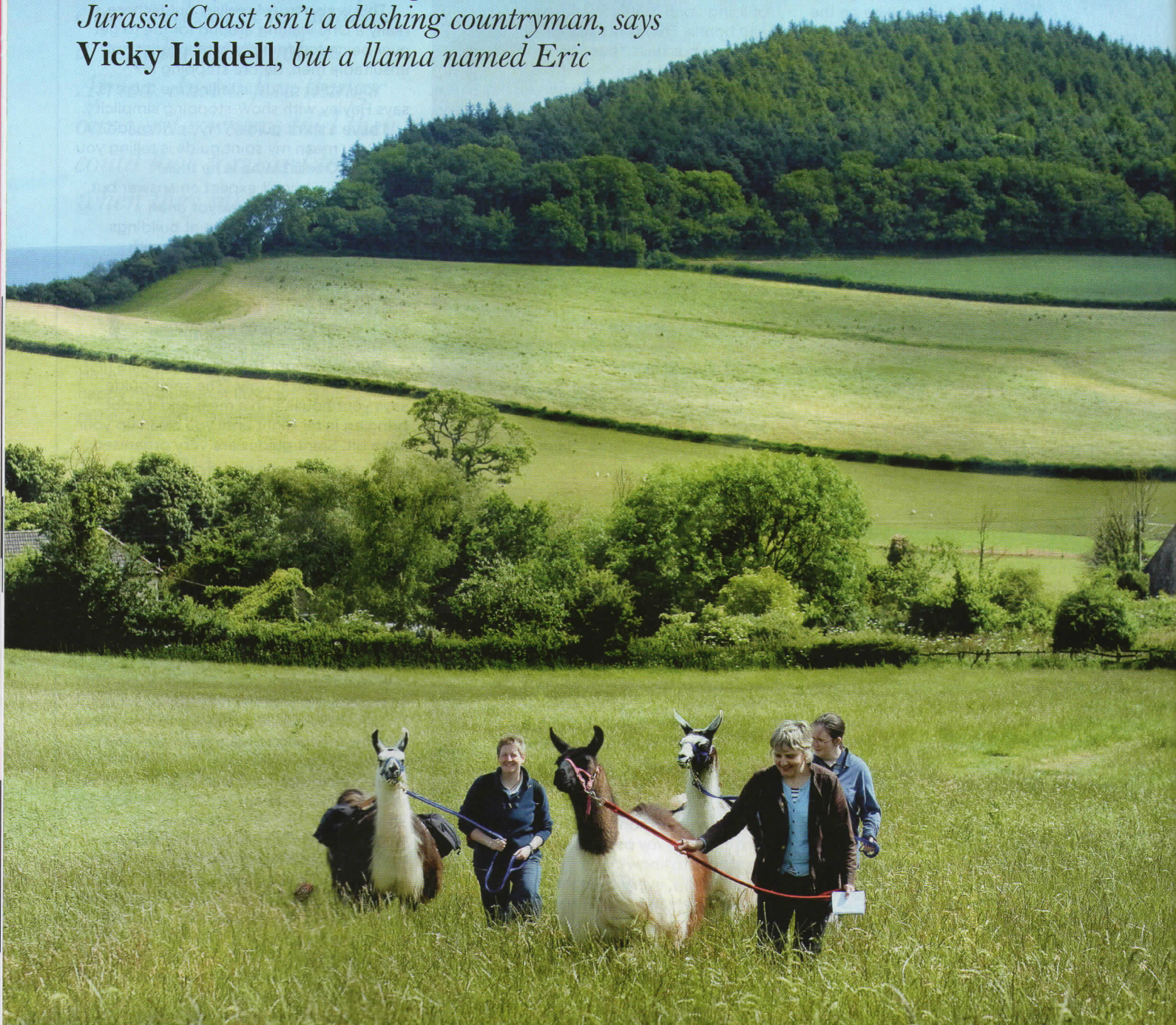


LLAMA KARMA

Forget Ray Mears and Bear Grylls. The perfect companion for a walk along Devon's dramatic Jurassic Coast isn't a dashing countryman, says Vicky Liddell, but a llama named Eric



AS WALKING COMPANIONS GO, ERIC has much to recommend him: beautiful doe eyes, a long, elegant neck, a fine head of hair, and a lively interest in the hedgerows. Sadly, he's not a dashing handsome countryman... but a llama.

Which is more than a little odd, given that I'm in Devon, not Peru. Either way, as one of a team of seven llamas based at the Peak Hill Llamas experience near Sidmouth, Eric is going to be my consort on a two-hour-long yomp through a beautiful West Country landscape. And I can't wait.

His owner and trainer Maggie Jee has understood the benefits of llama karma for some time. Originally an import from the US,

llama trekking has slowly been catching on here, and there are a growing number of centres around the UK. You can't ride a llama because they're not strong enough to carry people, but they are easily trained to wear a halter and carry bags. And they're jolly good company.

