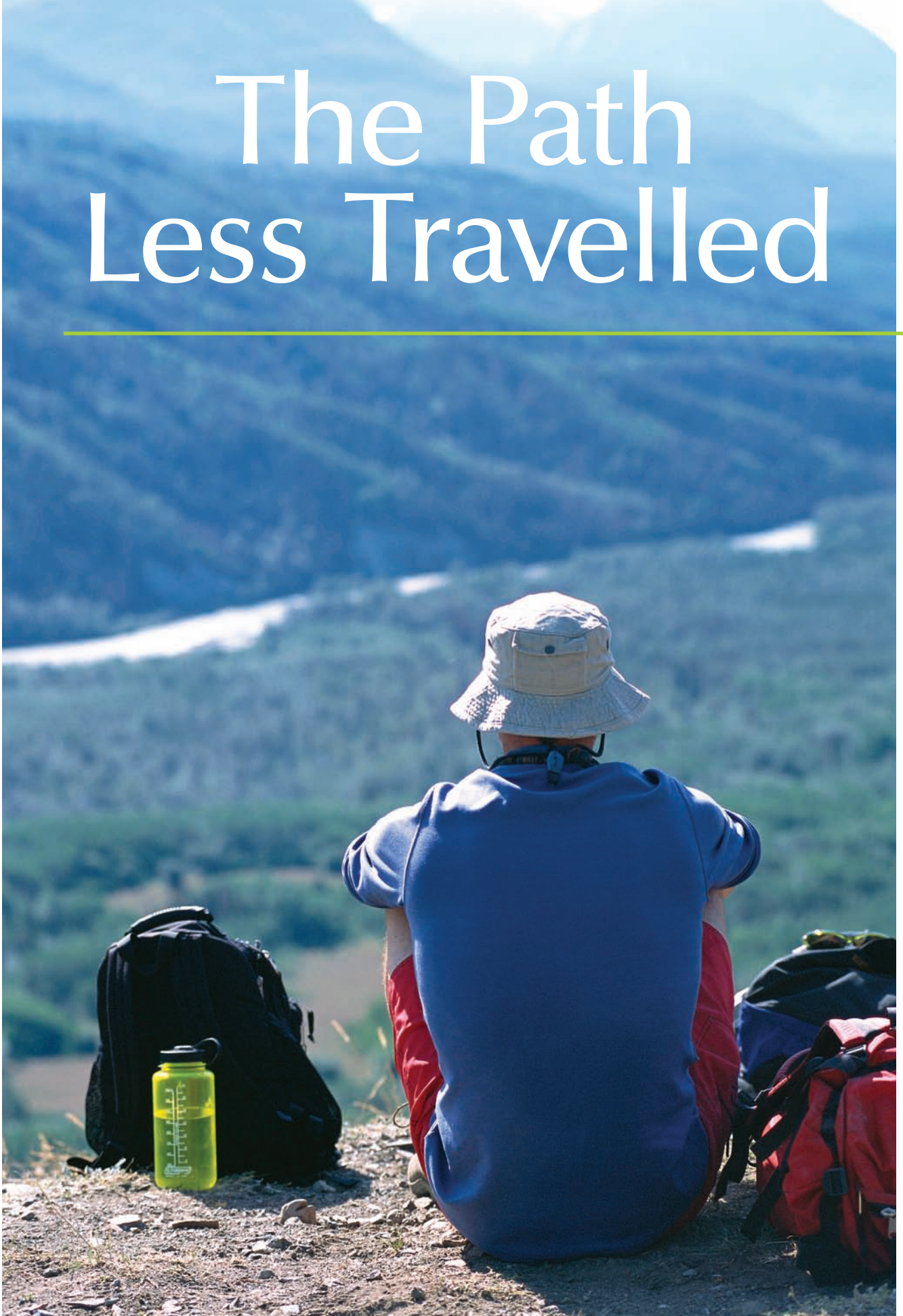


The Path Less Travelled



NOEL HENDRICKSON/MASTERFILE

You've walked to work and hoofed all over the 'hood. Kick it up a notch and take a hike!

