

The Icelandic Horses

Like Iceland; little but strong

The Icelandic horse is just how Iceland likes to perceive itself: little but strong. They are squat and muscular and in winter they have long shaggy fur.

Icelandic horses tend to be around 140 cm tall. Internationally, most horse breeds shorter than 1.47 metres are dubbed “ponies” but there are also some other characteristics that make a horse a pony. The Icelandic horse is right on the limit but all our horses are horses because we say they are.

In fact, the Icelandic horse’s closest relative is the Shetland pony, who gets called a pony to its face because apparently, Shetland isn’t looking out for its equine friends the way we do ours.



Nurture or benevolent nature?

The Icelandic horse has become popular outside of Iceland for being easy-going and friendly.

Icelandic horses are often treated very much as members of the family and are not generally subjected to the strict riding form and discipline. So it may just be that they have a more relaxed life.



KEEP OUT

Following an unsatisfying attempt to crossbreed the Icelandic horse with oriental breeds, the Viking parliament Althing forbade horse imports to Iceland as far back as 982 AD, to prevent the degeneration of the stock. As a result, the horse has been purebred for over 1000 years and the Icelanders have remarkably few livestock diseases, as well as very strict regulations about even bringing saddles or riding boots to Iceland.



...AND DON'T COME BACK!

Due to the aforementioned import restrictions, once an Icelandic horse leaves the country, it can never return to Iceland. This means that Icelanders going to riding competitions abroad never take their best horse with them since they will probably sell it after some competitions. The best horses are kept in Iceland to compete or breed.



History & Culture

Historically, a quality Icelandic horse was a highly desired prize, both for practical purposes and as a status symbol. They have a place in Norse mythology.

They follow the Icelanders from their very earliest history, for instance in the book of settlements, where the chieftain Sela-Pórir set up his settlement at the place where his mare Skálm decided to rest. In the Icelandic Sagas, e.g. in Hrafnkel's Saga, Njál's Saga and Grettir's Saga, horses play important roles, for instance in horse fights, as status symbols, and not least as plot devices. For instance, the epic hero Gunnar á Hlíðarenda falls off when his horse trips, looks at his beautiful country and decides to stay rather than be outlawed, which ultimately leads to his death.

To this day, horse breeding and competing are associated with status and wealth – breeding a good horse can generate a lot of wealth and because some wealthy people spend a lot of money on their horses.

