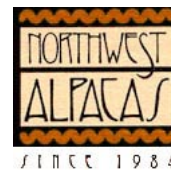




## **Alpacas Down Under**

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By Mike Safley  
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## Alpacas Down Under

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This is an old fashioned “on the road” story. Bruce Barr and I spent five days traveling the backroads and highways surrounding the city of Melbourne, Australia. Melbourne can easily lay claim to being the alpaca capital of Australia. There are a great many alpaca studs, or ranches as we call them, within one or two hours drive of Melbourne.

I arrived at the Melbourne airport two days late, thanks to my airplane’s proverbial “mechanical difficulties.” Cherie Bridges had agreed to meet me upon my arrival but had given up a day or so earlier when I failed to show up.

There I was, standing on the sidewalk with a confused look on my face, when up walked Ken Shurek. I had met Ken a year earlier in Estes Park, Colorado. He observed that I seemed a long way from home and wondered if he might give me some direction. I explained I was looking for Bruce Barr, and as luck would have it Ken was headed over to see Bruce at the Dalgehty auction complex, just a few miles away.

It didn’t take me long to accept Bruce’s offer to join him in an Australian alpaca tour. Before we were finished, we had put over a thousand miles on Bruce’s camper van. We had added Mike Wilkens of Wilkens Livestock to the entourage and had toured many alpaca studs, the Melbourne Cup Horse Race (which is a national holiday in Australia) and the Dalgehty Auction extravaganza.

If I were asked to describe Bruce Barr to someone who didn’t know him, I would paint a picture of the inveterate adventurer. Bruce has been to the national finals in five sports including hang gliding and wind surfing. He has a huge laugh and an easy manner. I don’t think Bruce has ever met a stranger.

Bruce seemed to know everyone in the Australian alpaca industry. He maintains a large herd of alpacas and llamas in Australia with his partner Bill Barnette. With Bruce as our guide we were enthusiastically welcomed as old friends at all the ranches we visited.

To say that Australia is beautiful doesn’t begin to describe her vast landscape. The rolling countryside is painted with giant brush strokes of vivid color. November is springtime in Australia and the country side is rich with emerald green fields and wildly colored flowers. Red parrots and pink cockatoos flutter from bush to bush and the koala bears sit in their trees and smile.

We arrived at Beneleigh Alpaca Stud, home of Carolyn and Allen Jinks, amidst their preparation for the big alpaca auction. Beneleigh is a 300 acre property which runs down to the ocean’s edge. Their home which sits on a bay outside of Geelong, and enjoys views of alpacas, the ocean and a rugged sea coast in the distance.

One hundred and fifty alpacas roam the farm’s lush pasture. The Jinks have been selling, raising, breeding and showing alpacas with great enthusiasm since 1989. Carolyn is developing the market for alpaca fibre with local spinners and weavers who have traditionally used sheep’s wool and mohair in their handicrafts. Allen, who grew up farming the land next to their current farm, has taken alpacas to heart and is pushing hard to breed for only the finest of fleece.

One can’t visit Beneleigh without getting to know “Miracle Millie.” She is probably the worlds friendliest alpaca. Born with a broken hip, she was nursed to health by the loving care of Carolyn. Millie demands a part in all the ranch activities and is generally one of the best alpaca saleswomen I have ever met.

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Being on the road with Bruce Barr means never being bored. Breakfast could mean anything from spaghetti and toast, a local favorite, to a sausage roll at the passing milk bar. "Take away food" was the order of the day. Between stops at local ranches, we talked constantly of, you guessed it, alpacas, with an occasional aside by Mike Wilkens about cutting horses, which we learned are his passion.

The Lyon Bank farm is home to Cherie Bridges and her Coliban alpaca stud operation. The ranch includes 450 acres, 24 pastures, 190 alpacas, 80 llamas and 2 koala bears. Bruce Barr and Bill Barnette agist their Australian alpaca and llama herd with Cherie, who cares for their animals as well as hers.

Cherie is a vivacious redhead, with a whole string of alpaca "firsts" to her credit. She introduced alpacas to Australia when she purchased 15 animals from Agricola of New Zealand and obtained on consignment, 20 additional animals from Alpacas and Llamas International. She immediately began selling the alpacas at the traditional Australian animal fairs and farm days.

Not one to sit still for long, Cherie organized the first Australian Alpaca Conference and Retreat. Next came the [Australia Alpacas Magazine](#). Currently she serves as editor for the magazine and is active selling and promoting alpacas on a daily basis.

On to the next ranch! Bruce was great at driving on the wrong side of the road but I'm still not sure how we made it through the "round a bout" intersections. One word of caution about Australian traffic: look both ways before crossing the street. The reverse traffic flow can be deadly to the American pedestrian, who fails to realize things are "backwards" down under.

We arrived midmorning at the Manifold Estate, home to Roger and Suzanne Haldane. The Haldane's ranch is a classic by any standard. Once spread over a hundred square miles, the ranch was developed by an Englishman who came to Australia in search of land.

The farm was initially developed as a dairy operation with over 9,000 milk cows and its own creamery. The homestead is set on Lake Purrumbete which is full of salmon and trout. Roger showed us an underground fort, which was the family's sanctuary during the occasional raid by aborigines.

