



MERRY LLAMAS IN THE SURREY HILLS



THE MERRY HARRIERS, SITTING ON A COUNTRY LANE IN HAMBLEDON, IS A TRADITIONAL VILLAGE INN DATING BACK TO THE 16TH CENTURY. LESS TRADITIONAL ARE THE LLAMAS LURKING IN THE BACK YARD. GISELLE WHITEAKER TAKES A TREK IN SURREY.

Dylan gives me a cheesy grin, his bottom row of teeth protruding to his spilt upper lip. His big black eyes are framed by lusciously long lashes that would make a supermodel envious and his shaggy black and white coat puts him bang on-trend. Not that he cares. He's more interested in seeing if there are any rolled oat treats left in the bottom of the feeding bucket. Llamas, it seems, are permanently hungry creatures.

Before today, I'd never seen a live llama. As soon as I'd heard llama trekking was available in Surrey, I'd booked a package, including a stay at The Merry Harriers Inn. It seemed like a great opportunity to get up close and personal with these relatives of camels. We checked in to our shepherd's hut after dark last night, so the closest we got to the real thing was a llama-festooned cushion on the bed and several ceramic llamas dotted around the surprisingly spacious cabin. For a moment, we wondered whether the fluffy fur covering on the chairs and footstool were llama, but the labels said sheepskin.

We'd popped straight over to the 16th-century village inn, directly across the road, for a bite to eat that turned out to be a merry feast. The chef is a generous soul, dishing up portions that would satisfy the most voracious diner. Perhaps a lesson learnt from the llamas? The BBQ ribs are just the right level of stickiness, so tender the meat falls from the bone, while the home-made Marie Rose sauce in the smoked salmon and prawn cocktail is delectably creamy, with a hint of chilli to liven the dish. The surf and turf is also a palate-pleaser, and we topped it all off with an entirely unnecessary, yet utterly praiseworthy gooey brownie with chocolate chunk ice cream. The ensuing food coma saw us early to bed, sleeping soundly throughout the quiet night.

By the time we ambled to the back of the pub garden post-breakfast, warmed by an unexpectedly sunny start to the day, the llamas were sporting harnesses and milling around the enclosure, nudging each other aside to reach the feed buckets. There are only four of us on the trek today and we are allowed to choose our companion from the four beasts selected for the outing. I tend to root for the underdog, so I team up with Dylan, a slightly timid llama who, according to our guide Rachel, ranks low in the pecking order and is unlikely to take the lead. My boyfriend chooses Truffle, a camel-coloured female with a black face, while the other female trekker picks Mungo, the alpha male, leaving her partner with Louis, a ragamuffin of a llama with flatulence and a massive dose of personality.



Clockwise from far left: Llamas are always on the lookout for snacks; the llamas wait by the paddock gate; Truffle in front of The Merry Harriers; the cosy pub area of The Merry Harriers; the wood-fired stove in the shepherd's hut; the comfortable bed.



The restaurant at The Merry Harriers.



Smoked salmon and prawn cocktail.



Surf and turf.



BBQ ribs.

Throughout the trek, we are to keep both hands on the rope and Rachel also warns us that the llamas don't like having their faces touched. We restrict our patting to their silky necks and thickly coated backs. Their pelts are soft and downy on the neck, becoming thicker and more matted along their backs. Louis in particular looks like he's been sleeping rough. "Louis is not a fan of being brushed," explains Rachel when she sees us eyeing him up.

"Llamas aren't pets," Rachel says. "They won't come looking for affection, but they tolerate it." Dylan doesn't seem too fussed either way when I run my hands along his neck. He's just keeping his eyes on the action around him, in case any snacks appear.

Walking across the paddock towards the trail that winds through woodland, part of the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, we are accompanied by Goji, a chocolate-coloured llama who grunts and whinges as he walks, as if sulking that he's not invited. Apparently he has some antisocial tendencies, so Rachel is almost as surprised as I am when he rubs his head on my shoulder as we wait by the gate. I seem to have a way with llamas.

As soon as we are on the trail, the llamas start tearing at the leaves as if they haven't eaten for weeks. "They'll get over it, it's just this first part," says Rachel. Determined to prove her wrong, the llamas munch all the way. The three-hour trek time is indicative not of the miles, but of



Above: Furry seating in the shepherd's huts.
Below: The shepherd's hut sit by a pond.

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Louis and Goji.



Dylan at the viewpoint.

each llama's willingness to continue at any point. At times they are keen to progress, at others they are focussed on grazing. Sometimes they stop stock still for no apparent reason and no amount of coaxing will make them move. Llama trekking is an act of patience. Dylan is a close-walker, shuffling along beside me compliantly when he's not distracted by low-hanging oak-tree leaves or delicious green ferns.

Needless to say, the walk is not strenuous. It is, however, thoroughly enjoyable, meandering along muddy paths up to a viewpoint and into the forest. At one point, we stroll into an area of sand and Louis and Truffle immediately sink to their knees, rolling ecstatically in their dirt baths. Dylan heads for the nearest oak tree – his favourite meal – and Mungo grazes on the heather. The llamas provide constant entertainment. It's a real treat to be this close and when Dylan commits to moving, I find myself automatically matching my steps with his.

Throughout the trek, there is only one minor spitting incidence. Despite rumours to the contrary, llamas spit infrequently and it's more likely to be at each other. It's their way of expressing irritation or displeasure with other llamas. Today it's because Mungo gets a little too close to Louis as they feed. The saliva misses its target and the kerfuffle immediately dies down.

Dylan is the last to trot through the gate back at The Merry Harriers. As if in defiance of his status, he lingers to rip mouthfuls of grass before conceding. Releasing the

llamas in the paddock, they line up with their compatriots by the enclosure gate, as if to say goodbye. During the summer months, our llamas could've carried picnic hampers – in the Andes, llamas are used as pack animals, carrying loads of 50–75 pounds over long distances. As the weather is now more temperamental, a pub meal takes the place of the picnic. We wash the llama dirt from our hands and feast on juicy burgers, loaded with cheese, pickles and baconnaise.

Our conversation revolves around llama facts. We've learned llamas don't bite or kick; a group of llamas is called a herd; llamas are much bigger than alpacas and have longer ears; and their stomachs have three compartments. We've also learned a slow llama trek is the perfect way to spend a Saturday.

Back in the shepherd's hut, we lay a fire in the wood stove and play card games in front of the crackling flames. When night falls, we'll fill our cups with hot chocolate and sit by the firepit outside, admiring the stars. We may be less than an hour's drive from London, but it feels like we're far from the madding crowd. ■



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INFO

For more information about The Merry Harriers and llama trekking, see www.merryharriers.com