

Wild Women ^{in the} wilderness

Travelers return from the woods with stories,
but not the ones they expected to tell.

By KIM HACKETT

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GATLINBURG, Tenn. — When we returned from our three-day Women in the Wilderness backpacking retreat in Tennessee's Smoky Mountains, our friends asked the same question: "So, did you really sleep outside?"

My standard response: "Well, you'll hear about it when I write about it."

My friend Nancy, an Osprey resident and hiking companion, declined to answer.

"I'm not saying anything until we get our story straight," she told me on the flight back to Sarasota.

It was Nancy's first backpacking trip and my fourth excursion with Vesna Plakanis, proprietor of A Walk in the Woods, a guided tour and backpacking outfitter outside Gatlinburg, Tenn.

Vesna and her husband, Erik,

have been taking people for three-hour nature walks and over-night backpacking trips for eight years.

Experienced hikers, park historians and naturalists, they handle all the details — mapping the route, packing all the food and supplies and guiding you through mountains that have the most variety of wildlife and plants north of the tropics.

The Plakanises know just about everything there is to know about the park — which mushrooms are safe to eat and which plants the native Americans used for medicine and stories about the Appalachian settlers, who lived there before it became a national park in 1934.

A Walk in the Woods clients include a crew from National Geographic, grandparents who return every year with children as young



STAFF PHOTO / KIM HACKETT

Vesna Plakanis, a guide with A Walk in the Woods, finds an elusive lady slipper, a flower that appears in early spring.

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as 5, and as of about four years ago, me, a native Chicagoan who had never “gone,” so to speak, in the woods.

After surviving an unexpected ice storm with temperatures dropping to 9 degrees on my first trip, I became hooked on the tranquility the mountains bring and the feeling of accomplishment of hiking on the Appalachian Trail with all I need to survive on my back.

There are no pick axes or rappelling on these walks; the trails are navigable and a hiking stick lends support.

Next to the clarity of mind that comes with a few days walking along majestic ridges bordering North Carolina and Tennessee, there’s nothing like the respect you get from people when you regale them with stories about black bear sightings (well, I saw scat) and cooking Katmandu curry on a mountainside.

Vesna, “a professor in hiking boots” as one travel writer described her, makes such daring feats easy, as long as you’re in decent shape.

“It’s like hiking for dummies,” I told Nancy, in my final pitch for this particular trip.

“Well if I don’t have a good time, at least I’ll have a good story,” Nancy said, the perfect attitude in a traveling companion.

Vesna, a tall, athletic blonde, gives you a list of what to bring — good hiking boots are a must. She rents all the gear, and helps you pack your backpack so it doesn’t exceed 20 percent of your weight. On the trail, she’ll nag you to drink more water, she extends her hand when crossing slippery rocks across a river, and she’ll insist on stopping every 20 minutes when you start, so you don’t get sore.

This was A Walk in the Woods’ first Creative Visualization trip combining self-re-



SOURCE: National Park Service

STAFF MAP / PETE SMITH

Nancy asked.

We laughed the kind of teenage laughter that comes from women unleashed from kids, spouses and responsibility. All of us were at a crossroads of sorts — Karen and Nancy, newly divorced and pushing 50, were discovering themselves after 20-plus years of marriage; Diane faces an empty nest this fall when the last of her three children heads off to college; and for me, the ongoing trauma of turning 40, also shared by our guide.

The next morning, after a pot of organic Costa Rican coffee and bagels, we had the sustenance we needed for a five-mile hike into the backcountry, where we planned to set up our tents and camp for two nights, taking long day hikes and doing meditation and goal setting.

A Walk in the Woods has about a dozen standard walks and hikes ranging from a two-mile historic walk through beautiful second-growth forest (the trees that come along after the big ones have been logged) along a pristine mountain stream up to a more rigorous overnight hike up to Mount Le Conte, one of North Carolina’s highest mountains.

begin creatively visualizing the Front Porch.

In nearby Cosby, about 10 miles away, the Front Porch is the happening Tex-Mex restaurant favored by locals and about the only place to eat out without going to downtown Gatlinburg. It doesn’t have a liquor license, so people bring their own bottles and, some, coolers on wheels. Live music is a staple on weekends.

