

Leader *of the* pack

Fancy exploring the hidden hills of the Lake District while also helping save the endangered fell pony population? Then get your walking boots on...

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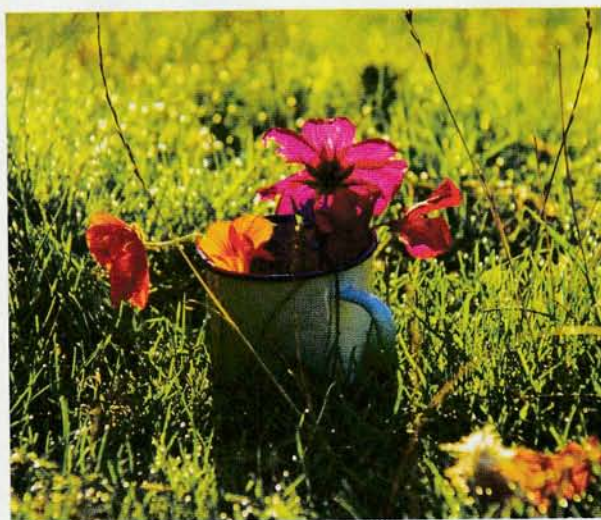
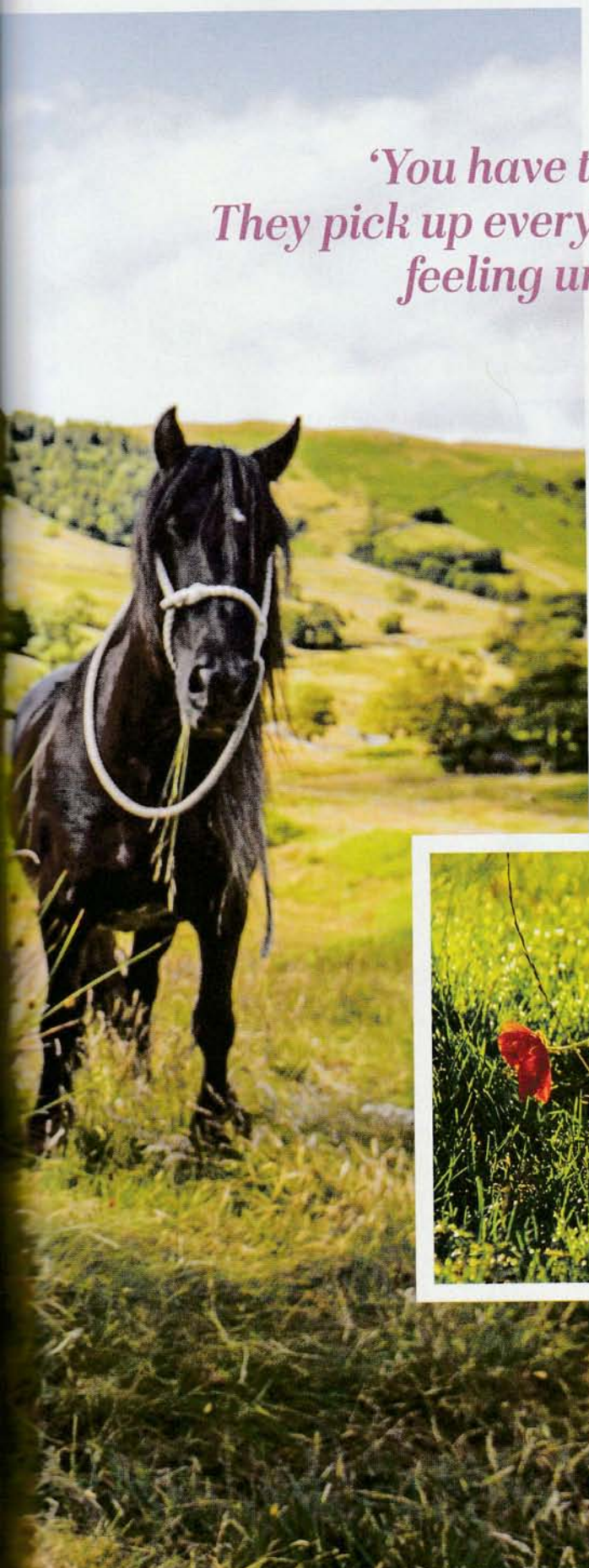


On the hoof
Leading a fell pony
through the
Swindale Valley





'You have to let the ponies know who's boss. They pick up everything about you, so even if you're feeling uncomfortable, pretend you're not'



Swindale smörgåsbord
Fell ponies much their way
through the scenery

It was a glorious autumnal day in the northern Lake District, the trees just turning gold and rustling softly in the breeze under a cloudless sky. Yet for all its bucolic beauty, I felt apprehensive walking through the fluffy cotton grasses on Rosgill Moor, with Fairmile by my side and some words of caution ringing in my ears.

