



Living the Dream - Through Iceland with a herd of horses

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When I was a child one of my friends owned two Icelandic horses, smaller than your standard horse with a thick mane and lively behaviour. Since then I had been dreaming of visiting the island with volcanoes under ice and riding those horses in their original environment. Forty years later my friend Andrea and I decided to make this dream come true and cross Iceland on horseback following the so called Kjölur trail, an ancient trail that runs from the hot spring area around Geysir through the mountains and desert in the centre to the north coast.

We met up in Reykjavik and spent a day sightseeing in this lively and colourful city, from the cathedral with its wonderful panoramic view, to the harbour. Then we met the team of riders that would be our companions for the ride, eight people from a wide age range and different parts of the world, united by their interest in the countryside and the horses. The next day we set off in a coach towards the farm from where we started the ride. On the way we stopped at Thingvellir, the ancient site of the annual parliament meetings, and at the original Geysir from which all erupting hot springs got their name. Then we finally got a first glimpse of the horses we were going to ride for the next six days; in a paddock at Kjóstaðir Farm was a herd of Icelandic horses in all colours and shades imaginable, patiently moving about or playing with each other. But before we could start interacting with

them we had to go through a briefing meeting and get kitted out. Each rider needed a hard hat, water proof trousers and jackets, a sleeping bag, a saddle and a nose band. Here we also met the team that would be supporting the horses and us during the ride, a group of Icelanders who mostly belonged to the same family and did a fantastic job looking after us and the horses welfare.

As soon as lunch in the comfortable farm kitchen was finished we were getting ready to set off. But unfortunately, the heavens wanted to show us what real Icelandic rain was like and opened up heavily. Fortunately, the first day we rode without the herd, so it was just about getting the riders wrapped up warmly and heading off into the downpour. The initial ride took us along the river canyon to one of the largest Icelandic waterfalls, Gullfoss, where we took a wet break. After a ride of 30 km we were soaked to the skin and glad that we were spending the

night back on the farm where we could get the clothes dried. Luckily the weather had cleared up in the morning and would continue to be drizzly, but largely dry, which was good riding weather, because it kept mosquitoes and dust low. From now on we were also travelling with a herd of 65 additional horses which were needed during the long riding days, up to 50 km, on difficult ground and at high speed, during which we changed horses at least once each day. The second day would get us along the slopes of Mt. Bláfell into the highlands. We crossed a mountain pass with a high pyramid of stones that travellers had built up there over the years. On our left hand side the mighty Langjökull glacier appeared as we were following ancient routes that connected the north and south of the country. At the foot of the glacier we saw Hvítárvatn glacier lake and after dinner we spent time cruising the lake and walking on the glacier tongue with help of crampons and ice axes.



Right: Breakfast at a glacier stream

Overnight we stayed in mountain huts, which belonged to the communities and were mainly used during the autumnal sheep gatherings. The next day was very long as we rode along the glacier fed river Fúlakvísl through huge rugged lava fields of Kjalhraun that the sure footed Icelandic horses mastered with bravery. Then the landscape changed as we entered Thjófadalur, or



Valley of Thieves, a grassy valley surrounded by high mountains, a true oasis in the wilderness. At the end of the valley the horses had to climb up a steep slope at the end of which they still had to cross some snow fields before we finally reached Hveravellir, a unique geothermal area between Hofsjökull and Langjökull glaciers. A natural hot pool gave our weary muscles a welcome soak. The challenge for the next day was the crossing of three large glacial rivers; fortunately it had been relatively dry, the water levels were low and the horses took them in their stride. The next hut, Strangakvísl, was beautifully situated on a hill overlooking the river valley with a fantastic view over the wide plateau fringed by snow covered mountains and Hofsjökull glacier in the background. The sky had cleared to a bright evening, not a cloud in the sky, the sun was getting lower and finally set at midnight in an orange sky behind the mountains while at the same time the full moon rose in the purple sky above the glacier. It was a magical moment, impossible to take as photograph, but forever treasured in the mind.



Top: Crossing the river Blanda

Bottom: Hveravellir Mountain Cabin behind a carpet of wild thyme

The next morning was taken leisurely to give us and the horses some rest and let them enjoy the sunshine and grass.

From here we slowly moved back into civilisation, but it still took another day to get into the lush valleys of the north following tracks marked with large man made stone cones; after the stony and rugged paths the rough tracks felt comfortable and the horses were speeding up towards the farm where they would rest for a couple of days. We had a good soak in a hot tub and a final delicious meal of Icelandic lamb before a coach took us back to Reykjavik.



Top: Every morning the horses that were being ridden had to be caught from the herd

Middle: With only two riders at front and back the herd follows willingly

Below: The horses love moving fast in the herd





*Right: A well deserved roll around
after a quick ride*

Travel Advisory Day - Sunday 28th October, 10:30am, National Railway Museum, York

The day will start with an introduction to travel photography and a look at, and analysis of, some successful Associateship Travel print panels sent from Bath. Following this, Leo Palmer FRPS, Chair of the Travel Distinctions Panel, will digitally project some of his own stunning travel photography. This will include samples of what is and isn't travel photography as well as some travel projects.

After lunch some members will talk about their successful ARPS Travel submissions including, John Bickerdike ARPS (India), Carol Palmer ARPS (Namib Desert), Sylvia Slavin ARPS (Isle of Skye) and Bob Turner ARPS (Newcastle Quayside).

There will then be feedback from Leo on prospective ARPS panels brought by members of the audience. Feedback places are very limited and must be booked well in advance.

The Gibb Theatre
National Railway Museum
Leeman Road
York YO26 4XJ

RPS Members £10 or £15 if bringing work

Non-members £12 or £20 if bringing work

Bookings to Stan Hodgkiss (Regional Treasurer, stanleyhodgkiss@sky.com) 7 Manor Drive, Harrogate HG2 0HR with cheques payable to RPS Yorkshire.