

# — Take a — **THRU-HIKE**

Dixie's How-To Guide for Hiking the Appalachian Trail

MT. KATAHDIN



Jessica "DIXIE" Mills

Take A Thru-Hike: Dixie's How-To Guide for Hiking the Appalachian Trail

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## **PREFACE**

Planning a thru-hike can be a somewhat daunting and overwhelming task, especially for a beginning backpacker. While preparing for my journey on the Appalachian Trail (AT), I often felt lost in a sea of information, usually overturning more questions than answers. The purpose of this guide is to help cut through the confusion, condense the information and present it in a straightforward and simple way. I want to leave you feeling more confident about your upcoming escapade, rather than intimidated by the thought of planning it. My first overnight backpacking trip was thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail, so I hope my perspective can be appreciated by novice and seasoned hikers alike.

For the beginners, if you see a term you do not understand or is not clearly explained, please refer to the “Hiker Terms” section. The more experienced may get a chuckle out of reading it, too. Throughout this guide, you will find not only relevant pictures from my thru-hike, but also links to my blog or vlog about various topics. Now, take a deep breath and let's do this!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jessica “Dixie” Mills is an outdoor enthusiast and avid gardener from Opelika, AL. In 2012, she graduated from Auburn University after completing her Bachelor of Biosystems Engineering degree with a minor in Agronomy and Soils.

After leaving the Colorado oilfield in 2014, she decided to fulfill her childhood dream of thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail which she completed on October 19, 2015. Although Jessica originally had no intentions of hiking other long distance trails, she now aspires to accomplish the Triple Crown of hiking.

You can follow Jessica’s adventures by visiting her [blog](#) or [vlog](#).

## CHAPTER ONE

### *My Story*

If you are reading this, it means you have already been bitten by the hiking bug. You may or may not realize it, but somewhere throughout your life a seed was planted and has started growing. It might have happened recently or years ago. Either way, it has led you to seek more information about hiking the Appalachian Trail. I must warn you, though. The more you learn, the more you will develop an insatiable desire to break away from the chains of everyday life and chase the wind. For me, it happened on a family vacation when I was at the ripe old age of 5 years old. My family and I were in North Carolina at one of my favorite places, Newfound Gap. I loved being able to stand on the NC-TN border. The idea of being in two states at one time was surreal. I remember trying to read a sign that said "Appalachian Trail," and having my mother sound it out for me. She explained to me that on this very pathway that laid before us, people hiked from Georgia to Maine. I vividly remember knowing that day I would *someday* return and hike the Appalachian Trail.



*Newfound Gap - North Carolina*

In 9th grade, I discovered my first Louis L'Amour book. Tales of tumbling tumbleweeds, strong-willed women and heroic cowboys made me dream of visiting the wild west. About a year after

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college, I finally had the opportunity to do just that. I quit a stable job I enjoyed and packed my minimal belongings, willing to take a leap of faith at the hope of adventure. I hadn't quite expected life to go this way, in fact I had hoped to hike the Appalachian Trail just after graduation, but it just didn't seem to work out that way. Most jobs don't really allow six month vacations, and I wasn't exactly financially capable of turning down a job offer and purchasing expensive hiking gear. As I hung my old, tattered AT map in my new office in Denver, CO, I promised myself I would walk it *someday*.

During my year and a half in Colorado, I lived in two different cities, visited 12 new states, ate wonderful food, marked multiple items off my bucket list, hiked beautiful trails and met wonderful people. I would love to say the job was just as exceptional, but unfortunately it wasn't. I was faced with lying, favoritism, unprofessional supervisors, and unwarranted stress. Worst of all, I began doubting myself and my worth due to my work environment. In July 2014, I knew without a doubt that the job was not going to pan out. I decided I would apply with new companies and leave it in the hands of fate.

One night after work, fate unexpectedly knocked on my door. I was out at business dinner attempting to appear interested in the conversation at my table, but my eyes wandered studying the faces of my co-workers and customers. These were the people I had watched step on each other to climb the corporate ladder too many times, then smile at one another the next day. I saw no life in their eyes, just empty shells. Lost in my thoughts, I hadn't noticed a stranger had appeared at the end of our table. The restaurant was crowded and he had no choice but to join us; it was obvious he felt out of place. I welcomed him, and the distraction, and began making small talk. He mentioned he was from out of town and was looking to move to Denver, but wanted to know what I liked about the area. I told him about my favorite places in the mountains to visit and several short hiking trails I frequented, "If you even enjoy hiking," I added. He answered, "Actually, I love hiking. Have you ever heard of the Appalachian Trail?" Without missing a beat, I said, "Are you kidding me? I keep telling myself someday I'm going to hike it." He kind of chuckled and humbly said, "I hiked it last year." My eyes lit up, and already knowing the answer I asked, "What part?" Chills ran through me when I heard the words, "The whole thing." A year from that moment, I was over halfway through hiking the Appalachian Trail.

Too often we fence ourselves in with imaginary boundaries as we gaze at our dreams on the other side. We lie to ourselves and say that *someday* we will break out of our daily routines and live our wild ideas, but everyday life passes us by and *someday* gets a little farther away. If you need encouragement to take the final step or a little push from fate like I received that night, here it is—

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You can watch my thru-hike right here:



## CHAPTER TWO

### *Tell Everyone. Yes, Everyone!*

So, you've decided you are going to do it. You are officially going to try to complete the entire Appalachian Trail. Awesome! Now, go tell everyone you know.

#### **Why should I tell everyone I am hiking the AT?**

Once you decide in your heart and mind that you are going to hike the Appalachian Trail, you need to tell everyone. Tell your family, friends, co-workers, and post it on all your social media pages. Why? Well, for several reasons.

1. If you tell everyone, then you HAVE to do it. Right? Not only will this encourage you with planning, but it will encourage you to keep pushing later while you're hiking. Nobody likes to fail or to say they are going to do something and not finish it.
2. It's best to tell your friends and family early on so that you can go ahead and get over the initial shock before you leave. That way they will be in the supportive stage (hopefully) when you say farewell.
3. Telling everyone will help you believe it yourself. If you're like me, it will take a while for it to sink in.
4. Building a support system (even virtually) is priceless. I can't tell you how many times hearing and/or reading encouraging words helped pull me out of a slump during my hike.

#### **Everyone will be happy for me, right?**

No. They won't. Some will be happy for you. These people will be excited for you and will be encouraging all along. Others will be angry. Most likely these will be folks who are very close to you. It's not that they don't want you to be happy and chase your dreams, it's just that they are worried about your safety. You can try to reassure them with statistics, videos from the trail, other people's experiences, etc. The bottom line is, they will either get over it or not. But, you are hiking the AT! Congrats! Some will call you crazy. These folks are probably happy for you, but would never do it themselves, and might literally think you are crazy. There will also be people who don't care. But, that's okay, too. Regardless of how others react, you are about to tackle one of your dreams head-on. Be happy for yourself, because the only opinion that truly matters is the one that belongs to the person you see in the mirror.

#### **Will my friends and family come visit?**

After announcing my plans to thru-hike, quite a few people said they would come hike a section or two with me. I half-heartedly believed them, and only one actually came. I was somewhat disappointed when plans didn't work out, but to an extent it might have been for the best. If someone wants to start the first stretch with you, that could be fun and help you adjust to the trail. After a couple hundred miles in, though, it becomes a different game. You will be used to hiking big miles daily, while fresh-legged visitors will need to take it slow. If you don't mind

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being left by your new trail friends, then it's no big deal. Before you invite all your friends to come hike with you, be aware that your mindset could change after beginning your hike.

I saw more than one example of this, but one instance comes to mind. A girl I became friends with on the trail had made previous plans to hike with one of her friends for a week or two when she got to Pennsylvania. She didn't want to get behind our group while hiking slower with her friend, but she also didn't feel right cancelling plans. She decided to bust out miles and get ahead, hiking into the night several times. We figured if she covered enough ground and then took it slow with her friend, we would end up catching her. Unfortunately, her friend decided after a couple days that hiking really wasn't for her and she left the trail.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Which Way Do I Go?*

Now that you've decided you're hiking the Appalachian Trail, and you've told all your friends, you have to decide when and where to start! There are oh so many options and all of them have their pros and cons. Let's cover the basics.

#### **Northbound (NOBO)**

This is the most common path that folks take while hiking the Appalachian Trail. They start at Springer Mountain in Georgia with plans to finish at the northern terminus of the trail, Mount Katahdin, in Maine. Typically, a NOBO hiker starts anywhere from the beginning of March to the end of April.

#### Pros

- You will be around a lot of other people who are new to this as well. It's nice being able to help and receive help from others.
- The terrain early on isn't terribly challenging which gives you a chance to get in shape as you hike.
- Neel Gap is less than a week away, so if you've made any gear or food mistakes, you have a chance to correct them quickly. In fact, the Mountain Crossings outfitter offers FREE pack/gear shakedown to give you pointers and tips on what you're carrying.
- Mt. Katahdin is the grand finale.

#### Cons

- You will be around a lot of people. This can be a negative aspect if you aren't wanting a social experience on the trail.
- Due to the increased volume of hikers, you may experience limited availability for hostels and hotel rooms.
- You are limited by time, as Mt. Katahdin generally closes (weather dependent) around October 15th.

#### **Southbound (SOBO)**

In a southbound hike, Mt. Katahdin is the starting point and Springer Mountain the ending point. If you for some reason need to start later in the year, this may be a better option for you, as Mt. Katahdin doesn't typically open until around Memorial Day weekend. SOBO hikers generally start anywhere from June 1st-July 1st.

#### Pros

- No pressure to finish by a certain date.
- More peaceful experience as there are fewer people around.
- The most difficult terrain is knocked out early on.

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### Cons

- There won't be as many people on the trail to help you if you run into trouble.
- The first town will be up to 10 days away, so you have to make sure your food and gear selections are exactly what you need. (Side note: There were opportunities for food drops into the Wilderness from local hostels when I was there. You could consider working something out with them.)
- The 100 Mile Wilderness is no easy feat, so the beginning will be fairly challenging.
- I've heard the black flies in Maine are terrible that time of year, but I've not personally experienced them. I do know bugs can test your sanity, so it probably wouldn't be optimal to start with that mental challenge.

### Flip-Flop

The AT sees a lot of traffic from NOBO and SOBO hikes, so the ATC (Appalachian Trail Conservancy) is encouraging hikers to flip-flop to minimize traffic and camping impacts. The term 'flip-flop' is used to describe a thru-hiker who completes the trail, but in a more unique order. Some people do this if they are starting late but don't want to do a conventional SOBO hike. One example might be starting at Harpers Ferry in June, summit Katahdin, then return to Harpers and hike SOBO to Springer Mountain. Another option might be to hike NOBO to Harpers Ferry, flip up to Katahdin and hike SOBO back to Harpers Ferry. The flipping point might even be another trail town. You get the point.

### Pros

- You will have a unique experience and can pick and choose your weather to some extent.
- There is no exact timeline as long as Katahdin is completed before it closes.
- Your journey will be spent with nature more than people as you will not be with the main 'NOBO' or 'SOBO' bubbles.

### Cons

- Flip-flopping can be more expensive than conventional NOBO and SOBO hikes as you will typically be paying for additional transportation costs.
- Depending on where you finish your flip-flop it might feel somewhat anti-climatic.

Basically, you should figure out what works best for you depending on your scheduling, preferences and needs. Just keep in mind that the typical hiker takes 5-6 months to complete a thru-hike. Make note of the June 1st (opening) and October 15th (closing) dates of Mt. Katahdin. These aren't set in stone, just a rule of thumb. You never know what the weather will do.

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*Mt. Katahdin, ME - A very snowy and icy summit day.*

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Packs and Trekking Poles*

#### **PICKING A PACK**

Pack selection is a pretty big deal. Your pack is what my mother refers to as “a hiker’s turtle shell.” It houses everything you will need; it is your lifeline. Since your pack will be the one thing you wear every day, you better make sure it suits you well.



*Nantabala Outdoor Center, NC - Packs outside of the local restaurant*

#### **Get Fitted**

If this is your first time buying a pack, I highly recommend getting fitted. I had never purchased a backpacking pack and had no clue where to start. Luckily, the good folks at REI assisted me. Packs have different suspension systems, so finding one that works with your body is vital to your comfort. If you already have your gear, take it to the store with you to test the weight with several packs. At REI, and most likely other outfitters, they have weighted pillows you can use to

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simulate the weight of gear. I spent about 3-4 hours trying on packs before I found the right one. There are many factors that play into proper fitting of a pack, but my top two are:

1. I highly recommend purchasing a pack that has an adjustable back panel to ensure it fits properly to your torso. Everyone is built differently! When you try on a pack, make sure the hip belt has some room to give and take.
2. The hip belt should rest on top of your hips, exerting the weight downward. The main issue I saw on the trail was when people would lose a significant amount of weight. Their hip belts could not tighten enough and the pack began slipping below the hip bones, creating stress on their shoulders. If this occurs, you can duct-tape large car washing sponges on the inside of the hip belt, but properly fitting your pack from the beginning is best.

### Capacity

If you've never backpacked before, you're probably clueless as to what capacity pack you will need (like I was). There is no right or wrong choice, as it really depends on your gear. You can purchase all your gear before selecting a pack and test it out to see how everything fits. I chose the 50L Osprey Aura AG without having purchased much gear. Knowing that I would fill whatever capacity to the max, I picked a 50L over the 65L to keep my pack weight down. I'm not saying it's the best method but, it worked! I saw pack capacities smaller than 50L, although, most of them were ultralight enthusiasts. I also hiked with someone who had a 100L pack. I wouldn't recommend getting one bigger than you need, though.

### Weight

When selecting a pack, the weight of the pack itself should be considered. Some pack brands are much heavier than others; there is no sense in carrying unnecessary weight. Osprey seems to be somewhere in the middle and they make great first time packs.

### Durability

The pack you choose needs to be durable enough to last you at least 2200 miles. Make sure it is rated for the weight you plan to carry in it. I also suggest inquiring about the return/exchange policy. One of my trail friends bought a cheap pack from Cabela's and had to replace it on trail twice. Luckily, they were easy to work with. From what I've heard, Osprey also has superior customer service.

### Features

A pack's features are what sets it apart from all the others, but do not sacrifice a proper fit for the bells and whistles. Below are some of the extras I appreciated about my pack:

- Wide Hip Belt - The hip belt on my pack wasn't floppy and more or less "grabbed" my hips. Also, the pockets on the hip belt were big enough to hold my phone and snacks.
- Anti-Gravity Mesh - The continuous mesh on the back panel allowed air to circulate. A lot of packs I saw just had a thick cushion, which would restrict airflow and collect sweat.
- Removable Brain/Lid - The brain on my pack was removable, so I was able to shave some weight by sending it home when I didn't need the extra space.

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- Pack Cover - My pack came with a pack cover for when it rains. Some people swear by and others curse pack covers. I think they help repel water, but mine was definitely not water proof.



*Hiawassee, GA - One of my hiker friends and I sporting our packs.*

### **How do I keep my pack dry when it rains?**

I suggest redundancies when it comes to keeping your pack and belongings dry. I lined my pack with a thick, black contractor bag. You might even want to throw an extra one down into the bottom of your pack, just in case. I always packed anything I didn't want getting wet first (sleeping bag, journal and clothes). You can put your sleeping bag in a waterproof stuff sack, if you want; I never did. My clothes were kept in a waterproof sack and my journal in a gallon ziploc bag. Once you pack the dry items in the contractor bag, roll it down tight. On top of that, you will pack anything that you don't mind getting wet (tent, food bag, water filter, etc.). Keep your pack cover in an easily accessible place and when it rains, you just toss it on. Using this system, I never once had a wet sleeping bag or soggy pajamas.

### Watch Video On Selecting a Pack



### TREKKING POLES

I vividly remember my first day using trekking poles. I was on the Approach Trail, not far past the never-ending stairs at Amicalola Falls. While taking a quick break, I looked down and noticed the poles attached to my pack. I had no clue how to use them, but I had read I should bring a pair on this thru-hike. So, there they were. Curiously, I pulled them off my pack and began fumbling with them. A couple came breezing by, both using a set of their own in a seemingly effortless manner. I thought to myself, “Well, I reckon I should give it a try.” I’m sure my first attempt mimicked the clumsiness of a foal taking its first steps. When I later caught up to the couple, they gave me some pointers. “First,” the lady suggested, “just start with one. You know, kind of like a cane.” Her husband agreed, “Yeah, then add the other when you’ve got that down.” By the end of the day, I pretty much had it whooped. Well, sort of.

Anyway, it’s not uncommon for trekking poles to feel awkward to start with, but I highly recommend them for several reasons:

- Save the Knees - On descents, your knees will thank you for using poles. Instead of stomping down, you can brace yourself and reduce the impact.
- Establish Rhythm - It might sound silly, but there’s a rhythm to hiking. Once you get used to your poles you can really truck down the trail.
- River Fords - I can’t imagine crossing some of the rivers I forded without having poles to stabilize myself.
- Self-Defense - You should never need to use your trekking poles in this manner. Let’s be honest, though, if you were in sudden danger you already have two pointy poles in your hands.
- Multi-Purpose - Some very lightweight tents use trekking poles instead of the added weight of tent poles.

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- Prodding Stick - When you go to use the restroom trailside, you can poke around ahead of you to check for snakes.

### **Collapsible vs. Fixed**

Unless you find a deal you can't turn down on fixed trekking poles, I would go with the collapsible style. It's important to be able to adjust the height to fit your body. Also, when in towns or during hand-over-hand climbing it's convenient to collapse and attach them to your pack.

### **Material**

There are three materials types to consider when selecting trekking poles:

1. Aluminum - Cheap and durable.
2. Titanium - Lighter and more durable than aluminum, but more expensive.
3. Carbon Fiber - Most lightweight and expensive option, but they are prone to breaking under too much force.

### **Grips**

It might not seem like the grips of your poles should make or break your choice, but you will have your hands on these more than anything else for 6 months. I enjoyed my cork grips, but you should test out the different options at the store and see what feels best to you.

- Cork - The least cushioning of the options, but they do absorb sweat well and don't get slippery to grasp while wet.
- Rubber - Somewhat softer than the cork. Easy to clean, but don't count on it absorbing any kind of moisture.
- Foam - The softest choice. Won't absorb moisture as well as the cork, but enough to avoid slippage.

