

## ARK &amp; TENT

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Not all of mankind's furry, four-legged friends can be found frolicking in your local pet shop; nor would most people want them roaming around their neighborhood. But there's an exotic creature you might want to get to know better, especially if you're a lover of the outdoors.

The llama is as gentle as a lamb, as curious as a kitten, and as sure-footed as a mule. They may spit at each other like their cousin, the camel, but not at people. In fact, these highly socialized animals only spit as a way to discipline a lower-ranking llama in the herd (the pecking order is never static, hence the reason they're known to pick spitball fights with one another). I learned this - and other fascinating facts - on a recent visit to Taos, courtesy of Stuart Wilde of Wild Earth Llama Adventures.

Wilde knows llamas as well as any dog lover knows canines. He'll be able to tell you they "hum" to one another, that their babies are referred to as cria (pronounced "cree-ah,"), and that they like to live in a herd. He'll also be able to share the fact that llama markings vary widely: from shades of grey, brown, black and red, to all white. Mature llamas (weighing an average of 300 lbs.) reach their full-body size by their fourth year, and they're ideally designed to carry a pack on their backs with little-to-no effort.



So how did Wilde get involved with this beloved beast of burden, originally from the mountainous regions of South America? As I discovered along our afternoon hike, the enterprising outfitter coozied up to llamas in the early '90s when he suddenly found himself a single dad, wondering how could he possibly take a hike with a baby, along with a diaper bag and all the requisite paraphernalia. He solved the

problem in a novel way, quickly picking up on the remarkable capabilities of llamas as docile, low-maintenance pack animals.

Before long he was taking other families out on the trail. "Llamas give kids super powers they don't know they have," Wilde enthuses. He's witnessed young people who find the animals so much fun that they enthusiastically participate in a walk in the woods without so much as an iPod or a Game Boy in sight; which for some kids is saying a lot.

Taking to the trails with the sure-footedness of any pack animal familiar with the territory, we were given some simple instructions by Wilde. "Hold the lead loosely, and walk alongside his neck," he advised us. Llamas like to play follow-the-leader in close proximity to one another, so we all strove to keep our llamas properly tethered - and spaced apart.



As we walked through groves of aspen trees in the majestic Sangre de Cristo Mountains, the leaves reflected the changing colors of fall. A softness settled around us, and Wilde stopped periodically to point out a particular flower or shrub along the trail. At one point, he led a small group of us (the others having stopped to enjoy their packed lunch beneath a shade-giving tree) into an aspen grove, and explained how animals lick the bark of the trees to self-medicate.

The quaking aspen, as it turns out, contains salicin - a natural painkiller similar to our synthetic aspirin - in its bark. Who knew?

Back on the trail towards our waiting vehicles, I stopped for half-a-heartbeat to listen to the sounds of silence that surrounded our little pack. I thought about how the llama's specially-adapted feet make them remarkably capable of negotiating a variety of terrains, most likely making this stroll in the woods a pleasure for them, too.

So while the llama may not be the kind of animal you'd adopt and take home, or find in a local pet shop, it was nevertheless a faithful companion to me in New Mexico's Sangre de Cristo Mountains on that sunlit autumn day.

### **FAST FACTS**

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