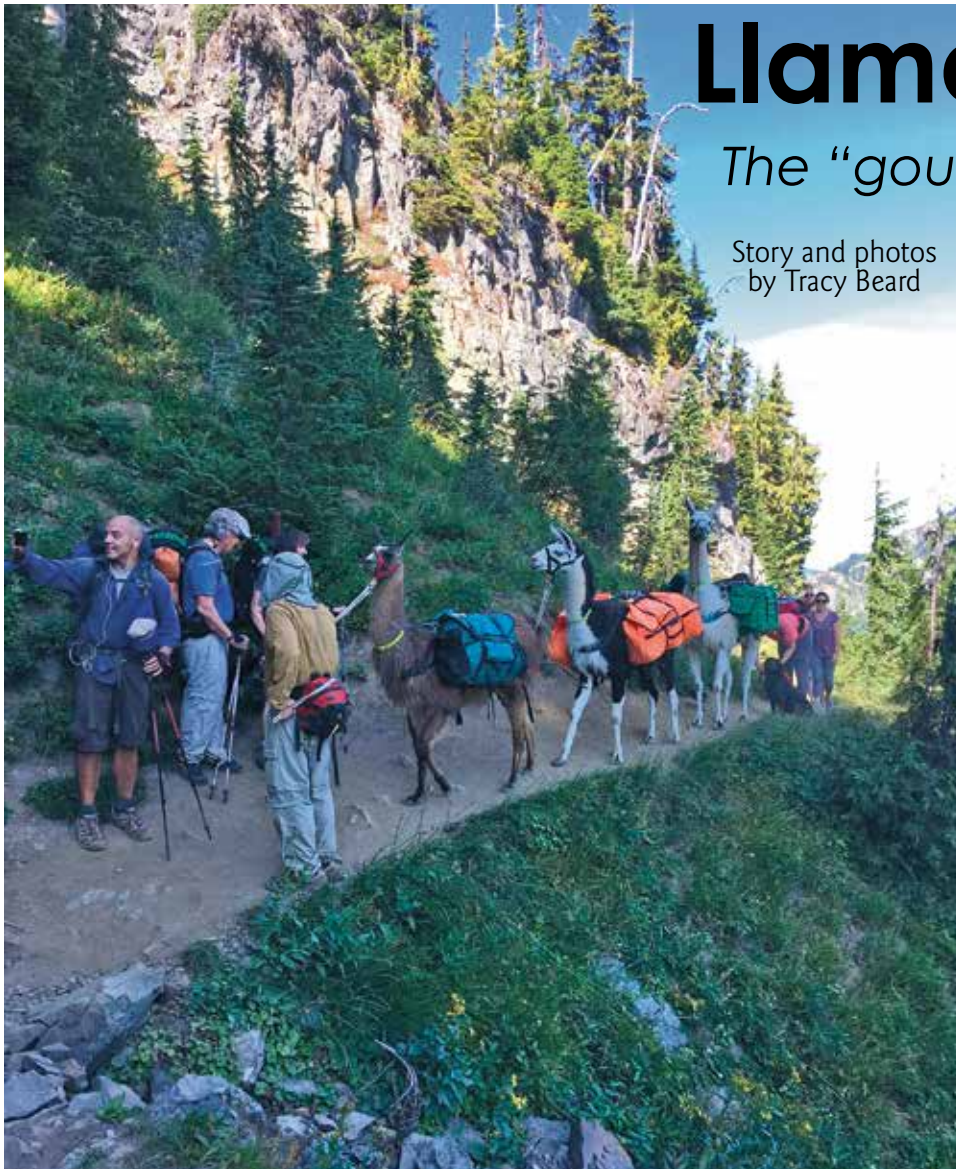


Llama backpacking

The “gourmet way” to hike AND take a load off

Story and photos by Tracy Beard



Outdoor enthusiasts often say, “Why stay in a five-star hotel when you can stay at a billion-star hotel?” I have been camping since I was a kid and hiking and backpacking for more than 15 years. As the years go by, hauling a heavy pack is not as easy as it used to be. When my kids were small I often lugged 60 pounds, but over time they carried more of their gear; today my pack is down to 45 pounds, which I find quite heavy. Castle Rock, Washington, resident Jeff Fisker has an answer. This year he and his business partner, Denise Bardal, are guiding small groups out into the Gifford Pinchot National Forest for two to five nights. All you need to carry is a light day pack. This summer they are offering four luxurious llama packing trips (*see sidebar, next page*).

The easiest packing trip ever

In September I ventured out on a three-day, two-night llama packing trip with Jeff and Denise. Llamas Dinah, Llew and Dillion hauled all the food and gear. Jeff drove us out to Chinook Pass and parked the truck and trailer in the Pacific Crest Trail parking lot. It was a glorious, sunny day, and I relaxed while watching Jeff and Denise load the animals up with all the gear and supplies. Soon we headed down the trail.

People stopped us, asked questions and admired our easy hike. Adult llamas can easily carry 60 to 80 pounds. Jeff’s specially-designed ice chests and bags fit into the panniers attached to the llama saddles. I was amazingly light on my feet; my daypack contained my water bottle, jacket, and camera gear, all weighing less than 20 pounds.

We hiked three miles and 800 feet elevation drop down to Dewey Lake in the William O. Douglas Wilderness area. I was a bit anxious about the

hike back out, but I knew I only had to carry myself back up the hill and not all my gear. We stopped along the way to admire the incredible views and an unnamed lake.