"You have to let these ponies know who's boss," our trek leader Tom Lloyd had explained earlier. "They pick up everything about you, so even if you're feeling uncomfortable, pretend you're not."

A jet-black fell pony with a mane like dreadlocks and strangely hairy ears, Fairmile looked wild and unkempt. But she was wise, the herd matriarch at 23 years old, and I felt like an anxious teenager on a first date, worried she'd immediately spot my novice nerves.

I was about to spend three days walking and wild camping with Tom and his rare fell ponies. We wouldn't be riding the ponies, we'd be leading them, looking after them and getting to know them while they carried our kit. But having had little to do with horses since I was a teenager, the (many) years in between had sapped my confidence. It hadn't helped when a friend who owned fell ponies

described them as "cheeky characters, clever and quite naughty. They'll run rings around you if you let them." As we set out into Cumbria's Swindale Valley, I was already envisaging Fairmile running copious laps around me.

Hades' horses

We had met Fairmile, Lucky, Patty and Boo the day before at Naddle Farm, Tom's basecamp at RSPB Haweswater. Belonging to the Hades Hill herd ►

'I began to notice nature's little things like dragonflies and butterflies around us, and buzzards flying overhead'



Working up an appetite
After a day leading the ponies through the Swindale Valley, you can enjoy treats such as this Lebanese wrap

◀ established by his father in 1957, they're short and stocky and almost identical. Only Lucky looked slightly different – her dishevelled mane was tinged grey, hiding a white star between her eyes.

Tom launched Fell Pony Adventures last summer to help support his herd and raise awareness of the plight of this endangered breed. "There are just 200 breeding mares left out in the fells, and many semi-feral herds and important bloodlines have been lost," he said. "They were bred as pack ponies for carrying slate and charcoal along old drover tracks before railways and roads were built. These fells make them what they are. To maintain a gene pool of hardy fell ponies, for them to thrive, they need to keep doing the job they've done for centuries."

Tom also believes that these ponies can help people seeking to reconnect with nature. "They're 'flight' animals, so to have a bond with them, you have to project an outer calm," he reasoned. "There's this sense of mindfulness, a sense of calm, from being outdoors with the horses following their gentle pace."

Lucky, Patty and Fairmile stood in a huddle, but poor Boo cut a lonely figure some distance away, a young misfit practicing social distancing before it was even a thing. Tom had sold her and now she was back on loan. "They're letting her know she's the outsider. It's difficult to get accepted again once you've left the group."

As Tom cooked a hearty veggie chilli for dinner, I sat around the firepit with my fellow guests. Although one, Charlotte, was an experienced rider, Di and Advait were not. I felt relieved they'd barely stroked a pony between them.

