

## Landmannalaugar – pure adventure and variety

No sooner have I mounted up than my Isi is already whirling exuberantly round the small riding arena, where we're doing a few practice laps to start with. It's unbelievable – the horses live out in the herd all the time and, for heaven's sake, get more than enough exercise. But my young, late-maturing gelding is bursting with energy. At last we're off! The herd, which had been dozing in the paddock outside, is let loose, and so we set off at a brisk tölt. A group of riders leads the herd, whilst the rest of us ride behind, making sure no horse turns back. In fact, on the first day there are two horses who would clearly have preferred to stay at home...

After his initial excitement, my gelding turns out to be a well-trained riding horse with a lovely tölt. However, no sooner have you got used to one horse than it's time to change saddles and move on to the next one. At a steep rock face, the horses are herded into a paddock and everyone is assigned a new one. So we change horses up to four times a day to ensure they always get a short break. In the afternoon, I ride a small, round mare that looks like an oversized Shetland pony. No more than 1.30 m tall and about the same width, she looks rather comical. But this very comfortable 'pug pony' turns out to be one of the liveliest horses in the herd, and before we know it, the three of us are suddenly riding at the front and our horses are having a little race – something we weren't at all prepared for. Unfortunately, nobody has a camera to hand, because the sight of my plump little pony alongside the tall, slender black horse, which measures about 1.55 m, must surely have been very amusing. After about 200 m of galloping – which is rather amusing on a steady-going Isi when you're used to faster horses – we finally agree on a manoeuvre and turn left at the same time. After that, everything's fine again and we ride leisurely back to the others. On the evening of the first day's ride, we leave our boisterous, colourful herd in a huge pasture in the valley and head back to the riding centre, where we first enjoy a dip in the jacuzzi.



In the morning, we continue across the vast fields and through the river valley, with views of the mountains surrounding the Thorsmörk Nature Reserve. Soon we spot the first glaciers: the Eyafjallajökull, made famous by the 2010 volcanic eruption, and the larger Myrdalsjökull. The foothills of the Thorsmörk area are moss-covered and rugged. At a steep rock face, we let the horses graze freely and enjoy a picnic in the sunshine. After passing through a lush, extremely idyllic river valley, we gradually make our way up into the mountains. We follow a narrow path with magnificent views to the hut in Emstrur. High above a wide river and a mighty rock face, the secluded hut sits in a stunning vantage point overlooking the impressive Myrdals Glacier. The horses are already familiar with this spot and roll about happily in the lush grass. Before they are put into the paddock, they are allowed to graze freely here for a while longer. After a long day's ride, we enjoy our delicious evening meal. The hut is very basic, with no shower. But never mind – the view more than makes up for it, and when the morning sun shines through the windows, we ride on in high spirits.

Almost immediately, the landscape changes: fine black lava sand provides the perfect ground. All around, the mountains glow green with moss. By a wild mountain river, little pink flowers bloom in stark contrast amidst the black sand. Then the weather suddenly takes a turn, and just as we reach the 30-kilometre-long black sand desert – which I'd been really looking forward to – the rain gradually turns to sleet and it gets really cold. I'm glad to be sitting on the giant black horse now, as he trots along all by himself and is incredibly comfortable, so I don't have to concentrate on the aids as well. We also come across many hikers in the sand desert, which is famous far and wide. Without a hint of envy, we watch as they wade through the rivers without trousers whilst we trot past – at just above 0 degrees!! Loaded down with heavy-looking rucksacks, the whole endeavour looks absolutely mad to us riders. With our hands half-frozen, we reach our picnic spot; due to the weather, the picnic is particularly short this time. The owner of the riding centre, who transports our luggage and delivers the picnics, conjures up a pair of woollen gloves for me, so that I can get back on my horse once I've thawed out a bit. Behind the next hill, everything is calm again; the hail has stopped and it's even becoming quite pleasant. We ride through a black-and-green landscape, the sort we'll encounter even more often in the highlands. In the evening, we head steeply downhill to the next hut. This time it has a shower, but in return a large dormitory, and late in the evening a group of walkers stumbles in – it's a good thing you don't have a light sleep...