We ate nachos, crunchy vegetarian fajitas, our smuggled beer, and then danced the two-step to a local bluegrass band. And then at 10 p.m., as if on cue, there was the loud sound of thunder and a bolt of lightning.

“I will never doubt you again,” I told Vesna.

We awoke rejuvenated and a bit nervous about our trip. Vesna was scheduled to pick us up at 8:30 a.m., but we decided to be eager students and surprise her with a rendition of ‘Coming Round the Mountain’ outside her door. After we took the short walk to her house joking about how she probably overslept, she appeared in the driveway next to Erik, who — with a beard, mustache and stocky-athletic build — fully looked the part

backpacking. I jumped at the chance as did my two cousins, Karen and Diane, who live in the Midwest and backpack with Vesna every year.

Nancy and I flew into Knoxville, rented a car and drove about an hour to Gatlinburg, arriving at a four-bedroom cabin about a quarter-mile from A Walk in the Woods' headquarters and home, across the street from Great Smoky Mountain National Park on Route 321. It's about 10 miles north and another planet away from downtown Gatlinburg with its Ripley's Believe It or Not Museum and the Ripley's Believe It or Not Saltwater Aquarium on a three-mile stretch of T-shirt shops, candy stores and arcades.

The park gets about 9 million visitors a year and about 90 percent of them never leave their cars, which in part inspired the Plakanises to start A Walk in the Woods.

"One of the problems of society," Vesna says. "Is that we are disconnected from the planet we live on and therefore from each other."

Our rental cabin, "Almand's Joy," named for the absentee owner, is tucked in the woods with a 20-foot-long wooden porch along the back overlooking a gazebo and stream. The cabin has a cast-iron fireplace, a serviceable kitchen and four down-filled beds— all the amenities you need to relax the night before a big hike.

After getting our packs loaded for the next day's journey, we sat around the fireplace drinking cosmopolitans — a slightly sweet martini.

"Does anyone see the irony of drinking cosmopolitans in the middle of the woods?"

The park spans a half-million acres between Tennessee and North Carolina and has 850 miles of trails, and to the Plakanises' chagrin, 270 miles of paved roads. The guides also map out trips for experienced hikers and provide pick-up and drop-off at trailheads for people who want to venture off on their own.

We heard President Bush was going to be in the park that day, too, celebrating Earth Day in what has also become one of the nation's most environmentally threatened parks.

Vesna appeared at our cabin looking a bit forlorn.

"The weather forecast calls for severe thunderstorms all day," she said. "We could wait it out. Maybe it will pass."

Later that morning word came that the weather was so bad that Bush decided not to leave the tarmac at the Knoxville airport. He said a few words about what he would have said had he been in the mountains. It rained a hard rain all afternoon.

"From what I can see on radar, it looks like thunderstorms will hit hard about 10 p.m. and then tomorrow, temperatures may drop to about 30 degrees," Vesna said. "We could camp out, but if the wind picks up the way I think it will, our tents may get blown over."

We thought about being wet and cold in the morning and decided to begin the retreat on the porch of our cabin, with an early start the next morning.

Vesna got us to close our eyes and creatively visualize what we wanted for our lives. We journal, and share our dreams and perceived limitations. After a few hours of "internal work" the three of us who have been here before

"She doesn't look like she's ready to hike," Karen said.

Erik told us there was a blanket weather advisory — 4 inches of snow. Usually, the

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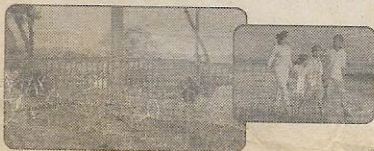
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But weather has the final word

advisories are for the upper elevations, but this one apparently was for the entire park.

"You always have to go with what's possible," Erik said. "One of the first rules of backpacking is proper planning."

In the eight years of guiding people through the park, the Plakanises have never had an incident or serious injury, although every year there are deaths in the Smokies because of stupidity — people hiking without proper equipment, getting lost on day hikes or ignoring bad weather advisories.

