

Walking with Llamas

Jack isn't impressed with me. He's perfectly well behaved, but I can tell by the way he flattens his ears and looks down his nose that I'm a disappointment. Whether it's my tatty trousers or ancient boots I don't know, but I obviously fall short of his requirements for human walking companion. "Er, you don't think he'll spit do you?" I ask his owner, Alastair Fraser. "No, of course not," he assures me heartily. "Llamas only usually spit at one another." I breathe a sigh of relief. "They're excellent shots," he adds proudly.

Walking with llamas might sound wacky, but it's becoming increasingly popular and there are now several centres dotted around Britain. "It's therapeutic," says Alastair. "People who've never walked 7 miles in their lives will happily do so with a llama." I put this to the test one crisp autumn morning, when I joined my friend Claire - together with her mum, aunt and 10 year old cousin Kezia - for a llama trek in the Forest of Dean. Alastair's company, Severnwe Llama Trekking, has operated here for the past five years. "All types of people come to walk with the llamas," he explains. "We've even had a man who'd scaled Everest. We take a donkey cart with us so older people or children can take a rest if they get tired."

Tours start from The Speech House hotel, which stands in the very heart of the Forest. Alastair meets us in reception and we all walk out to the car park, where our llamas are patiently waiting. As well as Jack - who's tall, brown and white, there's Nelson - shorter, younger and a glossy mahogany. Standing beside them is Ruby, a velvet eared donkey. "We usually bring one of our camels as well," says Alastair. "We've got three. But there was a lot of rain yesterday and the ground's too wet. Camels don't cope well with mud."

Alastair stows our day-packs in the llamas' panniers - they can carry up to 50lbs of luggage, but no passengers - and then hooks Ruby up to a small wooden cart. "Okay, who wants a llama?" he says, then hands Nelson's rein to Kezia. She looks a bit reluctant at first, but she's soon happily patting his long woolly neck. We set off across a field and into the woods - a canine escort provided by Alastair's two excited dogs. Claire's mum Ann drives the donkey cart; Claire and Kezia follow with the llamas - despite Alastair's assurances, I've decided to let Jack get used to me before I go too close. We make an incongruous sight in this quiet corner of England, and a passing dog walker does a cartoon double-take.

The paths in the Forest are wide and flat, so it's very easy walking. Llamas make excellent companions as they adapt their speed to suit you. They're surprisingly elegant creatures - the supermodels of the animal world, with endless eyelashes and a decided wiggle when they walk. I take Jack's rein - he's stopped flattening his ears when I look at him, I reckon he's just shy - and find it rather relaxing to stroll beside this gentle creature. Kezia gets increasingly confident and eventually has Nelson trotting after her as she runs through a blanket of crackly golden leaves. Her mum Suzanne laughs: "Normally we'd never get her to come out for a long walk like this. She'd have got bored long before now."

As we walk Alastair chats away, telling us more about the Forest of Dean. Tucked away in a corner of Gloucestershire, beside the Welsh border, it was once the hunting ground of Norman kings. They introduced Forest Law and appointed officials, known as Verderers, as its guardians. Poaching deer was a capital offence. "Speech House hotel contains the Verdererers' Court," he says. "It's the oldest law court in England - they

meet there several times a year. Some say that under ancient law you can still be sentenced to hang – the original gibbet’s meant to be buried somewhere in the Forest.”

There are still plenty of deer in the Forest – we spot three during our walk, and there are also wild boar and birds like the rare nightjar. Many think there are Big Cats too. Llamas, with their superior senses, are great wildlife spotters and their reactions can often alert you to an animal that you might otherwise miss. Alastair’s convinced that some of his llamas once sensed a puma lurking in the trees: “They just stopped, their eyes rolling widely. They’re very sensitive – and very protective of you.”

We walk on through the trees, stopping every so often to drag the llamas away from tasty snacks of foliage – and once for an extended llama comfort break: “When they go, they go,” declares Alastair – and goodness, they certainly do – the puddles are enormous. Kezia finds it most amusing.

Eventually we reach Mallard’s Pike, a peaceful lake where trekkers often stop and have a picnic. As we’re lunching at Speech House, we turn round and head back. Kezia and Suzanne have a go at driving the donkey cart, and Ann, Claire and I take turns at leading the llamas. By the time we’ve finished, Kezia’s walked further than ever before, Ann’s perfected her llama-cornering skills and everyone’s feeling relaxed. I pat Jack goodbye and he flutters his eyelashes – I think he likes me after all.