

Roughing It With Children On the Trail



Boy meets llama in the Willowa Valley of Oregon.

Shirley Doughtery

The risks and rewards of a weeklong family trek on the edge of the Himalayas. By Jeanie Puleston Fleming. □ Hiking with a 7-year-old and a pack of llamas

By BETTE-JANE RAPHAEL

A Boy's Best Friend Is His Llama

On an Oregon trail, a 7-year-old and six gentle beasts are the right combination for an outing



Jacob leads Murphy on the family trek into the Eagle Cap Wilderness Area.

“WHEN’S the llamas’ bedtime?” was the first question our son, Jacob, asked as we started our trek into the Eagle Cap Wilderness Area of eastern Oregon. From that moment on, he never stopped asking questions, some of which he even directed at Murphy, the llama who, with exquisite docility, allowed his young inquisitor to lead him up the trail.

His father and I were delighted by our 7-year-old’s obvious excitement. Our late August trip had been planned with his interests in mind, and this trek into the Willowa Mountains was his centerpiece. Knowing that he would never be able to lift a heavy backpack for very long, we had decided to make the four-day trek with llamas, who can carry as much as 100 pounds of food and equipment sure-footedly up and down steep mountain trails.

Jacob had spent the two months since we made that decision hopping from foot to foot at the thought of camping out in the mountains. He could hardly wait to sleep in that most magical of accommodations, a tent, and he was permanently wide-eyed with visions of petting a llama, learning to fish and maybe even seeing a bear, whose characteristics, he apparently imagined, would parallel those of Stan and Jan Berenstain’s bear family. We were hoping reality would live up to his expectations.

Our trek started on the Monday before Labor Day weekend. Two days earlier we had flown from New York to Boise, where we’d rented a car to make the trip from Idaho to Oregon, crossing from one state to the other over the Snake River, just below Brownlee Dam. After spending Saturday night at a bed and breakfast outside the tiny town of Halfway — its citizens say it is halfway between heaven and a stretch of the Snake River known as Hell’s Canyon — we drove through the Willowa-Whiteman National Forest and into the spacious and fertile Willowa Valley. Our destination was the little town of Joseph, Ore. (population 1,100). There, on Sunday evening, we walked the three short blocks that led from our motel in the center of town to a bed and breakfast on the edge of it. This was where we had arranged to meet Stanlynn Daugherty, the leader of our trek and the owner of the llamas who were to carry our packs.

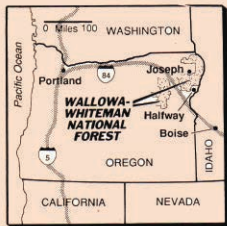
We already thought highly of our guide, sight unseen. We’d talked to her on the phone several times in the preceding months to make arrangements for the trip and discuss the equipment and clothing we would need. She’d instructed us on the kind of boots we should have for the hike and explained what we’d need for warmth and possible rain protection. It was at her suggestion that we bought Jacob his first high-top sneakers, a pair of white Reeboks that, having laces instead of Velcro closings, became his badge of maturity.

A robust, knowledgeable and eminently likable woman, Stanlynn has been leading llamas and people into Oregon’s Willowa Mountains for five years. At our first meeting, she introduced us to our trek mates — a couple from Puerto Rico and a woman from Iowa — and answered last-minute questions. Jacob had many inquiries, some practical and some of a more hypothetical nature. What kind of bathroom facilities would we have? (Answer: A latrine.) Would the temperature get below freezing at night? (Answer: Probably not.) What would Stanlynn do if we got lost?

We arranged to meet at 9 the next morning and drive to the trail head, situated about an hour away at an altitude of 5,200 feet. From there we would walk about four and half miles up to Brownie Basin, a sub-alpine meadow at 7,200 feet, where we would set up a base camp. The second day we would hike higher up the mountain to Laverty and Chimney Lakes, where we would be able to fish and, weather permitting, swim. The following day, we would hike up to Wilson Basin, where, Stanlynn told a delighted Jacob, there was an old gold mine and a third mountain lake. This was Lake John Henry, which, like the basin, had been named after the mine’s erstwhile owner. On the fourth morning, after breaking camp, we would hike back down to the trail head.

