

Fair Lanes
Spring, 1981

ROUTES:

TAKE A WALK

Hiking The Appalachian Trail



Harvey Lloyd/Image Bank

By JOHN SEDGWICK

One of the first hikers to cover the entire Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine was a 67-year-old mother of 11 named Grandma Gatewood. She completed the 2,025-mile journey in 145 days, losing 30 of her 155 pounds and wearing out five pairs of Keds along the way.

Since then, thousands of people have "done" the trail top to bottom (or bottom to top), although ten times as many have tried unsuccessfully. Four million walk some of it every year, and that's what we're recommending here, with a driving tour that touches the high spots of the A.T. (as it's dubbed by intimates).

From a respectful distance, the trail is something to be admired. Conceived in 1921 and completed in 1937, the A.T. is the longest posted trail in the world. Half the American population lives within a day's drive of the trail, which passes through 14 states. A third of it is on national park land; two hundred miles runs along roads, and the rest of it crosses private property.

March and April are probably the best months to go—before the insufferable black flies come out in Maine and before the rattlers and bears emerge in the south. Prospective hikers should realize that people are not the only varmints to enjoy the A.T.

Be sure to dress extra warmly and to take adequate rain gear. Backpackers have died of hypothermia in New Hampshire's Presidential Range as late as June. The trail is clearly marked with a two-by-six-inch vertical white stripe, but it would be wise to take along a guidebook and detailed map nevertheless. Get them from the Appalachian Trail Conference, Box 236, Harpers Ferry, WV 25425.



Marianne J. Skeen

DEEP SOUTH MOUNTAIN COUNTRY

Our trail begins at 3,782-foot Mount Springer, by Amicolola Falls State Park off Route 52, about 60 miles north of gleaming Atlanta. Springer is the first of the Blue Ridge Mountains, a high-rising rain forest that runs clear to Pennsylvania. Tame as it sounds, the Blue Ridge can be a little scary. One hiker in the early 1950s reported being so unnerved one night by a pair of tussling bobcats on Georgia's Hawk Mountain that he climbed to the lookout platform of a 55-foot firetower to sleep, lashing his bedroll to the railing with his shoelaces. Be warned.

After Georgia, the trail weaves randomly along the Tennessee-North Carolina border, by Joyce Kilmer ("Trees") Memorial Forest and over many of the highest peaks of famous Great Smoky National Park, including the towering 6,643-foot Clingman's Dome, the highest point on the whole A.T. Approach it, if you dare, on U.S. 441.

THE SMOKIES

Last year 12 million people visited the half-million-acre Great Smoky National Park, bisected by U.S. 441, on the Tennessee-North Carolina border, making it the most popular national park in the country. The folks are onto something, what with the mist rising daily out of the range's many pools to enshroud the hills.

Leaving the Smokies, the trail passes Tennessee's Nolichucky River, whose banks once harbored Davy Crockett, before climbing sixty-two-hundred-foot Roan High Knob, resplendent with rhododendrons much of the summer. It's just south of the town named Roan Mountain on Tennessee's Route 143. After swinging wide to get around many-fingered Watauga Lake of the Tennessee Valley Authority system, the A.T. skedaddles out of the state.

VIRGINIA'S VERDANT HILLS

Virginia holds more of the trail than any other state, some 465 miles altogether, and its curvaceous green hills intermixed with valley farmland make for splendid, easy walking. In the commonwealth, the A.T. picks up near statelike Mount Rogers by U.S. 58, then proceeds 150 miles through Jefferson National Forest, with its sharp, lichen-encrusted Dragon's Tooth rock formations on Cove Mountain. Reached by Route 311 from Catawba, the high ridge has great views of the valley's sprawling timberland.

After that, the trail parallels the Blue Ridge Parkway for about 70 miles from Roanoke up to Waynesboro. Up here, the rough-necked four-thousand-foot mountains gathered around the Priest (one of the more spectacular cliffs) are particularly stunning, all of them bright with hawthorne berries and tiny wild strawberries. Then comes the song-fabled Shenandoah Valley, where the trail moves to the shoulder of Skyline Drive for 60 miles.