Taking the reins

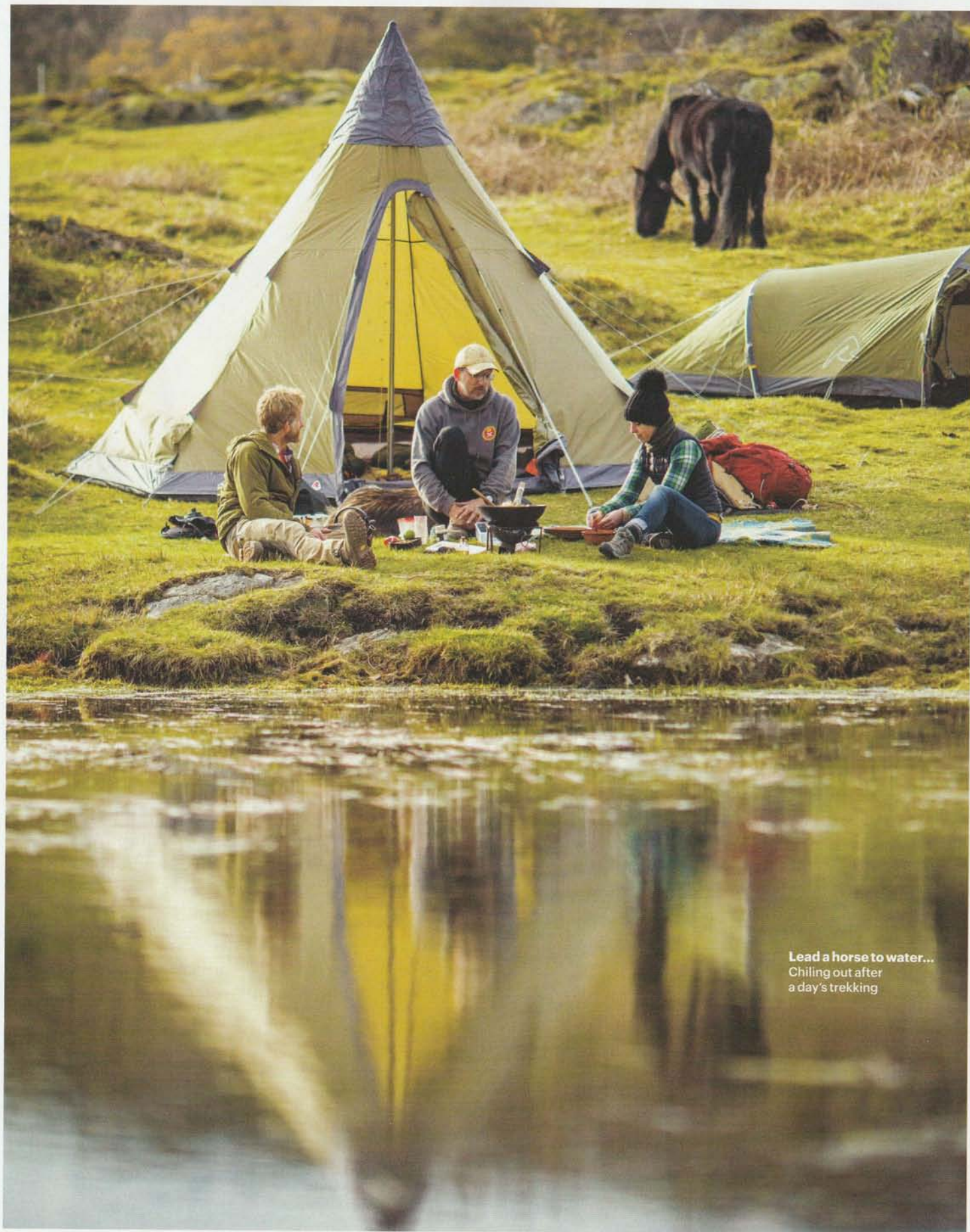
After a chilly, starry night, we woke to a cooked breakfast and a safety briefing from Tom and fellow guide Clare Dyson, as Finn, Clare's shaggy collie, listened in. "Walk next to the head, giving them a bit of rope but not too much. A swishy tail means 'get back.' Flaring nostrils and their ears back means they're really angry," Clare warned.

"Never be flappy around them and talk to them as you walk," added Tom. "And watch your toes – you'll know about it if they accidentally step on your foot..."

Walking with the ponies meant wild camping in comfort, with all our tents and bags, the stove, wok and firepit, copious amounts of food and drink, and even the proverbial kitchen sink (a large metal bowl for washing up) carried on their backs rather than ours, in huge leather saddlebags and plastic boxes. "They're carrying about 40-45kg, which is light for fell ponies," Tom reassured me.

After crossing the beck by basecamp, we headed uphill through fragrant pine forests. At first, I simply walked beside the ponies rather than lead one, but I watched Di leading Lucky, relaxed and beaming, looking like she'd walked her all her life, and realised it was empathy, not experience, that mattered here.

When we reached the moor, I took the plunge and held Fairmile's rope, conscious that those first tentative steps could give me away as a fell pony newbie. "She likes to eat on the move," Clare warned me, and I wondered if I'd be able to stop her munching all the way to camp. Trying to show, in Tom's words, that I was 'the boss', I held her ▶



Lead a horse to water...
Chilling out after
a day's trekking



'I scrambled up the fern-covered hills. From there, our yurt-style tents looked tiny, blending in perfectly with the golden grasses'



A view from the ridge
A pony munches (and yurt-tents get erected) in the long grass



◀ head up whenever she pulled it down to snatch a mouthful on the hoof, stroking her and speaking quietly as we walked. Gradually, her downward tugs at the rope became less frequent and I began to relax. "Fairmile's very good," Tom said, fondly. "She teaches the young ones all she knows."

