

San Juan Mountains Llama Trek

July 25 – August 3, 2020 (Trip #2048)



Photos by M. Mustard

The rugged terrain of the San Juan Mountains in southwestern Colorado offers some of the most spectacular scenery in the world. These mountains abound with beauty, wildlife, plant life, solitude, and the history of the “wild west.” We will start the trip with a night in Durango, then spend two days in historic Silverton, with a short hike to help us acclimatize to the altitude. Our group will comprise up to 10 participants, with two leaders.

The main portion of our trip will be a 6-day/5-night, one-way trek mostly on the Colorado Trail, with altitudes generally well above 9,000 feet, camping in shared backpacking tents. Seven llamas will accompany us and carry most of our gear; the humans will carry only day packs. For the trek, breakfasts and dinners will be prepared and eaten at each campsite; where there will often not be access to any facilities. All group members will participate equally in camp chores, as well as tending to the llamas. During our hikes, we will have many opportunities to stop for scenery, food (lunch and snacks), and relaxation.

This trip offers a unique opportunity to enjoy the backcountry camping experience without the burden of a heavy pack! Llamas will accompany us and carry our group equipment and food,

and 30 pounds of your personal gear. This gives you the opportunity to enjoy this wonderful area with a much lighter pack. Llamas are a low impact alternative to pack horses, and are easy-going and gentle enough that llama ranchers generally send their animals out without professional wranglers.

With seven days of hiking, this trip will be physical, despite trails which are excellent by Northeastern standards. Although the llamas will be carrying most of our load, this trip is not appropriate for people with no backcountry camping experience. Because of the altitude and the length of the trek, the trip requires that participants already have multi-day backpacking experience. Our hikes will be moderately paced, averaging 1.5 to 2.5 mph, depending on the slope and trail difficulty. The trip is rated [5 \(vigorous\)](#) because of altitude, trekking, and wilderness camping.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us. Leader contact information is included in the leaders' biographies below.

NO-DRAMA LLAMAS

Llamas are believed to have been used in South America for their meat and wool, and as pack animals, for thousands of years. They grow to about 6-feet tall and over 400 pounds, and a fully-grown llama can comfortably carry 70 pounds, sure-footedly over very rugged terrain. For our trek, we will use one llama to carry about 30 pounds of gear for each of two hikers (not including panniers and rain covers), eliminating the need for us to carry backpacks. We will use an additional llama to carry food, and cooking and other communal gear. Our group will have an orientation of about one hour with the owner at his ranch on the day prior to the start of our trek.

From [Out There Outdoors](#) magazine: "An Andes mountain native and a relative to the camel, llamas are born with ample genetics to easily get them through days of hiking in the Rocky Mountains. As low-maintenance as they are sure-footed, steep and rocky terrain is no match for these 'camels of the clouds.' They began their packing-for-humans career about 5,000 years ago and were bred to carry the weight of early goods over the high mountain passes of South America. Some of the earliest llama packers helped to connect communities of people through commerce and trade. In modern days, they continue packing for people who simply want to connect with pristine backcountry places.

"Llamas also embody amazing attributes; their camel genetics make the species incredibly low-maintenance for backcountry travel. They graze on leaves and twigs while hiking and rarely need to stop to eat. Additionally, llamas are excellent for both hiking and backcountry hunting, as they



can go without drinking water for up to three days. These packer friends can be tied safely to a tree and left alone for a couple of days before the hunter returns to retrieve the llamas, who then assist with packing out harvested game.”

Moreover, llamas deter other animals, including bears, from approaching hikers, their food, and their campsites. They are smart, gentle, friendly, easy to train, well behaved (if trained), social (live in herds), and very photogenic...and, no, they hardly ever spit at people, but will occasionally spit at other llamas, especially to keep them away from their food. My sentiment exactly!

