

An epistle from the Holy Land



Well, I've survived the rocks of Pennsylvania and am in Delaware Water Gap on the New Jersey (pronounced joy-zee) border resting my feet and trying to get all my housekeeping items done. I spent a good part of yesterday hanging out with some other hikers in Stroudsburg, now it looks like I may need to spend another day writing this and coordinating all my next steps which include, I'm hoping, another quick trip home once I reach the NY-CN border.

I've caught up with trailing edge of the main mob of thru-hikers, and am starting to feel like part of a great movement, or at least a loosely knit community. We are a pretty amazing bunch, if I do say so myself. One of the hikers I ate dinner with last night turned to me and said, "I used wonder why people seemed so willing to take hikers in and feed them or whatever, but now I think I get it. Thru-hikers are all such powerful people."

I think he's on to something. Thru-hiking is a great equalizer. We all look like derelicts out here, and when you meet another thru-hiker your first impression is that you are meeting some vagabond. I first noticed this down in North Carolina when I approached a shelter and saw a homeless couple shivering by a fire. Alarms went off in my head. "Will they ask me for money? Will they try to steal my stuff? Do I dare stay here or should I move on? Turns out she was a part time CPA who owned a B&B in New Hampshire and he was a retired corporate executive from Minneapolis.

Usually when I get together with other thru-hikers we talk about the trail or places near it, or our gear, or the weather, or how much our feet hurt. People seem hesitant to talk about their lives back home; it's all so irrelevant out here. Indeed, I've met a few hikers for whom "home" is an ambiguous term, since they're not yet certain where they will go after they finish their hike. Yet if you pry you are likely to discover they hold graduate degrees, have impressive professional careers, or, especially in the case of the many hikers who are out here after graduating college, seem on the verge of both.

Regardless of what else is going on in their lives, you find among hikers what I would describe as an incredible strength of spirit. I'm not sure if this is something the trail imparts to people, or if it's just a Darwinian phenomena where the rigors of the trail weed out the spiritually weak before they get this far.

At any rate, now that I feel like a real thru-hiker, I figured it was time I stop preaching and start giving some straight answers to straight questions. So, using the familiar web "FAQ" format, here's some of the questions "townies" (and others) ask most.

Where are you heading?
Katahdin.

Where did you start?

Springer (yawn).

How far is that?

2168 miles, but the last 2000 are the hardest.

Wow! That's a long way!

No s_____.

When did you start?

May 12.

How long will it take you?

Stock answer: five months. Real answer: I've planned 20 weeks. That's based on 120 days of hiking, averaging 18.1 miles per day, and 20 "Sabbath" days. In reality I'm averaging more miles per day on the trail, but I'm spending more days off the trail than I planned. The net result is that I've been consistently just a little ahead of schedule.

How many miles do you do in a day?

Since the initial two weeks, when I averaged about 18, I've been averaging about 22 miles per day actually on the trail. That's on the high side, most thru-hikers do less, but some do considerably more. The real question is how long you hike, not how far. I try to hike 8 to 10 hours per day not including breaks. That's surprisingly hard to do; more than 10 has been right on the verge of impossible for me and I'm usually closer to 8.

Speed over terrain varies widely, and the terrain varies, but not as much as you might think, at least in my perception (and never has the expression "perception is everything" been more true than on the AT). The peak altitudes are much higher at the southern and northern ends of the trail (generally higher in the south) but I've had to do some serious climbing every day so far, and in spite of what people have told me, I've yet to see an extended stretch of trail (say 25 miles or more) that I would call truly "easy." I can just make 3.5 mph over very smooth terrain (terrain that almost never lasts a full hour), 3 mph on "flat" trail, if it's not too rocky, 2.5 mph over more normal trail, 2 mph up a "normal" climb, 1.5 mph up a steep mountain, and God-knows-how-slow up or down the really hairy stuff. Yet my average speed over the course of a full day has been surprisingly consistent over the length of the trail—about 2.75 mph give or take a little.

What's your trail name?

Indy Marathon. I go by "Indy" but have taken the surname "Marathon" just in case there's another Indy out there, which seems likely.

How did you get that name?

