

Iceland – Horse riding and relaxation 22–28 August

The plane began its approach to landing and the first thing I saw of Iceland was a view of the rugged Westfjords. The weather was marvellous. Bright sunshine accompanied my journey on the airport bus to Reykjavik. The glorious weather made the first lava fields and mountains I caught sight of shine even more vividly with their green moss and lichen. If I were to describe Iceland in colours, it would be a rich, bright moss green, a deep sky blue and the black of the lava sand. I spent the first two days getting to know Iceland before setting off into the wilderness on the backs of Icelandic horses. Reykjavik is a very charming city, considering it's the capital of a country. There are lots of small, quirky shops, and in almost all of them you can buy something made from lava rock or sheep's wool. The white Hallgrimskirkja church is incredibly moving, and you get a fantastic view from the top of the tower. As well as the famous Blue Lagoon, there are plenty of lovely thermal baths in Iceland where you can warm up nicely. On the second day, I went on a bus tour of the 'Golden Highlights': Thingvellir, the point where the rift between the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates is most pronounced; Gullfoss, an imposing waterfall; and an area with many geysers, which all shoot a jet of water at 80–100°C into the air every 3–4 minutes.



After two days of exploring, my long-awaited horse-riding holiday in Iceland began. The shuttle service picked me up from the hostel early in the morning and we drove, along with a few other guests, to the farm. Around 300 Icelandic horses were waiting for the guests, and you almost get a sugar rush from seeing so many adorable horses, some of which were looking on curiously. First of all, I checked into my room and enquired about the hot pot – a sort of hot pool – as well as mealtimes and activities. Everyone working at the hotel and stables is incredibly attentive, very friendly and helpful. They all spoke excellent English, and some even spoke German, so you immediately felt at home. There were also plenty of staff of German origin who were quick to help anyone

if you'd run out of ideas with your Latin or English. That very afternoon, I went straight out on a short ride. It was a relatively slow ride of about two hours, but it was still great fun, as the tölt – which I'd never ridden before in my life – was a completely new riding experience for me. In the evening, I got to know my riding group and our guide Lydia over a cosy evening buffet with some truly delicious food. Lydia explained the plan for the next day to us, and after dinner we all settled down in our rooms, full of anticipation for the day ahead.

The first morning began. After a delicious breakfast of sweet oranges and fresh bread rolls, we headed to the stables, where the horses were already snorting as they waited for their riders. Today, Lydia and Marianne were accompanying us. We groomed the horses, who were then loaded onto the trailer to take us to our first starting point: a valley with views of the Hekla volcano and some very beautiful sandy tracks. We set off near a plateau with steep, red rock faces and a fantastic riding trail. Within just a few minutes, we were already riding in tölt, a pace we maintained for almost the whole day. The horses were full of energy and I was riding a small, well-trained gelding who was quite lively and very sensitive. At the start, I didn't really know exactly what the tölt was supposed to feel like and found it a bit uncomfortable at times – the reason being that I couldn't ride the gait properly yet. But that was soon to change. During the rides, you can swap horses at every break – or rather, the horses are swapped so that everyone gets to ride as many horses as possible. Unusual, but very interesting from a riding perspective.

We spent our lunch break at an ancient Viking relic – a large house that was later buried under the ash from a volcanic eruption. The horses were also allowed to relax. What followed after the Viking house, however, remains one of my absolute highlights to this day. After a short walk, following our guide, we arrived at an indescribably beautiful spot – a double waterfall that plunged suddenly into a turquoise-blue lake right in the middle of the canyon below us. It was such a beautiful sight that I've deliberately chosen not to post a photo of it here, as you simply have to experience it for yourself – a mere photo wouldn't do it justice. After our lunch break, the horses were saddled up again. Some of us found it easier to trot from the start than others. I was one of those who needed a bit of help with it. That's why, after the break, I was allowed to ride my 'sofa horse' Styrtinir, a natural trotter.

He was the best riding instructor I've ever had, because after just a few hours I could clearly tell the difference between a clean tölt and one that wasn't. That's why I particularly enjoyed the afternoon so much, and the canter at the end of the ride across a soft mossy field was like flying, as the moss swallowed up almost every sound of the hooves, so that all you could hear was the wind, the rustling of the mane and the soft jingle of the stirrups. My riding group got on really well together – everyone enjoyed the brisk pace. The day's ride ended with a delicious picnic at a lovely spot by a large waterfall. Back at the hotel, we were able to round off the day in a relaxed atmosphere over dinner and wine.

