

A Trek With Alpaca Annie

by Joan Bishop

When I entered the competition in a March issue of “The Lady” last year I was lucky enough to win, the prize being a chance to become a keeper for the day at Dartmoor Zoo, Devon, which proved to be a wonderful and enjoyable hands on experience. The highlight for me was being able to get close to the Tapirs whom I fell totally in love with, South American animals related to horses and rhinoceros, the size of a small cow.

On reading a recent issue I noticed an advertisement for Alpaca trekking on Romney Marshes which sounded like a fun thing to do. Being a total animal fanatic I decided it would be “right up my street” as the saying goes. My friend Kath had received an Alpaca adoption pack as a Christmas gift so I knew she would be the one to join me. We set off for Alpaca Annies in Burmarsh, Kent on a beautiful warm April spring morning full of anticipation at what to expect.

We arrived at Haguelands Farm, after booking in and enjoying a welcome cup of coffee, it was time to don the sensible footwear we had been advised to bring, and meet the animals we were to take on the trek. We set off across the farm- yard and there they were, six beautiful woolly Alpacas of varying shades and sizes. They are actually smaller than you think and utterly, utterly gorgeous . You could feel their excitement knowing they were going on a trek, who was more so, us or them! The natural instinct is just to hug and cuddle them, but Lara, who would be accompanying us on the walk that day explained they are very shy and private animals who like their own space and are not at all tactile. I practically needed my hands tied behind my back as the temptation to touch them was overwhelming.



After a short talk on the do's and don'ts and Alpaca etiquette we were each introduced and given our “own” Alpaca. I was paired with Fennell slightly taller than the rest....it was love at first sight!! Finding it difficult to resist giving him a huge hug, I remembered the things Lara had told us earlier and resisted the urge. With my friend leading her very “own” newly adopted Alpaca Hershy who was to be the leader of the group as he was the bossy one, (well matched I thought!) Fennell and I were next, the two naughty boys in the middle, the rest of the group following, we were off.

Being shy nervous animals and being led by these strange people (us) we could feel their tension and see the wariness in their eyes. Fennell, the eldest and more experienced had appointed himself “in charge” immediately started humming a series of low throaty sounds which was his way of communicating to the rest that all was well, these strange people were actually OK, and not going to harm them. The group visibly relaxed including us, and the trek was truly under way.

After a short while “self appointed in-charge” Fennell suddenly stopped, ears up, nose twitching , staring warily ahead, what had he seen? I noticed the whole group had also stopped and were watching him intently waiting for a sign that all was well. After deciding that the ewe and her two lambs in an adjoining

field were not a threat to him or his charges he hummed to the rest and we set off again. It was uncanny how they trusted him to make that decision for them, no doubt a genetic trait inbred in the animals over thousands of years.

Although we were walking them, it was soon evident who was in charge, and it certainly was not us!. The idea of walking behind each other soon vanished, with the Alpacas choosing which direction to take us for the juiciest clumps of grass. Eventually some order was restored and we formed an orderly line...well almost.

Lara was very informative and it didn't take long to realise just how amazing they are, although bred in captivity for many years now, their in built genetic traits are still very much in evidence. Listening to Lara's obvious passion for the Alpacas made you realise just how endearing and special they are. Quiet, strong, stubborn very shy and extremely nose, it wasn't long before we were completely under their spell.



We continued for an hour or so at a leisurely pace enjoying the peace and quiet of the marshes having been totally accepted by our new friends. Time to stop for a photo opportunity and more grass munching, (the Alpacas not us!) before starting the return journey to the farm. Noticing the pace had picked up a bit, I mentioned this to Lara who explained they realise they are returning to the farm and that a delicious treat of carrots would be ready and waiting.



On reaching the yard we led them to the sheds, fed them their well earned treats, reluctantly said our goodbyes before going to the paddocks to meet the rest of the gang. Being surrounded by a mob of inquisitive Alpacas is a memorable experience to say the least, and another photo opportunity presented itself.

A chance to meet Anne Clifton-Holt....Alpaca Annie to one of them all. A very charming friendly lady, totally in love with her Alpaca family as now we all were, it was time to say good-

bye to the animals and head to the Bistro for a much needed snack, a choice of delicious freshly made sandwiches and mouth-watering home made cakes, (especially the lemon cake...to die for!) a visit to the farm shop, more mouth-watering goodies and a chance to buy that all important souvenir of the day ,it was time to off load the muddy wellies and head home.

My head buzzing with wonderful "Alpaca moments" which I will always treasure. I am already planning my return visit in October to repeat the whole experience again. I would recommend anyone wanting a delightful hands on animal experience and a few lovely relaxing hours to "give it a go" you truly won't regret it.