

Step by Step

An Introduction to Walking the Appalachian Trail

By the staff of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy

Eighty-five years ago, a dreamer named Benton MacKaye imagined a footpath running along the eastern mountains, from New England to the southern Appalachians. That dream became the Appalachian Trail, America's premier long-distance hiking experience, stretching 2,175 miles between Maine and Georgia. Its terrain ranges from flat woodland paths to near-vertical rock scrambles that challenge the fittest wilderness trekker; it can lead hikers from busy small-town streets to high mountain ridges where they won't cross a road for days.

The Trail continues to inspire dreams. If you plan to visit or walk the Appalachian Trail, this booklet will answer some of your basic questions about the Trail and help you prepare for your adventure.

What is the Appalachian Trail?

The "A.T.," as it's called by hikers, is much more than just a path through the woods. It is a national scenic trail, part of the same national park system that includes Yellowstone, Yosemite, and the Great Smoky Mountains. Its official name is the Appalachian National Scenic Trail. But, unlike those famous parks, it's not a concentrated preserve with campgrounds and paths within its boundaries. As the longest, skinniest part of America's national park system, the A.T. stretches over 14 different states and passes through more than 60 federal, state, and local parks and forests. Hundreds of roads cross it. In some parts, the Trail "corridor" is only a few hundred feet wide. In other areas it encompasses nationally significant natural and cultural resources.

Maybe the most important difference between the A.T. and other na-



tional-park units, though, is that volunteers make it possible. Unlike other parks, which may be patrolled and maintained by hundreds of salaried government employees, the A.T. relies on a system known as “cooperative management.” Yes, there is a paid ranger and a few staff members assigned to the National Park Service’s Appalachian Trail office in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, but thousands of the people who maintain, patrol, and monitor the footpath and its surrounding lands are outdoor lovers like you. Each year, as members of “maintaining clubs” up and down the Appalachians, they volunteer hundreds of thousands of hours of their time to taking care of this public treasure.

What is the Appalachian Trail Conservancy?

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) is the only organization—a confederation of 30 local organizations of volunteers—focused solely on the protection and promotion of the entire Appalachian Trail and its surrounding lands. Since 1925, when Benton MacKaye convened a gathering to develop the long-distance trail he envisioned, we have worked to plan the route and relocate it to better areas; ensure that the footpath, shelters, and bridges are maintained; care for the land; and spearhead an unprecedented cooperative effort among hard-working volunteers, far-sighted government agencies, and generous benefactors of all sizes to establish and enrich a permanent corridor of protected lands. The efforts of the 5,500 volunteers are today supported by more than 39,000 individual members of ATC and a small professional staff (about one per 6,000 acres of corridor land). We invite you to join that membership: Our goal is to provide that special place for *your* great day!

For more information about the Trail, you can reach ATC at 304.535.6331 between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. Eastern time, weekdays. Our Visitors Center in Harpers Ferry is open the same hours and on weekends and holidays from April through the last Sunday in October.

Send e-mail to: info@appalachiantrail.org. Our Web site, www.appalachiantrail.org, offers a wide range of information about the Trail, current conditions, and other sources of useful information.

Good luck, and good hiking!

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Overview of the Appalachian Trail

Northern New England—Between central Maine and western New Hampshire, this section offers some of the most rugged hiking and most challenging weather conditions of the entire A.T. The path is often steep, rough, and slippery. Parts are above treeline, where weather is especially severe. It includes Katahdin, the Trail's northern terminus in Maine, the wild country of the "Hundred Miles," the Mahoosuc Range, and the White Mountains.

Southern New England—Between eastern Vermont and the New York–Connecticut border, much of this section runs along glacier-scraped mountain ridges such as the Green Mountains and the Berkshires, and rocky New England river valleys. Though less strenuous than the northern section, it offers a challenging hike through deep forests, yet lies within easy driving distance of major cities such as Boston and New York City.

Mid-Atlantic—Between eastern New York and central Maryland, this section of the A.T. runs between the glacial hills of the Hudson Highlands and the northern reaches of the Blue Ridge Mountains. It follows long, rocky ridges only a few thousand feet above sea level—ridges that often seem like islands of wild country above bustling valleys. Hiking is mostly moderate, but parts can be very rocky and strenuous.

The Virginias—Between the eastern panhandle of West Virginia and the Tennessee border, the Trail runs along the Blue Ridge of Virginia and the Great Valley of the Appalachians. This section includes portions of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, Shenandoah National Park, and the Blue Ridge Parkway. Hiking is moderate to strenuous, and the southern part offers long, solitary stretches.

Southern Appalachians—The Trail runs between northeastern Tennessee and the southern terminus at Springer Mountain in Georgia. It penetrates several of the vast national forests of the South, and crosses the Trail's highest mountain, Clingmans Dome, in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Though mostly well-graded, the Trail through this section is remote, with long, strenuous climbs. The high ridges along the North Carolina–Tennessee border are prone to winter weather similar to parts of New England.

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Planning Your Hike

Before you commit yourself, know what you're in for. The A. T. will test you, both physically and mentally. It climbs steep, rocky mountainsides and often leads miles from the nearest road or dwelling.

Yes, it can be hard. That's what makes hiking the Appalachian Trail an adventure. Even so, it need not be an ordeal. Proper planning and preparation will make your Trail experience easier, safer, and more enjoyable.

Basic Questions

How far should I go?

Start by deciding this. It will affect all your other plans. In general, your choices are:

A short day-hike—Most Trail users are day-hikers, their goal a few miles of hiking or a climb to an overlook.

A weekend backpacking trip—Many hikers plan a two- or three-day camping trip covering a dozen or more linear miles or a loop. This requires more preparation and overnight equipment (discussed on pages 11–13).

A long-distance hike—“Section-hikers” may plan long, linear hikes of a week or more. They need the same basic equipment as a weekend backpacker but must carry more supplies or resupply along the way. “Thru-hikers” attempt the entire A.T. in one continuous trip, a mammoth physical and logistical undertaking.

Am I ready?

Once you know where you want to hike, how much time you plan to spend, and how prepared you are, ask yourself tough questions. If you've never gone backpacking before, are you really ready to head into the mountains for a week? If you're out of shape, can you manage a three-thousand-foot climb? Are your goals too ambitious? Are your gear and clothing adequate for the range of temperatures you might encounter?

Be realistic about your conditioning and your needs. If you haven't carried a pack over mountainous, rugged terrain, don't expect it to come naturally. Hiking and camping on the A.T. can be an exhilarating experience, but it can also be a sweaty, painful, and grimy one, too.

Choosing a Destination

Where am I going?

First, identify the region you'll be hiking in. The map on pages 4–5 shows the five major regions, each of which has different weather and hiking conditions. In northern New England, for instance, plan on lower mileage because of the harder terrain.

Second, identify which state you're going to start in. Consult the state-by-state descriptions beginning on page 29.

Third, identify a destination or section along the Trail in that state. The Appalachian Trail Conservancy and its member clubs publish 11 guidebooks with accompanying maps that cover the entire A.T. in detail. Other guidebooks focus on selected day or overnight hikes. These publications identify the scenic, historic, and natural highlights along the Trail, as well as practical information such as regulations and the location of campsites, shelters, water sources, parking, and access points.

Fourth, study your route. Use guidebooks and maps to learn as much as you can about the terrain and elevation gain and loss, so you can plan your mileage accordingly. Mileage options are determined by the location of road crossings. If you are parking a vehicle, be aware that any remote parking area may be subject to vandalism. See ATC's website for tips on deterring vandalism.

When am I going?

Consider avoiding parts of the Trail that tend to be crowded, muddy, or insect-plagued at various times of the year. See the state-by-state listing on page 29.

Do I really need maps and guidebooks?

All hikers should carry a map and compass and know how to use them. Even though the A.T. is well-marked in most places, a map is important for good planning and essential in case of an emergency. All official A.T. maps also feature elevation profiles, indicating at a glance how much up and down each section contains. More information on A.T. publications can be found at the end of this book.

Is my mileage goal realistic?

With an appropriate guidebook and map and a sense of what to expect in terms of distance and terrain, you can intelligently reassess your original plan. Beginning backpackers should plan no more than seven to eight miles a day, and your first and last days should be shorter. On your first A.T. backpacking trip, expect to average no more than a mile an hour, even on moderate sections. A goal of “big miles” makes blisters and misery much more likely and may leave you stumbling in the dark or slogging through the rain when you are exhausted—a recipe for disaster. Rest your feet, and take time to enjoy the flora, fauna, and views.

