

FREE

# walk about

WALKING & HIKING FOR FITNESS

September | October 2010

## Destination Events

*Guts to Glory:*

**Breast Cancer  
Survivor Steps Out  
and Stays Strong**



**The Importance of  
Professional Dog Training**

www.walkaboutmag.com



## Over 40 and Over the Hill: Backpacking Seniors is a Growing Trend

"I needed an adventure, so for a 60th birthday present to myself, I quit my job and hiked the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT)." Ginny Benware of Portland, OR, is not out there hiking by herself, either. A growing number of older women are regularly loading up their backpacks and heading out into the wilderness. On a *Backpacker* magazine forum, Toesnorth (her screen name) says, "On a backpacking trip last weekend, my husband and I met a group of a half dozen women, mostly in their 50s at least, and they looked like they were having a blast. In fact, on three of the last four backpacking trips, I have encountered one or more all-mature-female groups along the way." Mtngri (screen name) agrees. "The last couple of years, it seems I see more groups of older gals out hiking the trails." The pleasures of wilderness hiking are not just for the young and firm.

### Why

Why would women past 40 backpack when it can mean going eight days without a shower or walking 15 miles a day for five months? There is nothing easy about a long hike, so what drives a woman to such a challenge? Karen Pico of Ruch, OR, says, "There's a tremendous sense of satisfaction and pride in physical condition that makes me able to do this. This is something I had to work for, and it's an achievement."

Toesnorth says, "The short answer is because we can."

The older a woman grows, the more she feels her physical abilities fade and the

clock of mortality ticking in the background. Best not to postpone a physical challenge.

### Start Easy

Backpacking does not require a commitment as extreme as the 2,650 miles of the PCT, of course. You might start with substantial day hikes, carrying a day-pack with food, water, and emergency supplies. William L. Sullivan's *100 Hikes* series ([www.oregonhiking.com](http://www.oregonhiking.com)) provides plenty of detail to get you started. Wilderness Press and Falcon Guides also have an extensive series of trail guides.

You can join local hiking groups for day hikes or short overnight trips. The Wilderness Society, Mazamas, and Sierra Club regularly sponsor hikes. These are excellent ways to see if you really do like backpacking, to network for hiking partners, and to test drive equipment and footwear. "Go with experienced people" is the advice offered by many of the women in Susan Alcorn's book *We're in the Mountains, Not Over the Hill: Tales and Tips from Seasoned Women Backpackers*.

Backpack45.com is also an engaging source of inspiration and information aimed squarely at "senior" hikers.

### Preparation

If you can walk, you can hike. But a long hike means preparation; you cannot simply walk out the door. Read Ginny Benware's trail journal online at [www.postholer.com/journal](http://www.postholer.com/journal) to get an idea of the preparation involved. Study Ray Jardine's books on ultralight backpacking. Read *Backpacking* magazine at the library. Hang out at REI. Take short hikes with experienced backpackers.

### Worries

What about safety? Google "women hikers" and the first article to pop up is entitled "Trail Murders." But Benware felt more worried about divulging her location data online, and Pico notes you are more at risk driving a car. Crime is very rare, animal encounters are not, and injuries are uncommon. Falls, broken bones, and illness brought on by



strenuous physical demands are risks.

Who will you hike with? A few people hike alone by choice, but Benware says it was lonely on the PCT after her hiking partner was injured. Pico's husband can't hike, so she went online and found Bill, her hiking buddy. Couples often hike together. This practice can test or strengthen a relationship. Groups of friends organize trips.

### Rewards

"Bucket list" does not have to mean idiotic stunts like bungee jumping. It can mean watching the sun set over an alpine lake, washing in snow melt, and feeling forest duff under your feet instead of pavement. Backpacking can provide respite from frantic routine and electronic demands, a meditation and connection to nature, physical challenge, the sweet satisfaction of honest sweat. Pico says "Hiking is so tranquil, I am happy, almost in a state of bliss." Krazi (screen name) best summarizes why women hike. "Because for a short period of time, all the 'stuff' we deal with every day is reduced to just surviving on your own. Backpacking has changed how I view myself and how I view life."

You may be like Benware and need an adventure, or you may be a committed walker tired of city streets and crowds. Consider backpacking and create your own adventure. **WA**

*Kathy Fritts is a retired school librarian who has worked both overseas and in the U.S., a grandma, and freelance writer. Fritts will be hiking the Oregon section of the Pacific Crest Trail next summer.*

