

# Brilliant Businesses

## Nidderdale Llamas, Wilsill



### Nidderdale Llamas' trek to sustainable success

Kiln Farm in Wilsill in Nidderdale is a survival story – both in personal and business terms – that has turned into a sustainable success story.

Shortly after it had been bought by James Benson, who comes from a family of Nidderdale farmers, and his wife, Suzanne, in 2002, disaster struck. James went into hospital for an operation which went badly wrong. He contracted septicaemia, remained in hospital for three months, lost 10 stones and almost died. It took him 18 months to regain his weight and even today he lacks the strength he once had.

James runs the farm, which has 50 cattle and 180 sheep, though Suzanne is in charge of lambing because of the physical strength required.

Like his farm, James is a survivor, but it is the introduction of a llama trekking business, run by Suzanne, that has brought economic sustainability to the family.

### Standing on its own four feet

Nidderdale Llamas, as the business is known, began in 2009 helped by a grant from Nidderdale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and has become a big success more than capable of standing on its own four feet. It now contributes as much income as the farm and in 2013 won a Certificate of Excellence from Trip Advisor because of the quality of the experience it offers visitors.

Back in 2003, Suzanne had no plans to develop a llama trekking business when she went to a horse sale in Ilkley. She came away with two ponies and a spur of the moment buy - a llama.

She then thought llama Larry should have a companion or two so





more llama purchases followed. The seed of the idea of developing a llama trekking operation was planted when she went to see ones in Scarborough and Dorset to find out more.

After the centre in Scarborough closed, she thought there could be a gap in the market in Yorkshire. So Suzanne invested what spare time she had into fully re-searching llama trekking determined to be able to work from home and support James on the farm. After buying two trained trekking llamas and 18 months of hard work to start llama trekking part-time, she was offered redundancy from a high pressure job as operations manager for a housing association in Leeds. She left and started Nidderdale Llamas the next day.



Since then the herd has grown to 13 trekking llamas, five breeding llamas and one alpaca. Visitors lead them on treks of 1½ miles, 3½ miles and 8 miles. The longest trek is to Brimham Rocks where visitors enjoy a packed lunch carried by the llamas.

Those on the shorter treks either have a buffet or cakes and drinks at the farm when they return. There are also two experiences where people can learn all about llamas and alpacas. The catering is provided by a Pateley Bridge business, the Sandwich Box, while another business in Harrogate provides speciality buns and cakes.



The business has strong connections with the National Trust at Brimham Rocks. “Llamas are environmentally friendly and have such hilarious and attractive personalities that they are invited to the Rocks in the school holidays, where families can enjoy walking around with them,” says Suzanne.

### Hen parties on the farm

Like most successful business people, Suzanne has learned to diversify. A good example is hen parties on the farm. There are now up to 15 a year for up to 20 people. “We put ‘L’ plates on the llamas’ tails, give the girls silly hats and sashes and they all have a great time, ending up in a special party room we have created,” says Suzanne. Wedding guests have come from Scotland, the south coast and even abroad, to enjoy the experience.

Suzanne is positive about the future. “We did our homework with market research before we opened, asking people if they would be interested in llama trekking. We have created two new casual jobs and imbued our staff with the importance of giving brilliant customer service.”

This is clearly a sustainable business, and one committed to recycling too. In her shop Suzanne sells fibre from her llamas kitted or crocheted by local people into hats, scarves, gloves and socks.

James and Suzanne are on a journey – you could say a trek – but they are definitely getting there.

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