

**Speech by
Eliza Reid
First Lady of Iceland
at the
World Conference on Tourism and Culture:
Fostering Sustainable Development**

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Your Royal Highnesses, Excellencies, Ministers, Dear Guests,
Dear Friends

Years ago I was in Samarkand, that beautiful and ancient Silk Road City. I was travelling alone, taking a somewhat diverted Trans-Siberian trip as part of a multi-month journey before I began a new life in Iceland. I knew nothing about Samarkand before I bought my ticket there, but a photo of the magnificent Registan in my tour brochure – this was before it was possible to book trips online – convinced me I had to make visiting that city a priority.

Late one spring afternoon there, in a combination of simple sign language and a few words of English and Russian, a woman who ran a souvenir stall at that very Registan invited me to join her and her family for dinner in their apartment on the outskirts of Samarkand. After partaking in a dizzying array of delicious foods, Mohabbat's husband Rofi led a series of toasts to my health, happiness, and, upon hearing of my recent engagement, a future of many children. (I hope he is pleased with the resulting four I have had!)

That special evening with Mohabbat, Rofi, and their four sons encapsulates for me what travel and tourism is all about – meeting people from other cultures and languages, experiencing new traditions and sights, exchanging ideas and friendship, and then sharing all of this with our own networks.

In the years after this encounter, I spent much of my time travel writing, and found great personal and professional satisfaction from the privileged opportunity of being able to share my stories with others.

With my strong belief in the power of sustainable tourism to help reduce inequality and increase tolerance, it is a tremendous honour for me

to have been asked to be a Special Ambassador for Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals.

As you know, the United Nations has declared 2017 as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. This year reaffirmed a powerful message: Tourism can contribute to sustainable development in all its dimensions – economic, social and environmental – and to each of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. UNWTO's mission is to promote the contribution of the tourism sector to the SDGs and thus, to a better and more sustainable world.

The UNWTO promotes the role of tourism in the following 5 key areas: sustainable economic growth, social inclusiveness, employment and poverty reduction; resource efficiency, environmental protection, and climate change; cultural values, diversity and heritage; and mutual understanding, peace and security. As a Special Ambassador, I have been given the task to assist UNWTO in their advocacy efforts in communicating these valuable messages.

A strong, positive correlation exists between tourism and peace. The very existence of tourism depends on peace and security. Tourism represents a vital force for peace and a factor of friendship and understanding among the peoples of the world, because of the direct contacts it engenders between people of different cultures and lifestyles.

In Iceland, we are proud to rank as the world's most peaceful country, according to the Global Peace Index, and we have seen the benefit this reputation has had on our burgeoning tourist industry. For the past eight years, we have also placed first in the World Economic Forum's index of gender equality and Iceland's new government, sworn in on 30 November this year, has made gender equality a priority, with an aim to close the gender pay gap.

The Icelandic government has also identified four of the UN SDGs that it places a special emphasis on. One of these is the fifth, gender equality. (The others are #7, Affordable and Clean Energy, #14, Life Below Water, and #15, Life on Land.) Iceland's new government is also prioritising the development of a long-term policy on sustainable tourism, and the UN's sustainable development goals will not be far from sight during this process.

We must all investigate further the value and opportunity of promoting and preserving culture through tourism – how tourism brings income to support cultural protection; how tourism can educate visitors and communities alike on the value of culture; how tourism can

rejuvenate lost traditions and provide communities with an enriched sense of pride in their culture.

In Iceland, for instance, our capital city Reykjavik is a UNESCO City of Literature, and is in fact the world's first non-native English speaking such city. Promoting our nation's rich literary heritage has been a sustainable way of increasing tourism to Iceland and of promoting Icelandic heritage and culture abroad.

Tourism can empower people and communities by providing them with skills and tools to achieve changes and development. Culture is vital to understand and help host communities. Community is also essential for tourism. It helps us understand the full context of any heritage site and to experience diversity and interactivity.

The need to both protect and present cultural sites generates major challenges in a complex and challenging balance of competing or overlapping goals and responsibilities. Careful planning and decision making are required, combined with close coordination and cooperation between conservation and tourism managers.

This is of course where many of you come into the equation. Gatherings like this are so vital for increasing our cooperation and understanding of how we can combine knowledge and best practices to create more sustainable and successful tourism for all.

This special year of sustainable tourism for development offers a unique opportunity to make tourism a catalyst for positive change as we strive towards a truly sustainable future for all peoples, and for our planet.

It is indeed an honour to be with you here today, and I look forward to meeting and learning from many of you during my time as a Special Ambassador for Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals. I wish you all a very successful conference.