

Versatile Arabian horses

We all know that Arabian horses are a versatile breed. Arabians dominate the discipline of endurance riding, and compete in many other fields of equestrian sport. You can find Arabians everywhere, including the United States and Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, Europe, South America, and their land of origin, the Middle East. But Arabian horses who play an important role in a coach retreat, in Namibia, Africa? That needs some explaining!

Arabian horses

Arabian horses are beautiful, good-natured, quick to learn, willing to please and able to form a cooperative relationship with humans. These qualities don't just make them excellent horses in competition and sports, it makes them excellent coaches as well. Their sensitive nature and high spirit makes Arabian horses react to your behavior and mindset in a clear way which makes you think of your own actions.



in Namibia

by Caja Revenich ■ photos by Caja Revenich, Eric Malherbe

**“There is something about the outside of a horse
that is good for the inside of a man”**

Winston Churchill



To be honest, that hasn't always been my believe. Like most people I started riding horses at a young age, I was 8 years old to be exact. From age 8 until 19 I took lessons at the local riding school and enjoyed riding horses and grooming them. During those years I came across a variety of horses and some horses I loved and some horses I didn't like so much. I learned about riding horses and taking care of them, but I didn't learn about the horse language or building a trustful relationship with horses. It never crossed my mind that I could actually learn from these horses and that the way they reacted to me, was a reflection of my behavior and my state of mind.

Looking back I now understand why I sometimes got bitten or kicked. I was taught to be the boss and did not show the horse how I really felt. At times when I was nervous, anxious, tense, frustrated or angry (like every normal teenager) I just put a big smile on my face and went to the stables. Well, I know better now. You should not play a role when you are with a horse.....

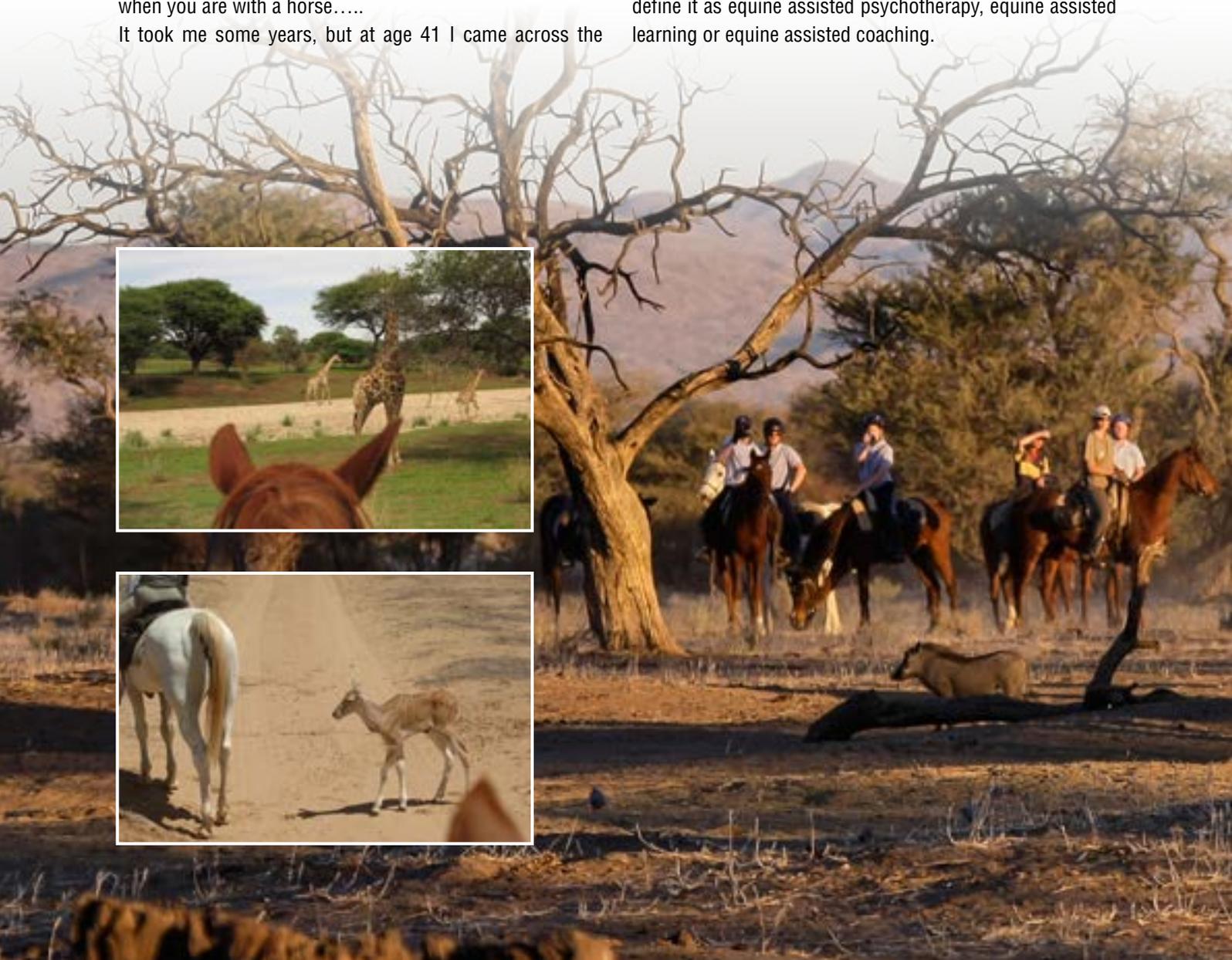
It took me some years, but at age 41 I came across the

