



## Get Online & Outside

Web meet-up groups help hikers get together

**Hikers on a *Something New!* meet-up trip on the Middle Fork Snoqualmie Trail. Online meet-up groups are an increasingly popular way for hikers to organize group trips.**



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The bank of the river glowed so white I had to shade my eyes. Salmonberries flickered in the evening light, which was soft and yellow, as if it was shining through old glass. Laughter from farther up the trail drifted to me on the breeze. I was hiking the Middle Fork of the Snoqualmie River with a group of strangers.

I had signed up to join the hiking group *Something New!*, a subgroup of [www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com), an online networking site. When you visit sites like Facebook and Myspace, you might never meet the other members. But with the web site [meetup.com](http://meetup.com), meeting outside the digital plane is the point. Meetup.com, founded in 2002, hosts more than 45,000 groups, based in 112 countries.

"It's been almost 10 great months with Meetup," said Sheri Hilton, one of the organizers of the Meetup.com group *Something New!*, which focuses on hiking, but does various activities, including bowling and barbecues. "Like any organizer, it's fun for me to watch the group grow, see many return hikers and make new friends and contacts."

Hilton and her boyfriend, Richard Stockhoff, led our hike, and there was no pressure to maintain a certain pace. There was a sense of

triumphant relief when the group would stop in the mist rolling off the river. The two dogs accompanying us—both named Jackson (a golden retriever and a German shepherd-basset hound mix)—would relax too, lazing in the creek water.

The dogs' minder is Michelle Tepfenhart, who moved to Seattle from Rhode Island six months ago. Also from the East Coast—specifically, Massachusetts—is member Paul Lamprey. Maggie Stam recently moved to North Bend from Atlanta, Georgia. Many of these transplants joined *Something New!* to meet other people with similar interests.

One member from Washington is Deborah Divers, who has hiked with the group since October. She'd previously found a [meetup.com](http://meetup.com) group in her hometown of Olympia, but that group hiked too quickly for her comfort.

"At the blessed young age of 55, most people I know do not hike," she said. "So, I searched for another hiking meet-up that might be a better fit for me. And I found them! I drive to Issaquah and join my meet-up group there. The trip takes me about an hour and 15 minutes, so it's worth it to find the group that I am not only compatible with, but I enjoy immensely!"

In addition to *Something New!*, there is the well-established backpacking group, Seattle Backpackers, which focuses on overnight trips.

Dedicated outdoorsman Cameron Ownby founded the Seattle Backpackers group in 2006, during a move from Chicago to Seattle.

"Before I even landed with my stuff, there were 40 members," he said.

The group now has 1,300 members, and about 250 active backpackers.

"We have an extremely diverse group," he said. Last time he was on a trip, there was a woman from Chile and one from India.

As well as welcoming hikers of diverse origins, both groups strive to accommodate different kinds of hikers.

"There is no such thing as inexperienced or overqualified," reads the Seattle Backpackers group profile. Ownby says he wanted to "get that out right up front," so that hikers of any skill level would feel comfortable participating.

For some using the Seattle Backpackers site, it's their first time hiking.

"Usually five people e-mail me directly saying, what should I bring?" Ownby said.

The people on my *Something New!* hike had a wide range of outdoor experience, from a woman who hiked every week to me. I hiked and backpacked frequently before starting at college, but hadn't been on a trail since. There was a sense of fun in the learning process, and all the hikers seemed to enjoy the moderate pace and opportunities to admire the views.

"We spend our weekdays and weeknights

rushing to push around paper, in the car fighting traffic driving to and from work to see clients," Hilton said. "So when I hit that trail, it's not about rushing anywhere, but about just taking my time."

The volunteer organizers of these groups have to be passionate enough to do a lot of work. Ownby spends about five to six hours a week maintaining Seattle Backpackers.

Organizers also have to pay for it. Meetup.com is a private corporation, and charges those who sign up to start a group. Rates for a group vary from \$19 for one month's membership to six months at \$12 per month. Members, however, can join as many groups and attend all the meet-ups they want for no charge.

