The Llama Dilemma

No animal should be this perfect

By Tim Cahill

I was leading, walking past some nameless pond in Montana's Mission Wilderness, when Pancho began humming. At first, the sound could be taken for the gentle creaking of a wooden ship at anchor.

"Uhmmmm."

It was almost a sigh. Pancho might have been saying, "Caramba, this pond is a loveliness, no?"

"Uhmmmm."

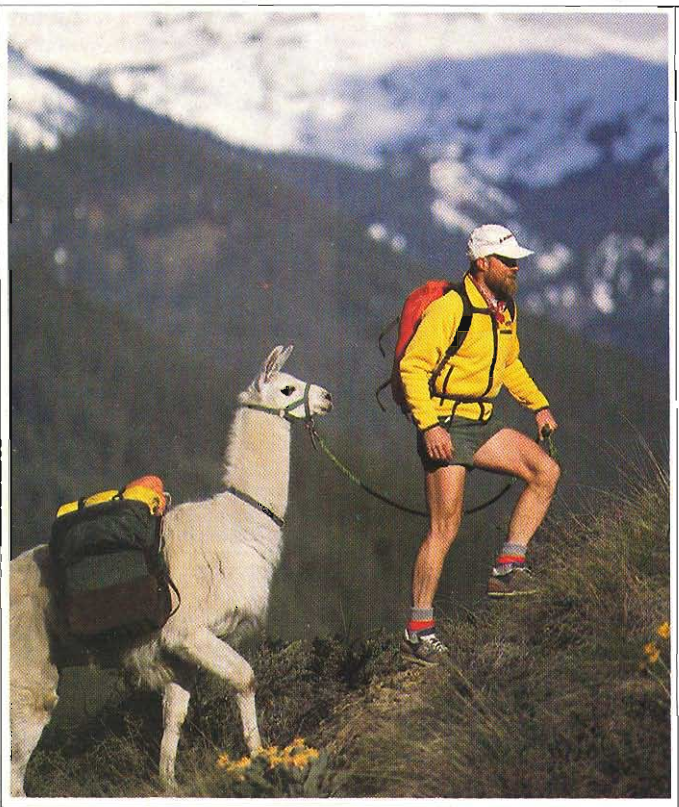
The sound was a little louder now, a little more nasal. I turned and Pancho gave me one of his patented llama looks. His head was precisely on a level with my own, and his face was strangely angular under the ridiculous rabbit ears. Pancho's eyes were flat brown from lid to lid. He looked like something sentient from another planet—not a Peruvian pack animal at all.

"Uhmmmmnnnn," Pancho said, and he swiveled his head on that long, curving neck in order to survey the empty trail behind us. There were no human beings where there should have been five following us. Most distressing to Pancho, there were no llamas back there. His pals—Switchback, Doc, Snowman, Houdini—were nowhere in sight.

"Uhmmnnn," Pancho said, and his long ears swiveled forward on his head in the manner of a man cupping his ears to hear a distant sound. I stepped in close and put a comforting hand on Pancho's woolly neck. The llama edged an arm's length away. Pancho was entirely placid, but he didn't like being cuddled or petted. No llama does. It is beneath their dignity.

"Uhmmmmnnn," Pancho hummed, in mild distress. "Donde estan mis amigos, anyway?" he seemed to be saying.

"Uhmnnn," one of the other llamas replied from around a bend in the trail.



ERIC SANFORD

The civil beast: When he's mad at you, he hums.

"Aquí, Panchito." Pancho seemed satisfied, and we stood there waiting.

"You all right back there?" I yelled to the various unseen humans.

"Hooty's taking a pit stop," Steve Rolfing called. Steve and his wife, Sue, own the Great Northern Llama Company just outside Columbia Falls, Montana. They breed the beasts and run commercial llama-packing trips.

Steve was telling me that his youngest llama, Houdini, had stopped to relieve himself. Unlike horses or mules, llamas must stop to heed the call of nature. Their droppings are small oval pellets, without much odor, and look rather like something a large deer or small elk might have left on the trail. Anyone who's ever done the apple dance behind a string of pack horses will understand why llama owners, alone among packers, point with pride to the droppings of their beasts. It is minimum-impact packing.

Another advantage: Llamas are not hoofed animals, like horses or mules. The bottom of each foot consists of two large pads, like those on a dog. While a heavily used horse trail can sometimes be worn down to a depth of two feet, the llama's pads leave less impact than a hiking boot. A kind of horny toenail above each pad curves down to a point that can grip into the slick ice of a glacier or snowfield. Llamas can carry packs there, in spots where horses would be sliding forever, falling into crevasses to be imprisoned throughout time, like mastodons frozen in ice.

Steve and the rest of the pack string came around the bend. I put the rope from Pancho's halter over my shoulder and fixed it to a Velcro tab on my jacket, leaving both hands free. Pancho liked to walk two feet behind me, no more or no less, and we could have strolled along for an hour like that, at whatever pace I chose, without pulling loose from each other.

"When am I going to see one of these guys spit?" I asked Steve Rolfing. I liked the llamas so much I was looking for some drawback to packing with them. Investigative journalists aren't paid to go around liking stuff.

"My llamas," Steve said, a bit defensively, "don't spit. Zoo llamas spit." Llamas, like cows, have several stomachs. Foraged foods—bear grass, alfalfa, fallen leaves, pine needles—are broken down by a bacteria in the first stomach, then brought back up into the mouth in a cud that is thoroughly chewed before being swallowed a second time. Unlike cows, which are doltish and bovine with their cud, llamas, in the process of digestion, seem wise beyond the capacity of

their species, even philosophical.

