



LEGAL HIGHS

Swimming with horses

You can lead Emma Freud to water, but can you make her swim with a horse?

Emma Freud | Saturday May 13 2023, 12.13am, The Times

Share    

Save 

I have always been scared of horses — even though my mum ran a community stable and my sister is a champion endurance rider (she got the balls, I got the fear). But I have a column to write, so when a friend invited me to go on a horseback safari in South Africa I was legally obliged to accept.

We stayed in a huge conservation area of savannah, where 40 horses roamed wild and free but arrived at our lodge every morning hoping to be chosen for the day's ride.

I was given Alex, a strapping gelding. I greeted him nervously and we set off with our guide like first-daters. Within two minutes we were grazing alongside a dazzle of zebras with their foals. We moseyed through a troop of baboons, a prickle of porcupines, a crash of rhinoceroses, and many kaleidoscopes of giraffes. Observing wild animals while riding one of their friends means you can wander among them - and within an hour I had forgotten my fear.



POPPY BELCHER

But wait . . . day two. While cantering through the bush in the morning, we stopped suddenly at a deep, brown watering hole and our guide broke the news about today's special treat. We were going swimming on our horses, bareback. As Alex's saddle and my trousers came off, the fear returned. I watched one rider come tumbling down as his horse reared in the shallows — and I shook. Alex waded in . . . I prayed for mercy. Deeper and deeper he strode, until finally his legs no longer touched the bottom. He started to swim . . . and so did I, our heads barely above water, his legs pumping beneath, my panicky limbs floating behind me.

As he carried me through the lake, I fell profoundly in love with him. Deep in the water, deep in nature, it was the ultimate natural high. (I was also inordinately grateful that Alex was the type of horse who enjoyed his food - my friend's horse was bony and her front bottom will never be the same again.)

It's not often that life presents that intoxicating mixture of emotions: fear, then ecstasy, energy, and a feeling of harmony with the world. It was a deep and euphoric joy: the cold water, the strong horse, utterly trusting and trusted. I would never have done it without the commitment required by this column, so for this treasured high, thank YOU.

waterberg.net