

Dayton Daily News

Backpacking for beginners

Get Active

By [Debbie Juniewicz](#) - Thursday, August 6, 2015
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Rookie hiker Darlene Aguilar recently hiked a portion of the Appalachian Trail. CONTRIBUTED

It wasn't that long ago that backpacking wasn't even on Darlene Aguilar's radar.

"I was a resort kind of girl," she said smiling. "If there wasn't room service, I wasn't going."

That was then.

Aguilar – who moved to the Miami Valley from California less than a year ago – recently returned from a bucket list hike along a portion of the Appalachian Trail. She has been hooked on backpacking ever since she attended a workshop at a local library earlier this year.

"Never, in a million years, would I have imagined doing this," she said. "I never, ever camped in my life. I never even owned a sleeping bag."

But the sense of accomplishment the 42-year-old feels after completing several backpacking trips over the past few months is almost unimaginable.

"It's like graduating from college," she said. "I can really do this, I'm so proud of myself."

With summer winding down, prime backpacking season is on the horizon.

"Fall is a great time of year to try backpacking," said Andy Niekamp of Outdoor Adventure Connection. "It's cooler, there are fewer bugs and it's just beautiful."

Not sure you can handle an overnight outdoor adventure? There are plenty of opportunities to help increase your knowledge and confidence before embarking on a backpacking adventure.

Overcoming fear

"Many people have a fear of spending the night in the woods, lots of people have never done it before," Niekamp said. "There are many things that hold people back from trying backpacking."

Aguilar had a laundry list of concerns.

"I had a lot of anxiety," she said. "I was afraid of not being prepared, being wet, bad weather, I was afraid that I would starve. I was so out of my element that first time."

Preparation and education will go a long way toward making your first backpacking trip a safe and successful one.

Aguilar advises beginners to attend a class or workshop before giving it a try.



Outdoor Adventure Connection workshop participants on the summit of Hump Mountain on the Appalachian Trail in North Carolina. CONTRIBUTED

"And when you go out that first time, go with experienced hikers," she said.

Five Rivers MetroParks, local outfitters and libraries host programs to help familiarize would-be outdoor enthusiasts with various aspects of backpacking. Outdoor Adventure Connection hosts a variety of events and trips for first-timers and experienced backpackers alike.

"Our guides are highly experienced, we know backpacking, we know the area and we know first aid, so that should definitely alleviate some fears," Niekamp said.

Avoiding potential pitfalls

According to Niekamp, the most common mistake rookie backpackers make is over packing.

"I tell people that the total weight of their backpack represents the sum total of their fears," he said. "If you're afraid to be cold, you bring extra clothes. If you're afraid you will be hungry, you bring extra food."

Minimizing pack size is important as the heavier the backpack, the more physically exhausting it will be to carry it.

And even after logging thousands of miles, Niekamp has still been known to over pack from time to time.

"I was guilty when I started and I'm guilty now," he said.

Niekamp and Aguilar also advise first timers to avoid a big shopping spree and borrow or rent much of their equipment for their first trip.

"You could end up spending a lot of money on things you don't need," Aguilar said.

Backpacking bliss

Last, but not least, enjoy the experience.

"I tell people that my long-distance hiking and backpacking is my fountain of youth," Niekamp said. "It's my chance to get away from all the daily stresses."

For some, like Aguilar, it's also about goal setting and a sense of accomplishment, whether it's the first overnight trip or the completion of a trail that spans 14 states.

"I want to finish the entire Appalachian Trail," she said. "And I want to finish the last leg by myself and that's something I never imagined I would be saying."

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Upcoming events

Give backpacking a try

MetroParks Intro to Backpacking, Aug. 26, 6-8:30 p.m., Wegerzyn Gardens MetroPark: Learn about gear, food, trip planning and other tips and tricks during this classroom session, setting you up to have a safe and enjoyable backpacking adventure. Info: www.metroparks.org/.

Backpacking 101 — Get Started With Backpacking!, Sept. 1, 6-7:30 p.m., Franklin-Springboro Public Library: This workshop will teach the techniques to have a safe and enjoyable backpacking trip, covering topics such as backpacks, tents, sleeping bags, stoves, food, clothes, footwear, weather, terrain, comfort zone, trip planning, and Leave No Trace Principles. Info: <http://outdooradventureconnection.com/>.

Backpacking Workshop and Overnight Trip (Skill: Level I), Sept. 19-20, Germantown MetroPark: A one-night, backpacking trip for beginner backpackers. Includes six workshops on backpacking essentials that every backpacker should know. This trip is designed for those with little or no backpacking experience who have always wanted to try backpacking under guidance of experienced backpackers. Info: <http://outdooradventureconnection.com/>.

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