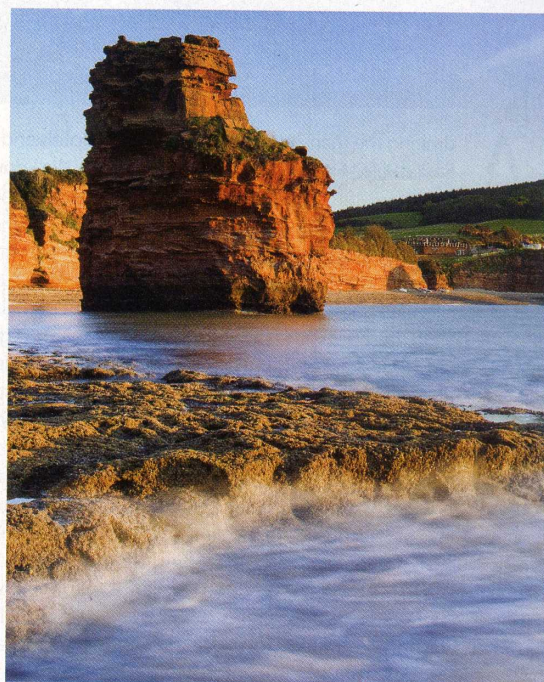
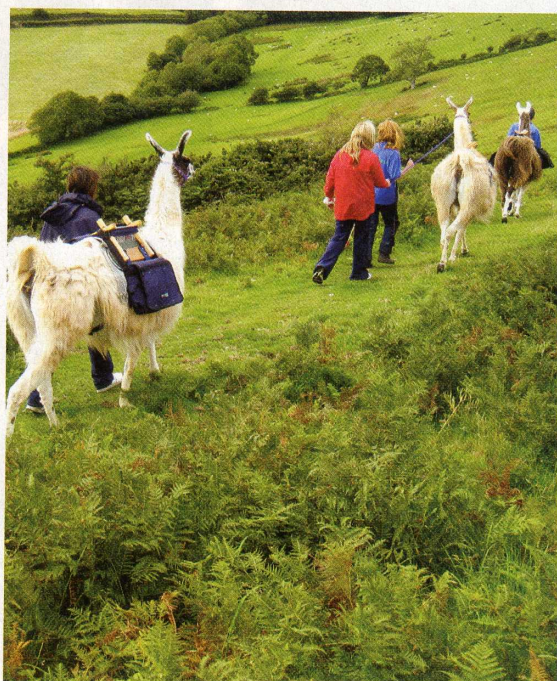
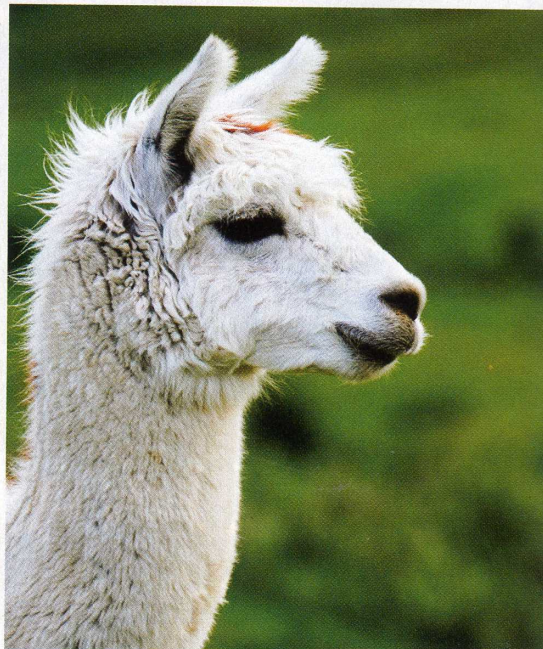


THE GREAT OUTDOORS: WALKING WITH LLAMAS



THE *ODD* COUPLE

Beverley Fearis took a leisurely walk along the breathtaking and ancient Jurassic Coast, accompanied by some rather unusual travelling companions

Blitzen was no ordinary llama. Usually known for their aloofness, most llamas like to keep a dignified distance – both from each other and humans – but within minutes of our meeting, Blitzen was nuzzling his soft nose into my neck and tugging gently on my sleeve. He even started to chew my hair!

