

Gone Hikin'

City dogs may have access to doggy spas and bakeries, but sometimes all a dog wants is a good roll in the mud. New York City's Blue Sky Dogs lets them do just that, with its "Canine Country Days."

"My husband and I used to take our dog Sienna hiking, and we could see the benefits of the exercise she was getting, but also how happy she was," says the company's founder, Tammy McCarley. "People do exercise their dogs in the city, but it's just not the same on concrete." So McCarley left a career in sports marketing and decided to help city dogs experience the joy of the outdoors.

After picking up dogs all over Manhattan,



McCarley heads to parks outside of the city, where she leads the happy hikers on trails that take in streams, waterfalls, and lots of dirt.

On the day FAMILY DOG tagged along, the crew comprised five Golden Retrievers and two Labrador Retrievers, many of them regulars. But McCarley says it's usually more of a mix, and even little dogs, including a Havanese, a wirehaired Dachshund, and a Yorkshire Terrier, get in on the act.

As soon as the dogs emerge from McCarley's Jeep, they transform from well-behaved city slickers into unabashed country dogs, playing games of chase, and rolling on their backs, all silly grins and lolling tongues.

"It's such a mental release for the dogs as well as a physical one," says McCarley. "They get so stimulated by being outdoors and off their leashes [where parks permit]. They get to act how dogs should."

For safety, each dog sports a Ruff Wear harness, which can be rented or purchased from Blue Sky Dogs. On our hike, McCarley demonstrates their usefulness—we use them to help the dogs over rocks in a stream and to hoist tired bodies back into the Jeep at the end of the day.

A typical trip includes about eight dogs, and hikes usually last for about three hours. But, with pickups, travel, and drop-offs, it's a full day for the dogs, who return to their city pads exhausted but content.

Blue Sky Dogs also organizes custom travel for dog owners, and plans "Best Friends" getaways for people and their dogs traveling together. McCarley's first book, *Best Hikes with Dogs: New York City & Beyond* (The Mountaineers Books; \$16.95) features reviews of 55 trails in the city, the Hudson Valley, and Long Island. It will be available in April from select bookstores, and from www.mountaineersbooks.org.

Canine Country Days cost \$75 per dog, including transport, natural treats and water. Discounts are available for two dogs from the same household, and for multi-day packages. Ph: 212-531-DOGS; e-mail: info@blueskydogsny.com. ♦

More doggy field trips

• Great Dog Day Care in Seattle will bus dogs to their own four-acre fenced "Adventure Park" for an extra fee. The park has trails, a pond, and agility equipment for dogs to wear themselves out on. www.gogreatdog.com/adventure.htm

• Dog Gone Beach Trips takes dogs in the South Bay area Angeles to the Huntington Dog Beach for a morning or afternoon of off-leash romping in the surf and sand. www.doggonebeachtrips.com

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