It sort of evolved. I was going by "Steve from Indiana" temporarily, which got shortened to "Steve < Indy." Eventually it made sense to me to just use "Indy," since I kinda like the name and I used to wear that style of hat (as in "Indiana Jones"). Meanwhile, I hiked a 26.2 mile day over some pretty big mountains in North Carolina and was thinking I might get my average daily mileage up to that once I hit the (mythical as it turns out) "easy" trail in Virginia, so I thought about taking the trail name "Marathon." In the end, I decided to just use it as a surname (which would make me "Dr. Marathon" if I ever graduate; ain't that a cool name) and be just "Indy" to my friends.

What's the hardest part?

Getting over my initial homesickness and walking day after day after day. Living outdoors is no big deal, especially lately, since I can hit a town every three to five days and get a hot shower and maybe even sleep between some sheets. Food is not a problem, unless you are carrying too much of it. Water is a potential problem, but not if you're careful. Sleeping on the ground or on the hard wooden slab of a shelter has (surprisingly) not been a problem. Walking in pain or discomfort day after day takes more physical and psychic tenacity than I think I have much of the time.

No, I meant what's the hardest part of the AT?

A subject of much pointless debate. It's all hard. The general consensus, if there is one, is probably that the mountains of New Hampshire and southern Maine are marginally harder than the somewhat higher altitudes in the southern Appalachians of Georgia and North Carolina. In my experience, so far, it's all damn hard, and the hardest section is always the one you just completed.

I bet you're in great shape!

Not really. Ideal physical conditioning is brought about (so I'm told by the exercise gurus who all have advanced degrees in astrology and have had six years of postgraduate training in medical babblejargon, near as I can tell) by perhaps one day per week of peak intensity exercise, three or four days of more moderate exercise, and two or three days of low-intensity exercise or rest. Thru-hiking, at least the way I've been doing it, is more like full intensity exercise all day everyday until I can't, and then a day or two of walking around town before doing it some more. Burnout is a more-or-less perpetual state.

The other factor is that many thru-hikers, myself included, suffer under the delusion that since we are burning umpteen million calories per day we can eat anything we want whenever we want it, including vast quantities of sugar, white flour, and any form of grease we can get our hands on. (The stuff they use to lube cars looks pretty good to me after a while.)

We can be forgiven for this delusion in part because it is a real challenge to pack in all the calories you are burning off (imagine that). We'd all probably be better off if we had sports nutritionists/chefs following us around preparing five or six meals of fresh vegetables and whole grains each day, but we do the best we can.

Have you seen any bears?

Yes.

Have you seen any rattlesnakes?

Lots of them.

Have you seen any . . . ?

(At this point you have to give the full inventory of every animal you've seen and then listen to several boring and/or improbable stories about encounters with bears, snakes, raccoons, and deer. Actually the only animals that have been a problem, so far, are the mice that infest every shelter on the trail. They need more coyotes and wolves out here.)

Do you carry that thing with you (pointing to my computer)?

No, I'd be tempted if the batteries would last for a reasonable period of time, but since it would become nearly four pounds of completely useless dead weight after the first time I used it (and I hear Lonnie saying "even while you are using it"), I wouldn't even consider packing it. I mail it

ahead in a "bump box" along with the means to recharge all my other various electronic devices, town cloths, a few grooming items, and medications.

I keep my journal and lots of other valuable data on a Palm Pilot (which is technically a computer, but so far only one person I've encountered has demonstrated that they clearly understood this), for which I carry a folding keyboard (13 oz combined that I'd rather not have to carry, but I haven't figured out how to get by without it yet). I also have been carrying a digital audio recorder, a digital camera, and, after much internal debate, a wireless ("cell") phone.

How much does your pack weigh?

I have no idea. I refuse to weigh it since accurate scales are not generally available and everyone lies about pack weight anyway. Ironically everybody used to lie about how heavy their pack was, now they lie about how light they are. Twenty years ago if someone said they were carrying a 70-pound pack you were supposed to think "gee, he must be really strong." Now, if someone says they are carrying a 70-pound pack most hikers would think "gee, he must be a real moron."

