

Travelogue: Thórsmörk and the hot springs – one-day ride, 23–28 June

Day 1:

My trip began with my outbound flight to Reykjavik from Frankfurt am Main. I booked a flight with Icelandair and was absolutely satisfied with the organisation and service. You could choose from a fairly extensive list of films, some of which were very recent, free of charge, or learn more about Iceland by watching documentaries. Water and a soft drink were also included. I was also able to buy my Flybus tickets on the plane itself, so I could travel later from the somewhat remote Keflavik Airport into Reykjavik city centre and save a fair bit of money in the process! Reykjavik Airport was very easy to navigate; everything flowed in one direction, so I reached the arrivals hall in no time, where there was also a Flybus counter. The bus stop was easy to find; there were only a few buses in the car park in front of the airport. The roughly 40-minute journey to Reykjavik was well worth seeing, with the harbour and the sea on one side and colourful volcanic rock on the other.

Every now and then, rocks would appear on the horizon – or perhaps even the odd volcano or two?! Upon arriving at the BSI bus stop in Reykjavik, I couldn't go wrong here either. On the other side of the building, a member of staff from the riding centre was already waiting and gave me a warm welcome. Gradually, more international riding guests trickled in, and soon we were able to set off for the centre. Upon arrival at the riding centre, we were first given a very warm welcome at the reception of the modern hotel, and I was shown to my room. The spacious entrance hall led into a long corridor, at the end of which were the centre's hot pools. Everything was simply and cosily furnished, as was my large room with Wi-Fi and a big TV. After settling in, I made my way to the dining room and joined one of the large communal tables for dinner. I immediately struck up a conversation with a group of riders; the shared love of horses really does bring people together across national borders.

Afterwards, I met my guide for the next day's ride to the hot springs, as well as my fellow riders – a cheerful Swedish family. We discussed the itinerary for the ride, when we should have breakfast and be at the stables in our riding gear, and who preferred to ride which type of horse.

Day 2:

After a peaceful and restful night, I fortified myself with a sumptuous breakfast buffet. The weather was lovely and mild, with no rain in sight. So I packed my bikini and a towel and made my way to the stables, which were about 50 metres from the hotel. There I met up again with the Swedish family and our guide, and, kitted out with saddles and helmets, we headed out together to the horses. In the outdoor area of the centre there was a riding arena and two large paddocks, where numerous Icelandic horses were already frolicking. Horses were also tethered around the paddocks. These had been taken out of the herd beforehand as they were to be used for riding. Our guide introduced us to the horses we'd be riding that day, and afterwards everyone prepared their own horse for riding. We then made our way to the riding arena, where Sarah, our guide, checked our equipment and helped us mount up. Once we were all set, we set off at a leisurely pace on our tour, heading straight from the farm towards the mountainous hinterland. We were allowed to decide the order ourselves, and soon we were making our first attempts at tölt, following a brief instruction from Sarah. The horses were all very well-behaved, but by no means sleepy, and the tölt was very comfortable to sit in. We passed through a wooded area and Sarah explained to us that most of the trees in Iceland were planted by people. As we continued, we approached smoking, bubbling springs,

some of which were loudly releasing gases from deeper layers of the earth to the surface. You could also smell the gases very strongly – a rather unappetising mixture reminiscent of rotten eggs.



Stinking gases escape from the hot springs

In any case, the hissing sounds of the springs and the smell didn't bother the horses in the slightest. We continued uphill at a brisk tölt until we reached a large meadow with a stream, where we let the horses graze and drink. Shortly afterwards, we continued our tour, though initially on foot, as the path now led steeply uphill for quite a distance. We met a few walkers and, once we reached the top, mounted our horses again. From up here, there was a magnificent view of the surrounding mountains and gorges, the sea in the background and a picturesque waterfall.



Picturesque landscapes with a waterfall

We took our next break at a paddock. We unsaddled the horses and, with our lunch and swimming gear, set off on our own a short way further up the mountain towards the

hot springs, a short distance further up the mountain. The springs flowed into a river, which was dammed at irregular intervals by large stones, creating pools. To the right and left of the river's course were wide paths made of wooden planks, and every now and then a bridge spanned the river. The closer we got to the springs, the hotter the river water became. We got changed and enjoyed our sandwiches in the wonderfully warm water, which, fortunately, didn't have any of the odour of the other springs. Alongside the few other tourists, a flock of cheeky sheep had come to visit the river. The very cute and curious animals scampered about on the wooden planks, eyeing up the swimmers' luggage, until they were finally gently shooed away.



