

AT A LLAMA'S PACE: Trekking in the Wind River Range

By Linda Crouch

My friends, Betty Erickson, Betty Thacker, Carol Holcomb, and I call ourselves the T.O.B.s (Tough Old Broads). Three of us are grandmothers; one is soon to be a great-grandmother. Certainly, the obstacles are greater for mature trekkers, but so are the rewards. We are slower: sometimes victories are measured in yards rather than miles. At this stage in our lives we have already "found ourselves;" we know who we are. Now we want to lose those selves. Our aim isn't to conquer the wilderness, but to join with it, blending harmoniously into the whole.

Being the least experienced hiker, I was a trifle intimidated when we began to plan this 12-day llama trek. Nor was I the only one. "No guide and completely out of touch?" my husband ventured. "Completely out of touch?" Others were even less encouraging. "Won't that be hard work?" "Aren't you afraid of getting hurt out there?" and my personal favorite: "Aren't you a little old for that kind of thing?" The answers were yes, yes, and NO. Like many older women today, we refuse to sit in our rockers knitting. We are still eager to explore, to challenge ourselves with the dangers and discomforts of a wilderness journey. We hoped to find that our pioneer heritage has not been lost in the clutter and comforts of our modern lives.

From among the many trails in the Popo Agie, we chose Bear's Ears. We planned to go in early August, after the rainy season but before snowfall. However, weather is predictably unpredictable in the mountains, so we tried to be prepared for anything.

At the trailhead in Dickenson Park, 30 miles west of Lander, Wyo., the llamas were trucked in to meet us. Mine was named Cream Soda, for his color. The others were Tom Dooley, Crockett and Stryker. Bear warnings were posted, but bears are said to avoid llamas. I certainly hoped this was true. Not that I'm afraid of bears. Much.

On the trail the llamas sorted out among themselves who was to lead and who was to follow, then instructed us accordingly. Tom and Betty E. were the acknowledged leaders. Soda and I started out last in line, but he kept breathing down my neck and even bumped me with his head to get me to move up. Not satisfied, he snatched off my hat. Never slow to take a hint, I moved into second place and felt no more llama breath.

South American Indians have used llamas as pack animals for centuries, but the animals have only been in this country for about 20 years. Besides the obvious advantage of their ability to carry heavy weight, they are very low-maintenance animals. They can go long periods without water, and save for a small ration of supplementary pellets, they will forage, munching grass, shrubs, flowers, even pine needles. Their soft, cushioned feet leave little mark on the fragile tundra, and their split upper lip lets them graze close to the ground without pulling up roots.

If you obey a few llama rules, they are docile creatures. However, they dislike having their heads touched, and we were told never to take their halters off: getting them back on would be a momentous struggle.

For us they were ideal. Each animal was able to carry 75 pounds, allowing us to backpack in relative comfort. Their easy pace is as stately as their appearance, which makes for slow but steady progress.

After a fairly easy first day, the trail became very steep and rocky. Despite being well-adapted for sure-footed climbing, Crockett complained, moaning a lot of the time. It's called "humming," but it sounded more like a high-pitched moo. At 12,000 feet, we were all moaning. My shortness of breath, nausea and headache signaled the onset of altitude sickness. This was only our second day, and I wondered if I could handle this. I stopped often, pleading my heart condition. "You don't have a heart condition," Carol pointed out. "I do now," I gasped.

Despite our difficulties, we were ecstatic. Magnificent panoramic views made us feel as if we were at the top of the world. Around us were large patches of snow the color of watermelon. It was pretty, but the algae that gives the snow its color also causes severe diarrhea if consumed. We decided to wait until later to melt more snow for water. Although it looked barren, the alpine tundra was alive with activity and growth. A marmot stood erect on a rock, watching us pass through his territory. Pica darted among the rocks, stashing grass for the coming winter. Butterflies sipped from tiny, bright flowers. Scattered showers alternated with warm sun. Tired as I was, I was overjoyed.

We had planned our stops in advance, expecting to spend one to three nights at each. At Valentine Lake, distant lightning encouraged us to descend quickly from the exposed ridge. We moved fast to unload the "boys" and dive into our tents just as the squall hit. Five minutes later, it was gone, leaving the air redolent of pine. We climbed out of our tents, groaning with aching muscles and creaking joints. It was a good thing we brought lots of ibuprofen.

Before turning in, we hung all the food that didn't fit into our bear-proof food canisters. We heard that a ranger had killed a bear nearby, a sow who may have had a cub. If so, the cub would surely die, too. I felt sad and guilty. We encroach on her territory, then she becomes a danger to us.

