



Paul Efir/News-Sentinel staff

Erik and Vesna Plakanis signed off their corporate jobs – producing television commercials and special effects for a company in Atlanta – and began operating a tour business, A Walk in the Woods, that shows people the wonders of the Great Smoky Mountain National Park.

*Two achieve a truly special effect
by abandoning fast track for a ...*

Walk in the Smokies

By Morgan Simmons

News-Sentinel staff writer

Four years ago Erik and Vesna Plakanis held high-paying jobs producing television commercials and special effects in Atlanta.

Today the couple earn their living taking tour groups through the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and though their income is a quarter of what it used to be, they say their lives are unquestionably richer.

“One day we asked ourselves what would be really important to us when we’re old and on our deathbeds and looking back on our lives,” Erik said. “We wanted to do something positive for the world, and making television commercials was not one of them.”

Being avid backpackers, the Plakanises knew they wanted environmental careers, but they didn’t know what kind.

Then, in 1996, Erik went on a solo hike through the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, where at almost every trailhead he encountered people filled with questions about the park. By the time he reached Smokemont Campground he had an idea: He and Vesna would lead interpretive walks and

backpacking trips through the park, focusing on families and newcomers to the outdoors, the kind of people Erik had seen on his hike.

Last summer the Plakanises and their 7-year-old daughter, Tara, moved to Gatlinburg, sold their house in Atlanta and began operating their tour business – called A Walk in the Woods – full time.

“About 9.2 million people who come up to the Smokies every year don’t leave the pavement,” Erik said. “Our goal is to increase these people’s ecological awareness through direct, positive experience with nature. We start by getting them out of the car.”

Acting as a naturalist team, the Plakanises design their outings to fit the customer’s needs. For some this means a one-hour interpretive walk, while others may be ready for an overnight backpacking trip.

To prepare themselves for their new career, they spent years studying the park’s human and natural history. One of their most helpful teachers was Mark Warren, who runs Medicine Bow, a wilderness school in North Georgia whose curriculum includes animal tracking and the use of medicinal wild plants of the Southern

Appalachians.

Home to more than 120 species of trees, 60 species of animals, 25 species of salamanders and 225 species of birds, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park can be a naturalist’s dream, or nightmare.

“We thought we knew a few things when we got here,” Vesna said. “From 1996 to 1998 we devoted at least half our time studying. At times we were almost overwhelmed. It seemed the more we learned, the more we didn’t know.”

In the spring the Plakanises like to feature wildflower tours, and in the summer they lead their clients to some of the park’s numerous waterfalls.

The couple is currently offering fall color tours in the park. They say the Smokies have received enough rain – especially at the higher elevations – to provide a vivid color season, and that the leaves should be turning by the first week in October.

Vesna said business has been good so far, with most of their bookings on weekends.

“When we’re not taking people hiking, we go out by ourselves during the week and keep studying,” she said.

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