

## THE GIFT OF *Experience*

Go beyond the bow  
THIS HOLIDAY SEASON.

This Yuletide, we invite you to take a break from the store aisles and give your loved ones the gift of experience. Offer them the chance to learn something new, try something they've always wanted to do, or create memories that will last longer than the snow on the ground.

We sent writer Matt Crossman out to test a few of the classes and adventure lessons offered around the state. He climbed trees, made cheese and lotion, and orientated in the wilderness with nothing more than a map, a compass, and a few friends. If you like these ideas, check out the list we've compiled on pages 66 to 69 for more unique gift experiences throughout the state.

STORY *Matt Crossman*  
PHOTOS *Dennis Coello*



# Climb Tall Trees



The tree's name is Willa.

She is a majestic red oak in Ferguson, and right now I am standing on one of her branches 30 feet in the air. I am drenched in sweat, with rivulets trickling from under my helmet. I am wearing a harness, and ropes connected to it tie me to the tree. Those ropes supported me as I climbed up here. I know—or should know—that because of them, there is no way I could fall. Yet still, I hold Willa as tightly as I can.

I am on the first of multiple pitches—like the landings in a stairwell—to which my instructor, Guy Mott, and I plan to ascend as part of my tree-climbing lesson, and if I'm going to go to the next one, I need to let go of Willa. I simultaneously have zero interest in letting go and 100 percent interest in climbing higher.

Something has to give.

Guy (his first name rhymes with tree) asks how I'm doing. I tell him I'm nervous, which is an understatement. My fear of heights, which was absent as I climbed, has barged in, big time. As I cling to the tree, Guy gently tries to coax me into letting go. He wants me to trust the ropes.

But he doesn't just tell me to trust them and expect me to do so. Instead, he encourages me to lean back, which will show me that the ropes will support me. Tentatively, I comply.

*Fine, I think, the ropes work. I still ain't letting go.*

Guy and I talk about what I have to do to go higher. I will recount that

conversation from memory, as even though my notebook and pen were in my pocket, I could not—would not—release my death grip on Willa to reach down to get them to take notes.

Here's what I remember: Guy says something but I forget what it is because I'm listening to my inner voice as it asks, *What was I thinking climbing this high?*

When Guy, owner of Adventure Tree in St. Louis—the only adventure education company in the country with tree-climbing lessons as its core modality—was a boy, he heard the famous quote, "Youth is wasted on the young." Those words have shaped his life ever since.

"I thought, that's somebody looking back from deep into their life, saying, when I was young, I could have done more," Guy says as he sits at a picnic table in the shade of Willa's branches. "I just took that to heart. I thought, 'I'm not going to waste my youth. I'm going to go out and do things.'"

When he was 17, Guy hitchhiked from the East Coast to the West Coast and back; it took two months. He drove a motorcycle at 140 miles per hour. He hiked the 486-mile Colorado Trail, long stretches of the Appalachian Trail, and all 48 of the 4,000-foot summits in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. He became a skydiving instructor and made 1,300 jumps.

RIGHT: Writer Matt Crossman practices tying knots with the climbing ropes. BELOW: Instructor Guy Mott waits for Matt to ready himself for the next leg of the climb.



**GIFT IDEA:** Tree-climbing or other high-flying adventure lessons

**PERFECT FOR:** The adventuresome thrill-seeker you know and love ... or those who like to challenge themselves in new and interesting ways

**WHY:** Sweat + exertion + new skill = big fun



LEFT: Guy Mott, owner of Adventure Tree, ensures safety is a priority, so he makes sure Matt's helmet fits exactly right. ABOVE: Matt is used to a lot of outdoor activities, but climbing trees brought him face-to-face with his fear of heights—especially when he had to swing down.

All of that was for fun. For work, he designed software. After 30 years he decided that, gratifying though that work may have been, it had kept him inside long enough. Nine years ago, Guy earned a master of education in adventure learning and started Adventure Tree with the slogan, "Have fun, learn, grow."

Adventure Tree offers tree-climbing instruction to camps and schools so they can start their own courses. Guy also teaches safe climbing methods to utility workers and tree-service companies.

Although his tree-climbing courses focus on skills—how to climb the ropes, tie knots, get the ropes up in the tree (by using a 9-foot-tall slingshot that is as awesome as it sounds)—he teaches much more than that.