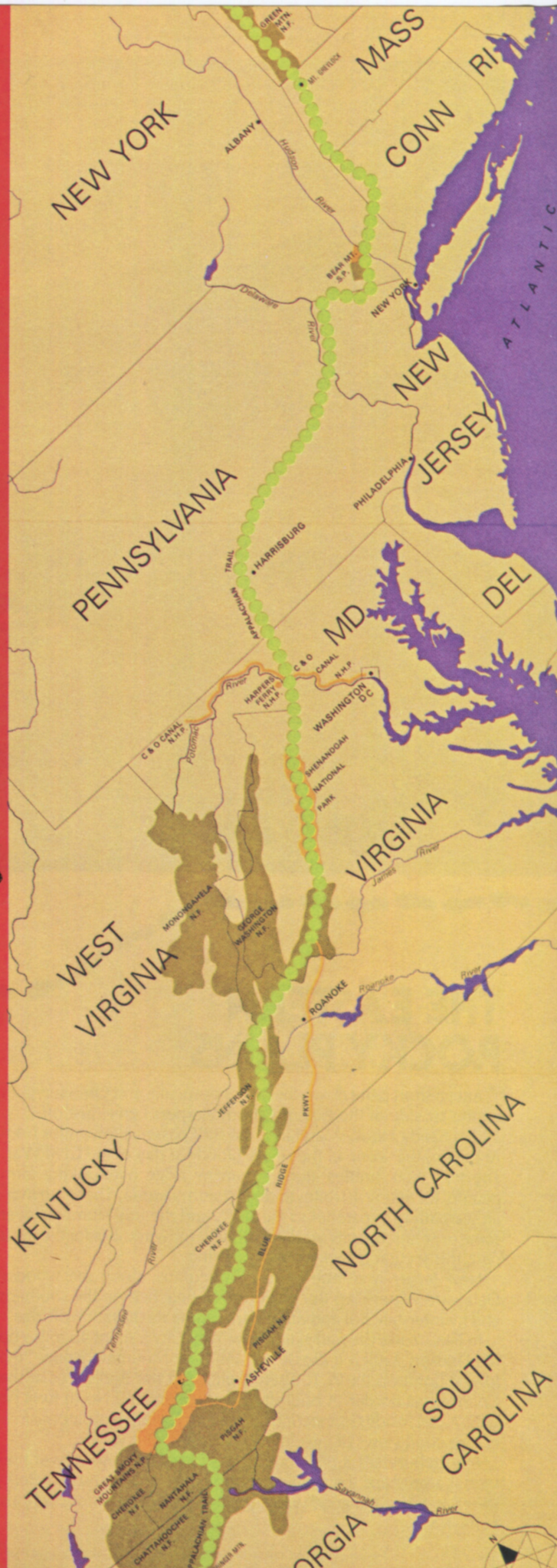
THE SHENANDOAH VALLEY

Shenandoah is thought to be an Indian word meaning "daughter of the stars," an appropriate name for this heavenly stretch of rich farmland through which the Shenandoah River winds before it pours into the Potomac. In the 18th century, early pioneers drove their wagons out of the valley to begin the new nation's great westward expansion. A century later, however, it became a thoroughfare for Rebel troops (led by peppery Stonewall Jackson, among others) surging north to attack the Yankees. Later, as Southern fortunes ebbed, Lee retreated through here after meeting adversity at Gettysburg and Antietam. Park along the Skyline Drive to look over this historic landscape from any one of the many viewpoints along the Appalachian Trail.

The Shenandoah River runs into the Potomac at historic Harpers Ferry, West Virginia (on U.S. 340), also song-fabled, thanks to rabble-rousing abolitionist John Brown. Thomas Jefferson, however, just liked the view in these parts. He called the wide river sliding through the solemn hills "one of the most stupendous scenes in nature."

