



File photo shows models wearing a creation for Chanel's Spring-Summer 2017 ready-to-wear fashion collection presented in Paris on Oct 4, 2016. — AP

## Iceland plays the tourism card, for better for worse

An island of ice and lava battered by the Arctic winds, Iceland's dramatic and pristine landscape is attracting a growing number of tourists, not all of whom are respectful of the fragile ecosystem. Along with hikers, nature lovers, reality TV starlets and fans of the series "Game of Thrones" which was partially filmed in Iceland, 1.3 million tourists visited the country in 2015, a number expected to rise to 1.8 million this year. Long a destination that appealed only to the earliest ecotourists and fans of the eccentric singer Bjork, this small nation of 330,000 inhabitants is now reaping the benefits of a thriving tourism sector.

Since the 2008 collapse of Iceland's financial system, tourism has become a pillar of the economy, accounting for seven percent of gross domestic product in 2015. But why are tourists thronging to this remote island, described so darkly in the recent wave of "Ice-lit" crime novels? "It's a place of fire and ice. You can see different things everywhere: geysers, glaciers, volcanoes. Things that you don't normally see in other places in the world," says Marcelle Lindopp, a 28-year-old

Brazilian thrilled by her stay despite a glacial rain lashing her face. "It's the experience of a lifetime, really."

### A strange beauty

One has only to drive a few kilometers beyond Reykjavik's city limits to be seized by the beauty and strangeness of the Icelandic panorama. Here, the rocky mountains give way to verdant tundra dotted with horses and sheep. Majestic waterfalls break the monotony of the volcanic rocks. A little further away, near the sea, the cliffs seem to impress even the puffins. Off the coast, bolder visitors can go whale watching, which tourism professionals hope will eventually sound the death knell for commercial whaling. Taking refuge inside a souvenir shop to escape the wind and rain, Jimmy Hart, a 49-year-old Irishman, who visited "Geysir", the hot spring that erupts high into the sky and which has given its name to the famous geysers.

"It's wonderful," he tells AFP. "An amazing experience." "We were at the Blue Lagoon yesterday and it was even bet-

ter than I thought. A beautiful place." In this geothermal bath, visitors can bask in water between 35 and 39 degrees Celsius (95 and 102 Fahrenheit) while enjoying a majestic view of the volcanic hills.

### Bieber impact

But does Iceland have the means to fulfill its ambitions? The director of the Icelandic Tourism Research Center, Gudrun Gunnarsdottir, rejects the idea that tourism has exploded out of control with unpredictable consequences. The tourism boom "totally affects the Icelandic community" and "is both positive and negative," she insists. Justin Bieber is one example.

In 2015, the Canadian star shot a music video in the country, which instantly became a huge hit. But the singer, idolized by young fans, ended up sparking an outcry after he nonchalantly ignored the particularities of Iceland's nature and forgetting that it can also be perilous. Bieber swam among the icebergs-risking hypothermia and the danger of detaching blocks of ice and trampled volcanic foam, a protected

species which will take years to recover. Social media went wild and the local tourism office had to release a statement urging tourists to behave more respectfully.

### 'Protecting nature'

In general, "Icelanders are not as positive as they were one or two years ago" about tourism, says Grimur Saemundsen, chairman of the Icelandic Travel Industry Association (SAF), while acknowledging that tourism has been helping the nation recover from economic collapse. "It has been very good for the economy but tourism has to be controlled way more... Until now the focus has been on quantity and not quality," laments Linda, who runs a boutique selling Icelandic products in central Reykjavik. "We need to invest in general infrastructure... we need to focus on protecting the nature," Saemundsen says. — AFP



Derek Hough as Coryn Collins, foreground left, and Maddie Baillio as Tracy Turnblad, foreground right, during a rehearsal for the musical "Hairspray Live!"



This image released by NBC shows, from left, Maddie Baillio as Tracy Turnblad, Jennifer Hudson as Motormouth Maybelle and Harvey Fierstein as Edna Turnblad during a rehearsal for "Hairspray Live!"



This image released by NBC shows Garrett Clayton as Link Larkin, center left, and Derek Hough as Coryn Collins, center right, during a rehearsal of "Hairspray Live!" — AP photos

## You can't stop the beat with 'Hairspray Live!' telecast

In the steadily escalating battle of the TV musicals, NBC's "Hairspray Live!" is the most ambitious contender yet. It's got a deep bench of stars, including Kristin Chenoweth, Jennifer Hudson, Ariana Grande and Martin Short. It boasts strong themes of racial equality, tolerance and self-acceptance. And it has the outsized, joyful talents of Harvey Fierstein as writer and actor, reprising his Tony Award-winning role as Edna Turnblad.