"I'm teaching people to climb, yes, but also to push and challenge themselves," he says. "There's something that accesses deep inside of people when they climb up in trees. I've felt it myself. I've experienced it. I've heard people echo it back to me. It's very subtle, but you can feel it. It enriches your life. You learn something about trees and yourself."

One thing Guy has learned about is fear. He sees it swathed across the faces of his students. Some people show up full of confidence and freak out halfway to the first pitch. Some people show up freaked out and somehow find the confidence to take them to the very top of Willa.

Others, like me, are a mix of the two. I climbed into the rope-harness contraption and pulled myself up to the first pitch without fear. The climbing motion involves a high step with my foot in a loop in the rope then pulling myself up with my arms. I could see the ropes working. But when I

got to the first branch and stood on it, I froze. I stopped knowing the ropes were working and started wondering if they would.

I climbed by sight.

I needed to stand by faith.

I couldn't do it.

I have a sketchy relationship with heights. When I was in first grade, my family drove the length of the Florida Keys. The bridges between each island terrified me. My memory says the other side of the two-lane bridge was an endless parade of nose-to-tail semis going 95 miles per hour, driving with their tires on the centerline and missing us by inches. I was certain our van would get hit by one of those trucks and go flying off the bridge.

When I drive over bridges now, I barely glance sideways. But it's not just bridges; it's heights in general. I have somehow kept every plane I've ever flown in aloft by gripping the armrest and digging my toes into the floor.

I often try to challenge that fear—I've gone parachuting, parasailing, paragliding, bungee jumping, and mountain hiking. I apply lessons learned scaling mountains and jumping out of airplanes and climbing trees to the rest of my life. I own my own writing business, and for most of the past four years I have been the sole breadwinner for my wife and two kids. That is scarier than all those other things combined, in large part because I have no choice. There are no ropes to keep me aloft, no branches to hold.

I have a choice on Willa. I could give up, and that thought crosses my mind. I look over at Guy, dangling a few feet to my left. He is smiling. I am grinding my molars to dust. The difference between my body language and his is the difference between Willa's

Guy helps Matt steady himself to reach the next pitch, or resting point. Guy allowed Matt to conquer his fear of heights at his own pace during the climb.



I'm trapped 40 feet up, just dangling there. I was terrified half an hour ago when I was connected to the tree by the rope, lanyard, and my own death grip. Now all I have is the ropes.

trunk and a cooked spaghetti noodle. I can't talk myself into going any higher. But I can't go down either.

Some adventure instructors fully understand their adventure and know nothing about instructing. Guy has mastered both. He recognizes my distress, understands it, and doesn't try to talk me out of it. After his instruction shows me I can trust the ropes, I manage to let go of Willa long enough to wrap a lanyard around her and connect it to myself, one carabiner on each hip of my harness. This is the proper procedure—Guy calls it one, two, one. I am always, always, always, tied in at least one way. After I connect the lanyard but before I disconnect my climbing rope, I am tied in twice. Even then, I barely let go.

I unclip my climbing rope and hand it to Guy. He moves it higher in the tree—so I can climb higher if I ever decide I want to—and hands it back to me. I reconnect the rope to

my harness (so I am again connected twice), disconnect the lanyard, take a deep breath, and start climbing again.

I high-step, pull, high-step, pull, high-step, pull, up, up, up some more. I stretch my hands and feet as far as they'll go to my left to gain purchase on the next pitch. I pull myself over and sprawl on the branch.

I stand up.

I freeze again.

This time I thaw faster.

I do the lanyard dance again so Guy can move my rope. I perform a B.A.C.K. check—the safety routine Guy taught me in which I check the belt, anchor (the rope's position in the tree), connectors, and knots.

Ten minutes later, I'm 10 feet higher in the tree—my third pitch—a full 55 feet up. I let go of Willa without Guy suggesting it first. "I couldn't have done that 10 minutes ago," I tell him.

I decide to quit here at the third pitch. I am in decent shape, but the

stress of the climb, on top of the climb itself, has wiped me out. My hands shake. I struggle to open the carabiners. My left leg spasms up and down. And, yes, I'm still afraid. But that fear has turned practical.

I start to slide down. I mess up the procedure, which causes the stopper knot that I tied in my rope on the way up to create a knot jam. I'm trapped 40 feet up, just dangling there.