DETAILED ITINERARY



For most of our llama trek, we will be within the San Juan National Forest, with much of our first three days being within the Weminuche Wilderness. We will be hiking from northeast of Silverton to southwest of the town on a circuitous route. Our primary trail will be the Colorado Trail (CT), doing part of its segment 24, then part of segment 25. (The CT has 28 segment and is 485 miles long.)

Each day of our trek, we may do additional, optional hiking to explore side trails, or look for more vistas as time allows.

Notes regarding itinerary: The exact itinerary may require changes based on safety factors, transportation logistics, or lodging/campsite availability, and other unforeseeable circumstances such as weather considerations, natural disasters, or recommendations of governmental agencies. The leaders reserve the right to make such changes as necessary, both before and during the trip.

Day 1 (Saturday, July 25, 2020): Arrival in Durango (alt. 6,500 ft; pop. 17,000) by 4 pm; group “welcome” dinner; overnight in motel. (Leaders arrive previous day and will purchase camp food and supplies.)

Day 2: (Sunday, July 26, 2020): Drive (~1 hr) to Silverton (alt. 9,300 ft; pop. 640); tour town; overnight in motel.

Day 3: (Monday, July 27, 2020): Porphyry Basin hike (out and back; 7 mi; elev. change, 3,300 ft; shorter options available); 1-hour llama orientation session at ranch; overnight in motel.

Day 4 (Trek day 1): (Tuesday, July 28, 2020): We will spot one vehicle at Coal Bank Pass on US 550 (end of trek). Llamas will be delivered to our trailhead (alt. ~9,800 ft) at Cunningham Gulch Trail. We will start our trek with a relatively easy day, hiking to the Colorado Trail (CT; 12,300 ft) and the Whitehead Trail (WT), where we will camp. (Total hiking: 3.5 mi; elev. gain/loss, 1,350/150 ft.)

Day 5 (Trek day 2): (Wednesday, July 29, 2020): We will leave our camp set up, and take the Whitehead and Highland Mary Lakes Trails to spend some time at these two very beautiful lakes, then return to the same campsite. (Total hiking: 7.5 mi; elev. gain/loss, 400/400 ft.)

Day 6 (Trek day 3): (Thursday, July 30, 2020): We will continue on the CT and the Continental Divide Trail to where the trails diverge (at ~12,800 ft, the highest point of our trek) and the CT heads west. We will visit a historic mine cabin, and continue to our campsite (~10,100 ft), close to a view point of the spectacular and dramatic Arrow and Vestal Peaks (each, ~13,800 ft) of the Needle Mountains, a subrange of the San Juans. (Total hiking: 9 mi; elev. gain/loss, 350/3,000 ft.)

Day 7 (Trek day 4): (Friday, July 31, 2020): We will continue west on the CT, stopping to visit a stop on the historic Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge RR, cross the Animas River (9,000 ft) to Molas Pass (10,900 ft; US 550), and to our campsite near Little Molas Lake. (Total hiking: 9.5 mi; elev. gain/loss, 2,100/1,250 ft.)

Day 8 (Trek day 5): (Saturday, August 1, 2020): Our route will continue west on the CT with beautiful mountain scenery, and passing by spectacular, 1,000-foot-high cliffs. We will turn south on Engineering Mountain Trail (EMT) to our campsite, surrounded by high mountains. (Total hiking: 10.5 mi; elev. gain/loss, 1,800/1,500 ft.)

Day 9 (Trek day 6): (Sunday, August 2, 2020): On our last trek day, we will have a fairly short hike (5 mi; elev. gain/loss, 950/1,800 ft) on EMT and Pass Trail, out to our destination, Coal Bank Pass on US 550. Llamas will be picked up and we will collect the cars; overnight in motel at Silverton.

Day 10: (Monday, August 3, 2020): Drive (~1 hr) to Durango for departures as early as 11 am.



