

# NZ HERALD - 22 July, 2015

## Australia: Hoof prints in the sand



Horses at sunrise at HWH Stables, Coffs Harbour. Photo / Supplied NZ Herald

### **At Coffs Harbour, Andrew Louis saddles up his fine steed for some seaside cantering.**

Horse riding is one of my favourite modes of transport. Combine a horse with a long stretch of beach and I'm in heaven. Riding with a cool breeze in your hair and waves splashing against your legs has got to be the definition of freedom. The stresses of the rat race disappear. Just you and your horse in nature.

Climbing on to the back of my noble 400kg steed, Coyote, I instantly turn from a city slicker into a country cowboy. Chris from HWH Stables assures me the 13-year old adult male horse is easy to ride and comfortable going into water. My riding skills, I confess, are beginner at best but Chris says we're here to ride horses. Anyone can sit on a horse and let it walk you along. We'll be trotting and cantering before the end of our journey.

Riding from the carpark down to the beach at Coffs Harbour in New South Wales, I test out the controls as horse and rider get acquainted. Turning and stopping are intuitive and responsive. But getting him to go is the hard bit. If I let Coyote stop to eat, it's like putting the handbrake on, turning the engine off then throwing the keys out the window.

After five minutes of unsuccessful clicking and popping noises with my mouth and kicking my heels, I resort to a Lone Ranger "Hiiyaaah!" to get him started again.

Going into the sea, the horses are naturally cautious and veer back to the dry stuff. The water moving back and forth below appears to confuse Coyote. I have to constantly turn him towards deeper water. The waves splash around us and I take comfort that if I fall, it would be into a few feet of water and not hard sand.

Back on the dry, we speed up to a trot, and for those game enough, a canter.

I manage short sprints up and down the beach without any problems although, I do confess, I cheat a little by holding on to the saddle with one hand.

Later I swap horses with the other riders in our group. Chris can accommodate a group of up to eight horses on a trip. I get to ride Brandy, another male horse but only 5 years old. He's a former pace race horse which Chris rescued.



The writer horse riding at Coffs Harbour. Photo / Supplied

He's not as comfortable in the water, though, and needs the reassurance of the older more experienced horses. Sadly, a lot of unwanted race horses are destroyed because they cost too much to keep in a paddock and are unsuitable to sell to weekend riders. Chris says, "The racing has to be trained out of them." The horses can finally put the handbrake on back at the carpark. I don't want it to end. It's been the perfect morning and I wish I could ride off into the sunset.