I was terrified half an hour ago when I was connected to the tree by the rope, lanyard, and my own death grip. Now all I have is the ropes, and I feel safe and secure. I finally wrench the knot loose and glide to the ground.

I'm exhilarated, radiating energy with "climber's high." I walk over to the picnic table to jot down notes. The adrenaline that has been rampaging through my bloodstream for the past hour is still on full go, so much so that I have no small motor skills. I can't read a thing I wrote.

# Make Cheese & Lotion

**GIFT IDEA:** Cheese- or other product-making lessons on farms, artisan cooking lessons

**PERFECT FOR:** Fans of history, self-reliance, and cooking, plus children and people who love animals

**WHY:** Give a man cheese, and he'll eat for a day. Teach him how to make cheese, and he'll make a pizza, and you just might get a slice.



Sandi and Keith Bentz keep 22 head of Texas Longhorn cattle at Heaven on Earth Ranch, where they offer classes such as cheese making.

**Take one step** onto the farm owned by Sandi and Keith Bentz, and you don't have to ask why they named it Heaven on Earth Ranch. The 360-degree view reveals rolling hills for miles and miles. There is no sound except that created by animals (on the rare occasions that helicopters or planes fly overhead, they do more to prove the silence than to detract from it), and there are no smells except those created by animals.

Sandi and Keith are practitioners and advocates of the homesteading lifestyle and have learned by trial and error over the last 11 years how to become self-sufficient. Now they are turning a building on the Heaven on Earth property into an educational

facility so they can pass along what they have learned. They want to teach people about life on a farm and about how simple life was before it got so complicated.

I visited their farm, which is about an hour northeast of Kansas City, one sun-kissed Saturday to learn how to make cheese and goat's milk lotion. I brought my 10-year-old daughter with me, and she helped with the cheese and made the lotion herself with plans to give it to her mom/my wife as a present. She laughed in delight when she held a week-old baby rabbit and petted a day-old calf, for which she offered a half-dozen name suggestions, all of them ice-cream related because the calf's mom is named Sundae. That

laughter was nothing compared to her reaction a week later when she found out Sandi and Keith had named the calf after her.

The Bentzes own 22 head of Texas Longhorn cattle here and another 17 in Illinois, plus 10 goats, and ducks, honeybees, so many chickens they can't name them all, rabbits, worms, and a Jersey cow for milking named Elsie.

Elsie provided the gallon of milk from which Sandi and I made a pound of mozzarella. The cheese was surprisingly easy to make. There are only five ingredients: milk, citric acid, rennet, salt, and water. The only "skills" needed are the ability to measure, read a thermometer, stir, and knead.

We start by pouring the milk and



LEFT: Sandi and Keith keep goats on their farm, and they teach people how to make lotion from goat's milk. BELOW: Sandi shows writer Matt Crossman how to make cheese using simple techniques.

citric acid into a giant pot and heating it up. Then we add the rennet. Sandi stirs the concoction with a spoon, judging by what she sees with her eyes and feels with her hand through the spoon when it curdles enough to begin the separation process. The temperature is crucial, too; the goal is 105 degrees for this step.

"See the way it's curdling?" Sandi asks as the soon-to-be-cheese in the pot looks a little bit like Greek yogurt. "It's getting close."

When it has curdled enough, I pour the mixture over a colander. Sandi saves the leftover liquid, known as whey, to feed to the chickens. We transfer the "cheese" to a glass bowl and pop it in the microwave.

Although Sandi and Keith pursue a simpler lifestyle, they are not anti-technology. They text and send emails and have a website and Facebook page. And as we make the cheese, Sandi jokes, "You wonder: What did they do years ago without a microwave?"

Whatever they did, it took longer, that's for sure. In part thanks to the microwave, making the cheese takes less than an hour. We knead it like pizza dough to squeeze more whey out, put it back in the microwave, and start over. When it is just the right texture—harder than dough but not as hard as finished cheese—Sandi puts it into a circular pan and places it in

cold water to cool.

**My daughter makes the lotion.**

She loves to help my wife cook at home, so she is comfortable measuring the avocado oil, almond oil, phenolip, wax, stearic acid, water, and milk. She puts all the ingredients in the microwave, sets the timer, pulls it out when it is done, and then pours it into the blender.

"It looks like a milkshake or whipped cream," she says as she peers into the blender. "But I don't want to eat it." She gently touches the button on the blender and jumps when it whirs to life faster than she expects. She had the same reaction, times 10, when she petted a Texas Longhorn outside and he shook his head.

