

Trekking with llamas? It's not ho-hum.

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

I recently went to Lexington, Va., to visit friends who had just hiked Mount Kilimanjaro. As I started planning my long weekend, I asked if they wanted to join me for a llama trek at a nearby inn.

"The llamas carry your lunch," I said, as though this detail would entice hikers who were accustomed to a staff of five sherpas each. As it turned out, my friends had to leave town just as I arrived. I doubt it was a coincidence.

Lexington is in the heart of Rockbridge County, halfway between Harrisonburg and Roanoke. Thanks to its colleges — Washington and Lee University and the Virginia Military Institute — the town's economy seems robust. Restaurants are full, Main Street is lively and there are enough culture and adventure enthusiasts to support stores dedicated to the performing arts and outdoor recreation.

The morning after I arrived, I walked into town and shopped at both the indie bookstores — the Bookery and Books & Co. I stopped in the 2nd Hand Shop, where owner Freddie Goodhart welcomed me with a gravelly drawl. "Look around," he said. "You'll see a lot of stuff you don't need." He was right: golf clubs, old rearview mirrors, Coke bottles, vinyl LPs, eyeglasses, Civil War bullets, belt buckles, license plates and fiddles.

Freddie loaded firewood into his wood-burning stove, lit a cigarette and began telling stories. "A woman once brought in two live, caged white ducks on a Friday," he told me. After some haggling, he bought them for \$5 and sold them on Saturday for \$8.

I took a walking tour of downtown, which finished just in time for the 5 o'clock cannon at VMI — the hour when the flags are lowered and the military duty day officially ends. Then I walked over to Blue Lab Brewing Co., a year-old microbrewery in an old feed supply store. I talked to the owners, who both have day jobs at Washington and Lee (one is a biology professor). As I stood in the small tasting room sampling ale, stout and porter, locals came in to fill up their growlers for the weekend.

The next day I awoke with anticipation. Despite the fact that everyone seemed perplexed (why are you going on a hike with llamas?) I was excited about acquainting myself with a somewhat exotic animal and the humans who own nine of them.

Chris Best, who owns the Applewood Inn with his artist wife, Linda, is a wiry man who takes stairs two at a time and delivers bad puns like nobody's business. The llamas are fluffy and finicky and can carry 20 percent of their body weight. The Bests ended up with two llamas at their Berkshires inn in the 1980s, and they've been smitten ever since.

Chris walked toward the llama pen with what looked like dog harnesses and offered our small group an orientation. "Use two hands on the rope," he said. "When we're on a trek, they're in a giant salad bar." The herbivore llamas will eat frequently on the hike, he told us, but don't be afraid to pull them along. "They will not try to hurt you, and they don't bite, but they do have a kick. And they have three stomachs, so when



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Applewood Inn owner Chris Best said his llamas "will not try to hurt you, and they don't bite, but they do have a kick." They also hum when they're unhappy and may spit to show their displeasure.

they want to give you a nasty spit, it comes from stomach three. It's like projectile vomit."

At that point, I set aside all other goals for the day. I decided to focus exclusively on not upsetting my llama.

Chris handed me a leash attached to a nearly full-grown llama named Spunky. He had giant eyes and expressive ears. Llamas are herd animals (used to protect flocks of sheep) and pack animals (used to carry things such as lunch). Surprisingly, there are many breeders in Virginia. Every March, Lexington's Virginia Horse Center hosts what it calls the largest llama and alpaca show in the country.

Spunky's face was about level with mine, and he moved in so close that I could feel his breath on my cheek. I seemed to pass muster, because after some intense sniffing, he let me lead him into the field, and with that, our trek began. We hiked for two hours on the 36-acre property, mostly in open pastures (since it was hunting season, we stayed out of the woods) and along peaks with panoramic views of House Mountain, the Short Hills and the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Another llama in the group, Stryker, was an infant terrible compared with my Spunky. Stryker would at times be flustered by something as ordinary as crunching leaves, and once, going down a steep hill, he decided to take off on his own. Toward the end of the hike, Chris led us

GETTING THERE

Lexington is about 190 miles southwest of Washington. Take Interstate 66 west, then I-81 south to Exit 188B/US-60 west into Lexington.

over a small bridge that the llamas had never crossed, and Spunky slammed on the brakes. Chris cajoled Happy, the one llama who was willing to try something bold. Once he crossed, the others summoned the courage to follow.

During the hike, Chris talked about the llamas' smarts and personalities — this one doesn't like water, these two can't be separated, that one is the loudest. I asked what kind of noises they make. "They cluck," Chris said, "to warn each other. And they make a humming sound to show their displeasure." (Why do they hum? "Because," Chris dead-panned, "they don't know the words.")

The inn's best trekker, Chaos, was on injured reserve after a mishap a few days earlier. Since hunting season had just started, the fox hunting club was out with its hounds. Apparently, a hound had spooked a black bear, the bear ran up the driveway and spooked Chaos, and Chaos tried to escape, getting stuck in a wire fence.

We returned to the pen, where Chaos was recovering and a light-colored llama named McNally was stationed to keep him company. But after all the other llamas were released to pasture, McNally expressed discontent at being stuck in the pen, repeating a faint, drawn-out, soulful sound. As I walked back to my car, relieved that I didn't have any spitting stories to tell, McNally looked out to the field longingly, and hummed.

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IF YOU GO

STAYING THERE

The Sheridan Livery Inn

35 N. Main St.
540-464-1887
www.sheridanliveryinn.com

Historic building with a 12-room inn and restaurant. Rates \$80 to \$170, including continental breakfast.

Applewood Inn

242 Tarn Beck Lane
800-463-1902
www.applewoodbb.com
Ten minutes from downtown, on 36 acres along Buffalo Creek. Off-season rates (through March) start at \$145.

EATING THERE

Pure Eats

107 N. Main St.
540-462-6000
www.pure-eats.com
Lexington's newest slice of heaven. Burgers \$6.50 to \$8, milkshakes \$4.50, doughnuts \$1 or \$10 per dozen.

Red Hen

11 E. Washington St.
540-464-4401
www.redhenlex.com
The town's first farm-to-table restaurant. Entrees change frequently based on seasonal ingredients.

PLAYING THERE

Applewood Inn

242 Tarn Beck Lane
540-463-1962
www.applewoodbb.com
Two-hour llama treks on weekends and weekdays starting at 10 a.m. year-round, weather dependent; for age 8 and older. Inn guests \$16 to \$19; non-guests \$27.50.

INFORMATION

www.lexingtonvirginia.com