



THIS HORSE IS A NORSE (OF COURSE)

Meet Norway's Fjord horses, a gorgeous and rare breed.

By Susan Zimmerman

Your horse is waiting for you," says a Norwegian friend who is fixing me up on my first-ever equine blind date. Well, it's the truth, in a manner of speaking. I'm in Norway to get the lowdown on the country's famous Fjord horses and had requested help meeting a steed so I could get the story straight from the horse's mouth.

Although it would probably have been easier rounding up a horse owner to talk to on the west side of the Atlantic (the United States has some 5,200 registered Fjord horses, almost as many as Norway's 6,000), but because the breed's official mother country is Norway, I wanted my encounter with one of the world's oldest and purest horse breeds to be on its own turf.

The Norwegian Fjord horse is believed to have migrated to Norway more than 4,000 years ago. This stocky draft breed, which is just two chromosomes shy of being related to the Przewalski but is linked to the Tarpan, still bears several vestiges of its primitive wild horse past. A dark dorsal stripe running from the forelock, down the middle of the mane, along the back and into the tail is its most telltale mark. Other remnants of the Fjord's ancient history are the zebra stripes on the forelegs and brown dun color.

While the majority of Norway's Fjords come from the west coast – where fjords and mountains are the keywords – they are found all over the country. I was calling on my “date” on a farm in a rural area some 30 minutes outside Oslo. It was a cold, windy and rainy winter afternoon (that's fjord-like weather) when owner Karen Loken went to fetch Stine from the pasture.

I was smitten from the moment I laid eyes on her standing in a muddy field, munching contentedly on grass as a gusty wind blew her forelock back from her eyes yet barely moved a hair of her buzz-cut mane. She was unperturbed by my presence and allowed me to rub her forehead as though wanting to verify the much-lauded claim about her breed's composed character.



Randall Hyman

“I bought her about six years ago from a friend in the western country,” says Loken. “I wanted a horse for pulling timber and with a calm head. Look how patient she is.” Stine waits in the wind to be haltered. Then, the two walk to the barn side by side – Stine's trademark good disposition showing as well as her appetite, which is apparently second nature.

In the steep, rocky landscape from where these horses come they survive on very little food, but when there's food on the ground they eat. “A Quarter horse boarded here didn't like that hay, but she eats it,” laughs Loken as Stine vacuums up every scrap on the stable floor. Stine has been on a diet the whole summer, she laments affectionately about her 16-year-old model Fjord.

“I cannot sit on her,” continues Loken, though this isn't due only to Stine's eating habits. The Fjord's naturally wide girth comes from the muscular build they need for farm work. Though the Fjord has historically been a draft horse, the demand for a lighter breed with less stomach and thinner and longer legs for use in riding and dressage is growing.

GUDVANGEN, NORWAY
THE ROOF OF NORWAY
AND THE FLAAM RAILWAY

Begin with an ascent of the Naeroey Valley, with 5,000-foot mountains on either side. Stop at a mine where a shining white mineral has been quarried for decades, then climb Norway's steepest road between plunging waterfalls to the Stalheim Hotel perched on a cliff overlooking the valley. Enjoy a buffet luncheon and then continue to Voss, where you'll embark on a train to cross the agricultural “Roof of Norway” to Myrdal station. Here you'll set out on the remarkable Flaam railway, which winds its way through 15 tunnels in 12 miles, descending nearly 3,000 feet to the fjord town of Flaam, where your ship has arrived ahead of you.

Fjords wear many different “saddles” these days and another popular use is as a therapy horse for the disabled. This three-gaited horse is as easily ridden by a beginner as by an experienced rider. Though the Fjord has a small stature (it stands an average 13.2 to 14.2 hands high and weighs 900 to 1,200 pounds), its “horsepower” is legendary and for many years it was the Norwegian tractor of choice.

The Fjord has flourished during its 4,000 years of domestication, except for a brief black mark in the late 1800s that almost led to the breed’s demise. Fortunately, efforts to mix the Fjord with the Dole, another Norwegian breed, to create a more powerful farm horse, were abandoned after some bad-tempered horses resulted. A 1907 decision to return to pure breeding literally saved the Fjord from extinction.

Through thick and thin, the tradition of keeping the Fjord’s ample mane close-cropped with a strip of black hair sandwiched between white on either side (which reminded me of an Oreo cookie in reverse) has been maintained. The customary crescent-shaped cut is designed to emphasize the curve of the neck. “I prefer this traditional look,” says Loken, who uses scissors to trim Stine when she gets a bit shaggy.

Seabourn Pride cruises Norwegian fjords during voyages departing May 26, June 21, July 12, August 2 and 23, 2007.



Of course, the Fjord is more than another pretty face. Its desirable traits have made it sought after by the Vikings for war mounts, by the Norwegian Armed Forces (until the 1980s) and in top-notch competitions riding in a quadrille. As flattering as written descriptions can be of this breed’s willingness to work, stamina, vigor and calm temperament, the Fjord’s actions speak louder than words.

“Just look at her,” says Ellen Sverdrup, a Fjord owner I meet up with at a riding stable in Norway’s Arctic town of Tromsø. “They don’t react to anything. You can put a small child atop them and they won’t run away,” she continues. As if on cue, a 737 descends rapidly over the head of a 9-year-old girl sitting atop a Fjord in the riding stable’s snow-covered pastures, which border the airport’s landing strip.

“Watch how the horse just stays there while the plane flies overhead,” Sverdrup says as the jet’s engines roar loudly during the plane’s final approach. At one point it appears as though the plane may land in the stable’s backyard, yet the horse shows no sign of bolting. It is easy to appreciate how the breed’s extraordinary sense of calm has contributed to its popularity.

“I have had my Fjord for 16 years,” says Sverdrup, who has no plans to trade hers in. Though Fjords may not appreciate in value over the years like a Porsche, this particular model is invaluable.

A HORSE BY ANY OTHER NAME

In Norway, there are plenty of riding opportunities and horses to choose from – some 45,000 at last count. While the Fjord is the most famous of the three Norwegian horse breeds, the North Norwegian mountain horse (which has the same general features of the Fjord but is smaller) and the Norwegian Forestry horse (which is used mainly for farm work) are also renowned in their own right. In addition to these three, the Icelandic horse, which descends from the Norwegian Viking horse, also has quite a following.

– S.Z.