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What All Hikers Should Know

Different hikes require planning for different contingencies, but all A.T. hikers should keep in mind some basics as they prepare for the Trail: how to hike responsibly, where to camp, what basic equipment to pack, and how to handle essential issues such as food and sanitation.

Leave No Trace

As more and more people use the Trail and other backcountry areas, it becomes more important to learn to enjoy wild places without ruining them. The best way to do this is to understand and practice the principles of Leave No Trace, a seven-point ethic for enjoying the backcountry that applies to everything from a picnic outing to a long-distance expedition. Leave No Trace is also a nonprofit organization dedicated to teaching the principles of low-impact use. For more information, contact Leave No Trace at: www.lnt.org, or call 800.332.4100.



How do I "Leave No Trace?"

1. *Plan ahead and prepare.* Evaluate the risks associated with your outing, identify campsites and destinations in advance, use maps and guides, and be ready for bad weather.
2. *Travel and camp on durable surfaces.* Stay on trails, and don't bushwhack shortcuts across switchbacks or other bends in the path. Keep off fragile trailside areas, such as bogs or alpine zones. Camp in designated spots, such as shelters and existing campsites, so that unspoiled areas aren't trampled and denuded.
3. *Dispose of waste properly.* Bury or pack out excrement not deposited in privies, including pet droppings. Pack out all trash and food waste, including that left behind by others. Don't bury trash or food, and don't try to burn packaging materials in campfires.
4. *Leave what you find.* Don't take flowers or other sensitive natural resources. Don't disturb artifacts such as native American arrowheads or the stone walls and cellar holes of historical woodland homesteads.

5. *Minimize campfire impacts.* Campfires are enjoyable, but they also create the worst visual and ecological impact of any backcountry camping practice. If possible, cook on a backpacking stove instead of a fire. Where fires are permitted, build them only in established fire rings, and don't add rocks to an existing ring. Keep fires small. Burn only dead and downed wood that can be broken by hand—leave axes and saws at home. Never leave your campfire unattended, and drown it when you leave.
6. *Respect wildlife.* Don't feed or disturb wildlife. Store food properly to avoid attracting bears, varmints, and rodents. If you bring a pet, keep it leashed.
7. *Be considerate of other visitors.* Limit overnight groups to ten or fewer; 25 on day trips. Minimize noise and intrusive behavior. Share shelters and other facilities. Be considerate of Trail neighbors. Carry and use cell phones out of sight and sound of other visitors.

Camping

If you've planned something longer than a day-hike, now is the time to anticipate where you might spend the night once you're on the Trail. On most sections, you have two basic choices: staying in a shelter or pitching a tent.

Where can I find shelters?

More than 270 backcountry shelters are located along the Appalachian Trail at varying intervals, as a service to all A.T. users. A typical shelter, sometimes called a "lean-to," has a shingled or metal roof, a wooden floor and three walls and is open to the elements on one side. Most are near a creek or spring, and many have a privy nearby. Most shelters are available on a first-come, first-served basis. They are intended for individual hikers, not big groups. If you're planning a group hike, plan to camp out or to yield space to individual hikers who may not have the resources you do. Many shelters are near good campsites for tenting.

What's the downside of shelters?

Shelters can be grimy and rodent-infested when hikers don't clean up after themselves, and they may be crowded. Carry a tent, in case a shelter is not available. Remember that shelters require considerable volunteer effort to build and maintain.

So, why stay at a shelter?

First, shelters are the best places to stay dry in wet weather; they fill up fast when it rains. Second, they are often a good place to meet and talk with other hikers, and most have privies and water sources nearby. But, third and more importantly, staying at shelters reduces hiker impact on the Trail environment and is a good Leave No Trace practice. It concentrates use in a relatively small area. A shelter site may seem trampled and overused, but, since the vegetation is already

gone, the site will not deteriorate much more, no matter how many people use it. Meanwhile, nearby areas stay pristine. To encourage others to use shelters, please be considerate: Keep the grounds litter-free, don't cut down trees, and don't vandalize the structures.

Should I carry a tent?

Yes. You should always carry a tent in case the shelters are full or you find yourself behind schedule and can't make it to the shelter before dusk.

Where can I pitch a tent?

Tenting regulations vary, so you'll need to check guidebooks for the area where you'll be hiking. In heavily used or fragile areas, you are usually required to use designated tent sites (often associated with shelter sites) in order to concentrate use and minimize impacts. In some areas, "dispersed camping" is allowed, but this method requires a good working knowledge of Leave No Trace practices. At a minimum, camp out of sight of the trail, if possible, and at least 200 feet away from any water sources. On the A.T. in the Smokies, tenting is not allowed except at the Birch Spring Gap camp site. (Those who meet the Park's definition of "thru-hikers" may tent in the immediate vicinity of the shelters when they are full.) You are required to have advance reservations in shelters and the Birch Spring site unless you meet certain requirements (see "Special Situations, p. 22.")

Can I find my own campsite?

In many areas, including the national forests of the Virginias and the southern Appalachians, "dispersed camping" is allowed. Dispersed camping means you can choose your own place to camp, but it carries with it a special responsibility of leaving no trace: You must be more careful to minimize your impact in pristine areas. In pristine areas away from designated sites, choose a site with no sign of previous use. Avoid places that show the beginnings of frequent use—those still have a chance to recover if left alone. Set up tents on durable surfaces, such as dead leaves or grass, well apart from each other and at least 70 paces from water. Avoid trampling plants and seedlings.

Should I build a fire?

Campfires create the worst visual and ecological impact of any backcountry camping practice. Building fire rings pockmarks pristine woodlands with blackened rocks, piles of ash and charcoal, blackened cans, and unburned wood. Vegetation disappears and soil packs down around the fire ring. Soil becomes sterile, which retards plant recovery. Hikers trample vegetation while looking for wood, and, when they find it, remove woody debris critical to a healthy ecosystem.

Leave No Trace principles encourage you to go without a fire. Use a backpacking stove instead. If you do intend to build a fire, check your A.T. guidebooks for fire restrictions along the Trail; some areas do not permit fires at all. Keep in mind that forest fires are always a potential hazard along the A.T.

Where fires are permitted, build them only in established fire rings. Don't add rocks to an existing ring. Keep fires small. Burn only dead and downed wood that can be broken by hand—leave saws and axes at home. Never leave a fire unattended, and never build a fire on a windy day.

Erase your campfire when you leave. Drown it with water, then stir the ashes. Feel for heat with your hand to ensure it is out. Remove unburned foil and plastic and pack them out. If you used an existing fire ring, scatter the ashes and camouflage the burned area with organic matter. Finally, scatter unused firewood you gathered in the forest.

Can I stay in a hostel or inn?

Hostels (inexpensive bunkhouses catering to hikers) are available in some towns along the Trail. Similarly, motels, inns, and B&Bs tend to be clustered in towns near the Trail. Those towns are typically from 50 to 100 miles apart at the northern and southern regions of the Trail and from 30 to 50 miles apart in the middle regions. The only opportunities for "inn-to-inn" hiking on the Trail itself exist in Virginia's Shenandoah National Park, northwestern Massachusetts, and in the far more rugged White Mountains of New Hampshire.

For up-to-date information about hostels and other off-Trail facilities, consult the *Appalachian Trail Thru-Hikers' Companion*, published by ATC and the Appalachian Long Distance Hikers Association (ALDHA).

Equipment

What you carry depends on how far you're going, where, and when. Camping and backpacking magazines may make it seem as if you're doomed unless you have the latest gear. But, new equipment for even an overnight hike can easily run \$1,000 to \$2,000 or more. Don't worry. You can plan a hike on the Appalachian Trail without bankrupting yourself in the backpacking store.

What should a day-hiker pack?

Packing for a day-hike is relatively simple. Pack the following items:

- Map and compass (learn to use them first!)
- Water (at least 1 quart, and 2–3 on longer hikes in hot weather)
- Warm clothing and rain gear and hat
- Food (including extra high-energy snacks)
- Trowel (to bury human waste), toilet paper, and hand sanitizer
- First-aid kit, with blister treatments
- Whistle (three blasts is the international signal for help)

- Garbage bag (to carry out trash)
- Sunglasses and sunscreen (especially in spring before leaf-out)
- Blaze-orange vest or hat (in hunting season)
- Insect repellent (to deter biting insects and ticks which can carry Lyme disease)

On longer hikes, especially in remote or rugged terrain, add:

- Flashlight (with extra batteries and bulb)
- Heavy-duty garbage bag (emergency tarp or to insulate a hypothermia victim)
- Sharp knife
- Fire starter (a candle, for instance) and waterproof matches
- Pen and paper

What should a novice backpacker pack?

