

Feb. 15, 2003.

Learning to be a Survivor

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Long before *Survivor* was a weekly contest for a million dollars, Tony Nester and the people who travel from around the world to learn from him were living the reality.

There are no cameras at Ancient Pathways, an outdoor survival training camp in Arizona, and no one gets voted out. But visitors of all ages learn the skills they need to survive Mother Nature in situations where the only prize may be their lives.

"Most people who come out want to learn basic skills to help them survive a short term emergency," explains the 38-year-old Nester.

His clientele is a diverse crowd ranging from campers and hikers to archeologists and park rangers. Those visitors have increased since the Sept. 11 tragedy, when many people began to consider for the first time how they'd survive if they couldn't rely on normal channels.

But why Arizona?

The attraction, says Nester, is Arizona's ability to appear like almost any other part of the world.

"Six out of the seven world life zones can be found in Arizona," Nester explains, noting that Flagstaff provides mountains, canyons, ancient ruins and a range of temperatures. All programs take place in the Colorado Plateau in northern Arizona, which is also the ancestral homeland of several ancient tribes. Their prehistoric dwellings still dot the landscape.

The locale, Nester says, is "unmatched" for providing clients with the opportunities necessary to test their skills.

And test them he does.

Sign up for the seven-day Bushcraft adventure and you and five others will walk into the woods with only a cooking pot, knife, basic food staples, canteen and small survival kit, but you'll leave with the ability to feed yourself from "nature's kitchen."

Sign up for the three-day Walkabout course and you'll be responsible for making your own shelter and creating fire without matches.

Other courses teach you orienteering, signalling methods, the recognition and use of medicinal plants, animal tracking, mental toughness and the use of bows and arrows.

The best part about a trek with Nester is that he isn't a fatalist.

He'll show you which insects you can eat, which plants are edible and what water to avoid, but if actually eating and drinking them doesn't appeal to you, you're in good company. It doesn't appeal to Nester either.

He never takes a group out without real food and water.

"I'm not into suffering," he says with a laugh. "The learning curve drops phenomenally when you're cold and hungry."

Nester's road to teaching began at age 11 and a love affair with the outdoors developed as a Boy Scout in Michigan.

He then spent much of his free time backpacking and canoeing across northern Michigan and Canada in his teens and twenties. When on one of the trips he found himself wondering how he'd survive if he lost his gear, he began to actively search out ways to survive without it.

For four years, he lived in the woods learning from anyone who would teach him about the historical ways the ancestors survived. Mountain men, native Americans, archeologists, cowboys and others became his teachers. A B.A. in anthropology added to his skills and in 1989 he turned his interest into the company he runs today.

When he's not teaching at Ancient Pathways, Nester can be found teaching in a classroom at the University of Northern Arizona, School of Forestry.

And what he has to teach you is worth knowing. They are the skills that can come in just as handy when you get lost on a hike as they might during a worldwide crisis.

Of the many visitors to the camp, one of the most memorable is the lady who really wanted to be on *Survivor* and visited Ancient Pathways prior to her audition.

★ Ancient Pathways courses for the 2003 season can be found at their Web site <http://www.apathways.com> or by calling 1-928-774-7522. Costs range from \$85 U.S. for a one-day course to \$695 U.S. for a full week.