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Get Out Go Llama-Trekking

In the early 1980s, the only thing most people knew about llamas was that Michael Jackson had one. But it didn't take long for them to realize that the potential of this woolly, big-eyed ruminant extends beyond being an exotic pet to eccentric pop stars.

Llamas were first domesticated in the Andes Mountains as beasts of burden. You can parade them in shows as you would fancy dogs, keep one in the back yard as a pet for the kids or use them to guard a herd of sheep -- all of which they will do without complaint. But until you put a pack on them, you'll never understand what llamas were really meant to do.



The good news: Just a drive away from the D.C. area, you can get to know these unusual animals by signing up for llama hikes and treks. Not only will you learn to load, lead and handle a llama on a trail, but you'll travel through some of the area's prettiest scenery. As someone who grew up on a llama ranch and spent every summer llama-packing in the Rockies, I can promise you that the experience offers quite a few more comforts than backpackers can afford. When I went backpacking recently, I considered eating oatmeal three times a day just to keep my pack light. But back home, my dad used to have a llama reserved solely for his fly-fishing gear. He didn't have to carry a thing -- and neither will you.

What to Expect: Your host will give you an overview of the hike before you get off the ranch. You'll learn everything from how to load the packs to where the animals like to be petted (tip: necks good, faces and legs bad). Llamas are ideal trail companions; they're amiable, calm, smart and smaller than horses -- so less intimidating. Yes, they do spit occasionally, but only at each other, so you'll only get an eyeful if you walk between a four-legged disagreement. On the trail, a well-trained llama will follow your lead on a lax rope, offering only an occasional hum in lieu of conversation.

What to Bring: Your hosts will probably provide food, water and equipment, so all you'll need is a good pair of hiking boots. Don't forget a camera. Dress in layers so you can easily adjust to temperature changes.

Cost: Prices range from \$18 for a two-hour trek to \$65 for a five-hour hike and gourmet lunch. Treks run year-round but depend on the weather.

Llama-Trekking Companies

Applewood Inn & Llama Trekking. 242 Tarnbeck Lane, Glasgow, Va. 540-463-1962. www.applewoodbb.com. Llama hikes and lunch hikes leave every Saturday morning and Monday-Friday, by appointment only. A two-hour trek is \$18; lunch is an additional \$6.50. Inn guests receive a discount.

Twin Creeks Llamas. 427 Turtle Lane, Browntown, Va. 540-631-9175. www.twincreeksllamas.com. Enjoy half-day lunch hikes in the Blue Ridge Mountains, 1 1/2 hours from the District. A five-hour trek, including gourmet picnic lunch, is \$65 for adults and \$45 for children younger than 12. Reservations required.