Walks start in the paddock with a quick lesson in handling and a chance to get acquainted with your animal. The official llama greeting, I am told, is a good sniff. 'Let them smell the back of your hand,' advises Maggie. Eric seems friendly enough, but once I 'take charge' of him, he's not remotely interested in doing what I ask. It doesn't augur well for the walk, but fortunately,

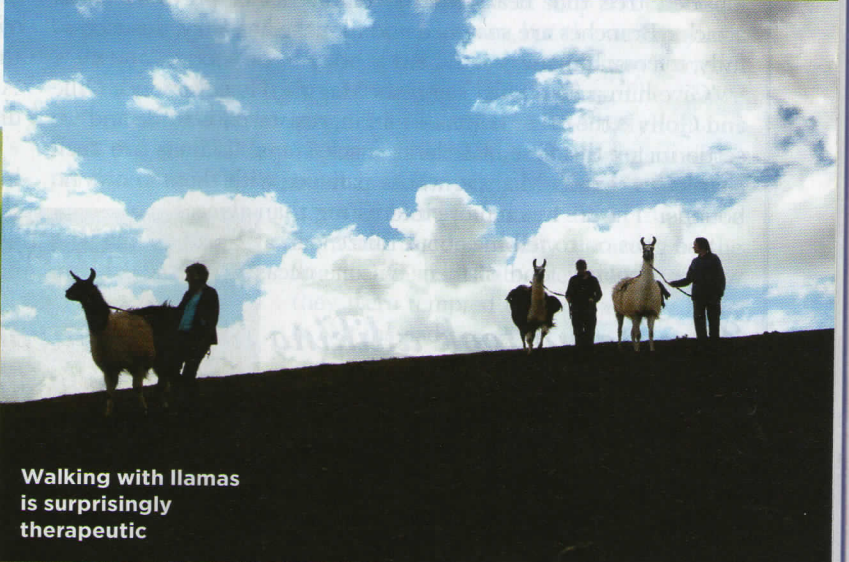
Chill out in the country with a llama



'The official llama greeting is a good sniff on the back of the hand'



Ollie enjoys his walks and is very well behaved



Walking with llamas is surprisingly therapeutic





once the gate is opened and the dramatic countryside opens up before us, he is happy to take the lead. And as we set off down a beautiful lane, flanked with campion and hogweed, I feel that we are getting to know one another.

Walking with llamas is surprisingly therapeutic. Quietly inquisitive with twitching, banana-shaped ears, they have an inner calm that is strangely contagious. And everything is done at their pace – ie, extremely slowly.

Sometimes, it is hard to tell who is leading who, since Eric knows the location of every hawthorn within a five-mile radius and, halfway up the hill, he makes a determined lunge towards a lopsided tree that bears all the hallmarks of previous llama attacks. Branches are snatched and munched as I try, unsuccessfully, to coax him away.

'Give him a firm pull,' suggests Maggie. However, once Ollie and Golly – the other llamas – join in, resistance is futile and we settle in for the first of several snack stops. 'Llamas are such characters,' extols Maggie, whose patience with them knows no bounds. 'They're much more interesting than alpacas.'

She goes on to tell me about Blitzen, an asthmatic llama who was particularly fond of men. On one occasion, Blitzen took a

'One llama took a liking to an unsuspecting chap and gave him a passionate kiss on the lips'

liking to an unsuspecting chap by the side of the road and ran over to give him a passionate kiss on the lips.

They're not always so affectionate, but llamas do like to hum. And as we reach the top of the hill, all the llamas in our group are feeling sufficiently relaxed to strike up a tune. Their low-pitched humming is a sign of contentment and reaches a crescendo when Maggie pulls out some favourite llama treats: goat mix (whatever that is), grass cuttings and carrots. The goodies are devoured in seconds and with llama karma temporarily restored, the procession moves slowly on up an old smuggler's footpath between fields of sheep.

Two of the beasts, Ollie and Golly, are soon having a minor squabble about bottom-sniffing, but the llamas are generally as unfazed by the bleating sheep as anything else in life. Apparently, llamas make good guardians for sheep and other field livestock, thanks to their panoramic eyesight. If a predator approaches, the llamas will even protect their companions, striking out with their front legs and emitting terrifying gurgling noises.

Watching Eric pick his way carefully along the path with a

piece of beech tree dangling from his mouth, it is hard to imagine him doing anything quickly – but Maggie assures me that he does have a higher gear. Somewhere. 'They like to have a run around the field in the early evening and roll around on the ground,' she says.

Llamas are clearly at home on the Devon coast, despite their high-altitude origins in the Andes. Their thick coats keep them warm in the coldest winters and they are relatively disease-resistant. They eat far less than sheep and cattle, do not need to be exercised, and calve easily.

Their first taste of British life, however, wasn't entirely happy. Shipped here by the Victorians and installed in zoos, llamas were often antagonised to the point of spitting, and it was from here that their unfounded reputation for spitting at people originated. 'A well-cared-for llama will only spit at another llama to settle a dispute, and not at a person,' confirms Maggie.

Either way, they're becoming more and more popular. According to the British Llama Society (yes, there really is such a thing), there are currently between 2,000 and 4,000, mostly privately-owned, llamas in this country. They have featured in *The Archers* (Constanza and Wolfgang) and recently, there has been a curious trend for using llamas as wedding attendants.

They are also increasingly being used as therapy. Their gentle, docile nature makes them good companions for children with autism and communication difficulties. And in the US and Canada, llamas have also been used in the treatment of patients with Alzheimer's. Maggie is now hoping to take some of her best-behaved llamas for brief visits to local hospitals and nursing homes.

'Everyone loves llamas,' she says. 'Over the years, we've had all kinds of people on the walks, from elderly ladies to cub scouts, and they've all thoroughly enjoyed themselves.'

As we arrive back at the farm, the rest of the gang rushes up to greet us and after a certain amount of communal sniffing, halters are removed and the llamas are free to go about their business. And as we sit down for a cream tea, overlooking the beautiful Jurassic coastline, I find I am already missing my rambling partner. I can only hope that I have an opportunity to step out with Eric again.

◆ *An Afternoon Cream Tea Walk costs from £60 for two people, and takes place at llama pace (not particularly fast). For more information on trekking with llamas, contact Peak Hill Llamas: 01395-578697, www.walkingwithllamas.co.uk*