



Donkeys in the forest

As parents search for ever more extraordinary birthday parties for their children, what could be better than having a party in the forest, with a couple of good-natured and cute donkeys for companionship? Maria Meyer thought so and started doing it.

We live in rural Germany, in an area which is up to 35 per cent woodland. But despite this, children rarely explore the wilds anymore. So we offer birthday parties for children aged between 8 and 12 years, at which you can play and walk in the forest. One of the options is a walk with our donkeys, Speedy and Gonzales. Ideally, we have a group of about 15 children, which is enough for playing games later on and also means that no child has to wait too long to have their turn on a donkey. Not surprisingly, the girls are much fonder of riding and petting the donkeys than the boys are but all enjoy it immensely.

I began this business around 10 years ago, after finishing university. My

Top left to right: Speedy and Gonzales take a well-earned rest; Tree identification by touch alone. Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Maria leads the party; Speedy, Gonzales and friends; Map of the route.

children had grown up and left home but I wanted to continue working with children. An environmental organisation called Nabu was looking for volunteers to help with organising natural birthday parties and I decided to get involved. In time, we incorporated natural birthday parties into our forest business, which already offered environmental education to children of all ages. Speedy and Gonzales came from a neighbouring farm, where my children used to spend time during the holidays and had taught the donkeys to carry children. When the farmer could no longer afford to keep the donkeys, my children begged for us to keep them. As I always loved horses, and as the donkeys were so cute and child-friendly, it seemed like an obvious addition to our forest parties business. So we tried and it worked!

Donkeys are ideal for children and for forest walking. They are small and

cute and very few children are afraid of them. Each donkey can carry about 50 kilograms (just under 8 stone) and they are patient and do not panic as quickly as ponies do, even when the children are running around and playing or if a noisy tractor passes. If they do take fright, which is very rare, donkeys only run a short distance, until they feel safe. If they don't see a safe exit, they stop. Because donkeys take more care of themselves than ponies do, they are also more cautious with the children. Donkeys do not eat as hastily as ponies do, and test the food with their lips first, making them safe for children to feed. The slow pace of donkeys is ideal. They are very careful where to set their hoofs and rarely stumble, even on very bad tracks, with tree roots and stones. The children are provided with riding helmets and sit on a thick saddle pad, with handles fixed to the lunging girth for beginners not yet ready to

take the reins. Unfortunately, we cannot do the rides when it is raining, since the pads are made of fabric and would get too wet for children to sit on. In such circumstances, we offer various alternatives from agreeing another date in the future to offering a reduced-price donkey-free option on the day for those who can't wait.

An alternative view

We always start the walk at the old copper mine in Dueppenweiler, before heading uphill to a view point, called Wehlenberg, which means 'blueberry hill'. And it is well named, as you really do find blueberries there! Depending on the season, the children are shown or told about what they can harvest there in the autumn and how to recognise the blueberries. We then have a picnic, followed by more environmental education as we play games. One of the favourites is the squirrel game, where the children have to be squirrels and jays. The squirrels have to hide acorns 'in autumn' and squirrels and jays have to find them again 'in winter'. The children are allowed to steal from each other's hiding places, so they learn how hard it is to survive. In fact, they usually find between 10 and 20 per cent of the hidden acorns. As you do not find acorns all year, we improvise with whole hazelnuts or almonds out of season.

Another favourite game is to recognise a tree you have only touched and

never seen. At Wehlenberg, there are a variety of tree species of various ages, making it ideal. The children have to form groups of two, with one child being blindfolded. The other child has to choose a tree, then lead the blindfolded child along an indirect route to the chosen tree - with lots of twists and turns to avoid 'cheating'. The blindfolded child has to touch the tree up and down and all around, until they feel sure they will recognize it again. Afterwards, they come back to the group and the blindfolds are removed. The game is for each blindfolded child to find their tree by sight. Most of the children love this game and only a few fail to find their tree. When child and tree are reunited, they can't help but touch it - it is not good enough just to see a tree you touched while blind! In addition to learning about our senses, this game is a fantastic way to demonstrate how different even similar-looking trees are.

Meanwhile, the donkeys are tethered up and allowed to graze and take a well-earned rest. Each child is allowed to give the donkeys one piece of carrot, to say "thank you", and are told about what donkeys eat, and why they eat what they eat. Usually, children will ask more and more questions about the donkeys, such as how they differ from ponies or zebras, and I am happy to tell them as much as they want to know.

All seasons

The rest of the walk is mainly downhill. In early summer, we pass wild strawberries and, above all, honeysuckle. It is not widely known that you can harvest the blooms and suck a drop of sweet nectar from the bottom of each one. Even the parents are amazed, and it offers another opportunity for learning - this time about the length of proboscis a butterfly would need to reach this food, and the wider connection between wild flowers and honey. In autumn, we find a wide range of common fungi.

So in addition to the fun they have with the donkeys and with each other, the children learn that there is a lot to discover and enjoy in their local forest. At the end of the day, the children will have walked at least 5 km (3.2 miles), and the whole 'party' lasts up to four hours, sometimes a little bit more. The children do not realise how far they have walked. And the parents are very thankful for having such tired children, who will go to sleep early and sleep long.

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