Sandi lets my daughter pick the lotion's scent and the color of the plastic container. As we rub on the lotion, it feels less greasy than most lotions I've encountered, and Sandi says it works particularly well on chapped heels.

**Both Sandi and Keith** have jobs outside of the farm. She is a bank teller and he is a corrections officer. In 2006, the couple moved from Illinois to this 40-acre plot in Weatherby (60 miles northeast of Kansas City) to try to get away from the harried city life. As proof their lives have changed despite still holding down "city" jobs, Keith adds: "People tell me I drive too slow."

Heaven on Earth sells honey, eggs, simple household cleaning



supplies, excess produce from the garden, goat's milk lotion, and goat's milk soap at a local farmer's market. The Bentzes grow or produce about 75 percent of what they eat.

My daughter and my wife are huge fans of the *Little House* books; they have read all of them out loud multiple times. As we drove home from Heaven on Earth—after I finally convinced my daughter that we did, in fact, have to go home—it occurred to me that our day there was as close to stepping into one of the *Little House* books as we'll ever get. I didn't plan it that way, but I gave my daughter the gift of spending one day like the young Laura Ingalls spent all of hers.

As for the cheese we made ... only half of it made it home. We devoured the rest.

# Use a Map & Compass



I look at the trail ahead of me, then swivel my head toward another trail that branches to my left. The fork is a good sign; my trail map shows a crisscross of trails near my destination at Busiek State Forest and Wildlife Area near Ozark.

The map has six points marked on it. I am tasked, along with two of my classmates, with finding all of them.

I am 97 percent certain that we are almost at Point 4. I think it's 20 yards ahead of me ... but I also might be standing on it. Neither the map nor my ability to read it helps me know for sure. Regardless, we declare Point 4 found.

The three of us—Lacy Mikrut, Matt Graham, and I—confer about where to go next. From Point 4, we have to find Point 3. We each pull out our compasses, place them on our maps, and measure our "bearings"—the angle relative to north by which we must travel to get there.

It is mid-afternoon on a Saturday, and Lacy, Matt, I, and 13 others spent all morning in a nearby church classroom learning from renowned guide Dan Nash. We studied how to read a map, work a compass, and calculate bearings. Then Dan sent us out into the wilderness to try it for ourselves.

In the forest on our own, we have to figure out where we are, where

we're going, and how to get there. We must do this without any computerized voices telling us how. This is old-school navigation, and it's a necessary skill for any serious hiker. Most places worth hiking don't have cell service or signals for GPS locators. And, anyway, outdoor adventurers know batteries die and GPS devices can easily be dropped, broken, or left behind. In case of disaster or electromagnetic pulse, humans need to know how to navigate without devices.

Matt, Lacy, and I find the same results when we spin our compasses for a bearing reading. Another good sign. We head toward Point 3—or at least where we figure Point 3 is located.

As we move, we stick to the trail. Dan warned us—rightfully so—that we were not yet prepared to go off-trail. Even as we tromp through paths that others have walked before us, we find more than I expect. I learn from my companions that figuring out where you are, where you're going, and how to get there is about more than following squiggly lines on a page.

**GIFT IDEA:** Orientating and survival classes

**PERFECT FOR:** Hikers, campers, fans of the outdoors, or doomsayers

**WHY:** It's a skill that you don't want to find out the hard way that you should have learned.



Instructor Dan Nash, right, shows students in the orientating class how to plot a course between two points on a map.

Dan Nash moved to the Ozarks when he was 7. He has two younger brothers, and together they explored their family's 400-acre farm from sun-up until sundown. He learned to hike, navigate, and rock climb, and, as he grew older, his outdoor hobby turned into a passion.

Eventually, he started guiding hikes, gained sponsorships from outdoors companies, and traveled the world in search of incredible summits and unseen views. His company, Satori Adventures and Expeditions, has led excursions all over the world, including a dozen summits of Mount Everest.

Closer to home, Dan also runs HikingTheOzarks.com, the business through which he offers three courses—map and compass, survival, and first aid, all of which are required to become a guide.

Even as his outdoors career took off, Dan has kept his day job. He's a homicide investigator for the Missouri State Highway Patrol, an incredibly stressful position from which the wilderness gives him respite.

While noting it's important not to go off-trail without proper training, he says he loves going off-trail and finding waterfalls, rock formations, and valleys that aren't on maps because few people, if any, have ever seen them.