When the truck stopped at our motel the next morning, it contained Stanlynn, her teen-age assistant, Kristen, several packs of food and camping equipment and six large-eyed llamas: Murphy (the oldest), Woody (the youngest), Pardner, Levi, Pal and Cupcake. For Jacob, it was love at first sight.

His father and I could appreciate his infatuation. Llamas are charming creatures. Not naturally affectionate — they will quietly move away from you when you try to pet them — they make up for their aloofness with a serene even-temperedness, infinite patience and an utterly nonaggressive attitude. Some people confuse them with camels, and have asked us if they were bad tempered or if they ever spit at us. Stanlynn told us that



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llamas will spit if you hurt them, but we never saw any evidence of ill humor. Jacob was easily able to lead two or three llamas up the trail, and they took the handfuls of food pellets he held out to them every evening without ever nipping his hand. Physically, too, they are very different from camels, except when it comes to their facial features.

They have long, soft, rippling fur in patterns of white, brown and black, and their backs are straight. Smaller than camels — a full-grown llama does not get much above four feet tall and weighs no more than 400 pounds — they have an infinitely more graceful gait.

At 10:30, after loading the llamas and arranging their packs, we started up the trail, and within an hour we had left the thick evergreen forest for sunnier climes. The weather was perfect — bright, breezy, in the mid-70’s — and would remain so the entire four days. By the time we reached our first rushing mountain stream, we were all thirsty. Stanlynn produced aluminum cups, and we drank our fill of the pristine, icy water (which, at the altitude we had reached, Stanlynn assured us was safe). Jacob further cooled himself by following Stanlynn’s example and holding his hat in the stream before plopping it, dripping wet, back on his head.

An hour or so later we stopped for lunch in a wooded area just off the trail, wonderfully crunchy tuna and vegetable salad sandwiches on homemade bread. Apples, cheese and brownies accompanied this main course, and Jacob, learning from Stanlynn that llamas love apple cores, handed them out after lunch to one eager animal after another.

Toward the middle of the afternoon, Jacob’s questions took on a tenor usually reserved for long car trips. “How much further do we have to go? “When are we going to get there?” Happily, before things turned down-

right cranky, the trail widened out into a sunny meadow, flecked with pine trees and surrounded with sheltering mountains. This was Brownie Basin and we had it entirely to ourselves. Tired, but with a comforting sense of accomplishment, we trudged across its relatively flat expanse to Stanlynn's favorite campsite. Situated beside a stand of tall pines, a short distance up from the banks of a stream that meandered lazily through the basin, the site was furnished with a fallen tree trunk that in the coming days would serve alternately as table and backrest.

Stanlynn and Kristen helped us pitch our tents and then encouraged us to cool off in the nearby stream while they unpacked the llamas. Hot from the exertions of the trek, we put on our bathing suits and went down to test the inviting water. It was as cold as properly chilled champagne and, at the end of August, not deep enough for us to fully immerse ourselves. But we dipped our feet for the few moments it took to make them numb and then followed the winding stream to where it tumbled over rocks in a miniature waterfall just below our campsite.

As the mountain shadows grew longer and gradually engulfed the basin, the air turned chilly. We changed into warm clothing and walked over to the newly started campfire. There we found nacho chips and salsa, Oregon wine for those who wanted it and, for Jacob, plenty of boiling water with which to make cocoa. While Jacob helped Kristen look for firewood, his father and I leaned against the tree trunk and read contentedly in the fading light.

From her tiny, portable stove, Stanlynn produced a delicious dinner of tacos, rice and vegetables. As everybody sat eating and talking in the firelight, the llamas provided a peaceful background presence. Stanlynn had hung bells around their necks, to help her find them if they meandered out of sight and, as the animals grazed, their bells tinkled delicately in the evening air.