Jeff and Denise scoured the area looking for the perfect campsite. Regulations prohibit camping closer than 200 feet to any water when accompanied by large animals. Jeff spotted the perfect place just over a small ridge in the center of a meadow. He and Denise unloaded the camp chairs and handed me one. After setting up my tent, I rested in my chair while they assembled the camp kitchen.

Gourmet food in the woods

My hosts had consulted with me about the menu before the trip. Jeff is quite the chef, and our first dinner was comprised of halibut topped with crab, steamed broccoli with homemade hollandaise sauce, freshly baked bread and warm brownies for dessert. They



provide all the food, do all the cooking and all the cleanup. I watched, relaxed and read my book. Jeff does not supply alcohol but guests are welcome to bring their own liquor and the llamas will pack it in. Pixie, Jeff’s dog, is a well-trained, lovable black lab that usually joins the trek. The first night we chatted late into the evening about our favorite places to camp. I learned more about my hosts, and my toes stayed nice and toasty with Pixie lying against my feet.

The following morning, I awakened to the smell of fresh coffee. Jeff gets up early to feed the animals and start breakfast. The llamas can carry quite a bit, so the first few days of a trek include delicious fresh items. Jeff whipped up mushroom, cheese, bacon and chive omelets, served with zucchini bread and sweet grapes. I cannot tell you

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Tracy Beard writes about luxury and adventure travel, fine dining and traditional and trendy libations for regional, national and international magazines and is

a regular “Out & About” contributor to Columbia River Reader.

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what a treat it is to have people wait on you out in the woods. I am usually the one cooking and cleaning when I go camping or backpacking. This trip, almost all the work was done for me.

My hosts packed a picnic lunch to take with us on our hike around the lake. We were traveling mid-week late in the season, blessed with a lack of bugs and people. Around noon we found the perfect log to sit on and enjoy lunch. We looked out over the lake at a stunning view of snow-capped Mt. Rainier. Back at camp, I read, Jeff checked the llamas and Denise filtered some water for drinking and dinner.

My hosts wanted me to try the style of dinner they serve a few days into a trip when most of the fresh ingredients are gone. Denise prepared delicious quinoa with black beans and corn. She has a fully stocked spice kit, and guests can season their dish to their liking. The pièce de résistance was the fresh avocado on top and the sweet cornbread Jeff made on the backpacker stove. I was too full to indulge in one of the leftover brownies and retired early to read while snuggled up in my sleeping bag, as it was very cold.

The perfect packing companions

“Llamas are reliable and interesting travel companions,” Jeff said. He and Denise have spent many hours training these llamas to be well-behaved and obedient. Dinah, Llew and Dillion were great companions and I appreciated them most as I hauled myself out of the bottom of the canyon, carrying just my lightweight daypack.

Although Jeff has guided many llama packing trips, 2019 is his first year commercially offering them. He has a big heart and wants everyone to enjoy the thrill of backpacking. Packing adventures are suitable for families, grandparents with their grandchildren, couples and individuals.

LUXURIOUS LLAMA PACKING TRIPS • Summer 2019

If you don't want to carry a heavy load and would like your own personal gourmet culinary/housekeeping team, consider booking a spot on one of Jeff Fisker's summer packing trips, each accommodating 4-6 guests. Prices are per person and subject to sales tax.

- Pompey Peak June 26-28 \$795.
- Juniper Ridge: Aug. 5-8 \$1,195.
- Languille Ridge: Aug. 19-24 \$1,595.
- Vanson Lake Loop at Mt. St. Helens Volcanic Monument: Sept. 3-7 \$1,495.



Jeff Fisker
dba Washington Llamas/Duraguard Woods, LLC
360-749-3084.

What to bring:
Tent, sleeping bag, pad, clothes, raingear, medications, special snacks, and wine or alcohol if desired.

Each guest is allowed 30 pounds. Tents, pads and sleeping bags are available for rent if needed.



PROVISIONS

ALONG THE TRAIL

Breakfast is excellent any time of day. Writing about breakfast on this trip reminded me of some of my favorites.



Tracy's Almond Pancakes

- 4 oz. mascarpone or cream cheese at room temp
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 2 teaspoons almond extract
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 2 cups of pancake mix
- 1 1/2 cups buttermilk
- 1/2 cup almond paste (room temp) cut into small pieces
- 1/4 cup toasted almond slices or slivers (chopped)
- Butter or cooking spray
- Maple syrup
- Fresh raspberries
- Sweetened whipped cream or whipped topping

Place cheese, sugar, almond and vanilla extract and buttermilk in a food processor and process until smooth. Add the pancake mix until combined. Add in the almond paste and almonds, pulse until incorporated.

Grease the griddle or large frying pan with cooking spray butter. Pour 1/3 batter onto the griddle and cook on medium until bubbles form. Flip and cook until light brown.

Serve with syrup, berries and whipped cream.

Spicy Bacon

- 6 -10 slices of your favorite bacon
- Cooking spray
- Maple syrup
- 1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper

Brush the bacon on one side with syrup and dust with chili powder. Spray a cooling rack with cooking spray and place on top of a cookie sheet lined with foil. Place bacon on the rack with the syrup side up and bake for 15-25 minutes or done to your liking in a preheated oven at 400 degrees.