"We have so many awesome things in the Ozarks to see. But only a small percentage of them are documented," he says. "We have these large, vast areas in the Mark Twain National Forest. Most people only see a very, very small piece, little

slivers of the pie. Why not go look at the whole pie?"

For as long as she can remember, Lacy Mikrut has loved the outdoors. An elementary school music teacher, she guides summer hikes in Colorado. She is also a fitness instructor, and she showed me how to better use my hiking poles and exercises to keep me in better hiking shape.

Lacy seems proficient enough at using a map and compass that, at first, I thought she was an instructor in the class. She isn't, but she does have experience with navigation. Her father-in-law is an Eagle Scout instructor, and her uncle is a mountain man and Vietnam War veteran. Both have extensive orienteering knowledge.

But experience with navigation is not the same thing as being able to get lost and still find your way out of the woods. It takes a long time to learn that. Lacy's participation in the class is more like supervised practice. For her, the class has practical value: she has some skills but needs more.

Lacy has mapped out a new route for her guiding business, and the map-and-compass class will help take her there. So far, the hikes she guides have always been "out and backs." That is, she returns to the cabin at the end of the day instead of camping out overnight.

With enough practice at orientating, she will be able to expand her offerings. "I want to be sure that whoever I take—whether it's just my girlfriends or my family—if something catastrophic happens, I want to be able to get them out," she says.



LEFT: Lacy Mikrut and writer Matt Crossman check each other's bearing calculations. BELOW: After a morning of learning the ins-and-outs of orientating, the classmates broke into small groups and headed into the forest.



ABOVE: Students started with the basics in the orientation class: how to read a compass. RIGHT: They also learned how to read maps the old-fashioned way: on paper instead of on a screen.

"Most people only see a very, very small piece, little slivers of the pie. Why not go look at the whole pie?"

—DAN NASH,  
guide and orientating  
instructor at Hiking the Ozarks



Hiking helped Matt Graham through trauma. When Matt was 15, he was a passenger in a car accident that killed one of his friends.

Then, five years ago, doctors told Matt and his pregnant wife, Alice, that their son would have no lung function and would likely only live for 20 minutes.

"The entire time my wife carried our beautiful boy we treated him as if he was already here," Matt says. "Took him hiking, to Kauai, plenty of other places to ensure he was involved in everything we did." Walker lived four days. His fifth birthday would have been October 18.

Through these dark times, hiking and being outdoors helped pull Matt through. "Hiking became my one time in my life when nothing else matters," Matt says.

Now, Matt sees a chance to redeem his heartbreak by turning his love for hiking and the outdoors into healing for other people. He is working to start a foundation to help people suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder—to take them hiking, fishing, and floating. He describes what hiking has brought to his life like this: "The solitude, the tranquility, the opportunity to realize that life is what you make it—not what happens to you."

As part of his work with others, he envisions leading hikes. To do so, he has to know where he is, where he's going, and where he's been.

I signed up for this class because at least once a year I go on an overnight hike, and I want to add orientating to my skill set. On one hike a few

years ago, my friends and I got lost on the way to the top of Mount Mitchell in North Carolina, the tallest peak east of the Mississippi River. I did not know how to work a compass—I didn't even own one, for that matter. We re-found the trail by dumb luck.

My hiking partners in this class helped me navigate learning more than I ever expected. I expected to learn how to use a compass at the class, and I did. Before I took the class, I saw the skill as strictly utilitarian.

After talking with Dan, Lacy, and Matt, I see it as an experience similar to when I taught my kids how to ride their bikes. The real benefit of the gift is the joy that results from using it.

From Dan, I learned something entirely unexpected: the joy of leaving the trail. I arrived at the class with two hiking rules I would never, ever violate: 1. Stay on the trail. 2. Bring enough coffee. Now, I'm seriously questioning No. 1. I never knew how much I was missing—or really that I was missing anything at all—until Dan described to me the joy of finding unknown waterfalls and undocumented valleys.

From Lacy, I learned the value of not being content to just get by. Before the class started, she already knew the basics of what we would learn. But that's not good enough for her. She wants to be an expert.

From Matt, I learned that healing comes in many forms, and that no matter how terribly lost we might be, there's a way to move forward. Maybe, if we cling to hope, we can become found again. Maybe we can even find our own way out.