

Packing With Llamas

International Llama Association Educational Brochure #10



Llamas' intelligence, natural agility and calm disposition make them outstanding pack animals. For over 4000 years llamas have been used to transport goods across the rugged Andean mountains in South America. Today they are found all across the United States and Canada, carrying loads for North American backcountry travellers. Here llamas serve as the pack animal of choice in situations that call for minimal environmental impact, ease of handling, agility and surefootedness.

Former backpackers, outdoor photographers, and public agency field crews use llamas to take the load off their own backs. High country fishermen enjoy casting across alpine lakes in float tubes packed in by their llamas. Hunters successfully employ llamas to pack game out of rugged areas that would be inaccessible to horses or mules. Families with small children have trained their llamas to accept a lightweight rider, enabling their youngsters to take longer backcountry journeys. Commercial llama packers have led scores of adventurous travellers on truly unique outdoor vacations with the support of their woolly packing companions.

Llamas for Packing

Male llamas in good physical condition are best suited to packing. Both intact and gelded male llamas make excellent packers. Many owners choose to have their pack llamas gelded (neutered) unless they will be using them for breeding. Geldings generally tend to get along better in a herd with fewer dominance disputes. To avoid injury during normal pasture roughhousing behavior all adult males should have their fighting teeth trimmed. As social, herd-oriented animals, llamas prefer living with other llamas or with other herd animals such as sheep or goats.

While some female llamas have been trained to pack, most often their value as breeding stock keeps them off the trail and in the pasture raising young llamas. Healthy, well-trained female llamas may be useful as packers. Their packing duties should be restricted during the three or four months prior to birthing and for a similar period after.

Once a llama has learned to stand to be caught and be easily haltered, and will follow readily on a loose lead, he may begin pack training. During these lessons he should learn to accept a saddle on his back and cinches around his belly before being loaded with lightweight, bulky packs. Additional training should include learning to walk into a trailer and allowing his feet to be picked up for examination and trimming. Most llamas quickly learn packing tasks when they are taught in a calm, consistent, and patient manner.

The distance a pack llama can travel is affected by its condition and natural athletic ability as well as its load and the terrain it will cover. A seasoned pack llama that is moderately loaded and in excellent physical condition should be able to cover 10-15 miles on well graded trails. Steep trails or especially heavy packs will shorten this distance. Young llamas and those in the early stages of training will be comfortable with much shorter distances. They will also benefit from an easy hiking pace and regular rest stops along the way.

When they are between two and three years old, llamas may begin carrying lightweight loads. At this young age they are still physically maturing and should not be asked to pack more than 40 pounds including their pack saddle. While youngsters should be limited to lightweight loads, mature llamas three and a half to four years old and in good physical condition may carry from one quarter to one third of their optimum body weight. Any llama that is overweight and out of condition will be limited in his ability to carry a loaded pack. At times this may cause them to lie down in the trail and pause for a brief rest. Proper conditioning is essential when owners wish to pack their llamas with full loads and cover long distances. A healthy, well cared for llama should be able to continue to pack for at least ten years.

Llama Packing Equipment

A variety of pack systems have been developed especially for llamas. These usually consist of a saddle and two pack bags, often called panniers. Most systems have a method of attaching lightweight, bulky items on top. They may also feature a breast collar and rump strap (a breeching or crupper) to fasten the load more securely on the animal.

Llama pack saddles come in two basic forms: frame pack saddles and frameless "soft" pack saddles. Llama packers may choose from several different types of frame packs made from lightweight aluminum, fiberglass or wood. A frame saddle is used with a saddle blanket to protect the llama's back. It may carry a pair of panniers or it may be used to carry loads tied on with more

traditional rope hitches. Soft pack saddles are usually made from leather or another stiff material, such as cordura nylon. They usually have an internal method of padding the llama's back along either side of its spine for the animal's comfort and protection. These saddles are used with specially designed attaching panniers.

Any type of pack saddle should be checked to assure that it fits properly on the llama's back. With any type of saddle there should be adequate spinal clearance and care should be taken not to place heavy items directly over the llama's spine. No part of the saddle should dig into the animal's back or cause rubbing or soreness.

In addition to the rest of their camping equipment, llama packers should take along a swivel picket stake and 10-20 foot line for staking out their llamas in camp, a hand scales for weighing and balancing loads, a curry brush to remove debris before saddling, an extra halter, and a ration of supplemental feed. In addition, it's important to take along a first aid kit that includes medications and equipment for treating minor llama injuries and ailments.

The amount of supplemental feed to bring will vary depending on how much vegetation will be available during the trip. On an average trip with good grazing opportunities supplemental feed may be limited to a pound or two of grain or hay pellets for treat or catch feed. On trips that include extended travel above treeline or where edible vegetation will be limited, about one pound per llama per day of a mixture of half corn, rolled oats, and rolled barley (COB) and half processed hay pellets is recommended. It's best if the feed is weed free certified in order to prevent introduction of non-native seeds into backcountry environments, and is required by some national parks and forests.

Transporting Llamas to the Trailhead

Pickups with stock racks, lightweight trailers and full-size vans will easily transport one or two pack llamas and their gear to the trailhead. Larger stock trailers may be used to transport three or more llamas.