### **Locking Mechanisms**

The two main locking mechanisms I saw on trail were the flip-lock and the twist-lock. I never had any issues out of my flip-lock poles, but I did see hikers get annoyed with their twist-lock poles. The last thing you want is to have a lock slip while you are descending rocky terrain, leaning forward, and applying most of your weight to your trekking poles.

### **Tips**

The tips on the end of your trekking poles are replaceable, so have no fear when you see them wearing down. I had mine replaced at an outdoors store in southern Maine for about \$10.

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*Tip wear on trekking poles is normal.*

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Shelter and Bedding*

#### **SHELTER**

Most hikers I encountered during my thru-hike slept in a tent or hammock. There are several other options, and I will touch on those as well. When I decided to hike the AT, I was immediately overwhelmed with what shelter I should choose. I had slept in big bulky tents before while “car camping,” but I had never used a hammock or backpacking tent. One of my friends asked me if I wanted to borrow her hammock, an ENO double nest. An opportunity to save money—why not? After a week of using the hammock I swapped to a tent, for a few reasons. One, my entire hammock set-up (including my homemade rain fly, slap straps and hammock itself) weighed about 4 lbs. As a general rule, I wouldn't suggest choosing a shelter system over 3 lbs. My two person Big Agnes Fly Creek tent weighs 2 lbs. 5 oz. Second, I wanted to change clothes in a more enclosed space. Third, I enjoy lying down in my sleeping bag while cooking a meal under my tent vestibule. Below is my video on this topic:



While sticking to the hammock would have saved me \$350, added comfort and convenience for 6 months was worth the investment. When selecting a shelter, the biggest factors to contemplate are comfort, weight and durability. So, let's cover some of the most common types of shelters in a little more depth.

#### **Hammock**

People typically LOVE hammocking or they hate it. I would recommend you try hammock camping before you attempt a 6-month wilderness venture such as the AT. There are many types of hammocks available and some are specially designed for backpacking. If you plan to hammock I would invest in a good, lightweight option. ENO's are nice for lounging in, but if I

had to hammock again, I would go with a more rugged, yet lightweight, version. I made my own rain fly out of duct tape and clear plastic drop cloth, but I would recommend investing in a store bought one if it isn't already included and you aren't pinching pennies. However, there are a lot of tutorials online if making your own interests you. Some considerations if you are thinking about hammock camping:

- Weather - In any system, you will probably get somewhat wet during a serious storm. However, with the opening between a hammock and rain fly, I feel that hammock campers are more likely to get wet when it's raining and windy.
- Sleeping Position - I always sleep on my stomach or side, so trying to sleep on my back was interesting, but hammocks are very comfortable.
- Extra Insulation - Many people will tell you that you need an under quilt if you plan to hammock camp. With the wind whipping under the hammock and your weight compressing the sleeping bag under you, it can become quite chilly. I got by with using a foam sleeping pad in early spring, but any part of me that slid off the foam was chilly. I would not have wanted to sleep in my hammock without an under quilt in Maine during mid-October. Adding extra insulation means increasing the weight of your set-up.
- Lounging - Hammocks are very nice to lounge around in at camp. Most people will be sitting on the ground, benches, etc. Sitting in a hammock relieves the pressure from your legs, feet and joints.
- Space - There isn't much space in a hammock for you and your gear. So, you need to explore options for keeping your pack dry when it rains. I tried to keep mine under my legs but found it extremely uncomfortable. Some people put their packs in black contractor bags and laid them under their hammocks. There are various options, but create a plan BEFORE you are in the rain. Also, you will probably have to change clothes outside of your hammock, which can be more miserable in the colder months.
- Tree Availability - More times than not, trees will be available to use for setting up a hammock. But, you might want to think of a back-up plan just in case!

## **Tent**

A tent is the most commonly used shelter on the AT, by far. There are many types and sizes. You can find extremely lightweight versions that use trekking poles instead of extra poles for set-up. There are one and two person options. Very cheap to overly expensive. Some that zip open from the front and others from the side. Selecting a tent can be overwhelming! When I decided to swap to a tent, I wanted something that would keep me dry, had a vestibule, was fairly lightweight, didn't take much skill to set up and had enough room for both my pack and me. When I presented these preferences, the sales associate at Mountain Crossings in Neel Gap introduced me to the Fly Creek UL2. It is a two-person tent and it cost me \$350. For \$300, I could've gotten a the UL1 (one-person). Since the weight difference was only 4 oz., I opted for the larger tent. With that said, I knew people who used \$50 tents the whole trail. It really depends on your preferences. Don't feel like you always have to purchase the best of the best. Your success in hiking is more likely going to be attributed to your mental state than the cost of your gear. The basics to consider about a tent:

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- Space - You will have more space with a tent than any other option. If you think you would like to be able to spread out your gear and have an enclosed place to change, then a tent is probably for you.
- Weather - When there is a serious downpour, you will probably get somewhat wet regardless of what system you use, but tents seem to be more water resistant during storms. Also, I felt like my body heat and the insulation from the ground helped keep my tent warmer during the cool months.
- Flat Ground - Relying on a tent for shelter can be aggravating in very rocky or steep terrains. Most of the time flat ground can be found on the AT within a few miles, though. The only exception is the White Mountains in New Hampshire, and I remember struggling to find a decent spot. By then (regardless of hiking NOBO or SOBO) you will be seasoned and know what to do.
- Lying Down to Cook - Especially when it was cold, I thoroughly enjoyed crawling into my sleeping bag to cook. It is not recommended that you cook near your camping spot (due to spills attracting wildlife), but when you are exhausted and cold, your thoughts on that might change.
- Vestibule - I recommend getting a tent that has a vestibule. While it is not vital, it is convenient. I always left my trail runners outside under my vestibule which helped keep them drier from dew and rain. Also, if it is sprinkling, cooking under the vestibule is a nice option.



*Ice Water Spring Shelter, TN - Big Agnes Fly Creek UL2 Tent*

## **Tarp**

Tarps were not prevalent during my thru hike, and I don't have any personal experience with them. It takes a bit of skill to learn how to set a tarp up to keep dry in the rain. Some things to think about if you're considering using a tarp as your shelter:

- Weight - Tarps are much lighter than a tent or hammock set-up.
- Privacy - Considering it is open, I don't imagine you will have much privacy in a tarp.
- Weather - In a solid storm, I don't feel as if the tarp will be very durable, but I'm sure it would be better than nothing.
- Bugs - Because tarps are not enclosed, you won't have much protection from being bug-bitten throughout the night.

## **Bivy Sacks**

I do not recall seeing any bivy sacks on trail, but I remember hearing of some being used. Bivy sacks were originally intended for use in emergency situations. Ultralight backpackers began adopting them, sacrificing comfort for a lighter load. But, due to improved technology, other sleep systems are now competitive in the lightweight category. You might want to consider the following if you are contemplating camping in a bivy:

- Weight - A bivy sack will probably be your lightest option.
- Space - This option offers the least amount of space. The lack of space could be an advantage in cooler weather, as it more efficiently maintains body heat.
- Weather - Because bivy sacks typically have an opening for ventilation, a steady rain could quite possibly leave you wet.
- Bugs - Bivy sacks typically don't offer any bug netting, leaving you victim to hungry mosquitoes.
- Terrain - Where other sleeping options may require trees, flat ground, etc., bivy sacks can basically be used anywhere since they require so little space.

## **No Sleeping System/Shelter Hopping**

At least once a day, a hiker can usually expect to find a 3-sided structure with a wooden floor along the trail called a 'shelter' (or in Maine and parts of Virginia, a 'Lean-To' or 'Hut', respectively). The 250+ shelters along the AT vary in size and might comfortably hold anywhere from 6-20+ hikers. On average, they are about 8-10 miles apart. It seems each year there are a handful of thru-hikers that choose to shelter hop, packing no alternative sleeping system. This sounds like a great idea in many ways, but too often on rainy nights they end up begging other hikers to squeeze in tighter so they can take cover in an already packed out shelter. That's really not fair and I would not recommend hiking the AT without some form of shelter in your pack. If you are planning to forego a personal shelter, though, consider these points:

- Weight - This method will obviously save you a couple pounds of weight.
- Less Freedom - If you rely solely on shelters, you won't have as much freedom to stop and make camp anywhere you please. Also, you will have to get up and make miles early to ensure you get to the shelter to claim your spot.

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- Weather - You could always cowboy camp anywhere you please, unless it is raining. In this instance, you either have to make it to a shelter and secure a spot or hike through the rain. Hiking in the rain at night is not much fun, trust me.
- Less Impact - Although it isn't possible for everyone in the main hiker bubble to only stay in shelters, sleeping in shelters does reduce impact on the trail.
- Bugs - I remember a couple weeks during my thru hike when shelters remained empty due to the amount of bugs. Most tents and hammocks offer some sort of bug netting, so it's best to keep your options open.



*White Mountains, NH - One of the nicer shelters on the AT*

### **SLEEPING BAG**

One of the items I was willing to splurge on was my sleeping bag. I wanted it to be as light and compact as possible, while still keeping me warm in lower temperatures. Often people buy two sleeping bags—one for cooler and one for warmer weather. NOBO's start with the cooler weather bag and later send it home, swapping out for their summer bag. To save money and weight, I swapped my cool weather bag for a fleece sleeping bag liner once it got warm. Many hikers send their warm bag and clothes home from Damascus, VA after Trail Days. I held onto mine until Waynesboro, VA, just to be safe. I did not have my sleeping bag sent back to me until I was in Vermont. I probably waited longer than I should have, but you will know it's time if you start shivering at night!

So, how do you pick out the perfect sleeping bag? I found that there were two main types of sleeping bags: down and synthetic. Both options, like any other gear item, have their pros and cons.

### **Down Bags**

Pros

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- More lightweight than synthetic options.
- Down is less bulky than synthetic filler, so a down bag will usually take up less space.

### Cons

- Down is pretty much useless when it gets wet. The down in my bag was treated to help the down keep its 'fluff' even if it gets wet. If you get a down bag, I'd recommend making sure it's 'dridown'.
- Down bags should be washed in a front-loading washer with special down detergent. Therefore, it won't be as convenient to wash along the way as a synthetic bag would be.

### Down Bag Tips:

- Use a thin liner that you can remove and wash to help keep it clean. I didn't wash my bag at all during my hike, but I washed the liner every time I did laundry. Plus, it adds a few degrees to your bag.
- If your down seems flat, you can tumble your bag in a dryer to restore the fluffiness.

## Synthetic Bags

### Pros

- Synthetic bags still have some insulating properties, even if they get wet.
- You can wash synthetic bags with regular detergent, so it's more convenient to wash when you're in town.

### Cons

- Synthetic bags are bulkier and take up more space.
- In addition to being bulky, synthetic bags are typically heavier, as well.

I chose a Sierra Designs Zissou sleeping bag that was rated for 23 degrees and filled with dridown. I was chilly a couple nights in the Smoky Mountain National Park (in April) and in Maine (in October), but I am cold-natured. I would not recommend a higher rating than about 30 degrees during the cooler months, though. Also, know that the temperature rating is the "keep you alive" temperature and does not guarantee that you will be comfortable at that rating.

## To Watch My Video About Sleeping Bags



## **SLEEPING PADS**

When I was first planning my thru-hike, I thought to myself, "I don't need a sleeping pad, that's for sissies." Anytime I had ever been camping, I just slept on the ground. Remember, I had never been on an overnight backpacking trip. Luckily, all the AT gear lists I got my hands on included a sleeping pad, so I decided I'd get one. I learned quickly how important these pads are to a good night's sleep. There are essentially two types of sleeping pads: foam or inflatable.

### **Foam Pads**

Because I was trying to save money, and I didn't think a pad was necessary, I chose to purchase a foam pad. This is what I learned about foam pads:

- **Lighter** - They typically weigh less than most inflatable pads. Also, foam pads can be trimmed to fit your height and decrease your pack weight.
- **Warmer** - Foam pads are better insulators than inflatable ones. You will generally sleep warmer on a foam pad because it stops the air from circulating under you.
- **Bulkier** - Since they either roll up or fold accordion style, foam pads usually won't fit in your pack and will have to be attached to the outside of your pack.
- **Durable** - Foam pads will take a serious beating. You can lay it down anywhere and not have to worry about it popping.
- **Cheap** - Foam pads don't put a hurting on the bank at all. I paid \$15 for my pad.
- **Convenient** - When you get to camp at night, you literally just unroll it and flop down. This is nice when you arrive to a shelter full of sleeping hikers you don't want to disturb.
- **Not for Me** - About the time I hit New Jersey, I was not sleeping much at night because I was extremely uncomfortable. I sleep on my side a lot, and I kept waking up with numb or painful hips.

### **Inflatable Pads**

After realizing how important sleep is to a person who physically exerts themselves every day, I broke down and made the investment on a Thermarest NeoAir XLite. I figured if I was going to upgrade, I might as well go with the best. This is what I learned about inflatable sleeping pads:

- **Pricy** - When it comes to inflatable pads, you get what you pay for. The price ranges anywhere from about \$40 to \$175.
- **Self-Inflating vs. Manual Inflation** - Even if you choose a self-inflating pad you will likely choose to blow it up more. Manual inflating pads will give your lungs a nightly work out, as it takes a minute or two to blow up. Manual inflation pads are thicker and generally more comfortable.
- **Heavier** - Most inflatable pads are heavier than foam pads, but my NeoAir was the same weight (12 oz.) as my foam pad.
- **Noisy** - If you toss and turn while you are sleeping, everyone will know. We often joked that some of the inflatable pads sound like you're lying on a potato chip bag. The noise also makes it hard to quietly set up in a shelter full of sleeping hikers.
- **More Comfortable** - Even the thinnest of inflatable pads is more comfortable than a foam pad.

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- Less Durable - You do have to be more selective as to where you lay your inflatable pad. They aren't necessarily easy to pop, but it could happen.

To sum it up, if you sleep on your back and are on a tight budget, you might get along just fine with a foam pad. If you sleep on your side or stomach, you should probably invest in a quality, lightweight, inflatable pad. Worst case, though, you can always try a foam pad as you won't be out much money if you upgrade later.



*Cowboy camping - Several different sleeping bags and pads in use*

## CHAPTER SIX

### *Food, Cookware and Water*

#### FOOD

##### **What do you eat while living in the woods for 6 months?**

The easy answer is, pretty much whatever you want! The main thing about food is not to get too caught up in pre-planning. I have heard of people purchasing groceries ahead of time and sending food drops to themselves all the way from Georgia to Maine. While I do not think that is necessary (or a good idea), I will cover mail drops in a later section. It is generally recommended that you have 2 lbs. of food for each day, but I never once measured the weight of my food to verify that. I just went with it. You will develop hiker hunger at some point during your journey, but you will adjust to that when it hits. Trust me, you will know when it happens.

##### **To cook or not to cook?**

Before deciding what you should eat, you really need to decide if you plan to cook or not. If you want to cook, there are several options. If not, then that is fine, too, but your options will be more limited. I knew a few people who decided not to cook, though most did. Saving the weight of a stove and fuel is probably the leading reason not to cook. Saving the time it takes to cook is probably a close second. However, having a warm meal was worth the weight and time to me. I alternated between cooking/not cooking for breakfast and lunch, but I always cooked my dinner.

##### **Example Daily Menu**

Below is an example menu of a typical day on trail for me. I had planned to eat healthy (like I do off trail), but that went out the window quickly. There are various resources online for healthier eating, but again this was my personal diet. I have made two sample menus—one for cooking and one for not cooking:

##### TO COOK:

###### Breakfast

2 packs of instant coffee  
1 Carnation Instant Breakfast (to mix with coffee)  
2 packets of Instant Oatmeal (toss in dehydrated fruits or nuts)  
Other Ideas: Cream of wheat, instant eggs

###### Late Morning Snack

Cliff Bar  
Handful of Cheez-It's  
Other Ideas: Fruit roll-ups, Gushers, trail mix

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### Lunch

Ramen Noodles (with a handful of fresh spinach, sprinkle of Parmesan cheese)

Packet of Spam (foil pack)

Handful of white cheddar popcorn

Other Ideas: Mac-N-Cheese, dehydrated soup mixes

### Afternoon Snack

Kind Bar

Snickers

Other Ideas: pretzels, starbursts

### Dinner

Knorr Pasta/Rice Sides dinner (add spinach and ground beef)

Skittles

Other Ideas: Backpacker's Pantry Meals, couscous, instant rice

### NOT TO COOK:

#### Breakfast

2 packs of instant coffee

1 Carnation Instant Breakfast (mix with coffee in water bottle with coffee packs)

Pop-Tarts

Kind bar

Other Ideas: Cereal w/ dehydrated milk (add water), granola, pre-cooked bacon, muffins

#### Late Morning Snack

Cliff

Powdered donuts

Other Ideas: Peanut M&M's, Skittles

Bar

### Lunch

Tortilla wrap with peanut butter and honey

Packet of tuna

Other Ideas: Summer sausage w/ cheese, chicken (foil pack)

### Afternoon Snack

Chips

Dehydrated Fruit

Snickers

Other Ideas: Little Debbie's, Wheat Thins

### Dinner

Wrap with pepperoni and cheese

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Combos

Other Ideas: Crunched up ramen noodles w/ seasoning (eat as chips), salmon (foil pack)

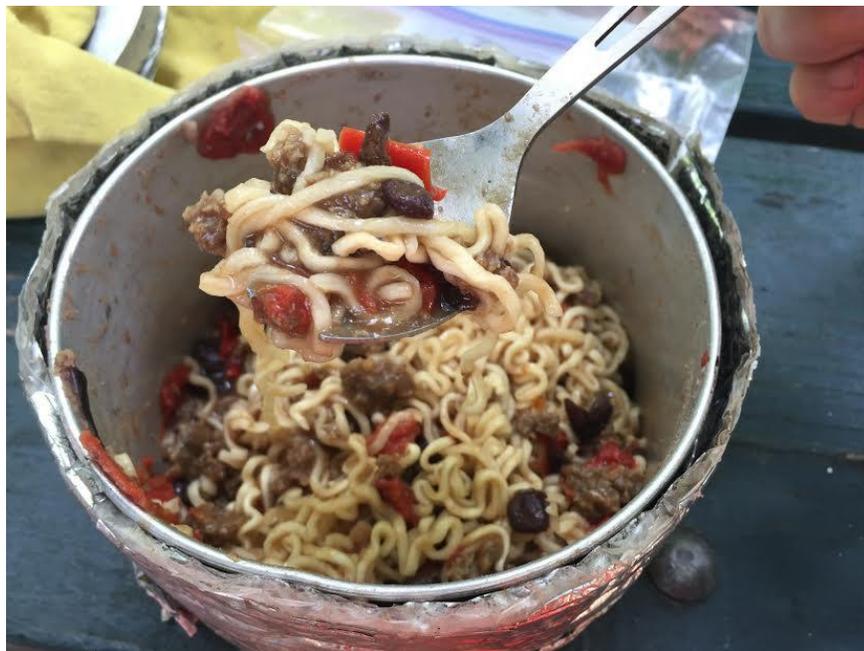
The possibilities are truly endless and you will get more creative than you ever thought with food! The only food item I would trouble myself with sending ahead, if I were to hike the AT again, is dehydrated ground beef, fruits and veggies. They add a nice touch to any meal! I dehydrated a lot before I left and had it sent to me at various locations on the trail. You should be very careful when preserving ground beef, though. If dehydrating this is something you would be interested in, see the recipe below. If you would rather watch the process than read about it, [click here](#).

