

Slackpacking: Weekend hiking on the Appalachian Trail

By Lindsey Tanner, Associated Press

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- Slackpackers - it's a nickname that is not affectionately bestowed, but it's one an old friend and I now proudly wear after a long weekend hiking on the [Appalachian Trail](#) in western [North Carolina](#).



By Janet Robertson, AP

The Mountain Magnolia Inn is a Victorian home and estate in Hot Springs, N.C., which sits at the confluence of the French Broad River and Spring Creek. It is named after natural mineral hot springs bubbling up from those waters.

The 22 miles we covered over 2 1/2 days near Asheville hardly seemed scoff-worthy. With long strenuous climbs through deep woods and sometimes steep, rocky and twisty terrain, in nearly six-hour stretches, stopping only briefly for water or snack breaks, it was exhilarating. We did make one indulgence though, spending both nights in hotel rooms rather than sleeping bags under the stars.

Even so, we can still claim to be among the more than 2 million people who experience some part of the trail each year. The most revered are "through-hikers," trekking the entire 2,181-mile distance nonstop over some four to six months between Georgia and Maine.

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Hard-core hikers consider those who stick to day hikes, with the night spent in town rather than a tent, slackers. My friend and I - she a marathoner, me an avid exerciser and tennis player, both in our early 50s - beg to differ. For those without the time to spend half a year in the wilderness, day hikes are a great alternative.

Our home base was the tiny [Blue Ridge](#) mountain town of [Hot Springs](#), near the Tennessee border. It's a 45-minute drive from Asheville, where our planes - from Chicago and New York - landed minutes apart. Asheville is a lively, artsy mountain city well worth a visit itself. But hiking was our goal, so after picking up our rental car and stopping for a delicious lunch of quiche and salads

at Asheville's vegetarian-friendly [Early Girl Eatery](#), we headed up curvy Route 25 to Hot Springs.

The town sits at the confluence of the French Broad River and [Spring Creek](#), and is named after natural mineral hot springs bubbling up from those waters. Privately owned for more than two centuries, the springs site has housed a series of resort hotels promoting the water's supposed healing powers and drawing tourists year round.

The Appalachian Trail is the other big draw, and one of the region's main economic drivers.

The trail literally runs smack through Hot Springs, and the Appalachian Trail's diamond-shaped logo can be found in Hot Springs on the sidewalk that runs along [Bridge Street](#), the main drag. The street is even marked with a couple of the trail's familiar white blazes, more commonly found on trees and rocks in the woods, at the turnoff where the trail and the street diverge.

The trail ascends into the mountains on either side of town. Most through-hikers start in early spring in the south, at [Springer Mountain](#), Ga., and make their way up to Maine's Mount Katahdin, though you can do it in either direction. The route runs across the railroad tracks in Hot Springs, over a bridge straddling a wide, inviting-looking stretch of the French Broad, and alongside the river for less than a mile before climbing up more than 1,000 feet to Lovers' Leap Rock and beyond.

Through-hikers starting in Georgia generally hit Hot Springs after about three weeks on the trail, and for many, it becomes a mini-oasis.

"There aren't that many places where they walk right through the middle of civilization," said innkeeper Pete Nagle, a member of the town's tourism association and owner the Mountain Magnolia Inn.

"Some just blow through and do their laundry and keep on going," said Nagle. "Some are beat up pretty good," and most spend at least one night in town.

It was sunny and hot in early June when we hit the trail, and we were grateful to take off into the shade of the woods. Deep groves of rhododendrons as tall as trees, gloriously blooming shades of pale pink and white, punctuated the deciduous forest. Songbirds and our boots hitting the dirt were the only sounds.

We saw little wildlife other than squirrels, but the woods were so deep and silent I sometimes felt certain that bears were lurking around each bend. The only other threat I feared were thunderstorms forecast the same day we perhaps foolishly decided to hike a 12-mile stretch that included Max Patch, a 4,629-foot bald peak covered in pasture grass, with breathtaking views of the surrounding mountains, including the [Great Smokies](#) in the distance. I just knew my friend's metal hiking sticks would make us lightning magnets, but the rain held off until we got back to town.

We also saw surprisingly few other hikers. On the first full day, heading north out of Hot Springs, we trekked two hours before encountering other people. They were through-hikers, a married couple from Friendswood, Texas, and we listened rapt as they shared their story.

Paul Koll, 62, and his 58-year-old wife, Eva, had been on the trail for almost 300 miles and just over one month since starting April 30 in Georgia. They'd conquered the highest point on the entire trail - Clingman's Dome in Tennessee's Great Smokies, elevation 6,643 feet, and despite countless bug bites and sore feet wrapped in moleskin, Eva, a travel nurse when she's not hiking, was almost giddy. That lofty dome "was like, lickety split, nothin'," she said. "I thought it was going to be terrible."

They figured it would take six months to reach Maine. And if they don't make it before the snow flies, "we'll come next year and finish," Eva said cheerfully.

"The funny part of it is," Paul said admiringly, "my wife would get up in the morning after hard day, with a smile on her face, and say, 'Let's do it again!'"

We had booked rooms at the Iron Horse Station Inn, a charmingly renovated old brick restaurant-hotel with hardwood floors, Persian carpets, and 15 very pleasant rooms on the second story, all with private baths. Rates range from \$75 a night to \$160 for a larger room with a whirlpool and a view of the surrounding forested peaks. Best of all, the super comfy beds, with fluffy duvets provided an ideal place to crash after long, arduous hikes along the trail.

While Nagle's handsome Mountain Magnolia Inn tends to draw older backpackers seeking an upscale respite, many other hikers spend a night or two at the cheap, homey and hostel-like Sunnybank Inn, also known as Elmer's and housed in a gorgeous old white house set back from Bridge Street.

Hikers often stock up at the local outfitter's store, and refuel at the Smoky Mountain Diner, complete with vinyl booths, waitresses who call you "hon," and a menu that includes grits, fried bologna, hummus quesadillas and homemade pizza.

The local post office has shelves set up for through-hikers, who sometimes have provisions mailed to them, or who, by the time they reach Hot Springs, are ready to shed heavier, warmer gear and send it back home.

Hot Springs Resort and Spa, the current owners of the town's namesake waters, includes several private outdoor hot tubs, or mineral baths, with hourly rates starting at \$12 an hour. We spent an hour soaking after dark, lovely and relaxing except for occasional cannon fire from a Civil War re-enactment group encamped on the sprawling resort grounds.

We left town somewhat wistfully, but refreshed, invigorated - and vowing to slackpack

again soon on another section of the Appalachian Trail.

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