If you're backpacking, we suggest you consult a good book for details about what to carry, or talk to an experienced hiker. We've listed some books inside the back cover. Remember that renting gear or buying used equipment are low-cost options when you're first starting out.

Although we can't discuss gear in detail here, most A.T. backpackers carry the following items, in addition to the day-hike checklist and some method of treating water (see page 14). Some items can be shared with a partner to lighten the load:

- Shelter (a tent or tarp)
- Lightweight pot, cooking utensils
- Stove (a small backpacking model, with fuel) and windscreen
- Medium-sized backpack (big "expedition-size" packs are usually overkill)
- A pack cover or plastic bag for rainy weather
- Sleeping pad (to insulate you from the cold ground)
- Sleeping bag of appropriate warmth for the season
- Food and clothing
- Rope or cord (to hang your food at night)

Do I have the right clothing?

Hope for the best weather; pack for the worst. Clothing to protect you from cold and rain is a must—even in midsummer and especially at higher elevations. Avoid cotton clothes, particularly in chilly, rainy weather, which can strike the mountains at any time of year. Wet cotton can be worse than nothing and can contribute to hypothermia, a potentially fatal threat. Synthetic fabrics such as polypropylene

and various acrylic blends will help protect you against the dangers of hypothermia. Layer your clothes—a "polypro" shirt, synthetic fleece, and a coated nylon or "breathable" waterproof outer shell will keep you both warmer and drier than a single heavy overcoat in cold, damp weather.

Remember, hiking will make you sweat, no matter the weather. Shedding thin layers enables you to regulate your body temperature more effectively than choosing between keeping a heavy jacket on or taking it off.

Is my footwear adequate?

Hiking boots are optional for day-hikes but recommended for overnight and long-distance hikes over rough terrain. Old-style heavyweight mountain boots are usually unnecessary now that good-quality lightweight boots are widely available. The most important thing is that boots fit well and are well broken-in before you hit the Trail: Nothing ends a hike quicker than blistered feet, and even minor blisters can become infected and cause serious trouble. Backpackers can expect their feet to swell; long-distance hikers should buy boots half a size too big to allow room for this.

Should I carry a cell phone?

Many hikers carry cell phones for safety and emergencies. Be considerate of other visitors: carry and use cell phones out of sight and sound of other people. Keep them turned off until needed or left in a pocket on the "vibrate" or "silent" ringer setting.

Be self-reliant, whether carrying cell phones or not. Don't leave ill-prepared or engage in risky actions just because you have a cell phone to call for rescue. Remember that in many remote areas cell phone coverage is limited or nonexistent. Many people go to the out-of-doors to get away from technology. Please respect their desire for solitude and be discreet when using a cell phone.

Food, Water and Sanitation

You should carry some kind of food and water on even the shortest A.T. hike, but anything longer than a short day-hike presents special considerations.

What sort of food should I take?

If you're out for the day, you can pack along whatever foods you like best—even fresh vegetables and fruits. But since these spoil quickly and are heavy (due to their high water content), they're not good for backpacking trips. Whatever food you choose, be sure to pack out all your garbage, including items such as apple cores and orange peels. Don't burn garbage in a campfire; it rarely burns completely.

Backpackers generally carry dried foods such as pasta that they boil and prepare on their portable stoves. There's no need to carry more than a week's food on most parts of the A.T. For hikes longer than a week, hikers typically leave the Trail

periodically to resupply in nearby towns. Some ship food parcels ahead to post offices, hostels, and businesses near the Trail; others buy food along the way. If you plan to do this, consult one of the books listed at the back of this booklet for addresses and locations.

Backpacking burns a lot of energy. Plan on a tasty diet of 3,000 to 4,000 calories a day, including high-energy snacks to eat while you're walking or during breaks. Thru-hikers may need to eat more—the typical male thru-hiker burns 5,000–7,000 calories a day. Backpacking food doesn't have to be expensive or specially prepared; many hikers get everything they need at the supermarket.

What about water?

Staying hydrated is an important part of safe hiking because it helps prevent both hypothermia and heat exhaustion. A.T. guidebooks and the *A.T. Data Book* list water sources. Usually these are springs or creeks, since rivers and ponds tend to be polluted. (Except in an emergency, please do not disturb nearby landowners with requests for food, water, or shelter.) Some sections of the Trail can be very dry during mid-summer, so plan carefully.

Is the water safe?

Drinking untreated water makes you vulnerable to *Giardia lamblia*, a common microscopic organism that is carried in the intestines of mammals (including humans) and spread when they defecate; it can contaminate many lakes, streams, and rivers. Waters may be clear, cold, and free-running and may look, smell, and taste good. In spite of all that, *giardia* may still be present.

Several ways of treating “raw” water make it safer. The simplest is boiling it, but that's not always convenient. Iodine or chlorine tablets or drops are not considered as reliable as boiling to kill *giardia*, although these products work well against most waterborne bacteria and viruses. Many hikers carry portable water filters that claim to remove *giardia*. Check the product literature to ensure that the filter will remove particles as small as one micron in diameter and cannot be contaminated easily by unfiltered water. Granular charcoal filters, of the sort used to make tap water taste better, won't make backcountry water safer.

Where are the rest rooms?

Few and far between. Many A.T. shelters have privies, but often you will need to “go in the woods.” Proper disposal of human (and pet) waste is not only a courtesy to other hikers, but is a vital Leave No Trace practice for maintaining healthy water supplies in the backcountry and an enjoyable hiking experience for others. No one should venture onto the A.T. without a trowel, used for digging a six- to eight-inch-deep “cathole” to bury waste. Bury feces at least 200 feet or 70 paces away from water, trails, or shelters. Use a stick to mix dirt with your waste, which hastens decomposition and discourages animals from digging it up. Used toilet paper should either be buried in your cathole or carried out in a sealed plastic bag. Hygiene products such as sanitary napkins should always be carried out.

What to Expect on the Trail

Expect the Trail to test you, both physically and mentally. Know your limits, and examine your reasons for strapping on a pack and tackling the Appalachian Trail. Part of the joy of hiking the A. T. is learning to deal with and overcome its challenges, to feel resilient and self-sufficient in a wild, rough place that has few of the amenities of civilized life. Don't underestimate the Trail's challenges—or ignore its timeless rewards.

Strenuous Climbs

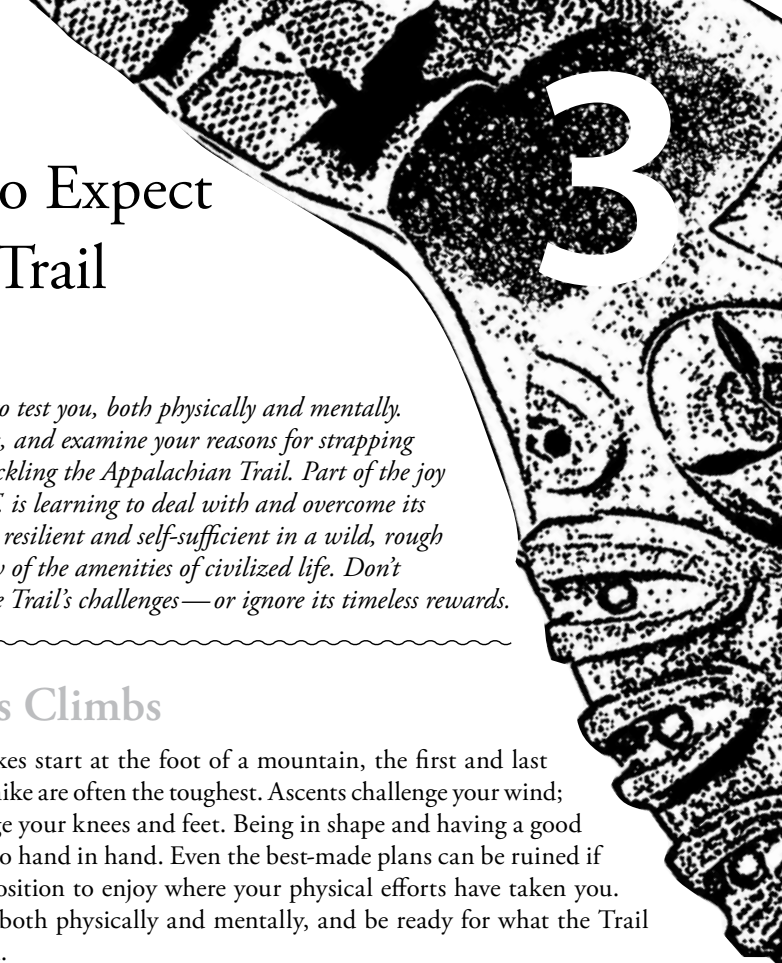
Because most hikes start at the foot of a mountain, the first and last few miles of any hike are often the toughest. Ascents challenge your wind; descents challenge your knees and feet. Being in shape and having a good mental attitude go hand in hand. Even the best-made plans can be ruined if you're not in a position to enjoy where your physical efforts have taken you. Prepare yourself both physically and mentally, and be ready for what the Trail will throw at you.