### Dehydrated Ground Beef

1 lb. lean beef (make sure to ONLY use beef with 15% fat or LESS)

1/2 cup bread crumbs

Mix bread crumbs into raw meat. Brown mixture in a frying pan. Remove from heat and blot as much grease as you can from the cooked meat using paper towels. Fat is what causes preserved meats to go rancid, so removing grease will help minimize any chance of your beef going bad. Next, spread your meat over parchment paper on a dehydrator tray. Try to split the meat into little chunks so it will dry completely and evenly. Dehydrate at 145 degrees for about 6 hours, stirring meat around and blotting several times during the drying process. The meat should be hard when it is dry. Vacuum seal 1/4 cup servings individually. Freeze vacuum sealed packets until you are ready to send ahead.



*Dinner is served - Ramen with dehydrated ground beef and vegetables*

## **COOKWARE**

If you have decided not to cook, you can probably skip ahead to the next section. But, if a warm meal sounds desirable to you after a long day, read on to learn more about cooking options.

### **Stoves**

When deciding what stove to select, a few thoughts should be considered. Will you ever want to cook on a fire? Would you prefer to use gas canisters or liquid fuel? How about a wood stove? Here is a breakdown of each option:

#### Liquid Fuel/Alcohol Stoves

##### Pros

- If you are on a tight budget you can cut costs by making your own stove using a tuna or cat food can. See my tutorial on how to do this [here](#).
- Denatured alcohol is cheap and available at most places. You can even burn yellow bottles of 'Heet' used in vehicles.
- There is no question about how much fuel you have used or is remaining.
- The weight of the liquid is reduced each time you use it.

##### Cons

- You cannot adjust the flame of an alcohol stove.
- You will generally not pour the perfect amount for cooking a meal. If you haven't used it all while your food is cooking, you have to let the rest finish burning.
- It can be messy (and scary) if spilled.

#### Fuel Canister Stoves

##### Pros

- Fuel cans are sold at most places for about \$5-6.
- You can adjust the heat/flame.
- There is no mess as the stove will screw directly on and off the fuel canister.
- People are often willing to give away partially used fuel cans, or you can often find them in hiker boxes in town.

##### Cons

- You can't see how much you have left in a can, but you will learn to gauge this by shaking them.
- The can weighs about the same whether it is empty or full.
- The stove stacks on top of the fuel can, and your pot sits on top of your stove, making the set-up slightly top-heavy. I only dumped my meal over once due to this issue, but it is something to consider.

I chose an MSR Pocket Rocket and never had any issues. It is compact, lightweight, durable, and relatively cheap. I heard good reviews before purchasing it and was not disappointed. It even comes in a little plastic carrying case. A lot of people chose not to carry the plastic case, but I liked having something to protect it and prevent the arms from bending. The Jet Boil is also a very popular choice in gas fuel stoves, but with the way it is designed, you can't really use the pot to cook on a fire. I tried to cook on a fire as much as I could to conserve fuel and just for the

experience, to be honest. I also saw a few wood backpacking stoves. I think they can be somewhat problematic on rainy days, but if you want to reduce your fuel costs, it might be something to consider!

### How long does fuel last?

It really depends on how much you use. I had a larger fuel can last me over a month. However, I only cooked for dinner most of that month, and the majority of my coffee and dinners were made on a fire. I would say the fastest I used a small fuel can was within a week, but I was cooking all three meals and coffee or hot chocolate twice daily.

### Pots

There are all sorts of pots to choose from. I wanted one with a volume of about 1L. Stainless steel works fine, but is extremely heavy compared to titanium. Titanium, of course, is much more expensive. I couldn't bring myself to spend \$100 on a cooking pot, so I improvised with an aluminum grease pot from K-Mart. It was just as light (or lighter) than the titanium pot I wanted, but only costs \$7-8. I made a slight modification (I replaced the plastic knob with an eye bolt), so I would be able to cook on a fire. I know, I know — it is NOT recommended to use aluminum cookware. I'm not telling you to; I'm just telling you what I did. I figured by not using deodorant I was balancing out my aluminum intake. Right?

### Pot Cozy

A pot cozy is not a necessity, but it is nice to have and really doesn't weigh much. The main purpose of a pot cozy is to reduce your fuel consumption and, in turn, your costs. To use the cozy, you boil the water needed for a meal, pour in the food packet (rice/pasta sides) and stir, cut off the stove, put the lid on your pot, and place your pot in the cozy. Since a cozy is made from reflectix material, it holds in the heat and continues to cook your food. No more than 10 minutes later your food will be ready! For each meal, using the cozy will save you at least a few minutes of fuel use. Another benefit is being able to hold the pot in your hands while eating. If you would like to learn how to make a cozy for your pot, I have a tutorial available here:



### **Sporks**

I saw many people go through multiple crappy plastic sporks. Go ahead and invest the \$8 on a good quality, titanium spork. I had the same spork for 2,189.2 miles. Mine even had a nifty little hook on the end that I used to loop through the eye bolt on my pot to lift the lid while cooking over the fire.

### **Lighter**

I used the same orange, hard plastic, Bic lighter my whole trip. Of course, I had a backup one, just in case. But, go with a Bic lighter. They are the best.

### **Bandana**

I liked having a bandana that I used solely for drying my pot and using with food.

### **Where and how do you wash your dishes?**

Never wash your dishes directly in or near any water source. I was by no means the AT environmental police, but I have to admit it made me cringe to see people lathering their pots with soap in a spring or creek. It doesn't matter how environmentally friendly the soaps claim to be, you just shouldn't. There can be chemicals present that don't exist naturally in the water. Not many people even bother toting soap. It was extra weight I didn't feel was necessary. To wash my pot, I dumped any leftover scraps in my trash bag, and then used my fingers and water to scrub and rinse. That's it. Whether you prefer to use soap, wash your pot well away from water sources and away from shelters/campsites.

## **WATER**

### **Availability**

Water is readily available throughout the trail. Until I got to Pennsylvania, I am fairly sure I passed a water source at least once every 5 miles. There was only a small stretch in Pennsylvania that I remember being worried about water much at all. Then again in New York. You will hear about it, though and will be aware of the situation before it occurs. SOBOs will share information with you, and word will travel through fellow NOBO hikers and shelter log books. Sometimes in dry areas, trail angels will leave jugs of water near road crossings. DO NOT rely on this, though, as dehydration is not conducive to thru-hiking.

### **How much water should you carry?**

Water is heavy. In fact, 1 liter of water weighs 2.2 pounds. I had the capability to carry 2-4 liters throughout my hike. However, I never carried more than 2 liters at a time. Typically, I only had 1-1.5 liters on me. Each person is different and guys usually drink more than girls. You will figure out what you need and what works for you. But, please DO NOT think you have to carry all the water you plan to drink for a day.

### **Treating**

Flowing water on the trail is one of the most beautiful sights to see. Going for a swim is often refreshing. It's safe to just catch some water in a bottle from a mountain top and chug away, right? The answer is maybe. Unfortunately, there really is no way to tell since most of the little

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devils that cause sickness in water will not be seen with the naked eye. There are people who thru-hike the trail every year without treating their water. There are also people who thru-hike and end up with giardia by drinking water that contains fecal matter from an infected animal. I only drank untreated water one time in North Carolina and I could literally see the water coming from a rock, straight out of the ground. This does not mean there was no risk, but the chances of it being bad water were reduced. I ended up with food poisoning later in Virginia and experienced diarrhea on the trail. After that, I just would not want to risk being sick again. Plus, treating water is so simple! There are several options for making water safe: filtering, boiling and chemically treating.

### Filtering

There are many types of filters on the market. I started with a Sawyer Squeeze, and it worked just fine. I would say it is definitely the most popular filter on the trail. Once my dirty bag broke, and the rubber seal came out (from me over-tightening) in Virginia, I decided to go with another option. I chose the Platypus Gravity filter because I liked having gravity do most of the hard work instead of having to squeeze every drop of water I wanted to use through a filter. The Gravity filter is the more expensive option. I would recommend either option, though, and I do not believe there is much weight difference between the two.



*Platypus Gravity Filter with 2L Bladder*

### Boiling

Boiling is said to be the only 100% effective method of killing most anything you might have to worry about on the trail. Also, this is the lightest method of treating your water since there is no need for carrying anything extra. It is, however, the most time-consuming method. Having to wait for your water to boil and then allowing it to cool before putting it in a bladder to drink seems monotonous. One of my fellow thru-hikers used a Life Straw to drink from and boiled all

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his water for cooking. However, I do not know anyone who boiled all their water, although it is an option.

### Chemicals

There are chemical options such as Aquamira water drops. Drops are probably the second most common water treatment method on the Appalachian Trail. When using drops, you should wait about 30 minutes before drinking your water after treating it. Chemical treatment is a lighter option than carrying a filter, but with boiling and chemically treating, you do not remove solids from your water. So, if you are getting water from a low or slow-trickling water source, you may have to drink or eat dirt (or filter solids through a bandana). Just something to keep in mind.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *Resupplying, Bounce Boxes and Mail Drops*

Before hitting the trail, you will likely excessively worry about resupplying. The truth is, you really don't have to stress over it at all. Most towns/businesses close to the trail stock typical hiker foods. They may not have a vast variety, but you won't go hungry. For NOBO's, Mountain Crossings at Neel Gap, GA will likely be your first re-supply point. Within walking distance, there is no other option. SOBO's, you will hit your first resupply in Monson, ME. You can shop at either Pete's Place (which has great breakfast, too) or Robinson's, both basically being small general stores. It isn't uncommon for people to send themselves packages/mail drops to Neel Gap or Monson, as the food selection is somewhat limited and pricey.

Tip: Hiker boxes are commonly found at hostels, hotels and outfitters in towns near the trail. These boxes contain items discarded by other hikers. You can always check these for free food!



*Hiker Box - Discarded food, ziplocs, fuel, etc.*

#### **Mail Drops**

I do NOT recommend selecting your food for a 6-month journey and mailing it to yourself in advance for several reasons:

- In real life, most people don't know what they want for dinner one week from now. Your appetite and cravings will change sporadically while hiking the AT, so it is best not to try to predict what you want for lunch 3 months and 12 days into your journey.
- If you can go to a grocery store and purchase the same food in a town near the trail, why would you buy it at home and pay extra to mail it to yourself?

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- Finally, your plans will change a million times on trail regarding what towns you will stop at, how fast you plan to hike a certain section, etc. Limiting yourself by pre-planning your whole trip will seriously be a burden on you later. One of the beautiful aspects of hiking is being able to let go of deadlines and schedules! Don't rob yourself of that before you even start.

However, there are several towns that past thru-hikers have agreed to be the worst for resupplying. Food and other goodies sent to yourself or from friends and family might be greatly appreciated in the following towns/places:

- 1)Neel Gap, GA
- 2)The NOC (Nantahala Outdoor Center), NC
- 3)Fontana Dam, NC
- 4)Bland, VA
- 5)Harpers Ferry, WV
- 6)Caratunk, ME
- 7)Monson, ME

### **Sending Mail Drops**

If you've decided you want to receive a mail drop along the trail, there is a certain way to go about it. First, do NOT use your trail name. You may have to show ID, and I have a hunch your driver's license probably doesn't read a name like, "Mountain Goat." Also, include your ETA. It does not have to be exact, but just a ballpark idea. Depending on where you send it, there are two formats:

#### **1)Mailing a package to a post office near the trail.**

Hiker's First and Last Name  
C/O General Delivery  
City, State, Zip  
Please hold for AT Thru-Hiker  
ETA: June 17, 2017

#### **2)Mailing a package to a hotel, hostel, or outfitter.**

Hiker's First and Last Name  
C/O Business Name  
Street Address  
City, State, Zip  
Please hold for AT Thru-Hiker  
ETA: June 17, 2017

Keep in mind that post offices may have more limited hours than a business—especially in small towns. Getting stuck in town for the weekend due to arriving 15 minutes late on a Friday is no

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fun. I would recommend referring to AWOL's AT Guide for business hours of post offices and businesses.

### **Bounce Boxes**

I did not use a bounce box, but some hikers do. It is simply a box in which you can send items ahead to the next town that you may not want to carry. Some examples of this may be surplus supplies when you are forced to buy more than you need, extra medications, town clothes, additional gear, etc. If you send using Priority Mail, you can always forward or "bounce" your box ahead for free as long as you don't open it.

### **Watch a Video Covering Resupply, Mail Drops and Bounce Boxes**



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### *Clothes & Rain Gear*

After I had purchased most of my gear, I started wondering: “What in the world am I supposed to wear?” Maybe that sounds like a typical female, but I really wasn't sure what and how much to take. Below are some clothing suggestions based on what I ended up wearing at different times during my hike.

#### **Cool Weather**

The main thing to remember in cold weather is you ALWAYS want to have dry clothes to sleep in at night. After hiking in the rain for a day, you will be soaked even if you wear rain gear. The next morning, it will be tempting to hike out in the dry clothes you slept in, but if it is still raining, don't do it! You will warm up while you are walking, so just wear your wet clothes. Also, it is important to avoid cotton when it is cold. Cotton does not dry out as quickly as synthetic material. Hypothermia is not conducive to completing a thru-hike, so take these tips seriously. The table below gives the weight and price of each item I carried when it was cold out.

**Table 1. Items worn in cool months with weight and price.**

ITEM	WEIGHT (oz.)	PRICE
Puffy Coat	14.7	\$90
Long Sleeve Shirt	8.5	\$35
Tank Top	1.8	\$35
Shorts	3.9	\$50
Leggings	6.5	\$8
Thick Wool Socks	2.7	\$18
Thin Wool Socks (2 pair)	4.2	\$40
Rain Jacket	5.9	\$10
Rain Pants	4.6	\$10
Sports Bra	2.7	\$15
Underwear (2 pair)	1.7	\$40
Beanie/Hat	2.0	\$10
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>58.9</b>	<b>\$361</b>

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Here are some suggestions of how to combine your clothes in different situations:

- When Hiking - Tank top/short sleeve shirt, shorts, thin or thick wool socks. If you are cold, layer up with your puffy coat, long-sleeve shirt and leggings. I even wore my extra pair of socks as mittens. Still cold? Throw on your rain gear!
- When it Rains - Tank top/short sleeve shirt & shorts + rain jacket/pants. Just keep moving and you will stay warm enough.
- When Sleeping - Long-sleeve shirt, leggings/long underwear, puffy coat, beanie/hat, thick wool socks. Add rain gear if you are still cold.
- When Doing Laundry - In town, I would wear my rain jacket and rain pants while waiting on my laundry. Also, most hostels offer loaner clothes.

### Warm Weather

Although wearing cotton is not much of a danger in warmer months, its ability to retain moisture can cause chaffing problems if you hike in it. I did sleep in cotton clothing to help air my skin out, though. The table below shows the weight and price for the items I wore during warm weather. Please note that some of the items are repeated from above when considering the total expected price for clothes.

**Table 2. Items worn in warm months with weight and price.**

ITEM	WEIGHT (oz.)	PRICE
Puffy Coat	14.7	\$90
Tank Top	1.8	\$35
Shorts	3.9	\$50
Thin Wool Socks (3 pair)	6.3	\$60
Rain Jacket	5.9	\$10
Sports Bra	2.7	\$15
Underwear (2 pair)	1.7	\$40
Cotton Shorts	3.0	\$10
Cotton Tank Top	1.3	\$5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>41.1</b>	<b>\$315</b>

Below are clothing combinations to consider during warmer months for various situations:

- When Hiking - Tank top, shorts, thin wool socks. It is common for guys to hike shirtless and girls in their sports bras, as well.
- When it Rains - Tank top/short sleeve shirt, shorts, thick wool socks + rain jacket only. I got rid of my rain pants in the summer to save weight, and it was really too hot for them.
- When Sleeping - Cotton tank top, cotton shorts. Puffy coat used as pillow.

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- When Doing Laundry/In Town - I had a light cotton dress that I wore while I was doing laundry and around town. It was worth the extra weight for me. Also, most hostels offer loaner clothes.

### **Item Descriptions**

Below I have listed exactly what I wore and my thoughts on that particular item. If you would like to view a picture and additional details of these, you can find the links to them through my Gear List blog post. If you think you've got clothes figured out, feel free to skip to the next section.

### **Long Sleeved Shirt - Under Armour Cold Gear**

When it was very cold, but not raining, I wore my Under Armour long sleeved top. If it was raining, I kept it put away so I would have something warm and dry to sleep in. I really liked the thumb holes in the sleeves of this shirt, especially because I did not have gloves. It was slightly fuzzy and very soft on the inside.

### **Beanie/Hat**

I sported an Auburn University beanie when it was cold. I got a little too hot to wear it while hiking, but it was nice to sleep in.

### **Leggings**

I wore cheap leggings that I purchased from The Body Shop. There was nothing fancy about them except they were fuzzy and warm on the inside.

### **Cotton Tank Top & Shorts**

I bought these at Wal-Mart. Something light and cheap will do the trick.

### **Puffy Jacket - REI Brand**

Even in the summer I carried a puffy coat. I am cold natured, though, and I seem to get chilly in the evenings. Puffy coats also double as pillows. I chose an REI jacket with synthetic fill because I wanted to be able to wash it every time I did laundry. Down filling requires special detergents. Also, you will love yourself later if you get a jacket with a hood.

