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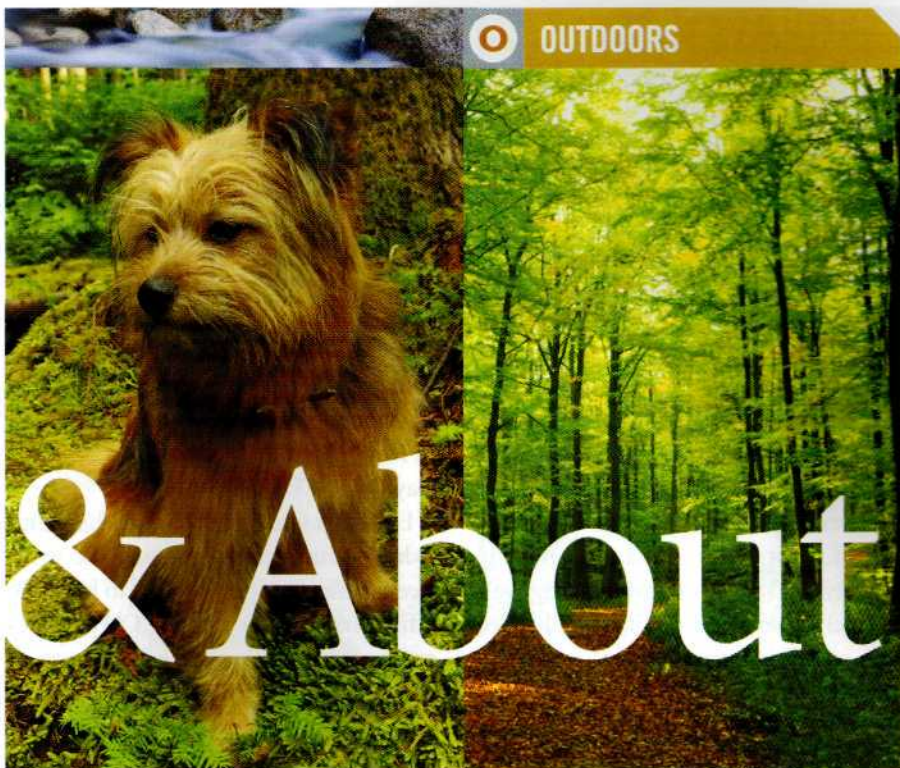
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Day-tripping dogs and their people
trade urban concrete for trails and trees

By Alison Pace

Out & About



As most of its inhabitants will quickly tell you, New York City is a place where you can get anything you want, at any time of the day or night. And when you're a dog person in New York, one of the things you want is to get out

of town. My dog Carlie and I, nature lovers both, are blessed with a flexible schedule and a close proximity to Central Park, which allows us to experience a small slice of open air each morning.

Inspired by our love for the off-leash hours in Central Park and my own occasional-to-frequent longing for the Great Outdoors, I recently looked around for nearby hiking excursions that could (and more importantly, would) include both people and their canine companions. This being New York, the aforementioned "anything, any time" city, I found two terrific options, and subsequently spent wonderful, tree-filled days outside with my pup.

Outdoor Bound

A hiking and adventure travel company based in downtown Manhattan, Outdoor Bound runs its "Hike 'n Hound" excursions

approximately every four to six weeks during spring, summer and fall. Organized in partnership with Leashes and Lovers, a New York City dog-and-people networking group, Hike 'n Hound day trips are approximately six-and-a-half-mile hikes of moderate intensity (not for the beginning hiker; for the best experience, be honest with yourself about both your own and your dog's level of fitness and hiking experience). Though the excursions are listed as being for medium and large dogs, a call ahead revealed that small dogs, at least of the hardier Terrier variety, were more than welcome, too.