ACCOMMODATIONS & TRANSPORTATION

This trip is geared towards the outdoors adventurer. We will spend a one night in a motel in Durango and three nights in another in Silverton, but our trek will have us camping five nights in the backcountry. Motel rooms and tents will be shared by two people. We will use rental vehicles for transportation and participants may be drivers if they pass a driving record check.

PRICE

The price for the trip is \$2,090 for AMC members, and \$2,190 for non-members. Non-members may [join AMC](#) for \$50, and pay the same price. The price covers the following:

- First night motel in Durango
- Second, third, and ninth night motel in Silverton

- All meals from first-night dinner through last-day breakfast
- All local transportation (to and from the airport and trailheads)
- Emergency medical and evacuation insurance coverage
- AMC Adventure Travel fee

For the trek, all participants are expected to share in meal planning, and in preparation of meals and cleaning up.

First and last day lunches, trail snacks, alcohol, and other personal expenses are NOT included.



Your transportation to Durango and back is your responsibility, although the leaders will advise you as much as you need. You can use a travel website, a travel agent, an airline, or frequent flier miles, as long as you are scheduled to arrive at the Durango airport by 4 pm on Saturday July 25, and don't plan on leaving Durango heading home before 11 am on Tuesday August 4. At this time, we estimate that the cost of a non-stop, round-trip ticket between the East Coast and Durango will be \$650-750.

The price for the trip is based on quotes at the time the trip was submitted to the Adventure Travel Committee in September, 2019. The final cost of the trip will be adjusted in accordance with the best final arrangements we can make. Any savings we achieve, as well as any cost

increases, will be passed back to you. Our cost estimates are conservative, so a refund is considerably more likely than a price increase.



Please be aware that, in accordance with AMC policy, you are subsidizing the leaders' costs. The subsidy from each participant is limited to 20% of one leader's costs. Beyond this, the leaders are not allowed to realize any profit from the trip.

The trip price also includes an overhead fee to cover the administrative expenses of the AMC Adventure Travel program. The overhead fee is 20% of participant land costs; air travel is not included in the calculation. The trip fee includes emergency medical and evacuation insurance coverage, which is required by the AMC. It does *not* include insurance for travel delay, interruption, or cancellation, or for baggage loss. If the possibility of such problems concerns you, individual travel insurance is suggested; the AMC has a recommended vendor whose material will be sent to you if your application is accepted.

REGISTRATION AND CANCELLATION

Each applicant must submit three required forms posted at www.bit.ly/SanJuans2020App:

1. Application form
2. Confidential health form
3. Acknowledgement and assumption of risk and release (waiver) form

The forms may be downloaded and completed electronically (preferably), or printed and completed by hand. All forms must be signed and dated electronically or by hand. Completed forms must be submitted to Mike Darzi either by email (Mike.Darzi@Gmail.com) or by regular mail (PO Box 2308, Rockville, MD 20847). A deposit check of \$500/applicant payable to the Appalachian Mountain Club must also be mailed to Mike when the forms are submitted.

To be offered a spot on the trip, the leaders must determine that you and the trip are a good match, a process that may require a telephone conversation with you and reference checks. Your deposit check will not be cashed until you are offered an actual spot and you accept. Deposit checks from waitlisted applicants will not be cashed until a spot is available, the applicant is accepted for the trip, and he/she accepts the offer to participate.

For those accepted, a second payment of \$500 will be due two weeks after acceptance, and a final payment of \$1,090 will be due May 1, 2020.



Cancellations received before the trip is confirmed to run will receive a full refund. Cancellations after that date will lose a minimum of \$200 of their deposit. Any additional refund will only be made if it does not raise the cost of the trip to the other participants or leaders. If your spot is filled from a waiting list, then you may be entitled to a full refund, less the cancellation fee. There is a possibility that participants will not receive any refund.

Participants are encouraged to purchase trip-cancellation insurance. If the trip is cancelled by AMC, you will receive a full refund for all payments.