### **Tank Top - North Face Eat My Dust Tank**

For a while, I wore a well-ventilated tank top and rotated it out with another one (from Wal-Mart). Somewhere in PA, I sent the Wal-Mart one home to lighten my load. You only really need one, I promise. I like how lightweight the North Face tank was.

### **Shorts - Patagonia Barely Baggies**

When I tried these shorts on for the first time, it felt like they would be durable and dry quickly. They were! They survived all 2,189.2 miles of the AT and I still wear them.

### **Sports Bra**

I rotated between two sports bras throughout the trail. They were the same brand (bcg) but different colors. In Pennsylvania, I sent home one of them to save weight. Again, you'll realize how much these little things cut weight. You only NEED one. Just go with whatever is comfortable to you.

### **Underwear - ExOfficio**

I used two pair of underwear the whole trail. I had heard wonderful things about ExOfficio's from both women and men. The rumors were true; they are amazing. The selling point for me is they are made to reduce odors which is nice when you rarely bathe.

### **Watch to See My Clothing Selection for the AT**



### **Rain Gear**

After buying most of my gear, I realized I probably wouldn't be able to spend a ton on rain gear. To be honest, you're going to end up wet anyway if it rains long enough (or even just from sweat). For my rain suit, I opted for the not-so-fashionable, yet functional, Frogg Toggs. If I end up with an extra couple hundred dollars at some point, I would like to invest in some fancy, lightweight rain gear with pit zips. For a tighter budget, Frogg Toggs are the way to go.

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*Addis Gap, GA - Sporting Frogg Togg's at a trail magic stop*

## CHAPTER NINE

### *Footwear*

#### **FOOTWEAR**

Footwear is a touchy subject because no two people have the same feet or stride. Some will be plagued with blisters most of the trail. Others will never have a single issue. Honestly, you should test your footwear long before you start a thru-hike. Even still, you may have issues. All I can tell you is what worked for me and what type of footwear I saw others use.

#### **Boots vs. Trail Runners**

One of the greatest gear battles in existence seems to be the Team Boots vs. Team Trail Runners. Honestly, I think it is more of a generational thing. There is no right or wrong choice, as long as you pick what works for your feet.

Boots:

- More traditional option
- Often heavier
- Increased ankle support
- Protective from rocks
- Bulkier
- Warmer
- Dry very slowly
- Durable
- Replace after approx. 800-1000 miles

Trail Runners:

- Much lighter
- Less protective from rocks
- Low-cut/Less ankle support
- Not bulky
- Typically dry faster
- Usually more ventilate
- Less durable
- Replace after approx. 400-600 miles)



*Zero Day - Perfect time to wash muddy boots and trail runners*

### **My Personal Experience**

When I first started my hike, I wanted boots for ankle support. If you decide to hike in boots, be sure you pick a good quality pair. I recommend soles that have been stitched on, not glued. I began with a nice pair of leather LOWA boots. They were comfortable and I never felt like I had to break them in. Unfortunately, after three days on trail, I developed tendonitis in my Achilles. Even though they were properly sized, the high ankle drummed on my tendon. I swapped to trail runners at Neel Gap, and I will never go back to boots. The typical saying is, “a pound on your feet is like 5 pounds on your back.” I absolutely agree. Salomon was the most common brand of trail runners; I had 4 pair of them throughout my hike. To see the trail runners I used and to hear my story about swapping from boots to trail runners, check out my video on this topic:



### **Sizing**

One of the most important aspects of selecting footwear for hiking is making sure your shoes fit properly. Try on footwear with the same thickness of socks you plan to hike in. If you are fond of having toenails, you do NOT want your toes touching the front of your boots or trail runners. In fact, when I was selecting my shoes, the sales people at REI and Mountain Crossings had me lace up and tap the toe of the shoe on the ground to insure my foot did not contact the front of the toe box. The shoe should also not be too loose, as slipping can lead to friction-induced blisters. Your best bet is to have someone help you properly size your footwear and let them know your intentions of hiking the trail.

### **Replace Your Hiking Shoes Regularly**

My thoughts on buying new hiking shoes were, “Why would I spend more money on shoes when these still have tread?” I didn’t mind if my big toe poked out a little. I mean, hiking isn’t supposed to be a fashion show — right? Well, it was that exact mindset that likely caused my development of plantar fasciitis and could have ended my journey. The problem isn’t a cosmetic issue, it’s a support issue. If the arch support begins to fail, your foot is forced to hyper-extend in that area, which can cause extreme pain and injury. I stretched one pair of trail runners for over 700 miles. It’s just not worth the risk.

### **Gore-tex — Yes or No?**

Gore-tex is a waterproof material often implemented in hiking gear. Hiking boots and trail runners both have gore-tex options. Why wouldn’t a hiker want waterproof footwear? Well, there are several reasons. First, gore-tex is not as breathable as other materials, so it keeps your feet warmer. This might be desirable in cold months, but not in the summer. Next, while gore-tex might keep your feet dry from dew and puddles, if it rains long enough your feet will be wet, and gore-tex takes longer to dry. I used one pair of gore-tex trail runners in early spring, and all my other pairs were not gore-tex. It probably would’ve been nice to have a pair of waterproof trail runners while trudging through the Maine snow, but I was fine without them.

### **Socks**

There are a ton of options when it comes to wool socks. After trying Patagonia, SmartWool and Darn Tough socks, I would say my favorite brand is Darn Tough. As far as quality goes, SmartWool is neck and neck with Darn Tough. You just can't beat the lifetime guarantee that Darn Tough offers, though. They basically dare you to wear a hole in them. If you're going to pay for a quality pair of wool socks, you might as well make sure they will last for life. For people who have blister issues, apparently toe socks help A LOT. Injinji is the only brand of toe socks I am familiar with.

### **Insoles**

Insoles are one of those pieces of gear that are difficult to recommend, because everyone's feet are different. Some people never wear special inserts, but others will swear you have to. I wore three different brands during my hike. The first was the SOLE brand. I liked them because you heat them in the oven and then step onto them in your boot/shoe to form them to your foot. After my feet swelled A LOT, I decided to try a different insole. Other hikers had raved over Superfeet, so I gave those a shot. Honestly, I can't tell you that I felt a difference in the two. In Pennsylvania, I ended up with a terrible case of plantar fasciitis. I tried to remedy the problem in multiple ways, but one of the things I feel truly helped was the Dr. Scholl's inserts for plantar fasciitis. I have continued to wear them, even after the trail.

### **Camp Shoes**

One of the best feelings after a long day of hiking is slipping on your camp shoes. The thing to look for in a pair of camp shoes is comfort and ventilation. It is important to allow your feet to air out as much as possible to prevent foot fungus. I wore two different types of sandals for camp shoes. At first, I wore Teva strap-on sandals. Later, I swapped to Teva slip-on sandals. The strap-on sandals were heavier, but I could wear socks with them. Many people also wear Crocs, and it is actually socially acceptable on the trail. It's all about your preference.

### **Gaiters**

It is normal to end up with minimal debris in your shoes while hiking. In fact, you might be surprised to see how dirty your feet will be even though you are wearing shoes and socks. However, if you have to stop frequently to empty pebbles and sticks from your shoes, you might need to invest in a pair of gaiters. Most of the gaiters I saw on trail were lightweight and low-rise - just covering the ankle and overlapping the tops of shoes. There are heavier-duty and waterproof versions, though, if that is something you might be interested in trying.

## CHAPTER TEN

### *Repair Kit*

#### **REPAIR KIT**

There were, luckily, only a few instances in which I had to repair things along the trail. Without adding much weight, you should be able to get by for a couple days before hitting town if you carry just a handful of extra items.

1. Duct Tape - Whether your water bladder breaks, pack cover rips, the sole of your shoe starts flapping, etc., duct tape is usually a savior in the world of repairs. Most people wrap some around their trekking poles, but I just rolled about a 6 ft. sections onto itself and kept it with my other repair items in a snack-sized ziploc bag. Don't tote the whole roll!
2. Tent Patch Kit - If your tent comes with a small patch kit, and the weight of it is pretty much negligible, I would recommend carrying it. You can also get a tear-aid kit. Using duct tape to temporarily repair a tent can leave sticky residue making permanent repair difficult for the manufacturer and more expensive for you.
3. Needle & Floss - Since floss is more durable than thread (and serves a double purpose), I would keep some in your repair kit. Whether you're repairing a pack strap or Frogg Togg's, you might be glad to have this on you when crisis hits. I stored my needle in the first fold of my rolled-up duct tape.



*Dental floss stitch job on my ripped Frogg Toggs*

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### *Financial Planning*

If I had a dollar for each time someone asked me how much hiking the AT costs, I'd at least have enough to hike the PCT by now. Unfortunately, this is one of those difficult questions that warrants the very simple, but vague answer: it depends. I will provide a summary of my financial breakdown, but keep in mind it is simply that — mine. You may require much more or less to hike the AT. It really depends on YOU. I would suggest saving as much as you possibly can for your trip so you have more freedom and don't have to stress over it while you are on trail. Okay, let's get into some detail.

#### **OFF-TRAIL EXPENSES**

##### **Bills At Home**

Because people tend to get so caught up in gear and on-trail expenses, they occasionally forget the world will keep spinning back home while they are hiking. The figure needed to hold down the fort while on the AT will be different for everyone, but here are some ways that you might keep your costs down while hiking:

- Sell everything. Some people actually do this before hitting the trail. Car, house, belongings-gone. I did not choose this method, but if you don't have anything to pay for off trail, it would be nice.
- Lease. You could lease your house and/or car for 6 months. I know several people who did this and it seemed to work wonderfully for them.
- Storage unit. A storage unit should be cheaper than rent. If you don't own your home, it might not hurt to move in with family or friends before you go and store your belongings in a unit until you finish hiking.
- Defer student loans. I'm not saying this is the best decision for the long-run, but it is an option.
- Cancel auto insurance. If your vehicle is going to sit in the same spot for 6 months, you might consider dropping insurance. I only have liability on my truck and knew it would not be moved, so I cancelled mine.
- Disconnect utilities. I considered this, but the deposits to have everything reconnected upon my return made it not worth my trouble. You can do the math and see if it works for you.
- Use a prepaid cell phone. By using a prepaid phone, you can eliminate a monthly cell phone bill. You won't be using your cell as much on trail as you do in everyday life.

##### **Gear (Before Starting)**

The cost of gear will vary from one hiker to another. You may already have most of the things you need, or like I did, you may be starting from square one. Some folks are all about the most

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lightweight options, while others don't mind a little more weight in order to save some money. As a general rule of thumb, you can expect gear to run you \$1,000-2,000 to start with. To potentially save a little money on gear:

- Don't wait until the last minute. If you have time to shop around chances are you won't spend as much and you may find some good deals.
- Shop where you can return things if you find a better deal. For example, REI accepts returns up to a year later.
- Check out used gear pages on Facebook. You can also join the groups from previous years of thru-hiker classes and post what gear items you are needing. Someone may be willing to sell theirs!
- Ask for gear or gift cards for Christmas. Even Wal-Mart gift cards can be useful to resupply with on trail.
- Consider making your own gear. There are numerous DIY videos on YouTube for those who are more resourceful.

### **Post-Hike Funds**

Make sure you budget in some money for after you finish the trail. Your mindset will be completely different, so having a little money to support yourself while you warm back up to society is a good idea. Also, job hunting might not seem as stressful if you don't have to accept the first opportunity that arises.

### **ON-TRAIL EXPENSES**

I have heard several estimates of what on-trail expenses cost. Some say \$1.50/mile, while others estimate \$1,000 per month. You could probably do it fairly comfortably on \$5,000-\$7,000, but that depends on your idea of comfortable. Below are some of the costs that you should consider when budgeting.

#### **Food**

The cost of food, like everything else, will be different for everyone. I ate lots of Knorr Pasta & Rice Sides, Ramen Noodles, and other cheap meals. Occasionally, I treated myself to a Mountain House backpacker's meal, but some folks eat the fancier foods for every meal. You just have to decide what works for you.

#### **Lodging**

Every hiker knows town = spending money. It is easy to want to stay at every town you resupply in. As your hike progresses, you will long for a shower and bed more often. If you find people to split hotel/motel rooms with, it can be cheaper than getting a bed at a hostel — especially down south. Once you get farther north, the hostels become the more economical route.

#### **Showers**

Several towns have community centers that will allow you to shower for a donation or a fee of \$3-5, and some hostels permit hikers to shower without staying for a small fee.

### **Laundry**

Most towns have laundromats. I think it cost me somewhere around \$5 to do laundry alone. Most times I tried to split a load with another hiker.

### **Restaurants**

When I went into town, whether I stayed or just resupplied, I always got at least one good meal.

### **Postage**

I sent post cards at least once in every state I hiked through. Also, I exchanged cold/warm weather gear twice, and anytime I bought new shoes I mailed the old pair home. So, even if you don't plan to do food mail drops, chances are you will incur some postage expenses along the way.

### **Gear Replacement**

You might feel like the gear you have is perfect for you, especially if you have tested it out on an overnight trip. I promise, though, over your several month journey you will upgrade or exchange SOMETHING along the way. If nothing else, you will need new footwear. If you are using trail runners, expect to buy about three new pairs on trail. Boots last a little longer, but you will need more than one pair. I replaced my sleeping system, sleeping pad and water filter. Allow yourself some cushion in this category, as your gear can make or break your trip.

### **Transportation**

Of course, you will have to consider the costs of getting to the trail and then home again. You might also want to consider how you plan to get to and from the trail during your hike. Not every town is trailside, and most are at least a few miles out. If you don't feel comfortable hitch hiking, things could get a little pricey. Shuttles or cabs aren't as bad, though, if you can split them with a group. They aren't necessarily always available, either. Keep that in mind.

### **Side Trips**

Most of the hikers I encountered, at one time or another, ended up sidetracking a little. For example, I went to Washington DC for July 4th, so I could see the Declaration of Independence on Independence Day. Then, while in New York, I decided to go see the city for a few days. Luckily, through other hikers, I had places to stay each time. Eating in town is more expensive than trail food. Anyway, it's a good idea to stash a little cash for these opportunities, as they are likely to present themselves.

### **Emergencies**

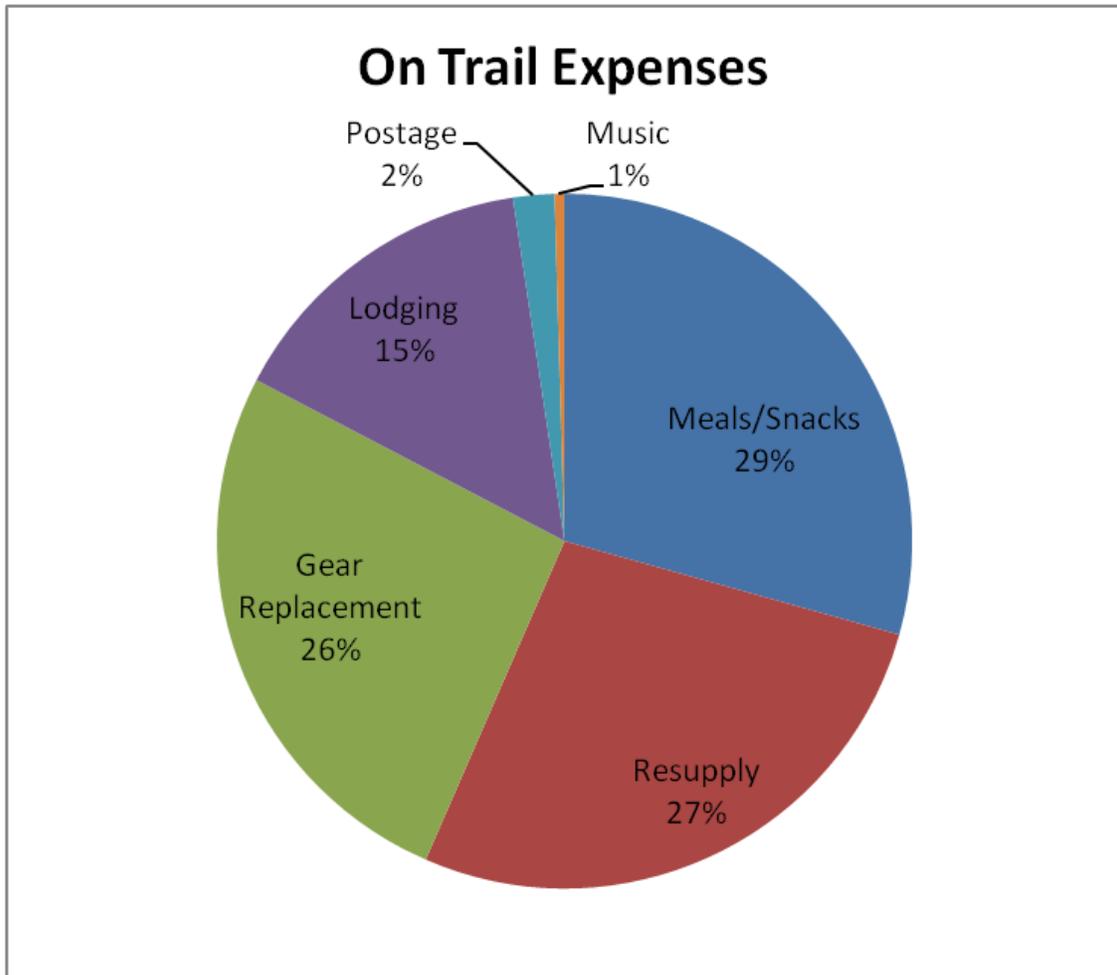
I hate to even bring this one up. I hope none of you experience this, but you never know. If someone gets sick at home or you have to see a doctor while on trail, you don't want it to end your hike. Even if nothing serious happens, you could break your cell phone and wish you had the money to replace it. Just be prepared.

**MY FINANCIAL BREAKDOWN**

Below, Table 3 lists my on-trail expenses and Figure 1 expresses these values by percentage. This information does not include any off-trail or emergency trips. You'll notice on the table I included "untracked cash." This is simply where I made ATM withdrawals and did not keep records of how the cash was spent. Because I can't say exactly how it was spent, it is not included in the chart of percentages. It's not surprising to me that over half of my expenses were food related.

