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Get Up Close and Personal With Wild Horses at This Sanctuary in Santa Barbara

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Return to Freedom founder Neda DeMayo with Sutter, a domesticated wild horse. Sutter, a calico stallion, was captured at a young age and abused in an illegal rodeo. He was rescued and found a home at the sanctuary. (Photo: Karen Asherah/Return to Freedom)

With its miles of seashore, rolling hills of vineyards, and Mediterranean climate, Santa Barbara has long drawn visitors, among them a greater-than-average quotient of celebrities. So while it's no surprise that some have even chosen to live in the county —

Oprah Winfrey, Kirk Douglas, Ellen DeGeneres — one celebrity resident not only calls Santa Barbara home, he also draws his own share of visitors for a reason other than beaches and wine. And he goes by one name: Spirit. To be clear, Spirit is a horse.

He served as the inspiration and model for the 2002 film *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron*, which was nominated for an Oscar for best animated feature. When production wrapped, DreamWorks Pictures searched for a home for the movie's muse — which is how Spirit found himself in Santa Barbara.

“He’s a little bit of a diva,” explained Kelsey Santini, as she stood near Spirit’s fenced enclosure, where the stallion seemed to pose gracefully for a visitor’s photographs.



Spirit, a wild horse from the Kiger mustang herd, was the inspiration and model for the animated film Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron. (Photo: Kimerlee Curyl/Return to Freedom)

Santini leads tours at the Return to Freedom sanctuary in Lompoc, Calif., where Spirit and 286 other horses are housed. But this is not a place where the horses are saddled and ridden or go to sleep in stables. In fact, the sanctuary tries to minimize human contact as much as possible. And the reason lies in these horses' special lineage. They are all wild.

“My vision was for a place where people would be exposed to horses living as they were meant to live in a community all their own,” said Neda DeMayo, the sanctuary’s founder. “We are just the hosts.”

WATCH: Movie Trailer to Spirit



Spirit: Stallion Of The Cimarron

Spirit: Stallion Of The Cimarron

Unlike their domestic counterpart, wild horses are not tame and live in free-roaming herds throughout the American West. The horse is known generally as a mustang and is descended from those brought to the New World by the Spanish, with varying degrees of crossbreeding with other horses such as cavalry mounts, Native American ponies, and ranch stock. Spirit is a Kiger mustang, hailing from herds in Oregon, with a close genetic relation to his original Spanish forebears.

