



Day 2 - May 1, 2009

My Journey is off to an excellent start. Yesterday a friend of a friend picked me up at the airport and drove me to Amicalola Falls State Park, where I officially signed in as a thru-hiker. Then I hiked the 8.5 miles to Springer Mountain, where the trail officially starts. A nice caretaker with a delightful Maine accent took my name and said I was the 820th thru-hiker he'd talked to this season - 100 more than last year, many of them hiking because they lost their jobs. I made an excellent dinner at the shelter - pasta, carrots, broccoli, and onion with green curry paste + peanut butter. I brought way too much food, half the weight in my 42 lb pack is food! But I find I can still carry it fairly easily + my legs are strong. I'm in better shape than any of the other hikers I've met so far. There are great people out here - a sweet couple from Quebec, a talkative young musician from S. Florida, an old man from W. Virginia... It is warm, the trees are just leafing out. All this still feels like a dream.

- Mary

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Day 5 - May 4, 2007 - Deep Gap Shelter

I am loving this experience more and more each day. The Georgia mountains are all fog, mist, and rain. I am in far better shape than I anticipated - I've been on the trail less than a week and today I did my first 20-mile day - 23 miles, actually! I hiked it with my new friends Aaron and Anthony, and it was good to have people along to keep me motivated. Anthony and I have pinky-sworn that we will go to Trail Days together (a yearly celebration in Damascus, VA), so now we have to average 18 mi/day to get through the smoky mountains in time to hitch a ride there.

Tomorrow we go into town to do laundry and buy a little food - I still have enough left over to make it to the next town!

Love this trail, love these people, Love all of you,

Mary

Day 7 - May 6, 2009 - Carter Gap Shelter, N.C.

It has rained every day here in the south. Today there were thunderstorms all morning.

I would have made my campers do lightning drill all morning if I were leading a trip, but since it was just me... I hiked through it. It was mostly sidehill trails anyway, not peaks, and the lightning strikes never got closer than 2 miles away.

We have trail names now - I am Penny Whistle, due to my daily jigs + waltzes, and Anthony is Union Break due to his by-the-clock break schedule. Aaron has out-hiked us so we probably won't see him again.

Today we crossed into North Carolina, our first state line! Tomorrow we'll buy 4 days of food to get us to the edge of Great Smokey Mtn National Park. It's nice to be hiking with somebody - it helps buoy my spirits amidst all this rain.

☺ Penny Whistle

Day 11 - May 10, 2009 - Brown Fork Shelter, N.C.

My 27th Birthday! And I got the best present possible: a full day of hiking with NO RAIN! We got some showers at 7pm, but by then I was snug in a dry shelter. I had dry socks all day! That hasn't happened since my first day on the trail.

Yesterday Union Break and I were so demoralized by the rain that we shelled out \$18.50 each for warm, dry bunks at the Nantahala outdoor center. Hot showers! Laundry! A Kitchen! I cooked up about $\frac{1}{2}$ pound of brussel sprouts I was sick of carrying ("You are really insane about your food" Union break said the first time he saw me cooking with fresh veggies) along with some dry soup mix and spent hours trying to eat it all. I dried out my gear on the cabin porch, then went out for dinner with 6 other thru-hikers (Aaron is hiking with us again, along with some other new friends). A friend told me that only 25% of thru-hikers are women, but in my experience it's more like 5%. I've only met two other solo women,

plus a smattering of women doing shorter hikes with ^② their partners or fathers or uncles. Maybe all the women start earlier - April 30th is a pretty late start date, only for those who are either very confident about hiking high-mileage days or are very disorganized. But the silver lining is that I got a bunk room all to myself in the women's dorm 😊 With no chorus of men snoring, I slept like a baby.

Today we had some steep climbs, but the views were great. Tomorrow we will stay at Fontana Dam Shelter, only a half mile from the southern border of Great Smokey Mountain National Park. From there Union Break + I hope to fulfill our pinky promise by catching a ride to Trail Days with some legendary AT folks from Gatlinburg, TN, but if that doesn't work out we may have to forfeit on our promise. Wish us luck!

Love from the trail,
Penny Whistle

Day 19, May 18th, Asheville, NC

I'm taking two days off the trail to visit my college friend Jem in Asheville, NC. I've been here before, but experiencing the city from the point of view of a resident rather than just as a tourist is far more fun. My legs are thanking me for taking a little time off from climbing mountains. I hiked 30 miles the day before I arrive here, my longest day yet! Jem is also a wonderful cook and we have been eating lots of delightful fresh vegetables.

