Backpacking down the Wild Azalea Trail

By Mike Hastings
State Editor

It’s that time of year again when Louisiana joins the rest of the nation and actually has more than one season. It’s also time to break out the camping gear and head for the hills.

You actually don’t have to go far to find rolling hills, clear flowing streams, piney woods and hardwood bottomland. They’re all waiting just a couple of hours’ drive north of Lafayette just west of Alexandria.

The Wild Azalea Trail that winds its way through the Kisatchie National Forest is the granddaddy of Louisiana’s trails with 31 miles of some of the best forest scenery in the state. The trail cuts through dense woods, up and down hills that literally will take your breath away if you go too fast and occasionally crosses spring-fed creeks. Just follow the bright yellow marks on the trees.

Trail maps are available.

You don’t have to do the entire trail. It intersects forest roads at regular intervals which present the opportunity to hike portions of the trail at different times.

Several other trails branch off the Wild Azalea and lead to Valentine Lake and Kingsland Reservoir.

But Wild Azalea isn’t the only trail that offers challenges, as well as beautiful 

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If you're into hiking and backpacking, the state has more than two dozen recognized hiking trails, many of which allow trailside camping. The nearest trail, besides the Acadia Park Nature Trail, is at Lake Fausse Pointe State Park east of St. Martinville. The six-mile trail winds through bottomland forest:

If you're planning to head out on a trail, there are several things you'll need, most importantly, the proper pack. If it's just a day trip, a small knapsack will do. But if it's an overnighter, don't try to stash food, tent, change of clothes, sleeping bag, water and other necessities in any pack unless it has a frame and waistbelt attached. If you do, chances are you'll be so tired and sore from toting it all that you won't get much enjoyment out of the trip.

Make sure your shoes or boots are up to the trip and fit properly. Most Louisiana trails can be hiked in decent walking shoes with grip soles but don't head out with brand new footwear without breaking them in for a few days. Blisters can ruin a hike.

Although it will add weight to your pack, take plenty of water. You can't depend on the purity of stream or river water but if you have to use it to drink or cook, boil it for several minutes or use purification tablets.

Information on trail locations and facilities available for all kinds of camping is available from the state Office of Culture, Recreation and Tourism. The best single source is the Louisiana Outdoors booklet, which features nature trails, backpacking, campsites, driving tours and swamp tours. Write to the office at P.O. Box 94291 or call (504) 342-8119.