We expect a group size of 12 (human) participants, including the two leaders. If you are interested in this fascinating and enjoyable use of llamas, you should apply as soon as possible. When registration is complete, we will send all participants the names, addresses, and phone numbers of all those going on the trip. We are good communicators, and will try very hard to keep everyone well informed, primarily by e-mail.

EXPERIENCE AND RISKS

Most of our route will be at altitudes above 10,000 feet, and will reach up to 12,800 feet. To facilitate acclimatization, we plan to do a moderate hike on Day 3, starting from 11,200 feet, and not begin our trek until the fourth day. Although with this acclimatization these elevations should not be high enough for properly conditioned people to contract acute mountain sickness (AMS), the combination of physical exertion and oxygen levels lower than in the Northeast require that we pace ourselves, and pay attention to proper nutrition and hydration. People wishing to participate in this trip must have previous backcountry camping experience, at the

intermediate level or higher. Although the hiking will be at a moderate pace, and the trail quality will be high by Northeastern standards, this trip is not intended for beginners or people who have not hiked three or more consecutive days in the last few years. You need to be prepared to commit yourself to keeping in shape between the time you are accepted for the trip and the time you depart for it.

You must be equipped with appropriate gear. Always be aware of the risks involved and conduct yourself accordingly. Aside from any personal medical problems, participants should be aware of the possibilities of bug bites, dehydration, sunburn and other heat or cold related problems. You should use sunscreen regularly, and be sure to bring enough water to be adequately hydrated on all day trips. There is a risk of tick-borne disease, so you may wish to use insect repellent as appropriate. Since there is a possibility of bear visits at all of the campsites, we will carry bear canisters.



Although the weather is likely to be good, the possibility of afternoon thunderstorms is significant, and some rainy days are possible.

When you participate in this activity, you should be prepared both physically and mentally, and equipped with the appropriate gear. You should always be aware of the risks involved and conduct yourself accordingly. We are not responsible for your safety; you are. Prior to your being accepted as a participant in this trip, you will be asked to discuss your capabilities and experience with us.

BEING A TEAM PLAYER

We will be more than just a group: we will be a team. You must enjoy being part of such a team and be willing to share with and help your team members. For safety and the integrity of the trip, it is important that participants disclose fully to the leaders their level of experience, level of current fitness, mental health and medical issues and treatments, and advise the leaders of any health changes before departure and while traveling. This is a physically and mentally demanding trip due to the amount of travel, hiking and altitude involved. You will be in an unfamiliar place with unfamiliar people, and be mentally and physically challenged.

You are expected to have a positive attitude with an open mind that unexpected issues can occur at any time. Group members should always be supportive and understanding of anyone having difficulties. Participants are expected to contribute to the group experience, be approachable by others, and take genuine interest in the group members. Any interpersonal matter that participants cannot resolve themselves should be brought to the attention of the leaders for resolution. Participants are expected to stay committed to the planned activity and

respect and follow the leader's decisions. Participants' thoughts, concerns and group consensus will be appreciated when received and will be taken into consideration in the leader's decisions. To minimize risks, we will stay close together, and will hike in groups, not alone.

Based on the locations of participants, a pre-trip hike and or gathering will be arranged so we can get to know each other, talk about the trip, and discuss appropriate gear.



EXPECTATIONS

It may happen on any trip that a participant is or becomes unable to participate in one or more of the planned activities. Leaders, in their sole judgment, have the right and obligation to refuse participation in any activity to any group member for reasons of group or individual safety. Illness, injury or lack of proper gear or fitness for a particular activity are examples of some conditions that may result in a participant's

