

When trying to briefly describe the experience of section hiking the entirety of the Ice Age National Scenic Trail, the first phrase that popped into my head was “a collection of joyous mistakes.” Not mistakes like failings or wrongful doings - more like false impressions and gaps of knowledge. From the start, the compulsive perfectionist in me saw this as a task to tackle, an adventure that was also a great accomplishment to collect. Yet, hiking the sections in an arbitrary order through the variety of Wisconsin seasons quickly showed me that the present moments on the trail were much more satisfying than the future endpoint we were fighting for. This might be an overrated point straight out of a movie or therapy session, but I certainly never expected a dirt path to be the thing that proved it to me.

The second oversight was my impression of what seeing Wisconsin would be like. As a native of North Carolina, I had been spoiled with coastline, piedmont, and mountain assortment. I’m ashamed to admit that I assumed hiking across Wisconsin would be....boring? As it turns out, the glacier that molded this region of the state certainly pulled its weight when it came to decorating. Beautiful rocky dells, precarious eskers, rolling moraines, and kettlebowl divots filled our exploration with new scenic surprises around every turn. I’m partial to nerdy science opportunities but never imagined I’d be so engaged with the history of rocks! However, this was only half of the trail transaction. Section hiking offered us the opportunity to take pause in as many of the charming trail communities as we could. Coffee shop treats certainly hit different when you’re 20 miles into a hike.

This brings us to the third false assumption. I thought it would be safe to assume that burying ourselves in the woods for hours at a time would be an isolating experience. The trail communities start to break this down with the chance to chat with locals. Conversations usually went one of two ways: someone was very excited to meet others who cared about the IAT, or someone was very excited to learn that such a thing existed in their home space. We created an instagram account for loved ones to keep up with our progress and were equally surprised by how invested they were as by how many new friends we made when we were immediately embraced in the community of trail enthusiasts. We also tracked a few thru hikers and felt like we had celebrity encounters for the couple we met on the trail. This is not to overlook all the existing friends we had that seemed to be just as gifted by the trail when they faithfully joined us for some fairly demanding hikes. Of course, the most prominent human interaction was with my hiking partner and significant other. The strengthening of our relationship through this process is something I’d have either no words to describe or endless pages worth, but is possibly the trail gift I’m personally most grateful for.

There were plenty of other slight, cheerful blunders along the way. All of my meticulous planning habits weren’t sufficient for predicting all the hiccups we faced. From packing oversights to unidentified creek crossings, the preparation errors made for some excellent tales and hilarious blooper photos. But in the end, the greatest inaccuracy of all was my prediction about my reaction at the finish. Our final hike had to be rescheduled several times, and I thought the only possible final feelings would be those of elation, relief, and fulfillment. But the final step brought a much more muddled notion, most easily described as sadness. Over what? I’m not sure...a loss of new sites, a fear that our lifestyle was changing, or something else entirely. However, having mismeasured so much else, I have hope that the new context in which we experience the trail will continue to provide unexpected delights, starting with seeing others introduced to all the joyous mistakes provided by the Ice Age Trail.