

A photograph showing the silhouettes of five horses standing on a dark ridge against a vibrant green aurora borealis in a dark sky. The scene is reflected in a body of water below.

The Icelandic horse





HISTORY

The history of the Icelandic Horse can be traced right back to the settlement of the country in the late 9th century. Viking settlers brought with them their best horses, from various origins, though mostly of Germanic descent. Some sources say that the Icelandic Horse is a descendant of a Northern European breed, “Equus Scandinavicus”, while others claim that the horse is closely related to the English Exmoor pony. Although the origin of the breed was mixed, today this is one of the most purebred horse breeds in the world, due to its isolation. The breed has remained pure for over a thousand years and thus today there is only one breed of horse in Iceland – The Icelandic Horse.

The Icelandic Horse has played a key role in the life of Icelanders from the beginning. In heathen times the horse was highly regarded and renowned in Norse mythology. Several of the Norse Gods owned horses that played major parts in the mythical stories. The most famous of these mythological horses was Sleipnir, the eight footed pacer. The influence of the Norse myths can still be seen in Icelandic horsemanship, as many riding clubs bear names of mythical horses, as do several horses in modern day Iceland. The horse is also often mentioned in the Icelandic Sagas where it played a vital role in the time of Viking

warfare. The Vikings treated their horses with great respect and to a warrior a good horse was indispensable. A slain warrior would often be buried alongside his mount. For centuries the horse was the only means of transportation in Iceland as well as being the most important working animal in the days before machinery. Therefore the horse was called “the most useful servant” and it literally

followed man from birth to grave, fetching the midwife as well as pulling the coffin to the cemetery. When the first automobile arrived in Iceland in 1940 the horse rapidly became redundant. However, a few enthusiastic individuals who were interested in the horse’s riding abilities kept breeding good horses and Iceland’s first horse breeding association was formed the same year the automobile arrived, but up until that time horses had mainly been bred with strength and stamina in mind, rather than riding abilities or gaits.

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BREEDING

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Today, there are close to 80,000 horses in Iceland which is an incredible number for a nation that counts 300,000 people. Ten thousand people are enlisted in riding clubs, but it is estimated that close to 30,000 people are active horsemen in Iceland. The horse is used for pleasure riding, traveling and competition purposes and it still plays a practical role in the annual sheep and horse round-ups where farmers use horses to round up sheep and horses in the highlands. Horse breeding is very popular and there are many ambitious breeding farms in Iceland, as well as individual breeders who breed horses for pleasure. The first breeding shows were held in 1906 and since then horse breeders in Iceland have concentrated on improving this versatile breed which is suitable for children and adults alike, whether people like to compete or enjoy nature on horseback.

Each year thousands of foals are born in Iceland. Most of them are born outside in grassy fields where the breeding mares roam in herds all year round. Natural breeding, where the stallion is with a group of mares in a field for a certain breeding season, is the most common breeding method in Iceland, although artificial insemination has been available for a few years in parts of the country. It is magical to witness the birth of a foal during a bright summer night in Iceland's beautiful nature and to many a breeder that is their favorite time of year. Breeders like to watch their foals closely in the beginning and they believe that the movements and spirit presented by the foal during its early days will predict their outcome in the future. Experienced breeders easily pick out future stallions and breeding mares within a week from their birth.





THE HERD

Foals will follow their mothers for the first few months of their lives, sometimes longer, but some are stabled during their first winter. After that the young horses are put in a herd where they will learn to live within a group and find their place in the chain of command.

Raising horses in this manner, in herds that roam free in wide open fields and highlands, is the key to shaping the personality and character of the Icelandic Horse.

During the summer they graze in lush green fields and during winter they are fed hay and provided with shelter. If they are properly attended to, Icelandic horses can easily be kept outside all year. Horses that are being ridden should however be stabled during the colder months. In parts of northern Iceland horses are still allowed into the highlands during the summer and autumn months. In late September or early October, they are rounded up and sorted out in corrals where each horse breeder picks out his/her horses and then drives them home to the farm. Raising horses in this manner, in herds that roam free in wide open fields and highlands, is the key to shaping the personality and character of the Icelandic Horse. These horses will treat humans with respect as they have only been handled occasionally, when their hooves are trimmed and they are given worming medication, and they learn to behave within the herd. The outcome is a spirited and forward going horse with much respect for the rider. The landscapes also play a major role in shaping a sure-footed and muscular horse, toughened by harsh weather and wide open spaces.





