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A Walk In the Woods

This Gatlinburg couple gave up urban life to pursue their dream of owning a hiking business.

Did you know that leaves from a hemlock tree make a great all-purpose medicinal tea? And that tea made from the inner bark of the dogwood tree relieves migraines?

Well, you learn those tidbits and a bunch more when you hang around Erik and Vesna Plakanis, founders of A Walk in the Woods, headquartered in Gatlinburg. Vesna, 40, and Erik, 41, are wilderness entrepreneurs and lifelong amateur naturalists who turned pro and never looked back. The robust market for their services has surprised even them.

"There are so many people out there who have no clue about nature, who've never been in the woods before, and who are eager to connect with the natural world," Vesna says.

1,000 and Counting

The couple—sometimes with the help of their 13-year-old daughter, Tara—began guiding nature hikes and backpacking trips in 1997. Since then, they've grown their business to the point where they now take 1,000 people a year into the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Marketing remains "word of mouth more than anything else," Erik says. "We get lots of repeat customers who bring along friends." ►



PHOTOGRAPHS: AMY JO YOUNG

Erik and Vesna Plakanis never regret giving up city lives to guide hikers along lush paths. They organize trips that take hours or days to complete and are suitable for many skill levels.

"There are so many people out there who have no clue about nature, who've never been in the woods before, and who are eager to connect with the natural world."

Vesna Plakanis, co-owner of A Walk in the Woods

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Maybe all the unrest in the world or the coming-of-a-certain-age for baby boomers prompts the response. Whatever the reason, "people seem to be really yearning for this," says Erik. "They talk about wanting more meaning in their lives. They want to make a connection with something beyond themselves, starting with the Earth itself."

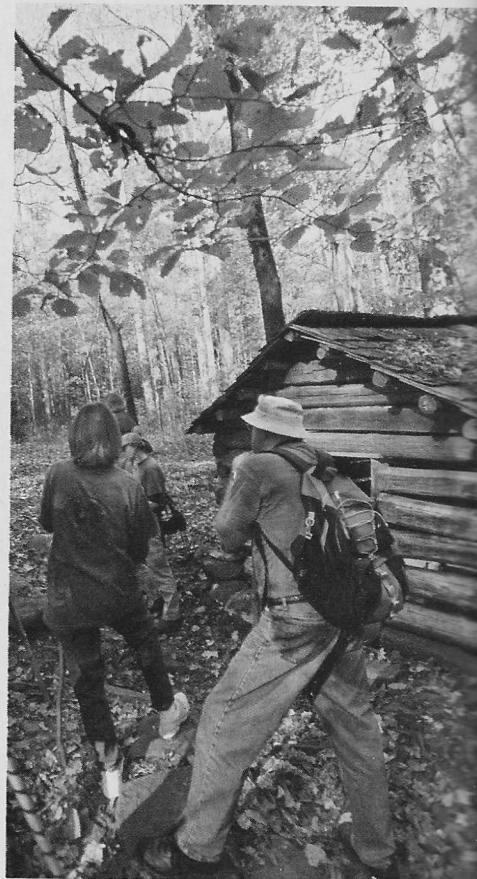
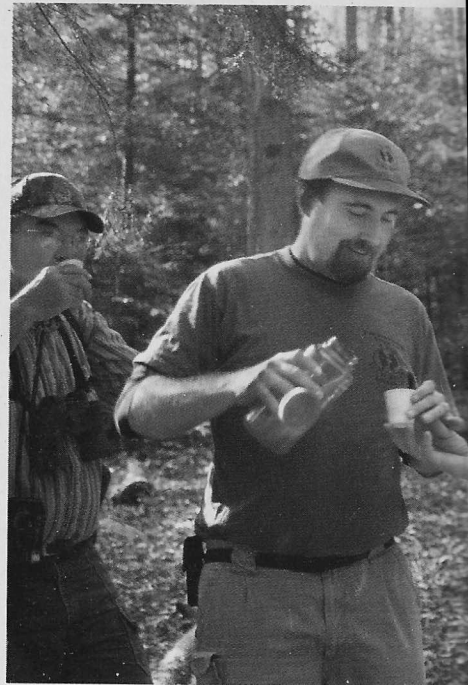
Customized service certainly contributes to the organization's appeal. Erik and Vesna tailor trips to match the experiences and interests of customers—whether they're vacationers and second-home owners from nearby or groups of friends traveling halfway across the country for a first-ever backpacking trip.