The morning sky was a glittering, cloudless blue. As usual, there were chores: start the stoves, put on water, take down the food, fix breakfast, clean up, rehang the food, spread things out to dry after the rain, walk down to the lake to filter water, and move the llamas to a fresh grazing plot. When the chores were done, we pursued our separate pleasures. The others were off on a day hike, while I loafed and enjoyed being alone with no telephone, no TV and no traffic, just lazing in the sun listening to the birds and insects.

Later that evening we sat drinking hot chocolate and discussing how well things were going. Having said that, sure enough our lives were about to get complicated. Betty T. turned her head and said, "Oh, where's Stryker!" The rope connecting his halter to the stake had come undone, and Stryker was grazing and watching us from a few hundred yards away. "No worry," we said. "We'll catch him." We quickly learned that llamas can be as skittish as they are agreeable and docile. We circled slowly. He waited until the last moment to gallop away. After a few tries we recognized a standoff. It stopped being funny when we realized an escape could ruin our trip. I made a lasso, but as soon as Stryker saw the rope he bolted. At Betty E.'s suggestion, we constructed a corral with ropes and branches and herded the escapee toward it. He wasn't fooled. We tried luring him with food pellets, generally regarded as a treat. Nope. By then it had grown so dark

we could barely see. Knowing that llamas tend to stay with their herds, we went to bed hoping for the best.

By morning we were gravely worried. Stryker had stayed near, but our renewed efforts to capture him were futile. Now what! The consensus was to go on toward Grave Lake and see whether he would follow. The other llamas would have to pack a little more, and we would have to carry the rest. Our loads were heavy and awkward, and it was painfully apparent that we wouldn't be able to go far. We called the beast names we wouldn't want our grandchildren to hear.

In the narrow valley along the South Fork of the Little Wind River, huckleberries were ripening and flowers were in bloom. Unfortunately, in our misery most of our attention was on the llama. He followed but stopped when we stopped, never coming closer. I thought about the great warrior, Chief Washakie, of the Wind River Shoshone, for whom many natural features in this area are named. He was friendly to pioneers in the 1850s and on occasion sent braves to help them round up stray cattle. Hopeful that so strong a spirit still lingers in these mountains, I petitioned him silently for help with our wayward beast.

We forded the river and rested beside a cascade lined with blue columbine. It was so beautiful that we momentarily forgot our defector. Suddenly, Carol said softly, "Look what I've got." She had her arms locked around Stryker's neck. The wretched creature had simply walked up behind her and now stood quietly while we attached his lead rope. What a relief. Thank you, Chief. With our extra weight returned to Stryker's back, we arrived at our next camp in high spirits.

The shore of Grave Lake was a narrow, sandy beach, warm and luxurious under our feet. Opposite, a massive stone wall rose precipitously from the rubble of talus slopes. All was peaceful.

An overnight shower left the silver-green new growth on the fir glistening like jewels. While the others hiked, I took an invigorating, albeit brief, skinny dip in the icy water.

Walking around afterwards, I came upon a pile of bear scat. I searched for tracks, claw marks on trees, fur on bushes-nothing. I was almost disappointed. Other wildlife was abundant, however. Other than the small creatures, we had spotted white-tailed deer and fallen asleep to the eerie music of coyotes. Some tree bark near camp had been chewed at a height that suggested moose.

Morning found us on our way to Onion Meadows for the day, pushing our way through the woods, stumbling over stones and roots, scrambling over wind-falls. The trail, when we could find it, ran along the boundary of the Shoshone and Northern Arapahoe Wind River Indian Reservation. Someone asked, "What day is it, anyway!" I relished not knowing.

Each day, dinnertime came earlier. We were always hungry. We cooked together, combining our supplies for variety, and found that even strange meals were welcome. After the first few days of perishable food, we relied on various dried, powdered and noodled concoctions. Hanging food was easier now because the anti-bear canisters could hold most of our rations.

The move to Washakie Lake was a short, brutal six miles. Even the llamas were huffing. Our camp was at timberline, among twisted and stunted trees, and with an

imposing granite ridge surrounding us on three sides. By the furious pace of the chipmunks harvesting seeds, we could tell that winter must be fierce up here, and long.

The llamas were staked nearby, and apparently they were too close together and feeling crowded. Every so often I heard a loud "ph TOO!" as they spit at each other. It seems to be a dominance or a "get outta my face" warning. They don't usually spit at humans, but if you get in the way, you'll get slimed.

In this vast silence, sounds carry great distances, but we heard no one. In the complete darkness we could see a million sparkling stars. There was frost on the ground in the morning. Washakie Pass beckoned the serious hikers, but I was content to wander. Down by the lake I found a deer skull and an arrowhead. To enjoy this glorious solitude was worth all the effort. There are certain days you always remember. I think this will be one of them.

