



No cause for a llama

The odd spat aside, **David Robson** finds himself charmed by some eccentric South American beasts on a trek in East Devon

'Guy's very friendly,' Maggie says. "He just doesn't like people going into his personal space."

She is not wrong. Guy IS friendly. He is several inches taller than me, but he looks down at me with a kindly, almost avuncular expression in his eyes. When I stroke his neck, he responds with a very low purr, inviting more of the same. But take any liberties with Guy and he lets you know.

I want to lead him along the bridle path, past a field of sheep, but he is determined to head south, towards the sea. When we cannot resolve our differences, he sits down and refuses to budge. "Just give a firm pull," Maggie says. I give a firm pull. Guy looks at me in outrage, as if I am in breach of the Geneva Convention.

Once he really does get angry, throwing back his head and giving a resounding snort that leaves spray on my collar. "Don't worry about that," Maggie says. "It wasn't you. He didn't like Ben sniffing his bottom." What is this? A Carry On film? She is probably right. Ben looks as guilty as sin.

Welcome to the weird and wonderful world of llamas. Guy and Ben shouldn't really be in Devon. They were born in Britain but, as a species, are indigenous

to South America, where they are used as pack animals in the Andes. But as two of the stars of Peak Hill Llamas, a llama-trekking company run by Maggie Jee, they cut quite a dash on the Jurassic Coast, striding across rolling fields, with the sea in the background.

Llama-trekking is one of the myriad activities on offer at the Cricket St Thomas Hotel in Somerset, part of the Warner Leisure group; and it has regular takers, intrigued by these beautiful, eccentric creatures.

"I have seen llamas in Peru," says Anne from Reigate, "but I have never been llama-trekking before. It's something I have always wanted to do. It's a bit different, isn't it?"

Guy and Ben are accompanied by Golly and Olly while the other three llamas, Rufus, Blitzen and Jonesy, stay in the paddock with the goat, Geoffrey. "No females?" I ask. "Too temperamental," says Maggie firmly.

Unlike alpacas, their smaller cousins, llamas are not prized for their fur. But they have become increasingly popular as high-end pets – a pedigree llama will cost £3,000 or more – and are a definite adornment to the English countryside.

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CHRISTOPHER JONES

Leader of the pack: llamas are popular pets, despite costing £3,000 or more

animals,” Maggie says. “I knew a farmer who used llamas to protect his hens. They trampled one fox to death last year.” Is it me or is Guy suddenly looking rather pleased with himself?

He and his pals certainly have exceptional eyesight which, allied with their periscope-like necks, makes them ideal security guards. During our two-hour trek they spot something in the distance – a horse, a tractor, some rambles – long before we do.

Llamas are grazing animals or, in the case of Guy, omnivores. In the course of our trek he munches not just grass but brambles, berries, myrtle leaves, nettles and half the contents of an oak tree. At the top of the cliff, where we stop to rest, he is given a bowl of special “llama mix”, with a side dish of carrots. Guy wolfs the carrots in one go, then sulks when he is not given more.

Golly pecks at his rations like a supermodel llama on a low-carb diet

Golly, in contrast, pecks nervously at his rations, like a llama supermodel on a low-carb diet. Ben takes a prolonged and noisy comfort break. And Ollie gives some passing rambles the once-over, as if to say: “Who said you could use this path? This is my land.”

Little by little, we are coming to appreciate not just what makes a llama a llama but their individual quirks. Golly, for instance, has one brown eye and one blue eye, like a James Bond villain, while Ben keeps simpering, as if enjoying a private joke. It is a real privilege to get to know them – even my occasionally stropmy friend Guy – under an English sun.

♣ A half-day Llama Experience (www.warnerleisurehotels.co.uk) costs £50 per person. Shorter llama walks can be booked through Peak Hill Llamas (www.walkingwithllamas.co.uk)