

I hopped on the Ice Age Trail after stepping off the PCT (Pacific Crest Trail) only 400-something miles due to a family emergency that ate most of the summer. With limited time left in the hiking season (for a Vegas girl. I don't mess with Real Snow), I was looking for a trail about 800 miles long to finish before the weather turned mean, and, really, 1150 isn't THAT much more than 800, yeah? And that's about all the info I had nine days before I started my Ice Age Trail thru.

The Ice Age Trail was not my first thru hike, but I am still no sort of hiking expert. I've done the Appalachian, the Oregon Coast, Camino Norte, and a few other walks, so I approached this trail with two critical lessons already learned: whatever can happen probably will, and that which doesn't kill ya, you can usually work around. I glanced over the FarOut map and saw where my public lands were, where private lands, generally, were, and where the weather would be the most dangerous in respects to bailouts and early snow. Okay. West to East makes sense. Let's do this.

My hike began in summer with a swim in the St Croix River that first day and ended crunching through frost in Forestville during the last. In between there were fields, fords, and forests. I got my first leech on this trail and ate a shocking amount of sauerkraut. There were hundreds more frogs than I could have imagined, but not nearly as many cows as I expected to see walking across the Land of Cheese. I found squeaky curds at a gas station outside Portage. I was delighted and grateful for every boardwalk volunteers have built. I slept in shelters, on random bits of forestry land, on porches, in campgrounds, in storage units, and, best of all, in the homes of Trail Angels.

And on the topic of Trail Angels, they were the defining feature of this trail. It took me some time to feel comfortable reaching out to folks 'cause reaching out always felt a bit like dragging someone else into my hike when I was inconvenienced. All the nights I was out there, I never could quite put my finger on my discomfort. Did it feel like "cheating?" Was reliance on others making me lazy? It was one thing to just meet a stranger in the woods and end up at their home the next day (hi, Shelly!), but to call people or text and schedule a time for them to get in their vehicles and pick me up? I'm at the point now with my family where sometimes I just Uber from the airport, but I want to impose on strangers?

Here's the thing though, the thing that made this awkward task so rewarding and might be a bit controversial: trails kinda all feel the same sometimes. Ya get up, take down your tent. Ya walk for ten or so hours, in my case, after you remove the breaks, and set up your tent. It can be a bit monotonous even when beautiful. And Wisconsin, I hope I don't offend to admit, was more beautiful than I expected. But.

I love the people I met on this trail.

Folks who reached out or replied back and said, "hey, my kid is at college and we have a spare room," or, "I've basically converted my basement into a private boutique," or, "my bar has a nice yard you can set up in." That's amazing. And then the conversations begin. Hiking long-distance trails, I tend to just talk to other hikers and the conversations can be like the trails: pretty monotonous. "Where are you aiming for tomorrow?" "How are your shoes holding up?" "How'd you get your Trail Name?" These are fun and all, but meeting folks who are connected to the trail outside just the thru-hiker bubble gave me a chance to actually MEET people which is just as magical as traditional Trail Magic when you haven't really opened your mouth in two days except to shovel peanut butter in.

Every hike, I am constantly talking to myself and imagining what sort of advice I'd give to someone about this specific trail. Hope this helps someone. I ended up sending my trail runners home around

mile 500 and wish I would have done so sooner. Between the CRs and rail-to-trails and well-maintained forest paths, traction was rarely as important as cushion. Nice to have in places around, what, Turtle Rock or in patches those first 400 miles, but my feet are delicate and my plantar fasciitis was screaming some days. Trekking poles were more useful than traction. I had longer water carries than I expected I would and more frequently than I thought I would. I carried 5L a couple of times just because it was a dry year and folks just don't comment on FarOut the way they do on some trails. Finding places to camp was often that classic joke of, "legal, cheap, or convenient: pick two." Do with that knowledge what you will. You might feel a bit like a mooch, but reach out to local chapters and Trail Angels and really try not to be That One Entitled Hiker who can ruin it for everyone behind you. And for goodness sake, pay attention to satellite images of CR walks and where trees are cause there can be LONG stretches where finding a place for a wee can be brutal.

I turned 40 on the Ice Age Trail. There was something symbolic about watching summer change to autumn while I was out there and, while I'm certainly not OLD, I felt like the orange Sugar Maples and I had a lot more in common than the pear blossoms in spring. I also finished before winter set in, reminding me that I still do, probably, have time for more adventures and more parts of this great planet we get to call home for a few decades.

I don't know what comes next, but if time is a somewhat finite resource, it was well-spent in Wisconsin. Thanks for hosting me for a few weeks, and I'll try not to be too smug about our "cold" days in Vegas that can have highs only in the 50s when I think of y'all up there.

Mary OBrien