

# Iceland: A Pop-culture Powerhouse at the Top of the World

Written by Robert A. Saunders

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ROBERT A. SAUNDERS, MAY 9 2017

In early May 2017, Bloomberg Financial reported that the Icelandic krona was the world's best performing currency, outpacing all others against the euro and the US dollar over the previous year. Moreover, it shows no signs of slowing down and is on track to continue its growth. The reason: *Game of Thrones*. Obviously, the gritty HBO series is not the only or even the main reason for the krona's dramatic ascent; instead, *GoT* serves a synecdoche for Iceland's pivotal role in producing contemporary popular culture and a concomitant rise in tourism. According to *Newsweek*, the island nation attracted approximately seven-times its total population in tourists during 2016. The driver for much of this tourism is rooted in the country's depiction in movies and television series; in fact, a recent study shows that more than a quarter of US tourists select their destination based on what they have seen on film or TV, and Iceland seems to be everywhere right now.

As an (anonymous) backdrop to fantastical shows like *Game of Thrones* and blockbuster science fiction films including *Prometheus* (2012), *Interstellar* (2014), and *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015), the otherworldly geography of Iceland's glaciers, fjords, and waterfalls makes an excellent tableau for showrunners and cinematographers. Seeking to cash in on film and televisual tourism, Iceland's tour operators tend to frame their excursions and travel packages with references to easily recognisable celebrities from Christian Bale to Angelina Jolie. With its proximity to both Europe and the north-eastern United States, Iceland has also become a cinematic stand-in for other locales, from the Himalayas in *Batman Begins* (2005) to Siberia in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). Tapping into the Nordic Noir craze, Sky TV's thriller *Fortitude* (2015- ) is also filmed in Iceland, which doubles as a fictional Norwegian island (Svalbard, perhaps?), and stars some of the country's biggest actors. However, the tiny nation at the edge of the Arctic Circle also serves as an explicit setting for other media products. In the recent remake of *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (2013), Ben Stiller's character makes his way to Iceland only to be greeted by a massive volcanic explosion, evincing the 2010 eruption of Eyjafjallajökull (paradoxically, the ash cloud which virtually halted air traffic in the North Atlantic actually put Iceland on the map for many prospective tourists). Similarly, the remake of *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (2008) was set in and around the extinct volcano Snæfellsjökull.

Not content to let Hollywood exploit the island's pop-culture resources on an exclusive basis, Iceland's cultural producers are also making good use of international interest in their homeland. The runaway hit *Ófærð/Trapped* (2015- ) has established Iceland as a peer among its Nordic neighbours Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, showing that an island at the top of the world can make shows as good as *Borgen*, *The Bridge*, and *Occupied*. Recognising the popularity of the Nordic Noir genre, Netflix has scrambled to sign deals for more Icelandic content, including *The Lava Field* (2014) and *Case* (2015). Following in the ample wake of the iconic songstress Björk, there is also an 'Icelandic invasion' underway in the US and Europe, spearheaded by ethereal rockers Sigur Rós, hipster darlings Of Monsters and Men, and up-and-coming acts like Samaris, thus expanding the allure of the island beyond its visual beauty and into the aural realm. With its unexpected defeat of England in the knockout stages of Euro 2016, the national football team has also added its might to the global image of Iceland as a country that punches above its weight in terms of popular culture.

Cognisant of Simon Anholt's notion of nation branding and Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, the growing

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puissance of Iceland popular culture-tourism partnership on the global scale bodes well for its position in International Relations (not least of which is the aforementioned buoyance of its currency, particularly in the wake a disastrous economic collapse a decade ago). However, such gains are not necessarily accidental. In fact, there is an obscure geopolitical source behind Iceland's current rise. When I visited the country in advance of the summer solstice of 2015, I was told by locals that the ongoing boom in tourism was – at least partially – attributable to US foreign policy. In 2006, Washington informed Reykjavik that it would be ending its decades-long military presence on the island, centred in Keflavik. As the State Department web site attests, the US committed to working with 'local officials to mitigate the impact of job losses at the Air Station, notably by encouraging U.S. investment in industry and tourism development in the Keflavik area'. During the financial crisis that lasted from 2008 until 2011, Americans started to flock to Iceland to see the northern lights, take the waters at the Blue Lagoon Geothermal Spa, and go off-roading across the country's unique landscape.

Buttressed by countless media products touting Iceland's harsh beauty, the country now presents a tantalising destination for Americans, Brits, and Europeans seeking something off the beaten path (though with its tiny population of 330,000, Icelanders are being swamped in a slurry of international visitors, which may not be sustainable in the long run). In 2015, the Pentagon signalled that it was interested in re-evaluating its decision to quit Iceland, recognising the rising threat posed by a resurgent Russia. Some ten years after departing, the US Navy is back on the island to counter Vladimir Putin's more aggressive posture, and seeking funds to modernise existing facilities. While the small military presence on the island may do little to deter Moscow, what it is certain is that Iceland is now a meaningful quotient in everyday geopolitical understanding of millions of citizens in other NATO countries, thus shoring up the country's security in ways that many foreign policy experts are liable to overlook.

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## About the author:

**Dr. Robert A. Saunders** is a Professor in the Department of History, Politics and Geography at Farmingdale State College-SUNY. He is the author of four books, including *Popular Geopolitics and Nation Branding in the Post-Soviet Realm* (Routledge, 2017). His research explores the changing nature of national, religious, and political identity in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.