

A ficionados call it paradise. Detractors call it crazy. Most everybody else calls it backpacking. Torrents of rain turn a dusty uphill trail into a slippery stream of water. Hot sun and sandy soil twist legs into rubber.

Bugs bite, nights turn cold, canteens run dry. Food gets scarce. Loads dig into the shoulders and back.

Quickly becoming one of the most popular outdoor pursuits in the country, backpacking is attracting thousands of Americans to the nearest woods to test their endurance and skill against the best, or maybe worst, of what nature has to offer.

Backpackers are becoming known as one of the staunchest bands of adventurers in this age of fitness and triathlons.

Doris Sherwood counts herself among that group.

What may seem to others like hassle and pain is part of the reward for these necessarily hardy athletes. But unlike some of the other individual endurance sports, backpacking has an added bonus.

The sight of a hidden waterfall or a boggy glen or a snowclad mountain top or a misty lake doesn't come easy — but at the end of every well-planned trail, the reward lies.

"It's all part of the adventure, the good and the bad," says the 47-year-old Rochester Hills resident.

"I've never packed up and left. I've always stuck it out. It's all part of the adventure. In olden days, people lived out of doors and had to deal with it," she says.

"The payoff," adds Sherwood, "is when you get to see something few people get to see."

Backpacking became a major focus of her life 12 years ago, after divorce interrupted her life. Since that time she has hiked many of the most challenging and beautiful trails in North America.

Now it has become a major building block in keeping her family together.

One day years ago she took her four children — Phillip, Valerie, Richard and David — on a trip into the Great Smoky Mountains in Tennessee. That trip gave a new direction to their lives.

Her love of the outdoors has carried over to three of her children.

Valerie, 22, is an avid rock climber, canoeist and sailor. She studies recreational therapy at Michigan State University.

Richard, 19, is studying wildlife management at Michigan State University.

David, 15, spent a chunk of last summer in Virginia's Shenandoah National Park.

Working as a psychologist for Lutheran Social Services in Detroit, she often vacations in the White Mountains in New Hampshire or on Isle Royale National Park in Lake Superior or on the Bruce Trail in Canada.

Rejecting comfortable motels, she opts for a tent along wilderness trails.

And while close proximity to nature can make a hike tantalizing, heaven can easily turn into a hellish experience.

A "real back country" hike near the Tennessee-North Carolina border brings back such memories.

The first night out was great. They listened to the rustling of foxes and the rushing of a nearby brook. They felt they were next door to heaven.

The next night, heaven changed to misery. After hiking into a "murky, trashy, dark campsite" the adventure began.

"After supper, we heard the crunch, crunch of a bear in a bush. We jumped up and ran down the trail, tooting a whistle. My daughter fell. The kids started to cry. We were scared

and didn't know if we should go back or go to a ranger station."

Deciding it was too dark to hike out, the group made a fire hoping to keep away the bears. They bedded down for the evening.

"About 1 a.m. it started to storm. It rained till 4 a.m. We had to set up the tents, dragging the wet sleeping bags into them.

"Everything got wet."

The next morning their fear of bear was replaced by a boar.

"We were hiking down the trail when we met a black boar. By that time, nothing fazed me. The boar didn't scare us. Later on, the ranger told us we had nothing to fear from the bear — it was the boar that we should have been worried about."

Neither bears nor boars nor bugs ever kept the Sherwoods from returning to the wilderness. "We all liked the adventure," says Sherwood.

To backpackers, hypothermia is a more realistic fear than an attack by wild animals.

If not countered by dry, warm clothes, it can kill.

Wet clothes and cold weather drain heat

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Trail hints

The road to the wilderness begins with physical fitness.

The quickest way to make sure you'll never do it again is to put heavy shoes on your feet, 30 pounds on your back and take off for a week's worth of hiking without first being in good physical shape.

- Walk, swim, jog or find some other exercise to strengthen your heart and lungs before you put on a backpack.

- Put off buying new gear until you go on a weekend trip and know for sure backpacking is something for you. For that first weekend trip, borrow gear from friends or rent it from local outfitters.

- Roughing it is fun, but pamper your feet. Correctly fitted hiking boots are a must. They should be "broken in" around the house or on subdivision streets long before they ever see a trail. If you wear a new pair of hiking boots on your first outing, your feet will scream for mercy. Boots absorb the extra weight of a backpack and cushion ankles and delicate toes against jutting

rocks and hidden stumps.

- Shop around for your equipment. You don't have to be a millionaire to get the proper equipment. On the other hand, employees at the specialty stores can give you some helpful hints on what is and isn't the best kind of equipment for you.

- Hitching up with a local group is a great idea. Experienced backpackers love to talk about — and show off — their lightweight gear. From them, you'll get a good idea what works and what doesn't.

Group backpacking has another bonus. The cooking gear — stoves, food, pots and fuel — is split among the hikers. Dividing the gear takes some of the load off your back and gives you some trailside camaraderie as well.

Two local backpacking groups that sponsor day trips, weekenders and lengthy outings are American Youth Hostels, 3024 Coolidge, Berkley, and the Sierra Club, Mackinac Chapter, 590 Hollister Building, Lansing.