

Taking a trek with some new friends



Browntown's Donna Parkman visits with two of her llamas, Coffee Bean and Domino, during a recent afternoon at Twin Creeks Llamas. Donna and Tim Parkman offer guided llama treks in Warren County. Jeff Nations/Daily



Tim Parkman spends a few minutes with his llama, Napoleon, during a recent afternoon at Twin Creeks Llamas in Browntown. Tim and Donna Parkman offer weekend llama treks at Front Royal's Raymond R. "Andy" Guest State Park throughout most of the year. Jeff Nations/Daily

Twin Creeks Llamas offers unique hiking opportunities

By Jeff Nations

BROWNTOWN -- When Tim and Donna Parkman were closing on their 20-acre property back in 1998, a prominent patch of meadowland got them to dreaming.

Tim Parkman, who'd just retired from a 24-year career in the United States Air Force, envisioned horses strolling across that flat expanse. But as he gazed across that picturesque meadow on a recent spring afternoon, it wasn't cavorting colts and fillies Tim Parkman was taking in.

"The idea of having horses passed through my mind because I'd had a horse as a kid," Tim Parkman said. "I started thinking about the responsibility of a horse, how much attention horses need -- they're fragile animals, they're expensive animals to keep. Both of us were working full-time at that time, and so Donna latched onto the idea of llamas."

Flash forward 15 years from that initial thought, and the Parkmans couldn't imagine a life without their dear friends, a group of eight male llamas who form the basis of Twin Creeks Llamas, a weekend hiking service the Parkmans have been offering for more than 10 years now.

"I had read about llamas and they sounded like an intriguing animal, but I still was not convinced about what we would do with them other than have them as pasture ornaments," Donna Parkman said. "And then right about that time there was an article in Southern Living. One of the editors had gone on a llama trek down in Tennessee and had talked about walking and bonding with the animals, and having a picnic. And I thought, well, we've got lots of trails around here. Maybe we could do that."

With Tim Parkman having his 50th birthday coming up, Donna Parkman planned a surprise llama trek in Asheville, N.C. That was all it took.

The Parkmans built their barn in 2001, then spent the next year working with state officials to find a suitable location to begin offering their guided llama treks.

"We spent months and months walking trails all around the Shenandoah Valley within comfortable driving distance of here to try to find that perfect trail. I tell you, we walked hundreds of miles on these trails. And



Browntown's Donna and Tim Parkman show off two of their llamas, Coffee Bean and Napoleon, at Twin Creeks Llamas. The Parkmans have offered guided llama treks in Warren County for more than a decade. Jeff Nations/Daily



Santiago, a llama living at Twin Creeks Llamas in Browntown, checks out visitors in front of his barn during a recent spring afternoon at the farm. Santiago is one of eight llamas who accompany Tim and Donna Parkman on their weekend guided llama tours in Front Royal. Jeff Nations/Daily

what we found mostly was that all the trails around here start at point A and end at point B, and then you have to turn around and see everything that you just saw. That's what we didn't want."

The Parkmans found that elusive loop much closer to home than they expected with the then recently opened Raymond R. "Andy" Guest Jr. Shenandoah River State Park in nearby Bentonville.

"They had three trails that were just perfect, and here we were within five miles of it the whole time," Tim Parkman said. "That's where we do 95 percent of our hikes.

"We can do a mile here, but people generally want to walk more than that. They want more of an experience."

Since 2002, the Parkmans' Twin Creek Llamas have offered nearly year-round weekend treks. They don't hike in the summer months, June through August, to spare their llamas from the excessive heat, but will still lead shorter, mile-long treks on their property during the summer.

Booking well in advance is advisable -- Twin Creeks Llamas only does one hike per weekend, and ideally limits trekking parties to six hikers ages 6 and up.

"We like for each person to walk with their own llama, to have that experience, and we can only take six llamas at a time," Donna Parkman said. "So ideally six would be the maximum, but when we're doing a homogenous group like a Girl Scout Troop or a birthday party and everybody's friends with each other, they understand and they will share llamas and trade off."

Hikes with the Parkmans' llamas begin in the barn, where clients are introduced to the individual animal they'll be trekking with on the trail. Hikers are encouraged to ask questions and get comfortable touching the llamas. Then the Parkmans teach how to halter and saddle the llamas in an hour-long instructional session. Much of Twin Creeks Llamas' clientele comes from the Washington, D.C., area, and often the prospective trekkers have limited experience around large animals.

"You can see the confidence growing just over that one hour that they're here," Tim Parkman said. "They start to feel like, 'I can do this, and I'm going to have fun doing this.'"

Before hitting the trail, hikers get a walk-through on safety and learn how to lead a pack animal through the forest. Then and only then, the trek begins.

"As they start the hike, you can just see the transformation in the person," Tim Parkman said. "And the llamas as starting to warm up to them. They're thinking, 'OK, you're a gentle person. You're not going to harm me.' And so this mutual confidence starts building. By the time we get to lunch, they're hugging the llamas. A lot of people talk to the llamas. I don't know why, but they enjoy it."

Twin Creeks Llamas (www.twincreeksllamas.com) is currently booked for the spring. For more information or to book a reservation, email tcllamas@comcast.net or call 540-631-9175.