

What's so special about riding in Iceland?



The Land

Iceland is like nowhere else on earth! Volcanos and glaciers, frost and fire work together to shape a beautiful island of lush green valleys, highland deserts, volcanic beaches, glacial rivers and vast, sunlit summer days when it doesn't get dark.

The People

Settled by 9th century Vikings, its isolation has shaped aculture that's both ancient and modern, where horses outnumber cars, and cell phones outnumber people!

The Horses

The smooth gaits of this small sturdy animal makes riding across their homeland a pleasure. The combination of open land, ancient culture and great toltng horses can only be found in Iceland!

Horses North, LLC

America's travel experts on Iceland.

We know Iceland and its horses like nobody else! Iceland's horses won our hearts on our first riding trip there, years ago, and we've never wanted to leave this beautiful, complex island. Call our toll free number and find out how easy it can be to travel to Iceland. Then get ready for the ride of your life!

More than Horse Touring

While horses bring many of our clients to Iceland, there's lots to do out of the saddle. Whether it's bird-watching or whale - watching, hiking, walking under a waterfall or across a glacier, fishing, snowmobiling, hunting for northern lights or northern night life, we'll help you with everything you'll need. See www.icelandadventure.com for lots of ideas for exploring Iceland.

Iceland is a land that invites exploration. It's a place to experience nature at work. Whether you're riding across black lava sands, crossing glacial torrents, or soaking in a natural hot spring, you become part of the ever-changing landscape. Abundant geothermal energy makes the country pollution-free, and shapes a terrain that requires rugged sure-footed horses to carry you through it. Iceland's culture is both ancient and modern, with an independence shaped by centuries of isolation but reliance on each other that is still seen in their way of life - it's a people on a first name basis - as any phone book will attest. Icelanders speak a language nearly unchanged in a millennium, but most have cell phones and internet connections!

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How to Choose?

We can help! There are so many riding tours, that you can certainly find one that's best for your schedules, skills and interests. This is where our experience comes in handy - Call or e-mail and we'll be able to help you pick the right one. First, consider a few basic questions:

When do you want to travel?

Longer riding tours are during the height of Iceland's short summer - from late June to mid August. Shorter (2,3 and 4 day) tours have a longer season, from March till October and there are day rides all year long.

How far do you want to ride?

While the riding is fairly easy, it's best to choose a tour that matches your fitness level. Many Horses North clients pick a 5-6 day ride, although 2 day rides are a great introduction and a 10 day tour can be the trip of a lifetime!

What kind of accommodations do you want?

Cross country tours through wild areas offer sleeping bag & mattress accommodations in mountain huts - sometimes referred to as "indoor camping". Farm based tours offer day rides, which return to the same comfortable farm guesthouse every night. These are great for groups with kids, or those who don't want to ride every day. Wilderness rides are great for fit equestrians, and the shorter rides work well for occasional riders. We are now offering rides built around very nice hotel accommodations.

Iceland

What else do you want to experience?

Iceland is so full of wonders that you may want to pick the ones - glaciers, hot springs, highlands, seashores, that you would most appreciate from the back of a horse. A lot of our clients want to explore Iceland either before or after a riding tour, and some explore without ever getting on a horse. We can send you information and answer questions to help you have a wonderful trip to Iceland.



A very special Horse

The real star of our riding tours is the Icelandic horse. Bred in isolation for 1000 years, good riding qualities, stamina, and a uniquely smooth gait (called the Tölt) have been vitally important in this land that had few roads. Even today, the Icelanders use their horses to round up sheep and horses from their summer pastures, and riding tours are still the best way to condition horses for this work. You can join in this ancient tradition, and tölt to the time of your life!

Our Horses

Breki is still recuperating, hanging out in a herd of Icelandics and basically having fun. Tinna, 5 years after we rode her through Skagafjordur in north Iceland and imported her to the US, is still pretty much the same horse as when we bought her. We liked her because she was a very forward, "go-ey" mare. She's smooth in all gaits, has developed a strong pace, and is always waiting for a signal to go faster. She'll never be the school horse that Breki became, but we never expected that of a horse with her spirit! She is a lot of fun to ride.

The following piece was written for the Pony Club that worked with, and rode, Breki our Icelandic gelding. It outlines a riding tour. It may be of interest to anyone who's contemplating riding in Iceland.



Breki and his home in Iceland

Back in Iceland, during the summer, Breki would be put into a herd of 20 to 60 horses and go on vacation. The herd would be made up of horses belonging to friends and families who would go off riding into Iceland's hills and valleys for a week or so. There would be a small truck that would carry food and sleeping bags and meet the group each night at a different shepherd's hut or maybe a schoolhouse for supper and a night's sleep. After breakfast and cleaning up the little truck would go off on the dirt track to head for the next night's stop and the riders would saddle up their first horse of the day. The people who were riding horses that always have to be in front would start off, they would lead the herd. Some mornings would start with a rush as this herd of remounts got all excited and poured out of the corral at a quick canter, with an occasional "wise guy" going off in the wrong direction. When things were settled the rest of the riders would get behind the loose horses to drive them if they needed it and to press the occasional wanderer back into the herd. The first day might be chaotic to start off, but the herd would gradually get the idea and stick together better day after day.

