LLAMA TREKKING IN DORSET

A different way to explore the English countryside.

(The Sunday Telegraph, 2006)

'I thought I was in Dorset,' said the bemused motorist, 'but I seem to have taken the road to Peru by mistake.'

His surprise was understandable. Sauntering past him along a country lane rich in buttercups, periwinkles and cow parsley were half a dozen llamas, looking every inch the woolly sort of fleecy hairy goats of Hilaire Belloc's description. If we, their handlers, had been wearing homespun blankets instead of hardy British waterproofs, and playing *El Condor Pasa* on Pan pipes as we walked, the effect could hardly have been weirder.

But unlikely as it sounds, llama trekking – already well established in the US – is catching on in Britain. UK Llamas, the company which organised our expedition through the Brit Valley, started out six years ago with just four animals; it now has a herd of twenty to draw upon, and a choice of 40 routes along or close to the West Dorset coast. Even so, it is hard pressed to meet the growth in demand, and summer trekkers are advised to book at least three months in advance.

The word 'trek' makes the going sound harder than it is. For a llama, any outing through lush English countryside is an extended picnic, and it has no compunction about breaking its stride to tuck into a tempting clump of vegetation. Grass, brambles, dead nettles, ivy: all are classified as *vaut le detour*. In the course of a five-hour excursion, including a picnic of our own, we averaged only one mile an hour – though in a less appetising environment a llama can manage ten to twelve miles a day, with a load weighing up to a third of its body weight. (They can also be ridden, but this is so bad for their backs that responsible owners discourage it.)

But if power-walkers might be disappointed, others will be happy just to amble along making the acquaintance of an animal which looks like a cross between a horse, a deep-pile carpet and a fork-lift truck. (In fact, the llama belongs to the camel family.) With their quizzical but intelligent faces, irresistibly soft fleeces and proud bearing, llamas are at once cosy and outlandish, noble and hilarious.

Our day out began with an introduction to the breed from the company's owners, Chris Eke and Jo Hargreaves. We were taught to distinguish Tampuli (long-haired) from Ccara (short-haired) llamas, and also introduced to two alpacas, which – though more highly prized for their fleeces – are 'less personable' than their llama cousins, and therefore not used for trekking. We learnt, too, that Peru's llama population (around 950,000) is paltry compared to Bolivia's, where two and half million roam the Andes.

For the purposes of trekking through Dorset, eight is considered the largest feasible number ('Any more than that,' says Chris Eke, 'and they get too strung out for you to keep an eye on them all.') We took six, which allowed themselves to be led with surprisingly little fuss into a trailer for the short drive to Beaminster's municipal car park. There they were loaded up with a collapsible picnic table and chairs, and – each of us taking a leading rein and giving the ancient Inca injunction 'Walk on!' – our unorthodox procession set off across the town square, heading for the bridle path which would lead us down the Brit Valley.

The valley is, in Chris Eke's view, a part of Dorset which deserves to be far better known than it is: a beguiling landscape of gentle hills sprinkled with woodland, where the River Brit follows a meandering course and occasional buzzards circle overhead. Part of the fascination of walking with a llama is that you see the countryside through its eyes, and notice what it notices – not only the tasty contents of the hedgerows, but a fox scampering towards the

tree-line, or a horse cantering across a field for a closer look at the unfamiliar passers-by.

You also get to know the different characters within the herd: the eight-month-old, still being trained, for whom the sight of cows is a novelty; the uppity adolescent; the veteran who only feels happy bringing up the rear. My own assigned animal, Kuzco, was a particularly handsome young male with a cinnamon red and white fleece, who had done promotional work for Walt Disney and carried himself with the assurance of a matinée idol.

As for the handling, it was surprisingly easy. Contrary to Tintin books and popular belief, llamas do not spend their lives looking for things to spit at: though flying saliva is the lingua franca of territorial disputes, an animal treated with respect is almost invariably docile. I had only one worrying moment, when Kuzco backed away in sudden alarm from an unseen threat; but within seconds he had quietened down again. (It may be that he had caught a whiff of Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, who lives nearby, prowling the valley in search of strange foods.)

Such equanimity makes llamas more relaxing to be with than, say, horses or ponies. They are also nimbler on their feet, for which reason imaginative owners sometimes use them as ghillies to carry fishing equipment on slippery riverbanks. The most testing part of our walk took us down a dry, narrow gully covered with loose stones and obstructed by low fallen branches: the llamas tackled it with barely a snort.

For lunch we halted at a beautiful spot beside a small weir, close to a dark grove where wild garlic covered the ground in a constellation of white flowers. The llamas were relieved of their panniers (made to a design perfected before the building of the pyramids) and tethered with long cords to corkscrew-shaped pegs. Some lay down in the long grass, but one – in a fascinating display of herd dynamics – remained on sentry duty throughout,

standing stock still with its eyes, ears and nostrils alert to any possible danger. (It is this vigilance that has made llamas popular as guardians of herds of sheep, which they treat as if they belonged to the same species.)

We headed on in the afternoon sunshine to the picturesque village of Netherbury, where our porters swayed past houses of pale Ham stone – some almost hidden by clouds of wisteria – and paused at the gates of the fourteenth-century church. It was here that their incongruity seemed most pronounced: six woolly representatives of the New World, nibbling in the shadow of a building which had functioned long before their continent had first been sighted, tasting the fruits – or at least the dock leaves – of reverse colonialism.

The final leg to our walk took us along the edge of the Parnham House estate, formerly the home of John Makepeace's cabinet-making school, with glimpses of its Tudor buildings and a luminous bluebell wood. Back in Beaminster our llamas nonchalantly negotiated the traffic, climbing onto the pavement and crossing the road like a school party returning from a nature ramble.

Chris Eke is understandably evangelical about his animals. 'They change people's lives,' he says, citing not only twenty clients who have become owners themselves, but also disabled children who have benefited from contact with them. As we unloaded the trailer at his farm I spotted a notice which read, 'Caution – our llamas will capture your heart'; but the warning had come too late.