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Hitting the Trail!

Backpacking for beginners set March 23-24 at Carter Caves

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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.

Andy Niekamp knows backpacking. No, I mean really knows backpacking. The lifelong hiker has chalked up more than 12,000 miles backpacking including three thru-hikes of the legendary Appalachian Trail, as well as hikes of Kentucky's Sheltowee Trace, Ohio's Buckeye Trail, Vermont's Long Trail and many others trails.

To share his love of exploring the outdoors by foot, Niekamp, and his new company, Outdoors Adventure Connection, has organized the first Beginners Backpacking Weekend at Carter Caves State Resort Park in Olive Hill, Ky., set for Saturday and Sunday March 23-24.

Only a few slots remain for the easy, one-night backpacking trip during which Niekamp will distill tips and backcountry skills.

The trip is designed for beginning backpackers who have always wanted to try backpacking under guidance of expert backpackers. The \$60 fee includes all workshops, Saturday dinner and smores around a campfire. Rental backpacking gear is available.

Niekamp, a Dayton, Ohio, resident who also gives many multi-media presentations at outdoors stores around the region, said he's excited to do the first at Carter Caves because he has been coming to the park since childhood.

"For me I am really excited that I have chosen Carter Caves as the maiden trip," Niekamp said of the 2,000-acre park that is home to more than 30 miles of hiking trails and over a dozen caves. "It is such a beautiful setting and it has a lot of above ground beauty. It really is the perfect place to introduce a person to backpacking."



Barbara McCray sits on the Lions Head formation at Dolly Sods

Niekamp, whose company is organizing other backpack trips in the region (including a women only backpack trip in May in the Red River Gorge), said his goal is to provide affordable trips so everyone who's curious about backpacking can come out and try it on a safe, fun trip.

"I tell people just try it and just do it," Niekamp said. "A lot of people want to wait for the perfect time or when it is the best possible weekend and weather or until I am in better shape. They have a lot of reasons why not to do it. But I say why not do it now. People who just come out and immerse themselves always enjoy it."

Well known at the park now as the webmaster and longtime volunteer for Winter Adventure Weekend and Crawlathon Niekamp said he wants to share the joy of backpacking.

"When I am backpacking I feel young again. I feel rejuvenated, and I feel in touch with myself with I return to backpacking," Niekamp said. "For me the benefits are connecting with nature and it is so good for the body and the mind. It reduces your stress, it gives you a good cardio workout and it improves your outlook on life. Plus when you are backpacking you have a chance to see some things you can only see on foot, things that you can't see from a bicycle or I car."

Niekamp, who has more than 100 hours of wilderness first aid training, said during this weekend's hike (about four miles on Saturday and about two on Sunday), he'll do a series of workshops giving folks everything they'll need to know to do another trip.

These workshops will cover things such as proper backpack fitting, fire building, bear bagging, backcountry sanitation and hygiene (do's and don'ts), the seven principles of Leave No Trace, and a demonstration of four different types of backpacking stoves on which Niekamp will cook up about half dozen different meals for everyone to try the range of easy-to-carry meal options available now for today's backpacker.

Niekamp said he'll also help folks figure out what they need even before the trip starts. As has been humorously chronicled in such hiking books as Bill Bryson's "A Walk in the Woods," backpackers are prone to chronically over packing gear.

"I'll review your gear and give you tips and pointers as to what to bring and what not to bring and just kind of help you from making some of those mistakes," Niekamp said. "There are also a lot of beginning backpackers who may be picked up some bad habits from trip leaders who learned backpacking 30 years ago. Things have changed conservation-wise and something you maybe would have done 20 or 30 years ago you wouldn't do today, so I will teach the modern ethics of Leave No Trace."

While he has hiked all over the United States, he also has been one of the few people to hike two long-distance trails here in our own backyard. He hiked the Sheltopee Trace (the 282-mile back country trail through Daniel Boone National Forest, Big South Fork NRRRA, and Natural Bridge, Cumberland Falls and Pickett State Parks in Kentucky and Tennessee) as well as the Buckeye Trail (the 1,444 mile-long trail that

runs from a beachhead on Lake Erie near Cleveland, to a hilltop overlooking the Ohio River in Cincinnati).

Niekamp said backpacking is a great way to explore these beautiful Appalachian hills and mountains.

'What I will say about Kentucky and Ohio is they are extremely beautiful places and the backpacker doesn't have to travel long distances to see that," Niekamp said. "The Buckeye Trail, which was 1,400 miles, was not a wilderness adventure but was an adventure of discovering people and places which was a wonderful journey. Kentucky is very fortunate to have the Sheltoewe Trace, it is more of a wilderness trail and it is not real popular yet but it will be someday. You kind of get that explorer, pioneer feeling because you are going into some very remote places. People know Red River Gorge and Big South Fork and all of those areas, but the places in between are just as spectacular and beautiful. And those are the places that people don't go.

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