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WHY NOT TRY

Hiking Has All the Benefits of Walking and More. Here's How to Get Started.

Exploring the great outdoors offers a host of mental and physical benefits. But there a few things you need to know first.

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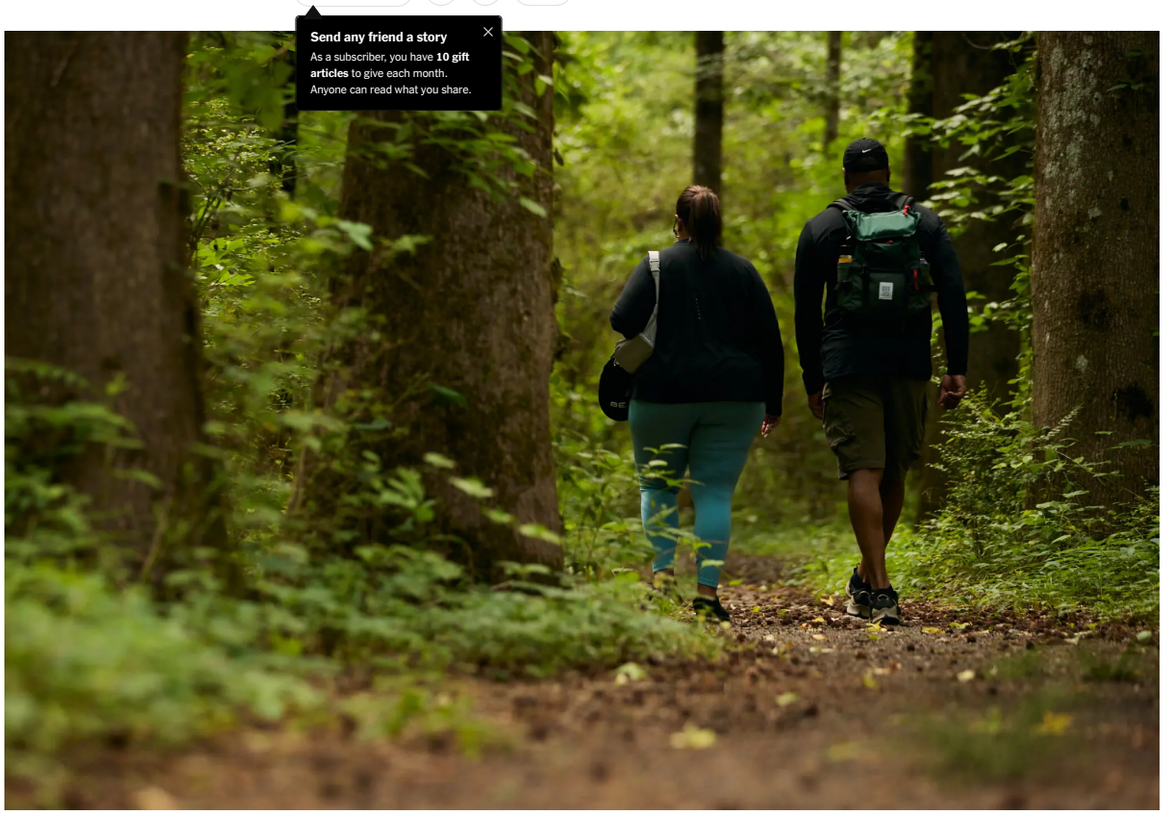

Bee Trofort for The New York Times

By Danielle Friedman
May 24, 2023

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Hiking, a form of exercise older than exercise itself, is so hot right now. From 2020 to 2022, the number of Americans hitting the trails ballooned from around 40 million to nearly 60 million — an 18 percent surge, according to the nonprofit Outdoor Foundation.

Though they came because of the pandemic, many people have stayed for the workout and for the refuge hiking offers from their screen-addled daily lives. For Alyson Chun, an outdoors guide and assistant director of adventure sports at Stanford, hiking offers freedom and perspective. She said it helps her reconnect with "the grandness of the world" whenever she feels bogged down by daily life.