ALICE FISHER

Elvia Picco, 48, started dabbling in hiking about 12 years ago to escape the demands of a public relations job in Calgary's then booming oil and gas industry. Later, hiking became a way to cope with her grief following the sudden death of her younger brother, Lorenzo, in a motorcycle accident in May 2002. The two had been planning a hike together in the Yukon.

She decided to go on the organized trek anyway. "I carried his backpack and his hiking poles and brought small mementoes from his apartment. When I got to the summit of the trail, I scattered and buried things here and there. I knew he was with me," says Elvia, who has since moved to British Columbia.

Hiking not only brings Elvia closer to her brother, it also provides myriad social rewards, gives her a psychic high and keeps her in shape. For example, an ambitious 25-day 600-kilometre group odyssey by foot and canoe through Nahanni National Park Reserve in the Northwest Territories helped her lose 12 pounds. "I had people say, 'You look amazing! Where did you go?'"

Lorenzo's death motivated one of Elvia's friends as well. Catherine van der Poel, a pharmaceutical representative in Calgary, was battling sarcoidosis, an autoimmune condition that attacked the lymph nodes in her lungs, making breathing laborious. Not only did she start hiking, but she also began operating her own hiking excursions out of Calgary.

Like Elvia, Catherine is drawn to hiking by the magnetism of the great outdoors. "As much as I struggle up the mountain, there's a huge sense of accomplishment when I get to the top," says Catherine.

A hike is an ideal opportunity to connect with nature, breathe in clean air, hear birdsong and enjoy delicate spring or brilliant autumn colours. It's also a green environment-friendly activity. And anyone can do it on the cheap.

These days, the biggest trend is front-country hiking within an hour's drive of an urban centre, as opposed to more remote backcountry hiking, says Tim Southam, public affairs manager for Mountain Equipment Co-op in Vancouver. "People are pressed for time but still want to be active outdoors."

WHO CAN HIKE?

If you have a pre-existing medical condition that makes intense exercise more difficult, then you should check with your doctor before you sign up for a hike. And hiking downhill may pose a problem for people with weak knees. "It's a little harder on your knees than going uphill," says kinesiologist Dr. Stuart Phillips of McMaster University in Hamilton, Ont. And about two days after an intense hike, a phenomenon called delayed-onset muscle soreness may appear, although the pain will be less severe after you've repeated the exercise a few weeks later. "Like everything else, if you've never done it, plan something small to start, something manageable and achievable," he says.



MICHEL DE NIJ/ISTOCKPHOTO

PHYSICAL BENEFITS

Hiking is physically more beneficial than walking, says Dr. Stuart M. Phillips, an associate professor and director of the graduate program at the Kinesiology, Exercise Metabolism Research Group at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ont. "Hiking is

generally a little more intense; it's going to make you work closer to your peak in terms of your aerobic fitness."

While most city walkers don't stay on the streets for long, hikers "make a plan and often go out for several hours," says Phillips. Furthermore, hiking typically involves some climbing, which forces you to use your leg muscles.

That involves a weightlifting component, albeit a low-intensity one.

The resistive force increases the efficiency of the heart and lungs and helps burn energy, thereby allowing you to ward off weight gain, says Phillips.

And building and retaining muscle mass becomes more important as we age. "If muscle is the energy-burning furnace of your body, then the furnace gradually shrinks as we age," says Phillips. "Walking doesn't do anything to stop that, but hiking, with its resistive component, does; it actually provides a mild

stimulus to stop the furnace from shrinking." (Weightlifting is even better, he adds.)

An added benefit of hiking is that it helps ward off diseases of aging. "Hiking allows us to maintain muscle, which is where we store and metabolize blood glucose. More muscle, more storage, so hiking reduces the risk of type 2 diabetes," says Phillips.