The closer you got to the springs, the hotter the water became

Completely relaxed, we set off again after about an hour, heading back down to the horses, where Sarah welcomed us with delicious biscuits. We saddled the horses once more and set off back towards the stables. We led our horses up the steep hill again, this time downhill. The highlight of the ride for me was a short stretch of canter. Here too, the horses were very easy to handle. Back at the farm, we released the horses together into the huge paddock behind the premises and put our tack away. We thanked Sarah and said our goodbyes to one another. I returned to the hotel to have a shower and change into my room at the guesthouse before joining my riding group for dinner ahead of the Thórsmörk tour. The guesthouse was about a one-minute walk from the hotel, next to the stables; it had its own kitchen with a living room, shared bathrooms and simple shared dormitory-style rooms. Once there, I got to know some of my fellow riders – three ladies of my own age who were sharing the room with me for the first night. We met the rest of the group and the guides shortly afterwards over a delicious three-course meal in the hotel dining room. There was a relaxed and very pleasant atmosphere; here, too, everything was superbly organised, including a welcome address from the facility's manager. After dinner, we discussed the following day's plans and were asked by the guides to say a few words about our riding experience and what type of horse we preferred to ride. The group of around 15 riders comprised a very diverse mix, ranging from beginners to competition riders, and from 14-year-olds to people in their fifties. After the briefing, everyone gradually made their way to their rooms, not least to discuss what clothing would be best suited for the upcoming day's riding

and which shoes would allow us to walk comfortably whilst keeping our feet dry.

Day 3:

The day began with a sumptuous breakfast buffet in the dining room. We didn't have to worry about our luggage; it was loaded into a van by staff and taken to our accommodation for the coming night. We were asked to go straight to the stables in full riding gear to try on the appropriate rainwear and riding helmets. We were then given a demonstration by one of our guides in the indoor riding arena. We were shown how to saddle and bridle an Icelandic horse correctly, and how the horses are accustomed to being mounted. This was followed by a demonstration of the different gaits, with specific tips on how to ride the tölt.

Then everyone was given their saddle for the next few days, and we walked together to the outdoor area behind the stables. Many horses were already tethered around the large paddocks. Everyone was assigned their first horse and set about grooming and saddling it themselves.



First horse: the mare Glódis – meaning ‘shining woman’ in English

We then led our horses out onto the large outdoor arena and were allowed to ride our first few laps. We were able to adjust our stirrups, make our first attempts at tölt and generally assess whether we were on the same wavelength as the horses. Everyone was very happy with the guides' choices, so after riding, everyone led their horse onto the trailer for a short transfer back to the tour's starting point, where we also met our third guide, the Icelander Laurus. At the start of our tour, the sky was rather grey and the higher ground was shrouded in mist, but the temperature, at around 15 degrees, was very pleasant for riding. After a short while on horseback, we turned off the roads and rode at a brisk tölt across meadows dotted with sheep, off the beaten track. The order in which we rode didn't matter at all, and we were free to change positions or ride side by side. Just as we stopped for lunch, the inevitable rain set in, and we slipped into our smart rainwear, which doubles as high-visibility vests. After lunch, some of the horses were swapped for the guides' lead horses, and so I too got to enjoy a second riding horse that day; a grey mouse-fawn, though I'm afraid I can't recall its name. This horse, too, was completely trouble-free. We continued our ride at a leisurely pace, without any

until we reached a bridge, which we had to dismount and lead the horses across.



Withstands any rain: rainwear available to hire from our partner

The landscape gradually changed the further we rode into the Thórsmörk region. The sheep pastures gave way to rockier, moss-covered ground. In the late afternoon, we reached our horses' overnight resting place, a spacious paddock. Here we let the horses roam free and set off on foot towards our hut.



This is where the horses spend the night – the rain has stopped again

Once we arrived at the cabin, we each chose a room in pairs, had a hot shower and were then treated to a delicious meal by our chef, Alex. The atmosphere was great, so we sat together for a while longer in the cabin's cosy living room.

Day 4:

The breakfast couldn't have been better: Alex had prepared fresh porridge, fruit, rice pudding, delicious bread and much more for us in the compact kitchen. Well fortified, we set off back to the horses. The herd had already been

us that morning with additional horses, which had been transported by trailer to the vicinity and herded to the paddock by two of our guides. All the horses were then herded into a corner of the paddock, fenced off, and caught one by one by the guides before being handed over to us. In Iceland, it's traditional to use a stone to groom your horse – it actually works surprisingly well! Anyone who had already groomed their horse was asked to help reinforce the barrier or act as a 'gatekeeper'. Once everyone had been assigned a horse, the rest of the herd was released back into the paddock – for the time being. The riders were split into two groups; those who were to ride ahead of the herd followed Laurus along the path for a while. The second group of riders waited behind the paddock gate to join the free-roaming herd from behind. Now the guides, Maria and Ida, on horseback, drove the herd across the paddock towards the gate that had already been opened, and the front group set off to guide the riderless horses in the right direction. It was an exciting moment and my first ride with a free-roaming herd. As part of the front group, I trotted briskly ahead of the herd, but otherwise there wasn't much to notice about the herd; almost all of them walked obediently in single file and rarely strayed from their positions. The ground was now becoming increasingly dark and stony, and we kept crossing riverbeds, from which the horses liked to drink. Water comes from above – and from below too



At lunchtime we reached a large paddock, into which we all rode, so that the herd followed suit. We unsaddled all the horses and treated them – and ourselves – to a break. These horses displayed excellent herd behaviour; I never once felt uncomfortable amongst this large number of unfamiliar horses. There was the occasional whinny, but I didn't observe any kicking, biting or chasing; the hierarchy was very stable. After the lunch break, everyone was assigned a new horse and the morning's routine was repeated. The terrain was now becoming increasingly hilly; every now and then we came across tourists driving huge off-road vehicles past us – the only means of transport that can still be used out here, apart from the horses. In the afternoon, we had another picnic. For this, we used a spacious paddock for the horses, into which the herd also walked without hesitation.



