Unbridled Retreat at The Alisal

Riding the trail at Unbridled Retreats at The Alisal

Fearless Photography (this page); Lori Faith/Photography by Faith (opposite)

The Mane Event

From equine meditation to happy hour with a herd, horse experiences are the new wellness craze and have tremendous healing benefits.

By Casey Hatfield-Chiotti

THERE'S NO DENYING THE BOND between horses and humans runs deep. There's evidence ancient people began stabling and riding horses more than 6,000 years ago, and, one could argue, no animal has been more key to our survival. Horses have been used in war, hunting, as a means of transportation and for companionship.

As prey animals, horses survive through being alert, intuitive and sensitive to their surroundings. As a result, experts insist, they're among the most intelligent and empathetic creatures on earth.

While using horses for therapy is not a new practice, it's become more mainstream in the last five years. Practitioners and wellness resorts offer activities where clients get out of the saddle and onto the ground to interact with horses in more meaningful ways than a typical trail ride or lesson. Experiences like a horse painting exercise or an emotional one-on-one coaching session in a round pen can help heal fear and trauma, even spark creativity.

According to Devon Combs, founder of the Colorado-based Unbridled Retreats program for women, it's natural to fear a 1,200-pound being. Still, when humans let down their guard and show vulnerability, horses almost always respond kindly. "A yoga mat's not giving you feedback, but a horse can," she says.

Here are four ways to experience the healing power of horses, from a day trip to Sonoma to a family-friendly program at a pastoral Central California resort.

Miraval Arizona

At Miraval Arizona's *(from $1,009 a night per person; equine experiences from $105; www.miravalarizona.com)* picturesque Purple Sage Ranch, surrounded by the Sonoran Desert and the coral-tinged Catalina Mountains, guests are greeted by friendly, free-roaming horses. A pioneer in incorporating horses and wellness, the renowned destination spa outside Tucson has offered equine experiences for 25 years.

The program has evolved over the decades, and in all activities, horses have "a voice and a choice," says Miraval Arizona Equine Program Manager Lucinda Vette, a lifelong horse lover who realized she needed to make a career change after working as a stressed-out attorney.

"Horses invite us to face our fears, to connect with our deepest joys and sorrows and to feel it all," says Vette. While classes are scheduled, most take place without restraints and encourage interacting with horses in their natural state. Some offerings include horse painting (guests use the side of a horse as their canvas), equine meditation where clients are invited to emulate a horse's mindful presence; and the private or semiprivate Cadenced Connection class. While on a horse, guests will learn to guide and communicate — all without reins — and achieve physical, emotional and psychological balance. "When we learn to listen to horses, it is really about hearing ourselves more deeply," Vette adds.

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Courtesy of The Alisal

Unbridled Retreats

Unbridled Retreats *(from $2,995 per person for a shared room; www.unbridledretreats.com)* founder Combs, who struggled with eating disorders and depression during her teens, says equine therapy saved her life. Combs grew up around horses, but it was a one-way street; she showed them to get a blue ribbon. At a treatment center in Arizona that offered equine therapy, a therapist welcomed Combs into a round pen with a horse loose in the middle. Combs strutted in confidently, and the horse turned away.

"The therapist said, 'Stop trying so hard; stop trying to control the situation. Just breathe,'" recalls Combs. She began crying uncontrollably. The horse locked eyes with her, walked toward her and put his head against her chest.

"When I was messy and imperfect. That's when the horse connected," says Combs. At the deeply immersive three- and four-night retreats she offers, she's seen moments like this play out time and again. "This is for people who want something with emotional healing, transformation and fun," says Combs.

Retreats take place at partner resorts such as the family-owned White Stallion Ranch near Tucson, an authentic "dude ranch" where activities might include rounding up cattle, Santa Barbara's Alisal Guest Ranch, which has cottages and suites with stone fireplaces and luxurious linens, and starting in 2022, the adults-only Sensei Lanai, a Four Seasons Resort in Hawaii.

Guests can participate in hands-on group activities, one-on-one coaching, line dancing and social hour, and horseback riding (although entirely optional). Combs says whatever you learn on the ground can be taken into the saddle as well. The next Unbridled Retreat takes place February 17 through 20 at White Stallion Ranch.

Carmel Valley Ranch

Helping people feel joy again after the trauma of the last two years is part of Carmel Valley Ranch's new Equine Experiences program's mission *(from $325 a night; equine experiences from $135; www.carmelvalleyranch.com)*. Launched this past June and led by Robert G. Magnelli, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist known as "the Horseman," and his wife Nancy, a pediatric nurse, several programs are offered daily.

James Baigrie

A labyrinth at Miraval Arizona Resort & Spa

Equine Experiences at Carmel Valley Ranch

In "Getting to Know the Herd," children and adults observe how horses socialize and interact, then make a nutritious treat out of carrots and apples to present to the ranch's five friendly therapy horses, Valentina, Bella, Diva, Vincenzo and Geronimo, before departing. During the 21-and-over "Equines and Wine," guests let their worries dissolve while spending time with the herd, glass of robust red wine in hand. Ranch guests often choose to hike up to the hilltop barn and corral, with views of green rolling hills blanketed with organic gardens and vineyards. Magnelli earned his certification from the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association in 2003 and has helped thousands of children, teens and adults find new emotional health tools through working with horses. He marvels at how guests often arrive hesitant and standoffish but leave grinning from ear to ear.

"There's science behind it all," says Magnelli, who points to research out of HeartMath Institute near Santa Cruz that shows a horse's electromagnetic field is five to 10 times the size of a human's.

"Being with animals, dogs, cats, horses, is healing, period. Our heart rate diminishes, but horses have greater power," Magnelli says.

Equi-Sense

Marin residents can schedule a healing horse-centered day trip in Sonoma with Equi-Sense *(hour-long sessions from $0 to $150 on a sliding scale; www.equi-sense.org)* for a closer-to-home option. Equi-Sense offers horse therapy sessions for individuals and groups at pretty farms throughout Sonoma County such as Giddy Up Ranch in Santa Rosa and Hillcrest Farms in Occidental. In this aviary sanctuary, five rescued cockatoos and a parrot mingle with goats and equines.

Erica Tom, the director of Native American Studies at Sonoma State University, founded Equi-Sense in 2018; she's had a passion for horses since she was young and even studied the positive impacts working with horses has had on prisoners and police officers. Her business has doubled in the last year as the pandemic has taken a toll on mental health and well-being. She serves a diverse clientele, from first responders to foster children and everyone in between.

"Some clients come specifically to process trauma, while others may be interested in learning more about horses, and ultimately, themselves," says Tom.

Tom's horse Indigo was rescued with the support of a sponsor after a family could no longer keep her. The American Paint with one blue eye and one brown eye is uniquely suited to her therapeutic role. Whether working with a small child or the elderly, Tom says, she is protective and drops her head low to watch over them.

"She's had hard times in her life, too. It feels like an honor that she is still open and willing to connect with people. She has the biggest heart," Tom says, adding that she also hopes to bring a wild mustang she's working with into the program eventually. Sessions are different for everyone and might include grooming, deep breathing and body language, and riding.

Stephanie Russo