

The Icelandic Horse

Thousands of people in Iceland own horses for the simple pleasure of riding out and enjoying the companionship of their horses. Travel on horseback is growing in popularity and Icelandic horsemen are respectful and considerate when it comes to nature, just as they are with their horse. All sorts of competitions are on offer and everyone can find a level that suits them, from novice fun classes up to top class national competitions. The Icelandic Horse can be used in all the traditional Icelandic disciplines as well as in classic equestrian sports such as dressage and jumping. Whatever your preference – you will always find an Icelandic horse to fulfill your dream!

History

- The history of the Icelandic Horse can be traced right back to the settlement of the country in the late 9th century. The breed has remained pure for over a thousand years and thus today there is only one breed of horse in Iceland – The Icelandic Horse.
- The Icelandic Horse has played a key role in the life of Icelanders from the beginning. In heathen times the horse was highly regarded and renowned in Norse mythology. For centuries the horse was the only means of transportation in Iceland as well as being the most important working animal in the days before machinery. Therefore the horse was called “the most useful servant”.
- When the first automobile arrived in Iceland in 1940 the horse rapidly became redundant. Iceland’s first horse breeding association was formed the same year the automobile arrived, but up until that time horses had mainly been bred with strength and stamina in mind, rather than riding abilities or gaits.

Breeding

- Today, there are close to 80,000 horses in Iceland which is an incredible number for a nation that counts 300,000 people. The horse is used for pleasure riding, travelling and competition purposes and it still plays a practical role in the annual sheep and horse round-ups where farmers use horses to round up sheep and horses in the highlands.
- Each year thousands of foals are born in Iceland. Most of them are born outside in grassy fields where the breeding mares roam in herds all year round. Natural breeding, where the stallion is with a group of mares in a field for a certain breeding season, is the most common breeding method in Iceland, although artificial insemination has been available for a few years in parts of the country. It is magical to witness the birth of a foal during a bright summer night in Iceland’s beautiful nature and to many a breeder that is their favourite time of year.

The herd

- Foals will follow their mothers for the first few months of their lives, sometimes longer, but some are stabled during their first winter. After that the young horses are put in a herd where they will learn to live within a group and find their place in the chain of command. During the summer they graze in lush green fields and during winter they are fed hay and provided with shelter.
- In parts of northern Iceland horses are still allowed into the highlands during the summer and autumn months. In late September or early October, they are rounded up and sorted out in corrals where each horse breeder picks out his/her horses and then drives them home to the farm.
- Raising horses in this manner, in herds that roam free in wide open fields and highlands, is the key to shaping the personality and character of the Icelandic Horse. The outcome is a spirited and forward going horse with much respect for the rider.

Training

- Training of the Icelandic Horse does not start until their fourth year. Research has shown that their leg bones are maturing until the age of 3 ½ and they should not be started earlier. Not all horses are started at the age of four, but those who are, are usually trained a little, taught to work with a saddle and bridle, shod and ridden a little. In their fifth year their training is continued and more demands can be made.
- The Icelandic Horse usually leads a long and healthy life and their natural life span is 25-30 years, but some have grown much older.

The five gaits

- The **walk** is a four-beat gait. When walking the horse should be relaxed, moving ahead briskly, putting each foot down independently. The walk is also good for releasing tension and to teach the horse to work in a more focused manner.
- The **trot** is a two-beat gait where front and hind legs on opposite sides move together. The trot is one of the so-called basic gaits and is used a lot in basic training before the horse masters tölt.
- The **canter/gallop** is a three-beat gait, ridden at different speeds. A slow canter is comfortable and is common all over the world in different horse breeds. A fast gallop can liven up the horse and increase its willingness, positive attitude and enthusiasm to work.
- The **tölt** is the specialty of the Icelandic Horse. It is a smooth four-beat gait in which the horse's hind legs should move well under the body and carry more of the weight on the hind part, allowing the front to rise and be free and loose.
- The **flying pace** is a two-beat gait, well known in the international racing world. When pacing the horse moves both legs on the same side together. In Iceland pace horses are ridden in races, not raced in front of a sulky like in other countries and pace racing in Iceland is one of the oldest and most respected equestrian sports.

Export

- Icelandic horses were first exported as working animals decades ago. They were used for farm work and mining and tens of thousands of horses were exported for that purpose. The 1950s saw the first exports of riding horses, and since then the Icelandic Horse has grown in popularity in Europe and North America. An international association of Icelandic horse owners, FEIF, comprises 18 member countries: Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, the Faeroe Islands, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland and the USA. There are more than 100,000 Icelandic horses abroad, most of them in Germany and Scandinavia. The growing popularity of the Icelandic Horse has made horse breeding a valuable business and it has boosted the agricultural community in Iceland.

Source: [The Icelandic horse](#), published by The Horse Breeders Association of Iceland (Félag hrossabænda) 2006