

GUYdelines

A few thoughts for outdoor lovers and leaders from

WILD GUYde Adventures, LLC

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Just Me and My Two X's: The Solo Outdoor Experience for Women

Mary Zook Tapolyai

To be completely honest, I was scared for a few minutes. After locking my car, shouldering my backpack, and starting up the trail alone, I passed a few college-age boys who looked me up and down with that all-too-familiar leer women are accustomed to getting on the street. I stared back with my very best “I murder for fun” glare and tried not to imagine them coming back to find me after dark.

My fears abated as I continued hiking and birdsong increased farther up the trail. “Uninterrupted birdsong means no human activity,” I assured myself. That’s what I wanted on my first solo overnight – to be absolutely by myself. By the time I reached my campsite as the sun was setting, I hadn’t seen another person for over an hour and my fears were long behind me. With confidence approaching elation, I set up my tent, hung my bear bag, and ate dinner as the moon rose. I fell asleep warm and cozy in my sleeping bag, listening to the creek nearby, and thought, *What was I worried about?*



The author's triumphant post-solo selfie

Recently I realized I’d never truly camped overnight by myself. The closest I had come was camping alone at music festivals, which hardly counts because other festival-goers were camped two feet away (“scuse me, could you turn down the drum circle, it’s 3:00am?”). I frequently take day hikes alone, but I understand not everyone is comfortable with even brief solo excursions. I was privileged to grow up in a reasonably safe community where walking alone was not a great risk, and I started running by myself in middle school. From there, hiking alone was not a huge adjustment. Camping alone, however, was an experience I felt I needed to have before I could write this article.

A question I frequently encounter regarding female solo adventure is “Is that safe?” TECHNICALLY, the outdoors really isn’t SAFE for anyone, male or female. Cougars and bears don’t discriminate who they attack based on gender. Storms don’t pick and choose where they strike based on the qualities of the people visiting that area. In some cases, the human element in the outdoors may be potentially riskier for women than for men, but that’s not nature’s fault. If the outdoors

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If the only thing holding you back from solo adventure is confidence or a little chutzpah, you can take small steps to prepare. Start with what you know – take a walk or bike ride around your neighborhood or spend an afternoon at a park you’ve never been to. Start small – go alone on a trail you already know well when the weather is nice, carry a backpack to get familiar with the feeling of self-sufficiency. Start semi-alone – go with a friend but hike a few meters apart so you can both appreciate the silence, or take a dog! Finally, ask yourself the following questions:

- What is keeping me from venturing out alone (comments from others, a feeling of unpreparedness, a past experience)? Where are those hesitations coming from, and how can I address them?
- What are some things I can do to better prepare myself (safety, learning, equipment)?
- Take some time to think about what you might gain from adventuring alone: freedom from pleasing others, a break from busyness, having complete control in where you go or what you do, the chance to think without outside input or corrections?
- Who are some outdoor women who inspire you, and what can you learn from them about confidence and safety on the trail?

More Resources:

- *Becoming Odysa* by Jennifer Pharr-Davis (2010)
- *Women Who Hike* by Heather Balogh Rochfort (2019)
- *She-Explores* podcast by Gale Straub:
 - Episode 10. Alone on the Trail
 - Episode 76. Solo (But Not Quite Alone)
 - Episode 90. Alone with Her Thoughts on the Welsh Coastal Path: Hiranya de Alwis Jayasinghe
 - Episode 117. Safer Alone in the Backcountry: Sarah Grothjan
- Outdoor Women’s Alliance:
 - “The Case for Female Solo Hiking” by Ashley Gossens
 - “Solo Hiking the John Muir Trail” by Karen Looney-Patterson
- *Outside* magazine: “Backpacking is My Respite from Sexual Harassment” by Sarah Grothjan

Have a great time and stay safe out there! **MDT**

Are you coming to Virginia for a family vacation, church group trip, troop event, or escape weekend? Why not experience Virginia adventure with **WILD GUYde Adventures!** **WCA** offers guided beginner level outdoor adventures and competent instruction in activity fundamentals. We can take you **hiking, rock climbing and rappelling, caving, or canoeing**. We use various activity areas in the George Washington and Monongahela National Forests, along Virginia’s Blue Ridge, and in the Potomac Highlands of West Virginia. Check out the 2020 trip options below, or call to talk about your own creative adventure idea!
(540-433-1637 or lester@wildguyde.com)
You may also visit www.wildguyde.com