HARPERS FERRY

Harpers Ferry is now a peaceful little town (population 423) on the Potomac, but back in 1859 it won national attention when dedicated abolitionist John Brown led a dozen cohorts to attack the town's national arsenal. The plan was to distribute the captured guns to the Southern slaves and to start a black revolt. Brown captured the fort, all right, but then got arrested before his rebellion got off the ground. He was hanged at nearby Charles Town. Although the town was sacked repeatedly by retreating armies from both sides of the Civil War, enough of the place still stands—or has been reconstructed—to make a kind of historic Brown-burg. It's worth a visit. The Appalachian Trail Conference, directors of the A.T. and sources of A.T. information, is also located here.



Courtesy National Park Service





THE EASTERN ROCKY PLAINS

After a short jaunt down the old Chesapeake and Ohio towpath on the far side of the Potomac from Harpers Ferry, just off U.S. 340 at Sandy Hook, Maryland, the trail passes a few miles from Antietam, the scene of the single bloodiest day in the Civil War. The trail then ambles along a narrow ridge overlooking farm country for nearly 40 miles to reach Pennsylvania. There, an Indian warpath runs parallel to the A.T., and the trail stumbles over some old charcoal pits used in colonial ironwork. But for the most part, this section is rocky and depressing.

New Jersey is a little better, particularly along the woody Delaware Water Gap Recreation Area (reached on the southern end by Interstate 80) and other parks along the Kittatinny Ridge.

In New York, the trail skirts New York City a scant 40 miles up the Hudson, which it crosses on the Bear Mountain Bridge, the lowest point on the A.T. Then it picks up the Berkshires at the Connecticut border. A brief stretch near Kent and North Kent on U.S. 7, just inside Connecticut along the rippling Housatonic River, has good views of the elm- and maple-laden valley.

Massachusetts's 3,505-foot Mount Greylock (and its war memorial atop) caps the scenic portion of the Massachusetts Berkshires and makes a good warm-up for the tougher climbs waiting to the north.

THE BERKSHIRES

This string of low hills is the background for much of Norman Rockwell's work. Each little town has gleaming white churches, small shops, and wide streets. Stockbridge, where Rockwell lived, is the classic New England town. Lots of literary sorts have set their works here, including Melville, Hawthorne, and Edith Wharton, and this is the place where hellfire-and-brimstone preacher Jonathan Edwards used to torment his flock year-round. In summer, the hills come alive with the sound of music—from Tanglewood, the Boston Symphony Orchestra's summer home in Lenox. (Tickets are available now from the Festival Ticket Office, Symphony Hall, Boston, MA 02115; 617-266-1492.)

The small state parks and reservations to the south (particularly Beartown, between Routes 102 and 23 near Stockbridge) are nice for short hikes and picnics.

BEARTOWN

Among the things to see in this area are the large number of intriguing grottoes and geological formations—including Ice Glen near Stockbridge. Bartholomew's Cobble in Ashley Falls (on Route 7A, just off Route 7), maintained by the Trustees of Public Reservations, has 700 species of plants and 44 different kinds of ferns on its grounds alone.

