

Back to basics

horse riding in Iceland

There's no better way to explore Iceland than on horseback. Yayeri van Baarsen discovers that in Europe's least populated country, horses aren't just a convenient way to enjoy the stunning scenery, but are an important part of Icelandic life and society.

Clouds of dust form as hooves thunder rhythmically over the ground. I briefly wonder if, instead of the reins, I could hold a pint of beer in my hand without spilling any of the liquid. This, Icelanders claim, is the best way to show how comfortable tölt – the smooth four-beat running walk their horses are most famous for – is. Instead, I decide to enjoy the backdrop of lush green valleys and look out for whales in the Eyjafjörður, Iceland's longest fjord.

At the end of a whole day's riding, I'm surprised to realise I don't ache at all – Icelandic horses are very comfortable indeed. They have to be, since horses were the main form of transportation in the country until the first cars arrived on the island, back in 1940. Before this, all travelling was done on horseback because most roads weren't even suitable for carts.

Bearing in mind the history, it's easy to see why Icelandic horses were considered mankind's most loyal servants. Barely a century ago, the midwife arrived on horseback. The children she delivered grew up amid horses and turned into adults who used their horses every day, no matter their profession. When they died, their four-legged companions pulled the coffin to the grave. Without horses, living in Iceland would have been impossible.

Objects of affection

Despite the arrival of motorised transport, the bond between Icelanders and their horses remains strong. Worshipped in Norse mythology, horses are still considered a national treasure. They are honoured in shows at the Icelandic Horse Theatre at Fákasel and admired by thousands at Landsmót, the National Icelandic Horse Show.

Landsmót is a chance to show off the five gaits (walk, trot, canter/gallop – which is considered one gait – tölt and pace) as well as the country's biggest horse festival. In Iceland, there are 240 horses for every 1,000 people. In the rest of Europe, the figure is just 13 horses for every 1,000 people. And it seems that everyone rides. Viggó Sigurðsson, owner of riding tour company Viking Horses, says: "Horses get people from all layers of society together. It doesn't matter whether you're a farmer, a car salesman or a doctor. On horseback you're all just riders."

Fun the Viking way

Viggó got into horses when he was a kid. "When growing up, I could see stables from my bedroom window. Then when I was a teenager, my parents made me choose between getting a horse or a motorbike. I chose wisely," he grins.

Together with his mother, Svava Aldís Viggósdóttir, and sister, Harpa Hödd Sigurðardóttir, Viggó has recently taken over the family business, Viking Horses, offering riding tours and specialising in small groups. He moved house to be closer to his 30 horses and now lives above the stables. Located 15 minutes outside Reykjavik's city centre, it feels like a different world in part thanks the nearby Rauðhólar (red hills), 5,200-year-old remnants of a cluster of pseudocraters. These lava formations are part of the Heiðmörk nature reserve, a landscape with something new to see behind every corner and that, naturally, is best discovered on horseback.

At first sight, my mount Sirius looks like a cute pony (Icelandic horses stand an average of 13–14hh), but the black five-year-old is strong enough to carry a grown man. He holds himself proudly, and once I master the aids, the lightest touch is enough to make him change gait into tölt, which feels like he's dancing. Tölting is made easier by the fact that on Icelandic horses the saddle is set further back to allow for shoulder movement. Noticing my confidence on Sirius' back and both our enjoyment during the hack, Viggó suggests going for a swim in the nature reserve. Bareback, Sirius is just as easy to ride and even though it's his first time swimming, he splashes through the water with a fearless attitude that clearly shows he's a descendant of the sturdy horses the Vikings imported all those years ago.



Viggó tells me: "Icelandic horses are strong, kind, amazing creatures that just belong in nature. I love riding at night in June, when it's light for almost 24 hours a day. You can ride for hours in the countryside without encountering a soul. It's a perfect moment – just me, the horse and nature."

*It's a perfect moment –
just me, the horse
and nature*



Hippie horse

Since most tourists stay around the Reykjavík area, even more unspoilt nature can be found in the north of Iceland. Surrounded by mountain tops that are covered in snow even in the middle of summer, the location near Akureyri seems an aptly chosen spot for a riding centre. Pólar Hestar, meaning 'pole horse' in Icelandic, is run by Stefán Kristjánsson, Juliane Kauertz and their 14-year-old son Simon. They own no less than 130 horses from different parts of the country. The horses are connected to all aspects of the family's lives: the couple even met during a horse riding tour, back in 1993. Stefán explains: "My horses are so much more than my work. I have been with them for all my life, they are a part of me."

