

Iceland – a truly unique experience of nature!

At last we're off – weeks of planning and preparation have kept our anticipation building steadily. The flight takes us safely to Keflavik, where all international flights arrive. Before we set off on our horse-riding tour in a week's time, we've planned a bespoke self-drive tour with my girlfriend. We quickly pick up the car and stow our luggage, and before we know it we're immersed in this extraordinary and fascinating natural landscape. Glaciers, volcanoes and their craters, the sea, geysers, countless waterfalls and an incredible sense of vastness await us on this island of contrasts. The journey to Reykjavik takes about 45 minutes and is straightforward, even on the Flybus.

We've come through our first night in Reykjavik just fine, and after breakfast we set off on a short tour of the city. This northern capital is unique and offers a wealth of sights, exhibitions and day-trip options. Its most famous landmark is undoubtedly Hallgrímskirkja, with the Leifur Eiríksson monument in the foreground.



In eight days, we'll be driving round Iceland on the well-maintained Ring Road: Reykjavik, the Golden Circle with Þingvellir, geysers and the Gullfoss waterfall, past the Vatnajökull glacier with its fascinating glacial lakes, and on to the East Fjords. The landscape is constantly changing (and the weather can change just as quickly). Over a hilltop, and suddenly everything looks different again! The route takes us north into the Mývatn area: a stunning natural landscape featuring Iceland's fourth-largest lake, lava formations, ancient volcanic craters and steaming sulphur springs, all the way to Húsavík. This small harbour town is the perfect place to go on a whale-watching tour in true style – on a boat. And what a stroke of luck – right at the start, we spot one of the rarest animals: a blue whale! Later, white-beaked dolphins ride our bow wave and several humpback whales greet us along the way. What an experience!

We head back to Reykjavik via Akureyri and the Snæfellsnes Peninsula to the west. My girlfriend

is reluctant to leave the island, whilst I am picked up by a member of staff from the riding centre

. Now we're finally setting off on the highlands tour across Sprengisandur – the riding tour with the longest stages.

I get to know most of the group straight away on the coach, and even the journey – which takes about an hour – is great fun. We settle into our rooms before heading off for dinner and the subsequent briefing about the tour. A brief round of introductions, where everyone shares their riding experience, helps us get to know our fellow riders for the next eight days. It's a very international mix, with a French mum and her two daughters, two Danes, an English couple, two sisters from Norway, two Swedish women, a German woman, an Austrian woman living in Switzerland, and me. We're accompanied by Nonni, one of the owners, and his wife. Anna, a member of staff, helps look after the horses; a friend of the family joins us with seven horses, along with another couple who are friends of the family. He drives the luggage and catering van, and she conjures up incredible meals for us – worthy of a four-star hotel!

We chat excitedly late into the night before we finally set off the next day. As the domestic flight taking us north doesn't leave until around midday, we have time for a hearty Icelandic breakfast (toast, jams, coffee, fruit, etc.).

On the way to the domestic airport in the centre of Reykjavik, we're handed brand-new orange weather overalls, designed to protect us from rain and the cold if needed. These are fastened behind the saddle. The tour takes place only twice a year: the first one goes from the base to the north with a return flight, whereas we're flying north and riding back. After 40 minutes, we reach Akureyri and are served a hot lunch right at the airport (the smallest I've ever seen). This is followed by a two-hour minibus transfer deep into the interior, where there's no sign of civilisation. There, 72 Icelandic horses await us, having had several days to regain their strength since the ride north. Nonni selects only the toughest and strongest horses for this tour.

Today's riding stage takes us across uneven terrain and, at around 40 km, is one of the shorter ones, but it features the steepest sections. At around 4.00 pm, we finally set off. The principle is that each rider changes horses up to five times a day; the lead riders stay at the front, set the direction and do not let the herd pass them. The 'back riders' follow at a slight distance behind the last of the 54 free-roaming *Isis* horses. A short break is taken roughly every hour, during which the horses are allowed to graze and the riders stretch their legs briefly. Gradually, the horses are swapped. For the slightly longer lunch break, the horses are fenced in: some of the riders act as posts and hold the rope to form the enclosure.

At a brisk tölt, we reach our accommodation in the heart of the countryside shortly before midnight. The horses are looked after, delicious hot soup is served, and I can't resist jumping into the hot tub. Warm water with a view of the herd grazing peacefully – what an idyll!

