

You might think that going on a mighty adventure isn't something you'd do on a whim. Perhaps, you've been considering giving yourself a new challenge for years, read in the news about heroic adventures, or maybe a friend of yours did something related once and you want to surpass him.

But none of these apply to Bill Bryson. One day, immediately after relocating to New Hampshire, he understood he was a distance away from one of the greatest walking paths in the world. Bryson proclaimed to all and sundry that he was going to go through the path and he wanted someone to walk with him. To his surprise, an old school friend of his called Stephen Katz answered the call.

Join Bryson on this unanticipated adventure along the Appalachian trail as he finds not only the beauty, nature, wildlife, culture, and ecology of America, and also some less attractive parts of the trip. Traveling regularly has its good and bad, however, you should know that all it needs is just a little will and effort and then you can shortly be on the trip of your life.

## The beautiful and challenging Appalachian Trail was created by the twentieth-century volunteers.

You don't go out of your door not being aware of what you are likely to encounter. Bill Bryson the author of this book had his mindset on walking the Appalachian Trail, however, he had to be ready.

The Appalachian Trail is probably the most well-known hiking path in the United States. It starts in Georgia and extends all the way to Maine, cutting through forests, mountains, and plains. What's so surprising about the trail is that the whole trail was created artificially. This isn't a path used by generations of Native Americans or colonists as they sojourned across the country. Rather, it was the vision of a man named Benton MacKaye who is an American forester and conservationist.

MackKaye created his plan back in 1921. He wanted to create a behemoth of a trail about 1,200 miles in length. Over the years, MacKaye kept changing his plan, however, it wasn't until a passionate hiker called Myron Avery got involved that things began.

Avery planned out the trail and he used groups of volunteers from hiking clubs to track it out on the ground. In August 1937, it was completed. Along the way, an extra 1,000 miles had been added to MacKaye's initial plan. The finished trail is around 2,100 miles as a whole— although the estimates of its length differ —the length was affected with seasonal factors and road building work through rerouting.

Volunteers created the trail, and up till now, it's volunteers who are in charge.

However, the Appalachian Trail is no walk in the park.

The lengthy trail has an extreme physical challenge even for seasoned hikers and explorers in top physical condition. Its landscape is different as there are gentler stretches, however, a few mountains too, the highest has a height of around 6,700 feet.

It is easy for you to encounter unforeseen challenges when walking the path. Bryson researched the dangers loitering in North American woods as he gets himself ready for beginning the trail. For example, bears are a present danger. There are approximately 500,000 black bears in North America, and a lot has been seen along the Appalachian Trail. Luckily, there are no grizzly bears around it. These more famous horrors are frequently seen in and around the Yellowstone National Park, much far around the west.

Now that he was aware of the type of adventure he could encounter, Bryson felt prepared to lace up his boots.

There's a lot of forest for the US Forest Service to watch, however, it isn't so ecological all the time.

It was during early March 1996, the author was with his old school friend Stephen Katz. They'd both grew up in Des Moines, Iowa, and they had decided to go to the Appalachian Trail together. They started in Georgia, at Amicalola Falls State Park just below Springer Mountain – the southern end of the Appalachian Trail.

The first phase of the trail took the two friends through a wood. They didn't see any public highway for about four days, much less anything that looks like a town.

The wood is called the Chattahoochee Forest, which once covered 950 million acres. Unfortunately, most of it is gone today. However, as Bryson can attest, when you're hiking through it, it still feels very huge.

There's a vast number of forests in the US, although you might not know of it. Approximately a third of the area of the 48 contiguous states is forest which is about 728 million acres.

The US government possesses about a total of 240 million acres. And a federal agency known as the US Forest Service manages 191 million acres.

The agency was established in 1905. The idea behind it was that it would supervise and guide the forests. However, presently, regardless of its name, its responsibilities aren't limited to caring for trees.

A lot of the forest tends to be designated as "multiple-use." This means that you'll see all types of untoward and unecological activities happening there. Oil and gas extraction, mining and timber logging for construction and fuel are all fair game.

Currently, as counterintuitive as this may sound, the US Forest Service spends the majority of its energy building roads. America's national forests at the present have 378,000 miles of road, and the agency wants to build extra 580,000 miles by the middle of the century.