But for those of us who haven't spent serious time outdoors since summer camp, a half-day hike can feel daunting. What happens if you lose cell service? How can you avoid getting lost or injured? And do you really need special hiking shoes? If the idea of breaking a sweat on the trails sounds appealing but you're not sure how (or where) to start, we've got you covered.

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Why hike?

Hiking offers all the cardiovascular benefits of walking, but the uneven terrain does more to strengthen the leg and core muscles, which in turn boosts balance and stability, said Alicia Filley, a physical therapist outside Houston who helps train clients for outdoor excursions. It also generally burns more calories than walking.

Shoes are probably a hiker's most important piece of gear. They don't need to be boots, but they should be supportive, with decent tread and be comfortable for long periods of time. Test them out on shorter hikes before going all day. Bee Trofort for The New York Times

These benefits multiply when trails increase in elevation. If you want to build upper-body strength, Ms. Filley said, you can wear a weighted backpack and use trekking poles.

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Spending time in nature and having experiences that inspire awe can also lower stress and anxiety. One small 2015 study found that people who walked in nature for 90 minutes were less likely to negatively ruminate about themselves — a risk factor for depression — than those who walked in an urban environment.

The conversational pace of hiking also makes it an ideal form of group fitness, said Wesley Trimble, a spokesman for American Hiking Society. Mr. Trimble, who has a mild form of cerebral palsy, hiked the 2,650-mile Pacific Crest Trail in 2014.

If you're exploring a new trail or region, consider meeting up with a local hiking club to learn the lay of the land. Several groups for specific communities have flourished over the past few years, like Outdoor Afro, Latino Outdoors, Disabled Hikers and Hike It Baby, a group for parents of young children.

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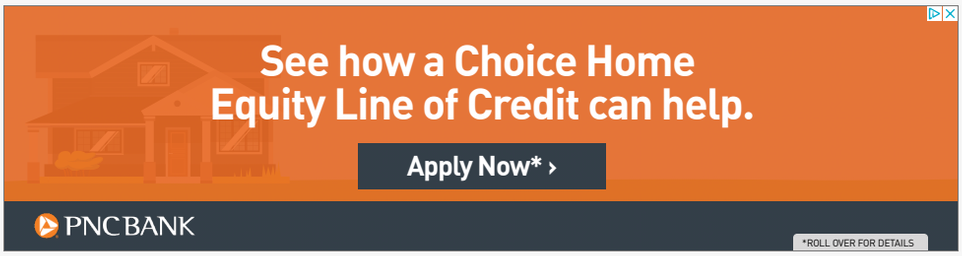

How do you get started?

Training for a hike

If you're relatively active, you're probably already training just by going for walks. "It can be as simple as heading out the door and walking for 40 minutes to an hour and to build up strength and endurance," said Lee Welton, a personal trainer in Seattle who prepares clients for long hikes.

Before taking a backpack into the woods, load it up with 15 pounds or so at home and wear it around to be sure it doesn't put too much weight on your shoulders or flop around. Bee Trofort for The New York Times

Even if you're just hiking a few hours, it never hurts to bring the bare necessities for a longer stay. Don't bring anything you haven't used before or tried out at home. Bee Trofort for The New York Times

To train for steeper terrain, walk up hills, shift your treadmill to an incline or take the stairs instead of an elevator. Mr. Welton also recommended simple leg-conditioning exercises ahead of and between hikes, including calf raises, toe lifts, squats and single-leg exercises such as lunges.

Finding trails

Picking the right trail can be the difference between a pleasant workout and a miserable slog. Thankfully, picturesque trails are everywhere, if you know where to look. City dwellers can reach many of them with a short train ride — or within city limits.

AllTrails and Hiking Project are databases compiled by experts and regular hikers alike that color-coordinate trails based on difficulty. Apps like them also allow you to download or print out copies of trail maps, in case cell service is spotty.

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When choosing a hike, note its average elevation gain per mile and use the maps and profile tool to see whether the uphills are gradual or more abrupt. “There might be a short, steep section of the trail, and the rest of it’s fairly easy to moderate,” Mr. Welton said.

