

Touring and Tölting in Iceland

Story and photographs by Beth Shepard



Like so many young girls, horseback riding at overnight camp was the highlight of my summer, until I hit puberty and going to camp was no longer cool; but my passion for riding remained intact. Opportunities became limited to family vacations where I'd sneak away to ride the sand dunes of Cape Cod, on empty beaches in Costa Rica, in the jungle of central Belize, and "tölt" the hills of Vermont on an Icelandic horse.

Six years ago, at the Vermont Icelandic Horse Farm in Waitsfield, VT – <http://www.icelandichorses.com/>, I first "rode the tölt", the special four-beat gait of the Icelandic horse that is smooth and comfortable for the rider. It was a life-changing event. I couldn't get that experience out of my head and found myself researching the history of the Icelandic horse and obsessing about how to find more Icelandics to ride. Four years ago, at age 55, I bought my first horse; a 14 year old Icelandic mare named Gefjun, the Nordic fertility goddess, and oh is she a goddess! Gefjun boards at Dry Brook Stables – <http://www.drybrookstables.com> in Bernardston, MA, just six miles from home where I ride as often as possible.

Riding has become an integral part of my life and as I learned more about Icelandics, their isolated history (since the year 1100, horses that leave Iceland can never return and no other horse can enter, making Icelandics one of the purest breeds in the world), the challenge to preserve the breed, and the important role that horses play in the culture, I found that going to Iceland was the only way to get it "straight from the horse's mouth".

And so, this is where the story begins, on a non-stop flight from Boston to Reykjavik to attend a week long horseback riding clinic with America2Iceland – <http://www.america2iceland.com/>, a group devoted to enriching equine education and experience run by Rebecca Bing and master Icelandic horse trainer, Gudmar Petursson – <http://www.Gudmar.com>.

Arriving in Iceland at Keflavik International Airport at midnight in June is surreal – the midnight sun is strong and it is light as day. Our trip was based at the magnificent horse farm and guesthouse Hestheimar on the south coast, about an hour east of Reykjavik, the capital city. Hestheimar – <http://www.hestheimar.is> is a bit of heaven on earth for so many reasons; the herd of 140 horses with their luxurious manes and tails flying in the wind, the impeccable hospitality

and home-cooked cuisine by chef Hallur, the caring and lovely innkeepers, Lea Helga, her husband Marteinn and their outstanding staff, not to mention the surrounding countryside with ravines and hillocks, roaring rivers, volcanoes and glaciers off in the distance. It takes a few days to get used to 24 hour sunlight at 66 degrees North latitude, but there is so much to see and do that by the time you lay your head down each night at 1:00 am or so, sleep comes easily.

Ten women arrived in Iceland, ages 15 to 65, some solo, some with their daughters, others were sisters. They came from all walks of life, a lawyer, a veterinarian, a horse trainer, an artist, and a nurse practitioner, all with a single passion for horses. We fell into a steady routine of class time with Gudmar twice daily, followed by scrumptious home cooked meals. Each class was followed by a trail ride on terrain that seemed impossible to maneuver but it was quickly apparent the horses were expert at treading in just the right spot taking care of their rider with every step. My horse, Glofaxi which means “glowing mane” was sheer delight; surefooted, confident, and basically a tölt machine in the arena and on the trail.

Every evening, after another mouthwatering meal of either cod, salmon, haddock, lamb, or yes, horsemeat (but not the ones we rode during the day!), lots of greenhouse grown vegetables, and desserts to die for, my new friends and I would take long leisurely walks through pastures filled with grazing mares, their spring foals, and proud stallions that watched our every move and protected their herd.



It was interesting to compare how Icelanders treat their horses versus here in the U.S. where ours are often pets. Here we groom, vaccinate, buy individual saddles and tack that has to fit just so, we basically coddle our horses, almost personify them. It's different in Iceland; horses are livestock. They are kept in a herd, much like cattle, treated with tremendous respect, but not coddled. Horse owners and breeders do have their favorites, their favorite mare, stallion, or child's pet, but generally the herd is treated as a unit.

In the tack room at Hestheimar, there are about 75 saddles, bridles, bits and helmets. Pick one, any one, and it will adjust to fit the horse you are riding. A communal bucket filled with brushes, curry combs and hoof picks is on the floor of the barn; again pick and use what you need for any horse. The horses stay out in their pastures all summer (except when they are brought in to be ridden or shod) where they feed on rich grass and fresh water streams. In the poor weather of winter they are brought into barns and fed hay and grain. Icelandics are known as “easy keepers”; they basically need very little daily care. It is true for Icelandics that live in the U.S. as well; they too are easy keepers.



By the way, horsemeat eaten in Iceland comes from separate herds that are specifically kept for that purpose – I did not try it – it was difficult to consider eating creatures that are as beautiful as Icelandics, however I understand and appreciate the fact that nothing is wasted in Iceland and that the tradition of eating horsemeat is ingrained in the culture.



Iceland presents so much that one week is not enough to explore its rugged and extraordinary landscape. One morning we all piled into a van and drove north to view the waterfalls at Gullfoss, a power so stunning and greater than our Niagara Falls. Then on to the town of Geysir (where the word geyser originates) to view boiling hot water spewing 40 feet into the air every 5 minutes like clockwork. Fields of blooming lupine, herds of horses, and glaciers in the distance were eye candy to us all as we snapped picture after picture trying to capture the beauty of this special place.



The week flew by but not without a parting visit to Iceland's natural wonder, Blue Lagoon, conveniently located near the airport. Bathing at the Blue Lagoon is a rite of passage for everyone visiting Iceland. As their website describes - <http://www.bluelagoon.com/>, "The Blue Lagoon geothermal seawater is part of an ecocycle where nature and science work in harmony. The seawater originates 6,562 feet beneath the ground where it is heated by earth's natural forces. At this depth the temperature is 464°F and the pressure is 36 times the pressure on the earth's surface." And it is all that it promises; an experience like no other.



At the airport, I picked up some gravlax, Icelandic chocolates, rhubarb jam, and a few other treasures from the North Atlantic. Recently I read an article by Deena Clark, author of a 1951 article on Iceland for *National Geographic*. Prior to her trip she was told by an Icelandic that she would need to bring "a boundless capacity for astonishment", I couldn't agree more.

Beth Shepard is the principal at Beth Shepard Communications, LLC in Gill, Massachusetts – <http://www.bethshepard.com> - beth@bethshepard.com