An enclosed trailer or vehicle will protect llamas from the elements, allowing them to ride comfortably and safely. When hauling llamas in a covered trailer or stock rack you do not need to tie them. If using a stock rack or trailer with no roof, it's best to tie the llamas up on a short lead so that they will not jump out if they become excited.

When travelling long distances with llamas it's a good idea to stop along the way, allowing them a little exercise and a chance to relieve themselves. After a long haul, llamas should be given an overnight rest before carrying a loaded pack up the trail.

Pre-trip Preparations

The key to successful llama packing is working with a healthy, well-conditioned and well-trained animal. Llamas, like people, benefit greatly by being in good shape before they're put to work carrying full loads. A pre-packing conditioning program should include regular walks with light packs, gradually working up to longer distances and heavier loads. Vaccinating for tetanus and other livestock concerns, worming for internal parasites and keeping toes properly trimmed will also help llamas maintain good health at home and on the trail. It's a good idea to do vaccinating, worming, and toe trimming well in advance of a pack trip to allow the llama time for any needed recovery. Consult ILA's brochure "Llama Medical Management" for more details on llamas' medical concerns.

Pack llamas should have experience being saddled and carrying light loads before their first trip into the backcountry. It's also important for them to know how to safely negotiate a picket line and simple obstacles like streams and fallen logs.

Some types of plants, such as those in the azalea and delphinium families, are poisonous to llamas and other livestock. Llama packers should be aware of and able to identify the potentially poisonous plants in the areas they visit. Their llamas should not be picketed near or allowed to browse on these plants.

When planning a trip on public lands, such as national parks or forests, llama packers should check with the agency in charge of administering the area. These officials can provide information on permits, trail conditions and any regulations that may apply to pack stock use.

On the Trail

Packing with llamas is a very special experience. Besides taking the load off your back they are unique trail companions. They often spot wildlife and other backcountry travellers well before you do. They often give vocal comments on trail conditions or their opinions about when it's time to take a break. The way they negotiate obstacles with aplomb is a never ending marvel.

More than one llama may be tied together to form a llama packstring. Llamas follow one another quite naturally, and quickly learn to "line out" as they proceed up the trail. The most common method of hitching a string of llamas together is to fasten the leadrope of the trailing llama to the saddle of the llama in front of him. Safety dictates that the attachment should be with a quick release knot or that a "weak link" of lighter cord or rubber should be used to allow the connection to break away if trouble arises. Leading a string of llamas requires that you pay extra attention. You should look back frequently to check on them and take care when negotiating obstacles.

While they may drink from streams along the trail, llamas may also completely abstain from drinking during the hike to camp. In either case they should be offered water in the evening after their ration of supplemental feed and again in the morning before hiking.

When possible llamas should be picketed within sight of camp, away from small trees and any potentially poisonous plants. Because llamas often choose the dampest areas in which to make their dung piles they should not be picketed too close to streams or lakes. As a safety measure, many packers attach the picket line to the stake with a piece of rubber or bungie cord. This acts as a shock absorber in case the llama spooks and runs abruptly to the end of its rope. On layover days, the llamas' picket sites should be moved morning and night to minimize grazing impact.

Llamas' padded feet, unobtrusive dung, and light browsing habits have a lower impact on the land than horses, mules and donkeys. In keeping with this principle, llama packers should make a special effort to practice "no trace" camping and leave as little evidence of their visit as possible. Llama groups should set up camp and stake out llamas away from other backcountry users to minimize social impacts. All garbage that is not burned should be packed out. Stoves should be used for cooking instead of wood fires. Human waste should be buried deeply, well away from water sources. All washing should be done away from streams and lakes. And before leaving camp, llamas' dung piles should be dispersed.

Special considerations should be made when llama packers meet horses and mules on the trail. These animals may become nervous or excited at their first sight of a llama piled high with a fully loaded pack. Safety dictates that llamas, as more maneuverable animals, give right of way to riders and their pack stock by stepping off the trail several yards to allow them to pass easily. Sometimes, this means going back down the trail a ways to a wider area. And when possible, getting off below the trail is preferable to above. It's helpful for llama packers to give a bit of warning to riders they see approaching, letting them know that they're travelling with llamas and that they'll get off the trail at the first opportunity. A friendly greeting goes a long way toward promoting good will, reassuring the horses and mules, and seeing that all parties have a safe and pleasant encounter.

Today, llamas are the newest pack animal to enter the North American backcountry. Many people have never seen a llama on the trail, and when llama packers meet hikers and riders they are presented with an opportunity to introduce others to the pleasures of travelling with llamas. A bit of time spent answering questions about how much they can pack and where they come from can increase good will and acceptance of these special creatures.

A final word of caution: packing with llamas can be habit forming; you may never want to carry a backpack again! For, when handled with respect and understanding, these unique animals will continually demonstrate their natural abilities as hard working trail companions.

For additional references on llama packing, packing equipment, and other llama and alpaca products and services contact ILA at 1-800-WHY-LAMA (1-800-949-5262) and request a free copy of [The Llama Catalog](#).

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