



Into the wild

Horse whisperer Marie Franco believes that the bond between human and horse can be truly life-enhancing

By Becky Sheaves



Buckland-in-the-Moor.

In preparation, the horses are groomed, given rope halters and then Marie mixes up some white clay so that everyone can paint their own handprints on the horses, cowboys-and-indians style.

Getting dressed up for Pony Club, this is most definitely not. There is not a starched white shirt or smart black showing coat in sight. Hairnets are out. Instead the look is free-flowing manes with the odd plait thrown in at random – and that goes for both humans and horses.

Marie runs a small business called The Horse & Heart Centre, which offers the sort of equestrian training sometimes described as horse whispering. “It is a place for horses to learn the way of people in a gentle way, based on free will and confidence boosting,” she explains. “And for people of all ages and backgrounds to learn the way of horses in the same way.”

For example, as I am given a small chestnut pony to lead, she tells me that I should never pull or drag a horse by the halter. “You have to be the leader. But if the horse won’t follow you, you tap them on the shoulder or neck, as another horse would do.

“Essentially, what we are trying to do here is

learn to speak horse. Eventually you will, albeit you will still be speaking horse with a strong human accent.”

And in the pursuit of keeping her horses in the most natural way possible, Marie is moving the horses to a freer, more natural environment on the moor. “They will live there as nature intended, and forage for their food amid herbs and rocks, in a herd. It will be so much healthier for them.”

Marie is from France originally, travelled over first to Sussex in the UK, and then – finding it too groomed and manicured – has wended her way to Dartmoor. “Someone told me it would suit me, and it really does,” she laughs. She’s very charismatic. I can totally understand why Kitty, her Ardennes mare, follows her so enthusiastically. We volunteers clearly feel like doing the same.

Marie practises, and offers training in, a concept she calls Holistic Horsemanship. “This can be used for anything one might like to do with a horse, from grooming to riding or horse logging or simply watching them and understanding what they do,” she says. “It can also be a therapy – given the space horses will help us face our

