



# Condé Nast Traveler

THE WORLD MADE LOCAL

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2023

TRIED AND TRUE TRAVEL CLASSICS

## the gold list 2023

WHERE TO FIND  
WELLNESS THIS YEAR



New Mexico  
Barcelona  
Chile  
Bangkok  
Morocco

WHY WE TRAVEL

## Horse Sense

Nervousness, self-doubt, fear—during equine therapy, our four-legged friends help us recognize the vibes we're giving off



During an Equus Experience session at Four Seasons Resort Rancho Encantado

**I**t's an early morning in May, and a low desert sun is rising over Purple Sage Ranch, a dusty sprawl surrounded by the saguaro-studded Santa Catalina Mountain foothills. I've come to meet Lucinda Vette, the head equine facilitator at Miraval Resorts in Tucson, for a session with a quartet of horses. My mother was supposed to join me, but the side effects of a cancer trial drug have left her napping in our room.

This wasn't my first time working with horses. Over the past few years, I'd visited Wyatt Webb, Miraval's recently retired, Oprah-endorsed "horse whisperer," whose classes helped me gain insights into my self-doubt, and I'd taken advantage of other equine offerings at Miraval's Austin and Berkshires outposts. In 2018, a solo sojourn brought me to the Equus Experience at Santa Fe's Four Seasons Resort Rancho Encantado, where I spent time with Dante, a Cavalia horse. My sole task was asking him to walk with me without a halter. I learned more about my communication style in those two hours than I had in years of talk therapy.

This time, I'd come to equine therapy with anxieties around aging, mortality, and the imminent loss of my mom. A typical session starts with an expression of intent: why you've come, what you're seeking, and, importantly, how you carry yourself—what equine facilitators refer to as your nonverbal communication with the horse. Despite trying to be present, I can't focus. The horses sense this. Minutes after I greet them, they walk to the other side of the arena. "It's hard to be vulnerable in front of others," Vette says, and gently asks me questions about how I'm doing. Indeed, as soon as I'm able to articulate my feelings, one of the horses returns to my side. When we're consistent in matching our behavior to our emotions, horses are more likely to work with us, she explains. Horses, more than 56 million years old as a species and equipped with sensitive nervous systems, are prey animals designed to scan their environment for safety. "They sense what you're giving off," Vette tells me. "Are you scared? Is your mind racing?" Horses uniquely deliver feedback based on our emotional states, often serving as a mirror for how we make choices, maintain relationships, and see ourselves. "This work is for somebody who wants to understand why they do what they do," Vette says, adding that the only prerequisite is curiosity.

Humans have known about the healing power of being around horses since 400 BC, when Hippocrates, the Greek father of medicine, lauded its benefits. Today, occupational therapists prescribe time with horses to patients with autism and cerebral palsy; it's also been useful for veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder. There isn't much scientific research around equine therapy, but several studies out of the University of Arizona show it can lower blood pressure and heart rates and regulate the nervous system.

These days, as more people are tapping into the natural world's healing powers, hotels are taking note. The Lodge at Blue Sky, Auberge Resorts Collection, a 3,500-acre ranch in Utah, gives guests the chance to work with rescued mustangs and thoroughbreds. In 2023, a new overseas program called Retreat and Conquer, run by Operation Centaur, a UK-based horse-therapy organization, will offer five-day equine retreats in remote locations, including the revered Indonesian retreat Nihi Sumba and the Cotton House on Mustique.

Last spring, I visited Zapata Ranch, a remote and immersive Western-style working ranch in southern Colorado. My mother had just passed away, and I felt a deep calling to ride the majestic animals who had given me so many personal insights over the years. It was time to dust myself off and get back in the saddle. *KATE DONNELLY*