The next day, we ride uphill again through a moss-covered, hilly river valley. Here, it's not hard for us to believe in trolls and elves, as the many grey rock formations scattered everywhere would certainly make an ideal home. Let's just hope we don't ride right over them, as that could lead to some nasty revenge! Soon we're heading up a black sandy track and enjoying a magnificent view over the vast, surreal landscape. For a change, we ride at a walk here, so we can really take in the beautiful panorama to our heart's content. Most of the time, however, the herd sets such a pace that the riders have their work cut out keeping up with the horses. The 'old hands' in particular would love to take the lead themselves, rather than staying behind the front riders. On the other side of the mountain, we're now heading back down into the valley – at breakneck speed, of course, because when the herd gallops downhill, you simply have to keep up. Naturally, the Icelandic horses

are incredibly sure-footed, and we all quickly develop a blind trust in these charming little horses. We now ride through another river; on the other side, the path leads through a narrow crevice into a green valley. The horses know their way round and, one by one, they fall into line. Later, out on the plain, we gradually leave the black-and-green mountains behind us and catch sight of the first red-coloured rock faces, so typical of the Landmannalaugar area. Riding over a small pass, we pass through colourful mountains and cross red-tinged streams. On the other side, the heart of Landmannalaugar finally awaits us: Picturesque ochre-coloured to red rock faces rise up on either side from the reddish-yellow plain. Another river crossing awaits us here, and this time we're wading right into the deep water. How glad I am that I've got my rubber riding boots on; what's more, I'm sitting on one of the largest horses, so I make it across dry and without any trouble. My friends, on the other hand, are at a double disadvantage in the white water with their ankle boots and small horses, but the horses bravely and without hesitation battle their way through the strong current, which reaches right up to their chests. Anyone with wet feet, however, can warm up in the hot springs straight after feeding the horses. Open-air wellness with panoramic views!

After our soak, we take a minibus to the Landmannahellir huts, just under half an hour away. Here we learn how to accommodate 11 people in 20 square metres – and still manage to cook and eat. On the second night, there are even three more people, as the men's hut was accidentally double-booked by the management... After long days spent on the go for around 7 hours in all weathers, the main thing is that it's warm and cosy and there's good food to eat. And there always is! And when there's even a coin-operated shower available – albeit 500 metres away – there's really nothing else needed to make us riders happy.

The next morning, we have time once again for the hot springs and to explore Landmannalaugar. In the afternoon, we simply ride over to our accommodation at Landmannahellir. It's a lovely ride through green, red, yellow and black mountains, past a large, picturesque mountain lake. Before that, we go for a walk of about an hour with stunning views. A narrow path leads through a colourful gorge into the mountains near the hot springs. At the top, we pass a steaming spring rising from the foot of a red rock. Afterwards, we enjoy our packed lunch and warm up in the small mobile café on site. As wild camping is prohibited in the nature reserve, there is a large tent camp in Landmannalaugar for all hikers. At least 50 tents are pitched close together on the stony ground; the whole scene looks rather uninviting and resembles a refugee camp. Which is perhaps not such a bad comparison after all, as in a sense it is mainly 'refugees' from (all too) civilised Western Europe who are seeking refuge here in the wild, unspoilt nature. We meet a few of these 'refugees' in the café, a historic bus. Enviously, they ask us all about our horse-riding tour. Do you have to know how to ride? Where can you sign up? After days of hiking through the rugged wilderness, wading across rivers with bare legs and sleeping in tents in the cold, not all the hikers seem quite so enthusiastic anymore. This makes us appreciate our fortunate situation even more. Carefree, we enjoy the exhilarating natural surroundings and let the Isis carry us up and down through the mountains all day long. This naturally means we make much faster

than on foot and we certainly see twice as much of the landscape. Although the odd photo taken by our fellow riders reveals some unexpected surprises: 'What? Where was that hut? Were we there?' Because some things do fly past you quite quickly when you're travelling with such a lively herd of Isis...

But our Icelandic adventure is incredibly good fun. And yes, you do need to know how to ride!!! Unfortunately, not all of our fellow riders are quite so steady in the saddle, and the next morning one of them loses her stirrups at a brisk pace and, as a result, her balance. Whilst our guide Sophia carries on with the herd, someone jumps off their horse and catches the runaway mare. The rider who fell gets back on, but in the meantime the herd keeps moving further away. The riders at the front have held back in shock, instead of slowing the herd down. As many riders as possible are now needed to head back to the front and round up the herd. The three of us approach the herd, but the horses are setting such a fast pace that it takes quite a long time before we actually catch up with them; eventually, however, I gallop round them and join Sophia. It will take quite a while yet, though, before we can slow them down, as there is simply far too little grass. After a very windy, barren pass, we ride down through a patch of remaining snow; as we pass by, I also notice steaming springs. And then, at last: a lush green meadow in the valley! And now we manage to stop our herd too. Soon afterwards, the support vehicle arrives and we erect a fence around the horses. Now we just have to wait for our fellow riders to arrive one by one. A few were close behind the herd, but it will take at least another half an hour for the last ones to arrive.