"It's absolutely my passion. If it was a hundred bucks a month, I'd pay it," Ownby said.

The site offers tools to make organizing groups easier, like a mass e-mail system.

"[There are] some limitations to the site, but you just have to accept it for what it is," he said. "They seem to be consistently improving the service."

Ownby said the biggest problem is when those who sign up for trips don't show up.

He limits the number of people allowed to RSVP to reduce the impact on trails and make minding the backpackers easier. No-shows waste coveted spots.

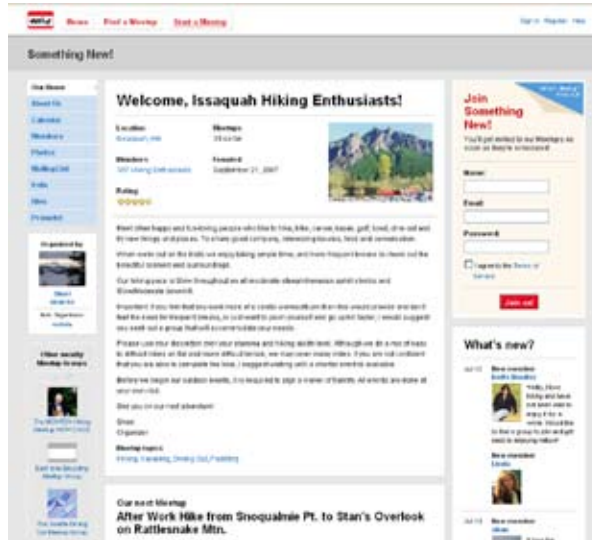
As for problems during trips, generally there aren't any, Ownby said. Instead, members tend to form a tight-knit group when they enter the wilderness.

Hilton, the organizer of *Something New!*, said that no-shows happen once in a while, but hikers getting lost on the way to the meeting location and a lack of bathrooms out there are the worst problems.

Hilton works in real estate, as does her boyfriend, Stockhoff. Their jobs used to dominate their lives.

"If my boyfriend and I didn't break away from our very stressful and demanding jobs, we could develop some illness or suffer job burn-out," she said. "Before I get to the trailhead, sometimes my heart races a little. I feel so alive when I'm in the forest."

More can come out of a hike with *Something*



**Meet-up groups such as the Issaquah-based *Something New!* are a great way to meet new hiking partners. You simply sign up, show up and start hiking.**

*New!* than just having fun. Four of the group's members used to be morbidly obese. Since they've become active in the group, they have lost a combined 80 pounds. Hilton's boyfriend also lost a few pounds, she said. "And we're much happier now, so that's a plus."

Hilton would often glance my way during the hike. An infectious smile would turn her lips, and despite the heat I always smiled back. She emanates charisma, which, when paired with that mischievous smile and

her bright eyes, makes her a natural leader.

"I wanted to share my excitement, curiosity, adventurous and childlike nature and the pleasure [of] seeing the happiness on other people's faces when they set foot on their first or second hike," she said.

We had to keep going when she slid her pack back on to continue down the trail, chattering about a waterfall or view up ahead. Stockhoff bounded along beside the group, balancing on fallen logs and railings. They encouraged us to go farther than we would ever have gone alone. Now instead of being strangers, I have ten new friends. ♦

## Online Hiking Meet-up Groups

### Something New!

<http://hiking.meetup.com/382/>

Meet other people who like to hike, bike, canoe, kayak, golf, bowl, catch a movie, or dine out.

### Seattle Backpackers

[www.Seattlebackpackers.org](http://www.Seattlebackpackers.org)

The Seattle Backpackers are about making new friends and exploring the outdoors together.

### The Eastside Slow Poke Hikers

<http://hiking.meetup.com/343/>

This group is dedicated to the "lollygaggers, the meanderers, the dawdlers, and the slow-pace hikers of the Pacific Northwest."

### Pacific Northwest Hiking Group

<http://hiking.meetup.com/233/>

This group does hikes, backpack trips, bike trips, walking and social events.