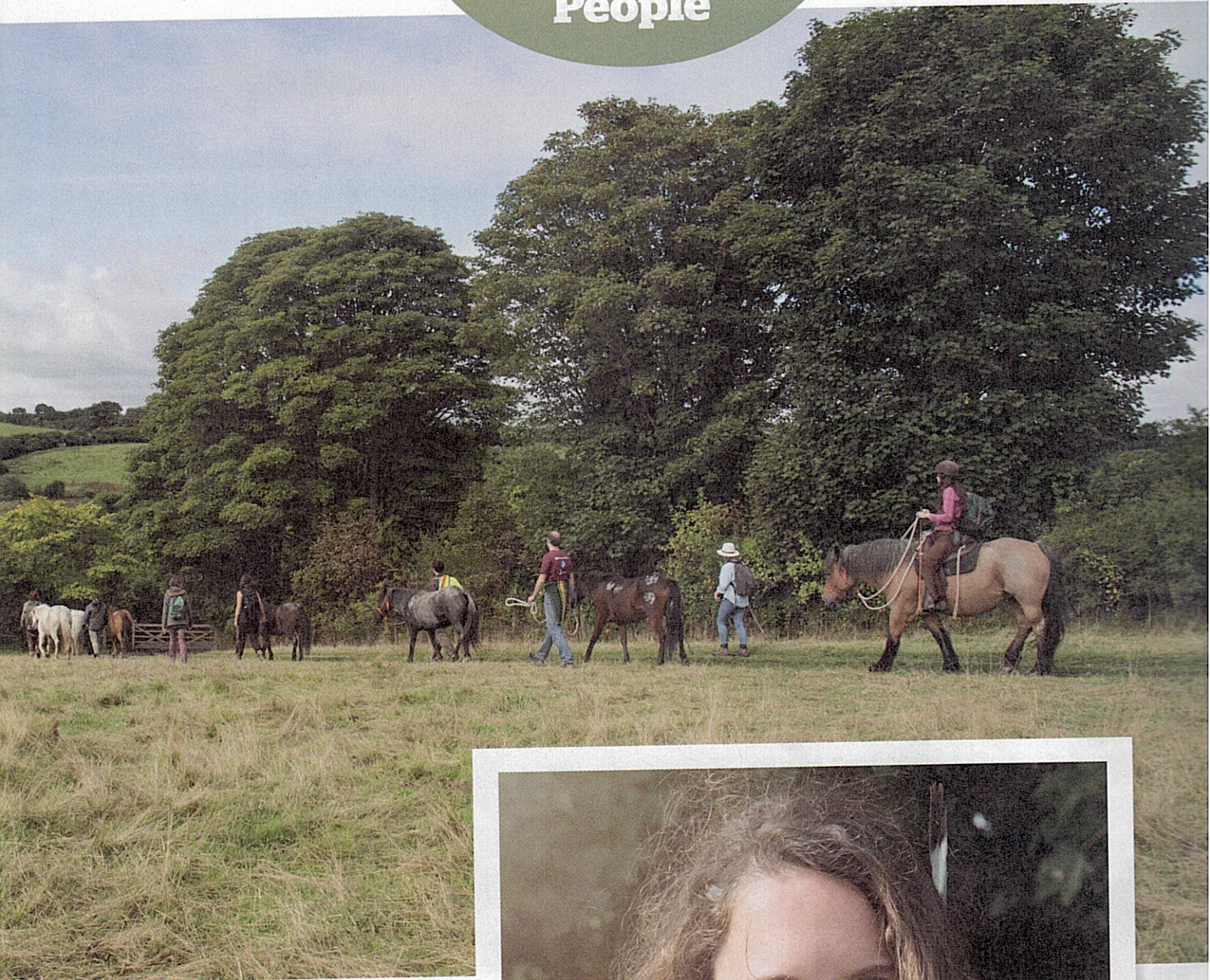
If you had a perfectly nice couple of fields, with good road access and within view of the town where you live, why on earth would you want your horses to be kept 13 miles away, on the wilds of Dartmoor? Roaming freely over 25 acres of unfenced rough moorland, where, by your own admission: “if it snows, they probably will be unreachable for a couple of days”.

That – and other questions – are uppermost in my mind when I meet Marie Franco and her horses, on a most unusual equine outing.

“We are taking the horses to their new home,” says Marie, with a broad grin, running across the field with – rather amazingly – her horse Kitty, not on a lead rein but trotting freely after her of her own accord. I have never seen a horse do that before.

We – that’s me, Marie and various volunteers – are gathered together in a field on the outskirts of Moretonhampstead. We have a day of trekking ahead of us, leading an assortment of ponies and horses on foot to their new, much wilder, home at

People



emotions and blockages and we do the same for them," she tells me as we stroll the narrow lanes towards Hound Tor.

Holistic Horsemanship is a great tool in management and leadership too, and Marie offers training for people in managerial positions at their place of work. I can quite see why this would be a good idea. I'm astonished at just how much trust and communication Marie has with her mare Kitty. For a start, she is riding in, essentially, no more than a length of knotted string, instead of a conventional bridle. There is no metal bit in Kitty's mouth. Instead, Marie relies on pressure on the string across the horse's nose, to indicate her instructions.

At one stage, Kitty doesn't want to move across the road out of the way of other riders and walkers. Marie has a long riding stick, but it is not used to hit the horse; she nudges Kitty with it on the neck and shoulders. "Again, this is talking 'horse'; this is what a horse would do to move a fellow horse over, if they were the leader," she explains.

