls the “laboratory for the world”. David takes on Goliath, not with a slingshot, but instead with water.



SATELLITE, SELJAVALLALAUG



BLUE LAGOON, GRINDAVÍK