

SUZANNE MORPHET

discovers a new type of therapy in Ecuador

Mist swirls across the wide, open plateau of Ruminahui, a dormant volcano in the highlands of Ecuador.

The air is thin up here and we stop to catch our breath and look at six long-horned bulls in the distance.

"Wild bulls", they're called. Descendants of cattle introduced by Spaniards more than 500 years ago, these animals have adapted to the high altitude with bigger hearts, stronger lungs and smaller hoofs.

Once or twice a year, the local chagras — cowboys — at Hacienda El Porvenir round them up for market or keep them for breeding.

But surprisingly perhaps, ranching is not what keeps this ranch going. Tourism is.

"The idea is to create a model to show other landowners that they can still do business and have their crops and have their cattle

and stay close to their traditions while being more sustainable," says Maria Jose Andrade, one of the brains behind tourism operator Tierra del Volcan.

And almost 25 years into it, it's working.

The wild bulls are now secondary players, fewer than before, but still necessary. "The chagra and cowboy culture is linked intrinsically with the

horses and with the cattle," Andrade says. "So if we take out this, we're going to take out a core concept of the local culture."

Yet, the paramo — the ecosystem of the high-altitude Andes — is no longer what it was, having been overgrazed by livestock, and burned and deforested for centuries.

It was the current owner's father who decided to do things differently. "He understood that the water comes from the highlands," Andrade says. "And those areas that have forest are more wet than those that don't."

So in 1998, the owner started planting trees and shrubs and the following year, Hacienda El Porvenir opened its doors to visitors. Hiking, mountain biking, cooking classes and, of course, horseback riding are all on offer.

These days, 80 bulls range over 450ha in the upper paramo, a smaller area is farmed more intensively, and a 350ha chunk has been returned to nature.

Starting our descent, we walk

Hacienda El Porvenir offers twice-daily horseback rides for guests. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet

through an enchanting forest of polylepis trees with sinuous trunks and layers of papery red bark. Other native trees and shrubs are thriving too. To date, the owners have planted an incredible 680,000.

"I remember the first time I appreciated the variety of plants when I was hiking with some Germans," says Felipe, one of our guides. "They said, 'in Germany, at about 4000m you have nothing. No plants, just rocks'. And here there's so much."

Something else is happening at Hacienda El Porvenir too.

It's not something you can name, like the caracara bird we spot on a fence post.

It's not something you can point to, like Cotopaxi, Ecuador's legendary volcano, which we see one evening after the fog lifts and we rush outside to capture its snow-capped beauty on our phones.

This thing has to do with the ranch's 40 horses.

About six months ago, Andrade

got a voice message from her vet: "Hey, I need to know, what are you feeding your horses? What's happening? How are they handling the horses at the farm? Because I see that the herd, in general, is way more accessible."

One horse, for instance, who never allowed anyone to touch his face was now letting the vet do so.

Andrade believes it's because the horses are enjoying better relationships with people.

CONTINUED PAGE 18

The Andes high life makes horse sense



Suzanne Morphet gets comfortable with horses at Hacienda El Porvenir, including this horse named Fusil.



Trumpet flowers grow at high elevation in the Andes, including by the horse corral at Hacienda El Porvenir.



The horses wait in front of the main house to be saddled up.



It's easy to see why polylepis trees are known as "paper trees".



Suzanne Morphet's husband enjoys playing the role of a cowboy at Hacienda El Porvenir, wearing traditional chagra attire of wool poncho and sheepskin chaps.



Local guide Miguel Guacialpud taking guests on hikes through the reforested part of the paramo.

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FROM PAGE 17

Instead of just being ridden, they interact with visitors.

"They know when we're going to ride them and they know when we're going to therapy," Andrade tells me one day when we're drinking tea by the fireplace.

Going to therapy?

If I already feel off-kilter from the altitude, the idea of going to therapy with horses leaves me speechless.

But minutes later, I'm in the large corral with four horses and Andrade. She directs me to greet each horse in turn and see what happens. Three of the horses continue to graze and barely acknowledge me, but one is interested. Fusil walks up to me, smells me, looks me in the eyes. I can feel his warm breath on my face and sense his curious intelligence.

"Horses work as mirrors," Andrade explains. "Usually, they will show certain aspects of you."

"It's not about reading tarot cards or looking into the future. It's about having a different relationship and exploring a little bit further. And you can go as deep as you want."

I'm willing to go deep, but suddenly it starts to rain, then hail. We run for cover.

The next morning I'm up early to help one of the chagras fetch the horses from their overnight pasture. I realise I'm seeing them differently now, especially when a few horses give us the slip and sneak back into the field. They're just like people, I think, not wanting to go to work on a Monday morning.

That's not something I expected to learn by visiting a ranch in the Andes, but perhaps this horse therapy has given me some horse sense.

WYNTK
what you need to know

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Suzanne Morphet was a guest of Tierra del Volcan. They have not reviewed or approved this story.



Wool ponchos hang to air on the fence of the horse corral at Hacienda El Porvenir. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet