

**O**n a pristine Santa Fe morning, I leave a half-eaten stack of blue-corn pancakes on my hotel bedside table and traverse a dried riverbed across the property to a handsome little ranch. The air smells of juniper and pine, and my pulse is racing. I am about to come face to face with four giant horses, and I'm terrified. Like many destinations looking to tap into the white-hot world of wellness, the Four Seasons Resort Rancho Encantado added the EQUUS Experience to its spa menu in the spring. The program claims to "inspire lasting change and breakthrough learning" via the healing powers of horses, according to Santa Fe native Kelly Wendorf, a lifelong equestrian with a background in neuroscience, who conceived the multi-hour or multi-day program and runs it with her partner, Scott Strachan. "It's about radical self-inquiry."

The field of equine therapies is booming, thanks in part to our warp-speed modern lives. Occupational therapists integrate horseback riding into the care of patients with cerebral palsy and autism, and mental health professionals certified in equine therapy use the majestic beasts in their treatment strategy for addiction, eating disorders, depression and PTSD.

"Horses are very intuitive animals and they pick up on human emotions and vulnerabilities very quickly," says David Godden, clinical director at Byron Private Holistic Treatment Centre in Byron Bay. "When you're working with an animal that's twice the size of you it takes an enormous amount of trust and a certain level of boundary setting to be able to have a relationship with that horse."

Equipped with large and sensitive nervous systems, these ancient animals have an exquisite ability to read scent, brainwaves and body language, so they are keenly attuned to humans' emotional states and able to deliver nonthreatening feedback. This makes it easy for the quartet of horses at the ranch to size me up when I arrive.

There is no set syllabus at EQUUS, because whereas fear has a big hold on my life – the fear of ageing, that I'll never finish my book, that I'll end up in an Alzheimer's home, like my mother – other people may need to

explore different things: boundaries, creativity, grief, leadership or joy. I approach the horses expecting them to rear and trample me, and my heart threatens to catapult onto the sand. But as I chat to them and stroke their manes, never mounting them, each remains somewhat calm, expressing its own personality. One is playful, another wary. Cooper, a brown quarter gelding with gorgeous undulating flanks, catches my eye. Three hours pass dreamily as I amble from horse to horse, until the strangest thing happens: they all lie down on the ground.

"The horses are saying: 'Fear isn't something you have to get over,'" Wendorf explains. As long as I put up no false front, they can relax, which brings me peace as well. When I get back to the hotel, I weep.

The next morning, some equine magic draws me back to Cooper. He presses up against me with warm support, like a gentle nurse. I connect with this nearly 408-kilogram champion as if he were a mirror. "He doesn't engage much," Wendorf tells me, explaining that Cooper is a thinker who tends to live inside his head. "But when he does, it's serious."

It is also seriously mystifying. The area of equine therapy still lacks robust research, but some scientists, including Tim Shurtleff, a lecturer on occupational therapy at Washington University, hypothesise that changes in brain chemistry that lower stress-inducing cortisol and raise bond-building oxytocin levels occur when a person is in contact with a horse. "It's hormonal," he says. It's also spiritual, which is how Noreen Esposito, a psychiatric mental health nurse practitioner and equine therapist who teaches nursing at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, describes the "deep and real" connection.

As the weeks go by, I nurture a new relationship with my fear: that living with it, rather than struggling against it, could in fact lead to better writing, more inner peace and more acceptance of passing time. If the horses possess an ability to reflect only what is true, then my truth is that fear is not a force holding me back. "There are other things that they reflected back to you," Wendorf writes in an email. "Those are for you to continue to discover."

## HEALTH

# Taking the reins

As equine therapy inspires luxury spa menus with the aim of chiselling away at modern-day stress, Marcia DeSanctis assesses her life – and calls in the cavalry.



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