Also, the US Forest Service has the second-highest number of road engineers of any government institution globally.

Bryson and Katz came across some of these roads during their hike on this path of the trail.

## Hiking on the Appalachian Trail means facing all kind of weather and landscape.

At the time Bryson and Katz begin the trail that March, spring still hadn't come. Temperatures had not risen, and there was hardly the sound of a chirrup. The absence of the birds and insects made the forest quite.

The majority of the time, Bryson walked a good way ahead of Katz, who was striving with the movement. Each one was alone in his privacy. Fellow hikers were nowhere to be found regardless of the pleasingly temperate weather and they could go for hours without seeing anyone.

However, the weather changed for worse when they got to North Carolina.

One early morning after they'd gotten to the curiously named Big Butt Mountain, snowflakes started to drift down gently. By midday, the wind had picked up, and with it, there was a vast amount of snow.

The route they were on didn't direct them up the mountain, however, it passed along its side on an ever-narrowing track – at one point just 15 inches wide. One side was the rocky mountain, and the other side was an 80-foot drop.

Even in a good weather condition, it wouldn't have been an easy path. Rocks and tree roots were on the route, but now there was the ever-present danger of ice frozen in sheets and unseen below the snowdrifts. They were battered in what looked like a tempest while attempting to peer through the thick, flying snow, without falling as they did so.

They managed to finish a little more than half a mile within two hours. Finally, the ground became more firm, however, there was no time to rest. They had to keep walking, and finally, they made it to their campsite for the night tired and battered – the somewhat fittingly named Big Spring Shelter. It was blessed relief.

## The Great Smoky Mountains National Park isn't only huge – its wildlife and natural beauty are also something to witness.

It was rewarding enough to have withstood the snow, however, an even huge reward was at hand. Bryson and Katz had now made it to Tennessee.

Before them was the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, an incredible 800 square miles of forest laden full of animals and plant life. The trail through the Smokies – as it's more casually called – follows the border between Tennessee and North Carolina. It's 71 miles long and needs climbing of 16 mountains, each mountain above 6,000 feet high. As a matter of fact, the highest point of the whole Appalachian Trail is The Clingmans Dome Mountain which is located in the Smokies, standing an exciting 6,643 feet tall.

In the park, you'll see above 1,500 types of wildflowers and 2,000 kinds of fungi. Also, there are about 130 various species of tree – impressive when you think there are only 85 species in the whole of Europe.

Also, the park has wildlife. It has 67 different kinds of mammal, including a population of about 400 to 600 bears. Additionally, there are 80 reptile and amphibian species, which can get very big – the hellbender salamander grows up to two feet in length. What's even more amazing is that about one-third of the worldwide mussels are found in the Smokies like 300 different types. Also, they have some great names and the author's favorites include the purple wartyback, the monkey-face pearly mussel, and the shiny pigtoe.

When such an abundance of richness is explained, you might think that the park looks like a modern-day Eden. Unfortunately, it's often ignored by the US Park Service. This signifies that a lot of plant and animal species are at danger or in danger of extinction.

Let's look at the mussels. Of the 300 types found in the Smokies, half of it are endangered. They aren't very thought of, and therefore, it looks like they're not worthy of protection.

Amazingly, back in 1957, the US Park Service even put poison into one of the park's creeks to "reclaim" it from the various rainbow trout that germinated there. This led to the death of tens of thousands of fish and 31 species disappeared from the creek overall. They even succeeded in eradicating smoky madtom catfish, which, up to that point, had not been known to be in the park.

Overall, it took Bryson and Katz seven days to get to the northern boundary of the park. They wanted supplies and they were aware they could find them in the town of Gatlinburg. It was a surprise: from the quiet resplendence of the Smokies, they saw themselves in a much-commercialized horror with numerous fast-food joints, 400 gift shops, and 100 motels – nearly all of it packed into one vile main street.

However, a thing they couldn't fault was a night indoors. After a lot of rain, a night in a warm, dry bed was really required. Early in the next morning they packed up and got out so fast – they were going to Virginia by car.

