

Thousand Miler essay of 2024 Thru-hike -- Barney Scout Mann
December 2024

I chose the Ice Age Trail because it was different. In 2020 I heard a Backpacker Radio podcast featuring the Ice Age Trail. Before then I had no particular interest. Luke Kloberdanz was interviewed. He'd thru-hiked in 2003, one of the first ten. Luke was a friend and a fellow board member of the Partnership for the National Trails System. My ears perked up as he described how few hiked the IAT, how days could go by without seeing anyone else, yet at the same time the trail went through 60 small towns. He said there were Bar&Grills everywhere, that a food called cheese curds would "squeak" in my mouth. His talk of long road walks didn't discourage, and his talk of the Northwest Woods, of eskers, drumlins, erratics, glaciers, and kettles, whetted my appetite.

But I'm preaching to the choir. You wouldn't be here unless you were already sold on the IAT. What I thought best to share is: "Things I would I have liked to know before I started the trail."

A little background: I'm 73. I've thru-hiked the Pacific Crest, Appalachian and Continental Divide Trails. And after the Arizona Trail in 2021, the IAT leapt to the top of my list. The last dozen years I've been an author and freelance writer—I have a January deadline for a Backpacker magazine article on the Ice Age Trail. My latest book *is Journeys North: The Pacific Crest Trail*. I kept a daily journal on the Ice Age Trail which [you can find here](https://trailjournals.com/scoutIAT). (<https://trailjournals.com/scoutIAT> -- I apologize for the site's annoying ads.)

I completed the IAT in 66 days, averaging 20 miles a day, one zero a week. I had never stepped foot in Wisconsin until the day before I started at the Eastern Terminus.

What would have liked to know beforehand. (One hiker's opinion.)

--Water: Surprisingly, drinking water was a challenge. Wisconsin is a wet state, there are over 15,000 lakes, but nearly all IAT ground water passes through heavily-used agricultural land. My Sawyer Squeeze won't remove pesticides, chemicals or heavy metals. I filled up at county parks, restaurants, Bars&Grills, restrooms, trail angels' homes, once or twice I bought water at a store, I knocked on farmhouse doors and filled up once at a tall-steepled church. Beware of those old-fashioned, long-handle water pumps—not one worked for me. Either the handle had been removed, it was locked or I couldn't prime it. Don't be ashamed to ask a work crew or picnickers for water. Be proactive, stay hydrated. (Yes, I'm aware that Minnesota, the "Land of 10,000 Lakes," has fewer lakes than Wisconsin)

--Hiking with others: You won't hike with others unless you pre-arrange it. I am used to trails, even the CDT, where a third or more of the time I'd leap-frog with other hikers. On the entire IAT I saw only 19 hikers with backpacks. Twelve were thru-hikers, all of them going in the opposite direction. Less than a dozen times I hiked for an hour or two with a day or section hiker. A young friend joined me for a week and our son hiked with me for two days. I do like hiking by myself, but just wanted to give you a heads up.

--Camping: The other long trails I've hiked are 90-percent-plus on public land. The IAT flips that —less than 10 percent is on public land. Think of it as a fun challenge. The “Designated Camping Areas” (DCA) are great but are few and far between. I started out making reservations at state forests or county park sites beforehand, only to have weather set me back a day and forfeit the prepaid reservation. Sometimes, the only options are rough trailhead parking lots, the space behind a roadside historical marker, or a farm house yard where you've asked permission. Read the notes on FarOut about the county parks and the one county fairground where a call beforehand secures a no-fee place to camp.

--Trail Angels: I like being self-sufficient. It took me a while to get over being embarrassed about calling the local chapter coordinator on the IAT Trail Angel list for a ride or place to stay for a zero day (the 20-page Trail angel list is available from the IATA).

--Bars&Grills: This one took me 200 miles to realize. FarOut and the IAT Atlas maps rarely tell you when there's a Bar&Grill nearby. There are actually more than 2,700 in Wisconsin. That one Bar&Grill every 24 square miles. One travel site says: “Wisconsin is home to countless bars, taverns and pubs.” So, as you plan out your next trail section, open Google Maps and zoom in on named intersections, even the smallest of unincorporated villages, there is often a Bar&Grill. Maybe it's a block or two off the trail, or right on it. They are a great place to refill water and get a sandwich which means less food to carry on your back. In the Northwest Woods the B&Gs got more and more rustic, but it still felt like I had walked onto the set of Cheers. “Hey folks, this is Scout. He's hiking the trail.”

--Road Walking/Connecting Routes: The suggested CRs, the “Connecting Routes,” are not cast in stone. It took me a while to look for, ask other hikers about, other alternates to link one trail segment to the next. Sometimes the major highway they avoid, has a wider, safer shoulder than the less-crowded small-road CR.

--East to West or West to East: I highly respect the person who told me: “There is only one way to go, East to West.” But having done it, I'd lean toward going West to East. For me a high percentage of the trail was on roads the first few hundred miles, and I might have wanted to hit that toward the end of my hike.

One personal story before I sign off. On October 17th, my birthday, I thought it was likely that I'd see no one. I was 900 miles along, in the heart of the Northwest Woods. I'd seen only one person the day before. Then I got a text: “Scout, it's your birthday, what are you craving?” Just days before I'd hiked in sleet and woke to a morning in the low twenties. “I'd love a hot chocolate and a turkey sandwich.” In 2016, Gail, a young woman, had stayed at our San Diego house before she started the PCT. She was going to meet me mid-afternoon where the trail crossed a small dirt road. What I didn't know until she was well on her way was that she was driving six hours to do this. It absolutely made my day.

I had a great time out there. The people were so friendly, and I so enjoyed this state I'd never been to before. It was a privilege to hike the Ice Age Trail. I am grateful for the trail angels and all the volunteers who made the trail and my hike possible.

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