As we reached the broad and beautiful Swindale Valley with views sweeping across the fells, Tom revealed his impressive fell pony CV, including driving two ponies and his bow-top wagon all the way from Cumbria to Cornwall and back and drove three stallions and his wagon up Kirkstone Pass, one of the steepest roads in the Lakes. "Once they trust you, they'll do anything for you," he mused.

I began to notice nature's little things like dragonflies and butterflies around us, and buzzards flying overhead. By now, my 'outer calm' had imperceptibly transformed into a deep inner calm and thoughts of my day-to-day life drifted away. All I needed to do was follow 'my' pony at her pace, with no rush, no stress, no deadlines, nothing but the here-and-now, focusing on Fairmile and our journey together.

Gentle drama

We set up camp by Forces Falls, in time for a late lunch of mezze and fruit. The waterfalls cascaded into crystal-clear pools among the rocks, tempting Di and Advait in for a swim. After brushing the ponies and taking them to drink, I scrambled up the craggy, fern-covered hills nearby. Our yurt-style tents looked tiny below, blending in perfectly with the golden grasses. And the ponies, grazing peacefully, simply looked like they belonged here, a picture of pure contentment.

Yet, with numbers dwindling, these ancient native ponies are struggling to survive. Tom is one of just a few remaining breeders that still raise semi-feral ponies in their natural habitat, grazing them out on these fells all year. "The greatest ▶



'As darkness fell, we relished that mountain solitude, sipping red wine around the fire and chatting into the night with not another soul around'

◀ threats to their survival," he explained, "are an ageing population of breeders and environmental pressures. You can see how they love the fells," he added. "Now more than ever, we have to preserve a gene pool of fell ponies with the hardiness and character that make them what they are."

For all the autumn sunshine, the clear blue skies and fabulous views, few walkers had passed us on our trek. "Some 200 people a day queue up to take selfies on top of Scafell Pike," Tom said. "It's mad. But not far away there's this place that's still totally unspoilt."

As darkness fell, we relished that mountain solitude, sipping wine around the fire and chatting into the night with not another soul around.

Or so we thought. Suddenly a snake of torchlights came up the hillside: mountain rescue teams were searching for two people lost above Haweswater. Although it's gentler here than many places in the Lakes, it's still wild with its own inherent risks, and proper preparation is vital.

Thankfully, we later learned that the couple were found cold but uninjured. Just as well, because we woke to a soundtrack of howling wind, heavy rain banging on our tents and thunder echoing down the valley. The ponies mostly stayed calm, apart from Patty who shifted around nervously and stepped on Charlotte's foot as we packed them, proving Tom right about how painful that can be.

Walk a Fairmile in her shoes

Cloud obscured our planned route back, high up along the Old Corpse Road (yes, they used to take bodies along the track to be buried at Shap Abbey). Instead, we retraced the previous day's steps along the valley then followed a broad country lane to reach Frith Wood. I walked with Fairmile again, chatting quietly to her as we passed four feral fell ponies on the hills, their heads held high with an irrefutable air of freedom. These special ponies are as integral to this landscape as the mountains, moors and becks, and it seemed unconscionable that without breeders like Tom they might soon be no more than a memory.

By now, the storm had passed and the ancient woodland arching above us radiated calm and serenity, with rays of sunlight shining through the foliage still glistening from the rain. Fairmile and I walked quietly, slightly behind the rest of the group in our own little bubble. Her ears were forward, sometimes she rubbed me gently with her nose and I stroked her constantly. That tense first walk with her on Rosgill Moor seemed a lifetime ago now, and I savoured our last hour together.

"These fell ponies are full of heart and personality," Tom said as we returned to Naddle Farm. "Once you make that connection, you're travelling at their pace, seeing everything through their eyes. You're connecting with their world."

That world is under threat. But with projects such as this helping to lead the way towards survival, Fairmile and the Lake District fell ponies will hopefully be running rings around visitors for many years to come. ▶

Leading lights

Wild camping; (inset) the author walks with Fairmile

Footnotes

Lake District

THE TRIP

Fell Pony Adventures' 3 Day Wild Camping Trek to the Swindale Valley costs from £600pp. They provide all camping/cooking equipment, sleeping bags and mattresses, communal shelter and all meals. Day treks and two-four-day treks around Windermere and Howgill Fells are also available. (fellpony.co.uk)

Vital statistics

Capital: Ambleside, Keswick and Windermere are the main towns. The nearest town to RSPB Haweswater is Penrith.

