

BRITISH BREAKS

Saddle up and fall for the Fells

Sue Watt travels to the Lake District to trek and wild camp with a rare breed of pack pony

I feel quite apprehensive when I first meet Lucky, Patty, Fairmile and Boo. Jet black, short and sturdy, they're almost identical. They look wild, with strangely hairy ears and manes like matted dreadlocks so unruly they completely cover their eyes. That's how perfect fell ponies should look. But I'm more concerned about their characters. "You have to let them know who's boss," Tom Lloyd warns me as we enter the paddock. "They pick up everything about you, so they'll know if you're uncomfortable around them. Even if you are, pretend you're not." I wonder if I'll be able to hide my nerves or if they'll suss me out as a newbie. My friend Charlotte and I are spending the weekend with Tom and his ponies, walking and wild camping with fellow guests Di and Advait in the Swindale Valley, a corner of the northern Lake District few people visit. Fell Pony Adventures, Tom's brainchild, is a new way to experience the Lakes, yet it's built on ancient traditions, leading these increasingly rare pack ponies as they carry our kit on age-old drover routes over the hills. Tom, 50, grew up with fell ponies and has travelled with them across the country. He tested this venture last summer, having given up his London life to care for his father's herd called Hades Hill. Just 200 fell ponies survive in their natural habitat, and the biggest threat to them, according to Tom, is an ageing population of pony breeders. "There's no one to carry on the old traditions. I want to revive them, to give the ponies the job they've been doing for centuries." Our base is Naddle Farm, part of Haweswater RSPB centre. Having arrived on a Friday afternoon, we settle into our yurt-shaped tent complete with inflatable mattresses and sleeping bags beside an ancient

oak, then go to meet Tom and his charismatic herd. Fairmile is the matriarch, a wise old lady at 23 who teaches the younger ponies all she knows. Patty is Fairmile's best buddy, while Lucky is distinguishable because her mane is slightly grey. And then there's Boo. Poor Boo. She left the herd because Tom sold her and now she's back, but it would appear the others haven't forgiven her – she's always alone. At dusk, we pop into the farm's hide and spot three huge badgers before a fox scares them away. The evening is spent chatting around the firepit with Tom and helpers Clare and Janine. Morning brings a sunny crisp-clear autumn day perfect for country walks. Tom packs up our ponies, each one carrying 88lb in leather saddlebags or boxes. For our sturdy fells this is lightweight, he says. Having the ponies means we can take luxuries not normally associated with wild camping. Our kit includes all the camping gear, our bags, a firepit, wok, stove, kettle, drinks and masses of food. We don't go hungry, with delicious cooked breakfasts, meze-style lunches, and dinners including a veggie chilli and Lebanese stir-fry plus plenty of nibbles. There's also a trowel – in order to dig our not-so-luxurious "lavatories". After crossing the beck, we head up through pine-scented woodland. I rode as a child and have had little contact with horses since, but experience is irrelevant here. That's the beauty – all you need is empathy. We amble across the wild Rosgill Moor with fluffy cotton grasses and the ponies' long manes blowing in the breeze. I take Lucky for a while and love how calmly she walks beside me, even when we go downhill through marshy bracken that's almost as tall as me. Our path takes us along the broad Swindale Valley with mesmerising views across the fells. For all this beauty and the fabulous weather, we've barely passed another soul. "It's mad," Tom says. "Some 200 people a day queue to take selfies on Scafell Pike. But



GRAHAM WYNN

PACK TO NATURE Walk the tranquil Lake District as fell ponies, above, carry all that you need for wild camping, below

not far away there's this place that's still wild and unspoilt." After a break, I lead Fairmile, who likes grabbing grass on the move. Remembering Tom's words, I try to assert my authority, pulling her head up as she pulls it down. Generously, she lets me win and I'm completely smitten, stroking her constantly. Some three hours after leaving we set up camp on a hillock near Forces waterfalls. Di and Advait go swimming while Charlotte and I climb the hills to photograph the sweeping valley – our tents look tiny below, perfectly camouflaged, and the ponies seem totally at home. It's hardly surprising. "Everything here is what makes fell ponies what they are," Tom explains. "To help them thrive and keep them hardy, we have to keep them on the fells." We sip red wine around the fire, telling stories into the night in the best traditions of wild camping. Overnight, the weather turns stormy and the next day, the route we're meant to be taking is smothered in heavy cloud. "The Old



Essentials

Fell Pony Adventures (07734 409251; fellpony.co.uk) offers a three-day Wild Camping Trek to the Swindale Valley from £600 per person (minimum group of four) including all food, equipment and camping fees. Day treks and longer treks are available on request.

Corpse Road is a muddy, wild place, a different kind of beauty to this but it's very exposed," Tom says. So we opt for a lower route on country lanes and it soon becomes clear Tom's experience has led to absolutely the right decision. In the distance, we spot four feral fell ponies. All black apart from one bay, they look wild and unkempt, staring at us from afar with a haughty air of freedom. Our ponies stay calm, watching them with bemused curiosity as we head to Frith Wood. The rain seems to make this ancient woodland glow with extraordinary lush beauty. With Fairmile by my side, strolling at a gentle pace, I drift into my own little world while the rest of the team chat. I chat to Fairmile instead, about nothing in particular, stroking her as we walk. Her ears are forward, she sometimes rubs me gently with her nose and blows softly from her nostrils. Back at Naddle Farm, Clare tells me this means she's contented. I know how she feels.

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