

Sea horses

A COMBINATION OF FUN AND MUTUAL TRUST MAKES SWIMMING WITH HORSES THE RIDE OF A LIFETIME

Words by **Yayeri van Baarsen**, photographs by **Mike Newman/www.ocean-image.com**

Girls love horses and I am no exception. Ever since sitting on the back of a pony for a few steps around the paddock aged 4, I have been enthralled with these intelligent creatures that somehow instantly seem to sense what you are feeling. Riding

lessons remained the highlight of my week until the age of 12, when friends, homework and other sports took over. However, the love for horses always remained; even if it was reduced to the occasional ride on holiday.

Most of my previous experience on a horseback has been in dressage, my teacher's favourite equestrian sport. A bit less appealing to me and the pony – both of us didn't see the point in trying to make perfectly round circles in the paddock. I could think of way more exciting things to do with horses such as jumping or racing. One thing however had never occurred to me: swimming with them.

In Cornwall, this is possible at Longrock beach in Marazion where Cornwall Sea Horses take their horses to the water with high tide. Chris Cooke (56) has been swimming with horses ever since he was a little boy. "I grew up in the West Indies and we didn't know any better. It never occurred to us you weren't supposed to swim with them," he explains. So when he moved down to Penzance 26 years ago Chris continued this activity, and in May 2013 he and fellow

equine enthusiast Vikki Timmins (35) from Mullion started Cornwall Sea Horses. Nowadays Vikki has taken over and runs the company with a team of helpers. All the horse riding and swimming sessions are done when the beach is relatively empty in order not to disturb other beachgoers, and go on from May through to October, weather depending.

Cornwall Sea Horses is by no means a conventional riding ➔



school. Next to swimming, the horses get trained with saddle, bareback, in the pen, in the field, and on hacks. This variety helps when they train and re-educate horses with issues, such as not wanting to stand still. "A horse's instincts are different from ours, so we use natural horsemanship and speak their language rather than trying to make them understand ours. It's about training them in small steps and building a relationship; working with them, rather than against them," Vikki explains.

Seeing the horses standing content in their natural habitat I wonder out loud if they actually like being out of their depth in a choppy sea with people on their back. "My horse absolutely loves it," Vikki exclaims. "They all do; we have a young mare, Jazz, who likes it so much she keeps putting her nose under water to blow bubbles, just like little kids in the bath." The sea water is an added bonus; the salt is good for their coats and gets rid of feather mites, small parasites that get into the hair around the horses' feet, something which is especially common in Shire horses.

My swim will be on Roxanne, a beautiful grey 12-year-old mare from the Czech Republic. She was destined for the meat trade, but luckily didn't make it to the burger van and fell into the hands of Chris and Vikki instead. The calm horse is the queen of the herd and a very experienced swimmer; therefore she is often present when new horses are introduced to the water. "As fun as swimming is, it's imperative that it is done correctly, patiently and in the right sea conditions. Safety comes first," Vikki says. Regarding the sad incident of a horse drowning in July 2013 when its rider took it swimming privately she adds: "All new horses need to be trained and gradually introduced to the sea in order to be confident in the water. It's absolutely vital to have someone with you who knows what they are doing. At Cornwall Sea Horses we only swim at high tide so the horses are close to dry land and we always bring experienced horses along and have our instructors swimming alongside."

Riding experience is necessary for those wanting to take to the water and people who want to ride bareback to the beach have to be assessed beforehand in the round pen. Chris, (who reminds me of the horse whisperer as he can make his Dales pony Chip rear up by just saying 'and ... up') fortunately approves of my riding abilities and even lets me

try some trotting and cantering bareback in the paddock. I am surprised how comfortable and confident I feel, especially since the last time I sat on a horse without a saddle was a bit of stepping 20 years ago. According to Chris, it's all about having a relationship with the horse that is built on trust. "The horse should do what you ask it because it trusts you, not out of fear or equipment you use," he explains.

Arriving at the beach, the smile on my face breaks into a big grin which stays there the whole evening. The idyllic surroundings – sand, sea and St Michael's Mount in the background- add to the already magical experience of being

on horseback. I feel at one with my horse, galloping alongside the beach without any fear of falling off. When I steer Roxanne into the water and she wades through it happily, I almost scream with excitement. "Nothing can beat this," Vikki agrees.

The whole session is a total blast; from paddling and bathing to trying to stand on my horse's back (and naturally ending up falling in the sea). After seeing the fun we have even my partner, who considers horses creatures that are dangerous at both ends and uncomfortable in the middle, joins us in the water. He ends up 'horse surfing', holding on to Roxanne's tail and being dragged along in the waves - something he boasts about later to his surfer friends. Chris tells me it is possible to do real horse surfing by catching a wave while the horse is swimming, which

is, akin to normal surfing, all about timing. "We just have fun in the sea and found out it worked. I have also let a horse tow me into town on a skateboard once. Why not? They love learning new things as long as it's done in achievable steps; the only thing a horse shouldn't do is climbing a tree or going in a hole," says Chris, before diving off his horse into the sea.

According to the stand of her ears (they are pointing forward which indicates a happy horse), for Roxanne this swim was a lot of fun. For me, it wasn't only that, it also was the best ride of my life. 🐾

Horse swimming is done on beaches close to Mullion such as Poldhu, Polurrian and Kennack, and the time in the sea is dependent on the horse, tide and weather. Bring your own wetsuit or clothing suitable for going in the sea. Cornwall Sea Horses also organise swim tuition, hacks, beginner classes, and equine therapy. For more information, follow Cornwall Sea Horses on Facebook or visit their website www.cornwallseahorses.co

