

On the trail of a PR llama

Sunday started much like any other with breakfast at dawn but the rumour was around that a tourist train was arriving at Bungendore around lunchtime. There could be people looking for something special to see and do... could this be meeting a llama strolling around the streets? Plans were made for a PR Llama outing.

Experience shows that it is easier if you take two on a PR expedition – two animals and two people. In this case we took Llama Magic Alabaster with alpaca Basil for moral support. Having prepared a bag of chopped carrot and packed the camera, it was time to load Alabaster and Basil into the van. These two are experienced travellers and have learnt to jump up into the back of the van. They travel untethered, usually gazing out the back window at passing motorists. When we arrive we open one door, clip the leads on and then the fun begins as people see them get out of the back of the van.



Unloading near a playground means that there are lots of children wanting to have a pat. Most are well behaved and wait to be invited. This is where it really helps to have two people to keep an eye on who might be approaching the back end of the animals with the thought of having a pat. We don't want to scare people but we also don't want to risk anyone getting kicked. It seems to help when we concentrate on positive messages to direct the activity: 'they like to be patted on the neck', 'be gentle', 'they really like carrot, would you like to give them some' and (to the parents) 'they don't like being grabbed unexpectedly on the back end – just like people really'. Alabaster and Basil are handling the attention pretty well but we explain that they are still on their 'L' plates and we watch carefully for any signs that they have had enough.



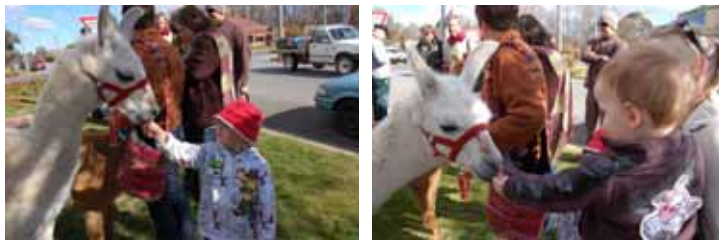
We try to break up the intensive patting sessions with some quiet times walking along the streets. Alabaster would like to sample the herbaceous delights available in Bungendore gardens but this does not seem a good idea if we wish to be welcome back.



Our next encounter is with a group of international tourists who all want their photo taken with Alabaster and Basil. It turns out that one of the tourists has spotted us on arrival and has rung all his friends to tell them to come quickly. We wonder what they will tell people back home about the way people in Bungendore live. Many of them say it is their first time to see a llama or alpaca. The cameras just keep appearing.



We eventually get to the next corner and meet up with a lot of people who came on the train. Once we stop the people just keep on coming. We keep up the same watching routine, Alabaster and Basil are looking for carrot from everyone and interacting with young and old. We are answering all the usual questions about llamas. It is actually helpful to have an alpaca there so that people can make the comparisons for themselves and many people are happier patting a smaller alpaca first before moving up to a llama. Alabaster is wonderfully calm and seems to be getting into the swing of doing PR, especially where it involves carrot. Basil adores the child who has bathed with watermelon scented soap.



When Alabaster has designs on a nearby geranium we figure it is time to move on. We have made it halfway around the block in an hour. Obviously travelling with a PR llama was not meant to be fast. Back at the carpark we talk to some more people and finish off the carrot before loading back into the car for the trip home.



Back home we feel somewhat exhausted after the intensive PR session. An hour working the crowds was definitely enough. We figure that we have made contact with more than 50 people. Most of them have never seen or touched a llama before.