

Sheep trekking: fancy taking a sheep for a walk?

Pony trekking has long been a popular pastime for visitors to the Brecon Beacons in Wales. Now rural thrill-seekers can try something new



Woolly thinking: a family and sheep companions set out on a trek in the Brecon Beacons

By Clover Stroud

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"Sheep trekking?" says Jimmy, my 14-year-old son, tearing his gaze from his iPod for two seconds. "That sounds completely ridiculous."

His reaction to the idea is more than simple teenage resistance to any organised activity. He is right: there is something inherently absurd about taking a sheep – not creatures celebrated for their biddable natures – for a walk. But creative thinking is key to rural diversification, and since Wales is the spiritual home of both sheep and pony trekking – a popular holiday activity there – putting the two together made sense for Liz and Paul Matthews, who farm 200 acres in the Brecon Beacons.

Just two hours after he tells me there is "absolutely no way" that he will join his younger siblings,

Dolly, 11, Evangeline, two, and baby Dash, with their sheep, Jimmy is walking through the Welsh countryside, leading a Jacob sheep called Jagger on a lead. “It was a lot more fun than I was expecting,” he says later. “I think I’d even do it again.”

The benefits of sheep trekking are two-way. The Matthews run Aberhyddnant Farm with their daughters, Bethan and Nicola. “Finding work locally is hard for younger people, so I took on training the sheep as it meant I could be involved with the farm,” says Nicola.

Rather than the larger, more wilful Welsh hill sheep, Nicola chose Jacobs for their relatively malleable characters, which makes them easier to handle and halter-break. “We liked the fact that Jacobs are a hardy, ancient sheep who haven’t been bred to suit man’s needs,” explains Nicola. “They’re biblical sheep and their nature is unchanged across the centuries.”

Nicola bought the lambs from a local breeder and started handling them in the early summer. “My job was to make friends by talking to them and feeding them from a bucket. They’ll do anything for food,” she says. “Once I had their trust, I put halters on them, then first walked them in the barn and then out for longer walks.”

It’s raining heavily when we arrive for our trek, but Jimmy’s resistance to rural activity dissipates when we are introduced to a litter of hound puppies that Liz and Paul are walking for the summer and, later, to the line of Jacob sheep, tied up in the barn and looking surprisingly sweet in their halters.

We walk the sheep on a round trip for an hour, stopping for tea in a barn with stunning views, to Pen y Fan, where Liz has laid a picnic table with local apples, Welsh cakes and bara brith she has home-baked. This break gives the children a chance to immerse themselves in the Welsh landscape while Paul, who inherited the farm from his father, a vet, tells us about life in such a remote area.

The farm lies on the western side of the Brecon Beacons National Park, the least-visited area of the park, which is partly what makes it so stunning, but running a business that relies on visitors here is difficult. While Liz and Paul provide the sheep and land, the idea was dreamt up by Julia Blazer, who moved to the Brecon Beacons 10 years ago. When her small design business folded during the recession, she was determined to channel her energies into an educational venture that would bring visitors into the area and help local people with employment.

“I was working part-time for the Brecon Beacons Tourism Association, so I had a good idea about the sort of activities on offer here,” says Julia. “I wanted to do something to help tourists and locals

engage with each other in a sensitive way.”

Putting her network of contacts to work, Julia started Good Day Out, organising fun, educational activities for tourists including hedge laying, foraging, sheep shearing and cheese making. Local businesses have benefited, and Julia also makes a donation to a local cause linked to each activity, with particular emphasis on preserving and appreciating the native environment and wildlife.

Local reactions to sheep trekking, however, were not overwhelmingly positive to begin with. “Quite a few farmers laughed at me. Explaining that I wanted to make it possible for tourists to take a sheep for a walk on a lead took a certain amount of tact,” she says.

Pony trekking was already part of the landscape in Wales and Julia had read about llama trekking, but “felt it lacked a truly authentic local connection to what was going on it, since sheep farming is such an essential part of the character of this part of Wales”.

The answer lay in the Jacobs. Visitors can take them on a circular walk through the farm, including a picnic of locally-sourced goods, but longer days out are also being planned, including taking the sheep for day treks. While she might have been laughed out of the farm initially, Julia’s persistence is paying off. “Families love it, but we’ve also had groups of young professionals visiting from London, who enjoyed the chance to meet new people and do something unusual,” says Nicola.

Taking the sheep for a walk reminds me how much children benefit from time spent with animals, too. There is certainly a novelty value in getting to know a Jacob sheep; but the experience also brings the children right into a Welsh hill farm in a unique way. And, unlike so many activities set up for tourists, when it comes to sheep trekking, “hands on” really is the right term to describe the afternoon. While I might have to drag my children kicking and screaming away from their screens for a walk with me, this time it is the sheep who are doing all the dragging.

Other activities offered by Good Day Out

How to teach your family dog fun and engaging tasks with a specialist dog trainer on a farm near Brecon.

Help clear the Beacons of the bracken that chokes the heather moorland by spending a morning bracken-bashing.

Spend a “dark skies” evening with an astronomer learning about the constellations.

Learn about trees and timber in an area of private woodland in the Brecon Beacons while carving your own spoon, followed by a campfire cookout.

Learn about edible plants, flowers and unusual herbs in the kitchen garden at Aberglasney with a cookery teacher and head gardener.

Create your own felt wall hanging from local wool using ancient felting techniques.

Learn about local traditions of hedge-laying using traditional hand tools.

How we moderate

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