We were on Peak Hill in Devon, just outside Sidmouth, taking a leisurely walk with Blitzen and two other llamas, Ben and Golly. Walking with llamas is one of the more unusual 'experiences' offered by CSMA Club Approved Partner Warner Leisure Hotels at its country

house hotel in Cricket St Thomas, Somerset.

We had driven from the hotel that morning to meet with Maggie Jee, the owner of Peak Hill Llamas, at the farm where these very engaging animals are kept. Here Maggie showed us how to groom them.

Maggie has seven llamas in all, and they take it in turns to go walking with guests. Llamas are carefully matched to walkers according to their age and ability. I'd been paired with Blitzen, the liveliest of the bunch, but Maggie and her partner, Paul, were close at hand to stop him from misbehaving. When he got a bit frisky, I was advised to walk him ►

*'Within minutes of our meeting,
Blitzen was nuzzling his woolly
nose into my neck and
tugging on my sleeve'*

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around in circle before continuing. I was a bit nervous at first, but soon got the hang of it.

Most walks involve some uphill walking, but less challenging walks can be arranged if required. Ours took us up to the top of Peak Hill and along the undulating cliff top. The views here are breathtaking. This deep red rocky coastline dates back 185 million years and is known as the Jurassic Coast. Spanning the Triassic, Jurassic and Cretaceous periods, it has UNESCO World Heritage status. There's a sense of natural history, geology and a rugged and varied beauty to the coastline that makes it a walker's paradise.

The llamas like to walk at a leisurely pace, particularly up hills, and we soon discovered that, like us, they like to stop and admire the scenery. They are nosy creatures, and although their near-sighted vision is weak, they can see an incredibly long way. We would see their banana-shaped ears straining forwards and their necks lengthening as they spotted a sheep or a dog in the far distance.

The hotel had prepared a tasty packed lunch, so while we tucked in, Blitz, Ben and Golly chewed their way through the bramble and Maggie shared her passion for – and extensive knowledge of – the llamas. She told us that their reputation for spitting was unfounded, as it would only happen if you antagonised them. I'd also heard rumours they were smelly, but they weren't at all.

Close up, these gentle, majestic animals were bigger than I imagined, and prettier, with luscious long lashes and shiny eyes. Ben had piercing blue eyes, Blitz's were brown, and Golly had one of each, like David Bowie.

I was sad when it was time to say goodbye,

particularly to Blitz, and I let him have just one more nuzzle in my neck. However, back at the hotel, there was more wildlife to see. The hotel backs on to Cricket St Thomas Wildlife Park and guests are allowed in for free. Not only that, many of the animals can be seen just by walking through the hotel's private grounds, so each night after dinner we took a stroll to see the cheetah, zebra, emu, and (my absolute favourites) the meerkats.

The Park re-opens in May as a lakes and gardens attraction, although you will still be able to spot flamingos, meerkats, lemurs, wallabies and deer. Apart from making the most of the wildlife park, we spent the rest of our four-day trip simply relaxing at the hotel. Next door to the main hotel is the Manor House, a Grade II listed building that was the setting for the TV series *To The Manor Born*. Here, we had afternoon tea, played lawn bowls and enjoyed a game of croquet.

One afternoon, when we were heading back from our massage treatments in the hotel spa, we spotted what we thought was a very large cat. In fact, it was a lemur, lurking by the hotel door. Fellow guests later told us that this cheeky creature has even been known to sneak its way into guest bedrooms on occasion. Now that's just a little bit too close to nature for me.

Top, from left: The Cricket St Thomas Country House hotel in Somerset offers elegant English hospitality and is an excellent base to explore the impressive Jurassic Coast

'Our walk took us along the undulating cliff top, where the views are breathtaking'

Save 25 per cent at Cricket St Thomas with CSMA Club

A four-night stay at Cricket St Thomas, with breakfast, dinner, use of leisure facilities and evening entertainment, costs £244 per person (price without discount £325) based on two people sharing, plus £50 per person for the Llama Walk Experience. To book, call **0800 1388399** and quote 'HG611' or visit **csmclub.co.uk/warner**