How fit should I be?

Any physical edge you can bring to your trip will pay handsome dividends over the first few steep miles and help your attitude. Take a few training hikes, and get used to your boots and equipment. Identify non-essential items you can do without to reduce your pack weight. Work up to carrying a full pack gradually. The best preparation for A.T. backpacking is carrying a pack on the hilliest terrain you can find. If you live in very flat country, you're better off doing leg strengthening and aerobic training exercises.

What pace should I set?

On the first day of your hike, take it easy. Pace yourself on the first climbs. Hikers who overdo it always regret it the next morning—leg muscles simply will not stand up to such punishment. For longer hikes, allow two to three weeks to get into good shape. Going too far, too fast makes foot, knee, and leg problems far more likely.



Fast-Changing Weather

Be prepared for sudden weather changes along the Appalachian Trail. This is particularly true of the higher elevations of the southern Appalachians, the White Mountains in New Hampshire, and on Katahdin in Maine. The Whites and Katahdin may be hit by snow during any month of the year. For ways to deal with weather-related health problems, see page 21.

What do I need to know about lightning?

The odds of being struck by lightning are low, but you should take precautions. If a storm is coming, immediately leave exposed areas—an open ridge is no place to be during a thunderstorm. If you cannot enter a building or car, take shelter in a stand of smaller trees or in the forest. Boulders, rocky overhangs, and shallow caves offer no protection from lightning, which may actually flow through them along the ground after a strike. Tents and three-sided A.T. shelters may keep you dry, but they do not protect you from lightning. Avoid ski lifts, flagpoles, and powerline towers. Avoid clearings, the tallest trees, and solitary trees or rocks. If caught in the open, remove your pack, crouch with your feet close together, and put your hands over your ears. Do not hold a potential lightning rod, such as a fishing pole or metal hiking pole. If you are in water, get out. Disperse groups, so that not everyone is struck by a single bolt.

Can I expect cold weather?

Sudden spells of “off-season” cold weather, hail, and even snow are common along many parts of the Trail. Winter-like weather often occurs in late spring or early fall in the southern Appalachians, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine.

A cold rain can be the most dangerous weather of all, because it can cause hypothermia (or “exposure”) even when conditions are well above freezing. Wind and rain chill the body so that its core temperature drops, and death occurs if the condition is not caught in time. Avoid hypothermia by dressing in layers of synthetic clothing, eating well, staying hydrated, and knowing when to hole up in a warm sleeping bag in a tent or shelter. See page 21 for tips on prevention and treatment.

When is heat a problem?

Dry, hot summers are surprisingly common along the Trail, particularly in the Virginias and the mid-Atlantic. Water may be scarce on humid days, sweat does not evaporate well, and many hikers face the danger of heat stroke and heat exhaustion if they haven’t taken proper precautions such as drinking lots of water.

Trail Markings

The Appalachian Trail is marked for daytime travel in both directions, using a system of paint “blazes” on trees, posts, and rocks. Above the treeline, and where

snow or fog may obscure paint marks, posts and rock piles called “cairns” are used to identify the route.

What is a “blaze”?

A blaze is a two- by six-inch vertical rectangle of paint in a prominent place along a trail. White-paint blazes mark the Appalachian Trail itself. Side trails and intersecting trails use blue blazes or other colors. Two blazes, one above the other, signal an obscure turn, route change, incoming side trail, or other situation that requires you to be especially alert. Where offset double blazes are used, turn in the direction of the top blaze.

What if I don’t see blazes?

Distance between blazes varies. In some areas, blazes are frequently within sight. In areas managed as wilderness you may encounter only four or five per mile. Historic areas such as Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, or where the Trail follows the Chesapeake and Ohio Towpath in Maryland may have even fewer blazes. If the frequency of blazing suddenly changes and you haven’t seen a blaze, retrace your steps until you locate a blaze. Then, check to make sure you haven’t missed a turn. Often a glance backwards will reveal blazes meant for hikers traveling in the opposite direction. Reroutes (called “relocations”) completed since the latest edition of the maps and guidebooks will not appear in publications, but may be referenced on ATC’s website.

Does the Trail route ever change?

Yes. Although 99 percent of the Trail is located on protected public lands, each year small sections are rerouted to provide better scenery, better treadway or to move the Trail away from threats. Hence, the Trail’s total length changes each year. When blazing differs from your map, follow the blazes.

Wilderness Areas

These special places, designated by Congress, are intended to be kept in their wild state, “where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” (Wilderness Act of 1964)

Wilderness designation provides the broadest and most permanent protection for A.T. lands. To keep these places wild and pristine, they are managed so that observable human influence is minimal. That means that logging, mining, and the use of motorized vehicles is prohibited, as well as construction of roads, power lines, cell towers, and other intrusive developments.

That also means that the A.T. itself is intentionally built and maintained in a primitive manner in keeping with wilderness values. There are far fewer blazes—only four or five per mile. Signs are inconspicuous and there are fewer man-made improvements such as bridges and privies. Trail maintainers are required

to use hand tools to cut down trees and clear vegetation, and typically must carry their tools long distances.

Safety Issues

The Appalachian Trail is safer than most places, but a few crimes of violence have occurred in the past. Awareness is one of your best lines of defense. Be aware of what you are doing, where you are, and to whom you are talking.

How can I protect myself?

Stay aware of what's going on around you and report all incidents. In this way, hikers can be a more effective "community deterrent." Be prudent and cautious without allowing common sense to slip into paranoia. Follow these rules of thumb:

- *Don't hike alone.* If you are by yourself and encounter a stranger who makes you feel uncomfortable, say you are with a group that is behind you. Be creative. If in doubt, move on. Even a partner is no guarantee of safety; pay attention to your instincts about other people.
- *Leave your hiking itinerary and timetable with someone at home.* Be sure your contacts at home know your "Trail name," if you use one. Check in regularly and establish a procedure to follow if you fail to check in. On short hikes, provide your contacts with the numbers of the land-managing agencies for the area of your hike. On extended hikes, provide ATC's number.
- *Be wary of strangers.* Be friendly, but cautious. Don't tell strangers your plans. Avoid people who act suspiciously, seem hostile, or are intoxicated.
- *Don't camp near roads.*
- *Dress conservatively to avoid unwanted attention.*
- *Carrying firearms is strongly discouraged.* They are illegal on National Park Service lands and in most other areas without a permit, they could be turned against you or result in an accidental shooting, and they are extra weight.
- *Eliminate opportunities for theft.* Don't bring jewelry. Keep wallets and money on your person rather than in your pack or tent. Leaving a pack unattended at trailheads is risky even when it is hidden, and may attract wildlife in search of food. Even at shelters, don't leave your gear unless you have a friend who can look after it. Don't leave valuables or equipment (especially in sight) in vehicles parked at Trailheads.
- *Use the Trail registers, the notebooks stored at most shelters.* Sign in using your given name, leave a note, and report any suspicious activities. If someone needs to locate you, or if a serious crime has been committed along the Trail, the first place authorities will look is in the registers.
- *Report any crime or harassment to the local authorities and ATC.*

What's the best safety tip?

Trust your gut.

Is hunting permitted on Trail lands?

Hunting is allowed along more than half of the Appalachian Trail's length, including some part of each of the 14 Trail states. During hunting season, make sure you can be seen and heard. Wear a blaze-orange cap and vest and/or backpack cover at all times, including in and around camp. During deer season, avoid wearing white. During turkey season, avoid clothing that is blue, red, or white. For more information on when and where hunting is allowed, visit our Web site, www.appalachiantrail.org.

Trail Problems

In the 1990s alone, Trail relocations to provide better scenery and recreation led to several hundred miles of new treadway. Every year, thousands of men and women contribute up to 200,000 hours of volunteer work on the Trail or adjacent lands, improving the route and dealing with maintenance problems.