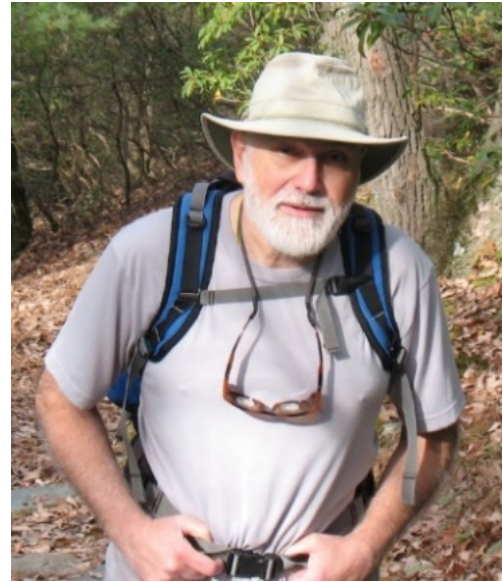
inability to perform one or more activity. Leaders may try to find a substitute activity for the trip member, but this may not always be possible.

Safety is paramount for all AMC-sponsored events. Participants should be aware that there are risks associated with outdoor adventure activities, including, but not limited to, adverse weather and environmental conditions, remote locations of our trips, and transportation in vehicles or on foot.

AMC Mission: AMC Adventure Travel trips are run in a manner supportive of and consistent with the conservation, recreational and educational principles and mission of the Club. Trip leaders encourage participant conduct consistent with Leave No Trace environmental and conservation principles and local regulations.

TRIP LEADERS

Mike Darzi, Leader: Mike has been leading outings for the Appalachian Mountain Club and the Sierra Club for over 20 years, and is a former Chair of the AMC Potomac Chapter. He has led numerous multi-day trips in the northeast and mid-Atlantic U.S., including the Berkshires, Acadia National Park, the White Mountains, Pine Creek Gorge, the Adirondacks, and Shenandoah National Park. For AMC AT, he has led trips to Morocco, France, Switzerland, Italy, Bulgaria, and SW US. Contact Mike at Mike.Darzi@Gmail.com or 301-580-9387.



John Lisker, Co-Leader: John has led 20 previous AMC Travel Adventures, including seven tent backpacks in the High Sierras in California, the Elk and San Juan ranges in Colorado, the Wind River range in Wyoming, and the Canadian Rockies. He has led four New Zealand trips, each with three short hut treks; five hut-to-hut treks in the Alps; and two supported treks in Morocco. He is a leader with the Hiking-Backpacking Committee of the AMC Boston Chapter, and is also a former Chapter Chair. John can be reached at 617-244-1636 and john.lisker@juno.com.

WHAT TO BRING

Below is a list of the required and recommended gear for the trip, as well as a list of items which some people will bring and share.

Required and Essential Gear

- broken-in hiking boots (preferably waterproof)
- at least 2-3 set of hiking socks with liners
- non-cotton shorts (or long pants if you prefer) and shirt for hiking
- large day pack (with extra capacity for flexibility)
- sleeping bag good down to freezing
- sleeping pad
- waterproof wind and rain gear (tops and bottoms)
- wool sweater, or synthetic pile/fleece jacket
- warm long pants - wool or fleece
- hat for warmth, and gloves or mittens
- polypropylene, Coolmax, Bergelene or other synthetic extra layer clothing
- sunglasses
- hat or bandanna for sun protection
- sunscreen and insect repellent
- Tevas, Crocs or other sandals (to wear around camp and for stream crossings)
- headlamp or flashlight with fresh batteries
- mess kit (fork, spoon, cup, bowl)
- unbreakable water bottles or hydration bladder (at least 2 liters total capacity)
- waterproof pack liner and/or pack cover
- high-energy trail snacks
- toilet paper & kit
- ear plugs
- straps/cords to attach gear to pack

Shared Gear

The leaders will collect information on what equipment people have in these categories, and decide who should bring what to share.

- lightweight tent for 2 or more
- stove (and fuel bottle, if necessary)
- water filter
- bear canister

Optional Gear

- casual clothing for travel and in town
- small daypack/lumbar pack for sightseeing
- personal first-aid kit (leaders will have group first aid kits)
- hiking poles
- waterproof matches
- whistle
- knife
- camp towel
- toilet kit
- bathing suit
- camera