



A wild ride

Horse trainer and film-maker Emma Massingale has made a career of showcasing her unique and beautiful friendships with her animals. If you're lucky enough to have pets in your life, she'd love to inspire you to get out exploring with them

When Emma Massingale goes out for her daily dose of fresh air in the stunning Cornish countryside, she likes to take an unusual group of friends along for the ride. What Emma calls her 'tribe rides' have made her something of a spectacle, and curious drivers and walkers often stop to take photos or ask questions. She rides her ponies without traditional tack such as bits, bridles and stirrups, and can often be found sitting astride one mount while leading another. Meanwhile, Emma's dogs hitch a lift on a specially designed pack saddle with padded platforms – including heated seats for her comfort-loving dachshunds. Emma's nosy cat, Louis, sits tucked into a rucksack on her back, purring loudly in her ear.

'Going out with my tribe is a shared experience,' she explains. 'The inter-species friendships are very special; everyone is considerate of one another and we all really enjoy it. I think

you experience and understand nature differently when you're in the company of animals.'

Animal attraction

Emma grew up on a smallholding with sheep and goats, resulting in a lifelong passion for animals. She was pony mad, but her family could only afford to buy her a horse that nobody else would ride – a large, bad-tempered Irish Draught called Kariba who had a reputation for bucking to unseat his riders.

'I ended up on the floor frequently,' she laughs. 'I took him to Pony Club camp once and we were terrible. But at the end of the week, I got a special rosette for the most-improved rider, because I'd managed to go a couple of hours without falling off.' Emma persevered, and as a teenager she spent all her free time at the stable yard, where she eventually met her now long-term



partner and videographer Jeremy Colwill, who was a riding instructor at the time.

By 2000, Emma was 18 and her passion for training difficult horses was drawing attention. She was offered the opportunity of a lifetime – three months working on a cattle and horse station near Margaret River in Western Australia.

'It was the most incredible experience,' Emma remembers. 'There was no internet, it was hot and dusty, and I slept in a tin shed in a hammock. But I loved the simple way of life, working with the animals, herding cattle on a quad bike and sleeping beneath the stars.'

It was also where Emma first learned the liberty method of training horses without traditional tack, instead working to forge trust and build a relationship. 'If horses like you, then they will look after you,' she says. 'I learned that if you treat animals as friends, earn their trust and make good decisions for them, then there's no reason for them not to want to work with you.'

Out of the comfort zone

For the next few years, Emma spent three months every summer working in Australia. Meanwhile, back in the UK, she set up her own business, building a reputation for re-training so-called problem horses. But by 2014, she was feeling burnt out and ready for a new challenge, so she came up with an unusual idea. 'I wondered what would happen if I was marooned on an island, with no food or shelter and only wild horses for company,' she says. 'Would I be able to train the horses with no equipment or assistance, just out in nature together?'

Emma pitched the idea to a documentary company and, in June 2015, found herself on a boat to a remote outcropping off the west coast of Ireland. On board were six Connemara ponies, including two that were completely untrained. 'There was only one spot on the island where I could get a mobile phone signal,' she says. 'Watching the boat sail away, I did have a moment where I thought "Oh my God, what have I done?" I suddenly felt quite vulnerable.'

Over the next month, Emma filmed *The Island Project*, making video diaries documenting herself spear-fishing in the sea, harvesting cockles, laying out seaweed to dry into crisps and – most crucially – working to earn the trust of the six wild ponies. 'I slept in a leaky tent, but with the ponies snuffling about outside, I never felt alone,' she says. 'The biggest risk was backing them [introducing a horse to a saddle, bridle and rider], because if I fell off and hurt myself, there was no one on the island to help, but by the end of the month, I was able to ride them with no saddles or bridles. The ponies were my friends and we'd spent every day surviving and exploring together.'

Emma remembers the experience as magical and says she could have 'stayed there forever'. But perhaps the most special moment was sailing back to shore. 'It was sunset and a pod of dolphins came to escort the boat,' she says. 'It's so easy in our lives to always be busy – but living on that island was so simple.'



Putting the cart before the horse

Following the success of *The Island Project*, Emma and Jeremy established themselves as film-makers, trained dogs and horses for films and commercials, and also offered bespoke riding holidays from their 35-acre home near Bude. Emma made several more documentaries, including *Horseboarding the Hebrides*, which followed her adventure from south to north through the Outer Hebrides. She made the journey on a modified mountain board, which was pulled by her pair of rare-breed Eriskay ponies.

Then, in 2019, yet another wild idea suggested itself. Emma explains: 'For over 2,000 years, humans have been using horses for transport and industry, riding them into battle, ploughing fields and pulling carriages. I wondered what would happen if I turned the tables.' To raise money for international equine charity Brooke, which supports working horses, ponies and donkeys around the world, Emma came up with an attention-grabbing concept. 'I wanted to connect with non-horsey people, and make them smile and ask questions,' she says.

The challenge saw Emma set out on a 1,135km trip across Europe in spring 2019, starting in Basel and following the River Rhine to finish just south of Rotterdam. She rode a specially adapted bicycle and towed a curious cargo. An engineer friend had helped modify a small horsebox to transport two Shetland ponies in comfort, with a shelf for Emma's dachshund Inca.



Instead of the horses pulling the cart, Emma's bicycle would pull the ponies. They stayed in campsites, stretched the ponies' legs in farmers' fields and brought city centres to a standstill as people stopped to stare.

'I remember cycling through the centre of Strasbourg and so many people were smiling and waving at us,' she says. 'A lot of folk looked at me towing the ponies and asked "haven't you got that the wrong way round?" but the reactions were overwhelmingly positive.' She adds: 'One of the biggest privileges of that trip was all the smiles we created. A lot of people get impatient when they see horses on the road, but instead they were stopping to meet the ponies and ask questions. I think we left a positive hoofprint on a lot of people's hearts.'

Let's go outside

Back in the UK after the trip, there was one man in Emma's life who was particularly happy to have her home. Louis, her nosy and inquisitive cat, had been sad to be left behind, so she started to experiment with ways to take him along on her daily rides with her ponies. With Louis tucked into her rucksack as she explored her local fields and forests, the idea for tribe rides developed. 'I wanted to take my dogs too, but worried they would be at risk off-lead beside me on the roads,' she explains. 'Jeremy and I adapted a pack saddle, adding two carefully-balanced platforms, wrapped in fleece bedding, with heat pads

for colder weather. It meant the dogs could ride beside me or jump down when they wanted to run and explore.'

Now, Emma goes out for a tribe ride most days, usually in the company of at least two ponies, her dachshunds Tweedy and Pompom, labrador Luna and dalmatian Nancy. Louis the cat joins in but as Emma observes, he's a fair-weather rider and prefers to stay at home when it's raining. Emma's also busy working towards her next adventure project. Inspired by the movie *The Incredible Journey*, she's making a film about her bridleless rides with her tribe.

'There's no therapy on earth like going out for a walk or ride with an animal,' she says. 'It's always the highlight of my day. If you're lucky enough to have a pet, spend as much time with them as possible and really invest in that friendship, because the love, trust and companionship will come back to you in spades.'

Emma adds: 'I'd love to inspire people to get outdoors with their dog, cat or other animal, and see the world through their eyes. It's the most undervalued and unappreciated thing, and best of all – it's free! You will always come home feeling better.'

Words: Jade Beecroft

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PHOTOGRAPHS: JEREMY COLWILL