

# Hiking Buddies for Hire

## Let a woolly llama help carry the load

By Gigi Ragland

Each year people are discovering different ways to get into the backcountry. For some it's a dog-sled ride bounding along snowy trails. For others it's zip-line trekking through forests zooming above crystal streams. And yet others may require a deeper immersion into the wilderness. Intrepid travelers looking for a more interactive experience in the mountains should consider trekking with a llama.

Domesticated by the South American peoples of the Andes over 6,000 years ago, the nimble-footed llama is the perfect low-impact pack animal. Their soft-padded, two-toed feet deftly cover ground in high altitudes leaving little or no imprint as compared to hooved animals like the mule or horse. The llama (pronounced "yama") transported trade goods across the perilous mountain terrain for thousands of years. Once a llama is seen in action climbing with the agility and grace of a mountain goat, it becomes evident why these animals were dubbed the "ships of the Andes."

Mountain outfitters in the United States have been using llamas since the 1960s. Even government departments like Fish and Game, the Forest Service and Surveying have continually used the llama for its low maintenance and agile climbing ability. Now in the 21st century as active travelers are seeking to connect more with their natural environment, llama trekking is gaining in popularity and is a great way to get into the backcountry with the help of a four-legged woolly friend.

Wild Earth Llama Adventures of Taos, New Mexico is one of the many outfitters that has noticed an increase of people getting out into the backcountry and their interest in hiring a hiking buddy. Director and head wilderness guide Stuart Wilde says the company's mission is to "make wilderness experiences available to people of all ages and backgrounds while promoting conservation and stewardship of our public wild lands."

For over 16 years Wild Earth Llama Adventures has been offering llama treks in northern New Mexico's pristine backcountry. They operate under permits issued by the Carson and Santa Fe National Forests and the Taos and Albuquerque offices of the BLM. Says Stuart, "The Taos area has all the beauty of the Arizona desert and the Colorado Rockies, with none of the people. It's getting harder and harder to find places where you can hike and camp and feel like

you are the only one around for miles. The Taos area offers some of the least visited and most pristine wilderness in both the desert and mountain West."

Wild Earth's stable of llamas have all been rescued from difficult circumstances that would have compromised the animal's survival. Jokingly, Stuart refers to his stable as the "halfway house of misfit llamas." The 14 male llamas are all very gentle and personally trained by Stuart. Since llamas are much smaller than horses or mules, they're not as intimidating to people without large animal experience.

One of the most frequently asked questions of most llama outfitters is: "Do llamas spit?" And Wild Earth Llama Adventures is no exception to this rule. It's a fair question, considering llamas are part of the camel family. And we all know camels spit. And yes, llamas spit too. "But they spit at each other," Stuart confirms. "If a person gets spat upon it is usually because they were caught in the crossfire. Llamas know they have to be on their best behavior with us on the trail," he adds.

"Kids love llamas, and some llamas are so gentle that even the smallest of children can lead them effortlessly down the trail," says Stuart. He also notes that "because kids can lead and bond with their own llama on the trail, they are very focused on the experience. You'll be amazed at what great little hikers you have in your family." Wild Earth offers a variety of multi-day family wilderness adventures.

Stuart's lifelong passion for nature and wild places stems from his days as a teenage Scout where he was taught the foundations for the backcountry skills he uses as a wilderness guide. As a naturalist and field ecologist, Stuart enjoys sharing his knowledge of local ecology, natural and culture history and wilderness skills while on the trail. Hikers will get a chance to watch him do field demonstrations and also participate in hands-on experiences learning about native plants, animal tracking, geology, wild edible mushrooms, survival skills, and natural and cultural history. "My years of experience and training as a guide enable me to provide fun and educational, safe and comfortable wilderness adventures



Stuart Wilde of Wild Earth Llama Adventures gets help from a woolly hiking buddy.

tures for all ages and fitness levels," says Stuart.

When asked what he hoped people remembered from their experience, Stuart says thoughtfully, "I want people to remember feeling at home in the wilderness, not just as an observer, but as an integral part of a much larger community." And with a llama carrying your load and keeping you company, the experience is enhanced that much more.

*Gigi Ragland is a freelance travel writer based in Longmont. She gets out as often as she can to hike and bike the nearby peaks and trails.*

For more on Wild Earth Llama Adventures, visit [www.llamaadventures.com](http://www.llamaadventures.com) or call 800-758-LAMA.

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