THE HIGH COUNTRY OF NORTHERN NEW ENGLAND

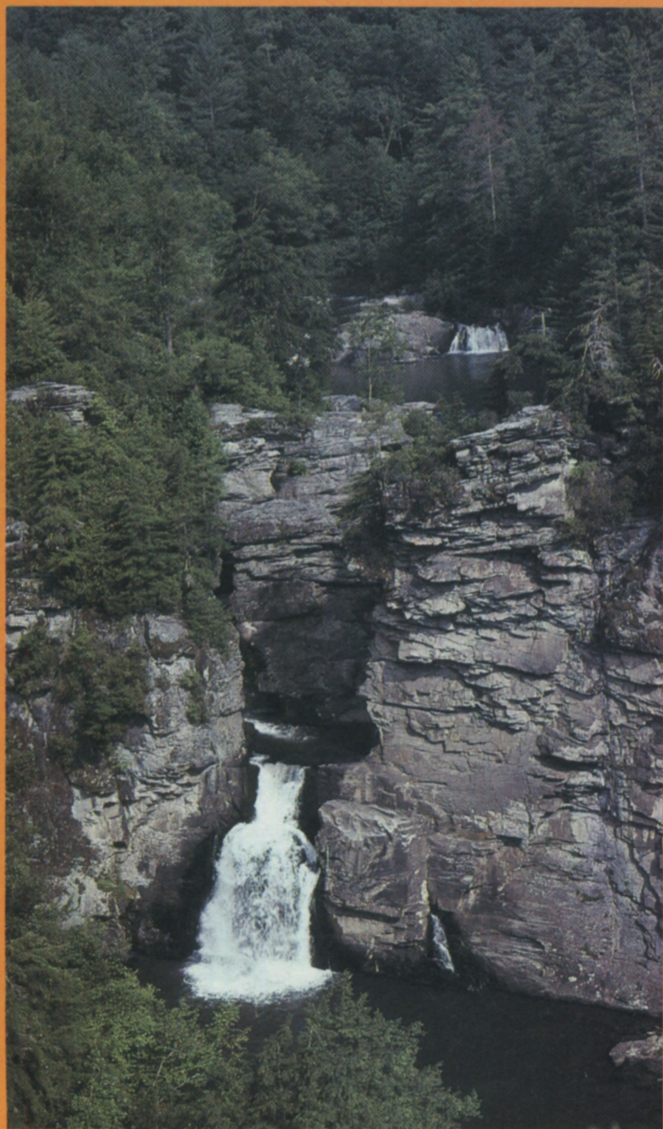
In Vermont, the altitudes last seen in North Carolina return with the string of four-thousand-footers up through the Green Mountains—made famous by Ethan Allen and a host of ski resorts—just east of U.S. 7. The trail section from Killington to Pico Peak, about five miles south of the intersection of Route 100 and U.S. 4, is particularly steep—and dramatic. The trail veers to the right just afterward, leaving the Long Trail to its long haul straight north to the Canadian border, while the A.T. heads through more lush green—virtually a jungle—to New Hampshire.

After a fairly level stretch, the trail crosses the wide Connecticut River to pop into Hanover, home of Dartmouth College. Then it cuts north to pass through the thick of the White Mountains around charming, but often crowded, Franconia Notch before hitting the multi-peaked, craggy Presidential Range. (There's no Mount Reagan yet, but there is, by coincidence, a Carter Dome.)



Jim Amos/Photo Researchers

Burton McNeely/Image Bank



J.H. Robinson/Photo Researchers

FRANCONIA NOTCH AND THE PRESIDENTIAL RANGE

Extending about 50 miles from Kinsman Notch, 5 miles west of North Woodstock on Route 112, through to Gorham on U.S. 2, this portion of the White Mountains has a lot of nature to offer the day tripper. Right by Kinsman, there's a scenic walk through chilly glacial caverns and potholes, one of them 25 feet across and 65 feet deep, on Lost River. On Interstate 93, Franconia itself has the famous Old Man in the Mountain, a 40-foot rock formation, and just off 93 at the southern end of the notch, the 800-foot-long Flume tumbles past Mount Liberty. The most imposing of the mountains in the Presidential Range is Mount Washington to the east—and not just because you can drive up it (or take a cog railway). At 6,288 feet, Washington gives a stunning view of the smaller succeeding presidents, all of them sturdy granite. A warning: the trail passes over most of the 5,000-foot-plus peaks in this section, so it's obviously not for everybody.

Near Gorham, at the crossing of Route 16 and U.S. 2, successful trail followers stagger into the great state of Maine. The A.T. leaves the crowds behind here as it makes its way up through the scrubby, lake-splotched Down East countryside. Just off Route 27 by skiable Saddleback Mountain, twin-peaked Bigelow, poking up from near-flat Carrabasset Valley, is quite a sight. Before turning traitor, Benedict Arnold led his ill-fated march on Quebec past Pierce Pond, which comes next, five miles south of West Forks on U.S. 201.

That's about it for history in these parts, but there are enough moose splashing around at the edge of the pine-fringed lakes to make up for it. Finally, at the end of the Longfellow Mountains, the trail concludes at the top of monstrous Mount Katahdin in Baxter State Park, 22 miles northwest of Millinocket, on a potholed, unnumbered road.