



Camelid Cousins: Walking with llamas

*The pleasure of walking with llamas, says **Paul Rose**, lies not merely in the fact that the llama is saving the walkers the effort of lugging the picnic lunch or camping gear themselves; nor just in the novelty of going for a walk with llama in tow. It is the transparent contentment that the llama displays on a walk.*

Few reading this article will have failed to notice the media's recent obsession with lists: the top hundred comedies or tragedies, the world's greatest person or invention, etc. In the last of these categories *the wheel* most likely would have topped the charts for several millenia: but not in the mountains of South America where it was *the llama* that reigned supreme as host for the movement of the indigenous population's possessions, their trading commodities and often themselves. Even today there are regions and communities in Bolivia, Chile and Peru where the llama remains not only at the heart of their way of life in general but their transport in particular.

Llamas combine strength with surefootedness, intelligence with willingness, calmness with agility. These attributes, together with the ability to derive sufficient nourishment and energy from relatively little in the way of solid or liquid provisions, offer the potential for an outstanding companion and long distance carrier. In South America mature adult male llamas might carry upwards of 30kg, walking 20km a day across difficult terrain on treks that might last several weeks.

In North America, these qualities have led to a burgeoning interest in llama trekking – or packing as it is known there – as a leisure pursuit. In the Rocky Mountains, for example, and in various other national parks where horses and mules have been banned from trails because of the environmental problems they cause, llamas have become a familiar sight on the trail. Weekend and week long hikes with a string of llamas are becoming increasingly popular; the llamas carrying tents, camping equipment, provisions and the walkers' personal belongings - no need for backpacks! With better nutrition and deliberate selection, llamas used for packing in North America tend to stand several inches taller than those in their original homeland and might carry up to 40kg on their backs.

Here in the UK, adapting to the terrain and its scale, llama trekking tends to be represented by less strenuous jaunts: pleasant half or full day rambles along footpaths and bridleways, with the llamas 'burden' being little more than their two-legged companions' lunch. Not only is this a most relaxing, enjoyable and healthy pastime for llama owners but in recent years several commercial trekking ventures have set up offering treks to the public at large.

The pleasure of walking with llamas lies not merely in the fact that the llama is saving the walkers the effort of lugging the picnic lunch or camping gear themselves; nor just in the novelty of going for a walk with llama in tow. It is the transparent contentment that the llama displays when on a walk. For whilst your companion llama on the trail will not wag his tail like a dog, nor purr like a cat, his quiet attention to every detail of the scenery, his acute observation of all that is going on around him, and his evident enthusiasm for tasting the varied morsels to be found along the route, all add a rewarding and unique dimension to the experience.

Whether walking for pleasure or profit, there are a number of important pointers and guidelines to be followed. As with all species, temperaments and suitability for the task will vary. In South America there is a huge pool of stock to draw upon and the less willing llama or able llama will follow the herd. Here we need to be more choosy about the llamas we use for trekking in ensuring good conformation and reliable temperament. Trekking along roads and with children make the latter especially important.

Male, or gelding, llamas are the best option as trekkers. Females can be trekked but if they are also used for breeding, significant periods of pre- and post-calving are ruled out giving you a very short window of opportunity. There may also be problems if they are brought along on treks with entire males.

You can start halter and lead training your llamas at a young age, ideally from when they are weaned, or possibly earlier but at such a young age the lessons and contact should be kept short. A llama that will become a good trekker will be one that quickly learns to stand and accept the halter and be led on a loose

lead. He will allow his feet to be picked up without a struggle and will not kick when lightly or unexpectedly touched on his back legs.

Following these lessons you can soon progress to short, easy, but infrequent walks and without a pack. By the time the llamas are a year old they could be doing a couple of miles with a pouch pack (a blanket type pack with a pocket at each end that will take your sandwiches and a drink). In this way training and experience build up as the llamas grow, and you learn together. By the time the llamas are two they can be undertaking undemanding treks with a full size pack, partially filled. Then, by the time they are three, you can start planning your route for a Land's End to John O'Groats challenge (or part thereof). The rule of thumb for the carrying ability of a mature adult is 25-30% of its body weight, providing he is fit and healthy. Depending on the terrain, his experience and your determination to make progress he might walk twenty miles or more in a day.

The packs used should be dedicated llama packs rather than makeshift adaptations of other bags. A number of specialist companies make excellent products that come in various types and sizes. There are the previously mentioned pouch packs which are simply slung over the llama's back, or wooden saddle-like frames which tie up under the llama and on which separate bags or panniers are hung, and substantial one-piece packs with various compartments - the equivalent of a person's backpack. The basic requirement for llamas to carry any type is that the weight is evenly distributed on both sides, that it fits comfortably over the back, and that it is properly secured.

Packs are not the only things that can be carried when walking with llamas. Returning to the point where this article began, it is possible for a mature and calm llama to be ridden not just by children but by adults too (if the llama and adult are of appropriate size), although not for the distances likely to be involved in a trek. Walking with llamas around a golf course is an activity that has been greatly enjoyed by participants and observers. In the U.S tournaments are organised where all the caddies are llamas! And if you enjoy fishing, a llama is ideal to carry your tackle... and catch, making a great ghillie. An old friend who was both a passionate llama enthusiast and passionate salmon fisherman, swore his llama would allow him to fish pools others could not reach! But these are stories for another article...

Apart from the fun of owning your own trekking llamas or going on treks with commercial operators, there are regular opportunities to join treks organised by the British Camelids Association* and its members to raise funds for charity. Recent examples include treks along the spectacular Dorset Heritage coastline organised by UK Llamas of Beaminster, which raised funds for MacMillan Nurses and for WaWa (Quechuan for child), a small charity that raises funds to help disadvantaged Peruvian children, providing anything from equipment for schools to shoes (to replace the cut-outs of rubber tyres worn on their feet). A very worthwhile as well as extremely enjoyable way to spend a day. And if your alpacas are lead-trained and fit (i.e walked regularly) there is no reason why they should not join in too. BCA trekking guidelines* advise "... *but please have regard to their smaller stature and do not expect them to be able to carry proportionate loads or go on longer treks*" – that said, I am sure they would enjoy greatly a day out walking with their camelid cousins.

*. *These will be carried forward to, and developed by the new British Llama Society*

When trekking off your own land, do...

- ensure you have appropriate public liability insurance
- get permission from landowners to use the public footpaths and bridleways on their land
- be sure your llamas are happy around strange dogs
- give a wide berth for horses, remembering that whilst llamas are usually curious about them, horses are often alarmed if they have not met llamas before ...
- beware poisonous plants that you might meet along the way such as Yew, Rhododendron, Laurel etc).

Trekking equipment

- Good quality, well-fitting packs
- Well-fitting halters.
- stake-out ties that you can screw into the ground and attach your llama's lead when resting*.
- Extra long leads and attachments to put your llamas in a string*.
- Food treats - for the llamas!

* Practice in their use is essential before using on a trek

A range of useful packing equipment is available from various specialist manufacturers such as "Quality Llama Products"
tel: 01308 868674
email: jo@ukllamas.co.uk