

STRETCHING HIS LEGS

on the
APPALACHIAN
TRAIL

By Grant E. Nichols

After nearly 10 years of sitting behind a desk, it was time for me to stretch my legs. I had enjoyed the past decade, spent as an associate at a Philadelphia-based law firm and later at an insurance company, but the weeks, then months, then years, were passing by with a sneaky speed and invariability. In March of this year, my girlfriend, sensing a growing unease in me, off-handedly mentioned the Appalachian Trail (AT). I knew very little about the AT and even less about camping, but the idea of hiking from Georgia to Maine somehow lodged itself in the front of my brain. Without thinking about it too deeply, I started to determine if it was feasible to leave my life in Philadelphia and live in the woods for a while. Three weeks, \$2,000 in gear, a lease agreement with some quickly found tenants, and a one-way plane ticket later, I was at the Hiker Hostel in Dahlonega, Ga., wondering what I had gotten myself into.





Grant Nichols at McAfee Knob, just outside of Roanoke, Va.
Photos courtesy of Grant Nichols

Probably more than 80 percent of the thru-hikers started alone, and fewer than 20 percent of people who start the AT intending to thru-hike actually complete it.

There were about 20 other hikers at the hostel that first night, all planning to thru-hike the AT (*i.e.*, hike the entire trail within a 12-month period), and all of whom had read multiple books on the AT and spent months, sometimes years, doing meticulous research and preparing their bodies to hike 2,185 miles over rough terrain. I had prepared by reading about half of “A Walk in the Woods” by Bill Bryson – a great story, but one essentially about the author failing to thru-hike the AT. On April 16, the Hiker Hostel van dropped us off about one mile below Springer Mountain, the start (or terminus, if hiking south) of the AT. I spent that mile on the phone with the CEO of the company I had just left, disconnecting about 100 yards from the top and starting the trail with no preparation, outdoorsmanship, income or home. But merely making it to the start felt like an accomplishment; I had never felt better.

On the first evening, I melted my camping stove, the directions failing to mention that I should avoid placing the stove’s detachable plastic plate directly on the isobutene flame. On the sixth evening, I figured out how to pitch my tent, which had collapsed on me during the previous five nights. (If

you’ve never had a tent collapse on you in the middle of the night, you’re lucky. It feels like you’re being buried alive, at least to this author, who doesn’t even like elevators.) After a couple of weeks, I was making edible dinners, sleeping like a baby, and hiking 20 miles each day. I was amazed how fast I got used to living out of my 30-pound pack, and I was lucky to come across very early what was a constant truth during my time on the trail: people on and around the AT want to help. (Many thru-hikers prefer the more mystical version that “the trail provides.”)

One of the greatest things about the AT is not the trail itself, but the people who work hard to keep it, and the hikers, in working order (they are known as trail angels). There is not enough room here to discuss all of the generosity (trail magic) I came across, but it’s safe to say that very few people, myself included, would finish the AT without it. When you’re out of food and the nearest town is 20 miles away, you need to come across someone who’s willing to pick up a dirty, smelly, bearded hiker from the side of the road and take them into town.



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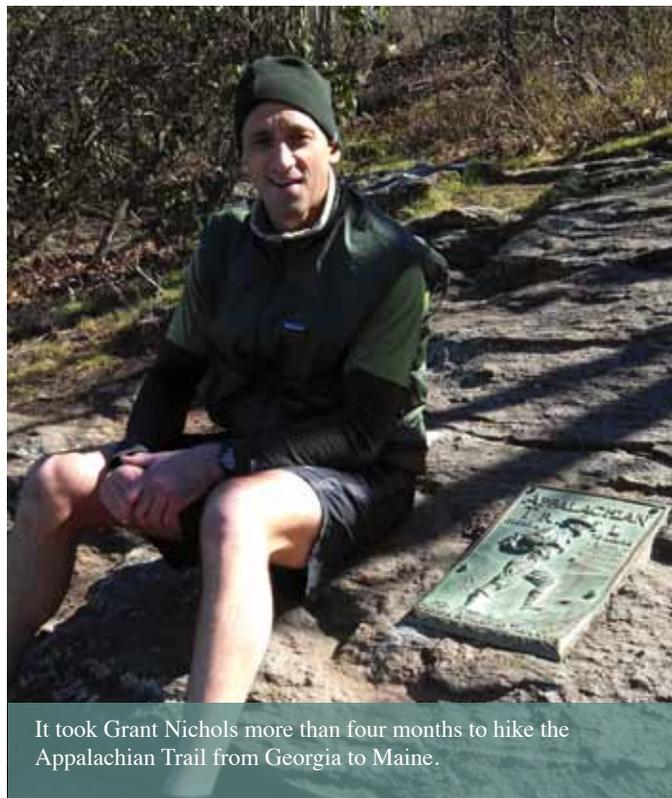
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As such, hitchhiking becomes an art form for a thru-hiker, and the people of the trail towns along the AT look for hikers to pick up as part of their summertime routine, similar to the way drivers in New England learn to look for frost heaves in the winter. On a quiet stretch of Route 26 in Unicoi, Tenn., a driving instructor, in the middle of a lesson, saw me standing at a road crossing and had her student pull over to give me a ride to the nearest convenience store for resupply. The poor 15-year-old kid with his hands glued at 10 and 2 didn't know what to make of the whole thing. Possibly the oddest trail magic I received was in Dalton, Mass., to which I hiked for 25 miles on a bum foot and in a cold rain in order to get to town and sleep in a dry place, only to find that the one motel in town was booked. Just then, a ponytailed guy in a white van pulled up and asked me if I need a place to stay. I said I did. I was in luck, he explained, because he had a bed in his van. I said OK, which gives you an idea of a thru-hiker's desperation. It turned out that this trail angel also had access to a camper, there were a few beds in it, and my initial fears proved unfounded.

