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A'Mazing Space

Going in search of uncharted urban wilderness.

Kristen Mosbrucker
CityPaper



neal santos

Guy gone wild: Sidney Goldstein follows no path but his own.

[NATURE]

As big cities go, Philadelphia doesn't rank too badly for offering quick escapes into greenery. Fairmount Park, the Wissahickon Valley, Pennypack Park, Tacony Creek — all nice and nearby places for a little hike. But they're never quite enough, are they? Wander the Wissahickon a few times, perambulate Pennypack enough, and it's hard not to feel that you've, well, seen what there is to see. The sensation of solitude begins to fade; you see the stuff of recreation, yes — but not adventure.

Slowly, that sense of escape begins to seem like an illusion after all.

But Sidney Goldstein has spent two decades making it real. He and the group he leads via meetup.com — Hiking Around Philly (hikingaroundphilly.com), with members known as Fearless Lost Explorers, or "Fleas" for short — don't just hike Philly's forested regions. "We explore," he emphasizes.

The 60-odd-year-old Goldstein has hiked, waded and bushwacked his way off the beaten path and into the city's secret, forgotten places. His stories have an almost fairy-tale-like tone of mystery and wonder. Once, after veering off the Schuylkill River Trail, he and his group came upon a lone sycamore, centuries old, buried miles inside the woods. Then they ran into some oxen. Then a forgotten graveyard.

"There's a certain hill in the Wissahickon where if you get halfway up and look at the creek, it looks like it's going into the sky. It's an optical illusion — really spectacular," he mentions offhandedly. "I've been to places in Canada where you drive a hundred miles to see some river that looks like it's going up a hill."

Mention a mundane-seeming spot in the city — a park, say — and Goldstein will describe it back to you as a portal to the unknown. Ambling around the Belmont Plateau one time, for example, Goldstein and his crew decided to bushwhack off-trail.

"And there was this clear path, and the path went on and on and on, zigzagging, almost in circles, in loops. It was like, my God, where in the world are we?" he recalls. "We finally had to bushwhack our way out. I call it the Belmont Plateau maze."

"There's more than one maze," he adds mysteriously. "Be prepared. Once you go into the maze, be prepared to be in there for a lot longer than you expected."

A hermit's cave, an overgrown woodland opera theater, forgotten bridges, ancient structures, old stairways descending into the depths — "I can't really tell you how to get to these places, because they're miles from any street."

Goldstein leads organized hikes as often as five times a week, including a "lunch hike" on Wednesdays and a "brunch hike" on Fridays, and holds a weekly "twilight hike" on Thursdays, followed by "jazz or a movie" at his place in Chestnut Hill. His 1,000-member group held more than 200 events in the past year. He still has not, he insists, run out of new places to explore. "There's an area on the other side of Lincoln Drive from the entrance to the Wissahickon," he said recently. "I've started to explore those trails — there's a whole maze in there."

(editorial@citypaper.net)

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