**Table 3. On-trail expenses incurred during Appalachian Trail thru-hike.**

<b>ON-TRAIL EXPENSES</b>		
<b>Category</b>	<b>Cost</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Meals/Snacks	\$1,605	29%
Resupply	\$1,488	27%
Gear Replacement	\$1,429	26%
Lodging	\$818	15%
Postage	\$105	2%
Music	\$25	1%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$5,470</b>	<b>100%</b>
Untracked Cash	\$845	-
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>	<b>\$6,316</b>	-



**Figure 1. On-trail expenses expressed by percentage.**

In Table 4, shown below, I have listed all my original gear purchases. In addition, I have included the associated upgraded or replacement gear. In the last couple rows, I compared the weight differences of my gear (after upgrades) by season. After completing the financial analysis, I was surprised to see that I almost spent the same amount on replacements/upgrades as I did on my original gear. I'm not sure if this is typical of thru-hikers, but lack of experience with my gear may be reflected in these numbers.

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## Table 4. Gear list including upgrades and replacements.

GEAR LIST						
Original Purchase			Upgrade/Replacement			Reason For Upgrade
Item	Weight (oz)	Price	Item	Weight (oz)	Price	
Pack - Osprey Aura AG 50L	66.6	\$230	-	-	-	-
Hammock - ENO DoubleNest	21.0	\$70	Tent - Big Agnes Fly Creek UL2	32.4	\$350	Was not an experienced hammock camper
Hammock Accessories	44.8	\$50	Tent Accessories	7.5	\$15	Swapped to tent
Sleeping Bag - Sierra Designs Zissou 23-Degree	35.0	\$260	Fleece Sleeping Bag Liner	17.4	\$20	Used liner in warmer months in place of sleeping bag to save weight
Foam Sleeping Pad - Wenzel	12.0	\$15	Inflatable Sleeping Pad - Thermarest NeoAir	12.0	\$160	Could not sleep at night anymore due to being uncomfortable
Hiking Boots - LOWA	-	\$230	Trail Runners (x4) - Salomon	-	\$455	Boots caused me to have tendonitis
Socks - SmartWool (x3)	6.9	\$60	Socks - Darn Tough (x3)	6.3	\$70	Wanted ankle socks for warmer weather
Insoles - SOLE	-	\$50	Insoles - Dr. Scholl's for Plantar Fasciitis & Superfeet	-	\$70	Began having issues with plantar fasciitis
Hooded Synthetic Puffy Coat (On sale from REI)	14.7	\$75	-	-	-	-
Long Sleeve Shirt - Under Armour Women's Cold Gear	8.5	\$40	Cotton Tank	1.3	\$5	Cooler clothes to sleep in for summer
Synthetic Tank Top - Walmart	2.0	\$15	Loose Fitting Tank - The NorthFace	1.8	\$50	More comfortable option
Hiking Shorts - Patagonia Women's Barely Baggies	3.9	\$50	-	-	-	-
Camp Shoes - Strap On Teva Sandals	17.9	\$40	Camp Shoes - Slip On Teva Sandals	6.5	\$25	Slip on sandals were lightweight
ExOfficio Underwear (x2)	1.7	\$45	-	-	-	-
Rain Gear - Frogg Toggs	10.5	\$20	Rain Gear - Frogg Toggs	10.5	\$20	I had shredded my original pair by Vermont
Sports Bra	2.7	\$15	Sports Bra	2.7	\$15	Replacement
Leggings	6.5	\$10	Cotton Shorts	3.0	\$10	Cooler clothes to sleep in for summer
Beanie/Hat	2.0	\$10	-	-	-	-
Stove - MSR Pocket Rocket	3.9	\$40	-	-	-	-
Pot - Grease Pot from K-Mart	3.7	\$8	-	-	-	-
Titanium Spork	0.5	\$10	-	-	-	-
Collapsible Cup - Sea To Summit	1.7	\$15	-	-	-	-
Pot Cozy	1.3	\$22	-	-	-	-
Water Filtration - Sawyer Squeeze	3.0	\$40	Water Filtration - Platypus Gravity Filter	8.8	\$120	Ease of use/Time saver
Platypus Bladder & Hose w/ Bite Valve	3.8	\$30	Replacement Hose w/ Bite Valve	1.5	\$15	Replacement
Back-Up Battery Charger	2.4	\$10	Back-Up Battery Charger - Sound Logic	4.9	\$20	First back-up didn't give enough charge
Bear Cord - Z Packs	1.2	\$12	-	-	-	-
Carabiners - Z Packs (x4)	0.4	\$10	-	-	-	-
Trekking Poles - REI Women's	17.0	\$90	Trekking Pole Tips	-	\$10	Replacement
Knife - Gerber	1.9	\$20	-	-	-	-
Pepper Spray	1.5	\$10	-	-	-	-
Food Bag - No Limits 15L	3.6	\$10	-	-	-	-
Head Lamp	6.5	\$40	-	-	-	-
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>308.9 oz (19.3 lb)</b>	<b>\$1,652</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>116.6 oz (7.3 lb)</b>	<b>\$1,430</b>	<b>-</b>
<b>TOTAL COST OF ORIGINAL &amp; REPLACEMENT/UPGRADED GEAR - \$3,082</b>						
<b>TOTAL WEIGHT AFTER REPLACING ORIGINAL GEAR W/ UPGRADES (COLD WEATHER) - 279.6 oz (17.5 lb)</b>						
<b>TOTAL WEIGHT AFTER REPLACING ORIGINAL GEAR W/ UPGRADES (WARM WEATHER) - 250.5 oz (15.7 lb)</b>						

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**Watch A Video On My Gear Picks**



## CHAPTER TWELVE

### *Personal Hygiene*

#### **HYGIENE ON TRAIL & ANSWERING THE CALL OF NATURE**

I was somewhat worried about being gross and not bathing for days. It's actually very liberating and EVERYONE is doing it! I mean, they don't really have a choice. Just embrace it and enjoy, because it probably hasn't been socially acceptable in your life before. Although you will go days (and maybe weeks) without bathing, there is still hope of minimal hygiene if you so desire. Although good hygiene is optional, you should at least be aware of and abide by the rules of how to handle using the bathroom in the woods to ensure a safe and pleasant experience for everyone.

#### **Pooping**

There are basically two options for where to poop:

- Privy - Most shelters have a privy nearby, which is basically an outhouse. Most privies require "duff" (dried leaves, wood chips, sawdust, etc.) to help the waste compost, but there will be instructions telling you what to do on the privy wall. The only item permitted to be deposited in a privy, other than human waste and duff, is toilet paper. No wipes, regardless if they say they are compostable or not.
- Cat-Hole - A 6" hole that is dug with a rock, trekking pole, trowel, etc. Cat-holes should be dug AT LEAST 200 ft. (approximately 80 steps) from water sources. It is recommended that when you are finished you should stir some dirt in with a stick before burying your poop to aid decomposition. Toilet paper may be buried, but not wipes.

Tip: When using a cat-hole, it helps to hold on to a tree while hovering over the hole. You won't be a pro at first, but your legs will get stronger and your aim better.

#### **Peeing**

The main rule for peeing is to be at least 100 feet (or approximately 40 paces) away from a water source. Men have it a little easier in this category, as they don't have to worry about wiping. These are some options for the ladies:

1. Wipe with toilet paper and bury it or pack it out. A cat-hole is not required for peeing, but if you decide to bury your toilet paper it needs to be 6 inches deep so curious animals won't dig it up.
2. Use a pee rag. You can tie a bandana to the outside of your pack and use it to wipe with. Having it on the outside of your pack helps dry it out and keeps it easily accessible. Also, it conveniently keeps pranksters from touching your stuff.
3. Leaves. I do NOT recommend this at all. But, I have heard that some girls do it. Honestly, I think putting something that rests on dirt down there is a very bad idea. But, to each her own!

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4. Shake it off. Yes, you read that correctly. You know what I mean, when you get done, just shimmy and wiggle a little. I used a pee rag for a while, but finally just went with this method.

### Peeing Devices For Women

I have received several questions about the “shewee” or other devices for female urination. I have no experience with them and do not plan to ever use one. I think the biggest attraction to them is not having to remove your pack, but I enjoy taking breaks. Also, I’m not sure how I would conveniently locate one to access it without taking my pack off. Regardless, if you think it would be useful for you, they do exist, so it is something you could consider.

### Teeth

You really should brush your teeth but, some people don’t. I made a point to brush my teeth twice a day. Once it got cold in New Hampshire and Maine, I settled for brushing at breakfast and lunch instead of breakfast and dinner. I cut the end of my toothbrush off (to save weight and space) and carried a small travel-sized tube of toothpaste. Most towns have a travel section in the local grocery store, so you should find they are available more often than not. I cut my toothbrush handle off to save weight and space. It’s all about personal preference. Some hikers even use those travel tooth brushes. Just remember to put your toiletries in your food bag when you hang it for the night, and don’t brush your teeth and spit next to your tent!



*Taking advantage of a natural toothbrush and toothpaste holder*

### **Bathing**

Since having a proper bath each day isn't possible, there are ways to reduce your funk. I thoroughly enjoyed a good wiping down with baby wipes each morning and night. I also sprinkled a little baby powder on my body occasionally. Apparently, there are some serious accusations about baby powder causing cancer, so that might be something you want to look into. I'm just telling you what I did. If you do decide you just can't take it and you need to soap up on trail, DO NOT use soap in water sources regardless of how biodegradable it claims to be. Just carry some water away from the water source and do your bathing there. You might have to make several trips, but nature and other hikers will thank you.

### **Deodorant**

Don't bother! You will smell terrible anyway, so it isn't worth the extra weight. Also, there is just something freeing about being a stinky hiker and not applying deodorant. Plus, you should give your body a break from chemicals. Embrace the stink.

### **Hair**

For containing wild hair and covering up the greasiness, men and women both wore Buffs or bandanas in their hair. Buffs can be worn several ways and help to keep sweat from running down your face. I never used one, but a lot of my thru hiker friends did. I simply put baby powder in my hair (to absorb the oil), combed it, and braided it. You will figure out what works for you.

### **Chaffing**

One of the most awful pains I experienced on the trail was chaffing. Bodyglide will save the day in that category. It comes in a small deodorant-like tube for easy application, and should be available at any outfitter. Gold Bond or baby powder will help, too. In the summer time, I would give a little sprinkle of baby powder in easily chaffed areas and sleep commando in cotton shorts. It never hurts to let things air out a little.

### **Log Books**

If you are wondering why this title is present in the hygiene section, it's because they are GROSS. A lot of hikers don't have the best hygiene and forget to clean their hands after using the bathroom. Then, right after they are done doing their business at the privy, they come to scope out the shelter log book. I'm not saying don't sign and read the books, I would just hand sanitize after doing so unless you want a good inoculation of your immune system. It may seem like I'm making a big deal of nothing, but I promise you do not want to be sick on the trail.

### **Foot Care**

The last thing you will want to do after hiking all day is play with your feet, but remember they are kind of a big deal when it comes to hiking. Some things you can do to make them happy:

- Wash them. You can pour water on them or use baby wipes, just get that salt and grime build-up off your feet.
- Soak them. Putting them in cool water does wonders for sore feet.
- Massage them. Massaging my feet when I had plantar fasciitis helped save my hike.

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- Elevate them. When you take a break during the day, kick your feet up on a rock. Also, if you sleep on your back, you can prop them up on your pack while sleeping.
- Let them air out. When you get to camp you should have some sort of camp shoes to wear like cros or sandals. Put these on as soon as you get there to maximize the time your feet have to breathe. Also, in the summer you can sleep without socks. I saw several hikers suffer from trench foot and other types of foot fungus, it didn't look like something I would want to experience.

### **Feminine Hygiene**

Okay ladies, let's face it. Periods SUCK. Unfortunately, they are even more annoying on trail. So, it's best to think about your options ahead of time as there are a few different ways to deal with your monthly visitor.

#### Conventional Methods

You know, pads, tampons and panty liners. The good part is, you are already used to these. The bad part is, that's a lot of additional trash to pack out since you can't bury or dispose of it in a privy. If you choose to use pads/tampons:

- Pack more than you think you'll need. You don't want to be stranded without them! Plus, you might save the day of another female on trail if you have extra.
- Store them in a ziploc to keep them dry. Wet pads and tampons are pretty much useless.
- I suggest keeping a separate gallon trash bag for feminine products so you don't have to open up a bag of used tampons at dinner time. One of the girls I hiked with a while kept hers in an empty peanut butter jar.
- DO NOT bury or throw your used products in a privy. They do not break down quickly and animals will uncover them or trail maintenance volunteers will have to fish them out.

#### Menstrual Cups

The Diva Cup, Moon Cup, etc. If you've never heard of these, they are essentially small closed funnel looking cups that you insert inside of you to collect your period. They are reusable and don't weigh much at all. They take some practice and getting used to, but they save you money and hassle of packing out trash in the long run—if they work for you. If you decide to use a menstrual cup:

- Practice several months before the trail. You don't want to be sitting in a privy or hovering over a cat hole the first time you try this.
- Keep in mind that inserting and emptying the cup is a bit messier than using pads and tampons. Baby wipes help!
- It is recommended that you boil the cup for each cycle. You would have to do so in your food pot. It may not bother you, just something to keep in mind.
- If you accidentally drop it in the privy, it could put you in a bad spot!
- Touching yourself down there while not being able to wash your hands regularly could put you at risk of infections.

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### Period-Proof Underwear

Post-hike, I have heard several women mention underwear that can be worn during your period that absorb up to two times what a tampon will. I assume these could work for hiking, but again I would suggest getting used to them prior to the trail. If you choose this option:

- There won't be any trash to pack out.
- Consider carrying a couple pair, at least, so one pair has time to dry out before you wear it again. Wet undies could cause chafing, which is no fun.
- I would compare the weight of a couple pair of these underwear against the other options.
- DO NOT wash your menstrual underwear in water sources. It would be best to carry water a couple hundred feet away and rinse them over a cat hole.

During my thru-hike, I started with the Moon Cup, but brought pads and tampons for back-up. I liked the Moon Cup much more than the Diva Cup, as it was less rigid. After a month or two, I went back to pads and tampons. I just didn't feel comfortable with the cup on trail. I like the sound of the Period-Proof underwear and would probably try them in the future. Everyone is different, but you will find what works for you!

### **Watch A Video Covering Hygiene Topics**



## **CHAPTER THIRTEEN**

### ***Physical and Mental Preparation***

#### **Do I need to prepare physically?**

My first response to this question is no, but since I do not know every reader's physical and medical condition, the best answer is — it depends. I am not in perfect shape by any means, nor were the majority of thru-hikers I saw on the trail. I met a 10-year old girl and a 72-year old woman. I am very thin and my starting and finishing weights were within a 5-lb. range. However, I met a young woman on the trail who started out weighing 230 lbs. (with a goal of dropping 100 lbs.) and was down to 180 lbs. by Pennsylvania. The point is, do not let your weight or fitness level be your excuse for not hiking the trail. If it is something you truly want to do, there are very few valid excuses for not doing it.

With that said, you **MUST** listen to your body while hiking. If you follow this simple rule, your training will come naturally on the trail. Standing on one of the 6,374,291 steps (okay, there are really only about 600, but it felt like more) on the approach trail in Georgia I wondered if I would ever make it to Maine, but I did because I paid attention to what my body was telling me. My first day, I hiked about 8 miles. I kept this pace until maybe a week later when I did 10 miles. Then 12 miles. Slowly, I noticed I took fewer and fewer breaks on an uphill climb. Your pace will increase, but it should not be forced. Let it happen naturally. Maine isn't going anywhere anytime soon.

While you do not have to train physically, if you would like to it won't hurt anything. If you have a lot of free time and are training way ahead of time, start getting used to having some weight on your back. Go on day hikes and slowly add your overnight gear to your pack, acclimating yourself to increased weight over time. Camp out for a weekend to test your gear. Do whatever you feel will help you prepare. The bottom line is, nothing will actually prepare you for the AT, except the AT itself.

#### **What should I expect to deal with mentally?**

Completing the Appalachian Trail is much more of a mental feat than physical. Most days you will likely question yourself and your decision to hike the AT. So, it is best to establish these reasons before you ever step foot onto the trail. These were some of my most mentally difficult moments:

- In rain. One rain storm is no big deal, but after about 3 days in a row it gets a little tough. Putting wet clothes back on to hike in the morning, not being able to enjoy breaks during the day, and going to the bathroom in the rain are a few of the inconveniences I hated about the seemingly never-ending rain. You just have to keep trucking knowing that the sun will eventually shine again. It will, I promise!

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- In extreme cold. Cold was my kryptonite. Especially cold AND rain. I remember being in the Smoky Mountain National Park around lunch one day and I was slightly chilly. I thought to myself, "This is the warmest I am going to feel all day." I was right. If I made it through, though, you can, too! The weather will warm up and you will be pouring sweat before you know it.
- After being alone for several days. When I first started, I thought I wanted to have alone time. I didn't get much of it at the beginning, but I was alone quite a bit toward the end. I started feeling like Tom Hanks in the movie *Castaway*. There is no real way to "deal" with this, except maybe listen to podcasts/music and write in a journal. You will be lonely at times, but maybe it is an opportunity for you to get to know yourself a little better.
- When I was close to the finish line. I went through this strange mini-depression, if you will, toward the end of my hike. At some point in Maine, I became the biggest worry-wart in the world. I kept thinking, "What if I fall and hurt myself?" Because I was pushing it time-wise, I knew if I injured myself severely, I wouldn't have time to heal before Baxter State Park closed. I remember saying out loud, "Psh. I will CRAWL up Katahdin if I have to." I was still worried, though. I think most people go through this to some extent, however, I wouldn't recommend finishing quite as late as I did (October 19th) to avoid some of the stress.

### **Words Of Encouragement - You CAN do it!**

You will have your own quirky thoughts and experiences that get you down in the dumps. Frustrating things will happen and you will probably throw at least one toddler-like fit during the 2,000+ mile stretch. Here are some things to remember that might help you through these moments:

- "No rain, no pain, No Maine." I think I first heard this saying in Georgia, but reminded myself of it often. If you are a NOBO, this saying will be true for you.
- "A bad day of hiking is better than a good day at work." I seriously pictured being in the office at past jobs when I was having a bad day. Sure, work might have had heat/AC, clean water, and a toilet, but it was still work. Instead of being in a stuffy office, I was out living one of my dreams.
- "Keep your head up." It's easy to get in a rhythm and stare at the ground while hiking. Instead, take note of how beautiful nature is and that all forms of weather have a certain charm to them. My favorite part of rainy weather was the presence of Red Efts. They seemed to only come out when it was damp or raining. If you focus on picking out your favorite aspects of each type of weather, you'll stop dwelling on the negativities.
- "All you have to do is put one foot in front of the other." I said this out loud while hiking many times. This is probably the best advice I received as I was taking my first steps onto the approach trail. After all, that's how you get to Katahdin — literally.
- "Don't quit on a bad day." Seriously, don't. Everyone is going to have bad days. Here's the test. Wait for a nice day and take a seat on a beautiful summit with the sun shining on your face, butterflies fluttering and birds singing. While you are taking it all in, if you still think, "this sucks," only then is it time to quit.
- Grandma Gatewood completed the trail, multiple times, with much less than what you have. You can do this.



