



The Hills Are Alive: A Letter from Switzerland

*Alpacas of Switzerland was established in 1994. With most of the animals spending the summer at a height of up to 2200m it is perhaps the European location that most closely resembles the environment found on the South American Altiplano. **Uli Lippl** and **Arnold Luginbühl** describe their experiences with alpacas in the Alps.*

In the heart of Switzerland, at the base of the Alps' most famous summits, is our alpaca and llama breeding farm. Perched between Bern and Interlochen on a sunny terrace at 1000 m., the picturesque town of Aeschi is home to Alpacas of Switzerland. Most of the 450 alpacas and llamas spend the summer at elevations of 1500-2200 m. in high alpine pastures that have been used by the Luginbühl family for many generations. This rugged mountain terrain promotes excellent health and fitness, and the development of superior fibre.

Alpacas of Switzerland was established as a camelid breeding farm with the arrival of Woolly Llamas in 1994. This herd now numbers 70 head and the farm's breeding goals are heavy wool coverage, characteristic banana ears and correct body conformation. A group of Suri Llamas was added this year and represents the foundation of a new breeding group.

As alpaca breeders our focus is on Huacayas and our bloodlines originated in the well known herds in Peru and Northern Chile, Bolivia and the USA. Our most recent Peruvian importation was in 2005. Despite restrictive export protocols, a large number of coloured males and females found their way to Switzerland. Coloured, first-class Peruvian alpacas are quite rare and therefore this group is destined for breeding in the Plantel of Switzerland, the Luginbühls' reserve herd that is not for sale. In this way, the strong points of the Chileans (body and leg conformation) can be ideally combined with the strong points of the Peruvians (fibre character and coverage). The entire Alpacas of Switzerland huacaya herd, with its impressive array of the complete colour range, currently numbers 350.

In their native Andean environment, camelids live as high as 5000 m. It is quite natural, therefore, for us that the alpacas and llamas spend the warm season from mid-May until late October on alpine pastures at altitudes of 1500 m to 2200 m. When deep snows close these pastures to both people and animals, the herds are assembled at the farm down below in Aeschi. Even at the height of winter, when the surrounding peaks are snow-clad, the climate on this sunny plateau is agreeably temperate.

Once the crias are all born and ready for the trek, the alpaca and llama herds climb from Aeschi to their summer pastures. On Mount Niesen, two separated pastures totalling 18 hectares are reserved for llamas. The alpacas have several big pastures on the nearby Griesalp, where they are surrounded by glacial peaks covered with mountains of snow. A herdsire, selected for colour, is placed with each colour-segregated group for field breeding throughout the summer. The structure of the herd is rarely changed until the animals descend from the Alps to Aeschi. The stability of this social order, sire with harem, mimics that of the camelids' natural and traditional husbandry.

A stall is present in every mountainside pasture so that grain or hay can be fed as necessary. This is important in alpine terrain where weather conditions can change dramatically to frost or snow within hours, even in summer. In cases of extreme weather, the buildings serve as shelters that the alpacas may enter by choice, though the herds are controlled by shepherds daily.

In their countries of origin, alpacas and llamas have adapted to extreme temperatures. On the South American Altiplano, nights are clear and cold while days are sunny and hot. Similarly, in the Alps, the temperature swing between day and night is far greater than in the valleys. Night time cooling helps animals more easily bear higher daytime temperatures. As needed, the herd seeks cooler ravines and

trees for shelter from sunshine or rain. Moving about on such steep ground, nearly impassable in places, invigorates the whole body. (It also eliminates the need for toenail trimming, a welcome herd management bonus!) Though internal parasites are controlled with periodic fecal sampling, the problem is greatly reduced by the large dimension of the alpine pastures and the absence of the herd from them for at least half the year.

The direct correlation between diet and fibre quality is well known. The biggest enemy of fine fibre is the rich protein diet often found in European pastures. If, in addition, climate conditions are not ideal, fibre characteristics can deteriorate considerably in just a few months. In this regard, the climate and flora of Swiss alpine pastures provide yet another benefit. Grasses with a high crude fibre and mineral content predominate, supplying a diet suitable for camelids in every respect.

Our experience during the last 12 years has shown us that the that the Swiss Alps are ideally reminiscent of the animals' Altiplano homeland. On both continents, the rigours of mountain living contribute to robust health and physical development.

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