CHOOSE YOUR ADVENTURE: 2020 Daytrips with WILD GUYde Adventures, Harrisonburg, VA

Top-Roping at Hidden Rocks, Virginia: This is the rock climbing trip for the adventurous beginner – you don't have much experience, but you want a great outdoor day with your family or special friends. Thirty minutes west of Harrisonburg, we'll park just inside George Washington National Forest, gear up, and hike a scenic 20 minutes through rhododendron and hemlocks and across some mountain streams to a secluded sandstone cliff. There will be pink and white mountain laurel in June, and wild huckleberries in August. You'll be introduced to harnesses, knots, helmets, and the *belay system*; then we'll try some easy warm-up climbs to remind you that the kid inside you still likes to clamber on things. We can go on to some harder climbing that invites you to try new skills and movements. And we'll finish the day with a rappel – backing over the edge, with nothing between you and the ground below but 60 feet of air and a great view! Closer to Luray or Northern Virginia? We'll visit **Waterfall Mountain** in the Massanutten Range, or **Little Stony Man** on the Blue Ridge for TALL climbing and spectacular Shenandoah Valley panoramas! Closer to Lexington or Roanoke? We'll visit **Goshen Pass** and climb above the gorgeous Maury River!

(Full day \$250 for 1-3 people; \$60 for each additional. ½-day \$175 for 1-3, and \$45 for each additional)



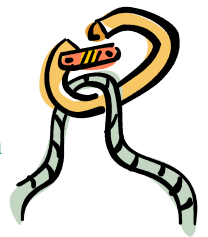
Beginner Climbing at Seneca Rocks, WV: After 90 minutes of curving mountain highway (okay, *country two-lane*), you'll gasp to see a spectacular blade of Tuscarora Sandstone, whose summit sits almost 1000 feet above its North Fork Valley floor. Seneca Rocks is a scenic place for the beginner or family to learn the rock climbing basics, top-roping and rappelling to an awesome West Virginia backdrop. Easy routes guarantee early success, but more challenging climbs also wait to test your skills. Seneca Rocks is an awesome place to climb, just beyond the sign: "*Here ends the realm of the hiker!*" (Full day \$275 for 1-3 people; \$65 for each additional. ½ day \$200 for 1-3; \$50 each additional)

Multi-Pitch at Seneca Rocks: A little more experienced in climbing? Maybe you tried it at camp or the local rock gym? Ready for the next step? Join me for the multi-pitch experience, seconding the route as we lead-climb to the top of the fabled South Summit! This is the only technical summit in the U.S. east of the Mississippi. Seneca has routes at all ranges of difficulty, from starters like *Old Ladies Route* (5.2) to mid-range classics (*West Pole* 5.7) to old school hardman routes like *Crack of Dawn* and *Madmen Only* (5.10). Every one of them will give you a new appreciation for the expression "*high and vertical.*" Register your accomplishment and ruminations in the summit journal, wave to tourists way down in the valley, and then head down to *terra firma* via the three-pitch rappel. Finish the day with a splash in the North Fork River swimming hole at "Gravel Beach"; then pick up a cold drink and a West Virginia memento at Harpers General Store before sleeping the ride back to Virginia and "the Burg."

(Full-day: \$225 1st person; \$150 each addl.)

Instructional Climbing: This is a tutorial for those who have a little exposure to climbing, and want to gain eventual autonomy. Lots of instruction in current best-practices and hands-on trying it for you in rigging top anchors, belaying skills and equipment alternatives, movement coaching, and rappel setup and protection. There will be individualized attention and repetitive practice, as well as some exploration of the historical evolution of climbing equipment and protocol. You will finish the day with a lot more confidence in your basic skills. Bring a partner so you'll have someone to climb with later.