As we were breaking camp the following day, Tom and Soda gave a loud, distinctive call, signaling alarm. We saw nothing, but they didn't calm down until we left the area. We suspected a bear.

The trail out from Washakie returns to our previous ford on the South Fork. It was windy and hot: time for a cool stop by the stream. It was to be our last leisurely lunch.

On the crossing, Betty T. slipped on a log, fell into the icy water and came up with a broken hand. It was an obvious fracture with a dislocated third knuckle. Betty E. quickly reduced the dislocation with gentle traction, while Carol found a round stone that fit the palm perfectly. I wrapped the makeshift splint with my bandanna, and we tied two more together as a sling. The pain must have been enormous, but Betty T. kept saying, "I'm fine."

We had planned three more days, but now we decided to hike out directly. Betty T. had to agree. The pain was likely to increase, but a more serious concern was her circulation. If it should become impaired so far from medical care, we feared she could lose her hand. We studied our maps. About 25 miles, mountain miles, in two days. Well, I thought, here's where I find out if I'm really a T.O.B.

The llamas walked at their own pace and would not be dragged. It was just as well we couldn't go faster: the rocky trail was treacherous. We were lucky to reach Valentine Lake by dark.

Before daybreak we were on our way again. A killer day was ahead, a steep pass that is arduous under the best of circumstances. Oddly enough, we were looking forward to testing ourselves. The view from the top of Bear's Ears was breathtaking. We could see layers of lakes up the mountainsides. Around us were rocks, huge boulders and multi-colored lichens. The wind was constant, first hot, then cold. It was here that we encountered the young men who were surprised to find women of our "maturity," as they delicately put it.

At this point, however, I was afraid our "maturity" was showing: every step was an effort. Clearing the high pass, we were forced to consider whether we were physically able to continue. A cup of Earl Grey and a hot meal restored us somewhat. Betty T.'s hand was badly swollen, despite the cold compresses we had been applying at every snowfield. It was unanimous: we would go on.

We would have to climb again, over Adam's Pass. I was so tired I was near tears. Just put one foot in front of the other until we reach the top, I told myself. Now, we could no longer see the far mountains where we had been. Instead, the plains were waving in the distance. We were actually making good time. Our main concern was getting to a doctor, but there was also talk of showers and real food: steak and green salad.

At last, we staggered into Dickenson Park, unloaded the boys and gave them the last of their hard-earned feed. I was sorry to leave Soda. I'll miss him. Betty E. and Carol waited with the animals, while Betty T. and I headed for town. First, a call to Lander Llama for an unscheduled pick up. Betty refused to go to the emergency room until she had cleaned up, so we took turns transforming ourselves into ordinary women. The long awaited shampoos and showers were pure pleasure. At the hospital, X-rays confirmed what we had known all along. Soon, Betty emerged in a plaster splint.

"She's pretty tough," the doctor said. "That's because she's a Tough Old Broad," I replied.

Later in my soft bed, I kept wondering if it was going to rain, if the llamas were safe and if I would have to get up to find a bush. I couldn't believe I was under a roof; couldn't believe where we had been. We had covered about 80 miles, most of it hard going. We were forced to face our limitations, but now we also know our strengths. We are patient and not easily panicked. We possess common sense, mental toughness and the self-reliance bequeathed us by our foremothers. Then there are the intangibles: love of the outdoors and a respectful curiosity about our world; observant eyes and open hearts; and most valuable of all, a healing sense of humor. For a while, this grandma will be content to sit in the rocking chair and knit, but she's going to be working on a sweater for next year's adventure. We'll probably never climb Denali, but no doubt about it, we'll definitely keep on trekking.

The Mature Trekker

You're not 20 anymore. Get in good shape. Don't wait until the week before you leave to start exercising. Carry an adequate supply of any prescription drugs. An extra pair of glasses wouldn't hurt, either. Research your route in advance, assessing its difficulty and the availability of water. Avoid dehydration: drink at least two liters of water daily, more if you are really exerting or if your urine turns dark. Remember that both hyperthermia and hypothermia can begin subtly and quickly in older people and are life threatening conditions. If you come from a lower altitude, take a few days to acclimatize before starting. Consult your doctor before going to higher altitudes.

Quick Tips

The Wind River Range contains three wilderness areas managed by the U.S. Forest Service: Bridger, (307) 3674326; Fitzpatrick (307) 455-2466; and the Popo Agie, (307) 332-5460. For access to the Wind River Indian Reservation, contact the Joint Council of Shoshone and Northern Arapahoe Tribes at (307) 332-3040.

Hikers must be prepared for rugged terrain and any weather: snow can fall any day of the year. Earthwalk Press publishes valuable and informative hiking maps. Call (800) 828-6277.