Me and my friends made it through Great Smokey Mountain National Park without getting our food stolen by black bears -- although I did see five bears my first day in the park, two sets of mamas with cubs! The first mother bear was very close to the trail and I got a great picture. I was cautious around her, but she didn't give a hoot that I was there and just went around her business, munching on spring greens. Union Break and I hiked most of the Smokies with our speedy friend Aaron (now named Plunder, which is perfect because he's very pirate-like). We tried to get a ride to Trail Days out of Gatlinburg, TN, but our potential ride evaporated, so we shrugged our shoulders, un-swore our pinky promise (so we wouldn't have to cut off our pinkies), and continued North. Our hiking partnership is a bit looser now and we will not always camp together, but I'm sure we'll see each other up the trail. Plunder has pulled ahead of us again as well.

Spending time with my friend Jem made me realize that it might be useful to describe the real basics of the Appalachian Trail for those who know little about it:

Appalachian Trail 101:

The AT runs 2175 miles, from Georgia to Maine. About 1000 people attempt a thruhike every year, but only 20% of those will actually finish the trail before winter. Some people hike the whole trail in small chunks over the course of several years, and they are called section hikers. Lots of dayhikers, weekend backpackers, boy scouts, etc. use the trail as well. There is a strong solidarity between thruhikers -- no matter who a person is in their outside life, on the trail we all have to climb the same mountains, weather the same storms, and cultivate the kind of inner motivation that will carry one 2175 miles. The trail is our great equalizer.

I've been struck by what a social experience the AT is. Most people off the trail imagine it as a grand wilderness adventure steeped in solitude. Hardly! Every 10 miles (on average) there is a trail shelter: a wood or stone three-sided structure with sleeping space, a water source nearby, and often a privy, bear cables, tables for cooking, a fire pit, etc. Hikers congregate at these shelters every night -- I've yet to spend a night in a shelter alone. Most carry tarps or tents just in case, but in a rainstorm a shelter is much nicer. Also, every shelter has a register -- a simple notebook that those who pass by write in. Entries vary from "May 16th -- Bob was here" to long philosophical musing about the trail. Some people draw comics and pictures. People sign with their Trail Name if they have one, and leave notes to hikers that are behind them. You can read the dates on the entries and calculate how many days another thruhiker is ahead of you. Plunder and I like to pick a hiker and chase them until we catch up -- "Oh, so YOU'RE OneStep! I've been reading your entries!" The registers are also the first reference for local law enforcement if a hiker goes missing.

Some thruhikers pick their own trail names before they leave, while others wait to be named on the trail. Some hikers acquire multiple trail names over the course of their hike.

Every few weeks most hikers take a "zero day", a day that they hike zero miles, or at least a "nero day" (near-zero day). This helps with blisters, aches and pains, and morale. If you don't want to take a zero day in the woods, there are many hiker hostels right on the trail. These simple establishments are a lot of fun and fairly cheap -- they have comfortable bunkbeds (often just one large room for everybody), yummy foods (pizza delivery, etc), hot showers and laundry, and such civilized distractions as movies, board games, and internet. The owners are often former thruhikers, and the staff are always really nice.

Every few days the thruhiker hitchhikes into town to resupply. Carrying more than four days of food is not popular (too heavy!), but the frequent road crossings offer easy access to towns every few days. Resupply places vary from tiny general stores to large supermarkets to local outfitters with lots of gear and fancy dehydrated meals. Hitchhiking the 10-15 miles into town is easy, since the locals know (and generally trust) hikers, and some of them are hikers themselves who moved there to be close to the trail. Sometimes people do a u-turn from the other direction just to give us a ride. I hadn't hitched alone until I came to Asheville, and a very nice older man gave me a ride just because he felt bad for me standing out in the rain -- he hadn't even been headed there!

That is part of "Trail Magic." Most frequently, trail magic consists of local people leaving a cooler of soda or a box of snickers bars out on the trail for passing hikers. Some trail associations have cook-offs at the trailhead, feeding hungry hikers free hot dogs and burgers. But more broadly, trail magic is all the serendipitous support that hikers receive during their hike. Hikers are superstitious about trail magic. Sometimes you have to build up your good karma for it to happen. For example, I carried out 5 pounds of trash that had been left at a shelter by other backpackers, and then got a quick ride in a luxury car at a road that is relatively hard to hitch on. People become generous to each other out here, knowing that all they give will come back to them in some form down the trail. It's an economy of generosity that's having a big impact on me. How could we make the whole world function like this?

The entire trail is marked by rectangular white blazes. The markings and signage are so clear that most thruhikers don't carry maps at all, only small "data books" that list distances, elevations, and brief information on hiker services and resupply points in nearby towns. All side trails are marked in a different color, almost always blue. A person who cuts out a section of the AT by hiking a shorter blue-blazed route is called a blue-blazer. Those who skip a section entirely by hitchhiking past a section of trail are ridiculed as "yellow-blazers" after the broken yellow line that divides the lanes on the road. "Purists" insist on hiking every single foot of the Appalachian Trail itself, continuously and in one season. Many motivated thruhikers aspire to one day achieve the "Triple Crown," which means to thru-hike the AT, the PCT (Pacific Crest Trail, from Mexico to Canada through CA, OR, and WA), and the CDT (Mex to Can through the Rockies, by far the most remote and least hiked of the three). I wouldn't mind getting my Triple Crown someday... I've already been scheming about how to save enough money to do the PCT in a few years!

