

What is tölting?

by Kristin Berkery

[Iceland](#) and its horses seem like a world apart from what we're used to in the U.S., but surprisingly, Iceland is only about a six-hour flight from New York City – much less than the time it takes to fly from New York to London.



Icelandics are a tough breed that have survived inhospitable weather and famines for over 1,000 years. Photo by Sela Yair

What makes Iceland different? Most of the country's native population is descended from Scandinavian settlers in the 9th century AD who had to survive on an isolated island with an inhospitable climate, volcanic eruptions that caused great famines, and multiple epidemics that wiped out large parts of the population.

[Icelandic Horses](#) share a similar heritage with the Icelandic people, but they enjoyed an additional protection: In the 10th century AD, the Icelandic parliament banned the importation of horses and forbade exported horses from ever returning to Iceland. This protected the breed from outside parasites and diseases and prevented any kind of cross-breeding. As a result, the Icelandic Horse is one of the purest breeds in the

world, descended from a gene pool that is more than 1,000 years old. A unique trait of Icelandics is that they have no natural predators on their island home, so this seems to make them less likely to spook.

Icelandics are small and stout, around 13 or 14 hands in height, but they're called horses. One theory for this is that the word "pony" doesn't exist in the Icelandic language. Another reason given is that they have "big" personalities like horses. But as [Lesli Kathman discovered in a genetic diversity report](#) published in the *Genetics Selection Evolution Journal*, the Icelandic is closely related to the [Shetland](#) and [New Forest](#) ponies. Their small size isn't a detriment though – an Icelandic can easily carry a man for long rides over rough terrain.



An Icelandic Horse tölting.
Photo by Dietmar Walberg

Icelandic Horses come in a rainbow of colors, including all the base colors like bay, chestnut, grey, and black, as well as [dun and grullo](#) (black + dun), the [cream](#) colors of palomino and buckskin and double dilutes like perlino and cremello, tobiano, [splash white overo](#), [silver dapple bay](#) and [black](#), and [roan](#). Sometimes Icelandics will have an unexpected combination of these characteristics, resulting in colors like [buckskin silver dapple](#) and [smoky black tobiano](#).

Considering that the Icelandic's cousin, the Shetland pony, comes in all the same colors as the Icelandic, it's likely that they both inherited their various colors from their common ancestor, the ancient Celtic pony, which was in turn

descended from ancient draft stock from Western Europe.

Most Icelandic Horses can perform [five gaits](#): walk, trot, canter, and most famously, the tölt and flying pace. The tölt closely resembles the [Tennessee Walking Horse](#)'s running walk or the [Saddlebred](#)'s racking gait, a four-beat gait where the hooves touch the ground in the same sequence as the walk, but faster. The tölt can be performed at a variety of speeds up to about the speed of a canter.



A tölting Icelandic Horse.
Photo by [Dagur Brynjólfsson](#)

The flying pace is performed like a [Standardbred](#)'s high-speed pace, with both hooves on one side striking the ground at almost the same moment. It must be done at high speed because a slower pace would be uncomfortable for a rider. (The slower pace is called the "piggy pace" and discouraged in Icelandics because of its tendency to bounce the rider from side to side.) Used in short-distance pacing races, the flying pace can reach speeds of 30 miles per hour.

The people of Iceland love their Icelandic Horses, primarily breeding them for pleasure riding and show. (A small number are bred for meat and exported to Japan.) It's estimated that there are 80,000 of the breed in Iceland and 70,000 outside of Iceland. There are between 2,000 and 3,000 in the U.S., and it's possible to see them perform at events like the [Western States Horse Expo](#) each year.

Below is a video of Icelandics performing at a show in

Iceland.