Today's ride takes us about 50 km across the highland tracks. Paths that are not used by any vehicles serve as our riding trails. The horses are fantastic: sure-footed, reliable and, in some cases, as comfortable as a sofa. Everyone quickly finds their favourite horse. There are around 78,000 purebred horses in Iceland, in all colours and sizes, and of course equipped with one or two extra gaits: the tölt and, in some cases, the pass. We spend almost the entire tour trotting briskly along, allowing us to experience the landscape at close quarters – far away from noise and hustle and bustle.

In the sunshine, after 8 hours, we reach the huts near the river. The horses graze peacefully against an idyllic mountain backdrop and we are served a multi-course meal.



We eat together at a long table and share stories of the day's adventures. Thanks to everyone's helpfulness and friendliness, our group is increasingly coming together as a well-functioning team – a process to which our evening of singing together also contributes significantly. We spend so many fun-filled hours singing in all sorts of languages and voices.

Thursday brings us one of the longest riding stages, covering a good 60 km and taking around 10 hours. For many of us, the muscle ache is easing, so we set off early on our day's adventure. Today the weather is a little more changeable, but we've got our waterproofs, so nobody needs to feel the cold at this altitude. Soon, however, the sun's rays reappear, bathing the landscape in soft light. Over hill and dale, across the high plateau and past a lake, the path leads us to a beautiful wooden house. We have the place entirely to ourselves and, after yet another fantastic evening meal – thank you, Margret – we round off the evening by the fireside.

A 50 km, 8½-hour ride takes us from initially sandy, greyish-looking terrain, across several rivers, into a valley situated by a river with a lake and green pastures. The car can also come round here for our lunch break, so we enjoy hot tea, water, coffee, sandwiches, biscuits and chocolate, served straight to us. And out in the great outdoors after a ride like that, everything tastes twice as good!

Today I was riding one of my absolute favourites – it was simply marvellous. Riding in tölt, I felt as though I were sitting in my favourite armchair and was able to soak up the natural surroundings even more intensely.

We ride from the plateau into greener pastures. We break into a walk for a few stretches due to the occasionally stony sections. For the final part of the roughly 42 km, we follow a river and turn onto a wider track leading to a hut with a view of the Hekla volcano.



The horses, too, know full well that they are approaching the lush green pastures and set a brisk pace. After 7½ hours, they are well and truly released into the freedom of a vast pasture. A snack of pancakes with various fillings, accompanied by coffee and hot chocolate, is the icing on the cake for the riders. We eat on the terrace in the sunshine – a real treat for everyone! We spend our final evening in this beautiful cabin with a terrace overlooking lush greenery and the volcano. Once again, we're treated to a culinary feast in the evening – a minor miracle given the tiny kitchens in the cabins (it will remain a mystery to me how such a wide variety of delicious dishes can be conjured up with so few ingredients and so little space). One last sing-along and chat together, and sadly this day is already over. But the preview of tomorrow's stage promises further highlights.

One of them is a real Icelandic forest! But the day begins with a ride through green plains to a beautiful waterfall, where we take our first break. Then comes the aforementioned Icelandic forest. It's worth noting that on this island you usually find only scattered trees; there are hardly any impressive forests here. But this one is among Iceland's largest and features a single path running straight through the middle of the trees. The lead riders set off at a brisk tölt, with the rear riders following the herd. This is necessary to ensure the free-roaming horses don't disappear between the trees. Moreover, an encounter with oncoming animals would be undesirable. But everything goes smoothly, as it has so far, and we reach a slight rise for our midday break. One last bite to eat before we cross a river and head out onto a vast grassy plain. The horses are heading home and setting a very fast pace. As a farewell, I sit in the saddle of my undisputed favourite and enjoy the 'breeze' blowing in my face. All too soon we reach our destination for the day, having covered a distance of a good 40 km in 4½ hours.

It now seems incredibly short to me. The horses are allowed to frolic in the vast pastures and recover from the trek – a bit like a holiday, really. We're served another delicious afternoon snack before heading back to the base in the south by minibus. After a coffee break, we're taken to Reykjavik. Most of the group members stay overnight there or linger a little longer in the capital. After a lovely shower, the group meets up one last time at a restaurant in Reykjavík city centre. Time flies by far too quickly and I'm taken to the BSI, where I catch the Flybus to Keflavik Airport. I feel really wistful as I sit on the bus and watch this beautiful island pass by for the last time. My night flight leaves a few hours later, and then it's time to say goodbye. Bye bye, Iceland: I'll definitely be back!

Julia Wies, link to the trip: www.reiterreisen.com/spr008.htm