There were as many reasons for hiking the trail as there were hikers, but people generally fell into one or more of the following categories – recent retirees; recent college graduates; 30-something professionals either between jobs or taking leaves of absence from their job; endurance athletes/ultra-hikers; ex-military guys; and people hiking the trail to lose weight. Probably more than 80 percent of the thru-hikers started alone, and fewer than 20 percent of people who start the AT intending to thru-hike actually complete it. Surprisingly, it was the recent college graduates, the demographic physically most suited to long-distance hiking, who had the highest dropout rate (perhaps along with the weight-loss hopefuls). Thus, it became clear early on that this was less a test of physical endurance than of the mind's ability to stay focused on a task for an extended period of time, organize each day efficiently, and stick to your checkpoints. I had the tremendous advantage of having practiced law.

I also benefitted from hiking much of the AT with some of the most fascinating people I have ever met. Guy "Astro Guy" Gardner was a fighter pilot in Vietnam, an Air Force test pilot, a NASA space shuttle pilot for two missions, and then program director of the joint U.S.-Russia Mir program. He retired and followed his lifelong dream of becoming a physics teacher. Celeste "Acorn" Beyer was an ex-sponsored snowboarder who went on to counsel and treat drug addicts by spending time with them in the mountains of Vermont. Only toward the end of the hike did I learn I had been hiking with someone famous (by AT standards) for being the "toughest woman on the trail."

Most people I would meet in passing, and we would spend the day exchanging stories and appreciating each other's quirks. There were hundreds, including "Rocky," a laid-back dude who arguably managed to pull off both Willie Nelson braids and a kilt, and who always had two cars parked about 15 miles apart. He would hike 15 miles south from Car A to Car B, drove Car B 30 miles north, hiked 15 miles south to Car A, then repeated. I passed him a number of times going the opposite direction – in effect, he hiked south from Georgia to Maine, almost never having to camp outside. Another was



It took Grant Nichols more than four months to hike the Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine.

"Fig Leaf," an American who spoke Spanish, but only to her dog, which she bought in Nicaragua and which presumably had trouble understanding English.

The hike itself took just over four months. In that time, I went through six pairs of socks, five pairs of hiking shoes, four pairs of trekking poles, four hiking shirts, two pairs of hiking shorts and two backpacks. I saw five bears, one moose, one rattlesnake, one copperhead and the eyes, at night, of one wild boar. But the most dangerous animal I saw on the AT was also the smallest: the nymph-stage deer tick, carrier of Lyme disease. I hiked with four people who contracted Lyme disease during their thru-hike. I ate more than 30 pounds of peanut butter, 20 pounds of tuna and 600 tortillas. I covered more distance than the distance, as the crow flies, between New York City and Las Vegas, climbed and descended more than 515,000 feet, and took more than 4 million steps.

Was it worth the time, energy, money and gap in my resume? My answer is unequivocally "yes." I do not yet know the full extent of what the trail taught me, but I know I gained the ability to separate complexity from fullness of experience, and to slow myself down to a speed where the compartments of my life could gel. It had become too easy for me to load myself up with work and constantly juggle dozens of tasks, the busier the better. Time pressures still existed on the AT – to pack up and start hiking early, to hike a certain number of miles to meet someone, to get to town on a certain day before I ran out of food – but if I simply kept putting one foot in front of the other, 4 million times, I would get to my goal. ■

Grant E. Nichols (grant.nichols@gmail.com) is currently consulting insureds on coverage and claims issues and volunteers as a coach at the Miami Beach Rowing Club.