



Taking on the

VERY FEW HAVE HIKED ALL 2,179 MILES...
ANDY NIEKAMP '83 IS ONE OF ONLY 30 TO GO END-TO-END THREE TIMES

The diverse beauty of the Appalachian Trail continues to beckon Andy Niekamp, who refers to the AT as his "personal Fountain of Youth" – inspiring, relaxing and renewing him at every turn.



Andy Niekamp, 49, a semi-retired management information specialist, calls Kettering, Ohio, home, but the Appalachian Trail is his Greek Siren. It first called to him in 1989 and he completed the journey. Then in 2000, the trail called and Andy set forth once more. In 2006, he heard it beckoning yet again. Andy (Bachelor of Science, Business Administration, 1983) is one of just 30 individuals in the world who have hiked the entire Appalachian Trail—more than 2,179 miles—three times.

During those hikes, which he completes in sections of about 500 miles over a period of years, he's learned quite a few lessons; many about nature, perhaps more about life. The trail inspires him, relaxes him, and renews him. Andy fondly refers to the trail as his "old friend," and his "personal Fountain of Youth."

The Appalachian Trail, or "AT" as hikers like to call it, stretches from Maine to Georgia, traverses eight national forests and touches 14 states.

most, like Andy, complete it in sections. He finished the trail the first time over a period of nine years, and the second and third times in four years.

Andy travels lightly, carrying just an 18-pound pack filled with essentials. A typical day of hiking begins around 8 a.m. and ends at 6 in the evening. He either pitches a tent or hunkers down in one of the 260 three-sided shelters hikers find along the trail. Bedtime is early, 7 or 8 p.m.

When rations run low, Andy hitchhikes into a town where he has mailed provisions prior to beginning the hike. "I've never had a problem hitchhiking off the trail," he said. "The townspeople know that you are hiking and that you're coming into town for a break. I've had only wonderful, pleasant experiences."

The same can be said for the friendships he's made along the AT.

"When you're on the AT, you're a hiker," he said. "It doesn't really matter if you have a lot of money or no money or if you're 70 years old or 20

the pieces of a puzzle back together once you're on the trail," he explained. "The trail brings me a sense of comfort. I notice more, see more, and enjoy it more each time.

"The AT has helped me deal with life's challenges," said Andy. "It's given me confidence. I know I can deal with whatever life hands me.

"I just feel so renewed, vibrant and alive on the trail," he said. It's also made him more calm and relaxed.

Granted, he has been apprehensive while on the AT, although not due to bears or creatures in the night.

"What frightens me the most is lightning in the mountains. You hear the crack and boom of the thunder and see the lightning simultaneously, and you are right under it. There's nothing you can really do except hunker down and wait it out."

Andy came face to face with a stubborn bear in Georgia and has encountered rattlesnakes as thick as baseball bats. But he's also seen some of the most rugged and spectacular views

Appalachian Trail

Hikers may see black bears, elk, moose, and some of the 2,000 rare, threatened and endangered species that are native to the wide swath of the Eastern U.S. crossed by its well-marked paths. No one postcard can do its diverse beauty justice.

Andy, who worked for 26 years in MIS at Hewlett Packard and is a former Boy Scout, took his first trek across the AT beginning in 1989. While some tackle the trail in one long excursion,

years old. It's so easy to strike up a conversation and make friends on the AT."

The first time he hiked the trail was physically demanding and exhausting. "My second hike was extremely enjoyable," he said. "I was in better shape and brought lighter gear. My third time on the AT was even more delightful.

"You remember certain things from one hike to another, but it's like putting

in New Hampshire and Maine where the trail goes above the tree line.

The bout of heat exhaustion and trench foot he experienced are simply reminders of his adventures; they don't hinder him from coming back.

"I just can't seem to stay away from the trail; it calls me," said Andy. And if that call persists as it has over the past two decades? He may return to visit his old friend once more.