

Hiking made pleasant

A new group will promote walking in the countryside and friendship. What could be better than free physical exercise asks ALIX NORMAN



“Why strolling? Why not ambling or sauntering, rambling or simply walking?” There’s a pause and a smile as my interviewer considers. “Strolling is hiking made pleasant,” he replies. “I suppose it was coined from the idea that what we’re offering is not an intensive hike, strolling is really walking... but not too serious, really. We’re not stretching you to exhaustion; we want to offer the chance at consistent physical exercise with mental exhilaration, in the company of people who will soon be your friends.”

This well-considered reply seems typical of the founder of The Cyprus Strollers. Like his answer, Xenophon Hasapis is positive, thoughtful and thorough, the type of man whose empathy and integrity endear him to all; it’s almost impossible not to like such a courteous and dynamic character.

Based in Nicosia, The Cyprus Strollers is a newly formed group which aims to provide the perfect mixture of fun walks, a spot of exercise and the company of like-minded nature enthusiasts. With a consistent activity programme (walks occur every weekend, alternating between Saturday and Sunday in order to facilitate the needs of all members) and free membership, it’s a club that’s bound to appeal to people from - pardon the pun - all walks of life. Superbly organised, the group boasts a comprehensive website, an upcoming Facebook page and an email system to ensure everyone knows what’s happening when, and where they should meet. And it’s run by Xenophon himself, whose enthusiasm for the gentle sport of strolling is highly infectious.

“Doing activities outdoors was always part of my upbringing,” he explains. “My late father was a botanist who loved life outdoors and the touch of nature. He would take us for strolls, particularly in the summer time when we’d head up to the mountains, and point out all the plant names - some of which I can still recall!” This tradition of getting out into nature is something that clearly means a great deal to Xenophon, who believes that strolling has a great deal to offer the younger generations.

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ing let loose, if you like, to spend their time in front of screens, mobiles, appliances, tv, computers, and this makes them more sedentary - it doesn’t allow their creativity to flourish - it makes them passive. I realised the distinct temptation when my son was younger, and I wanted to create a paradigm outside this way of living, so I started taking him on walks and was tremendously impressed with his response: he loved the conversations and the knowledge. I remember the first time we went on a walk near Athens, where we lived at the time. We spent an hour and a half climbing a mountain to get to a spring, singing and playing and chatting; by the time we were done he had a smile up to his ears - I will never forget that.”

It’s a heart-warming anecdote that perfectly illustrates all that Xenophon hopes the Cyprus Strollers will be able to offer: companionship and a healthy stroll in the beauty of nature. And as the former leader of the Athens Strollers Club, he’s certainly privy to the expertise needed for such an enterprise, for it takes a certain amount of skill to ensure that taking a stroll in the wilderness requires quite a bit of forethought.

“People will be informed about an upcoming stroll through the website and the email system,” he explains, adding that there are currently 12 activities already confirmed for the coming months. “We can then carpool from the Nicosia meeting point if needed - a saving on fuel and an opportunity to enrich the conversation - or meet up with other members at the designated start point.”

As the current walk leader (though he hopes others will soon be



Xenophon taking a break in nature

able to take over, volunteering their own favourite strolls), Xenophon has already hiked every single route himself. “I have walked every single route that we’re doing over the past year and a half,” he says. “It’s very important that the route leader can guide the group, using notes he has made previously to ensure we’re not searching for a trail. So we make sure everyone is wearing a good pair of shoes, and has the essentials - water sunglasses, and so forth - in a rucksack, and we set off.”

It all seems superbly organised; a passport to quiet adventure. And living on a beautiful Mediterranean island certainly lends itself to outdoor activities of this type. “There will be short breaks during the hikes to enjoy a particular panoramic view and catch our breath,” Xenophon enthuses, explaining that all the hikes are rated according to difficulty. “We’re offering a variety of strolls,” he clarifies, “though nothing is ever exhausting! A rating of one designates a walk that’s easy for everyone, essentially flat terrain and not exceeding two hours. Two denotes a medium difficulty: slightly longer and perhaps a few gentle uphills. And three is a little more strenuous, with quite a bit of climbing involved.” And, whatever the level of physical challenge, there’s always a well-planned reward at the end of the road: “Once we conclude the trail, we’ll either adjourn to a taverna or enjoy a homemade picnic.”

It all sounds just delightful: healthy, hearty and amiable, with a substantial dollop of knowledge for good measure. And all at no cost - terribly important in these times, Xenophon concludes: “Perhaps we’ve

been through a period of time when there was an over-reliance on material things,” he adds sagely. “I think we’ve seen, with the economic collapse of the country, that it might be time to rely on our own two legs. And that’s really what The Cyprus Strollers is all about: enjoying what the island has to offer in terms of harmony of body and spirit.”

It does sound ever so jolly, doesn’t it? I’m definitely going to be a Cyprus Stroller... how about you?



The Cyprus Strollers

Meet every alternate Saturday / Sunday from October to May, and everyone - residents, tourists, children and pets - is welcome to join in. Details of the schedule and routes are available on the website <http://cyprus-strollers.org> or by calling Xenophon Hasapis by email (xenophon.hasapis@gmail.com) or phone (97 613720). The first walk is on October 4 in Nicosia, starting at the Ministry of Health at 11am and following the Pedieos River