"What I need Kitty to think is that, if something frightening happens, or something wor-



Marie Franco has plans for her horses to roam free on Dartmoor

'They will live on the moor as nature intended, foraging for their food in a herd'

*When I am an old horsewoman
I shall wear turquoise and diamonds,
And a straw hat that doesn't suit me
And I shall spend my social security on
white wine and carrots,
And sit in my alleyway of my barn
And listen to my horses breathe.*

*I will sneak out in the middle of a
summer night
And ride the old bay gelding,
Across the moonstruck meadow
If my old bones will allow
And when people come to call, I will
smile and nod
As I walk past the gardens to the barn
and show instead the flowers growing
inside stalls fresh-lined with straw.
I will shovel and sweat and wear hay in
my hair
as if it were a jewel
And I will be an embarrassment to all
Who will not yet have found the peace
in being free
to have a horse as a best friend
A friend who waits at midnight hour
With muzzle and nicker and patient
eyes
For the kind of woman I will be
When I am old.*

By Patty Barnhart

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ries her, she does not need to go into flight mode and bolt away. I want her very first thought to be, in stressful situations, 'Help! Marie!' and she will turn to me to guide her. That is what being a leader is all about.

"We humans are often aggressive or bossy with each other. Being a true leader is all about gaining respect, and that translates really well into human interactions too."

Among the volunteers joining Marie in moving the horses is Jessie Watson-Brown, who lives near Moretonhampstead and is leading a pony called Hazel. "I just enjoy helping out," she says simply. "It's great to spend the day with the horses on the moor." In her everyday life, she describes herself as a hide tanner, basket-maker and beekeeper: "Getting in touch with nature is all about what life means to me," she says.

Another volunteer is Richard Toogood, who is walking with an iron grey pony called Rosie. "I'm very interested in natural horsemanship and all it entails. I live off-grid on the moor and work as a carpenter."

For Marie, her present business is the culmination of a lifetime's ambition. She was born in

northern France and went to an international school just over the border in Germany. "I drew horses in the margins of my copybooks, sat and dreamed under trees at breaktime, and attended the local riding schools. Horses were a hobby, life on the land a dream," she says.

She worked first as a music teacher, then discovered the world of natural horsemanship, and now her Dartmoor-based business is the result of many years of training, both here in and Europe.

Joining us on the trek is Natalie Torr, who runs the Dartmoor Pony Training Centre. Indeed, it is Natalie who has bought the new tract of moorland to which we are heading. Her charity seeks to rescue and re-home unwanted ponies from the moor, a growing problem thanks to falling demand for the ponies from child riders.

There is clearly a great synergy between her work and Marie's. Natalie is taking her spotted mare, a horse which, she tells me, was broken in to be ridden conventionally but is now in the same string halter as Kitty wears. "Marie and I can work together and support what we are both doing, as our aims are so alike," says Natalie. "We both want the best for horses and ponies, wher-

ever possible."

Not all equestrian enthusiasts would totally agree, even though the idea of natural horsemanship is gaining traction in the wider horse world.

Interestingly, as we make our way upwards to the moorland, we meet a woman riding on a tall, beautiful dressage horse. She takes us in, the long line of small, hairy ponies, all with unshod hooves and untrimmed manes and tails, not to mention the relaxed, bohemian vibe of Marie, Natalie and the volunteers.

"You are clogging up the lanes! Upsetting the drivers! We already have enough problems here without you making cars wait for ages," she shouts furiously.

In fact, the few drivers we have encountered have waited patiently for us to pass with charmed smiles on their faces. I can't help but feel this complaint is only the tip of the iceberg in terms of her antipathy to what we are doing.

After all, in the more mainstream equestrian world of today, horses are kept in stables, have their coats clipped, wear weatherproof rugs, have steel shoes hammered into their feet to allow them to ride on hard ground, eat carefully-prepared diets, and so on.

For Marie, though, the more natural a horse's life, the better: foraging for food, drinking from streams, growing a long protective coat and remaining outdoors all year round is, she believes, much better for them. She shrugs off the dressage rider's complaints with a calm smile.

The clash between mainstream equestrianism and natural horsemanship is a debate that could be divisive, but I come away impressed and intrigued by what Marie is up to on Dartmoor.

As she says: "We humans think we should be teaching a horse, but in fact there is so much we can learn from horses."

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