

On Horse Time



WORDS BY Alex Mullarky
PHOTOS BY Meegan May

We drive up a lane shaded by eucalyptus trees and park between two dams. As we step out of the car, our ears fill with birdsong and the echoing 'bong' sound of what the women of Wedgetail Rides refer to as 'the bong-bong frogs'. At the edge of one of the dams is a painted bus, which turns out to be the tack room, and, above it, a sheltered arena, perched on a forested hill. Only a third of the 150-acre property is cleared for horses; the rest is bush and it envelops us at once.

"I think with women particularly, we've got a hundred things we need to do right now," says Lindy Schneider, who helps proprietor Kim Wren in the running of Wedgetail Rides. "The minute you enter this property here, there's something that happens where all that can drop away."

"If you've got a horse, you know about 'horse time' - where minutes on a clock don't really matter. You're just here and present," Lindy goes on. "There's something that grounds you and makes you feel real, being with a horse. I guess they don't care what your hair and make-up's like, or what your brand of handbag is. They just care that you're there for them. That lesson may be subtle but it's a very deep, moving one for people I think."

Wedgetail Rides is much more than a trail riding centre. It's a community of like-minded people who care deeply about horses, and the ways they can change and connect with people.

RIGHT: 'Horse time' - where minutes on a clock don't really matter.

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Origins

Kim Wren didn't set out to start a horse business. When her daughters began attending the local Steiner School, she found parents seeking her out to see if their children could come and spend some time with her horses. Others hadn't ridden since their childhoods and were interested in getting back on the horse themselves.

"I started with a ride for a bag of feed," Kim says. "Some of the parents would come, bring me a bag of horse feed and then I'd take them out for a ride." She found herself teaching in the traditional style, despite having a different attitude to horsemanship in her own practice.





IMAGE A: Kim's daughters Jazmin and Jade chill out on the arena fence.

IMAGE B: Kim Wren, the founder of Wedgetail Rides.

IMAGE C: The tack room bus, painted by some of Kim's WWOOFers, is one of the first sights to greet newcomers.

IMAGE D: At Wedgetail, compassion and respect for horses is key.

IMAGE E: Horses graze in one of the cleared paddocks that make up only a third of the property.

Kim describes working with horses as "a whole-body experience". The first thing she instructs her riders to do is "breathe". She asks participants to reflect on themselves before asking the horse to do anything. "It's not 'whip the horse, make the horse move forwards'. It's 'look at yourself, come back to yourself and then move forwards'."

However, when a broken leg left her laid up on the couch for the best part of a year, Kim discovered Linda Kohanov's iconic book 'The Tao of Equus'. This experience made her realise she wasn't the only one in the world with different notions of what horsemanship should be, and she could work with people and horses in a way that felt true to her.

She then found out about Australian Equine Facilitated Learning and began her studies in the field. The development of the business always seemed to progress organically; even their purpose-built arena is the result of a fortunate coincidence. "Our neighbour wanted clay to fix their dam, so they cut the arena to take the clay and that's how I got an arena," says Kim. "It's just evolved."

Writer and editor Lindy Schneider first became involved when she booked her daughter's fifth birthday party at Wedgetail. She and Kim quickly discovered they had lots in common; Kim was studying for the Art Therapy diploma Lindy had previously completed and, while Kim helped her with her horsemanship, Lindy helped Kim with the writing aspect of her assignments.

"We'd found one another and realised we had something mutual to share," says Lindy. She became more and more involved with each passing week, and now she has her own horse at the property and an AEFL qualification under her belt, so that she can co-facilitate with Kim. She loves the community that is centred around the property. "My daughter comes here all the time to ride. We've just found our place."

Holistic horsemanship

Although they offer trail rides, Wedgetail Rides isn't the sort of place you can just turn up, hop on a horse and go for a canter. Kim asks for a minimum commitment of three sessions; taking time is key to their approach to working with horses. "We do trail riding but it's done our way. Horses always come first," she says.

Over the course of three sessions, riders take the time to groom their horse, get to know them on the ground, take them for a walk on the lead and begin to get an idea of how their mind works - all before putting a foot in the stirrup. Basic riding skills are taught in the arena before heading out on the trail and they'll always start on the lead rein. Safety is paramount for both horse and rider. "Before you're going to trot or canter or do anything like that, you need to be in full control."

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The 17 horses of Wedgetail Rides all have their own stories and have come into Kim's hands for different reasons. She ensures their riders treat them with respect and compassion.

"Our horses all have their own personalities, so we don't beat them into submission. If our horse has done something, we watch and we work out why that horse has done that, and we try to work out how can we change our behaviour. Why is it the horse reacted like that?"

"It's not about being the best rider," says Kim. For her, working with horses can offer so much more than an afternoon activity. I ask what she wants the riders to gain from their experiences at Wedgetail. "To have a connection with the horse. A friendship. My first pony was my best friend and I think that's really important."

IMAGE A: Jade, Jazmin and Kim.

IMAGE B: Preparing for a vaulting training session.

IMAGE C: Kim and Jazmin with some of the arena artwork created by a local year 12 student.

IMAGE D: Jade takes a moment out in the pony paddock.



The Wedgetail team is committed to making horses as accessible as possible, and their riders' groups give children who otherwise wouldn't be able to afford the privilege an opportunity to own a pony for one day each month. "It's really important to me to keep it accessible for people who don't have the money, to be able to still have that experience with horses," says Kim.

Healing

Kim tells me the story of how a group of boys came to the property one day who were determined not to have anything to do with the horses. Instead of fighting them, she gave them some paint and asked them to paint the round yard for her. "Then, they saw what everyone else was doing and that they were enjoying it, so they all ended up having a turn with a horse. I let them do something they wanted to do, so they felt they had the freedom."

Equine Facilitated Learning can have many meanings to different people. It can be a form of therapy; a way to build life skills; a kind of meditation. In the presence of a facilitator, participants work with horses on the ground and in the saddle in order to work through personal issues or simply take time out to relax.

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Lindy runs a program called 'Real Time', giving women living high-stress lives the opportunity to take time out and be mindful. "I remember when I was in the city on concrete all day, and I used to want to just get to a park and just feel grass under my feet. Coming here gives you that and then a whole range of other things as well," says Lindy.

"I had a corporate life in my 20's where I was mad and crazy, and working ridiculous hours, and this is something I know that can be really beneficial. I just really wanted to give other women an opportunity to perhaps experience what I've experienced."

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Wedgetail Rides do a lot of work with at-risk young people in cooperation with organisations who send groups to work with the horses. "I think they all start to feel like this is a little bit of home for them, a place they can come to, particularly kids who have had rough starts, like a lot of the horses," says Lindy. "They can come here and just be who they are, and the horse doesn't care what their story is beforehand; the horse only cares how they are with them in this moment."

The skills that participants learn at the property stay with them after they leave. For many people, it is quite a profound experience. "You'll get people crying and in total disbelief they could have a relationship with such a large animal. Particularly with people that are used to using force or having to be strong all the time, being soft and gentle, and having a positive outcome like that applies everywhere in their lives. It's a lesson that's learned here, but has application way beyond the arena."