Armed with hiking shoes, plenty of water, snacks, sunscreen and a new portable water dish for Carlie, the two of us set off on a beautiful, sunny spring Sunday for our first hike. We headed across Central Park to a meet-up point

on the upper West Side, where we met Connie Magee, the proprietor of Outdoor Bound and our hike leader for the day. We received a bag of complimentary organic dog treats and met our fellow hikers: two Dalmatians, a Husky, two beautiful Hound mixes, a Shepherd mix, a Sheltie and their people, along with two hikers who didn't have dogs but just liked to be around them. Then we all got into Outdoor Bound's large white van and began the hour-and-a-half drive north. There was a great energy and the anticipatory feeling of a high school field trip; aside from a bit of a tussle between Carlie and the smaller (and apparently less genial) of the two Dalmatians, it was a very pleasant journey.

Our van ride ended at Harriman State Park in Rockland County, N.Y., and we were dispatched toward the Pine Meadow trail. The trail led through some rugged terrain and up a steep incline (at which point, we human hikers formed an assembly line to pass the cautious Carlie up the rougher parts), across a stream, and to our destination: the beautiful and expansive Pine Meadow Lake. There, we perched on rocks, enjoyed our lunches, and spent over an hour reclining in the

sun; watching some of the more sporting of the dogs swim; luxuriating in the calming, peace-filled views; and feeling as though we were so much farther than we actually were from our everyday urban lives.

By the end of our hike, Carlie had a hint of the exhausted to her swagger; my hiking friend Lynda remarked that, when seen from behind, Carlie looked a bit drunk. As we all once again boarded the van and headed toward the highway, the conversations were more subdued and the panting and rustling of the dogs were remarkably absent—each and every one of them was sound asleep. Back in the city, we said good-bye, hoping we'd see each other again. Carlie and I headed east, and I checked for ticks (be sure to check a few times; they have a way of appearing even after you're sure you've looked everywhere). We slept better than usual that Sunday night, and on Monday morning, for the first morning since the last time the temperature dipped below 25° (my "Let's skip Central Park today" marker), we slept in.

Blue Sky Dogs

While Outdoor Bound offers an array of trips from the city—wine-tasting tours, horseback riding and hikes culminating in mountaintop yoga—all of those outings are only for the company's two-legged clientele. Alas. However, another

New York City-based company, Blue Sky Dogs, caters exclusively to the dog. In addition to extensive dog-friendly travel planning advice and "Best Friends Day Trips," each season, Blue Sky Dogs also offers several "Best Friends Weekend Getaways" during which people and their dogs can travel together to dog-friendly destinations throughout the tri-state area (New Jersey, New York and Connecticut) as well as New England. Also on offer throughout the year is my absolute "only in New York" favorite: Canine Country Days, or CCD.

For dogs who enjoy a good hike and a day spent in nature during the work week while their people have to be at the office earning their kibble, CCD provides an excellent solution. Blue Sky Dogs will pick up your dog (or dogs) at your home and safely transport him out of the city to any number of parks and hiking trails, rivers, meadows, and streams, where he can run, hike and even swim along with a pack of other dogs. Tammy McCarley, the spirited and tireless proprietor of Blue Sky Dogs, was kind enough to invite Carlie and me along for a CCD of our own.

CCD trips are divided by location: For ease of pickup (if the word *ease* can be applied in any real way to driving through rush-hour Manhattan and making as many as 10 canine collections), Tuesday is for downtown dogs and

Thursday is for those uptown. When groups get larger, Wednesday is added for the geographically in-between dogs.

Uptowners, Carlie and I were picked up, right outside our apartment building no less, early on a Thursday morning. Already in the Jeep were the East Side dogs: Blue, a Boxer; Champ, a grand Golden Retriever; Ruby, a Jack Russell Terrier who frequently boards with Tammy and therefore joins on uptown and downtown jaunts; and the leader of the pack, Sienna, Tammy's Golden Retriever/Chow mix. We settled in and quickly headed over to the West Side to collect yet another Golden Retriever, Dakota; another Boxer, Broder; a rather professorial black Lab/Border Collie mix, Edgar; and last but not least, Thurman, a long-haired and especially charming Miniature Dachshund.

