

## Riding on the edge of the sea

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By Paul Miles

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It is the first time I've galloped. I stand in the stirrups, leaning forward, grasping the reins close to the strong neck and wayward mane of my stocky Icelandic charge, named Gauski. Sulphurous grey sandy mud spatters us from the thundering hooves of the horse in front. The sun is warm and the sky is a friendly, beckoning blue, enticing us – faster, faster, faster. I am usually overly cautious. But somehow the beauty of this wide, empty space that is neither here nor there, neither land nor sea, makes me fearless.

Galloping along a pristine seashore is the stuff of television adverts. In real life, a donkey at Southend-on-Sea is normally as good as it gets. I haven't ridden since taking a few lessons in early childhood, when I spent most of the time walking around a muddy courtyard complaining that my hat was too tight as a way of deflecting my fear. But Icelandic horses are known for their good nature. Several dozen have been shipped over to this small, bucolic Danish island of Læsø (pronounced "Lay-soo"), where the big outdoors is the main attraction. My pony, Gauski, although small, is a graceful mover.

We had left the stables at walking pace but were soon at a "tølt" – like a trot but without the bouncing. "These horses are very suited to this terrain," Inger Lise Jensen, the owner of the stables, assured me. "They need to be sure-footed on this uneven ground," she said, as we splashed across a small estuary in which two people were kayaking. We stepped out through sedge reeds into a meadow-beach-sea swirl.

The sky has that top-of-the-world paleness; sea lavender shimmers purple; the shallow water sparkles and a fresh ion-rich breeze blows up from the Baltic. This is where it happens. Just as I am enjoying the peace and tranquillity, Jensen announces cheerily that we will gallop. My heart beats faster. I feel it thud inside my tightening chest. I imagine I will be gripping on for dear life. But Gauski's mane tickles my face as we charge headlong, furiously and I grin like a maniac.

"You looked very comfortable," says Jensen at the end of our half-day ride. "You were stuck to him like a burr." I take it as a compliment. I dismount and pat my steed goodbye, vouching to myself that I should do more of this. In life there isn't enough galloping along seashores.

Læsø, off the east coast of North Jutland, in the Kattegat – the strait between North and Baltic seas and between Denmark and Sweden – is a flat speck of forest and fields. Its southern portion swirls into the briny, undecided if it is sea or land until the wind or air pressure coaxes the water inwards on to the tidal meadow. This part of the island, the Rønnerne, hard to explore on foot and certainly not by car, is a favourite with horse riders. Other visitors make do with less romantic transport – they clamber aboard a trailer pulled by a tractor for four-hour tours of the area's unique flora and fauna.

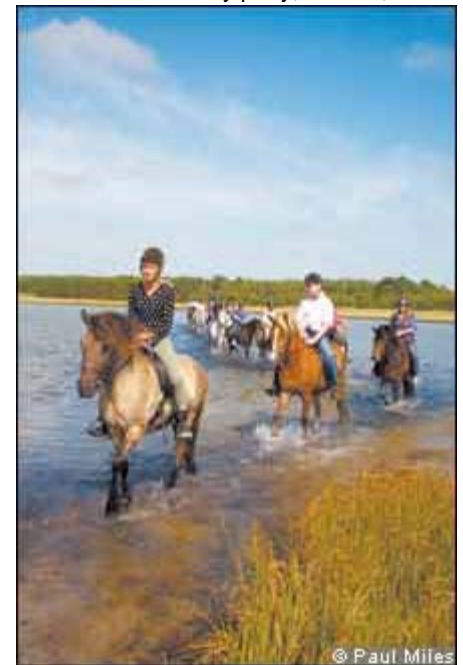
It is in this salt marsh that medieval residents made salt. The church imposed steep taxes that it levied on the precious mineral. In large, wood-fire-heated vats, the peasants evaporated water, saltier than the sea, collecting the crystals. In an all-too familiar tale of resource over-exploitation, by the 16th century, they had chopped down all the trees for firewood and so the salt industry came to an end.

Several centuries later, trees were replanted and, since 1991, a recreation of the medieval salt meadows has been producing 80 tonnes of gourmet sea salt annually while proving a popular tourist attraction for Danes and Swedes, the island's main visitors.

We watch as men scoop up crystals from steaming salty water. "It tastes sweetish and slightly spicy and dissolves quickly in the mouth," explains Torsten Jacobsen, the manager. "It's the Château Lafite of salts."

This year, the salt meadows has opened a new spa, Læsø Kur, in the small town of Vesterø Havn, where ferries from the mainland dock. Appropriately, considering the church's original role in the island's deforestation and exploitation of its residents, this temple of physical pampering (and state-funded treatment for psoriasis) is a converted church building. Just as in medieval times, the church still needs the salt of the earth but today, rather than funding an oppressive regime, it cures the body.

After my morning's ride, I season myself in Oxo-brown brine baths, sweat in a steam room and rinse off in a salty waterfall before relaxing in an outdoor hot tub under the heavens. Out at sea, white horses are charging to shore.



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## Details

Paul Miles was a guest of DFDS and [Visit Denmark](#).

The [Lyngfeldts Hotel](#) opened this year in Østerby Havnand and makes for a good base with harbour views. The comfortable ten-room hotel is a former fishermen's mission. Currently only two bedrooms have their own bathrooms and the shared facilities haven't been improved since its mission days.

The fishing port lands tonnes of langoustines every year for export across Europe. There is also a marina where visiting Swedish and Norwegian yachties moor. Bicycles are the best way to get around the island. There are several places to hire bikes and many miles of flat, straight, quiet lanes and dedicated cycle tracks by forests or long, narrow fields. The island's beaches are fine strands of white sand and dunes. The small island of Stokken has an especially clean and lovely beach – a remote, long strip of sand dunes to which you have to wade.

[DFDS](#) sails to Esbjerg from Harwich.

Trains depart from Esbjerg to Frederikshavn, from where you take a ferry to [Læsø](#).

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