

Playing Follow the *Llama*



By **Lynn Coulter**

I'M STANDING at the trailhead, listening for the rush of the Rio Grande in the gorge below, breathing in the spicy scents of pinyon and juniper, when the llamas start to hum. Stuart Wilde, our intrepid hiking guide, rips open a big nylon bag with his pocketknife and gestures to the dozen or so tourists who have signed up for this half-day trek. "Dig in," he urges, grinning, and I plunge both hands into a mixture of sweet feed, oats and other grains.

One of the llamas, a handsome cream-colored male named Azul, is kneeling, camel-like, beside Wilde's truck, so I stoop to offer him the snack and revel in the feel of his warm nose nuzzling my fingers. With his soft, fuzzy ears, buckteeth and gentle disposition, he reminds me of an overgrown white rabbit. He munches as he watches me with a chocolate brown eye, then swivels his head to reveal a sky blue one.

Hiking the steep terrain of the Rio Grande Gorge is much easier when your **FOUR-FOOTED** companion can carry 60 to 80 pounds on his back.

"Azul was my first llama," says Wilde, a passionate naturalist and New York native who ditched his unsatisfying city life to open a wilderness adventures business back in 1992. When Azul stands up, Wilde stuffs water jugs, sandwiches and fruit for our lunch into a satchel fastened over his strong back. "We've spent tens of thousands of hours and miles together over the last 18 years," Wilde says. "He's getting close to retirement, but he still likes to come out and do this."

Azul looks like a wise and laid-back kind of guy, and those are both desirable traits when you're choosing a hiking companion for a steep descent like this one, which begins in the Wild Rivers Recreation Area of New Mexico, about 35 miles north of Taos. But before I can stow my gear in his pack, another hiker in the group starts loading from the opposite side. It's like having somebody jump into a cab you had waiting at the curb.

No matter. Wilde sorts us all into groups of three, two hikers per animal, and passes me a bright red lead attached to Zephyr, a young, black llama who's the feisty teenager in his herd. "Ready to go?"

It's only about a mile from the trailhead to the bottom of the canyon, a fairly easy journey despite some switchbacks on the narrow path, although of course Zephyr is doing the heavy lifting. He likes it when I stroke the wiry hair on his neck, but I try to walk slightly behind or ahead of him, as llamas prefer to travel single file. In spite of what you've heard, there's little chance of being spat at, although llamas can engage in spitting contests. It's a "guy thing," Wilde explains, a dominance behavior between males—not something his nicely trained llamas usually do. Soon Zephyr and two other llamas, K2 and Domino, take up Azul's hum. It's a nasal little sound the animals use to communicate with each other and to express

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companions

everything from curiosity to nervousness. “It’s like their whistle as they walk through the woods,” Wilde says. “Llamas are prey animals, and they’re nervous by nature. When you’re food for somebody else, you’re never all that settled.”

Except for their humming, llamas are rather quiet creatures, which has earned them the name “silent brothers” among the indigenous people of the Andean highlands. Once domesticated by the Incas, llamas nearly became extinct when that civilization collapsed with the Spanish conquest in the 1500s. (The conquistadors introduced their own livestock.) They’re actually part of the camelid family—think camels without humps—and they’ve been used in South America as beasts of burden, and as a source of wool and fiber, for over 6,000 years.

As we descend, we hit some rough patches on the trail. Pebbles roll under my feet, sometimes making me slip, and occasionally we’re forced to pick our way over an outcropping of rocks, but within an hour, we reach the river. The hilly terrain is no challenge for our four-footed companions. Llamas have feet, not hooves, with split toes that give them their sure footing. The animals literally leave a small footprint on the earth, and the priciest hiking boots can’t match the equipment of these furry mountaineers when it comes to stability and agility.

Their deftness as hiking companions, and their uniqueness as pets, have renewed interest in these gentle, intelligent animals in the past 25 years. Today more than 1,300 breeders in the United States and Canada sell llamas. While there’s a limited market for their wool, some countries have considered raising them for food, a possibility that has surely caused a lot of nervous humming.

Wilde bought his first two animals as hiking buddies in 1991, and today he gets



AN EXCURSION IN LEXINGTON, VIRGINIA, WITH APPLEWOOD LLAMA TREKKING

calls from all over the Southwest asking him to rescue neglected or unwanted llamas. “People get llamas as a designer pet, or they turn out to be a breeding investment gone awry, and I’m happy to incorporate them into my herd,” he says. “I have all males, since females aren’t traditionally used for packing and I don’t do any breeding.”

The llamas instinctively follow one another as Wilde leads us single file down the trail. A self-taught naturalist and field ecologist, he stops to let us breathe in the vanilla-scented bark of the tall ponderosa pines, and points out petroglyphs of bighorn sheep and elk drawn by members of an ancient Pueblo culture.

The air gets cooler as we descend, and soon we glimpse the sun-spangled

river. At the bottom of the gorge, we loop our leads over branches and lounge in the shade at beautiful Big Arsenic Spring. Crystal-clear water bubbles out of volcanic rocks, filling a pool surrounded by ferns and moss-covered boulders. Wilde invites us to sample a nearby patch of watercress, a green that leaves our tongues burning with the spicy bite of horseradish. While he prepares sandwiches and fruit for lunch, Zephyr and Azul snack on fresh pine needles and leaves. It’s fascinating to watch them use their split lips like little spoons.

We pull off our shoes and dangle our feet in the cold river while the llamas rest, then regroup for the hike back to the Wild Rivers Recreation area. Zephyr strides confidently up the trail, but it’s not so easy for me, given the high altitude. Wilde hasn’t lost a hiker yet, and like the excellent trail guide that he is, he slows the pace to accommodate those of us who aren’t used to the thin air.

At the top, he rewards the animals with more feed as we drain our water bottles and pose beside our hard-working, sweet-natured llamas for a few more photos. “Many of us today live lives that are removed and insulated from nature,” Wilde says. “These animals help bridge the gap and help people feel at home in the environment. They are ambassadors to the wilderness.”

Lynn Coulter, author of Mustard Seeds: Thoughts on the Nature of God and Faith, hums with the llamas from her home in Douglasville, Georgia.



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- Applewood Inn & Llama Trekking in Lexington, Virginia; 800-463-1902 or 540-463-1962; www.applewoodbb.com
- El Paseo Llama Expeditions in Taos, New Mexico; 800-455-2627 or 575-758-3111; www.elpaseollama.com
- English Mountain Llama Treks, based in Hot Springs, North Carolina, in the Great Smoky Mountains; 828-622-9686; www.hikinginthemokies.com
- Leelin Llama Treks, based in Julian, California (about an hour east of San Diego); 800-649-5487 or 760-765-1890; www.llamatreks.com
- Northern Vermont Llama Company, Waterville, Vermont; 802-644-2257; www.northernvermontllamacom.com
- Wild Earth Llama Adventures, Taos, New Mexico; 800-758-5262; www.llamaadventures.com