*Red Eft – Always out after the rain*

### **Being Alone In Your Mind**

At some point, one thing you will have to adjust to on the trail is yourself. I learned that my mind is a much noisier place than I ever imagined. Without the distractions of people, social media, news, etc. you really can't escape thoughts, especially the less than pleasant ones. In other words, you are forced to contemplate feelings you have placed on the back burner or masked by "staying busy." In the long run, you will benefit from this. I think it's often true that we grow most rapidly outside of our comfort zone.

### **Mental Benefits From A Thru-Hike**

Completing a thru-hike will change your life. I often joke and say, "The Appalachian Trail ruined my life — in a good way." The changes will likely not be noticed until looking back on the experience. Although it is different for everyone, I think it is safe to say upon completing a thru-hike people often feel like they have gained:

- More confidence. Post-trail I've talked to several of my fellow 2,000 milers and we agree that we now share the "If I can hike the AT, I can (fill in the blank)" mentality.
- Resistance to the need for instant gratification. Working on a goal continuously for 6 months strengthens a person's diligence and acceptance of delayed gratification. It allows you to exercise creating small goals for yourself and enjoying little victories.
- Increased appreciation for modern luxuries. People often say, "It's the little things in life that matter most." After hiking the trail, you will appreciate many everyday comforts you once took for granted. I always said that when I finished the trail, I would never complain about having to get up out of bed in the middle of the night to use a flushing toilet. Also,

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when it rains and I have to walk from my truck to the house, I often catch myself lingering, looking up at the sky and realizing that the rain was once a struggle that I overcame.

- Priceless memories. Not to be overly Halmark-ish, but after a thru-hike you will think about your memories and people from the trail often, if not every day.



*I think about these white blazes daily*

### **Doubting your Physical or Mental Ability to Thru-Hike?**



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### *Common Injuries and Afflictions*

It is normal to experience some discomfort while hiking long distances. I named the act of climbing out of my tent in the mornings “the first stand.” From this moment, I could gauge how sore I would be that day. After you get accustomed to this “normal” pain, you will notice if it suddenly becomes abnormal. Pains that need attention might be related to the following issues. Let it be known, however, that I am not a doctor and if you feel you are injured it is your responsibility to seek medical attention.

#### **Blisters**

I saw some rather gnarly blisters while on the trail. Luckily, I only had one and it happened the day I crossed over mile 1700. I can't tell you what caused it as nothing with my footwear had changed. Unfortunately, some people are plagued with blisters for 2,000+ miles. Here are some ways to deal with blisters:

- Prevention - Injinji toe socks help with preventing blisters as they help mitigate skin-to-skin friction. It also helps to allow your feet and socks to air/dry out as often as possible.
- Early detection - As you are hiking, if you begin to feel a hot spot on your foot, stop and apply moleskin, a band-aid, or even duct tape. Just something to reduce the friction on your skin.
- Treatment - Antibiotic ointment is good to have on hand for blisters. Some advise against popping blisters, as opening the skin might not be the best idea in an unclean environment, but they are more painful when filled with fluid. Most people popped their blisters and treated them with antibiotic ointment. I also saw several people pull a needle (that they burned with a lighter and rubbed hand sanitizer on) with Neosporin soaked thread through their blisters. They would leave the thread hanging out of the blister to wick out the fluid while they were sleeping. It seemed to work. Just make sure to clean the area regardless of what method of treatment you use.

#### **Achilles Tendinitis**

It is easy to overwork your Achilles while hiking. As I mentioned before, hiking in boots irritated my Achilles and I had to swap to a low-ankle trail runner. I experienced issues with my right Achilles on and off throughout my hike. Here are some ways to deal with an irritated Achilles:

- Rest - Enjoy a zero day or two and allow your body to heal itself. Resting beats ending your hike due to serious injury.
- Ibuprofen - This will help with pain and inflammation.
- Ice - If you are in town, ice your tendon. If on trail, find a cold spring to soak it in.
- Stretching - One of the most important morning rituals you can have is stretching. I made a point to stretch problem areas at least twice a day.

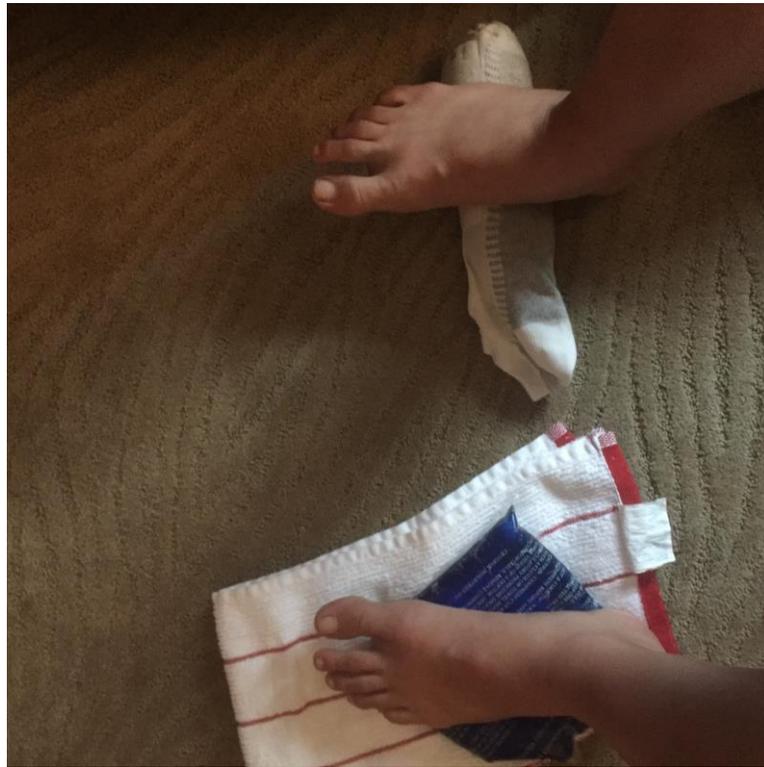


*Even properly sized boots can cause Achilles Tendinitis.*

### **Plantar Fasciitis**

The plantar fascia is the tendon that runs along the bottom of your foot. If your arch is over-worked, it can cause damage to that tendon. I began suffering from plantar fasciitis in Pennsylvania, but was able to work through it. The following are some of the remedies I tried:

- New shoes and insoles - When I realized I had plantar fasciitis, the support had been long gone from my shoes. I bought new trail runners and replaced the factory insoles with Dr. Scholl's insoles for plantar fasciitis.
- Rolling with a ball - I bought a game of jacks from the dollar store and threw away the jacks. I used the bouncy ball to roll out my foot. I would stand and place the ball under my foot, working out all the tender areas.
- Rubbing/Massaging - I was told to pull my toes back with one hand to tighten the plantar fascia. Then, apply pressure and rub upward on the tendon (between the heel and ball) with the thumb from my other hand. I did this each morning, during every break and at night.
- Stretching - Not only should the plantar fascia be stretched, but also the calf and hamstring. They all work together as a system.
- Icing - If you are in town, you should ice the bottom of your feet. I found using a frozen bottle of water to roll out each foot was helpful. If you aren't in town, soak your feet in a cold spring or stream at least twice a day for 10-15 minutes.
- Ibuprofen - This will help with pain and inflammation.
- Rest - Taking breaks and resting your feet is important. Enjoy a zero and heal your body!



*Icing to treat plantar fasciitis and swollen feet.*

### **Sprains**

If you feel like you have sprained an ankle, I would take it slow to the next road crossing and head to town. If after a day or two of rest, ice and ibuprofen it is still painful to stand on, it might not hurt to have it looked at. A sprain can go quickly from bad to worse.

### **Tick Bites**

Dealing with ticks was never a big concern of mine. The possibility of contracting Lyme disease from a deer tick is nothing to take lightly, though. You can wear bug repellent on your pants or legs, if you so choose. Also, your gear can be treated with permethrin. I did not want to subject myself to poison on a daily basis, so I chose to just regularly check myself. I once saw a tick on my pack and found another crawling on my shorts, but I never had one attach itself to me. Some of my fellow hikers found several on them, however, I do not personally know anyone who ended up with Lyme disease while hiking last year. If you find a tick on your body, here is what you can do:

1. Clean the area with soap and water (if you have it). You can always use hand sanitizer, baby wipes, etc.
2. Remove the tick with a pair of tweezers, making sure the head comes out with the body.
3. Clean the area again.
4. Keep an eye on the bite to make sure a bullseye pattern doesn't form around the area. If you do see this typical indication of Lyme disease or experience fatigue, muscle-aches or fever, seek medical attention as soon as possible. Better safe than sorry!

## **Giardia**

Unfortunately, not all people follow “leave no trace” principles when using the bathroom. Bears, deer, and other forest animals don't care if they poop in or near water, either. There is this microscopic devil called Giardia that can be present in food, soil and water that has been subject to feces contamination by infected animals. Most hikers who end up with Giardia likely contract it through unfiltered/untreated water. I only knew of one person who was affected by Giardia and she admitted to getting lazy about treating her water. I guarantee she regretted that decision. If you end up with giardiasis, expect to experience diarrhea, nausea/vomiting, gas and dehydration. You will need to get off trail quickly and seek medical treatment. Before you get to town:

- Try to stay hydrated. Losing too much fluid through diarrhea and vomiting is a real concern.
- Eat bland foods. Mashed potatoes, plain noodles, and crackers are a few options. I had food poisoning once on trail, and I thanked my lucky stars when another hiker traded me his mashed potatoes for my Knorr rice sides.
- Take Imodium (diarrhea medicine). You should keep some of this with you at all times.

## **Minimal First Aid/Safety Kit**

I really did not carry much in the way of a first-aid kit. You should add to this list if you think you might need something else, but the following items might come in handy:

- Whistle - This could help if you were to fall down a drop-off or were stranded and needed to catch another hiker's attention. Also, it is said to help ward off bears up-trail.
- Needle - If you don't already have one in your repair kit, add it here. It can be used to dig out splinters or pop blisters.
- Thread - If you want to try the wicking method on a blister as mentioned above, you should take a couple feet of thread.
- Tweezers - These can be helpful in dealing with ticks and splinters.
- Antibiotic Ointment - Those small foil-like sample packets are nice to have. If not, squirt a little in a snack-size ziploc with an ear swab or two for easy application.
- Anti-diarrheal - Make sure you have enough for a few doses. I learned that the hard way!
- Moleskin/Duct Tape - Either of these will help reduce friction if you are prone to blisters.
- Super Glue - Super glue can be used on blisters, cuts, etc. It never hurts to have it.
- Ibuprofen - I don't recommend becoming dependent on ibuprofen, but it has its applications. If you experience swelling from an injury, happen to over-do it one day, experience fever or some other unusual pain, ibuprofen would be good to have on hand.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### *Safety*

When I first announced my intentions of a thru-hike to my family, I could feel the worry in their half-hearted congratulations. It's not that they didn't want me to chase my dreams; they were concerned for my safety. Luckily, the Appalachian Trail is relatively safe considering millions of people step foot on it annually. Most injuries that occur are due to typical risks associated with any outdoor activity including human error, wildlife incidents, waterborne diseases, etc. As far as crime goes, there have been fewer than 15 murders on the Appalachian Trail since its completion in 1937. Pick one area in the United States in which 2-3 million people live and I guarantee it has seen more than 15 murders in an 80-year period. With that said, I don't expect your family to necessarily be comforted by hearing the AT has only been associated with x number of murders. So, let's get into a little more depth about how you can be safe while hiking.

#### **Hiking Solo vs. With a Group**

While a solo hike sounds rather independent, the truth is you will be around other people quite a bit. I agree in most instances "there is safety in numbers," but you won't be alone simply because you start your thru-hike by yourself. Most people create some sort of pack or "trail family" along the way. I hiked with a group of 9 other solo hikers for several hundred miles. We eventually dispersed and some left the trail, but I will always cherish the time I had with them. I was able to enjoy the best of both worlds during my thru-hike. There are pros and cons to either scenario. Please, don't stay at home because you don't have a hiking partner! In fact, before begging someone to tag along with you, consider these points:

#### Solo Hiking Benefits

- Freedom of Schedule - While hiking alone, YOU make the schedule. There is nobody else to consult. "Self, can I take a zero today?" "Sure."
- Injuries/Illnesses - I saw several couples (and groups) in sticky situations due to someone being sick or hurt. Is the injury significant enough to warrant time off trail? Does the partner continue on or give up a thru-hike if necessary? When you are solo, you avoid this situation completely.
- Alone Time - While I greatly enjoy sharing experiences with others, it is nice to have alone time when you want it. You have to really be sure you like someone to spend a continuous 6-month journey with them.
- Lodging Availability- Hostels and hotels, especially down south during a NOBO hike, tend to fill up quickly. It's a lot easier to accommodate just one more person than a group. Your fellow hikers will also be more inclined to give up some floor space in a hotel room, if it comes to that.

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### Couple/Group Hiking Benefits

- Buddy System - It is nice knowing that someone is always looking out for you. Generally, people do so, anyway, but there were days I was alone in Maine and I knew if I were to disappear it would be a day or two before anyone was aware. I especially felt this way while fording rivers solo.
- Gear/Weight Sharing - I met couples who shared gear such as tents and cookware. This can significantly reduce the weight of each person's pack. I also saw some trail break-ups that ended somewhat ugly due to shared gear. If you trust your hiking partner and y'all have similar hiking speeds, then sharing gear can be helpful.
- Cheaper Lodging - If you are traveling with a group of 3-4, it is often cheaper to split a hotel room than if you are solo and stay at hostels. I split rooms with my trail family when we were hiking together.
- Comradery - You won't always have good days and there will be many times you will question your sanity. Having someone encourage you while facing the same struggles is priceless at times. There is one instance of this that stands out in my mind. It had rained all day and I hiked into the night waiting for a break in weather to set up camp. Realizing hours later the break wouldn't come, I stopped, stood in the rain and sobbed. I was cold, wet, tired, hungry and thirsty. I barely had enough energy to *think* about setting up my tent. Thankfully, one of my trail friends still had some humor about him. He looked at me and started singing, "Aruba, Jamaica, ooo I wanna take ya to Bermuda, Bahama..." At least I laughed while crying.

### Hitchhiking

Most crimes that occur on trail are not committed by hikers and are typically in areas where the trail comes in close proximity of town, so hitchhiking is obviously risky. It is also an inevitable experience for most thru-hikers. Sure, there are shuttle services in a lot towns, but they get expensive quickly. Here are some safety tips to keep in mind if you are thumbing a ride:

Buddy System - If you can, find someone to hitchhike with. Again, there is safety in numbers. I was mostly able to find a hitching buddy, but I did hitch a ride alone a handful of times.

Pepper Spray - I kept my pepper spray and pocket knife in my hip belt while hiking, but had them in easy reach while riding with strangers. I often grasped my pepper spray (ready to fire) in my pocket.

- Follow Your Gut - If someone pulls up and offers you a ride and they give you an uneasy feeling for some reason, don't get in. Tell them you realized you left a piece of gear and you must return to your last campsite, you decided you are going to go back down trail to wait on a friend, or "no thanks." Say whatever you have to, but come up with something before you are in that situation.
- Daylight Hours - I can't say I never hitchhiked at night when I was desperate to reach town. It is safer to wait until day time, though.
- The Law - The only states I remember being restrictive of hitchhiking are New Jersey and New York. AWOL's AT Guide plainly warns of this in those areas.
- Good Location - Be sure to stand in a spot that isn't dangerous for the driver to stop. They should have enough room to pull completely off the roadway.

It is important to recognize and treat hitchhiking as a real danger, but I feel inclined to say I never felt threatened. Most people near trail towns truly love helping hikers and collectively they have created an amazing community from Georgia to Maine. From two of my hitchhiking experiences, I was offered (and graciously accepted) boarding for the night. In both instances, I ate wonderful meals, bathed and did laundry. The trail honestly has a way of restoring your faith in the world. I remember calling my mom and telling her that I was staying with a family in Fontana Dam, NC. She frantically said, "Oh my gosh, Jessica. Do you even KNOW these people?" I informed her that, no, I didn't. Trying to convince her I was in good hands, I assured her that I would be staying there with my fellow hiking friends Rigga and Camel. She shrieked, "But, you really don't even know them!" She wasn't wrong, but I knew I was in good hands. It's difficult to explain the trail vibe to people who aren't on it. So, if you are freaking out, stop. It's going to be okay and you will meet and experience amazing people and places!

### **GPS/Tracking Devices**

The trail is plainly marked with white blazes and/or signage, so having a GPS really isn't necessary. Plus, you really can't mistake a beaten path with undisturbed ground. Things can get a little tricky when the terrain is rocky, but you'll be a pro by then. I did get turned around and ended up on other trails a couple times, but I was never truly lost. I never saw anyone with a GPS, however I did see a handful of people carry SPOT devices. SPOT devices use the GPS network to keep an open line of communication while you are in the wilderness. You can allow friends and family to track your location, send pre-programmed messages, and alert rescuers when in distress. They aren't cheap (\$100-200 + service plan), but they are an option for additional safety and peace of mind.

