

the do's and don'ts of alpaca farm visits

a new breeder's perspective

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bout a year and a half ago, we decided to explore the alpaca industry. The more we researched, the more we liked what we read and heard. So we thought, let's go see these creatures. Pictures are okay, but nothing compares to seeing them on a farm. All of a sudden, these animals have personality. It is almost like you can hear them talking. "Here come some more of those short-necks – no they're two legs – no they're both!" While we tend to see everything from our point of view, we believe they, too, are interested in us. So here are some tips that we have learned along the way which may be helpful to you.



- **DO... Ask questions.**

There are no wrong questions, especially if they sound dumb to you. Remember, all owners at one time felt dumb also! "Is this a llama? What are they good for? Can I ride them?" Inquire about all aspects of the business – shearing, fiber processing, breeding, showing animals, tax advantages, alpaca organizations, etc.

- **DO... Touch the animals.**

If you are not comfortable handling the animals, this is a good way to learn. Follow the owner's lead.

- **DO... Be observant!**

Observe the farm set-up: fences, stalls, waterers, runs, etc. If you see something that doesn't make sense, ask questions. Watch farm employees; see how they work with the animals. Watch the animals. What can you learn by their interactions with humans and other animals? "Why is she raising her head and putting her ears back?"

- **DO... Listen.**

The best way to learn about alpaca farm operations is by following alpaca ranchers around and asking them why they do things. Offer to give a hand, an arm, a strong back or whatever you can give.

- **DO... Dress appropriately.**

Ladies, no high heels or open toed shoes. Men, your blazer and tie are better at home. You may find yourself walking through a pasture.

- **DO... Expect to fall in love!**

If you can look at a 3-day old cria without falling in love, you are not in the right place.

- **DON'T... Assume all alpacas behave alike.**

Don't get between a new mama and her baby if you don't know her temperament. Don't sneak up behind an alpaca and touch his flank when he can't see you. It is rare to find an alpaca that will kick a person on purpose, but if he thinks you are a horsefly or that pesky weanling again, you may be more surprised than he is!

- **DON'T... Schedule your first visit on shearing day or...**

when the alpacas are receiving veterinary care. These are stressful times for the alpacas and sometimes the owners, and they might not be on their best behavior. "Oh, so that's what they mean by spitting!!"

- **DON'T... Be bashful.**

Call for an appointment so you can see what alpacas are all about! Alpaca owners love to talk about their animals and love sharing their stories on how they got hooked on them. "And then there was the time..." ❖

Ernie became interested in camelids in 1997. After a visit to a llama farm, and several alpaca ranches, he was enthralled by the sight of multi-colored suris. His farm welcomed the first generation of crias in 2000, and he is eagerly awaiting this year's on-farm-bred offspring. Ernie is a founding partner of McMatley Alpacas, which is located in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. (540) 338-2045; mcmatley@netscape.net

"Just keep in mind that you need to enjoy yourself in this whole process. You will learn a lot from the farms you visit. In the end, you will choose what is right for you."