
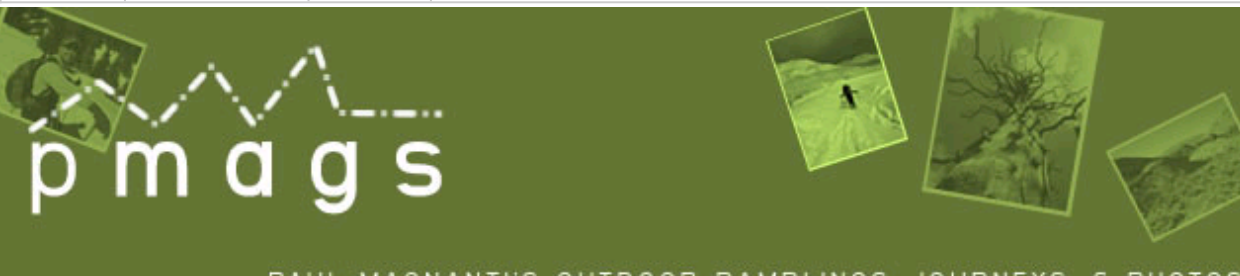



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## A Quicky and Dirty Guide to the Appalachian Trail

Written by Paul "Mags" Magnanti  
Wednesday, 16 September 2009

For a person planning the AT, sometime there is too much info. It is bit like drinking from a fire hose!

This doc will attempt to make planning for the trail a bit less daunting and a little more organized.

Think of this doc as a jumping off point to explore other, more detailed, resources.



**To walk. To see. To see what you see.**  
*--Benton MacKaye on the purpose of the Appalachian Trail.*

The Appalachian Trail is a footpath that winds its way along mountains of the the East Coast. A trail that fires the imagination of many backpackers. Other trails may be more remote or have more of a wilderness feel, but there is something special to the Appalachian Trail. In the long green tunnel are memories to be made, sights to see and experiences to be had. It is a trail with a deep past and a vibrant culture.

Planning for an extended trek on the Appalachian Trail can be easy. There are probably hundreds of books,websites, articles and guides on how to backpack on this trail.

For the same reason, planning a hike on the Appalachian Trail can be intimidating. Esp if a person is new to backpacking and/or long distance hiking, the sheer amount of resources can be overwhelming. Where do you start?!?!?!?

And that's the purpose of this document. A handout-like doc to simplify the planning on hiking this trail . It will not answer **every** question you may have..but it will hopefully point you in the right direction.

The Appalachian Trail is a wonderful place. I can honestly say those five months I spent hiking from Georgia to Maine was perhaps one of the biggest watershed moments in my life.

Perhaps it will be the same for you.

As always, please consult other resources before going on an extended trek in the mountains. The Appalachian Trail may be one of the easier long trails...but it ain't easy. 😊

### **The Appalachian Trail at a glance**

- Administered by the Appalachian Trail Conservancy
- Under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service
- Is approx 2175 miles long
- Southern terminus is at Springer Mtn, GA
- Northern Terminus is at Katahdin in Baxter State Park, ME
- Goes through 14 states, 6 National Parks and 8 National Forests
- Lowest point is 124 ft at Bear Mtn, NY...highest point is 6643' at Clingman's Dome in the Smokeys
- Goes above treeline in Vermont (with a quick side trip), New Hampshire and Maine
- Well marked with a series of white blazes; side trails are marked with blue blazes
- Take most hikers 5-7 months to hike the trail
- **Other facts can be found here**
- Walking all or part of the trail is a wonderful experience you will not forget!

### **Major Concerns of Appalachian Trail Hikers**

Most people hiking the Appalachian Trail are new to long distance hiking. As such, the questions asked by many aspiring AT hikers range from the basics (What tent should I take? What water treatment method should I use?) to the more detailed (What towns are best for resupply?) to the even more philosophical (Is the AT a true wilderness experience?).

This section will attempt to address the range of concerns and direct the aspiring AT hiker to the right resource.

### **Equipment**

Equipment is perhaps the least important part of an AT thru-hike. Equipment of course *is* important, but there are other aspects of backpacking that are more crucial to a good hike. (Mental and physical health, the views, where the best beer may be located.



Having said that, here is a quick and dirty synopsis of basic equipment questions.

