

american spa

2018 Spa and Wellness Trend: Animal Inspired Wellness



Countless studies have shown that pets can have a major impact on the health of their owners, with benefits ranging from lowering blood pressure and cholesterol and reducing allergies in children with early exposure to more esoteric aspects like improving self-esteem and providing a sense of purpose. “There’s a lot of science behind why the animal-human bond is so effective,” says Linda Milanesi, executive director of Assistance Dogs of the West, which has a puppy training program in partnership with [Sunrise Springs Spa Resort](#) (Santa Fe, NM). “It gives you a sense of security and safety. It also lowers blood pressure and cortisol levels, which signal the fight or flight mechanism. It increases oxytocin, which is the bonding hormone that makes people feel really good and really elevated.” As such, it’s no surprise that some in the wellness space are taking notice and bringing animals into the mix in creative, though sometimes gimmicky, ways.

The year’s biggest buzz is perhaps around the goat yoga experience, videos of which have gone viral. In the spa arena, however, it is a different hooved creature that seems to have the most legs when it comes to wellness—horses. While equine experiences aren’t necessarily new, their popularity is galloping ahead. Wyatt Webb, director of equine programs introduced his Equine Programs at [Miraval](#) (Tucson, AZ) when it opened its doors more than 20 years ago with the simple step of asking participants to lift and clean a horse’s hoof. “It seems simple, but the horse won’t lift its hoof unless it is approached with total authenticity and vulnerability,” says Webb. “If you don’t allow yourself to tell the truth about yourself and experience vulnerability, you won’t be able to connect with the horse, and that relates to our relationships with other people.” Sheryl Jordan, equestrian director at [Salamander Resort & Spa](#) (Middleburg, VA), has also spent most of her career in equine therapy and has introduced several equine programs at this horse-country resort. “Horses represent strength, empowerment, peace, mindfulness, non-judgement, and beauty in motion,” she says. “People are in awe of their powerful presence and yet gentle way of being. The presence and heart resonance of the horse have a calming and healing effect on people. Horses offer collaborative connection and acceptance.” For all these reasons and more, horse programs, ranging from yoga and meditation in stables and even on horseback to horseback rides to private and picturesque meditation and yoga spots to equine programs designed to help guests achieve mind-body wellness, are growing. “I think word is getting out that the process works,” says Webb.

But horses aren't the only animals making an impact. At Sunrise Springs, guests can commune with the property's surprisingly cuddly silkie chickens and puppies. Though not necessarily known as therapy pets, the chickens have resonated with guests. "Silkie chickens challenge our preconceived notions about connection and communication," says Danielle Simmons, horticulture and animal interactions guide. "Yet as soon as guests enter the coop, they are greeted by curious coos and excited cackles as our silkie chickens extend their greetings. Guests spend time feeding and holding the chickens while in the coop. This unique experience provides an increased sense of connection, an attunement to non-verbal communication, and a sense of groundedness." Playing with puppies is also incredibly engaging to guests and helpful to socializing puppies who need to be calm and unflappable in their future roles. "Just being with puppies actually makes you feel a lot happier, a lot calmer, and it gives you a sense of wellbeing," says Milanesi.

Wellness resort guests are also not the only ones who benefit from this animal-human connection. It is proving to be equally fulfilling for industry employees. [FarmHouse Fresh's](#) charitable mission includes rescuing abused and neglected farm animals. The company has a pasture on-site at its Texas headquarters where employees care for rescues of all shapes and sizes, providing the ultimate in workplace wellness. In addition to their own rescue animals, FarmHouse Fresh dedicates company funds and employee time toward a wide range of rescue projects throughout the year where team members coordinate and participate in large scale dog bed donations, animal adoption events, foster programs, transports (recently of Hurricane Harvey animal evacuees), and more.

As for the future, experts agree that authentic animal experiences are the ones that will continue to thrive. "The wellness traveler attracted to the benefits of animal interactions will not be looking for goats to crawl all over them during a yoga class," says Sally Fisher, M.D., medical director at Sunrise Springs Spa Resort. "They are and will continue to seek out engaging and authentic, sometimes even transformative, experiences with animals."