

The Life Aquatic

By Leslie Potter

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Our current HI Spy question asks visitors to share what they would love to have in their dream barn. This is a topic I could probably go on about for a very long time. When I was a kid, I had notebooks full of plans for my dream barn, carefully measured out and drawn to scale. I think I was pretty good at showing restraint. Sure, the plans invariably included a large indoor arena, but no bronze statues of my favorite horse or fountains in the courtyard.

My dream barn is a bit different now. Since entering the world of horse ownership as an adult, my goals are a bit more modest than they used to be. These days, I'd want just a few stalls, a nice tackroom, a good-sized outdoor arena, and plenty of turnout space. Oh, and a lake. A clear, clean lake with good footing for horses within riding distance of my barn. That's not too much to ask, right?

Swimming with horses is high up on many equestrians' bucket lists. You know that scene in *The Black Stallion* where Alec rides The Black successfully for the first time, galloping down the beach, no tack, splashing into the ocean? Admit it; you want to be that kid. So do I. So does everyone who has ever had any interest in riding horses. It's an irresistible image we'd all love to be part of.

Last summer, shortly before I moved from Maine to Kentucky, I took Snoopy (aka The Black Gelding) on his first-ever beach ride. The boarding stable where he lived was just a short ride from a neighborhood with a private beach, and since the barn owner's mother-in-law happened to live in that neighborhood, we could ride down there with her permission.

Snoopy tends to be a bit excitable on trail rides, especially when he's headed somewhere he's never been before. On our trip to the beach, he designated himself leader and marched to the front of the group. I had to make him stop and wait a couple of times as the other horses ambled along in the July heat. His leadership skills faltered a bit when we finally reached the beach. The Black Gelding is actually a bit wary of water. He'll roll in the sloppiest mud puddle he can find in his paddock, but if someone's on his back, he'll eye even the tiniest puddle with suspicion, and will do anything he can to avoid setting hoof in it. So when we reached the end of the trail and encountered the biggest puddle he'd ever seen, well, you can imagine he wasn't too eager to continue forward. However, after Jewel the steady draft cross took the lead, he was willing to follow.

I didn't expect Snoopy to actually go for a swim. So while most of the other horses in the group waded in with minimal difficulties, I let him stay on the beach. He would have liked to turn around and head for home, so we compromised. I didn't try to force him into the water, but I didn't let him leave the shore, either.

After about twenty minutes of pacing the shoreline, Snoopy stopped and just stared at the other horses playing in the water. He stood there for a while, and then much to my surprise, took off at a trot into the ocean. I was so proud! And the pivotal moment was caught on tape.

Taking the plunge! He seemed to enjoy playing in the water. After a few minutes he walked out and willingly walked back in again. He even went deep enough to where his feet couldn't touch the sand and he had to actually swim. At first I wasn't sure how that was going to go. Snoopy's never swam in his life. Would he panic? Would my weight throw him off? No and no, it turns out, he was a natural swimmer. If you've never experienced the sensation of sitting on a swimming horse, I highly recommend it. When the horse's hooves leave the solid ground it feels like he's flying. You can't help but grin.

Now The Black Gelding and I no longer live in Maine and opportunities for swimming are, well, non-existent. So that's why my dream barn, modest though it may be, will have a trail leading to a fantastic freshwater lake where we can go swimming all summer long. So if anyone knows the name of a good realtor and the winning lottery numbers, please let me know. Until then, Snoopy and I will be working on conquering the puddles on the driveway.

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