From our vantage point in the passenger seat, Carlie and I sat riveted as Tammy deftly found parking (and double-parking) on busy Manhattan streets and gathered up the dogs. Each was outfitted for the day in his or her safety harness, a fantastic contraption that has a handle on the top so the dog can be easily and quickly picked up in case of danger or even just unsure footing. The dogs were loaded into their respective places in the vehicle and all were remarkably well-behaved.

Upon our arrival at a park called



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Ninham Mountain, the established pack of dogs (they hike together almost every week) checked out Carlie as we disembarked from the Jeep. I was happy to see this part of the trip go quite smoothly; the gang of seven mostly larger canines all sniffing and investigating Carlie at once didn't seem to cause her any stress or nervousness (though the same can't be said for me).

With Carlie now in her own borrowed safety harness, we set off on our leisurely paced four-and-a-half-mile hike. Shaded woodlands, a lively stream, a pond where we enjoyed lunch and almost all the dogs enjoyed a swim, and a wide-open field were among the highlights. The dogs were champs, a well-behaved, respectful-of-others pack with great listening skills; when Tammy called out "this way," they actually went that way. (Because all Blue Sky hikes are off-leash, whenever a new dog joins, Blue Sky is careful to screen for obedience; dogs who may wander wear an electronic collar at first.)

As before, the drive home was quieter than the trip out, with a group of thoroughly exercised and mellowed-out dogs lounging in the back. Carlie, pack member that she now felt herself to be, left me in the passenger seat and went to sit among her new friends in the back. We went along to watch as the dogs were returned home—once again, I was impressed by the fluidity, flawless timing and skill with a hands-free cell phone required to return dogs to their proper homes in rush-hour New York.

As I gave back Carlie's borrowed safety harness, checked that I hadn't left behind her portable water dish or my Deep Woods Off, and stepped out of the CCD-mobile and once again onto pavement, I was very hopeful—dare I say certain—that there'd be many more dog-friendly hikes in my and Carlie's future. I mentioned this to Carlie in the elevator; I'm pretty sure she agreed wholeheartedly. **B**

Alison Pace is the author of the novels *If Andy Warhol Had a Girlfriend*, *Pug Hill* and *Through Thick and Thin*. She lives in New York City with her dog, Carlie.

CONTACTS AND RESOURCES

Blue Sky Dogs
212.531.DOGS (3647)
blueskydogsny.com

Outdoor Bound
212.579.4568
outdoorbound.com

Get Ready—Gear galore can be found by cruising the online (or actual) aisles of suppliers of all things dog and outdoors, Ruffwear.com, Wagglestore.com, GraniteGear.com, Doggonegood.com, L.L. Bean, REI and Orvis among them.

Read Locally—Look for books on local hikes with your dogs. Among the best series are those published by Avalon Travel Publishing ("The Dog Lover's Companion"), Mountaineers Books ("Best Hikes with Dogs"), Countryman Press ("Dog-Friendly") and Spotted Dog Press ("Favorite Dog Hikes").

Make Connections—Meet up, sign up or show up. Across the country, dog folks are finding ways to connect with nature and like-minded others. Here's a sample.

Ariz.: Canine Hiking Club of Arizona
Mydog8az.com/k9hike.html

Del.: Hikewithyourdog.com/newtours.html

Calif.: Los Angeles
Rei.com/rei/outdoorschool/LAX/laxhikedog.jsp
Caninehikers.homestead.com

San Diego
Offleash.meetup.com/18/calendar/7078278

Santa Cruz
Societydog.com

Hawaii: Paws on the Path
Hawaiianhumane.org/programs/pawsonpath/viewcat.asp

Idaho: Boise Hiking Dogs
Hiking.meetup.com/426

Minn.: Canicross Hiking Club
Points-unknown.com/canicross_hiking_club.htm

N.Y. & N.J.:
Groups.yahoo.com/group/harrimanhike

N.C.: Brown Dog Adventure Tours
Browndogadventuretours.com

Pa: Chester County Canine Hiking Club
Hikewithyourdog.com/CCCHC.html

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