

Awakening Your Spirit Outdoors

by Megy Karydes

Photos by John Lionberger

Time spent outside can refresh and energize both mind and body, and feeling attuned to nature can be a spiritual experience. Two local organizations offer a variety of organized nature trips designed to revitalize your connection with the outdoors and awaken your spirit—all you need to do is show up and be open to the possibilities.

John Lionberger, president and founder of Evanston-based Renewal in the Wilderness, considers it his life work to help people find the “reset button” in their lives through canoeing or kayaking. He takes clients to some of the most beautiful bodies of water in the United States, from the Boundary Waters, in Minnesota, to Alaska’s Kenia Fjords National Park.

“Most of our clients are middle-aged or older, and while kayaking and canoeing are not sedentary activities, they don’t require the same energy as a backpacking or hiking trip,” advises Lionberger. “Being out in the water is also a really good way to get deep into the wilderness; just sit in your canoe, gaze at what is around you and take it all in.”

Lionberger’s trips are designed for self-exploration and the days are structured loosely. “Each morning, we begin with guided meditation, intended to keep us present to the presence of God,” says Lionberger. Lessons on safety and wilderness skills follow, the facilitator asks the group to think about a meditative question of the day, and then the day’s trip begins. When night falls, the group sets up camp, cooks,

relaxes and discusses what they saw, sharing their answers to the day’s question.

For those who prefer a land-based experience or are new to meditation, Inner Metamorphosis University (IMU), in Rogers Park, has been hosting silent meditation sessions and retreats for several years. At 6 a.m., on the first Sunday of each month, students can participate

John Lionberger is the author of the new book, *Renewal in the Wilderness: A Spiritual Guide To Connecting with God in the Natural World*, available at bookstores or through the publisher, SkyLightPaths.com.

in IMU’s guided hiking meditation at a nearby state park or forest preserve. IMU also offers longer domestic and international meditation retreats that incorporate nature, including a trip in southwestern Michigan at a lodge and retreat center nestled amid 350 quiet acres, ideal for sensing Earth’s balance and finding one’s own.

IMU co-founder and instructor Amona Buechler agrees that being surrounded by nature has a powerful, calming effect. “The senses get stimulated in a very pleasant way via the sounds, the sensations on the ground, the visual beauty and most of all, the air, the smells, and the breeze on the

skin,” says Buechler. “I sometimes say, ‘Give me good air and I am happy.’”

Both Lionberger and Buechler have regular

clients. “For many, it has become the way to recharge and reconnect with themselves every year,” says Buechler. She likens the experience to recharging batteries. “While daily meditation helps you achieve balance for a short period of time, the retreats allow for deeper reflection, because they provide more time to empty yourself and then recharge.”

Options for reconnecting with your spirit abound for every age, level of physical activity and religious background, and meditation experience isn’t necessary. “These trips are designed so that you’re very present,” says Lionberger. “It’s when you’re completely invested and completely focused, that those ‘Aha!’ moments happen.”

Renewal in the Wilderness, 42 Thayer, Evanston 60201; visit RenewalInTheWilderness.org. See ad in the *Community Resource Guide*.

Inner Metamorphosis University, 1418 W. Howard St., Chicago 60626; call 773-262-1468 or visit LifeSurfing.org.

Megy Karydes is a freelance writer living in Chicago. She takes every opportunity to enjoy the outdoors with her family during the warm months, but in winter, she prefers to snuggle up inside with a cup of hot, fair trade cocoa as she watches snowflakes fall.