What should I do when I encounter a maintenance problem?

If you encounter a poorly marked or overgrown section of trail, or even a tree that has fallen across your path, please don't just gripe. Send ATC a postcard or an email to info@appalachiantrail.org, identifying the problem and the location. We will promptly forward your remarks to the maintaining club for that section of the Trail. Better yet, join your local volunteer Trail club and help them, or apply to do a week of work with one of ATC's Trail crews.

If you come across excessive litter, please help by carrying as much of this out as you can. (We suggest packing an extra garbage bag for this purpose.)

Is hiker behavior a problem?

It can be. Be considerate of fellow hikers and the people who live alongside the Trail corridor. Behave in such a manner that the next hiker gets a good reception. When a smelly, arrogant, or rude hiker passes through a town, store, or hostel, ill-will is generated toward future hikers. When people do you a favor, get their name and address. After your trip, drop them a postcard or letter, thanking them for making it memorable. You would be amazed at the impact such a simple gesture can have.

Try to shower once in a while, too. Out on the Trail, backpackers quickly become somewhat immune to their own smell, which pervades clothes, boots, and backpacks. Shower before going indoors or into a public place, especially a restaurant. It makes a real difference in how people will treat you.

Can people ride or drive on the Trail?

Motor vehicles are illegal on all off-road sections of the Appalachian Trail. Bicycles and mountain bikes are not permitted except where the A.T. runs along the C&O Canal towpath in Maryland, the Virginia Creeper Trail in Virginia, and in certain Pennsylvania state gamelands. Horses and pack animals are prohibited except in parts of the Smokies and at a handful of crossings by designated horse trails.

Can I bring my dog?

Dogs are prohibited in Great Smoky Mountains National Park and Baxter State Park and must be leashed in many other areas. Required or not, leashing at all times is strongly recommended to minimize their impacts on wildlife and people. Keep dogs out of springs and shelters and away from other hikers, their food, and their gear. ATC's Web site, www.appalachiantrail.org, offers more details about hiking with dogs.

Wildlife

Seeing wildlife is one of the reasons to hike the Trail. It is not uncommon to see deer, moose, wild turkeys, bears, foxes, and a wide variety of small mammals, reptiles, and birds. But, wildlife can pose problems for hikers, too.

Will I encounter snakes?

Poisonous and nonpoisonous snakes are widespread along the Trail in warm weather, but they will usually be passive. Please don't kill them! Watch where you step and where you put your hands.

What other creatures are problems for people?

Ticks, which carry Lyme disease, are a risk on any hike; always check yourself for ticks daily. Mosquitoes and other stinging insects may also be a problem. Porcupines, skunks, raccoons, and squirrels are quite common and occasionally visit shelters and well-established camping areas after dark; if they smell your food, they'll eat it if they can! Mice are permanent residents at most shelters, and may carry diseases.

What about bears?

Black bears live along many parts of the Trail and are particularly common in Georgia, the Great Smoky Mountains and Shenandoah National Parks, and parts of Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Black bears are the only species of bear found in the eastern U.S.

While attacks on humans are rare, a startled bear or a female with cubs may react aggressively. The best way to avoid an encounter while you are hiking is to make noise by whistling, talking, etc., to give the bear a chance to move away before you get close enough to make it feel threatened. If you encounter a bear and it does

not move away, you should back off, speaking calmly and firmly, and avoid making eye contact. Do not run or "play dead" even if a bear makes a "bluff charge."

The best defense against bears in camp is preparing and storing food properly. Cook and eat meals away from your tent or shelter, so food odors do not linger. Hang your food, cookware, toothpaste, personal hygiene items, and even water bottles (if you use drink mixes in them) in a sturdy bag from a strong tree branch at least 12 feet off the ground and well away from your campsite. Make sure the bag is at least six feet from the trunk of the tree; black bears are crafty climbers and good reachers. Bear canisters also provide an effective alternative for food storage. Where bear boxes, poles, or food hoist cable systems are provided, use them. Never leave trash in bear boxes. Never feed bears or leave food behind for them. That simply increases the risks to you and the hikers who follow behind you.

In recent years there have been reports of bears on the A.T. ripping open tents and even grabbing a sleeping bag or bivy sack and attempting to drag it off with a hiker inside. A bear that enters a campsite or cooking area should be considered predatory. Yelling, making loud noises, throwing rocks, etc., may frighten it away, however, you should be prepared to fight back if necessary.

If you are actually attacked by a bear, you should fight for all you are worth with anything at hand—rocks, sticks, fists.

Health and First-Aid Issues

What safety equipment should I carry?

Preparation is the key for a healthy trip. Choose clothing and equipment carefully, and make sure you have adequate food, water, and shelter available. Carry a basic first-aid kit that can treat scrapes, blisters, sprains, and aches. Always carry first-aid information with you and make sure someone in your group has first-aid training.

How do I prevent blisters?

Blisters are one of the most common ailments suffered by hikers. Break in new boots before you begin your hike. Always keep your feet dry while hiking. When you stop for breaks, take your shoes and socks off to air out your feet; change socks. Don't wait for a blister to develop. As soon as you feel any discomfort, place adhesive tape, duct tape, moleskin, or a blister-care product over areas of developing soreness.

How do I prevent hypothermia?

Stay well hydrated, even when it's cold. Wear layers of warm, windproof, and water-repellent clothing in chill, wet weather. Wearing a fleece cap or balaclava conserves valuable body heat lost through your head. Always keep dry, spare clothing in your pack, and take care to keep your sleeping bag and matches dry.

Remember that wind chill or body wetness, particularly when aggravated by fatigue, dehydration, and hunger, can rapidly drain body heat. Shivering, lethargy, mental slowing, and confusion are early symptoms. Left untreated, hypothermia can kill you.

To treat hypothermia, immediately seek shelter and warm your entire body, preferably by placing it in a sleeping bag and consuming warm liquids.

How do I prevent heat emergencies?

During summer months, dehydration can occur on any part of the Trail. Be especially careful in low-elevation areas where temperatures are higher and areas with considerable elevation gain and loss. On hot and humid days, it's best to keep your mileage low, and take a break during the warmest part of the day. Remember to drink plenty of water throughout the day and don't wait until you feel thirsty to drink. Make sure your urine stays clear; dark yellow urine is a sign of dehydration. Also remember that while hydration is important, there comes a point where water alone may not be enough. To maintain a proper balance of electrolytes, include fruit or fruit juice or a very diluted sports drink in your pack.

Permits and Fees

The Appalachian Trail is open for all to enjoy. No fees, memberships, or paid permits are required for walking on the Trail. However, the A.T. passes through numerous state and national parks, a few of which require permits and fees.

Where are permits required?

Permits are required to camp in the backcountry in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and Shenandoah National Park. Baxter State Park and the Smokies require reservations for overnight camping; different regulations govern thru-hikers in these areas.

Where are fees charged?

Fees are charged to enter many parks by car, in some areas on some national forests, and to stay at certain shelters and overnight sites in heavy-use areas.

Special Situations

What are the special situations in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park?

Pets are prohibited in the backcountry; private kennels can board and shuttle dogs around the park for thru-hikers. Contact ATC for more information. Backpackers using the A.T. or its side trails in the Smokies must obtain a permit to stay overnight and are required to reserve space at designated shelters and campsites. All except

thru-hikers must obtain the permit by mail or in person from a park ranger.

A.T. thru-hikers (defined by the park as those beginning at least 50 miles north or south of the park boundaries and continuing at least 50 miles beyond the other side) need a permit that allows them seven consecutive nights and eight days to traverse the park. Those are available at Fontana Dam, North Carolina, (southern end) or from the U.S. Forest Service ranger station in Hot Springs, North Carolina, (35 miles north). Only three spaces in shelters along the Trail are generally reserved for thru-hikers from March 15 through June 15. Other thru-hikers must yield their bunks and tent outside the shelters if additional hikers, with shelter permits, arrive. Only thru-hikers with permits are allowed to pitch tents outside a shelter. No more than one night may be spent at any one shelter. For permits and additional information, write to Backcountry Reservations Office, Smoky Mountain National Park, Gatlinburg, TN 37738, or call 865.436.1231 between 8 a.m and 6 p.m. Eastern time daily.

What are the special situations in Shenandoah National Park?

