





Visitor Center in Hellissandur, Iceland

The building

The design for the Snæfellsjökull National Park Visitor Center in Hellissandur won first prize in an open competition in 2006. Hellissandur is a small fishing village on Snæfellsnes peninsula in the west of Iceland. Construction began in 2020 and was completed in 2022. The building was fully designed and constructed according to the international BREEAM certification standard, emphasizing environmentally friendly materials and minimizing waste.

The Visitor Center is more than a building, it is also a walking path, it is a viewing platform, a vibrant center of culture and nature. The building form, shape and use are inspired by the fauna, culture and landscape, and is intended to reinforce the visitors' experiences of their stay.

Floor plan

Site plan

Project title:	Visitor center in Hellissandur
Address:	Sandahraun 5, 360 Hellissandur, Iceland
Competition:	1st. prize in an open competition
Building size:	710 m2
Function:	Visitor center in Snæfellsnes/Hellissandur
Architects:	Arkís arkitektar, Vesturvör 7, 200 Kópavogur Iceland
Owner/client:	The State Construction Agency
Location:	N64° 54' 49.465" W23° 53' 21.027
Photographer:	Karl Vilhjálmsson
Awards:	1st prize in an open competition



Visitor center with Snæfellsjökull in the background

Jökulhöfði - Glacial Cape

Unlike human eyes, the whale's eyes are located on each side of the head which gives the animal two different perspectives on its environment, instead of the one perspective most people and other animals are given. Whether the human eye is inside Glacial Cape, or in its immediate vicinity, it can expect the ordinary perception of the eye to yield others experiences than usual.

Glacial Cape does not dominate its surroundings, it merges into them. Its presence is easily visible from the main road, but from there no one perceives it fully. Immediately upon arrival the tone is set for the different nuances that the building creates in interaction his with nature. The trail, from the parking lot to the building splits a sea of lava around the Cape so the line of sight is limited at first. As one gets closer, the Cape gradually reveals itself and its immediate surroundings. There a melting pot for cultural, educational and recreational activities becomes revealed. A melting pot which the Cape is intended to foster. Out of the lava sea, the route continues up the Cape, where the view is unbroken to the glacier, land and sea.



The design concept is inspired by the surrounding nature and the two formal elements of the building have been called Glacier Cape and Fishbone.

café and showroom



showroom



education space





The bow of the ship

One of the main goals in designing the building at this location was that it would be constructed with as little disturbance as possible and that it would feel as though it had landed there fully formed, without any disruption. To achieve this, the design included a part of the building that hovers over the edge of the lava field. This required a new approach to building design in an earthquake-prone area, which places high demands on the structural system — especially when dealing with cantilevered structures, which are very challenging

The “bow” of the building, inspired by the front of a ship, contains an exhibition hall and a restaurant.





The pathway

A pathway runs through the center, allowing visitors to walk directly through the building from one side to the other. Stairs on both sides of the building lead up to the rooftop observation deck, which offers panoramic views of Snæfellsjökull glacier and the village Hellisandur.



BREEAM certification

The National Park Visitor Center was fully designed and constructed according to the international BREEAM certification standard, which emphasizes sustainability and environmental responsibility. Environmentally friendly materials were used throughout and all construction waste was carefully minimized, measured, and monitored. Strict environmental requirements were also enforced on the contractor for the duration of the project. All wood used in the building is FSC-certified, ensuring that it is responsibly sourced and fully traceable throughout the production process.

Improving the environment

BREEAM also addresses the connection between building and broader social factors, including the local environment, transportation and innovative solutions that enhance building quality and sustainability. The National Park Visitor Center reflects these principles with well-developed walking and cycling paths that connect the center to the surrounding park. The building is accessible from both sides, with a pathway running directly through its center, integrating pedestrian access seamlessly into the design.



Function diagram



Two types of timber cladding

The exterior walls of the building are clad in two different types of timber cladding: on the Jökulhöfði part, there is horizontal timber cladding and on the Fishbone part of the building, there is vertical timber cladding.





Enviromentally friendly methods

The entire construction and operational process follows environmentally responsible practices, with a strong emphasis on sustainability. All materials were carefully selected for their low maintenance requirements—eliminating the need for outdoor maintenance and allowing for natural weathering without compromising durability.



The buildings connection to land and sea.