A good starter hike might have between 100 and 300 feet of elevation gain per mile, he added. “Anything over 500 feet gain per mile is considered difficult.”

If you’re attempting something harder, look for a trail with multiple routes back, in case you need to scale back your ambitions. Read about the trail’s length and terrain to estimate how long it will take (or use an online calculator). Remember to add rest stops and consider how weather might change the difficulty.

Packing the right gear

The key to a relaxed hike is being as prepared as possible for the unknown, whether it’s a sudden downpour or a twisted ankle. Every hiker should bring the 10 essentials, which include food and drink, first aid supplies, a map and compass and rain gear — all inside a supportive backpack with thick shoulder straps and a waist belt. (See Wirecutter’s list of the best hiking gear.)

While hiking can be a way to bring your fitness regimen to a new level, it’s also a way to connect with something larger than yourself. Never forget to stop and enjoy natural wonders large and small. Bee Trofort for The New York Times

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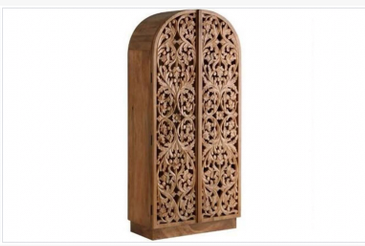

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But the most essential gear is footwear, Mr. Trimble said, because “your feet are literally your foundation.” You don’t need to invest in special hiking shoes, you do need to wear shoes that offer stability, protection and traction, especially if the trail is rocky, steep or potentially muddy.

“Most physical injuries on the trail aren’t training errors but the result of being in nature,” said Ms. Filley. “Good shoes and hiking poles offer extra stability.” (Poles can also help clear snakes near your path.)

Staying safe

Hiking does carry some risks, but taking a few simple safety precautions can help to ensure you get back safe and sound. If you’re a new hiker, go with a friend or a local group until you’re more experienced, Mr. Trimble said. And leave the selfie stick at home.

Make a habit of telling at least one person where you’ll be and of checking in afterward, said Ms. Chun. Leave a note on your car dashboard with your route so if you’re not back by sunset, rangers will know where to find you.

Finally, to avoid injury, don’t push yourself too hard or fast through more challenging trails. Remember: The point is to be able to see the views and smell the flowers.

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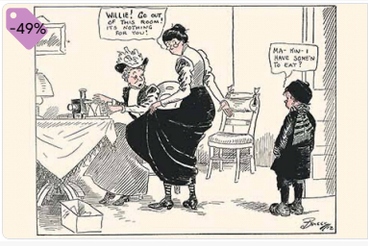

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“Slow down, take in the scenery, listen to the birds,” said Mr. Welton. “Just be present in nature.”

Danielle Friedman is a journalist in New York City and author of “Let’s Get Physical: How Women Discovered Exercise and Reshaped the World.”

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Exploring the Outdoors, One Step at a Time

Hiking is a great way to immerse yourself in nature and tune out the chaos of city life. The tips below will help you get ready before you hit the trail

- Start by making sure you have the right gear. Wirecutter has recommendations for anything you might need — from hydration packs to trekking poles. And make sure to try on hiking boots at the right time of the day.
- Next, pick a trail. From New York to California and places in between, like Wyoming’s Teton Range, the opportunities are endless.
- Planning to venture out for a nighttime hike? Opt for wide, easy-to-navigate paths.
- Experts say failing to alert family or friends of your plans is one of the biggest mistakes hikers make. Here are some more safety tips.
- Beware of apps and services like Google Maps: Challenging trails are often not flagged appropriately by these tools and can lead to dangerous situations.
- It can be easy to get lost in thought while hiking. With these simple practices you can take a more mindful approach to your nature walks.

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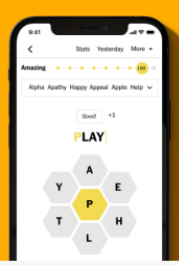

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