**If you are new to backpacking**, you probably don't where to start. *What gear should I even bring? What is really needed to start backpacking?* The first concept to keep in mind is that there is no "best" piece of gear. Rather it is the best gear for your personal style of hiking.

I wrote a **little guide aimed towards people new to backpacking**. Though written for Colorado, the general concepts apply to almost any three-season mountain environment. It covers the basics of shelters, stoves, water treatment, footwear, etc.

Once you have your basic gear together, it is time to backpack! Nothing can teach you the basics of backpacking like backpacking. 😊 Go out there, try your new gear and have fun.

### **What's this lightweight backpacking I've heard about ?**

If you are doing an extended trek in the mountains, or a traditional backpacker who camps more than hikes (with the corresponding gear load), you may want to consider a lighter than normal load. The lighter your base pack weight (all your gear in the pack, minus food, water and fuel), the easier it is to hike. On an extended hike of the Appalachian Trail, you are walking more than camping. You will be carrying your gear all day. As such, you may want to consider taking gear that is light while meeting your own personal comfort and safety levels.

A great book that tells the how and why of lightweight backpacking (rather than the what to take) is **Lighten Up!**. Rather than gear specific, it gives traditional backpackers the understanding and concepts on how to lighten their loads.

There are other resources (many!) on how to lighten up your gear loads, but if you are new to lightweight backpacking, the above resources can get you started.

If you want to delve more into this subject, I have an **article on lightweight backpacking as well**.

### **Logistics**

OK..you have your gear and have an idea of what works for you. Now you want to know specifically how to hike the Appalachian Trail.

### **Guidebooks and Maps**

There are quite a three major guidebooks for hiking the length of the Appalachian Trail. These guides are pretty much functionally the same. Each will tell you what permits you need, how to arrange shuttles, getting to a trail terminus, regulations for specific parks, what towns are near the trail and what services and supplies they provide, etc.

The three major guidebooks for the Appalachian Trail are:

**ALDHA Companion** : This book put out by the Appalachian Long Distance Hikers Assoc has a team of many volunteer field editors who compile and update the information for the Appalachian Trail. There is also a free online edition avail at [http://www.aldha.org/comp\\_pdf.htm](http://www.aldha.org/comp_pdf.htm) The online edition may be better for section hikers as you can print out a section at a time(those doing a *section* of the trail, rather than hiking the whole trail at once). Printing out the whole document may be time consuming and not really that cost effective.

**Appalachian Pages**: A newer guidebook put out by AT Troll of [Whiteblaze.net](http://Whiteblaze.net) fame and Rick Miller (AWOL 2003)

**Thru-Hikers Handbook**: The traditional guidebook for long distance hiking on the AT. Put out by the maintainer of [Trailplace.com](http://Trailplace.com) (Bob McCaw)

*Other sources of info you may find useful are:*

**Appalachian Trail Data Book**: Another great book to buy, esp if you just want the info in quick and dirty form, (you don't need to know where all the AYCE buffets are!), is the Appalachian Trail Data Book. Concise. Light. Inexpensive. Still a good complement to the above guides as well.

**Appalachian Trail Conservancy Guidebooks**: The ATC puts out a set of 11 guides for the trail. More for background, history and cultural info than logistics. Best for post-trail recollection. **Note**: This link also includes the maps in addition to the guidebooks. ATC members get a STEEP discount on the set (\$224 vs \$280).

**Appalachian Trail map pack**: While it has been argued you don't absolutely need maps to hike the well marked Appalachian Trail, I still like having maps so I can eyeball what is up ahead and know where I am. YMMV. As before, ATC members get great discount (\$165 vs \$207). In the past, the ATC has done a map pack sale just prior to thru-hiker season.

## Resupply

Resupply is very easy on the Appalachian Trail. Towns/resupply areas are generally not very far from the trail (and sometimes just on it), usually have good sized grocery stores, other facilities and generally makes hiking the Appalachian Trail easy on a logistic level. Generally speaking, most hikers will resupply every 3-5 days on the Appalachian Trail.

There are three major ways of resupplying on the AT (and long trails in general):

### *Maildrops:*

Maildrops is simply mailing a pre-made food parcel to a post office, hostel or other area in town on the trail. The advantage of this method is that the supplies are waiting in a package for you.