"In petting zoos," Steve said, "people crowd the llamas. They try to touch their face." Llamas hate that. "So they spit."

You can see it coming, this warning gesture: The animal swallows once, and then you can see the cud from the first stomach working its way up the long, graceful neck. Folks who continue to insist on cuddling llamas, those who mistreat them, find themselves doused in a firehose blast of odorous green bile.

Llamas are the new-world equivalent of camels, relatives of those foul-tempered ships of the desert, whose owners can often be seen running from their own animals. Llamas—these camels of the clouds, woolly buggers that evolved on the cold, 15,000-foot-high plains of Ecuador and Peru and Chile—are regular sweethearts in comparison. They don't spook, shy, or kick; and because they have teeth only in their lower jaw, they couldn't bite even if they wanted to.

"One lady asked me if you can go blind if you get the spit in your eyes," Steve said. "The answer is no. The real answer is to pack the llama properly, give it an arm's length of respect, and it won't spit anyway."

In a further gesture of respect to the animals that earn his living for him, Steve has resisted the impulse to name any of his animals Fernando, Dalai, and Tony.

While llamas can weigh 400 pounds and more, Steve thinks the smaller animals, those weighing 325 to 350 pounds, have more stamina. "A general rule is that a llama can comfortably carry about one-third of its own weight." With properly weighed and balanced packs, a llama can put in a good 20-mile day. An overloaded or exhausted animal will simply lie down on the ground. It will spit and refuse to budge. No amount of pulling on the halter will move it.

As far as I could see, anyone who'd overload a llama, or walk it to exhaustion, has to be an ogre. The animals gently let you know if they are uncomfortable about something with a nasal hum. Ignore the hum and live for hours with a sordid sense of guilt.

WE CAMPED FOR THE NIGHT NEAR THE alpine lake. I unloaded Pancho and buried that night's beer in a north-facing snowbank. Common sewers of the hop, such as myself, know that all beer tastes better in bottles. Backpackers, such as myself, frequently omit bottled beer from their gear in favor of more mundane survival items, such as warm clothes or food. My usual pack, for instance, weighs about 50 pounds. Pancho was comfortable carrying twice that, and the extra weight was the difference between serious comfort camping and a survival

trek. In addition to the beer, we had a two-burner cookstove, camp chairs, fishing gear, tackle boxes, bottles of wine and cognac, and a pineapple upside down cake in a large tin.

While the night's batch of cutthroat trout was baking on the campfire, Steve whipped up a fondue on the stove. He said that he had hurt his back a few years ago while working at a ski resort. "I hammered moguls all day long for a whole season. Then the next year I had a desk job. My back gave out and the orthopedic surgeon said the best thing for me was walking." Without a backpack.

Steve, an avid outdoorsman with a degree in forestry, thought that he was doomed to day hikes until a friend suggested he try llama packing. The Rolfings bought their first llama, Pancho, in 1979. Now they own 30 of them, and Steve guides weeklong treks into the Glacier National Park region.

While Steve stirred the fondue, I went through a large scrapbook he'd brought along for my edification and education. I read an article about a sheep rancher in Wyoming who hasn't lost a single lamb to coyotes since he installed a pair of llamas in his pasture. The animals are alert and curious, and they come running up to a visiting coyote humming, "Qué pasa, hey, what's going on, señor?" The coyote, for his part, sees a couple of really strange-looking beasts, both nearly ten times his size, and he departs, in haste, thinking, "Perhaps this evening I'll dine on rabbits."

Every journalist that had gone packing with Steve Rolfing seemed to adore llamas. There were articles in the scrapbook about "llama love," about minimum-impact packing, and nobody mentioned any drawbacks at all. I worried about that, about writing a balanced article on llamas, as I sat in my tent with a last cup of coffee and cognac. Pancho was tethered just outside the front door: my own personal watch llama. It was grizzly country, and Steve said Pancho would make a sound like a cold car engine turning over on a subzero morning if something unwelcome visited the camp. "I haven't had any grizzly problems," Steve had said. He thought that llamas might smell dangerously weird to bears. Mostly though, he figured that all the "big, warm bodies around camp" are something of a threat to the grizzlies.

The possibility that hungry bears might avoid llamas, for whatever reason, didn't seem to be a drawback to camping with a few of them.

I figured up the expenses. Steve said a bale of hay will last a llama about ten days, so that it costs about $120 a year to feed one. Not bad.

A trail-trained male costs $1,200 to $1,500. With an import ban on the animals and only about 8,000 llamas in all of America, a female can cost $6,000 or more. But the animals, Rolfing assured me, are earnest and frequent breeders—females are in season all year long and the gestation period is about 11 months—so that purchase of a young female and a stud is an investment that should pay for itself several times over.

Steve's llamas require only half an acre of pasture apiece. "You can even house-train them," he told me. "They always go in the same spot, so all you have to do is show one some pellets by the back door. When the llama's gotta go, he'll stand by the door." Steve had kept Pancho in the house for a while. "They're graceful," Steve had said. "They don't bump into furniture or knock anything over. Of course, they're hell on houseplants."

That's it, I thought, finishing the last of the cognac Pancho had carried: the fatal drawback to owning llamas. I unzipped the tent flap and glanced out at the watch llama guarding my door. "You're hell on houseplants," I said. The llama gave me a calm, flat-brown philosophical glance.

"Es verdad," Pancho hummed, ruminating over his cud, "but as for myself, at this moment—how do you say?—I could give a pellet." He lay on his belly with his legs folded under him in a contemplative posture. The full moon seemed very bright above, and the lake was a shimmering expanse of cold, molten silver.