The home was built in the late 1800's and enlarged in 1902. Constructed of stone and full of art nouveau carved wood work, I was surprised to learn that the house was supported by timbers from my home state of Oregon. The house has 16 fireplaces for heat and enough bedrooms to accommodate an army.

Roger Haldane's whole family is involved with their alpacas. Suzanne explained that she and Roger see the alpaca herd they are creating as a legacy for their children. Roger doesn't expect to see the full potential of the alpaca realized in his lifetime. His son Ewen and daughters Thea and Amy all take an active role in the breeding and care of their 300-plus alpacas.

I found Roger Haldane's knowledge of alpacas to be broad and deep. He works closely with the Textile Fibre and Research Institute in Melbourne to better understand alpaca fibre qualities. Roger and the institute are studying the effect of ultraviolet light on the quality of the fibre being produced. Roger points out that ultraviolet light damages fibre and makes it harder to process. Sweaters and yarn made from sundamaged fibre will pill up and shed. Mohair, for instance, is shorn every 6 months and avoids most damage from harsh sunlight. He feels that Australia, with its lower elevation and cloudy skies, may provide a superior environment for growing fibre than the alpaca's native Peruvian homeland with its high elevation and harsh sunlight.

Roger also feels that Australia's fibre handling expertise is superior to that of South America. He points out that in Peru, ranchers fail to skirt or sort the fleeces at the point of shearing. In Peru all grades of fleece are commingled. The finer grades of fleece become contaminated with coarser fibre from inferior fleece. Extra care during the initial clip could ultimately produce a superior textile product and require far less hand labor.

The Haldane's alpaca herd benefits from Roger's long history of raising other livestock species such as sheep. For instance, he uses vitamin therapy to prevent the rickets. He believes that vitamin D, A and B-12 are essential to baby alpacas, particularly in the winter months when they need to metabolize calcium and phosphorus into bone. Vitamin D is a vitamin derived from the sun. Low sunlight in the winter months, particularly when combined with dark animals, can create a likely environment for the rickets condition. The rickets don't occur in Peru where babies are born exclusively in the spring under conditions of bright sunlight.

Anyone fortunate enough to visit the Haldane ranch will leave well fed thanks to Suzanne and well informed after talking with Roger. The alpaca's future outside of Peru will prosper with families such as the Haldanes involved in the industry.

No story about Australia would be complete without comment on the charming and friendly people you meet there. Go to a restaurant, shop or motel and people are genuinely nice.

The shop girl will ask you "is that the lot?" before ringing up your purchase. The innkeeper will offer you a "pot of milk" for your morning coffee, which by the way is always drunk "white" in Australia. When you say thank you for the fine service you've received the reply will be "no worries mate".

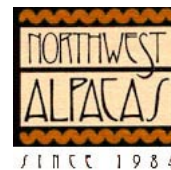
The suburbs and small towns of Australia made me feel as if I was back to the good old days of American life. I didn't see any graffiti, slums, unsafe streets, or homeless people. The houses were all neat and homey, each had a lovely fenced front yard.

Bruce, Mike and I were treated to the Melbourne Cup Horse Race two days after the Dalgehty Alpaca Auction. Carolyn Young, who heads up a local stock import export firm specializing in alpacas, found us "member-only tickets" to this spectacular event. From high above the race track we observed a most fashionable crowd of ladies all decked out in spectacular spring outfits. The cup race attracted \$90 million of wagers. That represents \$30 of wager for each of Melbourne's 3 million population, all on one horse race.

Next we were off to the world's largest alpaca herd outside of South America. What is the Royal Canadian Alpaca Ranch doing with 750 alpacas on 480 acres in Winchelsea, Australia? They're selling alpacas at a record setting pace, that's what. Ken Shurek and Florette Schnelle are a marketing force with their feet on two continents, Canada and Australia.

All the alpacas they've sold in the last two years, some 150 pair, live in Australia and are owned by Canadians. That's right, they do not sell alpacas to Australians even though Australian demand for alpaca is intense. Why? The Canadian clients of Ken and Florette have bought all the alpacas the couple care to sell.

At Royal Canadian Alpacas Ranch each pair is sold for \$30,000. The owner then enters into a contract for the care and boarding of the animal. Many of the Canadian buyers have not yet seen their investment. This marketing approach has successfully positioned alpaca ownership as an investment, which competes with certificates of deposits and stock as a financial investment vehicle.



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Ken and Florette's animal husbandry skills are a match for their marketing skills. The entire operation is run in a first class manner from breeding and birthing to nutrition and care.

Peter Williams, an English man with vast experience in farm management, together with his wife Pauline, head up the team. They have installed several innovative management techniques, in the ranch's breeding operation, which is entirely computerized. Female alpacas are weighed and body-scored prior to breeding, they are then assigned a pasture with feeding regulated to their overall condition. With 500 females to keep pregnant Peter is constantly processing and recording breeding activity. The 31 Royal Canadian herd sires are also a busy bunch.

At the ranch each alpaca pair can have a different owner and records must be kept accordingly. It's fair to say that Peter and Pauline don't take a lot of long vacations.

I would recommend an Australia alpaca trip to any alpaca enthusiast. If you can wrangle Bruce Barr as a tour guide and Mike Wilkens as company I'll guarantee you'll have the time of your life. I did.