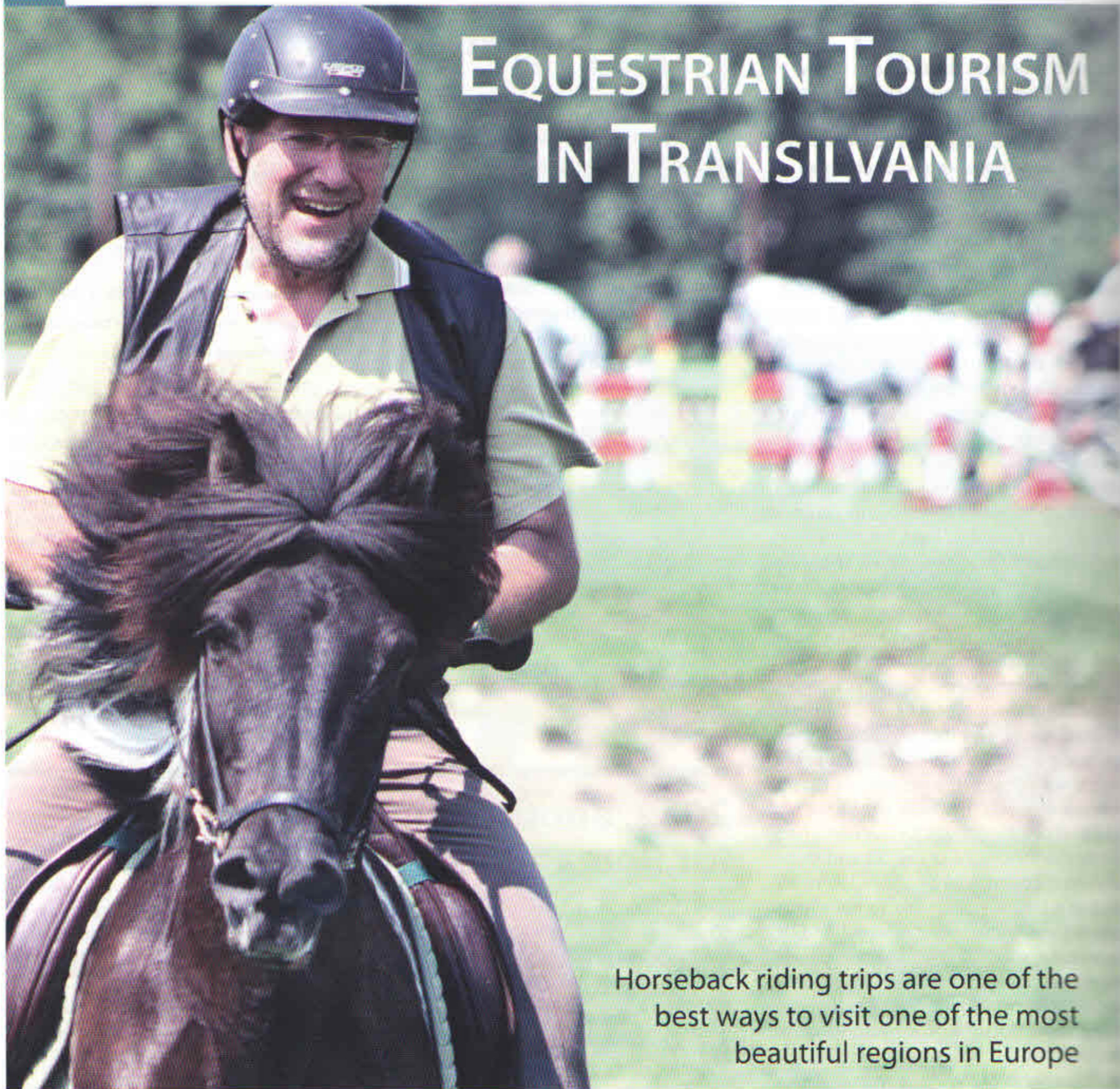


# EQUESTRIAN TOURISM IN TRANSILVANIA



Horseback riding trips are one of the best ways to visit one of the most beautiful regions in Europe

Albert Andras, riding on one of his horses.

A piece of heaven. This is how one could describe the landscape of the Transilvanian village Izvoarele. Here, the lofty peaks of the Eastern Carpathians are bordered by pine forests. In a valley traversed by a crystalline stream, which babbles among rocks, a herd of horses crops the grass. We are talking about an unusual breed for that area, namely Icelandic horses. These horses have a height between that of the common breeds of horses and English ponies. Icelandic horses are descendants of the horses brought on the island in the North Atlantic by the famous Viking warriors. In the Carpathians this breed was brought by the businessman Andras Albert.

