

Created by: Debra C. Argen and Edward F. Nesta

Riding Icelandic Horses

Flying along a trail on the back of an [Icelandic horse](#) in Iceland is a magical experience.

When we were doing our research to prepare for our trip, we learned about the Icelandic horses brought by the Vikings to Iceland in the mid-800s; said to be friendly, personable, gentle, and very adaptable, we could not wait to experience riding them.



Research is one thing, but actually seeing these gorgeous creatures, which number around 100,000, half of them wild and running free, with their stocky bodies, and thick manes was another. Ranging in over 40 colors including Pinto, Dun, Crème, Silver, Roan, and Chestnut, these horses have a very unique beauty.

The horses range in height from 12.3 hands to 14.3 hands (49.2 inches - 57.2 inches) with an average height of 13.2 hands (52.8 inches) and are smaller than most standard light breeds (i.e. Arabians, Morgans, Quarter Horses, et al) that range in height from 14 hands to 16 hands (56 inches - 64 inches), and weigh around 363 kg (800 pounds) versus standard light breed weights ranging from 386 kg to 680 kg (850 pounds - 1500 pounds). Strong, sturdy, muscular, and surefooted, by the time that the Icelandic horse is four years old, it can carry a rider up to one-third its weight.



Having grown up riding horses, when Eggert Jóhansson invited us to go out riding with him and his girlfriend, Margrét (Magga), we jumped at the opportunity. After a brief stop to buy his beloved horses a treat we arrived at his stable and as soon as we left the car, his horses came rushing up to the fence to greet us. While Eggert and Magga attended to some tasks, we petted the horses that each demanded our immediate attention, and they were so friendly that they reminded us of playful dogs.



Debra: A chilly day, with alternating periods of rain and wind, the weather was a bit raw, and I loved burying my hands in the thick, warm manes of the horses, as I got to know each of their personalities.

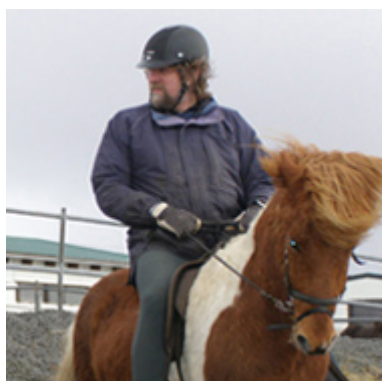
We decided that I would be the first to ride with Eggert and Magga while Edward took photographs, and when we returned, Edward would go out riding with Eggert.



Since it was a bit wet out, Eggert gave me a pair of black leather chaps that he had made, to put on over my jeans, and amazingly, they fit me perfectly as if he had made them for me. When I showed Edward my new look with the chaps, he had an amused look on his face, but he (sensibly) refrained from making any comment. A borrowed windbreaker, gloves, and a helmet added to my ensemble, I hoisted myself up into the saddle and I was ready to begin my foray into riding an Icelandic horse.



The Icelandic horse has 5 gaits (walk, tölt, trot, pace, canter/gallop) as opposed to other horses with 4 gaits (walk, trot, canter, gallop), with the tölt being its distinguishing and highly desirable quality. Eggert told me that the tölt is a 4-beat lateral gait where the horse always has at least one foot on the ground, and that I needed to sit a little farther behind in the saddle than I normally would, and to lean slightly back. Okay I thought, I could do this, I was ready; and the three of us set off on the trail. Starting in a walking gait, we moved to the tölt and I found that this was something easier said than immediately learned, but I somehow managed, and after a time, I was tölting, or rather the horse was tölting and I was enjoying the ride; what an incredible experience! When my ride was over, it was Edward's turn to go out riding while I photographed him and took more photographs of the horses that appeared to like "posing" for the camera.



Magga

Eggert

Edward: While I waited for Eggert, Magga, and Debra to return, it felt like the remaining horses took it upon themselves to entertain me. They would whinny, run around the pen, two horses would jump up and while on their hind legs they would playfully 'paw' their front hoofs at one-another, while some rolled on their backs, it was like a Cirque du Soleil with Icelandic horses. Though it had been overcast and rainy most of the day, the skies started to clear and the sun rolled in for a short while, which made the whole "Three Ring Circus" that much more beautiful, and of course I tried to capture as much as possible with my camera.





Well, it was finally my turn to try my hand at riding an Icelandic horse. The saddle was not a western style saddle with the horn to grab as you mount your trusted steed, this was an English saddle thus you have to grab a handful of the horse's long flowing mane as you pull yourself up. Comfortably seated on the saddle, Eggert talked me through the various commands and hand/reins controls, he also told me to sit back in the saddle, but more important I was to relax and enjoy the ride. I am not the most experienced rider, but I felt very much in control, and had one of the most comfortable rides ever. When the horse started into its unique tölt I felt like I was riding on air; it was a smooth, gentle, controlled pace. Eggert commented that he was surprised at how well I adapted and that with a few more rides I would be a competent rider, which I knew was more the horse's doing than mine.



The Icelandic horses are unique, but the horses that Eggert has in his stable are very special, and of course babied, so if you believe in reincarnation you would definitely want to come back as one of Eggert's horses.

Our rides over, it was time to groom the horses. We entered the stalls and enthusiastically set about the task of brushing the horses. If horses could speak, we know that they would have been sighing with pleasure as the brush removed the tangles of their winter coats.

The horses groomed and fed, we said our last goodbyes to the horses and thanked Eggert and Magga for a most extraordinary day. Feeling like true Icelanders, we now know why these gentle horses are so beloved, and cannot wait to return to Iceland to ride them again.

There are many places in Iceland that offer horseback riding tours, and even if you have never ridden before, it is an experience that you should try as it will linger in your memory forever. We will always remember the rush of adrenalin riding the Icelandic horses as we flew down the trail with the wind rushing and our imaginations recalling the days of the Vikings riding their horses.

Please read other articles on **Iceland** in the **Destinations, Hotels and Resorts, Restaurants, Chefs' Recipes, Spas,** and [Fashion](#) sections.

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For information on **Iceland**, please visit the website: **Icelandic Tourist Board**:
www.icelandtouristboard.com.

For information on **Icelandair**, please visit the website: **Icelandair**: www.icelandair.com.

For information on **Hertz**, please visit the website: www.Hertz.com.

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