



Mrs. Parkman creates colorful tassels for an added touch to the llamas' halters.



Rich Cooley/Daily

Donna and Tim Parkman, who own and operate Twin Creeks Llamas, walk a pair of their llamas. Offering weekend treks with a twist, the business lures many capital-area hikers.

Couple's farm attracts llama-loving hikers

By Natalie Austin
 Daily Staff Writer

BROWNTOWN — Tim Parkman and his wife, Donna, always dreamed of owning a house in the country with enough land for some horses, once he retired from the U.S. Air force.

When it came time for the lieutenant colonel to step down, those dreams started coming true. The couple's beautiful chalet-style home sits on 20 acres with panoramic views of the countryside, overlooking a tidy barn and board fencing. A half dozen geldings graze in a field below.

With their long necks, banana-shaped ears, two massive toes and wooly coats, however, the gentleman farmer's herd is an exotic standout.

Deciding that horses were too high-maintenance, the Parkmans began surf-

ing the Internet for alternative livestock. Their cyber journey took a turn in South America, and Twin Creeks Llamas was born four years ago in rural Warren County.

"You will quickly notice we like anything with a lot of hair," says Parkman, shooing away a leaping Bonnie, one of the couple's two bearded collies. A long-haired cat is perched on a kitchen barstool, taking in the enthusiastic dog's latest faux pas.

The llamas, among them a large-and-in-charge male named Santiago and Napoleon, a showy Appaloosa, aren't just field ornaments. A trip to North Carolina for a "llama trek" on Parkman's 50th birthday resulted in a formal business plan and a weekend business venture for the couple. Visiting shows and area farms, they soon purchased their first three llamas, pack saddles and

equipment. They are in it for the long haul, it seems.

The first year was spent training the llamas on the trails, getting permission from park officials to use their facilities and marketing, including brochures and a Web site, www.twincreeksllamas.com.

The first season was booked solid. They were on to something.

Road-weary, capital-area residents — the couple's largest customer base — holstered their cell phones and came, and continue to venture to Twin Creeks in droves. Once there, visitors choose a picnic-lunch-loaded llama and take a hike in the nearby state or national park. Twin Creeks operates 10 months a year — July and August are too hot for the llamas — offering hikes in the Raymond R. "Andy" Guest Shenandoah River State and Shenandoah National parks.

This weekend, some repeat customers

from Pennsylvania are heading down for a hike, says Mrs. Parkman, adding that they have had people from as far away as New Hampshire and Vermont. Hikes are only held on the weekends; Parkman is back to work full time for the State Department.

Hiking with llamas is far from a new idea, explains Mrs. Parkman, sitting in the living room of her home filled with all-things-llama. Her latest, a large wooden llama, a Christmas present, sits in front of a stone fireplace.

Domesticated more than 6,000 years ago, she says, llamas were used by the Incan empire to transport goods through the rugged Andes Mountains in South America. They are exceptionally sure-footed, she says, noting in lieu of hooves, llamas have large padded feet, similar to a dog. Two large toenails protrude from their feet, more than lending themselves to nature hikes in mild Virginia wilderness.

The animals, which weigh between 300 and 450 pounds, can carry up to one-third of their body weight, Parkman says, and in the case of Twin Creeks, most of what they transport is food. Groups of four to eight people are preferred on the treks.

By the llamas, that is.

"They don't like to be left behind," says Mrs. Parkman, of what now is a tightly connected herd.

Human hikers should be in good physical health and able to walk at a moderate pace for two to five miles. The Parkmans, who haul the llamas by trailer the short distance, accompany all groups as trail guides.

The 4-mile Wildcat Ledge Trail in the Shenandoah River State Park in Bentonville is the most popular among guests, the Parkmans say. The trail winds through forest, descends into a ravine and crosses a small stream several times. A short hike to the top of the ledge, which overlooks the Shenandoah River, is the ideal spot for what Twin Creeks bills as a "trail gourmet" lunch. On the menu are: soup, hot apple cider, a deli sandwich buffet, pasta salad and dessert. All beverages are provided. The llamas also carry tables and stadium seats for comfortable dining. Empty packs are available for outer-wear,



Rich Cooley/Daily

Donna and Tim Parkman pose with their six llamas at Twin Creeks Llamas in Browntown.

cameras and other items brought by guests. Spectacular river and farmland views continue through the rest of the trek.

At the onset, however, Parkman warns hikers of a consistent phenomenon that develops on the trips.

"People start talking to their llama during the hike," he says, smiling. "There's something about those big, moony eyes."

Most of the guests who come to Twin Creeks know very little about llamas, but are aware of one not-so-pleasant characteristic of these animals.

"They spit don't they?" That's the first question we get," Parkman says. "they do spit, yes they do."

Typically, Mrs. Parkman says, they do not spit at humans, but at each other to determine their rank in the herd. A little later, down at the barn, some healthy spitting ensues over some offered grain. Unlike some horses, they do not bite — they have no upper teeth — or kick, she adds.

The llamas spot the Parkmans at the barn and gather in hopes there's some food involved. Napoleon and Santiago are joined by Coffee Bean, Domino, Jesse and Prince.

With their large doe eyes and split upper lips, which serve as fingers, moving independently, the animals appear curious and

jockey for a position on the fence.

Mrs. Parkman demonstrates how halters and packs are put on the animals, a duty which falls on the hikers once they choose their llama for the day. At the end of the trek, guests can purchase a pair of socks or other items made from the fiber of their hiking companions. Many of the items are handmade by Mrs. Parkman.

Neither husband nor wife say they have any regrets about getting into the llama business. A petite Mrs. Parkman climbs up to the hayloft, tossing out bales to the llamas below.

For Parkman, who, Monday through Friday trains personnel, many bound for Iraq: on construction site security, weekends in the park are welcome, indeed.

"It really is a lot of fun. That's why we do it," he says. "You just run into the greatest people."

Reservations for a llama hike should be made at least a month in advance. The cost of a half-day llama trek, including picnic lunch, is \$65 for adults and \$45 for children under age 12. For more information or reservations, call 631-9175 or visit the Web site, www.twincreeksllamas.com. The Parkmans may be reached by e-mail at tllamas@adelphia.net.

- Contact Natalie Austin at naustin@nvdaily.com

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TIM PARKMAN, OWNER OF TWIN CREEKS LLAMAS IN BROWNTOWN