Even the stragglers were herded into the paddock.

We were again allocated new horses for the third stage of the day, making a total of three different horses per day – brilliant! As we continued, the hills gave way to steep rock faces, and we reached the foothills of a gorge. The rocks were covered in green vegetation, a stark contrast to the black ground. On the higher levels, the rocks were shrouded in mist, giving the landscape a very mystical feel. This was only heightened by Laurus's stories about the elves who live here. Our destination for the day was a large paddock in the middle of the gorge, through which a river flowed, set against a steep rock face. There were no more pastures here, so we worked together to spread a bale of silage on the ground – enough feed for everyone.



A mystical night's rest for the horses

After we'd looked after the horses, we set off for a nearby campsite. There we came across the odd hiker, but otherwise it was completely peaceful – absolutely brilliant! We reached the hut, which consisted of an open-plan room with an adjoining kitchen and a side room where the guides were staying. In the middle of the room stood a long row of tables with benches, whilst along the side walls were rows of bunk beds. Fortunately, my initial fear that one of the male riders might snore proved unfounded. There was also a stove in the corner, so it didn't take long for the hut to become cosily warm. Here too, Alex surprised us once again with delicious, fresh food, consisting of oven-roasted vegetables, fresh salmon and much more. Some of us tried the shower, which felt a mere eight degrees 'warm', whilst others preferred to give it a miss.

Day 5:

After a surprisingly peaceful night, I woke up feeling refreshed, the aroma of coffee filling the air. The tireless and ever-attentive Alex was already busy in the kitchen, preparing another wonderful breakfast for us. Refreshed, we made our way back to the horses, where the usual round-up procedure began. First, we set off without the herd to ride further into the breathtaking gorge at a leisurely pace. As the terrain became increasingly rough, we dismounted and were able to continue exploring the gorge on foot in small groups, whilst the others held the horses.



The breathtaking Thórsmörk gorge.

After exploring the gorge, we rode on together to the paddock from the previous day. Maria and Ida had already herded the herd there, so we let our horses rejoin the others – all but one. For safety reasons, the ‘back-up’ horse had to be kept separate from the others for a short while, so that a mount would still be available should the herd break through the fence and try to make a run for it. After a snack, the round-up began again. My saddle had fitted each of the different horses well, as none had a pronounced withers and their shoulders, bodies and backs were also quite similar. None of the horses showed any signs of saddle pressure or discomfort. Every now and then, one of the horses would lose a shoe, but this was immediately replaced on the spot by the guides. After the break, our ride continued at a brisk pace with the herd, and in the afternoon we reached the same paddock again that we’d used for our lunch break on the way there. We enjoyed the improved weather and mostly took off our rainwear.



River crossing with the free-roaming herd

Today's ride ended at the same pasture as on the first day of riding, and we also spent the night in the same hut. Before dinner, however, we were taken by car to a waterfall to have a look around. At dinner, everyone was allowed to choose three of their favourite horses for the final stage the following day, and we rounded off the evening together with beer and wine.

Day 6:

This day also began with the usual fabulous breakfast, followed by the walk to the pasture. We set off on today's ride without the herd once again, so as to catch up with them behind the bridge from Day One. Maria and Ida led the herd onto the bridge, whilst the riders had already regrouped behind it into two groups. I was now allowed to ride behind the herd for a change and was therefore tasked with blocking the path with my group, so that the herd would have to turn off to catch up with the front group. The plan was successful and the herd didn't simply race straight home along the shortest route. The landscape was now turning greener again; we rode along a different path to the one on Day One, dotted with lots of purple lupins. At lunchtime, we reached a dip by the side of the path that was ideal for herding the herd into a corral. We swapped horses one last time, and everyone was now given one of their preferred horses. The remaining horses were collected by the trailers, and we were served our lunch, which we had to share with the horses in hand – and a few mosquitoes. It was a really warm and completely dry day – the perfect opportunity to test out our mosquito nets. Refreshed and already feeling a touch wistful, we set off on our final stage of the ride. A quick photo stop at a waterfall in the sunshine was even more enjoyable in such lovely weather.



Final stop with a stunning backdrop in glorious weather

By the afternoon, we reached the starting point of our tour again, where we were picked up by the trailers. I had a brilliant time with the international group, made up of Swedes, Americans and Germans. The riding levels varied considerably, but this tour is certainly manageable even for less experienced riders. Riding is very pleasant on the Icelandic horses, which love to walk. Once we'd reached the riding centre again, we released our horses from the trailers back into the large paddock and were served pizza rolls in the dining room to round off the day.

We were then taken back to Reykjavik by coach, where it was finally time to say goodbye. I'm already looking forward to my next visit to the Icelanders.

Isabella Heider

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