

ON THE TRAIL OF ADVENTURE

STORY BY LAURA WATILO BLAKE

IF YOU HAVE ONLY A FEW MINUTES to spare or want to fill hours, days or weeks experiencing the wilderness, you have ample options for adventure in Ohio. Whether you hike, kayak, cycle or ride a motorcycle or horse, you can pick from dozens of thrilling options that will leave you in awe of Ohio's beauty.



FALL IN LOVE WITH OHIO ON THE BUCKEYE TRAIL

Does the person make the journey or does the journey make the person? If you ask Kettering resident Andy Niekamp, the answer is both. An avid long-distance hiker and founder of Outdoor Adventure Connection, Niekamp retired early from a desk job in information technology to pursue his passion for taking long walks in the woods — something he developed as a young Boy Scout. “There are certain things that you can only experience on foot,” he said. “You’re completely immersed.”

If you consider long walks the perfect way to unwind, he suggests trying out Ohio’s Buckeye Trail. Besides hiking the Appalachian Trail three times, Niekamp is one of only a handful of people who have hiked the entire length of the 1,444-mile Buckeye Trail, a journey he completed at one time over the course of three and a half months in 2011.

“I had just come off the Appalachian Trail for the third time, and I wanted to try a different experience,” said Niekamp. “It’s an incredibly beautiful state, which made the journey so rewarding.”

The Buckeye Trail captured his interest because of how it links the state’s smaller towns, historic sites and natural attractions. It means you have the opportunity to walk into town for a meal or strike up a conversation with the locals. Niekamp didn’t always have to pitch a tent. He also slept in cabins, barns and strangers’ homes. “I learned that hospitality is not a Southern term,” he says. “Northern hospitality is alive and well.”

The Buckeye Trail forms a loop around Ohio, although Headlands Beach State Park in Mentor is considered the northern terminus. From that point, the trail heads west toward Toledo or south along the eastern edge of the state. The two branches meet up again in Southwest Ohio before heading to the southern terminus in Cincinnati. Picture-perfect views — and prime photo ops — along the way include beautiful natural areas, such as Cuyahoga Valley National Park and Hocking Hills State Park. However, more than half the route follows paved surfaces.

“It’s definitely not a ‘wilderness experience’ the entire time,” said Niekamp. “It’s more of a ‘discovering Ohio’ experience. You are taking a walk through the present and the past, whether it’s the canals of the 1800s, the forts that were in Ohio or Native American serpent mounds. When you get home, it doesn’t take long before you start dreaming about being back on the trail again. It gets into your blood and it’s hard to get out.”



Create treasured family memories on well-marked paths, such as this one in Conkles Hollow State Nature Preserve.