The second day took us through the valley of the Hekla volcano. Today I rode Vidir, who needed a bit of encouragement to break into a tölt. Thanks to yesterday afternoon, I now knew what to do: take up the reins and engage his hindquarters. Vidir was my second favourite horse of the riding trip, as he was very lively and very cute. He always tried his very best to do everything well and had a very beautiful,

wonderfully comfortable tölt. After bends or on uneven ground, he would often slip back into a mixed gait, but I didn't mind that – it was briefly uncomfortable, but you always had something to do. The black horse was like a small, black coffee in the morning – it really perks you up and keeps you alert. In the Hekla valley, you set off right by the 'three horns' – Thrihyrningur, a striking mountain – beside which a crystal-clear river winds its way through a deep, canyon-like riverbed. Along the way, we came across some sheep, which were roaming freely and eyeing us up from a safe distance. We spent our lunch break by a small cave right by the river, where the horses found plenty of lush grass to graze on. My highlight of the day was the view of the snow-capped Hekla and the very green landscape. We often rode off the beaten track along narrow, wild paths straight through the green moss-covered fields. Just before we reached the trailer, we were caught in a very heavy downpour, but thanks to the good-quality rainwear we'd strapped to our saddles from the start, we stayed mostly dry.



The third day promised to be beautiful. We set off from the black lava beach, and today the view was breathtaking: you could see a long way out across the sea to the other shore, with the three most striking snow-capped mountains emerging from behind the water, including the Hekla volcano and Eyjafjallajökull. Despite riding on the beach, the horses were very relaxed, and the sand wasn't too deep in most places, so we were able to enjoy some lovely, long gallops. After the beach, the ride took us through the long, winding river delta back towards the farm. It was quite chilly that day and the horses were lively. Hundreds of migratory birds had gathered in the river delta, preparing to set off from here to their next stopover. On the way, we also came across some horses living almost in the wild, with foals, on vast pastures where I could make out no boundaries apart from two small fences

for hours on end. Some horses were even out and about on peninsulas deep within the river delta, which also formed part of the vast pastures. A good half an hour before we reached the farm, the sky cleared once more and we enjoyed a relaxed tölt in the sunshine. As we'd ridden directly from the starting point to the hotel today, we were back at the hotel relatively early. I took the opportunity to enjoy a long, relaxing soak in the hot tub with a view of the pastures, where a few horses were grazing peacefully.

On the final day of riding, the horses and we made our way to Reykjavik. Reykjavik has a large riding community, and the large stables – which are almost like small villages in their own right – are linked by an extensive network of bridleways, which are even lit up during the winter months. We set off from the first stable, and the bridleways took us past lakes, woods and stables. There were also a few Icelanders out and about, pursuing their hobbies such as fishing or cycling. It was an interesting experience to ride through such an urban yet perfect riding area, where you could quickly find yourself surrounded by greenery. No sooner had we rounded the corner of the last stable than we found ourselves facing either a lake or a woodland. We spent our lunch break on a lovely hilltop, from which we could see a large lake and the outskirts of Reykjavik. My highlight was a lava formation that had cracked the basalt like a road surface. Beneath it flowed red earth, which had pushed the basalt upwards. Today, to round things off, I rode my 'sofa horse' again, and so the final, fast tölt on the large oval track was great fun. All the horses gave their all once more and were keen to be right at the front of the pack on the racecourse.

I would have loved to stay for many more days, but unfortunately that afternoon it was time to say goodbye to my lovely riding group, our guide and the horses. I'll always look back on this ride with fond memories, not only because of the spectacular scenery, but also because of the friendly and open-minded nature of the farm staff, the comfortable riders' hotel, and the exceptionally well-organised tours led by our guides, who always looked after us and the horses, ensuring everyone had a great time. And, of course, let's not forget the Icelandic horses, who showed such an incredibly wonderful temperament here – friendly, eager to walk and with strong nerves. Not all of them were as people-oriented as we're often used to seeing here, but they were very good-natured and always happy to be stroked.

Link to the 'Exclusive Southern Iceland' programme:
<http://www.reiterreisen.com/lux007.htm>