## The Appalachian Trail is filled with incredible trees; sadly they're very vulnerable.

The author had a lot of an hour to notice the beauty that surrounded him while he was walking through the trail. He saw himself particularly drawn to the trees and he soon came to appreciate their wonder.

Trees can take up unbelievable amounts of water to their uppermost branches and leaves. They do this using three layers of living tissue which are called the Phloem, cambium, and xylem. These are found just below the bark, surrounding the dead, thick main part of the wood. Three thin layers of cells – that's it. Extraordinarily, during warm days, big trees can take up to hundreds of gallons of water.

Also, trees have remarkable defense mechanisms that guide them against invading creatures. For example, the rubber tree leaks latex to put off predatory organism, but small, from taking a

bite. Other trees flood their leaves with tannin which is a bitter-tasting substance that caterpillars hate.

In spite of these efforts, a strong-willed invader will regularly find a way through.

Unluckily, during the early 1990s, the *Endothia* parasitic fungus laid waste to the Appalachians' beautiful chestnut trees. Its spores had most possibly arrived on a shipment of infected lumber from Asia. During that time, a quarter of the trees found in the Appalachians were chestnuts. Each and every one of them was struck down as the fungus' spores flooded out across the Appalachian woods, move into the chestnuts and eat up the trees' cambium cells.

Enough of these trees. Bryson and Katz saw themselves far from the forest In Virginia. They were now going after the 400-mile-long ridge from which the well-known Blue Ridge Mountains acquires their name.

The ridge itself is about one to two miles wide, and, aside from the occasional dip or mountaintop, it keeps a height of 3,000 feet along much of its length.

Bryson and Katz were fortunate enough to see some of wonderful views during the spring weather. To the west, there was the great green plain of the Valley of Virginia, and to the east, there were low foothills decorated with bunched farmsteads and lonely highways.

For nearly a week the landscape seemed to be for them only. They made their tents or bunked down in shelters, barely seeing other hikers and eating just noodles and Snickers bars. When they finally saw a town off in the distance, they comprehended that a change was in order.

## Lethargic Americans are fortunate to have Shenandoah National Park, regardless of its issues.

The town the two friends had snooped was Waynesboro, Virginia. In a lot of ways, it's a normal American town, made for car users regardless of it being found just off the Appalachian Trail. Incredibly, the author saw himself greeted with disbelief when he asked for the walking

directions to the local Kmart. Where was his car? He needed to buy insect repellent and he didn't consider the mile or so walk in each direction.

Perhaps, it's not a surprise that Bryson was met with this response. In the US, people are normally not a big fan of walking and it turned out there were no pedestrian paths on the way to Kmart.

The average American walks just 1.4 miles per week. That's what Bryson and Katz walk every 20 minutes while they were on the Appalachian Trail.

Americans virtually prefer to drive, even when the distance is short. As a matter of fact, a friend of Bryson's drives the 600 yards to her work daily, while another drives the quarter-mile to the gym.

However, it was time to leave Waynesboro. The two friends used a cab back to the trail, to the entrance of Shenandoah National Park. The park is beautiful, and it has some lovely walking to be had, however, pollution has had a big effect on the wildlife there, and also affecting visibility over long distances. The park's trout stock has been extremely depleted due to acid rain.

Lack of funding signifies that the overcrowded routes are in bad condition.

Due to the same reason, a lot of the park's side trails are closed or severely run-down. As a matter of fact, one of its core recreational spots is the Mathews Arm Campground and it was shut down permanently not long before Bryson went there, while a lot of others are open for only a few months yearly.

The actual reason a lot of people go to the park is the richness of wildlife and nature. Bryson himself saw a lot of deer, an owl, birds aplenty, squirrels and many buzzing insects. This explains why each year nearly two million people visit the park.

If there's something to be particularly positive about, it's that volunteers from the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club are doing their best to keep the trails that run through the park even the Appalachian Trail.

In spite of Bryson's gripes and a lot of challenges he faced, he still admits that Shenandoah National Park is probably the most lovely he has ever visited.

