

Research Foundation:

Learning & Riding Vacations for Horses and Humans

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"It was one of the best vacations I have ever spent. The two weeks just flew by and the learning gained has helped me in my relationships with horses as well as people," comments Corinne Johnson, Therapeutic Horseback Riding Program Advisory Board member, of her two-week vacation at the Equine Research Foundation (ERF). "I learned about the mind and spirit of the horse, rather than just the physical machinations people put them through."

That is what people come to do at the Equine Research Foundation, located in the coastal hills of Northern California's Aptos. The purpose of this nonprofit organization is to advance knowledge about equine learning abilities and, thereby, improve the human/horse relationship as well as the care and wellbeing of horses. Horse enthusiasts travel from all around the world to attend one-week and two-week learning and riding vacations or internships lasting from one to three months.

Participants do it all at the ERF ranch. In this one-of-a-kind adventure (in part, tax deductible) they assist with noninvasive cognition and learning research during part of the day. The rest of the time is spent

immersed in hands-on horseplay, during which participants learn and improve their skills in horse training, handling, and bonding. Methods based on ERF discoveries, awareness of the equine mind, learning theory, natural horsemanship, and positive reinforcement are used to build relationships amazingly strong in trust and understanding.

The ERF experience "made me realize that we do not give these animals any or enough of the 'right' training time to deal with the challenges and obstacles we place before them," says Robyn Reynolds, two-week vacation participant from Australia. "In

particular, when in the saddle, humans are so quick to punish them when what they need is a training program that acknowledges their mental ability and how they process stimuli or information." Two-weeker Rebecca Bailin concurs. "It absolutely changed my perception of horses and made my love for them more respectful."

Participants arrive with all sorts of different goals. Some come for research experience and school credit; others just for training instruction and riding; others just want to have fun. All share the desire to become better with horses. Programs are balanced between developing human/horse relationships on the ground and riding on the Monterey Bay beaches, mountain trails, through the redwoods and vineyard, as well as in the arena. Following a full day of horses, participants return to a newly renovated ranch house set in the midst of a vineyard to relax on the deck overlooking the valley or go for a swim in the pool or head into nearby resort towns for an evening of sightseeing and entertainment.

"I came to the Equine Research Foundation because I wanted to know more about how horses think and learn and to gain some experience in research. I came away from the program with not only a better understanding of how horses think and learn but how I can change the way I think in order to improve the relationship between my horse and I," says Kai Smith, UC Davis student, of her month long internship. My time at the ERF gave me valuable insights into the mind of the horse. This way of thinking has changed the way I work with my own horse and how I think about the horse-human relationship."

Article provided by ERF. For more information, please visit the ERF website at www.equineresearch.org; email EquiResF@aol.com; or call 831 662 9577.

