

Rosemary & Nechtan

"I am exceptionally lucky that at the age of 56 I finally had the opportunity to own my very first pony. Being a little old for pony camp, it has been a steep learning curve. I was offered a loan pony a few years ago and although I had never even put on a bridle I went ahead. I swear Yoyo, the loan pony, rolled her eyes whenever I went near her. I was happier riding her than tacking her up because I had done a little riding and she was slow and safe and I loved every minute of it. Then two years ago the opportunity came up to buy Nechtan, who is an eighteen year old Highland standing at 14.2HH and was described as forward going, so that was a scary thought, but I had him on loan first, and of course I was hooked.

My riding up till this summer has really been over a limited area, a path round our glen, and two or three fields around us. I had a couple of lessons and eventually got the hang of cantering but only really in a couple of the fields which I vetted for rabbit holes. My lack of confidence and fear of falling off was definitely holding me back along with being uncertain as to what Nechtan is capable of.

This is where Nikki and Cara stepped in. On the first day on Islay we headed to a forest area and the tracks provided the perfect place to be put through our paces. I had never cantered so fast or for so long, managing to duck for low branches on the way. I enjoyed every minute and I'm sure Nechtan did too. At the beach Nechtan was reluctant to go into the sea but Nikki managed to get him in using the pressure and release method of training and of course once he had done it he enjoyed splashing about with the other horses.

Day 2 was a real challenge for both of us over The Oa peninsula. I confess when faced with the first very steep narrow path with a sharp turn at the bottom then a steep ascent at the other side, I just did not see how Nechtan and I were going to manage. Of course my lack of trust in myself and Nechtan was a big part of the problem. After a couple of failed attempts where if I'm honest I thought "I want to go home", Cara said she knew that both of us could do it. She encouraged Nechtan down the path and that was it, he just got on with it. What a feeling of success that was and for the rest of the day we made it through bogs, heather, ditches, mud etc. Cara also told me to look forward and not down and that advice has made a huge difference to my riding as I spent far too much time looking at where Nechtan was about to step and feeling anxious about it rather than trusting him to get on with it. This alone has made me less nervous and more balanced.

Day 3 I had chosen to give Nechtan a rest and so the gorgeous Indie and I spent the day together. What an amazing ride, he was a machine on the boggy hill and I felt completely safe with him. I also had my first gallop on the beach.

Day 4 was a shorter riding day but included some road work and cantering through fields to reach the distillery we were visiting. I thought I would be nervous about cantering again but when the opportunity arose I was keen to do it and enjoyed the day.



Day 5 was spent on the 7km beach and started with 'follow my leader' typed games and going in and out the water. All helpful for someone who usually rides alone. Nechtan was a little reluctant to go into the sea but I put into practice what Cara and Nikki had taught me and he did go in. We had several long canters along the beach and then had to go through a river which Nechtan managed without a fuss.

What an amazing five days. Challenging for both horse and rider but that's what I signed up for and no question it has led to more trust between Nechtan and I. This has led to us going further afield on our hacks, not just on the paths but over the heathery moorland, always looking out for the signs of boggy ground that Nikki told us about. I am also braver about finding new bits of ground to canter on. I may even have the chance to ride in a five day endurance ride next year.....that will mean lots of training for us to get fit.....can't wait."