



animal magic

AUSTRALIAN SPAS are trotting the line between WEIRD and WONDERFUL with treatments incorporating horses, space-age pods and baths good enough to drink, finds *CELESTE MITCHELL*.

JACK AND I ARE getting fairly intimate. My chest is pressed against his muscular shoulder; I try to synchronise the rise and fall of our breath. I open my eyes and take in every part of his neck, his hair, running my hand down his back. But he knows I'm not really into it, with a quick jerk he moves away. Out of reach. "What were you thinking about just then?" Jack's trainer Megan breaks into my consciousness.

It's not that we're being watched that's off-putting. I've been trying to learn to meditate for the past year, being told the mind is like a puppy you need to train. Apparently mine is a very naughty puppy. The analogy likens your thoughts to the puppy's penchant to wander, or chew its lead (or bark like mad), but it's up to you to rein it back in. To calm it like Cesar Millan calms a dachshund.

Never has the metaphor been so apt for me as right now, as I'm standing in an arena at Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat with

a handsome horse named Jack. This is meditation on an entirely different level. There's nowhere to hide from this wise soul whose bare instincts can hold a mirror up to my headspace, and whose every whinny or foot stomp is telling.

Admittedly, I find it hard to shake off the image of what I must look like crouching down in front of Jack, trying to relax enough for him to bring his nose down to touch my head. I've tried alternative therapies before, but this really takes the apple.

Megan developed the Equine Assisted Meditation sessions two-and-a-half years ago after noticing the sense of calmness that overcame her when she spent time with the horses at the Gold Coast Hinterland retreat.

"They're very wary if we have our walls up, or if our communication isn't clear they won't do things," she says. "So they show us how to connect and develop a rapport so we can then play together. I think what all

of us truly desire in life is to feel connected to something or someone, and then to have a really healthy way of communicating and expressing ourselves. Equine meditation is about getting guests to slow down and understand what the monkey up here can do [pointing at her head] – it can either be friend or foe. But in that moment, when this gets busy, I notice the horses just walk off."

After my initial trepidation wears off and I realise my entire goal for this hour is pretty simple – to be present and relax – Jack seems more at ease. "He likes you," Megan comments. "He doesn't usually like anyone touching his face."

By the end, using only my breath and the slightest inclination that I might take a step forward, Jack and I are prancing around the ring together. Then, with a deliberate exhale, I stop him in his tracks. Just like that.

Forget about the puppy; I've just trained my mind to be a stallion. gwinganna.com

Here are some more out-there treatments with a difference to detox your body and brain.

VINOTHERAPY

Clinging to research that affirms red wine is connected to good health? Why not marinate in it? At Lost World Spa at O'Reilly's Rainforest Retreat in the Gold Coast Hinterland, a three-hour vinotherapy treatment awaits. You may feel like a side of beef as you soak in the warm tub with a bottle of shiraz poured in, but after a full-body exfoliation and red grape and clay body wrap to infuse those antioxidants, you can expect to feel like a younger, tighter version of you. oreillys.com.au



A SHOWER OF SOUND

In the Byron Hinterland, chakra cleansing, crystal healing and monk-inspired spa therapies are as easy to come by as almond milk on menus. At Gaia Retreat & Spa, you can join a group Sound Meditation (or book a one-on-one) to harmonise your bodily frequencies. Sound weird? It feels a little out there, too, when you're led through a guided meditation then immersed in a 'shower' of flutes, Tibetan bowls, and didgeridoo tones. This hypnotic experience is designed to release anxiety, charge the brain and give you razor-sharp clarity. gaiaretreat.com.au

SENSORY DEPRIVATION

On the Sunshine Coast, The Float Space has three space-age pods loaded with 500 kilograms of Epsom salts in 25 centimetres of water, designed to erase the stresses of the outside world, so the body's parasympathetic response can kick in. One hour in the pod is said to be equivalent to four-to-eight hours of deep sleep. thefloatspace.com.au

CHAMPAGNE SCRUB

Perhaps not so much weird as mouth-watering, the Signature Vino Spa Ritual at Spicers Vineyards Estate in the Hunter Valley kicks off with a pink Champagne scrub followed with a cocoa butter body wrap, choc mousse and cacao nib face scrub, and a facial infusion that contains 1000 milligrams of freeze-dried shiraz. You'll be dewier than morning frost on the vines. spicersretreats.com 