Anyone who isn't 100 per cent confident on rough terrain isn't really cut out for this ride. If all the riders had been truly confident in the saddle and fit, something like this could easily have been avoided. At this point, two riders who weren't quite fit enough dropped out and got on the

We've overtaken the support vehicle. At last, we're back on track. Shortly afterwards, however, as we ride along a ridge, we're buffeted by such a fierce wind that I feel as though I'm about to be blown off my horse at any moment. So I lean against its neck and just let it carry me along. The view would be magnificent once again, but unfortunately you can't really enjoy it in this wind. Once we're over the hill, however, the ordeal is over and we ride cheerfully along a magnificent black sand track to a lake, where we stop for a picnic sheltered by the rocks. Next, mysterious black gorges await us, through which small streams flow. And then, quite unexpectedly behind a large rock, an impressive waterfall. We'd only just passed the low, unassuming river upstream and are now utterly amazed by the hidden, roaring waterfall, which shortly afterwards plunges some 20 metres into a deep gorge. Iceland's natural landscape is truly full of secrets and surprises! The scenery is constantly changing. One moment you're riding through a lush valley, and the next, a barren desert landscape might lie beyond the next hill. The weather is just as varied. That said, apart from the sleet shower on the second day of riding, we've been very lucky and are often treated to sunshine.



Our destination today is once again the hut in Emstrur, and the final stretch there leads steadily uphill along perfect black sand tracks, as if made for riding. All around, the mountains glow once more in an unreal, vivid green from the moss that has spread across the lava sand. A bizarre, otherworldly landscape with many beautiful views! Finally, we release the horses back onto the green meadows with their picturesque old shepherds' huts, which are covered with traditional thatched roofs and serve as our tack room. We settle back into the Emstrur hut and enjoy the view of the glacier and the mountains – a magnificent spot!

Joining us in the afternoon are the cheerful stable owner and his friend, a retired vicar of about 70 years of age. Naturally, everyone here can ride, and the vicar bred horses himself for many years. We spend a cosy evening in the hut and a restful night. I'm once again struck by the unpretentious nature of the Icelanders: the two men, of course, sleep in the hut too, on mattresses on the floor next to the entrance. Photo

The next morning, in glorious sunshine, we set off on our final ride, which takes us back to the riding centre at the foot of Eyjafjalla. That means another good 60 km or so. We ride through the lovely green hills, with magnificent views of the glacial landscape, back down into the valley. Along the way, we startle the odd woolly Icelandic sheep, which roam freely across the heathland. They are very amusing animals, travelling in small groups of two to four sheep. Sometimes we wouldn't even spot them, but they always give themselves away by their bleating, before dashing off astonishingly quickly on their short legs. Riding alongside a wide stream, we make our way across the plain at the foot of the mountains. In the distance, the Westman Islands are already looming. We'd actually been told we'd have to rein the horses in today, as they'd be particularly fast on the way home. In the end, the opposite is true: as it's getting warmer and warmer – by the afternoon it's T-shirt weather! – the Isis are becoming increasingly laid-back.

Clearly, temperatures of over 20 degrees in the blazing sun are simply too much for them. Consequently, the journey home takes us a long time. Even my little speedster from the first day ends up 'crawling' home at a walk.

It's hard to imagine that a Viking horse like this would feel at home in the warm South German summer, when even 22 degrees clearly exceeds their comfort temperature. So we now take our time to enjoy the view of the Seljalandsfoss waterfall, which plunges steeply down from the cliffs. The Icelandic cows (which, incidentally, are just as colourful as the horses – there are even brindled ones) are full of energy today and gallop playfully alongside us as we reach the pastures in the valley once more. On the final stretch along the ring road, there are many green meadows fenced off for cattle and horses. A sandy bridle path runs alongside the road, which the horses more or less follow. Every now and then they also run on the road, which apparently makes for a great tölt track. They aren't bothered by the cars at all and are simply slowed down. Finally, we reach the riding centre, where we are already being awaited by some of our fellow riders who had dismounted earlier due to fatigue. It's not just the horses who are exhausted from the long ride in the sun, so we first enjoy a cold beer and then the long-awaited shower. Afterwards, the host treats us to a delicious Icelandic barbecue with grilled lamb and beef. But the vegetarian option, with grilled vegetables and vegetable patties, tastes brilliant too. A brilliant end to our Icelandic adventure ride. Up and down at a brisk pace with the whole herd, covering well over 60 km a day at times and spending up to 9 hours on the go – that's a real challenge for experienced, fit riders! And I'm sure this won't be my last riding tour of Iceland, because riding in Iceland is highly addictive! The terrain, the horses, and the friendly Icelandic way of life all combine to make the country a unique rider's paradise. As the landscape is as beautiful as it is varied, it certainly never gets boring, and so, after Kjölur and Landmannalaugar, Snaefellsnes is next on the itinerary... Photo

Jessica Kiefer, August 2014

Link to the programme: <http://www.equitour.com/lma009.htm>