On Stanlynn's advice, we tried to stay awake after dinner. "If you go to bed before 8:30," she warned us, "you'll get up way too early." But it wasn't easy. The chilly air made us think fondly of our waiting sleeping bags. Stanlynn kept us from becoming completely comatose by reading stories from "A Fine and Pleasant Misery," Patrick F. McManus's funny book about his misadventures in the outdoors. Then, promptly at 8:30, we took up our flashlights and made our way back to our tents, where we stripped down to our thermal underwear, put on our hats and mittens, and snuggled into our sleeping bags. During the night the temperature plummeted to the mid-30's. The next two nights, a degree or two above 40, seemed almost

balmy in comparison. The following morning we were up at 6, as we would be every morning of the trip. In the pale, dappled green light of our tent, we would giggle together as we observed who looked the funniest, whose hat was still on his head, who had slipped farthest down into his sleeping bag (Jacob, always), and who had rolled over onto whom.

Jacob's finest hour was to come later that day, when, after a breakfast of fresh fruit and sausage quiche, we made the easy mile and a half hike up to Laverty Lake. Along the way Stanlynn pointed out the last of the summer's wildflowers — vivid Indian paintbrushes and startlingly blue gentians — and the footprints of small animals along the trail.

We found Laverty Lake set in a small basin of its own, at an altitude of 7,800 feet. Beneath its still, perfectly clear water, we could see the stones lining its bottom. Stanlynn unpacked her fishing rod and bait, the grasshoppers that Kristen had shown Jacob how to catch that morning. The trick, she'd told him, is to go to a spot in the meadow where the sun is just appearing on the grass. The sunlight wakes up the grasshoppers, who begin to hop about briskly among the newly warmed blades. All this sprightly activity makes them easy to see and to catch, theoretically anyway.

Stanlynn baited her hook and proceeded to give Jacob a lesson on how to cast his line. On his third or fourth try he seemed to get the knack, and not long after that he had a bite. "I got one," he yelled over and over again, expressing the kind of excitement Ahab might have felt on bagging Moby Dick. And he did indeed have what Stanlynn called "a nine-inch," which was a pretty good-sized trout for a lake that is frozen much of the year.

MORE wonders lay ahead. At Chimney Lake, a half mile farther up the trail, the trout almost fought one another to get on Jacob's line. He caught at least a dozen. Patiently, Stanlynn extricated each from the hook and threw it back into the lake, explaining that you never take away any fish that you don't intend to eat.

His father and I resolved to test our mettle by taking a swim in the icy waters. Before we could think about it and back down, we stripped and jumped in, thereby initiating the coldest and briefest swim of our lives. Afterward, we were happy to settle down in the sun for an hour with a book and a bag lunch, before heading back down to camp.

That night we again slept like logs for nine and a half hours, and it was a good thing we did, because the third day's hike turned out to be the most strenuous. We had to cross over a mountain to get from our camp to Wilson Basin, where lay the abandoned gold mine, with its promise (for Jacob, at least) of untold wealth. This meant that we had to make a long uphill climb part of the way back, after lunch, in the hottest part of the day. It was tough going for Jacob, who complained with every step: ~~Once we started back down toward our campsite, however, he quickly regained his aplomb.~~

The mine itself was a great success, though nobody found so much as a speck of gold dust. I had stayed outside the excavation, after seeing how utterly black it became 10 or 12 feet from the entrance. But Jacob had eagerly followed Stanlynn's flashlight as far into the mine as it was possible to go unimpeded, and came out poor but happy.

That evening, just before dinner, we had visitors. A small herd of elk appeared amid a cluster of pines at one end of the valley and stayed in view for several minutes before disappearing again. They were much more welcome than the coyotes we had heard howling early on the previous morning. We never did see any bears, for which I am unspcakably grateful.

Immediately after breakfast the next morning, we broke camp and loaded up the llamas for our hike back. Jacob had Murphy firmly in tow, murmuring "C'mon, Murphy" and "Good boy, Murph" throughout the morning. The trek seemed easy after our previous day's exertions, and we were down at the trail head by lunch time.

The hard part was saying goodbye to the llamas. Jacob performed this ritual sadly and methodically, giving each animal a separate and personal whispered farewell, saving Murphy for last.

He brightened on the ride back to Joseph, however, and, rolling the sound of a new word around on his tongue, he pronounced the trip "memorable."

"Didn't you think it was memorable?" he asked his father and me. We did. ■



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Fishing for trout in a lake that is frozen much of the year.