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## Backpackers to offer workshops for beginners

With arctic temperatures outside, these February days are tailor made for spring dreaming.

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*Andy Niekamp, of Outdoor Adventure Connection, will be conducting a Beginners Backpacking Workshop at Carter Caves State Resort Park. He's pictured here along the Appalachian Trail in Virginia.*

For folks who want to venture out and hike through the heart of an Appalachian spring, you're in luck.

This is the third year that Andy Niekamp's company, Outdoor Adventure Connection ([www.outdooradventureconnection.com](http://www.outdooradventureconnection.com)), has organized a series of beginning backpacking trips through Eastern Kentucky including Carter Caves State Resort Park as well as the famed Red River Gorge, home to the most arches east of the Rockies.

Niekamp, who has chalked up more than 12,000 miles backpacking including three times thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail, Kentucky's Sheltowee Trace, Ohio's Buckeye Trail and Vermont's Long Trail, said these four backpacking weekends (two in March and two in April) are made for folks who would love to trek out into the wild but are not comfortable doing that without learning needed skills for survival and a safe journey.

"A lot of people are maybe out driving on a trip through the Smoky Mountains and come to a road crossing and see a backpacker and think 'wouldn't that be great if we could do that' but they are afraid to get started on their own," Niekamp said. "We help them take that first step and give them the skills to do backpacking and so we start out with an overnight trip and then they can progress to longer trips."

During the beginning backpack hikes and workshops, Niekamp and Yvonne Entingh, another veteran backpacker and instructor with Outdoors Adventure Connection, teach backpackers everything they should know including: proper backpack fitting, bear bagging - hanging your food in a tree, backcountry sanitation and hygiene in the woods, fire building, backpacking stoves and cooking and Leave No Trace principles.

Entingh, who thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail and the Eastern Continental Trail, said the workshops really help to empower people to go out and enjoy nature and to conquer their fears of being out, and sleeping out, in the woods.

"We give people those basic skills to get out into the backcountry. There is a lot of fear of getting into the backcountry alone out in the wildlife and the possibilities of being in the elements and not being comfortable and there is a fear factor," Entingh said. "I talk about the fears that I had and that fears are very common. I think a lot of that has to do with Facebook and it seems like there is a lot of fear not only in society but that transfers over to our want to be in the backcountry. People fear that mankind is going to be out there and the creepers are going to be out there, so by coming out to our classes they walk away with the knowledge and are excited because they have everything they need to plan their own trips."

While many of the folks who have been on the usually sold-out backpacking trips over the past two seasons with Outdoor Adventure Connections, Entingh and Niekamp are expecting an even greater increase in women backpacking after Cheryl Strayed's best-selling memoir, "Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail" was turned into a movie this past year starring Reese Witherspoon, who is up for a Best Actress Oscar on Sunday for her role.

"Over the years I have seen an increase in the number of women wanting to get out in the backcountry and I am not sure how much the book or the movie plays a part of it but I did go see the movie and I know with my own experience there are a lot of women my age who are single and who are wanting to go out and recreate themselves and find out who they are," Entingh said. "I always tell women that you set out it is not the same woman who finishes, the trail will transform you even if you go over a weekend."

Part of that transformational experience is being out and one in the glory of nature, and Niekamp and Entingh said there are few better places anywhere to do that than in the hills and mountains of Kentucky and West Virginia where great scenic trails abound.

"Both Kentucky and West Virginia are blessed with a lot of scenic beauty that a lot of states don't have," said Niekamp, who for years has been a volunteer for Carter Caves Winter Adventure Weekend. "They have excellent places to go in terms of scenery and waterfalls and hills, and it's a great way to get in shape and learn the skills for other backpacking trips. When I prepare for backpacking trips at Red River Gorge or Carter Caves I am taking the same gear on the Appalachian Trail. It is the same process, and what you learn in the Red River Gorge can translate into lots and lots of other trails."

Here in the maw of winter, both Niekamp and Entingh said their minds go often to their time on the trails and the spiritual rebirth that happens when they are out embraced in nature.

"Even if it is a difficult day and I am tired on the trail and it is hard, I want to see what is around the next bend and the next mountain and that keeps me going as far as the spiritual aspect of it," Entingh said. "I have grown close to God because I am out there and it is just he and I communicating and meditating on his word and I'm talking to him out there, and there is the mental aspect of it, over the years. I am not the same woman when I get done. You have that awareness of life itself and how precious it is and how much passion we have in life. I know I am more open and aware and as for the physical aspects of it, I like to eat good and exercise and when I am out there it is this huge boost in my physical abilities."

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