TRAINING

Training of the Icelandic Horse does not start until their fourth year. Research has shown that their leg bones are maturing until the age of 3 ½ and they should not be started earlier. Not all horses are started at the age of four, but those who are, are usually trained a little, taught to work with a saddle and bridle, shod and ridden a little. In their fifth year their training is continued and more demands can be made. However, four year old horses can be presented for breeding judgment in Iceland. No breeders and trainers start training earlier than in the horse's fourth year, but handling and halter breaking youngsters is common and sensible. The Icelandic Horse usually leads a long and healthy life and their natural life span is 25-30 years, but some have grown much older. In general the Icelandic Horse is a fertile, healthy breed. **Since the breed has been isolated in Iceland for a thousand years none of the major infectious horse diseases are found in Iceland.** Bone spavin has been researched thoroughly in Icelandic horses and has been proven hereditary. Therefore all rated stallions are now x-rayed and tested for spavin. Sweet Itch (summer eczema) is non-existent in Iceland, but the breed may be vulnerable to it abroad, so horse owners must take precautions in areas where sweet itch is a problem. Special Sweet Itch blankets are available and stabling horses during dusk and dawn may also help. Also, imported horses should be allowed time to adapt to new surroundings and it is necessary to vaccinate imported Icelandic horses against all major international horse diseases.



THE FIVE GAITS

The **walk** is a four-beat gait. When walking the horse should be relaxed, moving ahead briskly, putting each foot down independently. The walk is also good for releasing tension and to teach the horse to work in a more focused manner. Most exercises that aid training are first taught to the horse at a walk and then in other gaits. The walk is essential in preparation for the tölt, as the footfall is exactly the same in the two gaits.

The Icelandic Horse is unique amongst horse breeds because it masters five gaits; walk, trot, tölt, canter/gallop and flying pace. The breed is best known for its four-beat smooth gait, the “tölt”, that is very comfortable for the rider and elegantly displayed by the horse.

The **trot** is a two-beat gait where front and hind legs on opposite sides move together. The trot is one of the so-called basic gaits and is used a lot in basic training before the horse masters tölt. It is useful when working on the horse’s balance and it is important to train the trot well. Sometimes the trot is a problem for horses that are “pacey” or tend towards the pace, but it is important to train it as well as the other gaits.

walk



trot



The **canter/gallop** is a three-beat gait, ridden at different speeds. A slow canter is comfortable and is common all over the world in different horse breeds. A fast gallop can liven up the horse and increase its willingness, positive attitude and enthusiasm to work. It is good to allow horses in training to sprint short distances, both to improve the training and because they simply enjoy a good run now and then.

The **tölt** is the specialty of the Icelandic Horse. It is a smooth four-beat gait in which the horse's hind legs should move well under the body and carry more of the weight on the hind part, allowing the front to rise and be free and loose. A beautiful tölt horse has high foreleg movements, is well collected with good head carriage and presents itself in a proud, free manner. Similar gaits are known in other "gaited" breeds, such as the running walk or rack, but it is generally agreed that only the Icelandic Horse can manage this gait so naturally and with so much extension and variations in speed. The smoothness of the tölt is what makes it so desirable. At demonstrations Icelandic horses are often ridden in tölt while the rider holds a full glass in one hand and the reins in another, without spilling a drop!

The tölt can be ridden at any speed, from a gracious, collected slow tölt up to a very fast and extended tölt where the horse may keep up with a galloping or even a pacing horse.

canter/gallop



tölt



The **flying pace** is a two-beat gait, well known in the international racing world. When pacing the horse moves both legs on the same side together. In Iceland pace horses are ridden in races, not raced in front of a sulky like in other countries and pace racing in Iceland is one of the oldest and most respected equestrian sports. Not all Icelandic horses can pace, but those that manage all five gaits well are considered the best of the breed.



EXPORT

Icelandic horses were first exported as working animals decades ago. They were used for farm work and mining and tens of thousands of horses were exported for that purpose. The 1950s saw the first exports of riding horses, and since then the Icelandic Horse has grown in popularity in Europe and North America. In 1969 an international association of Icelandic horse owners, FEIF, was formed and today it comprises 18 member countries: Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, the Faeroe Islands, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland and the USA.

