

The discovery that horses calmed his autistic son led Rupert Isaacson to establish special camps to allow other children with the disorder to benefit from contact with the animals. CLARE HEAL was lucky enough to witness the effects

Horsing around to break down autism's barriers

AS A journalist and human rights campaigner, Rupert Isaacson spent much of his life on travel and adventure. He met his wife, the behavioural psychologist Kristin Neff, while in India and when their son Rowan was born they assumed he would be able to join them in exploring the world. So it was a huge blow to the family when, in April 2004, two-year-old Rowan was diagnosed with autism. It seemed to mark the end of any plans they might have had to see the world together. Moreover Rupert, a keen horseman, gave up his dearly held dreams of teaching his son to ride.

"Rowan was completely non-verbal, unable to use language apart from words and phrases repeated from the animated films he watched endlessly and he was prone to tantrums," says Rupert. He found that nature calmed his son, though, and a chance encounter with a neighbour's horse grew into an important relationship.

"Rowan was more relaxed on horseback and said his first words in the saddle," he recalls.

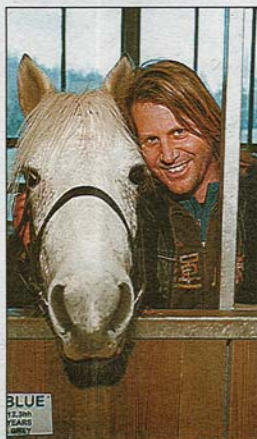
Gradually the idea began to form in Rupert's mind of a trip across Mongolia, a country in which horses are ingrained in the culture. The family set out from their home near Austin, Texas, in the summer of 2007 and journeyed across the Mongolian steppe to visit the Reindeer People of the north and their powerful shamans.

Now, eight-year-old Rowan is a completely different child.

"He's not cured," says Rupert, "that's impossible and I wouldn't want it anyway - autism's part of who he is, but he is healed. The tantrums, the incontinence, his terrible anxiety are all gone and we can live a more normal life."

Rupert wrote about the experience in his book *The Horse Boy* and has now teamed up with adventure holiday company Worldwild to offer other families with autistic children the opportunity to ride. Previous Horse Boy camps have been in Cornwall but the Sunday Express joined the first in Scotland, at Ardlamont Estate near Kames in Argyll.

In attendance were four families with children on the autistic spectrum: Maurizio and Zabedah Ferrari and their teenage daughter Natascia, Juan Dominguez with three-year-old Anna and four-year-old Sam and his mother Gillian Naysmith. Rowan and Eric Saunders brought their son Oak, who is three, to his second Horse Boy camp after he said his first words at last summer's event.



Natascia and Sam's siblings, who are not autistic, were also along for the ride. "It's important to offer a holiday for the whole family and to make it affordable so no one is excluded," says Rupert. The camps cost between £500 and £800 for

each family but assisted places for those in financial difficulty are funded by the Horse Boy Foundation. No one has satisfactorily explained why horses can have such a profound effect on autistic children but that they treat them differently from other riders is undeniable. They are gentler and more patient and while the effects on the children are also unexplained, they are well documented.

"There's a theory that the rhythm of riding soothes the mind enough to allow the intellect to come to the fore," says Rupert. "That's why you see advances in language, especially when the children

are on the horses. On the first of three days, the children have carriage rides in the morning and ride to the estate's beach in the afternoon. "We have the loosest of agendas because we don't know what the children are going to be like but I always include some sort of journey on horseback each day in which we change the environment," says Rupert. "We go around the house, then through the woods and on to the beach."

'I include some sort of journey on horseback each day. It becomes a charming and delightful adventure'

RUPERT ISAACSON, LEFT

everyday scenario school or the supermarket. The results are dramatic. After her carriage ride, Natascia looks happily and spontaneously hugs me.



DRAMATIC RESULTS: Three-year-old Oak Saunders is on his second Horse Boy camp while Natascia Ferrari, left, looks happy in the saddle



previous visit, learning several more words, one of which was "share" as he and Rupert's son Rowan played together. The next day, his mother Rowen reports: "He let me brush his hair for 10 minutes this morning. Normally he won't let me touch it at all." All things that sound small but to these parents they mark major milestones.

Rupert and Worldwild are hoping to make the camps more regular and to take the concept to more countries. What hopes does Rupert have for Rowan's own Horse Boy? "Just to be happy his own days in Scotland, perhaps a few more families can hope for the same things for their children."



ANIMAL MAGIC: Rupert helps Anna Dominguez, three, make friends with her horse, left, until she looks like a natural rider, right