Backcountry camping permits are required for backpackers. Northbound thru-hikers can obtain permits at the self-registration kiosk near the park entrance on Skyline Drive, 0.8 mile north of Rockfish Gap. Southbound thru-hikers can obtain permits at the self-registration station 0.1 mile south of the sign marking the park's northern boundary. There is no charge for hikers entering the park via the Appalachian Trail. A \$5 fee is charged at some other trailheads, and a \$10 per vehicle fee is charged drivers on Skyline Drive. Write the park superintendent for permits, or call 540.999.3500 for more information. Dogs are prohibited on certain trails (which are posted by appropriate signs) and must be on a leash at all times in all other areas.

What are the special situations in the White Mountain National Forest?

The high, exposed peaks of New Hampshire's White Mountain National Forest offer a combination of spectacular scenery, difficult terrain, and severe weather. Because of these factors and those mentioned below, advance planning is critically important here.

The White Mountains National Forest and its many miles above treeline contain some of the most fragile ecosystems along the entire A.T. Twice as many people visit this area as all the rest of the Trail combined. To limit resource impacts of so many visitors, backcountry use is concentrated at developed overnight sites (campsites, shelters, and huts) with adequate water and sanitation facilities. Camping is prohibited in "Forest Protection Areas" (FPAs). They are designated to protect heavily used areas from overuse. FPAs are found above treeline, around shelters, huts, and all other places where overcamping could be a problem (roads, ponds, fragile ecosystems, etc.).

Unique to the White Mountains are a system of eight huts operated by the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC) along the A.T., seven of which provide dinner, lodging and breakfast during the summer and fall season. Advance reservations

are recommended; A.T. thru-hikers are given member discounts. A work-for-stay option is available on limited basis for thru-hikers. There are also shelters and campsites in the White Mountains, some of which have a fee. A few, especially across the Presidential range, are as much as a mile off the A.T., and require a steep climb off the ridge. Know your options ahead of time!

For more information, visit AMC's Web site at www.outdoors.org. Thru-hikers should familiarize themselves with AMC's "Thru-Hiker's Guide to Facilities in the White Mountains," on AMC's Web site, and included in ATC's free thru-hiker packets.

What are the special situations in Baxter State Park?

Baxter Park is a wilderness park open only from May 15 to October 15. Trails above treeline are frequently closed during winter weather in early June and October, and the park is at capacity in July and August. Park personnel exercise a high degree of control over the number of persons entering the park and their activities. No dogs are allowed. A.T. hikers should read the park regulations before coming to the park. Because the gates close when the park reaches capacity, day users should plan to be at the park entrance by dawn to be assured of a parking spot, especially on weekends.

The A.T. up Katahdin typically opens May 31, later in years of heavy snow. Like other trails above treeline, severe weather can close it in any month of the year, but especially in September and October. Be forewarned: It is the toughest five miles on the entire A.T. and should not be attempted unless you are in good health. Those with fear of heights may be unnerved above treeline.

All persons entering Baxter Park, by car or on foot, must register at one of the three entry gates or at the nearest campground. Overnight hikers must have an advance reservation at a campsite and pay a fee (\$9 per person/per night in 2006). Individual hikers arriving on foot on a hike of 100 miles or more (including northbound thru-hikers, but generally not southbound thru-hikers or flip-flop thru-hikers) may stay at the Birches without advance reservations, space permitting.

For more information, visit Baxter State Park's Web site www.baxterstatepark-authority.com, or contact Baxter State Park, 64 Balsam Drive, Millinocket, ME 04462; 207.723.5140. Two of their free publications, "A Thru-Hiker's Guide to Baxter State Park Regulations and Policies" and "Katahdin Thru-hiker Alert" are available from the park or ATC.

What are the special issues facing groups hiking on the A.T.?

Groups are welcome on the Trail, but they need to do a few additional things:

- Take particular care to Leave No Trace (see page 8); this is vital because groups have a more concentrated impact on paths, campsites, and facilities.
- Plan to use tents and not shelters. Shelters are not designated for groups.
- Limit group size to no more than ten, or 25 on day hikes.

Thru-Hiking on the A.T.



A thru-hike is one of the most exciting and demanding outdoor adventures that America has to offer. Although the journey requires grueling physical effort, a willingness to endure deprivation and sometimes pain for extended periods, it offers an immensely rewarding and unforgettable experience.

Who can attempt a thru-hike?

Anyone in good health who can walk has the potential to complete a thru-hike. Being in good physical shape and having well-chosen, lightweight gear that you know how to use are certainly advantages, especially in the critical first few weeks of your hike. Knowing what to expect and being prepared is important, too. But an ability to enjoy the moment, a sense of humor in the face of frequent unexpected challenges, and a driving passion to complete the hike are perhaps greater predictors of success. Thru-hikes have been completed by those ranging from age 6 to age 81, and by people with a variety of disabilities, from all walks of life.

How long does it take?

On average, a thru-hike takes just under six months. Most thru-hikers take between five and seven months to walk the trail, although four or eight months is not uncommon. Most of the longer hikes belong to "flip-floppers."

When should I start a thru-hike?

Most thru-hikers start their trips between the end of February and early April at Springer Mountain in Georgia. Most finish at Katahdin in Maine between August and early October. Northbound thru-hikers should plan to reach Katahdin well before October 15 because of weather conditions and Baxter Park regulations.

Each year, hikers start earlier and earlier in an attempt to "beat the crowd" of more than a thousand fellow "northbounders." However, many are caught off guard by cold temperatures, snow, and ice in the high mountains of the southern Appalachians. The high elevations create conditions comparable to southern New England, with below-freezing temperatures and snow occurring well into April, occasionally even May. In March, daylight hours are short, and snow and ice can slow or halt your progress. If the snow is deep enough, you may even have to leave the Trail and wait for the snow to melt. Being prepared for these conditions means carrying a

heavier pack. Unless you are not deterred by several weeks of winter hiking, it's best to wait at least until the end of March. Leaving then you'll probably still see some snow, especially in the Smokies, but you'll see spring a lot sooner.

What about starting in Maine?

A few thru-hikers start in June or early July at Katahdin and finish in Georgia in November or December. Southbound thru-hikers must wait until the A.T. up Katahdin opens, usually the first week of June, but sometimes later. June starters can expect swarms of black flies and high stream crossings in Maine, but waiting much longer means additional weeks of winter hiking on the southern end. Hiking southbound is considered the toughest way to hike the Trail: you should be in seriously good shape before attempting this. A "southbounder" starts with the toughest mountain on the entire Trail on his first day, and spends his or her first month in the hardest state on the Trail.

What if I want to avoid crowds, cold weather, and tough hiking in the beginning?

Then you might want to consider an "alternative" thru-hike. The most common variations are called "flip-flops." For example, starting in the middle of the Trail and hiking north allows you begin later than the northbounders but sooner than the southbounders. You can also start in easier terrain, and set off in spring weather. A word of advice: Get tips from the early northbounders who pass you in the beginning, but don't attempt to keep up with them. You'll set yourself up for injury.

Don't overlook the aspects that some consider major drawbacks, though. You'll be missing out on the dramatic finish on Katahdin, and you probably won't feel as much a part of the A.T. thru-hike community. (Couples may mind this less.) Some may not consider you a "real" thru-hiker, but ATC, the body that officially records thru-hike completions, does. In fact, ATC applauds "alternative" thru-hikers for helping reduce impacts caused by crowds of northbounders on the southern end of the Trail.

ATC's Web site can give you information about this and other "alternative" thru-hikes.

Do I have to register?

No. There's no formal registration system. But, let friends and family know where you are, what your itinerary is, and your "Trail name."

Do I need to carry maps?

The Trail is well-marked, so many thru-hikers are tempted not to carry maps. In an emergency, maps are your best source of information on how to get off the Trail and find help. Maps also help you get a sense of where you are in relation to the land around you and can be helpful for locating water sources.

What books should I buy or carry?

See the list of books and guidebooks inside the back cover.

How detailed should my plan be?

Flexibility in your schedule is essential. Ignoring the warning signs of pain and forcing yourself to stick to a detailed, overambitious plan can lead to injuries that may end your hike. Lyme disease, if not treated promptly, can take you off the Trail for weeks, or worse. Snow or heavy rain can create conditions that will slow you down considerably. Allow space in your schedule for the unexpected.

What are my chances of finishing a thru-hike?

Each year, many prospective 2,000-milers start at Springer Mountain in Georgia, only to quit at the first town 20 miles up the Trail. Up to 10 percent quit in the first week, but approximately 25 percent make it the whole way. They give up for all kinds of reasons. Starting too early, heavy rains or snow, a schedule that is too ambitious and leads to injury, unexpectedly rugged terrain, overspending a meager budget, poor physical shape, ill-fitting boots and equipment, or no sense of humor—all contribute to an ill-fated expedition.