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FEIF organizes biannual World Championships for Icelandic horses. Each member country has the right to send a team of their best horses and riders. The Icelandic team is in a different position than the others since horses that are exported from Iceland can never return. Therefore the Icelandic team horses are leaving their home for good and the World Championships can never be held in Iceland since no import of horses is allowed. It is a major honor to compete at the World Championships and all the best riders in Iceland put themselves forward for the team even if it means they have to part with their beloved mount. The biggest horshow in Iceland is the biannual "Landsmót" national show in which all the best breeding and competition horses in the country take part.





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Because of the import ban and the geographical isolation the Icelandic horse has remained virtually disease free so far. No other livestock can be imported, although dogs and cats are imported but must go through weeks of quarantine before going to their new homes. The import of any used riding wear, tack and other article used in connection

with livestock, is strictly forbidden, unless fully disinfected.

There are more than 100,000 Icelandic horses abroad, most of them in Germany and Scandinavia. The number of Icelandic horses bred abroad or exported from Iceland is now greater than the number of horses found in the country of origin itself, where there are now approximately 70,000-80,000 horses. The growing popularity of the Icelandic Horse has made horse breeding a valuable business and it has boosted the agricultural community in Iceland.

The horse community in Iceland is somewhat different from other countries. People who own horses in towns or cities usually own a private stable within a larger complex of stables, inside or just outside their home town. Each complex of stables will have its own riding club and the biggest clubs have 500-1000 members. The horses are usually stabled during the winter months, from December to June, and then let out for summer grazing. People will continue to ride through the summer, but most horses in Iceland have the autumn off. Professional horse trainers however, stable horses year round and often use the autumn months to start the young horses. An increasing number of travellers like to come to Iceland to ride in the beautiful highlands and enjoy the unspoiled nature on horseback. It is an unforgettable experience, riding a horse that is so connected to the nature and landscape and where you can climb mountains, gallop across fields, cross rivers and enjoy the bright Icelandic summer nights.





COMPETITION

The competition season starts in February and usually ends in early September. Competing in different classes at the traditional Icelandic horse competitions is very popular. The two main competition types are the so-called Sports Competitions and the Icelandic “Gæðingakeppni” competitions. In the sports competition the main emphasis is on the rider’s ability

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and the co-operation of horse and rider, but in the Gæðingakeppni the horse’s qualities, spirit and expression weigh more. There are many different types of classes available at different levels, but some of the traditional ones are: Tölt, Four-gait, Five-gait, Flying pace races and the pace test. Icelandic horses have also been used for other types of competition such as dressage or jumping which they can easily learn. Breeding horses are assessed at special breeding shows where they are judged for both conformation as well as gaits and riding abilities. Future breeding horses are often valued by their Genetic Evaluation score, BLUP, which is calculated for each individual, based on their bloodlines and the accomplishments of their forefathers. Icelandic horses are registered in an international database called WorldFengur where information on bloodlines, breeding show marks and more can be found.





UNIQUE

The Icelandic Horse is certainly a unique horse breed – bred exclusively and naturally, isolated in the far North Atlantic. Bred in a country where the air is pure and landscape magnificent, raised in a wild herd in wide open spaces, learning to be courageous, respectful and independent. The horse is a favorite among Icelanders

and can be seen in art and literature all through Iceland's history. It has been purebred for a thousand years, treated with respect and dignity and raised to the highest level by systematic and ambitious breeding. It holds a special place in the mind of the nation.

The Icelandic Horse is intelligent, good-tempered, versatile and beautiful. It is the most colorful breed in the world, with over 40 different colors and over 100 variations. Unlike any other breed, it masters five gaits, among them the magical smooth tölt. It is strong and enthusiastic, forward-going and docile. It is virtually unknown for a horse born in Iceland to bite or kick and such horses are never used for breeding. The Icelandic Horse is also self-assured; acts well in traffic and is a quick learner. It is truly a horse for everyone, with generations of people enjoying it together. It is suitable for leisure activities and pleasure riding as well as top level competition.

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Thousands of people in Iceland own horses for the simple pleasure of riding out and enjoying the companionship of their horses. Travel on horseback is growing in popularity and Icelandic horsemen are respectful and considerate when it comes to nature, just as they are with their horse. All sorts of competitions are on offer and everyone can find a level that suits them, from novice fun classes up to top class national competitions. The Icelandic Horse can be used in all the traditional Icelandic disciplines as well as in classic equestrian sports such as dressage and jumping. Whatever your preference – you will always find an Icelandic Horse to fulfill your dream!



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For further information on the
Icelandic Horse:

www.fhb.is

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The Horse Breeders Association of Iceland