

A Llama for Mama

By Michael Konik

If you were to list all the things a woman might want to do on her 50th birthday, trudging her way through the Wyoming wilderness would probably rank somewhere between taking boxing lessons and getting cavities filled. But my mother, faced with my father's tantalizing promise of whatever she desired for that milestone, chose to spend a week hiking in remote back country. With llamas.

When my mother first informed me about the birthday outing, I wasn't completely surprised. After all, she had spent her summer vacations doing things like digging up dinosaur bones and attending an Outward Bound course in Colorado. Still, as far as I knew, llamas either lived in zoos or made unusual pets for eccentric rich people like Michael Jackson. The last time I had seen one was at Madison Square Garden, in a circus. It looked more like a child's cuddly bedtime companion come to life than a stalwart beast of burden capable of hauling enough tents, food and fishing poles to keep a group of city dwellers happy in the middle of nowhere for a week.

But now, having trekked through the Shoshone National Forest and the Popo Agie wilderness in the company of six llamas, I can report that these animals might be the best thing to have happened to back country travel since the invention of bug repellent and instant coffee. Climbing steep, snowlined passes, with only a day pack on my shoulders, I often speculated on why anyone would want to haul 75 pounds of equipment when a llama is happy to do it.

Two days into the trip, we are camped at approximately 11,000 feet above sea level in a stretch of the Wyoming Rockies called the Wind River Range. To get to this remote patch of solitude, our motley crew-me, my parents, my wife, Stephanie, and Sam the dog-have hiked miles of serpentine trails, every step taking us farther from the world we know. The hiking has not been easy: Adjusting to the altitude is difficult for my mother, and for those of us who haven't been to the gym in a few weeks, the constant climbing is more grueling than any StairMaster. Even my father, a tough ex-Marine, makes oblique references to boot camp as he tramps through a gurgling creek. But our initial hardships are soothed by the patience of our guides, Scott and Tim Woodruff of the Lander Llama Company, and the inspiring determination of our porters: Luke, Tall Tim, General Patton, Starburst, Cope Red, and Hot Shot.

When he first came to Lander, Wyoming, in 1985, Scott Woodruff had a few hundred dollars, no job and a big dream. "I wanted a business where I could be outdoors, a part of nature," he says. "I heard about llamas, and thought, This is it. This is what I've got to do." It took him several years to establish a herd and obtain a special-use permit from the U.S. Forest Service. In 1989 he was finally able to start doing what he loves. It shows. Burly and bearded, the Wisconsin native looks every inch a mountain man.

My mom says choosing Lander Llama was easy. Of the dozens of llama outfitters throughout Washington, Oregon, Colorado and Wyoming, Lander Llama was the only one she found that provided all meals and gear (including sleeping bags, tents and rainwear), charged a reasonable rate, and had a toll-free number to boot. Besides, she thought the terrain pictured on the brochure looked spectacular. She figured "even if it turned out to be half as beautiful I'd still be amazed."

Standing on a ridge two miles above sea level, surveying our progress, the family agrees: This is better than the pictures. On our trek to this spot, we've encountered

almost as many mule deer, moose and bighorn sheep as people. The vista looks very much like one of the scenes the man on PBS's *Joy of Painting* likes to slap together in less than 30 minutes: in the background, impossibly majestic peaks poking into the clouds; in the middle ground, patches of conifers and wildflowers; in the foreground, streams and lakes, shimmering in the sun like a inspired mirage. As in the paintings, the view has a feel of dreamy unreality.

Perhaps that's because in wilderness areas no planes, helicopters, motorcycles or mountain bikes are allowed-only people and their gear carriers, including horses, goats and mules. Even the rangers travel on foot. Much to the chagrin of traditional outfitters-cowboys who've been taking greenhorns through the wilderness on horseback for decades-a new breed of guides have discovered that of all pack animals, llamas are the most efficient and have the least impact on the environment. They weigh between 300 and 400 pounds and can carry up to 120 pounds of equipment, almost as much as a horse twice the size. They graze lightly, leaving virtually no scars on a meadow that horses would mow bare in one evening. Like dogs, they have soft, padded feet, which makes them sure climbers that leave barely a trace, whereas the hoof of a horse creates an indelible impression wherever it lands, especially when the ground is wet. And llamas, unlike their prodigious equine cousins, leave small, pellet-like droppings similar to a deer's or sheep's. They are ecologically ideal for a journey into the mountains-in their native Peruvian Andes or Wyoming's Wind River Range.