right people and I learned about a different side of horses. It all began when I bought a book 'coaching with horses'. It changed the way I look at horses and it changed my life in the process.

Equine assisted work

That book opened a new world for me: equine assisted work. A lot of different names are used, but they basically mean the same; equine assisted psychotherapy, equine facilitated psychotherapy, equine assisted coaching, equitherapy, hippotherapy, horse boy method, equine assisted learning, therapeutic riding. There are 2 main differences; at one side you have equine assisted work which involves horseback riding (like therapeutic riding or the horse boy method) and on the other side you have equine assisted work in which activities take place beside the horse.

Depending on the professional therapeutic background of the person who is performing the equine assisted work, you define it as equine assisted psychotherapy, equine assisted learning or equine assisted coaching.



After reading the book about equine assisted work I decided to start the 2 years training on equine assisted coaching according to the EAGALA model. EAGALA, which means Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association, is a worldwide organization committed to develop and professionalize equine assisted therapy and learning. Especially in the USA equine assisted work is very popular already. The rest of the world is starting to embrace this type of therapy and learning as well.

How does equine assisted therapy work?

The EAGALA website has a well written explanation about how and why therapy with horses works so well:

“Horses are large and powerful. Interacting with a horse

can help create confidence and can be rich metaphors in dealing with other areas of life. Horses can be a metaphor for relationships. Horses are helpful in this therapy as they are social animals and have distinct personalities and places within the herd. What works with one horse may not work with another. They also are prey animals and because of this they are aware of their environment and non-verbal aspects of communication which encourages the participants to look more closely at their own non-verbal aspects of communication and how this impacts relationships and movement towards attaining goals. In working with horses issues that arise include those of trust, respect, boundaries, affection, impact of non-verbal communication, leadership, patience and assertiveness.



Working with horses in a psychotherapeutic encounter can create a non-threatening mirror where individuals can look at themselves with compassion, objectivity and understanding. By connecting and associating the horses experience to their own, it fosters getting in touch with one's own feelings, beliefs, thought patterns and behaviors moving towards the exploration and experience of making different choices. Working with horses is an encounter for change and growth, individuals integrate learning through direct experience. It promotes change through action”.

Research on equine assisted work

The last years a lot of research has been done on the effectiveness of equine assisted work, especially in the USA. Studies show that being among and riding horses cause a significant reduction of cortisol (stress) hormone and increase the level of oxytocin (feel-good) hormone. Studies concluded that especially riding horses in collected gaits increases the levels of oxytocin. This has to do with the rocking of the hips during the riding. The horse boy method makes good use of this effect and provides an

effective therapy for people in the autism spectrum.

