



# Close encounters

by Izak Hofmeyr

Combining close contact with horses with the stunningly beautiful surroundings of the Eastern Free State, causes something to shift in people, opening them up for a profound experience that affects them long after they had gone back home. This, says Di Armour, is the foundation of what she calls the Equus Soul Encounter they offer at Shumba Valley near Fouriesburg.

Di and her husband Bob have been living on Shumba Valley for a good ten years now, moving here from high-pressure jobs in Johannesburg. Because they have experienced it first-hand, they understand the stresses and pressures people are subjected to in big city life. It is based on this understanding that they have shaped the products that they offer on the farm.

"I believe that horses can assist people in connecting anew with the environment, and ultimately with themselves. Much of what we offer here revolves around a connection with the environment. And it is often little things that trigger the urge to look deeper, to try and see more, which in the end makes the whole experience memorable."

Arriving typically on a Friday evening, participants would have an introductory session consisting of conversations around the well-stocked bar called The Armoury, followed by a delicious home-cooked dinner. The following morning everybody is up early and out by the stables to help with the feeding of the horses. Here Di would point out various characteristics of the individual horses. This makes many people sensitive for the first time in their lives to the fact that horses communicate non-verbally.



### Day one

"Most people coming on these encounters never had any exposure to horses in their lives before, so the first step is to teach those who volunteer some basic skills. Learning how to lead a horse safely, for example, is often a real eye-opener.

"Riding, on these courses, is totally optional. We find that most people don't want to ride the first day, but actually decide to get on by the second day. Once everybody is relaxed in the company of the horses, we all walk out into the veld, taking a few horses with us. Some, at this point, choose to get on a horse, while others prefer just to lead them."

Di would be at the forefront of this group to point out various little things to them. "I find that pointing out interesting facts regarding the things that we see around us, opens up an

aspect of the environment to the participants that most of them are largely oblivious to."

The stroll through the veld would take the group to the river where they would arrive just about ready for a leisurely lunch under the trees.

"The next activity is aimed to make the participants observe even more acutely. Every member of the group gets a chance to take a horse away from the group and just sit quietly while it grazes. They are briefed to try and observe little things, like how it uses its lips and which grasses it picks out."

During the course of the day participants are encouraged to pick various plants and collect things they find interesting. These are stuck into booklets that serve as a reference when they go home. It also contains some handy herbal recipes for all manner of ailments. Those who

want to, also gather plants that they take home to plant in their gardens in the city.

"After dinner on the Saturday evening we go on a night walk, again with the horses, but this time every single participant has to lead a horse. This is a very intense experience and the next day they won't stop talking about the connection they felt with their horses. In the total darkness they have no choice but to trust the horses. The close proximity of these large animals, the body warmth and the breathing all combine to make the closeness with the horses very real. The walk only lasts about 45 minutes and everything is very relaxed. It is surprising how exhausted everybody is by then, for they have been exposed to a total experience, involving them intellectually, physically and emotionally."

### Day two

On the second day, says Di, they find that most people choose to ride. "Again we go out into the veld. We spend our time looking for things that we did not manage to find the day before."

It is at this point, Di says, that she is able to observe how people are getting connected. They are tuned into the horses, are aware of the people around them, are acutely aware of their environment and are clearly aware of themselves in a different way compared to when they arrived at the farm.

At around noon lunch is served and by late afternoon everybody packs up and leaves for home.

"I find that very traumatised people, such as women who have been raped, go home and enter a period of deep depression. I have a psychologist in Johannesburg who is on stand-by in such cases. Although it is all part of the healing process, I feel we would be irresponsible to leave these people without any support."

Apart from the Equus Soul Encounter, Di and Bob offer a whole range of other experiences, including riding adventure trips of up to four days, therapeutic riding and team building experiences for companies. Particularly close to her heart is their Equus Enviro Youth Encounter where the focus is on teaching kids about the environment and their responsibility not only towards it, but also towards themselves.

"We place a huge emphasis on body language awareness in the use of horses. This awareness can be very productively taken into the corporate environment. One of the main points we try to emphasise is that one does not have to be aggressive to dominate, or have absolute control to be in command of a situation. Understanding the basics of respect for one another, is the basis of interpersonal communication." SAH



## GET CONNECTED!

Feelings are the language of the soul. Learn with us the wisdom of the horse and the vibrance of our planet. A therapeutic encounter, because we have reclaimed old-fashioned fun!!

Shumba Valley Farm  
**Shumba Valley Farm**

Bookings essential! Min 4, max 10  
School groups: 1-day and 4-day camps, max 40 children

For more information, contact us on: Tel/fax: 058 223 0277 • Bob's cell: 072 227 6752 • Dis cell: 084 562 9818  
E-mail: [barmour@worldonline.co.za](mailto:barmour@worldonline.co.za) • Website: [www.shumbavalleyfarm.co.za](http://www.shumbavalleyfarm.co.za)