A hiker will pick up their package, dump the food in their pack and go. The disadvantage of this method is that you are dependent on Post Office hours (if not sending to a hostel), have to pay for shipping and need a person on the home front to send out packages for you. Unless you have special dietary needs or on a time crunch, there is no real reason to use maildrops on a regular basis. (The exception is a bounce box; see below).

As mentioned, most towns on the AT have good sized grocery stores and other resupply areas.

If you use a maildrop, be sure to mail out as the example below shows:

### **Joe Hiker**

**c/o General Delivery  
Some Town, TN 55555  
Please hold for AT hiker, ETA 7/23/09**

The post office will generally hold your package for up to two weeks. Be sure to have an ID ready when you pick up your package. The guidebooks mentioned above will have the specific information for where to mail packages. If possible, you may want to mail a package directly to a hostel or business rather than the post office. The hours will be longer/more flexible.

### *Buy as you go:*

With good sized grocery stores in many of the towns near the trail, it is very easy to resupply as you go. Unless a hiker is in a time crunch or has dietary restrictions, this method works best for most thru-hikers.

### *Hybrid Approach:*

More common on Western hiking trails, this method works well if you know there is going to be an area with hard or expensive resupply (e.g. Fontana Dam or Monson). Simply buy supplies in a larger town and mail your package ahead. Can be a nice compromise between buying as you go and having to eek out supplies in smaller villages and stops.

Whichever method you use, I strongly suggest reading "**Baltimore Jack**" **Tarlin's resupply article** found on Whiteblaze. It is an excellent overview of what services are available and where you may want to do a maildrop vs buying as you go. Jack has thru-hiked the AT many, many, many times and knows the AT from a backpackers standpoint like few others. Good info! (Note: This article was written in 2007. While it is mainly up-to-date, always check the guidebooks for the most current info).

**Bounce Box:** Drift (or Bounce) Boxes come in handy for the self-supported AT backpacker. If you do not do mail drops from home, the drift box is valuable for containing memory cards, batteries, map sections and other items you use but not on a regular basis. Simply mail it ahead, take out what you need when you get to a town and then mail it up the trail again. A sturdy cardboard box may work (I used a bright orange Home Depot bucket on the CDT. No trouble finding the bucket whenever I went to the town.



## Section Hiking vs. Thru-Hiking

Not everyone can take 5-7 months off to backpack. Family obligations, finances and other factors make walking the entire length of the trail in one shot impossible. Many people find section hiking to be a great way to experience a long hike of the AT without disrupting their lives.

The advantages of a section hike (besides being less disruptive) is that you can see the trail in prime condition vs the varied weather often entailed in a thru-hike. See New England at peak foliage season. Hike the southern Appalachians when spring wildflowers are blooming, etc.

Whether completing the AT as a single thru-hike or over a few years in sections, it is a great accomplishment full of many memories.

## Northbound vs. Southbound vs. Flipping

Northbound means you "Walk with Spring" and follow the natural progression of the weather as you head north. A hiker will typically end in Maine at the cusp (of even past) Fall. It is the most popular way to hike and means, esp at the start of the trail, the services and towns will be busy. I will say that Katahdin is perhaps the most dramatic finish of any of the long trails. Typical start is anywhere from mid-late Feb to mid-April.

Going Southbound means less people. You are also walking into less daylight. For the hiker who wants (potentially) an experience with less people, this is a great way to go. This option also works well for many people who are newly graduated from college. Beware of the notorious Maine black flies at the start! Depending on the snow and mud conditions of Katahdin and

Maine in general, a typical southbound start is about late June per the Maine Appalachian Trail Club/ATC. Many start earlier. Please see the ATC website resources (below) and [www.baxterstateparkauthority.com](http://www.baxterstateparkauthority.com) for more details.

A final option is "flip-flopping". For those who want a unique hike (or to avoid colder weather and/or crowds) flip-flopping is a way to do the trail that while not logistically convenient, may be better timing wise. One popular variation is to start at Springer Mtn, hike to Harpers Ferry, WV and then flip up to Katahdin and hike south to finish the trail at Harpers Ferry. **There are many variations on this possibility.**

### **Internet access and Cell Phone coverage**

A sign of the times, but more and more people are asking about the above for their hike on the Appalachian Trail. But, that's another discussion that (no surprise), **I have some opinions about.**



In any case, Internet access is going to be available in most towns along the trail. Some hostels provide this service and most town libraries. WiFi is also increasingly available in many towns for those who have Blackberries, I-Phones or similar. Please see the previously mentioned guidebooks for more info.