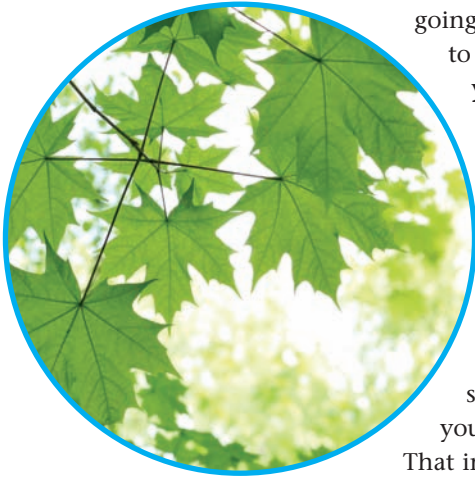
PSYCHOLOGICAL REWARDS

Emerging research suggests that exercising close to nature actually boosts memory and mental processes. A 2008 study in the journal *Psychological Science* found that interacting with nature, even in the middle of winter, boosts mental functions such as attention and memory. Elvia finds the sights, sounds and smells of the great outdoors stimulating. "Even if it's freaking pouring out or a windstorm's coming up, I love those elements," she says.

She's also drawn to the peace and quiet of the trail. "I can go on a trip with a bunch of people and not say anything to anyone for three hours," says Elvia.

SOCIAL PAYOFFS

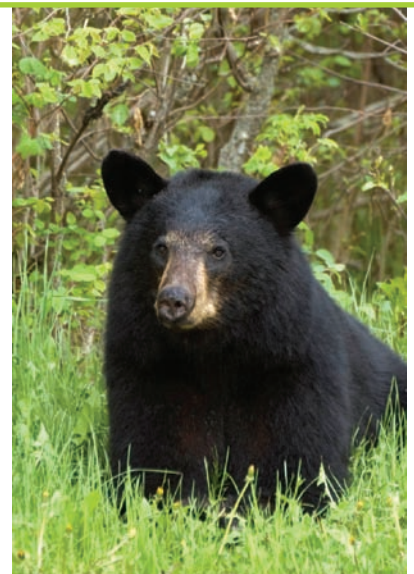
Both Elvia and Catherine met like-minded hikers through outdoor programs organized at the University of Calgary Outdoor Centre. Both agree that hiking is a great way to bond with friends and family.



BE PREPARED

Research the trails you plan to hike. "Don't depend on someone else to know the way," says B.C.-based hiking enthusiast Elvia Picco. Check out these other tips.

- ▣ Make a list of all the items you'll need to pack.
- ▣ Bring a trail map.
- ▣ Take a bear-safety training course if you plan to hike trails used by bruins.
- ▣ Ideally, take a first-aid/CPR course beforehand to cope with emergencies.
- ▣ Bring a cellphone (though it may not work on backcountry hikes).
- ▣ Don't hike alone (some experts suggest groups of at least three).
- ▣ Tell someone where you're going and your approximate time of return.



TOP: GRIGORY BIBIKOV/ISTOCKPHOTO; BOTTOM: CINDY CREIGHTON/ISTOCKPHOTO



HUBERT GRÜNER/ISTOCKPHOTO

RULES OF THE TRAIL

- Pack and carry your own backpack.
- Leave nothing behind — on a two-hour walk in the park or a daylong hike in the country. “When I see garbage on the trail, I go crazy,” says Elvia.
- Stay on the trails to protect wildflowers and wildlife (and don’t pick the flowers).



HIKERS' HELPERS

- ▣ For walking clubs and events across Canada, visit The Canadian Volkssport Federation at www.walks.ca.
- ▣ For hiking safety and preparedness, go to Adventure Smart at www.adventuresmart.ca.

HOW TO BE A HAPPY WANDERER

SHOW NO SKIN Whether it's muggy and hot or cold and rainy, always protect yourself from the elements. The first rule is to layer and wear clothing that breathes yet covers as much skin as possible. "Gone are the days of me wearing tank tops and getting a burn," says Elvia. In summer, wear light — not dark — colours to deflect the rays. And don't forget the sunscreen and anti-UV sunglasses — in all seasons.

THE HAT HAS IT Cover your head in all seasons to protect it from the sun, wind, rain and cold. A brimmed hat is best.