You don't have to be an autist to benefit from the positive effects of being around horses and riding horses. Other studies also concluded that, the people who were being coached with the horses, show a significant reduction of stress and anxiety and show an increase of social competences and increased self-efficacy.

The feedback I get back from my clients is that the horses have a relaxing and grounding effect during the coaching sessions. People tend to be more open and trust me faster compared to the coaching sessions I do without horses. Therefore, I am able to get to core of the problem quickly. A big advantage of working with horses is the opportunity for people to learn new behavior on the spot. Once you have concluded what the issue is, you can start to find new solutions for your situation. New behavior is often part of that. The horse gives instant feedback on that new behavior and tells you what works and what doesn't work. And all in a safe environment, because a horse doesn't judge you.

**“If you always do what you've always done,
you'll always get what you've always got”**

Okapuka Horse Safaris Namibia



I have explained most of the story, but how about Namibia in Africa?!

The past years I have travelled to Namibia several times. What started out as a horse riding holiday at Okapuka Horse Safaris turned into a friendship with the owner, Ingeborg Hernes and a huge love for Namibia.

I really enjoy the African nature, the weather, and the beautiful Arabian horses to ride during the horse safaris. I have worked as a guide on the horse safaris a couple of times. A year ago, one of the guests said to me; being here is like a vacation for my soul. I absolutely feel the same way when I am there. Encountering wildlife while riding your horse, enjoying the silence and nature, but also having a drink at the bar and watching the wild animals drink at the waterhole makes Okapuka very special.

This inspired me to organize a coach retreat at Okapuka so more people are able to enjoy this magical place and learn from the Arabian horses.



“Take me to Namibia, my soul needs to breathe”

The Arabian horses at Okapuka Horse Safaris are known for their versatility. Not only are the horses schooled in dressage and used for the horse safaris, there are also a few endurance champions Nabilah The Makers Masterpiece (2007), MAI Baaroot (2014) and Le-Wardi Coco, who achieved several Best Conditioned Horse Awards. The stables are graced with the Namibian National Champion Western Pleasure 2016, Baraka Magic Star (Baraka Ibn Hassan x AK Rodaniah) and Hendri Egyptian Pearl (Maistro x Hendri Reata) the National Reserve Champion Novice Riding Horse 2016.

In April 2017 a coach retreat will take place at Okapuka Horse Safaris where the horses play an important role. Next to the horse safari rides, the sensitive Arabian horses will also be used as coaches and teachers for the participants of the coach retreat we call Soul Vacation.

In an interview with Ingeborg Hernes, owner of Okapuka Horse Safaris and MAI Arabians I asked her about her experiences with Arabian horses.

How did you end up in Namibia?

I went on a holiday to Namibia in February 1999 and lost my heart the moment I set my foot on Namibian soil. It was as if I was struck by lightning and knew I could call this beautiful country my future home. At that time I had nothing to do with horses except that I enjoyed riding them and being around them; they gave me peace of

mind. After giving the possibility of moving to Namibia some more thought and returning to Namibia only 3 months later to have my feelings confirmed I decided it was time for action. Not wanting to continue in my profession (Human Resource Manager) I had to find something else to keep me alive. As I loved horses, Namibia's abundance of wildlife, stunning nature and wide open spaces, the idea of setting up a professional horse safari company came quick. After a lot of research on what other horse safari companies were offering and a year apprenticeship at a specialized horse vet, I went from Human Resource Manager to Horse Resource Manager. Once the negotiations were done (took more than a year) I finally received the green light to build the stables and the houses. Having empty stables is of no use and therefore they had to be graced by horses. But which breed of horses?

What made you choose for Arabian horses for the horse safaris and later on for your breeding business?