(\$175 1st person; \$125 each for 2nd and 3rd)



WILD GUYde Adventures offers two other rock climbing options: a **Boy Scout Rock Climbing Merit Badge** tutorial for troops and leaders. We send a booklet to get troops started on their knots and First Aid requirements ahead of time, and then spend two days going through all the climbing, gear spec., and rappelling activity requirements (\$90 each). We also offer the **PCIA (Professional Climbing Instructor Association) Top Rope Climbing Instructor Certification** course and exam. This 3-day course (\$450) and 1 day exam (\$150) is for recreational climbers who want to add an instructor certification on their resume. It's also very useful for individuals guiding with club, camp, or university outing programs.

Peaceful Paddling: Canoe a ½ day stretch of the **South Fork River**. This Class I and II water is ideal for families with elementary school children – just long enough to be engaging without getting boring. As we wind through pastures in the Shenandoah Valley, you'll learn basic canoe strokes and maneuvering. Dangle your feet or plunk your head to cool off. And keep watching for blue herons, turtles on logs, and cows in the water!

(\$140 1-3 people; \$35 each additional)

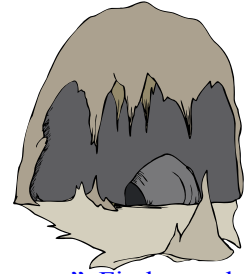


Pick-up-the-Pace Paddling: A full day of canoeing awaits further down the **South Fork**. This provides a little more excitement for teenagers, adventurous parents, & other paddle pilgrims! A casual start allows a review of canoe strokes and partner teamwork.

An amazing rope-swing breaks the quiet – you won't believe what comes out of your mouth when you let go (“*Geronimo!*?”) More paddling through runs and pools, always under the shadow of Massanutten Mountain. Lunch on the bank and then back into the boats. Finally, at Milepost 17, *Compton's Rapid* – a great shoot-through with some higher standing waves! Paddlers call it a “Fat II” – but stay wide of Pillow Rock! Below, there's a jumping rock for another cool-off before paddling the final mile to the take-out. Load the boats and start the drive home – happy, tired, and maybe a little sun-tanned! West Virginia travelers may want to visit the gorgeous “Trough” on the **South Branch of the Potomac**. High and remote mountain walls on each side of the river, and keep your eyes open for bald eagles!

(\$175 1-3 people; \$45 each additional)

Half-Day Caving: The underground sidewalk and the tourist cave light show are not for you. You want to see it the way it was before the electrician got there! Primitive caves have all the features of the subterranean world – *speleothems* (stalactites, flowstone, soda straws, and columns), *lots of real mud*, and sometimes even *bats* (but most of them are asleep, and all of them are harmless). Pull on your coveralls, clip on your helmet, adjust your headlamp, and down we go. There are squeezes if you want them, and belly crawls for the adventurous --- but there are also corridor ceilings higher than your house, and large cavern rooms for the claustrophobic. Learn cave travel safety, underground navigation, and some “total body movement.” Find out what the year-round underground temperature is, and then finally emerge back into sunlight with a new appreciation for what happens underneath Virginia when limestone and groundwater meet. The gleam of your smile might be the only thing shining through the mud on your face! Caving trips can be **Beginner Caving** (mostly horizontal movement – walking, stooping, or crawling) or **Intermediate Caving** (for folks fit enough to handle strenuous vertical moves, and more sustained physical effort). Various locations are available in both Virginia (20 minutes from Harrisonburg), and West Virginia (between Franklin and Elkins). *Caving trips are not advised for individuals who might be unfit, excessively overweight, or who live an extremely sedentary lifestyle, or for very young children.*



(\$125 for 1-3 people; \$25 for each additional)



Design Your Own Adventure: Numerous other options exist, including hiking and climbing guiding along **Virginia's Blue Ridge** or at the **NROCKS (WV)**, group orienteering challenges in the National Forest, a climbing self-rescue clinic, outdoor fitness training, and flatwater paddling instruction for beginners and children. We can customize to meet the interests of your family, scout troop, or youth group. Call to talk about your needs.