Except for my technological indulgences listed above, I'm pretty much in the minimalists/ultra-light camp. Most townies are amused if not amazed by my strategies for minimizing weight. I trim margins off of maps, shortened the handle of my toothbrush, carry no more clothing than I need to stay warm on the coldest night wearing everything I have (exception: 2 changes of thin "liner" socks). I carry one titanium .85 liter cook pot, one plastic cup and spoon, a plastic razor that I figure weighs less than the beard I would be growing without it, no more than 1 liter of water (but I drink several liters at refill spots) a bag of pills (better life through chemistry), some Band-Aids, adhesive tape, and gauze, a 1-ounce bottle of rubbing alcohol, an ultra-light stove, sleeping bag, and one-person tent, a .375" ¾-length sleeping pad, a headband-style LED flashlight and another key chain type LED flashlight for backup (much lighter than spare batteries), a 8-ounce water filter, a little toilet paper, a few pages from a paperback book that I burn as I read, unless I'm running low on toilet paper (the rest of the book is in my "bump box," CS Lewis, in case you were wondering, remarkably entertaining yet efficiently sleep-inducing) a compass, maps (which I also discard as I go), three bandanas (the most efficient piece of backpacking gear ever invented) some food, and darn little else. I don't carry any rain gear (though I will once the weather turns colder) since I'd just as soon be drenched in rain as drenched in my own sweat, which it seems I nearly always am anyway. I do "laundry" nearly everyday by rinsing my glorified loincloth (running shorts), socks, and sleeveless shirt in a handy creek or by showering in my cloths, including, sometimes, my boots. Some hikers do carry changes of clothing, but I have no idea why.

What's the difference between a thru-hiker and a derelict?

Gore-tex.©

How's your research going?

Research?

Aren't you supposed to be doing research for your dissertation?

Oh yeah. Well, better than I feared, but not as well as I hoped. Do you think it will rain tonight?

Are you trying to change the subject?

Yes.

No, really, how's the research going?

Well, it's been hard to find time for anything other than walking, preparing meals, filtering water, setting up and breaking camp, sleeping, preparing mail drops, planning town stops, nursing my feet, and other unmentionables. Since other thru-hikers are in the same boat, when I do get together with someone who might be a good research informant neither of us really have the energy for the type of structured interviews I'd hoped for. I had some technology problems initially trying to record interviews, but I've resolved those and have been carrying the means to record formal interviews for the past five hundred miles. In spite of that, and in spite of the fact that I've encountered countless thru-hikers by now, I've yet to record a single interview.

However, I have had many very rich conversations with fellow hikers, and though it has proved impractical to take detailed notes from those conversations, virtually all of them taking place while walking over difficult terrain, I am gaining more and more insight into my research questions. In summary, I believe I'm gathering the basis for a good piece of writing on my chosen subject, but I will have a lot of work to do once I get back. Ideally, I would have gathered all the data and begun the analysis of it while on the trail, and would complete the analysis and writing next year. In reality, I think I will have to continue to gather data after I get back, probably through web surveys, email, phone interviews, and perhaps some travel. I expect to make at least one return visit to ATC headquarters in Harpers Ferry.

In other words, I'm sure I'm gathering the basis for a substantial written work. The big questions are: Will I be able to write it? Will anyone want to read it? and, Will my committee accept it as legitimate academic research? If I can answer the first two in the affirmative, I won't be too ashamed if the answer to the last one is ultimately "no."

If a tree falls in the woods, and there's nobody there to hear it, does it make a sound?

Yes.

Will it be hard to adjust to "normal" life after spending five months on the trail?

Ya think?

Why do you call Pennsylvania "the Holy Land"?

I serve The Society of Friends (Quaker) and Church of the Brethren seminaries. Quakerism started in England, but Pennsylvania was founded as a Quaker colony early in our (both the nation's and Quakerism's) history, so the state played an important role in the development of our society, especially from an American perspective. German Anabaptists groups, like The Church of the Brethren, were attracted to Pennsylvania because of its religious tolerance, something that, contrary to popular belief, was not common in the American colonies (and arguably still isn't, or at least wouldn't be if certain Christian fundamentalists got their way). Because our histories share this geographic region, and because we both used to dress somewhat funny (actually pretty much everybody dressed that way at one time, we just had some peculiar notion about not keeping up with the changes in fashion) people sometimes falsely assume an historical and theological connection between Quakers and German Anabaptist groups. Though both were shaped by similar forces during essentially coincidental time periods, they actually developed more-or-less independently. (In spite of glossing over and hedging, my Quaker and Brethren colleagues will no doubt want to correct me on several points in the foregoing. I stand ready to be corrected.)