## The trail cuts through Harpers Ferry which is a Civil War spot of historical meaning.

Bryson and Katz were aware that they'd had a good run of it and they decided to finish this certain lap of their hike in Front Royal which is a small town found on the northern edge of the Shenandoah. They arranged to meet again in Maine a few months after and continue the trail from there. Firstly, Bryson needed to try a few stretches alone in West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire. His car would take him to the beginning and he'd devise a path accordingly to get him back to his car.

His first stop was Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, a place closely related to the American Civil War of 1861-65.

Back in 1859, John Brown the abolitionist, with his band member of just 21 men, created an ambitious strategy to release all the slaves in America. They succeeded in breaking into a federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry and pilfer about 100,000 rifles and huge amounts of ammunition.

President James Buchanan was having none of it. Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Lee which was at then still a Union loyalist – was sent out to sort them out. He, as well as his men, took no more than a few minutes to subdue the rebellion and recover the federal arsenal.

Also, they took Brown, who was later sentenced to death by hanging. It was this action that led to the forthcoming war and created the big problems that would be contested. In the North, Abolitionists saw Brown as a scapegoat, while Southerners started to get nervous that attempts to free slaves would soon become the custom and armed themselves in readiness. Before too long, the American Civil War had started.

Once he'd got to grasps the historical meaning and importance of Harpers Ferry, Bryson decided to proceed to Pennsylvania.

The Appalachian Trail heads northeast for about 230 miles In Pennsylvania. Honestly, it's a weak stretch. There are no national parks, forests or inspirational views to talk about. The worse of it all is that walkers regularly go back home from this part of the trail after accidents falling

over the rocks. These oddly-shaped rocks are dispersed in odd piles across the landscape – a feature of the continuous freezing and melting they experienced during the area's last ice age.

While we're on the topic, let's look at the geological history of the Appalachian Mountains.

## The Appalachian Mountains were created when continents collided, but currently, they're decreasing, slowly but certainly.

Over a billion years ago, the continents we know now were just one huge landmass. This supercontinent was called Pangaea and the sea that surrounded it was known as Panthalassa.

Turbulence in the earth's layer made the Pangaea divide into various continents that gradually but very slowly – drifted and sometimes collided with one another. The continents have really come together a lot of times since their first division. On the third of these collisions which was about 470 million years ago, the Appalachian Mountains started to be created.

There were about three mountain-building stages to the Appalachians. These three are called the orogenies, and it is what formed the Appalachians that we know now. The Taconic and Acadian orogenies are mainly in charge of the northern Appalachians, whereas the Alleghenian orogeny is what shaped the central and southern range.

However, mountain ranges don't only grow. Between times of mountain creation, environmental factors tear away at the very rocks themselves. The Appalachians are not different.

According to James Trefil a geologist, a mountain stream can wash away about 1,000 cubic feet of sand and other particles yearly.

Meaning, it would take a stream approximately 500 million years to wear away Mount Washington's 500,000 million cubic feet of mass flat.

Obviously, this process works in cycles, occasionally several times over. Mountains increase in mass and height, are slowly diminished, only to rise once again.

To this point, the Appalachians have had two such cycles, and they are now shrinking by about 0.03 mm every year.

Now that we know a little from the scientific aspect of things, let's now go back to the trail.

## The White Mountains are mainly the dangerous part of the Appalachian Trail.

Driving to and fro between spots on the trail was all well and good, however, the author wanted to get some actual distance under his belt before he caught with Katz again, therefore, Bryson let his wife drop him off close to Stockbridge. Bryson wanted to hike for three days through the wooded Berkshire hills of southwest Massachusetts.

The Berkshires cover approximately 100,000 acres of forest. It was full of wildlife, even though hunting has reduced the numbers of animals over time.

One victim of culling is the Carolina parakeet. Since the pilgrims first set their foot on the Northeastern Seaboard during the seventeenth century, it was a target. Certainly, farmers witnessed the bird's taste for fruit as a threat to their crops, however, the majority of the creature was shot down because its feathers generate tasteful hat decorations. In 1914, it was no more.

Bryson decided to make for the notoriously dangerous White Mountains in New Hampshire once he'd taken in Massachusetts and a little of Vermont. This time he was escorted by Bill Abdu, who is his friend's neighbor from Hanover, New Hampshire.