Only you know best what kind of person you are. Will you endure days of rain, when every item you own becomes soggy, including your tent and sleeping bag? Are you willing to plod up seemingly endless mountains with muscles that ache, only to see another grind still to come? Will you still be inspired after every view starts to look the same and the Trail seems like an endless green tunnel?

How can I know if I'm up for the challenge?

The smartest thing you can do is to take a practice hike that includes at least two nights out on terrain that approximates the part of the Trail you plan to start on. This will help you evaluate gear, physical conditioning, and mental readiness.

How much does it cost?

A fair amount of money—typically about \$3,000 to \$5,000—to undertake a 2,175-mile, five- to seven-month hike, not counting \$1,000 to \$2,000 or more for gear. Many dollars are spent in vain, along with planning time and effort, when someone learns too late that a thru-hike is not for him or her.

What costs so much?

Most of your money will be spent in town. Few thru-hikers can resist the temptation of restaurant food, motel beds, and hot showers after days of deprivation. You will also need money for supplies, laundry, postage, equipment repair, and equipment replacement.

What about maildrops?

Maildrops are not essential. You can either buy food along the way, pick up pre-sent packages, or some combination of the two. Another trick is continually forwarding

a “bounce box.” Sometimes hostels or businesses located close to the Trail and open seven days a week are more convenient than Post Offices for sending packages. For more details on choosing which method to use and how to mail packages to yourself along the Trail, see ATC’s *Thru-Hike Planner* or ATC’s Web site.

How do I find a partner?

If you’re starting a northbound thru-hike in March or April, you’ll have plenty of companionship from other thru-hikers. But, having a partner to plan your hike with and start out with can make the process more fun and less intimidating. Unless you and your partner are long-time friends, however, it’s best not to make a commitment to stay together more than a few days or weeks. Chances are, you’ll soon find others whose pace and temperament are a better match. Appalachian Trail Conservancy members may place ads for hiking partners in the *A.T. Journeys* at no charge. The following Web sites have a partners section or a forum where you can post a partner ad:

WhiteBlaze.net: www.whiteblaze.net

TrailJournals.com: www.trailjournals.com

Trailplace: www.trailplace.com

Are there alternatives to thru-hiking?

Many hikers, unable to take six months off from their jobs, families, and financial responsibilities, walk the entire Trail in sections over a period of years. The advantage of section-hiking is that you can choose the best time of year to be in a particular area—fall in New England, spring in the South, Virginia when mountain laurel is blooming, and so on. You can set your own pace, take time to enjoy the scenery, and will not have to be consumed with “making miles” as many thru-hikers are. The disadvantage is that you have to walk yourself into shape each time.

What happens when I finish?

The greatest rewards are personal ones—the memories, friendships, photographs, the sense of accomplishment, and the deeper appreciation of the eastern mountains. When you finish the entire Trail, either in one season or sections added together over the years, you become a 2,000-miler. Application forms are available on ATC’s Web site or by contacting ATC. When you return the form, ATC will send you a certificate of recognition and a “2,000-Miler” rocker for an A.T. patch. Your name will be added to our roster of 2,000-milers. Forms are also available at Baxter State Park in Maine and Amicalola Falls State Park in Georgia.

Who is eligible to become a 2,000-miler?

Anyone who has walked the entire A.T., whether as a section-hiker or thru-hiker, is recognized as a 2,000-miler. Our recognition policy does not consider sequence, direction, speed, or whether one carries a pack. More information is available on ATC’s Web site.

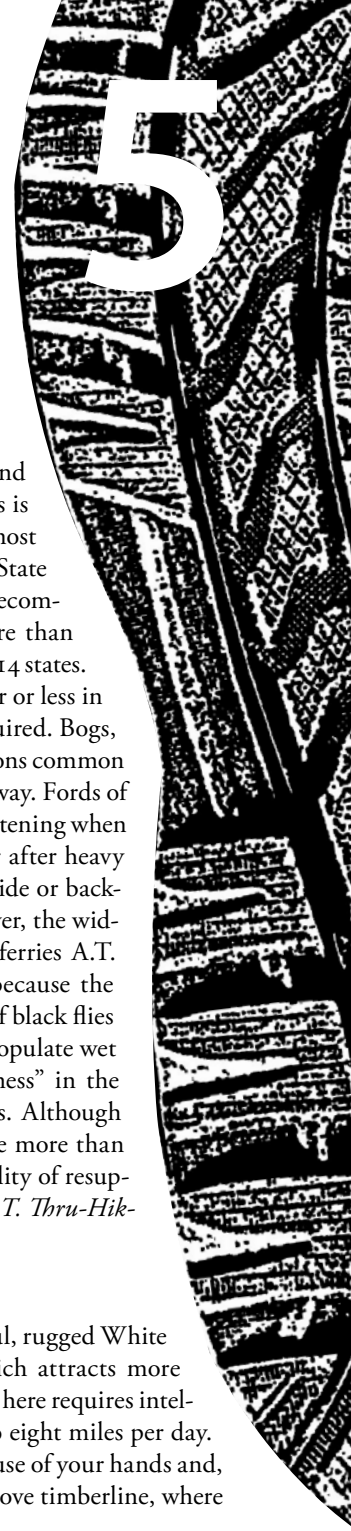
The Appalachian Trail: State by State

Maine

Throughout Maine, the A.T. is known for both its beauty and the ruggedness of its terrain. The Trail’s northern terminus is located atop the spectacular mile-high Katahdin, the A.T.’s most challenging mountain. (See “Special Situations in Baxter State Park,” p. 24, for more information. Much of Maine is not recommended for novice hikers, especially backpackers; its more than 280 miles are considered the most difficult and remote of all 14 states. Even the strongest hiker may average only one mile an hour or less in places, where climbing, sliding and scrambling may be required. Bogs, streams, and lakes abound. While that makes moose and loons common sights, it also makes for muddy, uneven, and slippery treadway. Fords of mountain streams can be difficult and potentially life-threatening when water is high. These conditions usually occur into June or after heavy rains. Often the only options are waiting for them to subside or backtracking and finding a road to follow. At the Kennebec River, the widest unbridged river along the Trail, a free canoe service ferries A.T. users across. Forging the river is extremely dangerous, because the water level can rise rapidly and without warning. Swarms of black flies in June can make hiking almost unbearable; mosquitoes populate wet areas through the summer. The famed “100-mile wilderness” in the northern part of the route is crowded in summer months. Although remote, it is technically not a wilderness, but does traverse more than 100 miles between paved roads. Over the decades, availability of resupply has waxed and waned; check the latest edition of the *A.T. Thru-Hikers Companion* before planning a hike here.

New Hampshire

The highlight of the A.T. in New Hampshire is the beautiful, rugged White Mountain National Forest, the dramatic scenery of which attracts more backcountry visitors than any other part of the Trail. Travel here requires intelligent planning and ample time; plan no more than five to eight miles per day. Be prepared for steep ascents and descents that require the use of your hands and, occasionally, the seat of your pants. Much of the Trail is above timberline, where



the temperature may change very suddenly; snow is possible in any season. The same severe weather conditions that prevent trees from growing on the high ridges also require a higher level of preparedness for a safe, successful hiking trip. Snow falls on Mt. Washington during every month of the year. High winds and dense fog are common. Most shelters and campsites charge a fee.

Between the White Mountains and the Vermont border, the Trail crosses broken terrain of alternating mountains and valleys. This area is noted for its fall foliage and is a good alternative to the crowds and steep scrambles of the Whites.

Vermont

Between the Connecticut River and the Green Mountain National Forest, the Trail passes through high, rugged country with woods and overgrown farmlands. From “Maine Junction” (near U.S. 4) south, the A.T. follows about 100 miles of the famed “Long Trail” along the rugged crest of the Green Mountains.

The Trail approaches treeline at Killington and Stratton mountains, and parts feature strenuous ascents. But, in general, Vermont hiking crosses varied terrain, at lower to mid-range elevations with a fair amount of elevation gain and loss. It passes through forests of paper birch and white pine, wooded mountains, and farm valleys. Avoid Vermont trails in “mud season,” mid-April through Memorial Day. Hiking there in wet, sloppy conditions leads to serious Trail erosion.