Population: 40,478 people live within Lake District NP.

When to go

The Lake District is one of the wettest areas of the UK, with around 200 rainy days a year, and



TOP TIP
The Lake District is not just about the horses. Keep your eyes peeled for wildlife including red squirrels, ospreys, otters and red deer.



Pitched right
Waking up to the charms of wild camping in the Lakes

the weather can change in a moment, even in summer.

Fell Pony Adventures (fellpony.co.uk) runs day treks throughout the year and wild camping treks between May and September.

Oct-Mar: Plenty of rain and autumnal storms then snowy conditions between December and March.

Apr-Jun: These are the driest months, although dry days can't be guaranteed.

July-Sept: The warmest months, between 8-18°C, and the busiest season for visitors.

Health & safety

It helps to be fairly fit for walking, although treks can be planned for all ages and abilities. **Fell Pony Adventures'** Tom and Clare are qualified mountain leaders.

Be prepared for bad weather - take waterproofs, layers and a change of clothes, as well as sturdy walking

boots, not sandals. Warmer weather entices irritating midges and insects so bring repellent.

Getting there

The basecamp for Fell Pony Adventures' 3 Day Wild Camping Trek is **RSPB Haweswater**, Naddle Farm. If driving, head 16km south of Penrith to Bampton, then further south towards Haweswater reservoir: Naddle Farm is signposted en route.

The nearest station is Penrith. From there, a taxi to Bampton costs around £25 through **Penrith Taxis** (01768 899298) or **Eden Taxis** (01768 865432).

Getting around

Bikes can be hired at **Arragon's Cycle Hire** (arragonscyclehire.com; 07745 190227).

Car hire is available through **Co-Wheels** car club scheme from Penrith Station, (www.co-wheels.org.uk) or through **Enterprise Rent-A-Car** (enterprise.co.uk; 01228 594941).

Cost of travel

The Greyhound (Shap; greyhoundshap.co.uk) offers not only excellent pub-grub mains from £10-23 but also double rooms from £80.

The George and Dragon (Clifton; georgeanddragonclifton.co.uk) is part of the Lowther Estate from where its 'field to fork' menus are sourced, with mains from £14-26 and double rooms from £100.

Check out the guided events offered by **Wild Haweswater**



Follow the leader
Fell Pony Adventures'
Tom Lloyd on the move

If you only do 5 things in the Lake District...

1 Horseriding... with a difference

Gallop on a beach or climb a Lakeland peak on a magnificent Shire or Clydesdale horse (they make fell ponies look like midgets). *Cumbrian Heavy Horses* has experiences to suit all levels, including carriage driving for those who'd prefer not to climb onboard Britain's biggest horses. cumbrianheavyhorses.com

2 Walking with wolves

England's last wild wolf was killed in Lakeland back in the 14th century. Based close to that spot, *Predator Experience* offer one-hour countryside walks with their wolf hybrid pack as you learn about the wolves. predatorexperience.co.uk

3 Take to the water

Ullswater Steamers' cruises connect some of Lakeland's

most iconic walking routes, making a trip functional as well as enjoyable as you take in views of the valley. ullswatersteamers.co.uk

4 One man (or woman) and his dog

Have you long been fascinated by working sheepdogs? *The Lake District Sheepdog Experience* has a team of working dogs trained to work

with amateurs like us. lakedistrictsheepdogexperience.co.uk

5 Let the bike take the strain

With all those hills, having an electric motor on your bike can be a real boon! An eBike can be hired from several locations, including at dramatic *Lowther Castle*, which has its own trails as well as being well placed for exploring. lowthercastle.org



(wildhaweswater.co.uk; from £10-20) with walks ranging from red squirrel spotting, dawn choruses and night-time nature, or watch badgers from a hide. But a lot of the classics are free: walk around picturesque *Ullswater* or amble around the market town of *Penrith* and its 14th century castle ruins.

Further reading & info

Romany Rai is an award-winning documentary by Fell Pony Adventures' Tom Lloyd about Gypsy life and Appleby Horse Fair. (romanyrai.com)

The Fell Pony (Allen breed series) by Clive Richardson (1990)

Lonely Planet's Pocket Lake District (1st Ed, 2019)

lakedistrict.gov.uk – official site

More online

Visit www.wanderlust.co.uk/208

Archive articles

- Exploring The Lake District by eBike – issue 145
- 10 things you must do in the Lake District – online