#### The Icelandic horses' saga

The story of the herd from the village Izvoarele goes back a thousand years. More

precisely, to the period of Iceland's colonization. Legend says that the island from the North Atlantic was discovered by Irish monks, who sailed with the purpose to find a remote piece of land where to live in peace. Around 870, the first Viking warriors arrived in Iceland. By that time, the Northern Knights were very well known for their skills in battle and so they were the true masters of the seas. Based on the principle that each good warrior should necessarily have a good horse, on the famous Drakkars, the slender ships with which the Vikings conquered the world's oceans, there were also horses. Some historians believe that they came from a now extinct race, *Equus Scandinavicus*. The race is supposed to have survived, due to isolation, under the today form of Icelandic horses in Iceland and under the form of different breeds of ponies present even today in a few small islands

in northern Britain. "Only the small-sized horses arrived in Iceland, selected from the start in order to fit better on ships and in order to fulfill the criterion of gentleness. Restive horses were slaughtered and eaten during the long ocean journeys", says Albert Andras. Icelandic horses are well known for the devotion showed to their masters, for their gentleness and strength. In order to protect these breed of horses from repeated crossing with other breeds, Icelandic leaders convened, in the first parliament, Althing, in 930, to ban imports of horses. Since then, the ban remained in force, and the rules are so strict that an Icelandic horse that leaves the island is no longer allowed to return again.

#### A tough breed

In many parts of Iceland, horses are kept outside the whole period of the year.

Most foals are born directly on lawns, and, except very heavy winters, Icelandic horses make do with whatever nature provides. In the north of the island, there are herds that are left to live in wilderness for weeks or months. Thus, young animals learn from the mature ones to cope with the difficult conditions and to be active, but still gentle. The training of Icelandic horses begins only when they turn four years old. Usually, these horses live to 25 to 30 years.

Now, according to estimations, about 80.000 Icelandic horses live on the island. Outside the island live another 100.000 Icelandic horses, most of it in Europe. Andras Albert realized that the breed was unique and valuable. "Because in Iceland there were few operable roads, the Icelandic horse was, for centuries, one of the most important means of locomotion in this area", says Andras Albert. Icelandic horses can be determined to learn the tolt technique, unique in its way, which makes their pacing to be more restful for riders than that of other breeds. Moreover, Andras Albert confesses that this mattered a lot when he decided to invest in Icelandic horses. "I learned to ride relatively late at 42 to 43 years on a farm of a friend of mine who owns ordinary horses", says Andras Albert. Then the businessman discovered the breed of Icelandic horses. An Icelandic friend, whom Andras Albert invited on several trips through the Eastern Carpathians, gave him the idea. "One day, we were sitting on the terrace, and he asked me: <<Do you know what you need? Some Icelandic horses>>, and this is how the idea of the farm was born", says Andras Albert. "Back then, I went very often to Iceland, with business, because I was the director of my former company. I started visiting herds, I started reading, I rode there and so I decided to buy horses", says the businessman. "The first four horses were chosen by me and my friends who had a vague idea about Icelandic horses, and the next time I went with my wife and we chose another four horses. After that, I attended a one week trip, with 90 horses in the wild there in the north of the island, and then I got another eight horses", says Andras Albert. Nowadays, 14 Icelandic horses, which are an extremely valuable genetic core, are living on the farm from the village Izvoarele. Icelandic horses are perfect for those who want to be initiated in the mysteries of riding. "As you realize, riding can be a dangerous sport. But Icelandic horses are very tempered, quiet by nature, very confident. They are not very sensitive to climate or to the way they are fed", says Andras Albert. "An Icelandic horse can ride 40-50 miles a day without being tired", said the businessman.

**Claudiu Pădurean**



Icelandic horses are famous for their gentleness and strength

## Opportunities

Several programs have been designed for those who love nature and horse riding. The riding tour in nature takes four hours and costs 25 euros. There are also one day riding tours, which cost 50 euros. These also include a venison meal prepared by the host. For those who learn to ride the Icelandic horse farm has an offer called "Introduction to the world of Icelandic horses." The program includes three riding lessons lasting each one hour minimum. These include trotting pace, tolt pace and riding in nature. The price is 45 euros. There is also

an individual riding course, which lasts an hour and costing 25 euros. Those who want to participate in these programs, must be at least eight years old. For children aged between four and eight years, there is another type of lesson, where the little ones learn by playing the essential elements of riding. One such lesson costs 12 euros and lasts one hour. There are riding weekends for the whole family. It costs 60 euros for an adult and 14 euros for a child. The offer includes two days of riding, one night at Villa Honor and served meals for the whole family.