As for cell phones, coverage is going to be spotty in the valleys and will probably be fine on the ridges and in most towns. Northern New England will probably have spotty coverage overall.

If you take a cell phone, please be courteous of your fellow hiker. A good rule of thumb is to use the phone like you are going to the bathroom: In private and away from where people can see you. Stepping off the trail 10ft will go a long ways to making everyone happier. 😊

**REMEMBER A CELL PHONE IS NOT A SUBSTITUTE FOR GEAR, EXPERIENCE AND KNOWLEDGE. DO NOT DEPEND ON A CELL PHONE FOR SAFETY. THINK OF IT AS AN ADDITIONAL TOOL AND NOT THE ONLY ONE.**

### **Shelters (Lean-tos)**

There are many shelters on the AT. They are generally spaced in 8-10 mile intervals.

While they can be handy on a cold, rainy, night they can often be full. They are first come, first served. Other than the Smokeys, there are no spots reserved for thru-hikers. Be prepared to tent (or tarp) it. Not taking your own shelter is irresponsible. Besides, do you really want to camp in a shelter with 16+ people on a rainy night? 😊

### **Camping along the trail**

There are often spots for camping near the shelters (but not always). In many places along the trail, there are great flat spots to get away from the crowded shelters and offer great views in addition to solitude.

In some places such as New Hampshire and Vermont, fragile and/or high use areas are pay sites. Areas near the sites may have restricted camping.

### **Dogs**

The AT, more so than the other trails, is great terrain for dogs. But dogs require special consideration. **The Appalachian Trail Conservancy has a great page on issues concerning dogs on the trail.** As with all things pertaining to the trail, please be courteous of your fellow hikers. Many dog owners find using a tent, rather than a shelter, helps eliminate many of the conflicts found on the trails with dogs and trail users.

### **Permits**

Only two places on the trail require a permit: Shenandoah and Great Smoky Mountains National Parks. The permits are free and can be obtained at kiosks near the park entrances.

### **The Head Stuff**

A hike of any long trail is more mental than physical. The challenges, the thoughts, and even the culture of hiking a long trail are more than just what equipment to bring and what books are needed. It is about the experience and perhaps some thoughts on the trail. I've touched upon some of the topics that often crop up in long distance hiking circles.

### **Training for a hike**

As mentioned, a long hike is more mental than physical. However, if you are in good health to being with, you may find that the initial part of the hike is easier. I never did understand the school of thought that you can get in shape on the trail. Why not be in shape in the first place?

Besides making your initial hiking easier, it is necessary for good health off trail, too. Besides, TV sucks...get out there and do something fun. 😊

**This article may help.**

### **Purity on the trail**

Hiking the trail pure is walking every white blaze on the Appalachian Trail. More common to Eastern hiking than Western hiking

(where trails are often viewed as a corridor). Some will argue that unless you walk the designated path, than you really haven't walked the trail. Others hold to the corridor approach. (Damn Western hikers! 🤔).

I won't get into that silly argument.

I'll just say when you complete the trail and **apply for your 2000 Miler Patch (if you choose)**, just be honest about what you've done. I suspect, unless you opted to drive around and not walk, you'll receive a totchke for your wall. 😊

### Etiquette

Remember, hiking the AT is a privilege and not a right. Always say "Please" and "Thank you", don't act like you are entitled to anything because you are long distance hiker, and respect not only your fellow hikers but also the people in the towns you are entering. Remember, your actions can impact the hikers coming after you.

ALDHA has an excellent guidelines at the "**Endangered Services Campaign**" site.

### What is a NoBo? A PUD? AYCE? Whaaaa??!?!?

Like every sub-culture, the AT culture has its own lingo, history and quirks. **This little guide** may help in understanding some of the nomenclature of trail talk. Many of the AT terms have made their way over to other trails. (Damn Eastern hikers! 😊)

### Is the AT really a wilderness experience?

The AT, except for maybe a few isolated parts in New England (and perhaps even smaller parts of the southern Appalachians), is not really a wilderness experience. The corridor is narrow and is often well used. It is, however, a *wildness* experience. A refuge where hikers can experience if not wilderness, than at least a wild, beautiful and inspiring area. Being on Franconia Ridge on a gorgeous crisp day? Seeing the first wildflowers of Spring? Hearing the loons on a quiet lake in Maine? The AT may not be wilderness, but it has wildness in spades.

