

Meeting Captain Blue On The Trail

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Excerpt from his upcoming book about the Appalachian Trail

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Andy "Captain Blue" Niekamp has backpacked the entire Appalachian Trail three times in sections and is now on his fourth.

"The Appalachian Trail is like an old friend who doesn't change very much," he says, when I ask him why he hikes the same trail over and over again. "When I come out here, I know what to expect. I know where things are. It's nice to see the subtle changes in the trail."

Captain Blue, 53, of the Dayton, Ohio suburb of Kettering, says he did his first complete AT hike from 1989 to 1998, his second from 2000 to 2004 and his third from 2006 to 2010. He used his four weeks of vacation from his information technology job at Hewlett Packard and unpaid leave to backpack. Since he retired in 2010, he's got even more time.

He started his fourth AT hike in 2011 and has backpacked from Springer to the Maryland-Pennsylvania border. He's hiking the 229.7 miles of Pennsylvania on this trip from north to south.

"I go different directions, different times," he says.

Captain Blue says he got his trail name in Georgia in 1994, when he was dressed all in blue.

"Friends were going to call me Blueberry. I said call me Blue, Captain Blue."

I meet him after leaving the 501 Shelter, when the rocks still haven't been tough, and he says he actually enjoys the rocks in Pennsylvania.

"The rocks aren't bad the second time. The third time they're kind of fun and the fourth time they're a delight. It's a challenge and you know you're going to hit it."

Captain Blue says he's backpacked many other trails, including the 1,444-mile-long Buckeye Trail, which winds around Ohio, in 2011. But many people still question why he keeps hiking the AT and he tells them that it keeps him young.

"I get a lot of condescending comments from people who ask, 'Why are you doing it?' I tell people that hiking the AT is my personal fountain of youth. I can come out here and get great exercise, commune with nature. I can live healthy and feel young again."

I tell Captain Blue that I really admire his backpacking ability and dedication to the AT. Then, we head opposite directions on a trail that hasn't had much elevation change today.