As a child, living and competing dressage in The Netherlands, I once saw a young lady on a white purebred Arabian horse doing a dressage test. This picture had such an impact on me that I promised myself to be the proud owner of such a gorgeous horse one day. Therefore, the choice was an easy one; Arabian horses it would be! Having set up the stables it



was time to start the search party for Arabian horses in Namibia and South Africa. Furthermore, the horses had to be of the right age and preferably already under saddle. This proved not to be an easy task; at that stage there were not a lot of breeders of the Arabian horse on my side of the world. Five horses were bought in South Africa of which only 1 was under saddle; 3 horses in Namibia which were still too young to be brought under saddle. Later on another few were bought in an auction and brought under saddle by a local guy. A few months later Sidi Makkhir (Maistro x Arabest Khirida), the Senior Champion Stallion South Africa, was bought. And what are you going to do with a stallion? Obviously, buy a few mares to keep him happy. And so the breeding of the Straight Egyptian Arabian started.

Over the years horses were brought in from the U.S.A. (Baraka Magic Star and RHR Sunset Cowboy [Thee Desperado x Chelima]), Germany (Shai Shirin [Shaikeel x Sanaa]) and Belgium (Flaxman's Zaroufa [Niyashin x Aaroufa]) and of course South Africa and Namibia.

What makes the Arabian horse special to you?

Their beauty and grace, their inquisitiveness, intelligence and aloofness, their sensitivity, gentleness and power, their playfulness and (wicked) sense of humor, their willingness to work and please, and of course their versatility.

What did you personally learn from working with your horses?

Each horse has its own character and their preference for a job, whether the job is 'just' the safari rides or endurance or being in the show ring. And more often than not, these three jobs go hand in hand. Being an introvert by nature the horses taught me to be more extrovert (definitely helpful in my profession). Furthermore, I learned to relax to get the best performance out of the horses, learned to trust them and I learned to compromise and to be less dominant.

Do you have a special relationship with one of your horses?

Even though I love all my horses dearly, there is one who has stolen my heart; Nabilah The Makers Masterpiece (The Makers Mark x Nabilah Shazedah). From the moment I saw him in South Africa I knew there was something about him, but he was not on the list to travel to Namibia. Once all horses were bought in South Africa and cross border paper work being prepared I couldn't get him out of my head. So without the knowledge of my –in the meantime- ex-partner I decided that Masterpiece had to join the transport. I called to owner to have them prepare his paper work and transferred his purchase price. The deal was done! Once all horses arrived and were stabled we

went through the stables looking at them and admiring them. My ex-partner stopped at Masterpiece and asked me who this horse was as he couldn't remember. So, I introduced them whereupon he replied: "But we didn't buy him!" and I said: "You're right! We didn't, but I did". It took quite a while for Masterpiece to be brought under saddle as he was not an easy horse. I remember my first ride on him and thought I was on top of the world! Over time our bond grew and we knew exactly what the other was thinking. We trusted each other especially in difficult situations; we were partners, partners in crime. He was the love of my life.

As stated earlier, my gorgeous Arabian horses have proven themselves not only to be excellent horses on the safari rides, but also in the show ring (halter and riding classes) and on the (international) endurance scene.

As I am a keen endurance rider Okapuka Horse Safaris gives endurance and non-endurance riders the opportunity to join me in one of Namibia's endurance competitions. Especially for non-endurance riders it is difficult to get a taste of what endurance is all about in their own country. Okapuka Horse Safaris offers this opportunity to do just that in combination with our safari rides.

Now, 17 years after my first step on Namibian soil I am the proud owner of 30 Arabian horses; youngsters, broodmares, stallions, safari and endurance horses. Dreams can come true!

Well, need I say more?

Ingeborg's personal and inspiring story shows me again how special Arabian horses are and how they can act as teachers in your life, as long as you are open to it.

Okapuka Horse Safaris in Namibia is the perfect place for you to experience Arabian horses as your teachers with a little help from the coaches facilitating the coach retreat. Join us, take the time to relax, enjoy, reflect and learn about yourself.

Getting curious about all the possibilities at Okapuka and the coach retreat? More info can be found on our Facebook page FB Soul Vacation Namibia and www.okapuka.com.

Caja Revenich
Equine assisted coach in the Netherlands
www.cajaco.nl

www.okapuka.com - www.eagala.org
FB Soul Vacation Namibia

Soul Vacation Namibia will take place from:
April 8 - April 15, 2017
September 18 - 25, 2017