Things you oughta know:

- **Lester R. Zook** is the **WILD GUYde**. He is a *Wilderness First Responder*, and is a certified member of the *American Mountain Guides Association (Single Pitch Instructor)*. He has been leading wilderness adventures and training camping leaders for 30 years, and loves to take people outdoors! **Ethan Zook** has been a camp counselor and adventure leader at numerous camps. He is a *Red Cross Lifeguard* and a *Virginia Paramedic*. **Aaron Zook** is a climber, caver, and paddler, a *Red Cross Lifeguard*, and has been through *Wilderness First Aid*. **Mary Tapolyai** is a *WFR*, and a *Leave No Trace Master Educator*. Together, we are a small family business that strives to provide exceptional service, and create value in the lives of our guests.
- More detail on activity possibilities is available by visiting www.wildguyde.com. Call or e-mail to ask questions and to arrange dates, rates, and meeting points:



(540) 433-1637 or lester@wildguyde.com

- **WGA's** guiding season is 7 days a week March through October, and weekends in the winter. Call early to reserve; weekends in particular can fill quickly.
- **WILD GUYde** will provide all technical equipment (ropes, harnesses, helmets, etc.). A personal *things-to-bring list* (clothing, water, lunch, etc.) will be provided.

- We can also help with **lodging ideas**. We can recommend from *primitive* to *posh* – National Forest campgrounds, drive-up motels, and some delightful Bed and Breakfast inns!
- For groups of 10 or larger, we disregard the starter fee and simply bill the per-person rate.
- Payment is by cash or check, payable to WGA; unfortunately credit cards cannot be accepted at this time. Gratuities are never expected, and always appreciated!
- Some activities have inherent risks – that’s the meaning of the word *adventure*. Participants will be asked to fill out a *Medical Form*, and sign a *Participant Agreement* acknowledging certain dangers. Some activities are physically strenuous, emotionally demanding, or require sustained cognitive attention to task and detail. We make every effort to create a great day, but **WGA** guides do reserve the prerogative to deny access/participation if, in our judgment, the client is not likely to be successful. Clients also may not be “under the influence” or “feeling the effects” of alcohol or recreational drugs at the time of the event.
- **WILD GUYde Adventures** incorporated in Virginia in 2004, and is fully insured. **WGA** is a permittee with the George Washington and Monongahela National Forests, and along Virginia’s Blue Ridge. **WGA** is an equal opportunity provider and employer. **WGA** practices environmental stewardship, and is a member of the *Access Fund*, the *National Speleological Society*, the *Virginia Tourism Corp.*, the *Christian Adventure Association*, the *Shenandoah Valley Travel Assoc.*, and the *Harrisonburg-Rockingham Chamber of Commerce*.

How was your trip with the *WILD GUYde*?!

Thanks again for guiding us – the trip was awesome! I’m a little sore and bruised today but it makes me happy because it reminds me of everything we did. The info was clear and the location appropriate. I also really enjoyed how you incorporated learning and team building elements into our trip. (Sarah, 2012)

We arrived back in Florida late Thursday night. We had a wonderful time on our adventure with you and we have all been raving to everyone about how great the trip was! Your professionalism and encouragement allowed us to continue on even when some of us were reluctant to try (me, of course)! The boys raved about the caving and the fact that it looked scary, but once you got through it, it wasn’t as difficult or scary as you thought it would be. Todd and I were both thrilled with the learning experience for the kids and feel that we have all grown as a result of facing our fears. Everyone talked about what a great guide you were for us! Overall, our adventure was a wonderful experience and the highlight of our trip to VA! (Christine, 2012)

We had a blast, everything was perfect, and you did an amazing job! The pictures are AWESOME! We would recommend you to any outdoor lover! We agreed that we learned so much from you. (Nina, 2012)

Thank you so very much for a wonderful adventure rock climbing last week. It was wonderful to share the time with my daughter. We both really appreciated your teaching style and the knowledge you imparted. I found a whole bucket-full of sermon illustrations. The location was excellent. We appreciated the fact that we were alone on the climb (except for the beautiful hawk). The photos you took came out well, and we showed them to my wife who appreciated our joy, but was thankful that she chose a more Hobbitish way to spend the day (reading). (Pastor Chris, 2012)

Your customer service was outstanding. Despite my late contact, you found a way to get us in on an adventure. The experience was excellent. The kids had a blast but you were appropriately serious in your approach. Safety was a clear priority as it must be. The experience was well structured and presented a number of great challenges. (Mark, 2012)