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HIKANATION TREK

COAST TO COAST

IS FEAT ON FEET

No travel agent could have planned it better. The Sierras in spring, the Rockies in early fall, the Appalachians in winter, and finally -- by next June -- the nation's capital.

What's different about this itinerary, however, is that it's all on foot -- a 4,500-mile colossal hike from the Golden Gate Bridge to the base of the Washington Monument.

Traveling the distance is a hardy group of nearly 60 backpackers determined to call attention to the size of the U.S. hiking community, the lack of sufficient trails around the country and the importance of walking and hiking as an "ideal" form of recreation for a low-energy future.

HikaNation 1980, conducted by the American Hiking Society, is sponsored by the makers of Postum instant grain beverage and the U.S. Department of the Interior. It was the idea of a seasoned hiker, Jim Kern, a man deeply concerned about U.S. trails and blessed with a talent for organizing mammoth hikes such as the state-wide march for trails he organized throughout his native Florida several years ago.

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"Our trails are disappearing," Kern says. "We have one-third fewer foot paths than we did 25 years ago. Yet in the last decade the number of hikers and backpackers in the United States has actually increased tenfold. In fact, last year nearly one out of every five Americans hiked."

Kern says there are only four national scenic trails in the United States, the famous Appalachian Trail, the Pacific Crest Trail, the Continental Divide Trail and the North Country Trail. Many other long-distance trails have been proposed but have yet to receive legislative approval from Congress.

But as far as the HikaNation participants go, dramatizing a message is only part of the road ahead of them. For most, it's a personal Odyssey that they'll remember all the rest of their lives.

Gomer Pyles and Gayle Rainbow, for example, are taking their infant daughter Jiamie with them across the country, in celebration of an historical time when families went across country on foot to settle in new lands.

And John Stout, a 68-year-old from Seattle, who didn't start climbing until he was 50, says he "got the fever" when he read a newspaper article about HikaNation. He didn't take it completely seriously, however, until his wife demonstrated her approval by buying him a down jacket for the trip.

From Jiamie to John and all those whose ages fall in between, the group is a slice of Americana. There's a librarian, photographer, nurse; handyman, housewife and a recent high school graduate.

There are some celebrities too. Joining HikaNation in California was Nobel prize-winning physicist Glenn T. Seaborg. Seaborg personally scouted the entire California route with his wife, their children and friends, laying out the trail for the HikaNation troop. He walked the entire route, except for a short stretch through the back streets of Sacramento.

Thousands of Americans are also expected to take part in HikaNation, although most will walk relatively short distances, joining the march as it passes through their neighborhoods, towns and states.

In San Francisco last April, officials closed the upper deck of the Oakland Bay Bridge to let the HikaNation troop pass. Nearly 10,000 friends and supporters joined them on the bridge crossing, helping to make hiking history.

By the time the HikaNation group reaches Washington it will have passed through California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri, Illinois, Kentucky, West Virginia and Virginia.

For more information, those interested in joining along the route can call a 24-hour phone service at the offices of the American Hiking Society at 305-251-0484 or write the AHS at 317 Pennsylvania Avenue, S.E., Washington, D.C. 20013.