### **Firearms on Trail**

The number one question I've received regarding my solo thru-hike is, "Did you carry a gun?" I usually answer, "My dad wanted me to." I can say with 100% certainty that I never once needed a gun during my thru-hike nor did I ever regret not bringing one. Also, none of the thru-hikers I met spoke of having one. In fact, we often joked about it being a frequently asked question. I am licensed to carry in my home state and I often do, but here is why I chose not to carry on trail:

- **Weight** - Guns and ammo are heavy. I trimmed pack weight anywhere I could, especially when I started having issues with plantar fasciitis. I know there are small pistols that don't are relatively light, but any unnecessary weight wasn't worth it to me.
- **Legality** - The AT passes through 14 different states in which some allow you to open-carry and some require permits for concealed carrying. Is there reciprocity for the permit you hold with all 14 of these states? Also, a significant portion of the trail passes through National Park territory in which discharging a firearm is illegal. I understand that you would have to be caught breaking the law for it to be an issue, but I didn't want to take that risk.
- **Comfort/Accessibility** - The only reasons I could see needing a pistol would be for criminals and bears. In both instances, your best bet would be to open carry. You can't very well tell an aggressive bear or human to hold off on attacking while you get the gun out of your pack. Packs have hip belts, shoulder straps, sternum straps, etc. that are around you most of the time you're hiking. I just couldn't see comfortably squeezing a

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gun in on top of all that. Yes, you could have it to at least sleep with at night, but I felt safe enough with my knife and pepper spray.

### Weighing the Pros & Cons of Carrying A Gun on Trail?



### Fording Rivers

I want to address this topic, mainly because some of the rivers I had to ford freaked me out a little bit. I hiked through 13 states, from Georgia to New Hampshire, and was spoiled by footbridges. Then, I met Maine. It probably didn't help that during my time in Maine we had some serious rain that my fellow hikers and I named "The Maine-soon." For most of the fords, I was alone. I am an okay swimmer, but luckily, I never had to prove that to myself. So, here are some pointers for dealing with river fords:

- Temperature - If it is cold, try to plan your river crossing for mid-day. You don't want to submerge yourself in cold water and then immediately crawl into your tent to sleep. Give yourself time to hike and warm back up.
- Weather - If it has recently been raining and the river is rushing or seems too risky to cross, wait. You'd be surprised at how much the water level will drop overnight. I camped on the south side of several rivers for this reason alone. On the flip side of that, if you know it is going to rain, but hasn't yet, get across the river so you don't get stranded on the other side. There were a group of hikers that were stranded between two rivers in the 100-Mile Wilderness because they forded one and camped before crossing the next. After it rained all night, both rivers were too dangerous to cross.
- Scout - Walk up and down stream if necessary to find the best place to cross. You will want to cross at wider areas, because the water in narrow sections is typically deeper and faster.
- Unbuckle Yourself - Always unbuckle the straps on your pack before fording. If you were to go down, you need to be able to shed your pack as quickly as possible. Swimming with an extra 20-40 lbs. is much more difficult.

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- Footing - Some hikers cross in their trail runners/boots, but I wore my sandals. Wet shoes are gross, uncomfortable and invite blisters. I would cross in dirty socks before crossing barefoot. Whatever you choose, make sure you have adequate footing before taking the next step. Use your trekking poles to help support you and probe the area ahead.
- Clothes - I knew some people who forded naked when it was cold out, so their clothes would not get wet. I always changed into my tank top and shorts and kept my warm clothes dry.
- Angled Crossing - In fast moving water, face upstream and walk downstream at a slight angle, stepping to the side while somewhat leaning into the current.
- Buddy System - If you know someone isn't far behind you, wait for them and cross together.
- Worst Case - If you happen to fall into the river and the current takes you away try to remain as calm as possible, push your pack off, flip onto your back and keep your feet up. Once you reach calm waters, swim to shore.

My favorite river to cross in Maine was the Kennebec, because you get to cross it in a canoe! There are certain hours and days that the ferry service runs during hiking season (you can find it listed in AWOL's AT Guide). Fording the Kennebec River is highly advised against, and when you see it you will know why.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### *Wildlife*

It should be no surprise that you will encounter wildlife along your journey. I saw deer, squirrels, chipmunks, birds, bears, snakes, moose, mice, fox, and the list goes on. Of course, some are more dangerous than others. There really is no way to prepare for dealing with them as each encounter is different. But, I will give you some tips to keep in mind.



*White tail deer are common on the Appalachian Trail*

#### **Keep food and other scented items out of where you are sleeping.**

I knew a guy who was too tired to hang a bear bag one night, so he left it in his tent. In the middle of the night he heard something in his tent. It was a mouse. The mouse had chewed through the tent to get to a full bag of goodies. Smart mouse, not so bright hiker. Mice are EVERYWHERE. They will find your food and they will eat and poop in it. Anyway, he got lucky that a mouse smelled it instead of a bear!

#### **Always hang a bear bag.**

This is extremely important for the safety of fellow campers and preservation of wildlife. Because I was a newbie to the concept, I had no clue how to hang a bag before I stepped foot on the AT. If you would like to practice ahead of time, you can find instructional videos on YouTube. Either

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way, don't fret; most of the shelters in Georgia have simple-to-use bear cable systems. When I finally had to hang a bag, plenty of folks were in the same boat and we learned together from more experienced hikers. **WARNING:** I almost knocked my teeth out hanging my first bear bag. Remember to move out of the way once you ring a limb with your rock-weighted end. I was ecstatic when I nailed it on my first throw and almost didn't see the rock swinging back at me.

Your bear bag/food bag should be hung every night before you go to bed. All food, cookware, trash, toiletries and other scented items should be stored in the bag. There are various sizes/brands of bear bags, but you just need some sort of lightweight dry sack. I used a 15L No Limits bear bag. This capacity comfortably fit about 5-6 days of food, but I would probably bump it up to a 20L if I had to do it again.

There are many options when choosing cord for your bear bag. Keep in mind, the thicker and slicker your cord, the less damage is done to trees. Many use paracord, but I felt it was too heavy. To hang my bag, I used 50' of a lightweight, slick cord called Z-Line. Several times I cut small pieces from my cord for repairs/other uses and I still had plenty.



*Bear bag hanging away from the shelter*

### **Keep an eye out for snakes.**

I only saw one poisonous snake during my thru-hike, but I would confidently say I am in the minority. The three venomous snakes you might encounter are cottonmouths, rattlesnakes and copperheads. The rattler I met was laying right on the trail in Pennsylvania, and he didn't even bother to rattle. If you see a poisonous snake, be cautious and give it some space. You will likely

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see a lot of non-venomous snakes while hiking, especially black racers. I usually didn't notice them until I was within a few feet. After one sighting, every root and stick was a snake for the rest of the day. I tried to be thankful for their presence; something has to control the mice population.



*The only rattlesnake I encountered during my thru-hike*

### **Read up on bear safety and try to remember it.**

I saw a total of 7 bears while hiking the AT. Only one was spotted in Virginia, the other 6 were in New Jersey and New York. All I can tell you is your encounters with bears are going to be like meeting different people. Be loud when you see a bear so you don't surprise them with your presence. Some will look at you like you are crazy. Others might run away scared. Unfortunately, there are a few who might want to stand their ground. Let me tell you a little story about my personal experience with an aggressive bear.

In Virginia, the area I was hiking through was closed for camping due to an aggressive bear. I should have waited to stop for water, but I was thirsty and I had a group with me, so why not? Standing in the spring on a rock I heard a noise that sounds like something was crashing through the woods. I looked up to see a bear approaching our group. He got behind a tree, and I wanted to see him. I stepped forward at an angle to stand on another rock for a better vantage point. *Not a good idea. Wrong move number one. NEVER advance a bear.*

Next, the bear looked up at me as my stepping forward caught his/her attention. When I realized it had noticed me, I spoke to it as if it were a dog. Maybe a small, furry puppy, even. I said "Hey

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there, darlin'..." in my sweetest southern accent. *Again, not a good idea. Wrong move number two. Try to appear large and intimidating. Not small and intimidated.*

Because I made myself appear small, timid, and like lunch, the bear took a few charging steps towards me, stood up on his back feet, threw his front paws up in the air and loudly hissed at me. Yes, hissed...like a cat. Of course, after that display of aggression, my natural instincts kicked in and I did what you are told not to. Yep, I started to run away. *Really not a good idea. Wrong move number three. NEVER run from a bear. Seriously. If you remember one thing, let it be this. It triggers their instinct to chase and you will NOT be able to outrun them. The best thing you can do is stand your ground and fight with everything you have if it comes to that.*

Immediately, one of the other hikers hollered out, "Don't run!" It was then that all the information I had studied regarding bear encounters suddenly came flooding back. I stopped in my tracks, turned to face the bear and my group of friends walked towards me. We all huddled together and raised our trekking poles to appear larger than the bear. He slightly backed down, the hair that had been raised on his back relaxed and eventually he went back to feeding. At that point, we decided it was time to move on down the trail. *Finally, did something right!*

All I can say is, please read up on bear encounters and how you should behave if you come across one. Move swiftly through areas that are currently experiencing 'bear activity/issues' and do not camp there. I'm just happy that despite my thoughtless actions nobody was harmed.



*Bear sighting in Virginia*

**Be cautious while hiking with headphones.**

If you're hiking alone and there is nobody else around, it might be best to play your music out loud. It will help ward off bears and you will still be able to hear the warning of rattlesnakes. If you prefer hiking with headphones or there are other hikers in the general vicinity, I advise just using one ear bud. While hiking in New Jersey, I had both ear buds in and I was trucking along to the beat of the music. I was hiking so swiftly, I almost ran into a bear cub. After spotting the mom and almost hyperventilating, I VERY slowly took a few steps back to give them some space. They eventually wandered off. If I had one ear open, I probably would've heard the bear before I ever got that close. Again, be smart and cautious!

**Do I need to carry bear spray?**

I don't know anyone who did. I had regular pepper spray and a knife. When I was in bear country in New Jersey/New York, I carried a little whistle to blow occasionally while hiking alone. It's also a good idea to sing out loud and hit your trekking poles together from time to time, as to not "surprise" the bears.

**Do I need a bear canister?**

The only section of trail currently requiring a bear canister is the 5-mile stretch between Jarrard Gap and Neel Gap in Georgia, from March 1st - June 1st each year. For NOBO's, this is the last 5 miles of trail before your first resupply point. This stretch includes Woods Hole Shelter, Slaughter Creek Campsite, and Blood Mountain Shelter. Instead of buying a bear canister for this small section, I chose to camp before Jarrard Gap and hike past it the next day. If you do camp in these designated canister areas, please heed the warning for the safety of hikers and preservation of wildlife.

**Watch My Video on How To Deal With Bears in the Woods**



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### *Hiking With A Dog*

I struggled with the decision of whether to take my dog-son, Hank, on the AT with me. Considering several factors, I decided it would be best to leave him at home. Therefore, all my knowledge on this topic is second hand through talking with fellow hikers who did bring their dogs.



*Hank with his pack in Colorado*

#### **Pros vs. Cons**

With any other decision involved in planning a thru-hike, there are pros and cons associated with traveling with a dog on the AT.

Pros:

- You are never truly alone when you have your fur-baby with you.
- If you are concerned about your personal safety, dogs can act as an additional form of protection. They can alert you to approaching wildlife and humans.

Cons:

Expect to carry more weight - food, water and treats.

- Lodging may not always be as easy to find with a dog, although I've heard most hostels are accommodating. If you can't find a place that is dog-friendly, however, be prepared to

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return to the trail instead of hanging in town with your new hiker buddies. It is a reality you might face.

- It will cost you more to hike with your dog. I've heard it costs somewhere in the range of \$7-12 more a week in food expenses, depending on your dog's size. If you don't have friends near the two sections of trail that don't allow dogs, you need to plan for transportation/boarding costs. Also, keep an emergency fund in case of unexpected vet bills.

### Is my dog capable of thru-hiking?

Every dog is different, and not all of them are cut out for the job. For your dog's sake, please be honest with yourself in this regard. If you aren't quite sure, here are some points to consider:

- Age - Taking a puppy or senior dog on the trail might not be the best idea. Puppies aren't fully developed and probably aren't quite ready for an extended journey like a thru-hike. Dogs that are older in years are more prone to injury. Most of the dogs I saw were 1-8 years old.
- Temperament - I met one dog on trail that unfortunately bit several hikers. If your dog doesn't like other dogs or new people, it's probably best to leave them at home or at a minimum, muzzle them. Honestly, though, it really isn't safe or fair to other dogs and hikers for you to bring an aggressive animal onto the trail.
- Physical Condition - Hiking the AT is no easy feat. Your dog should be up for the challenge of hiking 8-12 hours daily. You should take your dog to the vet for a check-up before setting out on a long-distance hike.
- Behavior - Your dog should be under voice command at all times, especially when off the leash. You don't want your dog stealing people's food, running off after wildlife, etc. Be courteous to others and make sure your dog is well-trained.
- Trail Familiarity - If your dog is used to being indoors a lot and rarely goes hiking, you should probably get them used to the trail long before taking them to thru-hike the AT. Drastically changing a dog's lifestyle can have a negative impact on them.



*Crossing mile 800 with the human crew and Bandit*

### **Common Mistakes & Injuries**

The last thing you want to do is see your dog get hurt on the trail. Pay close attention to any signs of discomfort they may show. Their health should be your top priority.

- Paws - Check paws daily for irritation. Musher's Secret wax is helpful for keeping toe and foot pads protected in rocky areas. I've also heard bag balm can assist in keeping paws moisturized.
- Nails - Keep an eye out for injured or severely worn down toe nails. Nail polish and super glue may be useful. Also, you can try nail caps used for protecting hard wood floors.
- Dehydration - Be sure to carry plenty of water for your dog and offer it frequently. Also, discourage them from drinking out of stagnant water sources.
- Tick-borne Illness - Ticks are not only a threat to humans, but also to dogs. Check the pooch once a day to make sure no ticks have attached themselves.
- Overburdening - Many hikers make the mistake of making their dog carry a pack from the beginning. Dogs have to work up their trail legs, also. Give it at least a few hundred miles or more before you start putting weight on your dog. Even toward the end of your journey, you should still be splitting some of the weight with them.
- Nutrition - I saw a couple very sickly looking, skinny dogs during my hike. Keep a watch on your dog's weight and act accordingly.

### **On what sections of the Appalachian Trail are dogs not permitted?**

There are two sections of trail in which you may not take a dog (there are special provisions for service dogs). These two areas are the Smoky Mountain National Park and Baxter State Park. Luckily, folks have capitalized on this opportunity and several boarding/transporting services exist in those areas. I have heard only positive reviews on these service providers.

### **Do towns generally have decent resupply options for dogs?**

Most towns have dog food and treats, but they may not have the greatest selection. If your dog requires a certain diet, you should probably consider mail drops. Also, keep a check in hiker boxes. I remember seeing dog food in them fairly often.

### **Do I need to keep my dog on a leash at all times?**

It is a good idea to keep your dog leashed when around humans, other dogs, in town, and near road ways. I'm sure there are certain leash requirements at various points on the trail, and you should familiarize yourself with them.

### **Can dogs sleep in shelters?**

Dogs are not supposed to take up space from other hikers. I did share shelter space with a dog a few times, though. The owners usually at least asked if anyone minded. I personally love dogs, but not everyone feels the same about our four-legged friends. Therefore, it is probably best for you and your dog to sleep in your tent, just to avoid any issues.

### **Do I need to bury my dogs poop?**

According to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy and Leave No Trace Principles, you should be handling your dog's waste as you would your own.

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Here is an interview with a 2,000-miler who hiked with her dog:



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### *Substances On Trail*

In the town you live in now, there are people who take illegal substances, use tobacco and drink alcohol. It is no different on the trail. However, most people are courteous to others regarding this topic.

#### **Is it easy to avoid?**

Drug, alcohol and tobacco use is somewhat avoidable and should not ruin your personal journey. Most hikers don't sit in the middle of a shelter, roll a joint and blow the smoke in your face. However, I can't promise you won't see someone use marijuana on the Appalachian Trail, because it is common. If you feel someone is being rude about it, just tell them politely. Chances are they may not even realize. I hiked on and off with a family of 7 (2 parents, 5 kids) and the children ranged from about 10-20 years old. Only a time or two in almost 2,200 miles do I remember hearing someone was blatantly rude when it came to drug, alcohols and/or tobacco use.

#### **Planning to quit smoking, drinking, drugging during your hike?**

Any effort to quit the use of something you feel impacts your life negatively is commendable in my book. Although, you should be warned that it might not be as simple as you think while hiking. Sure, you will be in the middle of the woods more days than not. However, with towns stops being available once a week, alcohol, drugs and tobacco will be readily available during your thru-hike. I witnessed several failed attempts at quitting tobacco, yet watched recovering alcoholics stay on the straight and narrow. It is all about your willpower and what you want your journey to be.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### *Etiquette*

One word that might not seem fitting when referring to the woods is “etiquette.” However, it is important to keep in mind that you are NOT the only person on the Appalachian Trail or in surrounding towns. Enjoy re-wilding yourself, but remember to reel it in when necessary. I apologize in advance if any of this comes across as harsh or preachy, but the trail and its close-knit community is important to me. I hope it will be maintained for generations to come, as it has significantly impacted my life.

#### **Shelter Etiquette**

Be considerate of the people you are sleeping near in shelters and, hopefully, they will return the favor. Nobody likes to be the manner police, so don't make them.

- Hygiene - Do not cut your toenails in a shelter. Hikers are generally sort of gross, but really, you don't have to share everything with one another.
- Eating - Cooking in shelters is frowned upon since it attracts wildlife, but I would be a liar if I told you it doesn't happen. If it is raining and you decide you want to stay dry while cooking, consider the feelings of those sharing the space.
- Technology - Phone conversations should not take place in or near shelters. Other hikers generally enjoy unwinding, reading and sleeping in them. It really isn't fair to interrupt that experience for them while you fight with (or coo sweet nothings to) your significant other.
- Snoring - If you know you are a snorer, please try to sleep in your own personal shelter (tent, hammock, etc.) instead of keeping everyone awake while you saw logs. For those of you who don't snore, bring ear plugs just in case.
- Disruptions - There are often fire rings in front of the shelters. If you decide to enjoy the fire while chit-chatting with other hikers, don't be loud or keep others up too late. Some live by the adage, “The early bird gets the worm.” If you are generally up with the sun, remember others believe, “The second mouse gets the cheese.” Try to pack quietly in the morning and avoid stomping your feet or slamming your belongings on the shelter floor.
- Smoking - This is common sense, right?



