

## Out for a walk on the Appalachian Trail

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On the morning of Aug. 26, Marc Sanson of Springfield updated the status on his Facebook page:

“Got up at 4 a.m. yesterday to climb Mt. Katahdin. Weather was perfect. My feet are sore and blistered, my palms are torn to shreds, and my back, shoulders and legs are screaming in pain. Took 6 hour(s) to summit, and another 5 to descend — but we made it! Possibly the greatest day of my life.”

About five months before that post, Sanson, 42, had departed on foot from Springer Mountain in Georgia. Accompanied by his friend Liz Moran and his trusty dog, Einstein, the Belleville native was setting out on a dream: to hike the Appalachian Trail across 14 states to the top of Mount Katahdin in Maine.

The dream took hold a few years back, when Sanson visited Shenandoah National Park while at a conference in Washington, D.C. He met a woman who was three months into her journey across the trail.

Sanson became intrigued with the idea and began researching the trip, including reading the journals of “through-hikers,” the term given to those who attempt to hike the entire trail.

“I was hooked,” Sanson said of the tales he read. “The prospect of leaving civilization for months on end, living in the woods, and living on nothing but what I could carry on my back stayed with me.”

### **‘Real will power’**

Although he and Moran, of Chicago, committed to the adventure on New Year’s Day in 2008, they eventually decided it would take at least a year to fully plan and prepare.

One of the biggest concerns was what to pack. Along the trail, there is usually somewhere to replenish supplies about every four to five days. Balancing the need to include all of the necessary provisions without excessively weighing down a backpack is an art among through-hikers.

“We learned the concepts and uses of multi-purpose gear, most notably duct tape, and the importance of counting every ounce,” he said.

Sanson went on a few short hikes to prepare for the trip, but building up endurance to tackle the Appalachian’s mountainous terrain isn’t easy to do in the flat plains of the Midwest. He discovered, however, that preparing for a five-month hike is much different from training to run a marathon.

“I realized pretty early on that anybody can do it if they’re in halfway decent shape. It’s more mental determination than anything physical, because the trail’s going to get you in shape if you stay out there long enough.”

Sanson is single with no children or mortgage, which made departing for a five-month excursion much easier. He saved around \$5,000, the amount he would need during the trip plus a bit extra to tide him over upon his return. Sanson gave notice and resigned from his job as an educational consultant for a firm that provides technology training courses.

“Fortunately, I had understanding employers who offered to make my position available upon returning,” he said.

Sanson departed from Springer Mountain on the last day of March. In the early going, he covered about six miles per day. But the trail eventually whipped him into shape to the point where he could go upward of 15 miles a day.

Each day’s trip was planned so it would end at one of the shelters set up along the trail. However, circumstances sometimes interfered.

“The main thing we learned was to always keep a couple of extra miles in our shoes at the end of the day, because you never knew when a shelter might be full, when a spring might be dried up or when a pesky bear was lurking around,” he said.

An unusually wet spring and summer meant hiking in the rain about five out of every seven days during the first half of the trip. The mountains took their toll as well, and at some points Sanson was only able to walk about 30 yards at a time before stopping to ease the pain in his legs. Yet the biggest challenge was also one of the most unexpected.

“The single biggest factor next to injuries that knocks most people off the trail is the sheer monotony that sets in once the leaves appear on the trees.”

Walking through what he described as a “green tunnel” for days on end — and stuck in the same routine of hiking, eating and camping — created the impression that he was living the same day over and over again.

“This is where real willpower and determination is required. Especially when you remember you don’t have to be out there doing any of this,” he said.

### **The kindness of strangers**

Sanson’s resolve was almost depleted near Harper’s Ferry, W.Va., where he encountered the “roller coaster” — 13 miles of climbs and descents.

“It’s just up and down and up and down,” he said. “We just walked through 14 straight days of rain and pretty much decided after that that we were going to quit.”

At the breaking point, Sanson met some other through-hikers, including a motivational speaker who had hiked the trail previously. They convinced Sanson and Moran to trek on, although with a change in strategy.

While Sanson set out with a 2,160-miles-or-bust attitude, he realized that he could meet this challenge on his own terms. Due to some time constraints, on the second half of the hike he began targeting sections in each

state he wanted to hit, then commuted or hitched rides past other stretches. In all, he hiked about 1,400 miles and the natural beauty eventually overwhelmed him.

“The Smokies were just incredible. The White Mountains were something that I’ve never seen before. And the whole state of Maine is incredibly beautiful.”

While escaping civilization was a motivating factor in his journey — and despite spending most days hiking in quiet contemplation, even when with a group — Sanson returned with a greater appreciation for his fellow humans.

“When I went out there, I thought it would be about nature and about hiking and exploring the mountains, all those great things. It turned out that it was more about the people. The trail is really this 2,200-mile-long community stretched out,” he said.

Hikers will travel together in groups, sometimes for a few miles, sometimes for a few days. Strangers will become fast friends, then part ways and never see each other again. Others meet up again periodically along the way as their daily treks overlap.

Despite the hikers’ diversity in backgrounds and nationalities, the trail provides a common bond over which instant friendships can develop.

And it’s people, not nature, who are responsible for what Sanson called the most amazing experience of all: trail magic.

Trail magic is the term hikers use for the little acts of kindness bestowed upon them along the way.

Some are random acts, such as when a stranger offers to buy dinner or a ride into town to purchase supplies. Other acts are well-planned. Sanson said some people camp near the trail and cook meals for anyone who happens by.

“On Easter morning, we descended into a gap where a group was cooking six-egg omelets, giving out free massages by a certified therapist and packing up elaborate sack lunches to send off with the hikers as they left. That’s not something you come across in normal, everyday life,” he said.

After spending five months on the trail and completing his journey, everyday life isn’t likely to be the same for Sanson anymore.

He doesn’t plan to return to his old job. He had been thinking of moving to South America to try his hand at organic farming.

The mountains, however, are still calling.

“There are a lot of people living and working along the Appalachian Trail that have a very rewarding life,” he wrote in an e-mail. “It has inspired me to reevaluate what I want out of life and what I love to do, and motivated me to seek out those opportunities. What those are, I don’t know right now. But I think seeking the answer to those questions will be the start of my next great adventure.”

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