The horses with their windswept, shaggy manes seem perfectly at home

Stefán and his family run Pólar Hestar



Their thick coats and shaggy manes keep Icelandic horses warm

While horses turned out wearing headcollars is a common sight in much of Europe, Iceland is different – none of the horses I see wear a halter in the field. I ask Stefán whether this makes them harder to catch. "No worries, if needed we'll just walk a bit longer," he tells me. That casual atmosphere stretches from catching the horse to the menagerie of other farm animals strolling around and even to the way one mounts a horse in Iceland. "Do you really think the horse cares which side you get up?" is the question I'm asked when walking around Hekla to get to her left side.

The horses themselves, with their windswept, shaggy manes seem perfectly at home – it's hard to picture them with a plaited mane in a dressage competition. And the same can be said for the riders. Within 15 minutes, Hekla enthusiastically canters through a particularly boggy patch and gives my pristine breeches a camouflage pattern of mud.



Despite the dirt, the Icelandic way of riding, which is more free than in other European countries, holds a huge appeal. There is no strict order during our hacks, and the horses merrily trot along together and when there's time for a break, we loosen the noseband to let the horses eat. The saying 'sit back, relax and enjoy the ride' perfectly describes recreational riding in Iceland.

Adapted to nature

When riding through the hills in the Grýtubakki area, galloping over tiny paths with sharp rocks either side (and in the middle) and tölting through fields still sluggish from melted snow, I wonder how Hekla finds her way without stumbling. Even jumping over a little river in the so-called Valley of the Elves is no problem: my horse moves as sure as a mountain goat. Stefán explains: "The horses have adapted to this landscape. The first four years of their lives, we leave them out to roam free on almost 2,500 acres of land. This way they are sure-footed when we begin their training."

The horses live out all winter, no matter how hard it snows. In that respect, not much has changed for the Icelandic horses since they were first brought to the island by the Vikings in the 9th Century. The exposure to the elements and the isolation in the harsh Icelandic climate for more than 1,000 years has made for one of the most pure horse breeds in the world. The horse has no natural predators on the island and as a result, when encountering something new, they are more inclined to stop and think rather than to panic and flee.

Renowned all over the world for their spirited character and stamina, they are also well suited to the novice rider. At Pólar Hestar, I watch a beginner group before their ride, unsure of how to approach the furry animals and wondering aloud how they'll be able to 'climb on top of it and hold onto these ropes'. An hour later, most of them are



cuddling their horses and whispering words of thanks, and all are reluctant to leave.

Stefán's wife Juliane explains: "I completely trust my horses, I'd give my life for them." She tells me about one of her first rides in Iceland where she got lost in heavy fog and let her horse guide her back home. As Juliane talks, I realise one thing for sure: this is certainly not the last time I'll be horse riding in Iceland.

Want to go riding in Iceland? Here are five tips...

- ▶ **Do disinfect** To protect Icelandic horses from infectious diseases, it's forbidden to bring used riding equipment (for example, saddles or bridles) into the country. Used riding clothes can be imported, but they must be disinfected, thoroughly washed or dry cleaned.
- ▶ **Be honest and clear about your experience** 'I've ridden before' can mean that you've sat on a horse once, but also that you've had twice-weekly lessons on your own horse for the last seven years. The more information you provide, the better the chance that the stable owner will be able to find you a suitable horse.
- ▶ **Read up beforehand** Although most stables offer great hacks in amazing surroundings, there are companies whose idea of riding in Iceland consists of having 50 horses walk in a strict line for two hours. Not that fun. Do some research into the options before you book.
- ▶ **Choose your time** Icelandic summer days are long, with almost 24 hours of daylight, and probably the best time to go. Most riding schools close in winter. Some offer tours all year round, allowing you to ride in a landscape covered in snow. No matter the season, be aware of the Icelandic weather: rain for two days out of three isn't uncommon.
- ▶ **Leave taking photos to the breaks** Most stables will tell you not to sit and shoot, but even if they don't, concentrate on riding your horse and the beautiful surroundings instead of taking pictures. It's not only safer, it'll also mean you won't have to delete 241 wonky shots of a horse's back end.

Iceland fact file



Population: 325,000 (the same as Nottingham)

Capital: Reykjavík

Time zone: GMT

Currency: Króna (ISK)

£1 is worth 191ISK

Pint of beer: 900ISK

Useful words:

Já – yes

Nei – no

Takk – thank you



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