*Thru-hikers are generally considerate to one another and share space well*

### **Trail Magic Etiquette**

This really should be a no-brainer, but I am going to cover it anyway. I saw way too many hikers being rude and not caring about their fellow man during trail magic — a selfless act of kindness! Some pet peeves I developed pertaining to trail magic:

- **Yellow Blazing** - More than once I heard of people who yellow-blazed (rode in a car instead of hiking) to a trail magic location and depleted the goods before any actual thru-hikers could enjoy it. If you are going to yellow-blaze you do not deserve trail magic, period. Cheating and then pretending to be something you are not to reap the benefits of others is wrong.
- **Taking More Than Your Share** - I know how exciting finding a cooler of goodies or a canopy with food can be! Remember in all your elation, though, that other hikers behind you want to enjoy it just as much.
- **Be Thankful** - I don't think I ever witnessed someone leave trail magic without thanking the trail angel (if present). Although, I did notice some folks not signing the trail angels' registers/journals. I know you will be tired, but a quick "thank you" with your name takes much less effort than the kindness they showed you.



*If you plan to road trip your hike, leave the trail magic for thru-hikers*

### **Town Etiquette**

Most hikers truly are good people. Unfortunately, like in real life, there are also some not-so-good folks on the trail. Several hiker-friendly places were shut down the year of my thru-hike. I never got to enjoy sleeping at the Palmerton Jail hostel in Pennsylvania, because a few hikers ahead of me decided to party like rock stars in it. Also, the home of a well-known trail angel in Dalton, MA who (at no cost) offered electrical outlets, a yard for tent space, and water was closed to hikers because a group of people with extreme entitlement issues could not follow his simple rules. These are just two of numerous examples; it is disheartening. Hotels and hostels are beginning to have a bad taste in their mouths due to the careless, selfish acts of a small amount of rotten people who, generally, are glorified road-trippers posing as thru-hikers. Just remember to be kind in town, don't ruin the experience for others, and the phrase "hike your own hike" is not an excuse for acting like a jerk. In addition to being a decent human, here are some additional ways to mind your manners in town:

- Showers - If you are showering at a hostel, keep in mind there may be others behind you in line who are longing for some soap and warm water. Don't hog it all.
- Toilet Paper - You aren't the first thru-hiker to think of taking a little toilet paper from a business in town. Instead of depleting their supply, just buy a roll and split it with your friends.
- Laundry - I won't lie and say I never did laundry in a bathroom sink. I cleaned up after myself, though. You should, too.
- Hiker Midnight - Even though you aren't technically on the trail, respect that others might be trying to rest up while in town. Don't be loud in the hostel bunk rooms.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY**

### ***Guide Books, Maps and Apps***

#### **GUIDE BOOKS**

The only two guide books I saw used on trail were AWOL's AT Guide and the ATC's Appalachian Trail Thru-Hikers' Companion. Both guides offer very useful information including elevation profiles, town maps, post office/business hours, hostel/lodging information, shelter locations, detailed mileage breakdown and much more. Either guide book will be extremely helpful, and I wouldn't recommend hiking without one of them. I originally ordered the ATC's Companion. After reading reviews on AWOL's AT Guide, I ordered it as well. After comparing the two, I must say I found AWOL's AT Guide to be much more user-friendly. It was by far the most used guide book on the trail.

Tip: Instead of hiking with your entire guide book, you can cut the book into sections to save weight. I ordered the PDF and book versions of the AT Guide. I left the book version with my family, so they could follow where I was and had PDF print outs sent to me at various points on the trail. I think the AT Guide is even available in loose-leaf pages for this purpose.

#### **SMART PHONE APPS**

I'm sure there are several smart phone apps, but the only one I saw used on trail was Guthook's Trail Guide App. I did not personally use an app on my phone, but quite a few people did and they loved this one in particular. It doesn't hurt to implement a little redundancy and get an electronic guide in addition to your paper copy.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### *Electronics*

#### CELL PHONES

Everyone I met on trail carried a cell phone. The two main types I saw were flip phones and smart phones. Either type of phone will work, but I do recommend having some sort of phone with you.

#### What type of phone should I carry?

There are benefits from each type of phone, so it depends on what you are after. Because flip phones are cheaper, you don't have to stress over losing or damaging it as much as you would with a smart phone. Also, I've heard flip phones get better service, although I'm not sure of the validity of that statement. Smart phones, of course, are a bit pricier and would be more unfortunate to lose or damage. Luckily, they make quality water-proof cases. A Lifeproof case protected my phone all 2,189.2 miles without any issues, but they aren't cheap. What I like most about hiking with a smart phone is my camera, video recorder, iPod and phone are all in one device.



*Rare photo of hikers on their phones – not typical!*

#### How often will I have service?

This depends mainly on your service provider. After polling my fellow thru-hikers, we have agreed that Verizon is the best all-around service while on trail. AT&T, which seemed to work

better up north than down south, came in second place. With Verizon, I had service in about 70% of the areas I tried to call/text out. On mountain summits, that number is closer to 80-90%.

### **How can I conserve my battery?**

I was extremely worried about my battery dying while I was in the woods alone. How in the world would I manage to make it last in between towns? This is what I did to conserve my battery:

- **Airplane Mode** - If your phone is in airplane mode, it won't constantly search for service. Of course, you won't receive text messages or voice mails until you turn-off airplane mode. You're busy hiking, though, right?
- **Power Off** - If you won't be using your phone for several consecutive hours, shut it off. I used my phone frequently throughout the day, taking pictures/videos and listening to music. Before I went to sleep at night, however, I turned it off.
- **Keep It Warm** - If the weather is cool, keep your phone and other electronics close to you. Cold weather was the number one killer of my battery. I often hiked with it in my coat/shirt and slept with it in my sleeping bag.
- **Conscious Use** - Attempt calls and/or text messaging when you are in an area that will likely have service. I typically aimed for clearings, peaks, etc. In other words, don't kill your battery by repeatedly attempting to place a call while standing next to a rock wall at the bottom of a mountain.

### **BACK-UP BATTERY CHARGERS**

Without a back-up charger, my phone would have lasted 2-3 days. I started with a small back-up charger that weighed about 3 oz., but it only gave me one full charge, at most. I upgraded to a Sound Logic XT 5200 mAh which provided around two full charges. It weighed close to 5 oz., but the extra weight was worth it for me. The most common back-up battery charger seen on trail is the Anker brand (approximately 6400mAh). These portable chargers take more than a few hours to fully charge, so plug them in as soon as you get to town.

### **Can't I just use a solar charger?**

You can, but it's most likely not worth it. Unfortunately, I didn't see anyone who had luck with solar panel chargers on trail. There were a couple people who tried and had minimal success before the trees formed leaves in the spring. Once the leaves have grown in, you just won't get much sunlight. They don't call it the "green tunnel" for nothing!

### **HEAD LAMPS**

There really is no right or wrong when it comes to choosing a head lamp. I purchased one from Target for about \$15, and after using it around the house, I knew it wouldn't suffice for my thru-hike. I ended up using a Coast brand with a 210-lumen output. I do wish the light had been a little brighter. Other than its output, it had all the features I prefer:

- **Light Output**- There is no specific amount of light output (lumens) that I would recommend. It honestly depends on your vision and intentions. If you don't plan on night-hiking much, having an extremely bright light might not be important to you. I, on

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the other hand, night-hiked regularly in the warmer months. Before my next thru-hike I will upgrade to a higher output.

- Red Beam - Make sure the head lamp you select has a red beam. It is much less harsh to the eye and is the perfect setting while sharing a shelter with other hikers.
- Adjustable Position - It's nice to be able to move the position of the beam rather than having to over exert your neck.



*Night hiking trio - guess who needs new batteries?*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

### *Documenting Your Journey*

Call me a sentimentalist, but I am very satisfied with my decision to document my thru-hike. I have looked back on my journal entries, blog posts, and videos many times since my summit of Katahdin. There are several ways to go about preserving the memories of the greatest adventure of your life.



*Blue Mountain Shelter, GA - Fire ring at sunrise*

#### **Journal**

At the bare minimum, I recommend carrying some sort of notepad or journal to jot down thoughts, stories, and memorable events. I used a composition notebook and kept it in a gallon-sized ziploc bag. It wasn't the lightest option, but I have always kept a journal using those particular notebooks. Your thru-hike will evolve greatly. I would bet after a few months into your hike, reading your first entries will leave you feeling nostalgic.

#### **Electronic Journal**

If you would like to share your thoughts and experiences with your family, friends and future hikers, but you aren't looking to start your own website, check out [www.trailjournals.com](http://www.trailjournals.com). In fact, if you are currently in the planning stages, you can register and start documenting now.

## **Blog**

There are many free hosting opportunities for blogs if it is something you would be interested in. I recommend WordPress, but any of them will do the trick! I decided to purchase a domain, as I had intentions of continuing my blog after my thru-hike. It was then that Homemade Wanderlust was born. I downloaded the WordPress app to my phone, so I could blog while on the trail. When I reached a town, I would connect to wifi and upload my posts to my website from my phone.

## **Vlog**

I had no clue what a 'vlog' was until I was about to set out on the trail. It's basically just a blog in video form. Most people did not keep a vlog, but if you are the least bit interested, you should go for it! If a picture is worth a thousand words, videos must be priceless. I think watching videos of me on trail helped my family and friends relax their fears about my well-being. Sure, I told them I was fine, but it was more believable when they could see it with their own eyes.

So, how does one vlog while on trail? I set up a Dropbox account before I began my thru-hike and I downloaded the app to my phone. Between towns, I recorded video clips. When I arrived in each town, I connected to wifi and uploaded the videos into Dropbox. Luckily, I had someone to edit my videos. She would pull the files out of Dropbox onto her computer and create the videos to post to my vlog. If you will be editing videos yourself, there are quite a few editing apps you can download onto your phone.

## **Social Media Accounts**

Many of my fellow thru-hikers either used their personal social media page (twitter, Facebook, Instagram) or created a new one dedicated to hiking for sharing on-trail pictures and experiences. Even if you aren't much of a writer, you can use social media as an outlet to dump pictures and videos for later retrieval. Social media platforms are also beneficial for gaining followers for your blog/vlog. In regards to this topic, I am compelled to admit that my virtual support system through YouTube was at times more helpful and inspiring than my family and friends. Many of my subscribers had been through what I was experiencing during my low points on the trail. With their encouraging comments and messages, I was able to push through the hard times. Don't underestimate the power of a virtual community.

## **How common is wifi in trail towns?**

Most of the towns I resupplied in had wifi. Unfortunately, the quality isn't the greatest in towns throughout the AT. If you decide to blog/vlog, you may have to suck it up and use a good bit of your data.

## **What camera did you use?**

The only camera I used to take pictures or videos was the camera on my iPhone 6. I saw a handful of people with some nice camera set-ups. You just have to decide if the extra weight and risk of damage is worth it.



*I love taking pictures of critters - iPhone 6 did well capturing close-ups*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### *Checklist*

#### CHECKLIST

Now that you have the information necessary to plan your trip, what should you do first? There really is no perfect order, but these are some of the items that are easy to forget or might take precedence over the others.

1. **Buy Footwear** - Go ahead and start wearing your boots/trail runners around town or in the woods. You might be able to catch some issues before hitting the trail.
2. **Get the “Big Three”** - You don't want to wait until the last minute to get your shelter, pack and sleeping bag. You need to spend some time selecting what is right for you. Plus, you'll feel so much better if you get these knocked out early. Your other gear will come together piece by piece.
3. **Order a Guide Book** - This doesn't have to be ordered at any certain time, it's just one of those little details that can be forgotten until last minute.
4. **Pick a Date/Pre-Register** - You will want to have a start date pretty well established a few months out. NOBO's are encouraged to avoid April 1st and weekends from March 1 - April 15 as these are the most popular days to begin and the trail can be rather crowded. You are not required to register with the ATC. However, it is a useful tool that helps hikers compare start dates with others and allows them to plan their trip, hopefully avoiding the social and environmental impacts of overcrowding.

To register you can visit: <http://www.appalachiantrail.org/home/explore-the-trail/thru-hiking>

5. **Make Transportation Arrangements** - Once you have a date set in stone, start planning the logistics of making it to the trail head. In both Maine and Georgia, there are services that will shuttle you. Since they get busy during hiker season, I would make these plans as soon as possible.
6. **Food** - I waited and purchased my first food supply at the last minute, which was stressful. Take some time in selecting what you are going to eat during your first stretch. Make sure you select food you actually like. If you don't like it in day-to-day life, you certainly won't like it on trail.

## Take A Thru-Hike: Dixie's How-To Guide for Hiking the Appalachian Trail

- Permits** - You will need permits to hike through The Great Smoky Mountain National Park (GSMNP), Shenandoah National Park (SNP) and Baxter State Park (The Hunt Trail). The permit for SNP is free and you will register for it at a small kiosk when you enter the park. As of 2017, you must have a permit in Baxter, but will also get it in person (for more details—click here). However, you should register for the GSMNP permit (\$20) right before you leave for the trail. You can apply up to 30 days before your planned arrival in GSMNP, and your permit is valid for 38 days from when the permit is issued. If you apply right before starting your thru-hike, you will have plenty of time to make it before your permit expires. To apply for a permit, visit: <https://smokiespermits.nps.gov/permitappatth.cfm>
- Take A Deep Breath** - You are about to embark on a life-changing experience!

## HIKER TERMS

**2,000 Miler** - Someone who has hiked the entire Appalachian Trail.

**Aqua Blazing** - Bypassing a portion of the trail to travel by water. This typically occurs in the Shenandoah National Park. However, aqua blazing a portion of trail is not recognized by the ATC as an acceptable way to earn a 2,000-miler status.

**Base Weight** - Weight of a hiker's pack minus the weight of consumables such as food, water and fuel.

**Blue Blaze** - Indicative of a side trail. Could be a water source, summit or alternative route. Still considered part of the official trail if you choose to take the alternate path.

**Cat Hole** - A 6" deep hole you dig to poop in.

**Churnin' Butter** - A term I created to describe the sensation of walking with a noticeable amount of filth and sweat collected near or in your butt crack. While you hike, you are churning away. Gross, I know.

**Cowboy Camping** - When a hiker camps under the stars with no shelter. Just like a cowboy.

**Day Hiker** - A hiker who is out for a joy hike just for the day. You will recognize them from their strong scents of shampoo, deodorant, lotion and/or perfume.

**Flip Flop** - Hiking in several different directions while completing the AT. Often, hikers will start NOBO in Georgia, hike to Harpers Ferry, flip up to Maine and hike SOBO back to Harper's Ferry.

**Hiker Box** - Boxes found in nearby towns where hikers can discard gear, food, books and other items in hopes that another hiker will use it.

**Hiker Hunger** - Condition that develops among hikers due to consuming less calories than what is burned. An insatiable appetite.

**Hiker Midnight** - Generally 9pm. Once the sun goes down, hikers are so exhausted that it already feels like midnight.

**Hiker Trash** - Term used to describe hikers and their lack of cleanliness and couch upon reentering society.

**HYOH (Hike Your Own Hike)** - Pretty self-explanatory, but it means just that. Hike your hike how you want to! This pertains to gear selection, food preferences, daily mileage, etc.

## Take A Thru-Hike: Dixie's How-To Guide for Hiking the Appalachian Trail

Unfortunately, it is abused by those who choose to Yellow Blaze, disrespect the trail, and make excuses for their lack of etiquette in town.

**LNT (Leave No Trace)** - Principles created to bring awareness that hikers should leave the trail as they found it (or better). This helps conserve natural beauty for future generations. Respect what you love!

**Log Book** - A journal of some sort which is found at most shelters. Hikers call this “trail social media.” It is a great way to see when other hikers came through or to learn important information about water sources, mice infestations, upcoming terrain, etc.

**Mail Drop** - A package sent to a hiker to be picked up in a town near the trail—either from the hiker ahead of time or their family/friends.

**Nearo Day** - A very low mileage day, but still more miles than a Zero Day.

**NOBO** - A northbound hiker. From Springer Mountain, GA to Mount Katahdin, ME.

**Pink Blazing** - When a male hiker speeds up or slows down his pace to hike with a female hiker.

**Privy** - Basically, an outhouse. Most shelters have a privy.

**Purist** - A hiker who insists on hiking every inch of the official white blazed trail as opposed to venturing out onto blue blazed paths as an alternative.

**Section Hiker** - Someone who aims to complete the trail over an extended period of time by hiking in sections instead of one long journey.

**Slack Packing** - Hiking with only what you need for that day, often leaving your shelter and extra food at a hostel or wherever you plan to stay for the night.

**SOBO** - A southbound hiker. From Mount Katahdin, ME to Springer Mountain, GA.

**Stealth Camping** - Camping in an area that is not officially designated for such use. It is discouraged, as it has more impact on trail vegetation. Some areas strictly prohibit it. But, sometimes, things happen.

**Thru-Hiker** - Someone who completes a long-distance trail in one stretch. For the AT, you must complete the trail within 12 months for it to be considered a thru hike.

**Trail Angel** - One who provides trail magic.

**Trail Legs** - A physical condition describing the point in which your legs are conditioned to the rigor of daily hiking.

## Take A Thru-Hike: Dixie's How-To Guide for Hiking the Appalachian Trail

**Trail Magic** - A selfless act of providing something to hikers. Some examples include, but are not limited to: food, drinks, beer, gear, and transportation.

**Trail Name** - A nickname or alias that a hiker goes by on trail. A trail name is often given to a hiker by another hiker because of a noticeable characteristic or event. While most trail names are earned on trail, some choose to create their own before starting their hike.

**Tramily** - Trail + Family. These are the people you meet on trail and grow to love like family.

**Vitamin I** - Ibuprofen.

**White Blaze** - A 2"x6" white rectangle that is painted on trees, rocks, posts, etc. signifying you are on the AT.

**Yellow Blazing** - Skipping a section of trail to ride in a vehicle instead. I also call this "cheating."

**Yogi-ing** - Coined with the antics of Yogi the Bear in mind, this is the art of dropping hints instead of directly asking someone for something. This frequently occurs unintentionally, but becomes natural for thru hikers. One example would be hinting to a day hiker that you need a lift to town.

**Zero Day** - A day in which no positive miles are made on trail. Typically, these are spent in town while resting.

### Watch To Hear About Hiker Terms



## A FEW WORDS OF APPRECIATION

To those who are planning their future adventures, I want to say thank you for allowing me to have a helping hand in the process. I wish you the best of luck and I hope you make the most of your adventure; this is YOUR journey!

To the family, friends, trail angels and blog/vlog followers who believed in me when I doubted myself, if it weren't for you I might have never completed the greatest accomplishment of my life. I will forever be humbled and thankful for your support.



Happy Trails!  
-DIXIE