"We have gone on at least five walks with them," says Terry Rainey, here from Huntsville, Alabama, with his wife, Olivia. They own a time-share at Westgate Smoky Mountain Resort, which contracts with Erik and Vesna for regular outings and nature programs. "It's just so pleasant to be on a trail in the Smokies," says Terry. "But the main reason we keep coming back to them is their knowledge of the local plants. It's amazing what we learn."

Popular People

Unlike crusty backcountry guides strong on wilderness ability and weak on people skills, Erik and Vesna are flatlander friendly. That's probably because they did time in urban environments themselves. Vesna was a video producer and editor in Knoxville and Atlanta, among other cities. Erik was an accountant for a video production outfit. Vesna worked the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games in Atlanta. Then, after exploring the mountains on their own for years and studying with regional experts, they made their move and switched careers.

"Having that background in television helps," says Vesna. "You kind of learn to read people." A lot of what the couple does qualifies as



This walk features lovely scenery along Porter's Creek Trail in the Greenbrier section of the park. An old springhouse, still standing from a homestead left from the early part of the 20th century, makes a picturesque focal point.



The group stops for a spot of tasty medicinal tea, made from the leaves of the hemlock tree, which is entirely unrelated to poison hemlock plant.

“They want to make a connection with something beyond themselves, starting with the Earth itself.”

Erik Plakanis,
co-owner of *A Walk in the Woods*

a more ancient form of journalism. Their job involves telling stories, rich in both the natural lore and the human history of the region.

Their walks often meander at a conversational pace, with stops every few minutes to look more closely at plants and trees that served as food or medicinal remedies for the Cherokees and early settlers. That's where the details about dogwood and hemlock tea come in. In answer to the obvious question about hemlock as poison, Erik and Vesna carefully

From the 40's to the future...

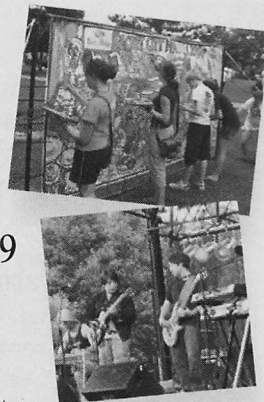
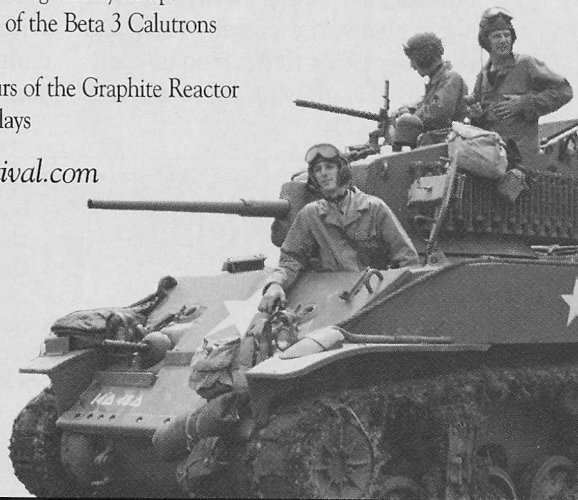
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distinguish between the always-safe hemlock tree and the toxic plant. On just about every hike, opportunities abound for supervised plant-munching.

Raising Awareness

Kids love that. "They ask, 'Are we going to eat some more plants?' I get a lot of that," Vesna says. She likes to hear the excitement in young voices because, in creating these programs, she explains, "I especially wanted to reconnect kids to the woods. Children used to grow up with backyards

to play in and with parks and wild areas to explore near their neighborhoods. Now many of them don't have that. That disconnection, I think, is one of our worst societal problems."

This same disconnection affects older generations as well. The latest surprise niche for A Walk in the Woods is "midlife crisis backpacking" for women. It started with Vesna guiding a stressed-out friend. Even with little outdoors experience, camping and hiking in the park seemed to recharge her friend. "Now,



Erik points to a spot in the Greenbrier section of the park where settlers cleared rocky slopes to create a vegetable garden. To avoid hauling the rocks off the property, they used them to create a stacked wall.

"I take them through everything they need and tell them what to pack. Then we go really slow."

Vesna Plakanis,
co-owner of A Walk in the Woods

she is addicted," Vesna says.

Vesna wondered if other women might want a beginner-friendly outdoor camping experience. "I just put it out there on the Web site, and people responded," she explains. Between spring and fall last year, she scheduled three such trips.

"I take them through everything they need and tell them what to pack. Then we go really slow," Vesna says. No scary stuff. No survival ordeals.

That's the secret of success for A Walk in the Woods and, as far as Vesna and Erik are concerned, a key to their own long-range sanity. When they worked in high-stress jobs in city office buildings, says Vesna, "We knew we wouldn't be happy doing that for the rest of our lives."