Massachusetts

The Trail here leads through the Berkshires. Pleasant stretches through wooded hills and valleys feature such outstanding peaks as Mt. Greylock and Mt. Everett, and the Trail passes through several small New England towns. Water is plentiful. Several summits and ledges provide views, and there are long, flat sections atop the Berkshire Plateau quite different from the dry ridgewalks of the mid-Atlantic and Virginias. Ascents, though sometimes steep, are seldom sustained.

Connecticut

The route through the northwestern corner of Connecticut meanders across the worn-down remnants of a once-lofty mountain range. The Housatonic River Valley to the east and the Taconic Range to the west are particularly scenic, and one section of Trail near Falls Village is accessible for persons with disabilities. Many sections run along the banks of rivers. Hiking is mostly moderate, with steep, fairly challenging sections that are short in duration. Views are often pastoral.

New York and New Jersey

Between Connecticut and the Kittatinny Range in New Jersey, the Trail is much less secluded—you can see the Manhattan skyline from some spots! The section through Harriman–Bear Mountain State Park, where in 1923 the very first new section of the Appalachian Trail was completed, gets a lot of visitors. The route along the Kittatinny Range in New Jersey is rugged and more remote, with abun-

dant wildlife, including an active bear population. Elevation changes are generally moderate and vary from relatively flat and gentle to short, steep, rocky pitches. Other sections cross bogs and wetlands, including a National Wildlife Refuge that features a wide spectrum of bird species. Natural water sources are scarce and sometimes polluted. The Trail crosses the Delaware River at the picturesque Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area.

Pennsylvania

The A.T. follows ridges of mountains east of the Alleghenies to the Susquehanna River in a long section of Trail notorious for its foot-bruising, boot-destroying rocks. The Trail north of the Susquehanna is characterized by long, flat, rocky ridges broken by fairly strenuous climbs in and out of gaps. South of the Susquehanna, many sections are mostly gentle, and grades are easy, making it one of the easiest sections of the Trail. This section crosses many roads, and some shelters are near roads, where scattered crime problems make extra safety awareness a good idea. About ten miles beyond the Susquehanna, the Trail crosses the Cumberland Valley. Pennsylvania can be oppressively hot in summer, and water may be scarce. ATC has a field office along the Trail in Boiling Springs.

Maryland and West Virginia

The A.T. in Maryland follows a 40-mile route along the backbone of South Mountain, a north-south ridge that extends from Pennsylvania to the Potomac River. This section is great for three- or four-day trips and is easy by A.T. standards. There are many pretty views and convenient access from nearby towns and highways. It’s also a favorite with Scouts seeking the merit badge for a 50-mile hike.

The A.T. enters West Virginia at Harpers Ferry by way of a footbridge over the Potomac River. Only 2.4 miles lie in West Virginia here, passing within just a quarter-mile of ATC headquarters, then crossing the Shenandoah River, ascending the Blue Ridge at Loudoun Heights, and straddling the Virginia–West Virginia border for the next 20 miles. Historic and scenic, Harpers Ferry is served by Amtrak and commuter trains that run into Washington, D.C. It makes an ideal location to start or end a hike. (The Trail also straddles the Virginia–West Virginia border several hundred miles farther south, near the New River.)

Virginia

One-fourth of the Appalachian Trail lies in Virginia. It varies from easy hiking to very difficult rock scrambling, from busy national parks to isolated wilderness areas. North of Front Royal, the Trail follows a long, low ridge, including a notoriously strenuous “roller-coaster” section south of Snickers Gap. Shenandoah National Park, with 107 miles of well-graded and well-maintained trail, is excellent for beginning hikers and is noted for its many vistas and abundant wildlife. Side trails provide excellent opportunities for one- or two-day circuit hikes. Nearby Skyline Drive has many waysides and concessions for resupply stops. The park gets very busy during weekends and in late October, during peak foliage-changing season. Park facilities

close from late November through March; when snow shuts down Skyline Drive, the entire park may become inaccessible by car.

South of Shenandoah, the A.T. occasionally crosses the Blue Ridge Parkway. The treadway is well-graded, but includes a number of 2,000- and 3,000-foot climbs. Mature timber, high summits, and spectacular wilderness can be found in the George Washington National Forest, north of Roanoke. The Trail then leaves the parkway and travels west through the Jefferson National Forest, crossing a series of ridges and valleys. Throughout the Mt. Rogers National Recreation area in southwest Virginia, the floral displays of rhododendron and azalea in June are outstanding. The Mt. Rogers high country, an area of spectacular highland meadows, routinely receives snowfall from October to May, making it considerably colder, wetter, and snowier than other areas of Virginia. At the southern border is the quintessential “Trail town,” Damascus, Virginia.

Tennessee and North Carolina

From Damascus, the Trail follows segments of mountain ranges in the Cherokee National Forest, ascending to the high country of the North Carolina–Tennessee state line, and the highest mountains along the Trail—several above 6,000 feet. Here lie the Roan Highlands, noted for their rhododendron gardens and the panoramic views of the open grassy “balds” such as Hump Mountain. The A.T. continues southward along the state line and through the Pisgah National Forest.

The Great Smoky Mountains National Park, with more than 70 miles of crestline Trail, features the highest elevations of the entire footpath, well above 6,000 feet. Permits are required for overnight stays; unless you are thru-hiking, you need reservations to use the shelters.

South of the Smokies come the long climbs of the Nantahala National Forest, with 4,000-foot gaps and 5,000-foot peaks. Cheoah Bald offers panoramic views of western North Carolina. The variety of forest growth and the beauty of the flowering shrubs, along with the many spectacular views, make this entire section of Trail memorable.

Like the White Mountains of New Hampshire, hikers on the high ridges and balds of the southern Appalachians can encounter dangerous weather conditions. Lightning is a particular danger in summer. Sudden snow storms are common as late as April and May, and can strand hikers.

Georgia

The A.T. in Georgia traverses the Chattahoochee National Forest. This area features rugged wilderness hiking, and the Trail’s southern terminus, Springer Mountain. Hiking includes many steep ups and downs, but the Trail is lower here, mostly along ridges of between 3,000 and 4,000 feet. Those tempted by the southerly latitude to plan spring-break hikes in March will often be disappointed to find cold rain, sleet, and snow. The Georgia section is crowded with thru-hikers in March and April, and spring-break crowds make this even worse. Heat and humidity can be oppressive in July and August.

Resources

Appalachian Trail Visitor Center

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy's A.T. Visitor Center in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia is open seven days a week from April through October and on weekdays during the winter. Find more information about the center at www.appalachiantrail.org.

Recommended Publications

DAY-HIKES

Best of the A.T.: Day Hikes (several hikes in each Trail state, no maps)
A.T. Maps

OVERNIGHT HIKES

A.T. Maps
Exploring the A.T. series (detailed guides for specific regions, with rudimentary maps)
Best of the A.T.: Overnight Hikes (selected hikes along the entire A.T., no maps)

EXTENDED HIKES/SECTION-HIKES

Guide sets (guidebook and maps)
A.T. Thru-Hikers' Companion (details on shelters and services)
A.T. Data Book (optional, handy for mileage calculations)

THRU-HIKE

A.T. Thru-hikers' Companion
A.T. Maps
A.T. Data Book (optional, handy for mileage calculations)

PREPARATION — GENERAL

The Appalachian Trail Hiker, by Frank and Victoria Logue.
Trail Safe: Averting Threatening Human Behavior in the Outdoors, Michael Bane.

PREPARATION — THRU-HIKE

Appalachian Trail Thru-Hike Planner.
David Lauterborn.

NATURE GUIDES

A Visitor's Companion, Leonard M. Adkins. (A guide to plants and animals).
Wildflowers of the Appalachian Trail, Leonard M. Adkins.

MAGAZINE

A.T. Journeys, the magazine of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, features great articles, stories, photos, and advice about the A.T., along with a "Public Notices" section, where members can post an ad to ATC's membership of 39,000.

NOTE: All titles above and many more books, DVDs, and other A.T.-related paraphernalia are available from the ATC's "Ultimate Appalachian Trail Store." Shop by catalog, phone (1-888-AT STORE), on-line www.atctrailstore.org, or at ATC's Visitor Center in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia.

Useful Web Sites

GENERAL

Appalachian Trail Conservancy
www.appalachiantrail.org
Appalachian Trail Home Page
www.fred.net/kathy/at.html
Trailplace.com
www.trailplace.com
WhiteBlaze.net
www.whiteblaze.net

THRU-HIKING

Appalachian Long Distance
Hikers Association
www.aloha.org
Thru-Hiking Papers
www.spriteaglehome.com/THP%20top.html
TrailJournals.com
www.trailjournals.com