### Interesting discussion. More thoughts about this "head stuff"?

The Owens have written what I consider to be the best document on the more philosophical points of long distance hiking. Gear, clothing, books...easy stuff. Head stuff? Not so much. **Read the Thru-Hiker Papers** for a great overview on not just long hikes on the AT..but any trail.

### I've hiked the AT. Now what?

Congrats!

Most people who've hiked the AT fall in one of two camps:

- People who are glad they did it. It is an experience they will always look on fondly, but will move on to other things. Long distance hiking is not a lifestyle for them
- Then there are those who "*have the curse of gypsy blood*" and pine for another long hike. Perhaps you'll do the Pacific Crest Trail? Walk the Grand Canyon? Bike across America? Or other adventures?

If you fall into the second category..you are ruined (in a good way). After about 10k or so long trail miles, I still don't have an answer. **I do have many questions, though.** 😊

### Other Resources

There are many resources for hiking the Appalachian Trail. Countless books, web sites, movies, etc. Below are some resources I have found useful:

#### Internet:

**Appalachian Trail Conservatory:** The first place to stop for info on the AT. They have an excellent page to answer all kinds of questions (transit? Permits? fees?) about the AT.

**Appalachian Trail Wiki Page:** Wikipedia has a good overview of the AT

**Whiteblaze.net:** This popular AT website has much info (and, uh, spirited discussion at times) on the Appalachian Trail and hiking in general. Their **articles** section is a good starting point before wading into the forums with more specific question. The **SEARCH box** is also useful for finding out a question that may have been answered as well.

**Trailforums.com** A website that has some fairly active hiking forums

**Trailplace.com** A more moderated Appalachian Trail site that may appeal to those who like strict "question and answer" type feedback

**AT-L** : Does not get as much use as the above, but can be good if you want your question answered in a less overwhelming environment

**Postholer.com** Has forums and journals about the Appalachian Trail

**Trailjournals.com** Has MANY journals from current and previous Appalachian Trail hikers

**My Own Journal:** The writings of a younger me. More hair, a stronger Rhody accent and a heavier pack. My life was changed from this hike!

**Books:**

While surfing the web can be informative and fun, nothing like a book for inspiring you to get on the trail. Here are some books I've read and enjoyed.

**On The Beaten Path:** Perhaps my favorite book on hiking the Appalachian Trail. Treating the AT what it is like for many of us..a pilgrimage in the mountains.

**Walking With Spring:** An account of the first thru-hike of the AT by Earl Shaffer in 1948. Simple and compelling.

**The Appalachian Trail: Calling Me Back to the Hills:** An excellent photography book on the AT by Bart Smith. The text is from Earl Shaffer on his 1998 thru-hike.

**The Appalachian Trail Reader:** My copy of this book is very dog eared. This book collects writings on geology, history and the culture surrounding the AT. It also features musings on the the trail and the Appalachians in general from the raw, but powerful voices, of everyday hikers to the eloquent musings of Thoreau and Wendell Berry. Highly recommended.

**Walkin' On The Happy Side of Misery:** A humorous account of an actual thru-hike on the AT

**A Walk in the Woods:** aka "That Book!". Not the best book about the AT...but an excellent book about stumbling through the woods. Gave me a few laughs and makes a great "airport" book.

**A Walk for Sunshine:** If you are thinking of hiking for charity, this account by Jeff Alt may be useful. Warning: I'm in this book.



**Videos**

...and sometimes you just want to see and hear the Appalachian Trail

**Southbounders:** A fictional account of southbounding on the Appalachian Trail

**Trek:** Well regarded documentary on a thru-hike of the AT

**Appalachian Impressions:** A documentary not just about the AT hiking culture, but also the land and history around the AT. This documentary was featured on PBS.

Also check out **Books for Hikers**. It has many, many, many, many books, videos, etc listed about the Appalachian Trail. It has resources for other trails as well.

**Best of luck on your Appalachian Trail journey! If you have any additional questions, please give me a shout!**

**Happy Trails!**

**--Paul Mags**

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