

Walking with llamas

Maggie Jee explains what made her start an unusual business on Devon's Jurassic Coast

MY fascination with llamas first began when I was about 10 years old due to a very silly Monty Python sketch which, among other outrageous claims, stated that llamas like to swim in rivers and have beaks for eating honey (obviously not true!)

It wasn't until around 20 years later that I had my first real encounter with these extraordinary South American creatures when I found a leaflet advertising that a group of them would be visiting Castle Drogo on Dartmoor one day - and that visitors would actually have the chance to take one for a walk around the castle grounds.

This seemed like far too good an opportunity to miss so, accompanied by my long suffering partner Paul, I eagerly headed off to Castle Drogo for my first llama encounter. On arrival at the castle, we were greeted by the sight of one of the llamas dragging his handler along the ground on his belly. I later learnt that this was due to the fact that llamas are herd animals and this one was somewhat disgruntled about being left behind while the rest of the group went off for a walk.

Despite this I was quite determined that I was going to walk a llama and that absolutely nothing was going to put me off... so, after a little instruction in the art of llama handling and with me taking one lead rope and the handler taking another rather like the dual controls on a driving school car we set off for my very first llama walk.

After a short distance I was deemed to be suitably in control for the handler to let go of the second lead rope, and I found myself in sole charge of my llama. He turned out to be a delightful walking companion - gentle and inquisitive - and at the end of the walk I didn't want to give him back.

From that moment it became my ambition to have llamas of my own one day. It took another 10 years for me to achieve my ambition when, after the death of my elderly horse, I found myself with an empty stable & field. Deciding to take a break from horses for a while my thoughts returned to my llama-owning ambition, and after much research into llama keeping as well as attending a training course in Camelidynamics, a gentle system of llama handling, Paul and I felt ready to take the plunge and become llama owners.

So, on a bitterly cold November morning in 2005 we took delivery of our first two llamas from Catanger Llamas in Northamptonshire: Rufus - a very sophisticated and superior looking white male, and Jonesy, a rather daft-



■ Maggie and Paul with some of their llamas ready for another days trekking with Peak Hill Llamas

looking brown one. The pair had done a small amount of llama trekking in their previous home.

Llama trekking is actually walking with llamas - they are not strong enough to ride. Instead they carry packs containing refreshments, waterproofs and even camping chairs.

In America where llama trekking is very popular they often trek for a few days at a time, the llamas carrying tents, sleeping bags etc. In this country the treks are usually shorter - either day or half-day treks with lunch or other refreshments provided.

Our first year of llama keeping was a pretty steep albeit very enjoyable learning curve. We joined the British Llama Society who were extremely helpful, and I would recommend joining to any new or prospective llama owners.

Over the course of the year we spent many happy hours taking our boys for walks around the fields. We are extremely lucky to be able to keep them on a 330 acre farm situated right on the Jurassic Coast with the coast path actually running right through the fields. The views are spectacular - on a clear day you can see as far as Portland to the east, and Haytor on Dartmoor to the west.

With this in mind, and realising the ever-increasing interest in llama trekking in this country, we started to wonder if this might be something we could do with our boys.

One day, whilst researching llama trekking on the internet I stumbled across a trekking business in Dorset that was for sale as the owner was emigrating to New Zealand - this included six trekking llamas plus pack saddles,

bags, and all the other paraphernalia needed for trekking. Another opportunity too good to miss!

So, on April Fool's Day 2007, hoping this wasn't a bad omen, we were joined by Ben, Blitzen, Golly, Ollie, Mac and Guy and shortly afterwards launched our own llama trekking business - Peak Hill Llamas.

Since then the business has gone from strength to strength. Paul is something of a computer whizz and has set up a website which has proved to be invaluable, and we now even sell gift vouchers on-line. We offer a number of walks including an afternoon Devon Cream Tea walk which has proved to be extremely popular.

Something we have started this year is the Llama Experience Morning where people can come along to the farm and get hands-on llama experience including feeding, grooming, walking, and even llama agility.

We also provide educational sessions with the llamas for schools and youth groups. This is really rewarding and is something we want to do a lot more of in the future.

The llamas thoroughly enjoy their walks which are conducted very much at llama pace, not particularly fast, as being inquisitive animals they do like to stop occasionally en route to admire the scenery and have a nibble at the hedges. They also enjoy interacting with our visitors - particularly our tallest llama Blitzen who, among other strange habits,

■ Keep up to date with smallholding issues by logging on to smallholder.co.uk

CAMELIDS



■ Maggie feeding Rufus, Jonsey and Ollie

takes great pleasure in kissing men. On one walk we were negotiating a particularly narrow section of the coast path with Blitzen as lead llama. A gentleman coming the other way very politely waited at the side of the path for us to pass.

On seeing him Blitzen started to walk faster and faster, until, as we drew level with the poor unsuspecting man he made a sudden lunge towards him and gave him a passionate kiss on the lips!

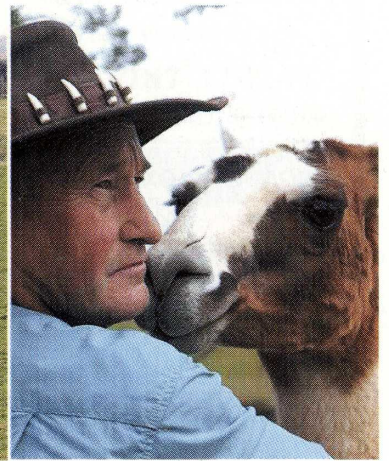
The poor man looked absolutely stunned and I had to drag Blitzen away whilst embarrassedly muttering apologies for his improper behaviour! Whilst on the subject of improper behaviour, the

first thing that a lot of people say when they meet the llamas is "Do they spit?" as sadly llamas still have an erroneous reputation for spitting at people.

This harks back to the days when they were kept in zoos and were often antagonised to the point that they would spit at visitors - supposedly in the name of entertainment.

The truth is that normally llamas only spit at each other it is their defence mechanism and is used in dominance issues and sometimes over food.

Llamas will only spit at people if they have been mishandled when young or in extreme circumstances, such as when you are doing



■ A warm welcome from Blitzen

something nasty like giving them an injection - which seems fair enough really.

We have had all kinds of people coming out on our walks over the past couple of years - from elderly ladies to cub scouts - and they have all thoroughly enjoyed themselves. We have met some lovely people, and are looking forward to meeting yet more as we start our third season.

Owning llamas and running our own trekking business has been a truly enjoyable and rewarding experience.

Getting involved with llamas is one of the best decisions we have ever made - and we owe it all to a very silly Monty Python sketch ■