A day in the life of a thruhiker:

*Get up whenever you want, have breakfast, fill & purify water.

*Hike all morning, take a few snack breaks, stop someplace pretty for lunch (or in a shelter if its raining). Ponder the meaning of life.

*Hike all afternoon, refilling water at streams that cross the trail, eating more high-calorie snacks. Browse through the registers at each shelter you pass, looking for notes from friends. Take pictures of views and wildflowers.

*Arrive at the a shelter, make dinner on your camp stove. Set up your sleeping mat and sleeping bag, hang your food from a high branch or bear cable system. Chat with other hikers, write in the register, write in your journal, fuss with your gear. Glance at your data book to make plans for tomorrow's hike, maybe make a shopping list if you're planning to resupply.

*Sleep. The shelter platform is hard, others are snoring all around, branches crack outside in the woods -- but you're oblivious. Sweet slumber.

Love to all,
Penny Whistle

Day 22, ~~May~~ May 22, 2009

Uncle Johnny's Hastel, Erwin, Tennessee

It's awesome to be back on the trail after my lovely visit with Jen in Asheville! Jen's Delightful friend Heather gave me a ride back to the trailhead, and I started up the trail with an over-heavy pack brimming with delicious healthfood from Asheville. I hiked until the sun went down, then laid my bedding on the ground right between two blooming Mountain Laurel Bushes. I fell asleep looking at the stars that twinkled down at me between the tree branches.

The next day I ran myself ragged trying to catch up with my friends. Is it my imagination, or are the miles longer north of Hot Springs? Lots of steep ups + downs. By the end of the day I was afraid I'd started to hallucinate. I wasn't sure if I'd missed a shelter... but no, the Jerry Cabin Shelter was right where it should have been, it just took me longer to get there. I blame all that heavy health food for making 23 miles feel like 30... And when

I finally got there, the shelter register greeted ② me with a jaunty note from Union Break saying he was headed on to the next shelter. So I was still more than a day behind him, and he was hiking 18 mile days! Leading me on a merry chase indeed - this might take longer than planned!

Next morning I was on the trail before 7am, marching North. The first 15 miles kicked my butt - lots of uphill. I was dreading the final climb of the day, up Big Bald, which is over 5,100 feet tall. I could see it in the distance, towering above everything else... but it turned out the trail up the side was so well graded and so pretty that I was at the top before I knew it. What a view - 360°! I was filled with awe at the sight of the rolling green mountains spread out all around me. Four ravens cavorted in the blustery winds over the grassy summit. The trees surrounding the bald were still red with the blush of springtime. It is hard to describe the effect that place had on me. All exhaustion

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swept away in the wind, and the empty place it left was filled with pure inspiration. This is why I came here. Who cares if I ever catch up with my friends? Big Bald is all I need.

I made supper at the top and ate my trail burrito while gazing at that amazing view. Then, feeling fresh and light-footed in the cold evening wind, I started my hike down the mountain, glancing over my shoulder all the way at an incredible sunset. When it was full dark I bedded down on some soft oak leaves and watched the stars again. 26 miles behind me and I felt wonderful. When I woke I could see the red blush of dawn on the Eastern Horizon.

I caught up with Union Break in Erwin - he'd been forced to take a day off to wait for a package. I resupplied in town and had a fine lunch: a whole pint of ice cream, a whole package of corn chips, and a half gallon of orange juice! I've been hanging out on the hostel porch, listening to folks play John Denver and Bob Dylan on the guitar, but I'll head on up the trail soon, to make a few more miles before dark. Love to all,
senny whistle

Day 27, May 27, 2009 - "The Place" Hostel, Damascus, VA

I must be brief, it is 11pm - I decided to do Erwin, TN to Damascus, VA in 5 days, which is a little over 125 miles - 25mi/day! My friends all said, "You're crazy, have fun." So I hiked like mad, covered a lot of ground, really started to miss my old friends, and had decided to slow down + wait for them to catch up.

But then, when I got into Damascus (just this afternoon) I heard that the girl ahead of me that signs her name as "penny" says her name is penny whistle and plays that instrument on the trail just like I do! What?? She can't have my name! Someone at the hostel suggested I catch up to her and we have a duel to see who can play the penny whistle better. The loser has to pick a new name! This scheme appeals to my medieval sense of justice, so I'm off early tomorrow to catch up with her + declare the challenge! Wish me luck. - Penny Whistle