We were given a few options — take a hike in the lower elevations and camp near a parking lot with easy escape should the weather get bad, or take a 10-mile wildflower day hike and sleep in the cabin.

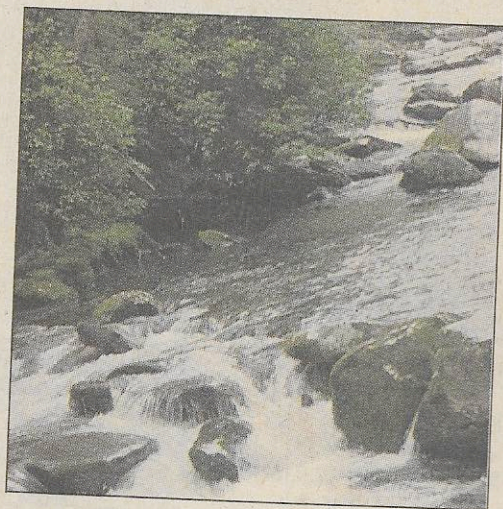
"It's a lesson in adaptability and giving yourself options," Vesna said in her retreat leader voice. "Life is going to throw curve balls at you. You've got to let go of having that outcome."

No one wanted to be the wimp, but after our comfy bed and Front Porch experience the night before and the obvious discomfort of our guides, we decided to do the day hike. It was early April and the wildflowers were beginning to bloom. Vesna told us about the elusive lady slippers that we might find. They come in yellow and pink, with the pink ones said to resemble a woman's genitalia. We laughed and took off on our quixotic adventure in search of lady slippers. We dumped the 20-pound packs in favor of 5-pound day-packs.

Vesna, having endured my "hiking for dummies" remark for years, has decided that we all need to be acquainted with our compasses and maps before we take off on the trail.

"Keep Fred in his shed and find north," she said referring to the needle on the compass.

I twisted the map a few times and couldn't quite get



Great Smoky Mountains National Park, straddling North Carolina and Tennessee, includes 800 miles of trails, some near rushing streams.

STAFF PHOTO / KIM HACKETT

my compass and map to coordinate. Nancy quickly saw my false hiker bravado for what it was — confidence in my guide.

The sun made its first appearance about 2 p.m., and on the Little River Trail we saw beautiful wildflowers — bishop's caps, fields of sweet white trilliums, and Solomon's seal.

Hiking with Vesna was a virtual banquet. She pulled off sassafras and had us taste it, then toothwort, a horseradish bite, and birch, a spicy wintergreen. We passed a field, site of the largest display of synchromistic fireflies in the world come mid-June. Millions appear for two to three weeks, blinking on and off in harmony. People travel to Tennessee just to see them.

We walked past a breathtaking waterfall cascading down two stories of moss-covered rocks and hiked through the former Parton homestead, where singer Dolly Parton's kin used to live. Throughout the park there are 71 crumbling cabins, barns, churches and outbuildings, the remains of Appalachian settlers who lived there before it became a national park.

There was a steady stream of rain all day as we passed over river beds and see fields of wildflowers. Then after about seven miles, Vesna spotted a site where she's seen the

lady slippers before. She climbed up a small hill and bent down. "Here they are," she said.

Where there should have been bunches, there were only three yellow ones.

"Someone must've poached them," she said with disgust.

A bit exhausted after seven miles, I jokingly asked why she couldn't just bring them down to us. I forgot to waterproof my boots and my right sock was saturated, so I became the problem child on the hike, whining the last few miles and anxious to get back to the cabin.

We rejoiced in the yellow lady slippers and lamented not finding the erotic pink ones. We headed back, took showers, threw on sweats and settled in for the evening. Instead of pasta with pesto over the propane, Vesna cooked it on the electric.

Our heads were clearer, we felt tired and satisfied, and the only problem was the story.

There are the Venice High baseball moms anxious to hear about Nancy's tales from the woods. There are my kids, husband and co-workers who think I'm a warrior.

"What are we going to tell people?" Nancy asked.

It's all about adaptability and giving yourself options, I said.