Executive producer Neil Meron also counts the TV musical's timing as a bonus, calling it impeccable despite its 1960s setting and roots in John Waters' 1988 film and, more directly, in the 2002-09 Broadway musical with Fierstein. "People already were excited about it, but after the election they were saying, 'Boy, do we need this now,'" Meron said recently on a Universal Studios set as the cast rehearsed "I Can Hear the Bells" for Wednesday's telecast (8-11 pm EST). With the country in a "divisive place," he said, viewers are eager for entertainment "that can be really healing."

### Whites-only rule

"Hairspray Live!" is set in 1962 Baltimore, where "The Corny Collins Show" is TV's hot dance program and the focus of teen Tracy Turnblad's dreams. When she's chosen to perform and gains instant celebrity, the plus-sized dynamo uses it to fight the show's whites-only rule. Tracy is played by Maddie Baillio, 20, of League City, Texas, a college student plucked from more

than 1,300 hopefuls in an open-casting call for her first professional role. Short plays husband to Fierstein's supportive wife and mother.

The cast includes Derek Hough as Collins; Grande as Tracy's pal Penny; Hudson as record-store owner Motormouth Maybelle; Ephraim Sykes as her son, Seaweed; Chenoweth and Dove Cameron as mean mom-daughter duo Velma and Amber Von Tussle, and Garrett Clayton as Link, Tracy's squeeze. Two former "Hairspray" Tracys, Ricki Lake (the movie) and Marissa Jaret Winokur (the play), are set for cameo appearances.

Among the catchy songs sure to rattle around in viewers' brains for days: "Good Morning Baltimore" and "You Can't Stop the Beat." The production is big (55 cast members, 600 costumes, 18 sets) and sprawling, designed to shift between the confines of two Universal Studios soundstages and a variety of backlot locations. It's also got an element of risk, following other recent musicals that aired live to ramp up the excitement factor (and keep viewers tuning into broadcast networks and commercials).

The TV musical competition is both intra- and intermural: The bar for "Hairspray Live!" was set at varying heights by NBC's "Sound of Music," "Peter Pan" and "The Wiz" broadcasts. "The Wiz" aired live in 2015, as did this year's "Grease" on competitor Fox, and "Hairspray" plucked its pair of directors, Kenny Leon and Alex Rudzinski, from those respective telecasts. Jerry

Mitchell, who choreographed the Broadway musical, also is aboard.

### Top themselves

The "Hairspray" producers have "certainly upped the ante," said Hough. "The people who are part of this, including some who worked on 'Grease' as well, they want to try to top themselves." Exactly, said Meron, who is producing "Hairspray Live!" with Craig Zadan. The partners also produced the 2007 movie version of the stage musical, with Nikki Blonsky as Tracy and John Travolta as Edna. While "Grease" made creative use of backlot locations, Meron said the "Hairspray" plan is to spend more of the show, about 40 percent, outdoors on the lot.

That will include mundane facades transformed into a colorful Baltimore downtown, one that happens to be in sight of the clock tower featured in "Back to the Future." Neon signs advertise businesses including Waters Plumbing, a bow to the story's free-thinking originator, and Divine Pet Food. That honors the original film's Edna, the late Divine (Harris Glenn Milstead), who set the template for a male to own the role.

As with "The Wiz," which starred newcomer Shanice Williams, "Hairspray" is rolling the dice with Baillio. But Fierstein says it's no gamble. She "has a voice that is just wonderful. ... She's excited about life. She's excited to do this," he told a teleconference, adding, "it's given me a whole new light to have

this terrific new young star." Fierstein showed plenty of spark on the set recently, interrupting an interview to playfully admonish a group of boisterous cast members on break.

### Own performance

"Don't make me come over there!" he shouted. Turning serious, the stage veteran said the demands of the TV musical, including learning to remain aware of multiple cameras, have proved a challenge. "In the theater, I'm in charge of telling the audience where to look and what's important. Here, you need to very much give up all control" except over one's own performance, Fierstein said. Director Leon explained that the production "is not theater, it's not TV, it's not a film - it's a hybrid of all of that. That's half the problem, understanding that. So we have to take this team of actors, get them in the same world, and present it in a way so that the viewers at home feel they are the live audience." What they'll discover in "Hairspray," said Baillio, are themes that are as relevant as ever. "One of the things I love about Tracy is her body positivity, and that she sees everyone as equal and believes everyone should be dancing together on 'The Corny Collins Show' and in life," said the sophomore at Marymount Manhattan College in New York. "It's bold to say, but I hope it changes opinions." — AP