For those with neither the stamina nor the desire to hike rugged, boulder-filled trails, the only drawback of trekking with llamas is that you can't ride them. They do, however, transport enough of the comforts of home to make you forget the minor hardships of wilderness travel. Instead of oatmeal and freeze-fried casseroles (the staples of traditional backpacking), our family dined on steak and shrimp, fresh mango and melon, and desserts like strawberry shortcake with whipped cream. This was all consumed courtesy of Tall Tim, who hauled two coolers packed with dry ice.

Even if we hadn't been equipped with enough wine and meat to start a back country restaurant, we would hardly have gone hungry. The fishing in the Wind River Range is stupendous, almost foolproof. At daybreak and sunset, when fish pop above the surface of the water to snare insects, the lakes look as if someone has turned on hundreds of underwater toasters. Scott tells us that our camp at one of the Ice Lakes (so named because they are frozen until late summer) is visited by about a half-dozen anglers all year. We catch close to 100 trout, including brookies, cutthroats and the elusive, highly prized goldens. The water here is so clear you can stand on a boulder and see fish 20 feet away, just waiting for an enticing lure to float along.

We have plenty of time to fish. Much to our slothlike delight, we discover that Scott and Tim do everything: setting up and breaking down the tents, collecting fresh water for drinking and impromptu bathing, preparing meals *and* doing dishes as well as packing up the llamas when it's time to move on. We're free to bask in back country luxury-and if we collect an occasional piece of firewood or stuff a sleeping bag into its sack, it's only because we feel like roughing it. Most evenings are spent sitting around a crackling campfire, telling jokes and recalling the day's highlights. When it gets dark enough, we crane our necks toward the sky and watch meteors streak across the blackness.

Hiking from the Ice Lakes to our ultimate campsite, Pinto Park, a grassy plateau known for its nightly elk and moose visitations, we must cross a series of slow-moving creeks created by the recent snowmelt. Those of us with two feet easily hop from one rock to the next; the llamas must slosh through. Occasionally Starbust, the youngest animal, emits a high-pitched hum that sounds like a cross between a bleating sheep and an inquisitive baby: Hmmmmm? Scott tells us that this can signify anything from anxiety to curiosity. For a better indication of what's on a llama's mind, he says, look at the ears, which normally stand erect, twitching at attention, but quickly wilt 45 degrees

when a llama is displeased or nervous.

After several days on the trail, leading my charge, the General, by a guide rope attached to a halter on his head, I have developed an understanding with him. If I don't walk too fast or too slowly, he'll follow with no argument. If either of us moves at what the other deems an unacceptable pace, we let each other know about it. For my part, a sharp tug or soft pat on the nose gets the message across. For his part, the General usually resorts to a blank stare and a burp. Conversely, when I'm especially pleased with his performance, I have the urge to hug his neck or make air kisses on his protuberant lips.

Sometimes he acquiesces, often not. Spend a few days with a llama and you discover that it has the demeanor of a cat: aloof, independent, yet highly social. The General reluctantly lets me pet him on his throat but never the head; he seems indifferent to physical contact with either humans or llamas yet grows agitated when the rest of his buddies are out of sight. Contrary to what I had previously heard, trained llamas, unlike their close relative, the camel, do not spit or kick, unless, of course, precocious dogs like Sam try an ill-advised nip at their ankles. They do, however, try to wander away every now and then. In these cases a handful of grain seems to bring them around to your way of thinking.

With a quarter-mile to go until we reach Pinto Park, Scott assembles us around him and asks us to raise our right hands. "Repeat after me," he says. "I, being a loyal llama packer, do solemnly swear to look straight ahead and not turn around until Scott says I can." We take the oath and expectantly commence to hike. "Trust me," Scott says with a conspiratorial smile. Fifteen minutes later we are in Pinto Park, which, true to its name, is home to 15 ponies, peacefully grazing in the meadow. "Okay," Scott announces. "You can turn around!"

Behind us, perhaps a mile in the distance, we behold the view: a steel-gray chunk of the Himalayas transplanted to America. "That's Lizard Head Peak," Scott says. "What you're looking at is probably the most dramatic scene in all of the Wind River Range."

We look, we shake our heads. We say things like "phenomenal," "magnificent." But we all know there really are no words for what we are seeing, only memories.

In one day and 10 miles of mercifully downhill cruising, we will be back to everyday living. Mom will cry with joy as we congratulate her on completing the long journey; Dad and Steph will gush about the film they're going to develop; Sam will finally be too tired to chase another chipmunk. We'll give the llamas one last pat and one last glance before they're loaded on their trailer, and as Scott and Tim drive them away, we'll imagine the humming we hear is the llamas' way of saying goodbye.

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Llama-trekking season runs from
late June to mid-September. A
five-day trip costs \$150 per
person daily.