After riding at a good clip for an hour or so there would be a stop for a rest. This is the pattern of riding in Iceland. Going along at a pretty good clip; trotting mostly, giving the horse a break by trotting, cantering, and maybe on some horses and a smooth dirt road, getting in a little pacing. Ride for forty-five minutes or an hour, rest for 10 or 15 minutes.

After three or four cycles like this, and covering 10 or 15 kilometers it would be time to change horses.

If you go on the internet to www.icelandadventure.com/p16.html you can learn more about Icelandic horses. And, on that page, if you click on the little box that says "Can these horses carry full size people?" you'll see two pictures of Breki. In one picture he's carrying a child who looks like some of the students who ride him here at Riga Meadows and in the other picture he's carrying a very big man.

If the riders knew that there was a corral on the trail ahead it would make it a bit easier. If there wasn't a corral some of the riders in the lead would ride on ahead of the herd, the other leaders would slow the herd down to a walk. Those who rode ahead would dismount in a meadow with some grass for grazing and stretch a white tape between stakes that hold the tape at about thigh level. This, along with all the riders, would encircle the herd when it stopped and make a corral. All of the horses, both ridden and driven, would get there, saddles were taken off and, of course, the horses got a chance to roll and scratch their backs. After this rest break everyone would pick out a new horse and tack it up, and the cycle; ride, break, ride, etc. would go on. Since this takes place during Summer time and Iceland is just about on the Arctic Circle no one worries about the time. Sometimes riding goes on until 10 or 11 o'clock. A 50 kilometer day is a long day a 20 kilometer day will allow a late start and maybe a dip in a hot spring.

The idea of riding tours came about a very long time ago and is an outgrowth of a pastoral and farming people. Being so far north Iceland can't dependably grow grain and there is only one cutting of hay so farming of crops isn't done (actually now there is a bit of greenhouse farming using geothermal heat and hydro-electric power). The land is used to graze sheep and horses and the best summer pastures are far from the farms and homefields. In the Spring and early Summer the sheep and most of the horses are driven to these meadows. There is very little ceremony associated with putting the animals out to pasture. Some areas have fenced off the ends of their valleys and put hundreds of horses into them. We rode through a valley a few times that had 1,000 mares and foals in dozens of herds running through it. So, there are all these horses and sheep wandering all over the landscape and they have to be gathered up in the Fall when the grass stops growing.

The end of Summer and the round-ups are somewhat more formalized than the Springtime when animals are put out. One of the older farmers is selected as "King of the Hill" and he chooses the dates for the roundups. The sheep roundup comes first, of course. A lot of Icelanders go back to the family farmsteads for the roundup, and many of these farms keep sheep just for the tradition of the roundup, the homecoming, the food and the parties. Rounding up the sheep is a lot of work. While horses will usually stay more or less in a herd, sheep will most likely scatter if you approach or try to drive them. A lot of time is spent on foot, off the horse, on land that's full of rocks and ledges. Usually there's a second sweep of the whole valley to find the last of the stragglers.

The horse roundup is a week or so after the sheep roundup, early- to mid-September for most valleys. On the last day when hundreds of horses are driven into corrals there is a festive air and a lot of friends seem to drop in to ride the last few miles with the farmers. The sorting begins when the horses are driven in groups of 50 to a hundred into the middle of the same round pens that sheep were sorted from earlier in the month. When a horse is identified, by its looks or its ear notches or its freeze marks, it gets put into the outside sector for that particular farm. This sorting takes place for as many cycles as it takes to segregate all the mares and foals into their farms. Nowadays many of the horses go to their farms by trailer or truck but a lot of farmers ride away from the roundup pens (or *riets* in Icelandic) driving their herd ahead of them, heading back home.

What do the roundups have to do with horse touring? Well, if you're going to ride up into the wilderness and chase first sheep, and later, horses you want the horses that you'll be riding to be in shape. If you have to get your horses in shape why not make it into a party - maybe 10 days of party. No one knows when summer touring started but since horses and sheep came over with the first settlers in the 8- and 900's the tradition could be almost that old. Some time in the 1950's some Icelanders invited some friends from mainland Europe to come along with them on their rides and that led to the present tours that are open to all, and provide jobs and income for riders in Iceland.

Breki's last ride in Iceland was a tour he took with Holly just before he got on an airplane and flew to his new home in America.



Horses North - America's Iceland Riding Tour Experts!

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