LEGGING IT Even in summer, you should protect your legs from scrapes and scratches on the trail. One of Elvia's favourite finds is convertible pants that zip off at mid-leg, allowing you to change in a jiffy from long pants to shorts. "You can zip them on and off to adjust quickly to the temperature," she says.

WIND AT YOUR BACK

Southam recommends a fleece jacket with an outer shell that's wind-resistant and water-repellent. "You want to be prepared for all weather conditions," he says. When not needed, it can be tied around your waist or stored in your backpack.



WELL SHOD, WELL TROD Some people are happy to hike just in shoes, but hiking boots probably make a difference if you're trekking in slippery conditions or on rocks where sturdy boots might better protect your feet, says Phillips. A new trend in hiking footwear, says Southam, is a GOR-TEX liner that deflects moisture and makes a boot more breathable.

Elvia prefers high-cut boots for extra ankle support. Hers have a special non-skid tread for good traction. For a selection of quality hiking boots, check out specialty



WHERE TO HIKE IN CANADA

If you want to take your walking habit to the next level, you're living in the right place. From coast to coast, Canada is full of rustic flat and wild mountainous trails that are ideal for hiking. Here's a list of our cross-country picks, but there are many more options. For details and photos, go to Canada Trails at www.canadatrails.ca and Parks Canada at www.pc.gc.ca. Or go to the websites given after specific trails and parks below.

- ▣ Gros Morne National Park, Newfoundland
- ▣ Prince Edward Island National Park
- ▣ Cape Breton Highlands National Park, Nova Scotia
- ▣ Mount Carleton Provincial Park, New Brunswick
- ▣ Gatineau Park, Quebec (www.canadascapital.gc.ca)
- ▣ Bruce Peninsula National Park, Ontario (<http://brucetrail.org>)
- ▣ Riding Mountain National Park, Manitoba
- ▣ Grasslands National Park, Saskatchewan
- ▣ Banff National Park, Alberta
- ▣ West Coast Trail, British Columbia (www.westcoasttrailbc.com)
- ▣ Nahanni National Park Reserve, Northwest Territories
- ▣ Chilkoot Trail National Historic Site, Yukon
- ▣ Auyuittuq National Park, Baffin Island

Gros Morne National Park, Newfoundland

MARCO MACCARRINI/ISTOCKPHOTO

sports-equipment stores near you. Try on boots with the socks you'll be wearing on hikes, advises Southam, and break them in well before a hike.

SOCK IT AWAY The hiking foot sweats, so put it in two socks, a lighter one next to the skin and a woollen on top one for warmth. Drymax makes a two-layered anti-blisters sock with an antimicrobial fibre that fights odour-causing bacteria (www.drymaxsocks.com).



GET A GRIP Gloves give you a better hold on hiking poles, rocks and branches. And they're essential in the mountains, where, says Calgary's Catherine van der Poel, "I've hiked through snow in July."

A LIGHTER LOAD Even on short hikes, bring a backpack but make it a lightweight one. Southam suggests one of the new breed with a layer of fabric stretched over the frame to separate the pack from your body. It chafes less and it's cooler. Here's a



list of what you might find in the packs of avid hikers.

- ▣ A healthy lunch and high-energy snacks such as nuts and dried fruits
- ▣ Two litres of water — for a daylong hike
- ▣ Extra sweater or a change of clothes
- ▣ Safety kit with Band-Aids, Aspirin, a small pair of scissors, disinfectant and sunscreen
- ▣ Duct tape (for covering blisters and making crude splints)
- ▣ Compass
- ▣ Lightweight thermal blanket



POLES APART Hiking with a pole in either fist forces you to work your arms for added aerobic benefit and calorie burning. For some people, especially those with knee problems, poles provide stability and balance, particularly on rugged, wet, muddy or snowy terrain. They also help with posture. Modern poles are lightweight and adjust to your height; collapsible versions attach to backpacks.

All gear (except Drymax socks) can be found at Mountain Equipment Co-op, www.mec.ca. 