What makes the White Mountains so dangerous is that the weather can change easily. Even during the warmest days, you can unexpectedly see yourself caught short in chilly winds and rain.

Hypothermia is an extreme risk in such situations. It's a strange condition because as the temperature of your body drops to seriously low levels, you start to feel lightheadedness, and before too long you experience hallucinations. The last phase of hypothermia witnesses the

body confusing the cold for burning and prickling heat. The victims are regularly found partly undressed as they've torn off their clothes in an endeavor to cope.

Critically, the majority of the people affected don't really die in extreme conditions, but when the weather is moderate and they haven't prepared well or made silly errors.

In 1990, this happened to Richard Salinas when hiking in North Carolina. As the temperatures reduced, the skilled hiker became confused and he began taking unwise decisions he would generally not have thought of. In his case, he decided to cross a river. A search party later saw his jacket and backpack in the woods which he'd abandoned in his confusion. His body was found a few months later in the Linville River.

Bryson experienced his own hypothermia scare while trying to climb the 5,249 foot Mount Lafayette.

The weather had been moderate and sunny, however, just as he should have anticipated in the White Mountains, the weather changed unexpectedly. The temperature fell, and Bryson started to feel cold and lightheaded. He'd recklessly left his extra clothes at home. In spite of the risk, he continued.

This time he was fortunate. The weather changed again once more and this time for the better. Those first twinges of confusion lessened with the sun's warmth. He'd gotten away with it, however, it had been a shock to the system.

## Maine's thickly forested Hundred Mile Wilderness is worthy of what it is called.

During the time August came again, the author was prepared for the next phase of the trail. He was with Katz once again. Their idea this time around was to make their way through Maine. Their aim was Mount Katahdin which is on the northernmost point of the Appalachian Trail.

In order to reach there, they'd have to pass through the Hundred Mile Wilderness and this isn't an easy journey. The path is just shy of 100 miles long, at 99.7 miles. Alongside its forested

length, there's hardly any civilization to talk of, there were no houses, no stores or telephone booths; it was only woodland nearly all the way to the top of Katahdin.

In normal situations, it takes between 7 and 10 days to cross this wilderness. You need to pack well and be fully ready because there's nowhere you can get supplies along the way. So, both Bryson and Katz start out with big backpacks full of clothes, food and anything else they might need.

However, planning can only get you so far. There was a struggle just for the first few days of the walk. Upset at the weight of his supplies on the first day, Katz threw away the majority of the things in his bag pack, including his water bottle which is really unbelievable!

A few days after, the two of them walked up Barren Mountain and they realized that they were running low on water. Leaving Katz behind to rest, Bryson went to get water at Cloud Pond, where Katz was to meet him.

However, as Bryson waited for him, Katz was nowhere to be found. Bryson was becoming very worried, then he went to go look for his friend, however, he didn't find him.

When the night came, Bryson went back to Cloud Pond and set up camp.

The following morning, he went back to the trail only to see Katz sitting on a log, smoking a cigarette. He'd certainly missed the pond completely, and he got lost while looking for water. Luckily for him, he somehow made it back onto the trail and decided to sit down and wait, in the hopes he would find Bryson.

It was a relief; however, the entire experience showed to be too much for both of them. It was time to quit. They didn't make it to Katahdin neither did they make it to the end of the trail, however, with a lot of the Appalachian Trail behind them, was there actually anything to be ashamed of? Not at all, they had a lot to be proud of.

## A Walk in the Woods: Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail by Bill Bryson Book Review

The mighty Appalachian Trail offers a huge number of challenges to anyone hiking it, however, the journey is worth it. The rich flora and fauna, beautiful landscapes, and memorable views are really something to look at. However, nature isn't something to be thought of in loneliness – also, the trail is a window into North American history and culture.

Be certain to know what type of bear is attacking you.

If you ever encounter a grizzly bear in the woods, try to climb a tree, because grizzlies find it difficult to climb. If it really gets close to you, avoid eye contact. And if one actually holds you, pretend to be dead. Allegedly they get bored eating on limp bodies. In contrast, Black bears are active climbers and they will eat you irrespective of how much you act dead. The best thing is to run as fast as you can.

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