



# Energy, energy, everywhere...

How did a massive volcanic eruption that shut Europe and grounded half the world's airlines affect the AMI readers trip to Iceland? Scarcely at all, reports Rob Spalding

Iceland is one of the youngest entirely volcanic islands in the world. Strange things happen beneath its craggy landscape. Volcanoes erupt with exciting irregularity. Most of its 300,000 inhabitants have a bath every day thanks to hot water delivered to their homes from deep underground.

You could dismiss Iceland as a flat and

barren land, the last tree unthinkingly felled and turned into decking timbers and floorboards long since.

But that would be doing it a disservice, for it is an fascinating outcrop between two tectonic plates and its natural formations make it a destination of adventure. But is it association convention territory? That's what a group of AMI readers wanted to find out. They became the first-ever international association group to inspect the island for meetings.

All that of course, before volcano Eyjafjalla exploded and drove a plume of volcanic ash south, closing European airports and grounding 63,000 flights. By then, the group had completed their programme and were preparing to leave, some already at the airport.

Despite departure delays and horrendous travel stories, Anna Valdimarsdóttir, Project Manager at the Iceland Convention and Incentive Bureau, was full of praise for the group.

"They stayed calm throughout and handled the situation in a great manner. It could be that the outcome means some of them got to know the country and the people here even better. At the very least, I hope that their experience is that we – as a nation and as a destination – tried and helped in every way we could to make

their stay as pleasant as we possibly could.

"Volcanic eruptions of this magnitude are not a regular thing in Iceland," explained Anna. "It is important to note that an eruption in this area hasn't occurred since the invention of aircraft."

It certainly didn't deter Prof Pasquale Daponte, of the University of Sannio near Naples. "I submitted a proposal of cooperation for establishing a conference in Iceland next year, the IEEE MeMeA conference, Medical Measurement and Applications, the only international event in our field until now not



The HARPA C&CC takes shape



The buyers line up on a black volcanic beach

assigned. I am still awaiting their decision."

Professor Zeki Garagülle, of Istanbul University, thought Iceland would suit his interests in medical hydroclimatology pretty well. He would need an invitation from a like-minded Icelandic soul, of course, and had already made one or two contacts. He was tucking into lunch at the cosy and unique Fishmarket Restaurant in Reykjavik, hosted by Ago, operators of the still-building HARPA Concert & Conference Centre, when he popped the question.

Where most associations dare not meet



Left: The Blue Lagoon  
 Top: On the edge of the glacier  
 Above: Anna Valdimarsdóttir made it all happen

in resort or spa locations for fear of social reprisals, Zeki's organisation ONLY meets there.

"I liked Iceland and the people and the cuisine," he said later. "I would love to organise a conference on psoriasis and balneo-photo-helioterapia there, even with an 'ash danger' of a new volcanic eruption!"

If anyone could set it up for him, Anna Valdimarsdóttir could. Passionate, sensitive and professional, she has identified three major target markets for the mid-Atlantic stepping stone which match with her inbred passions: the natural energy of the volcanic island,

by the HS Orka Energy Company.

The island of volcanoes has been known as a soft-adventure incentive destination up to now. "This is our first time for associations," admitted Anna as we sat over dinner at the Blue Lagoon's Lava restaurant, "so consider yourself guinea pigs. Let's hope this trip is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

Iceland has not really got into the convention league tables because it never had a purpose-built convention centre before. Now, 30 years after the idea was proposed, such a facility, albeit doubling

an off-road drive by superjeep and deposited on the edge of a glacier by helicopter, part of the soft-adventure programme.

Isabelle Rondeau, conference coordinator for the European Industrial Gases Association, was positive about the experience.

"I hope we can organise an event in the medium-term. We always plan our events two years in advance, so it could only be in three to four years from now, but Iceland is a good candidate as we have never organised an event there and we have one member company on the spot. I had a very good impression of the

## 'The readers' group was eased over stomach-churning escarpments on an off-road drive by superjeep and deposited on the edge of a glacier by helicopter'

female rights and fishing. Well, two passions.

The Blue Lagoon has become a dedicated tourist mecca and was first stop for the visiting meeting buyers. Sulphurous steam rises constantly and its skin softening properties were personally attested to by Umberto Solimene, secretary general of the World Federation of Hydrotherapy, based in Milan, who should know.

The Blue lagoon could be mistaken for a power station from a distance, and if you thought power stations were dull places you should tour the facilities run

as a concert hall, is about to happen. The HARPA Concert & Convention Centre opens in May next year. It will be joined by a 200-300 room hotel in 2013.

The stunning glass and steel crystal exterior of Harpa C&CC enfolds three main halls side by side, one for 1,800 (including the balcony area) a 'rehearsal' hall for 450 people and the conference hall for 750. The next largest is for 195 people and there are ten smaller meeting rooms besides.

The following day the readers' group was eased over stomach-churning escarpments on



Stomach-churning superjeep

possibilities, thanks to this fam trip."

The AMI readers trip was titled Get the Idea. Where did that come from? "We are an isolated island with many contrasts and when you see contrasts you get a new idea," suggested Valdimarsdóttir. Even the venerable association market might learn something new, she seemed to intimate.

Anna is a fanatic about her country. "If I didn't have this feeling I wouldn't be good at my job. So I take it very personally." And that means very good news for the eager international association market. **ami**