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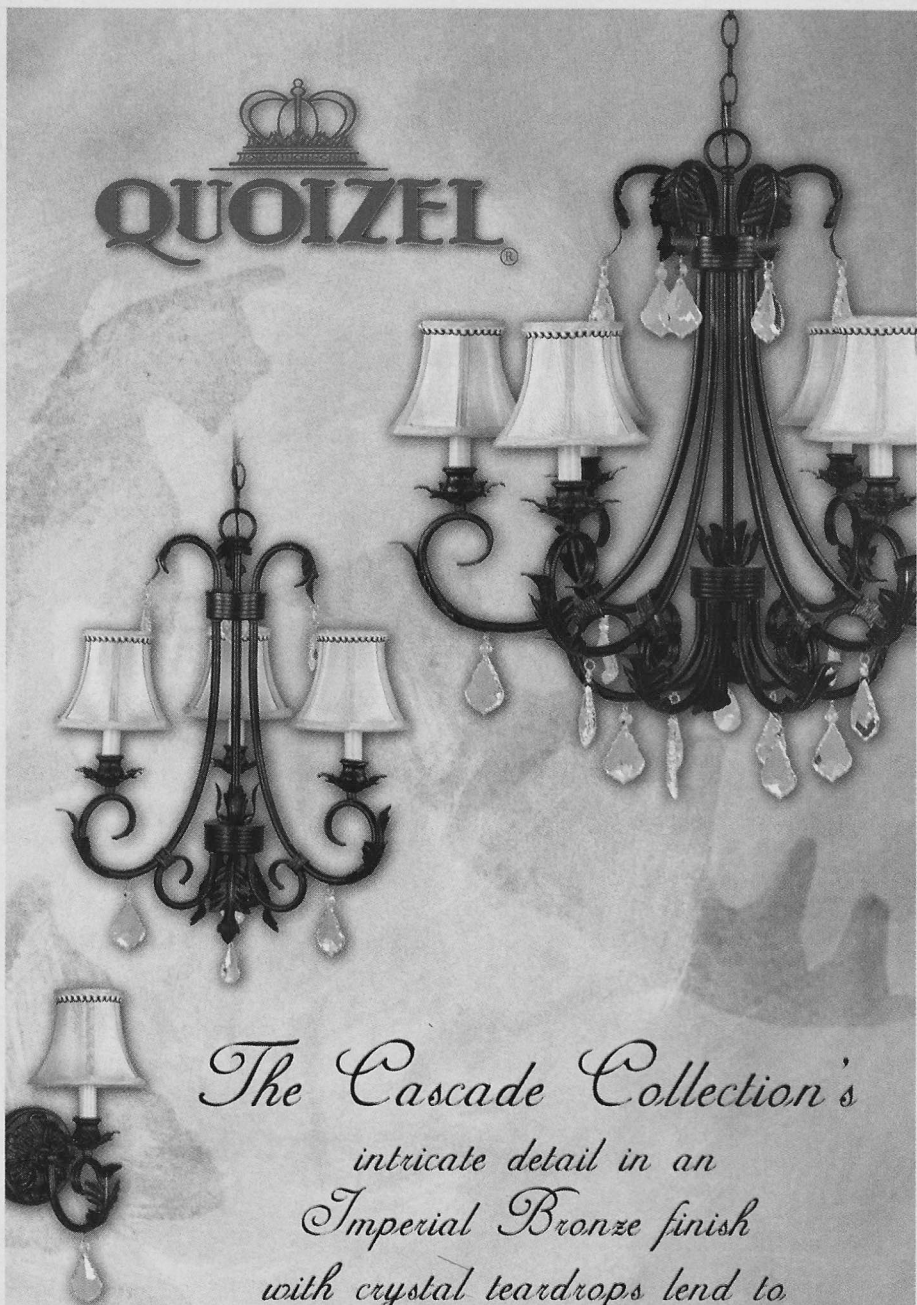




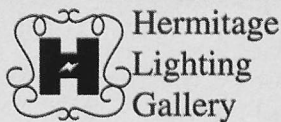
Take A Hike

A Walk in the Woods offers hikes that range from two or three hours on easy trails in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park to multiday backpacking trips. Erik and Vesna rent most of the equipment needed for overnight camping. They can design a trip to suit the interests and hiking experience of just about any group. All events are by reservation only. Prices vary, depending on the number of people, the length of the event, and rental equipment needs. For more information call (865) 436-8283, or visit www.awalkinthewoods.com.


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