

Appalachian Trail - an outdoor appetite

by Scott_Staats

When pursuing any invigorating outdoor activity, the pursuer can work up quite an appetite. Oftentimes, even the simplest of meals is as rewarding as filet mignon.

Back in 1982, my older brother Frank and I hiked the entire Appalachian Trail (AT) from Georgia to Maine, covering over 2,100 miles, 14 states, eight national forests and two national parks. The journey took us almost five and a half hungry months to complete.

Although we hiked through some of the most scenic areas on the entire east coast, endured every kind of weather imaginable and were bitten by just about every type of insect that flies, jumps or crawls, what I remember most is the food, or rather the lack thereof.

Within a week of hiking, our appetites increased at least threefold. Before the hike, we were just a couple of poor, skinny college kids. After 2,100 miles, we were even poorer and skinnier. Plus we looked like a couple of longhaired, bearded Neanderthals from some past geologic era since we agreed not to shave or cut our hair until the hike was complete. Good thing we finally did finish the trek or we might look like Cousin It on the Addams Family.

Standing at the beginning of the trail in northern Georgia on that cool spring day contemplating the hike ahead of me, three questions crossed my mind – “How am I ever going to walk that far? Will my feet hold up? When are we going to eat?”

Two weeks into our hike, our voracious appetites were to blame for our first 20-miler. All day my brother and I and a friend drove ourselves close to insanity by talking about steak and chocolate cake. Upon arriving at a small restaurant at a road crossing, we immediately ordered three steaks and the accompanying side dishes. Each meal was to include one of those mini loaves of bread. When the waiter arrived with only one loaf, we inquired as to the whereabouts of the missing loaves.

The waiter replied, “They are fairly big; I don’t think each of you can eat a whole loaf.” Apparently the man didn’t realize with whom he was dealing; we could have eaten the entire inventory of a local bakery. He was reluctantly talked into bringing the excess bread. After checking on us a few minutes later, probably hoping to see one or even two uneaten loaves, he saw not a crumb. We then ordered three pieces of chocolate cake and none of us saw any doubt in his eyes.

One of our favorite munch-outs occurred in the town of Cloverdale, just north of Roanoke, Virginia. We broke camp early in the morning and just about ran the 10 miles to the local Pizza Hut that we heard about a few days earlier. We arrived on the doorstep at 10:30 a.m. and sat there until they opened a half-hour later.

It was one of those All-You-Can-Eat specials for \$2.49 and believe me it was the most pizza I ever ate for that price, or any price now that I think of it. From 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., we each consumed 12 pieces of deep-dish pan pizza, a side of spaghetti, a salad bar (just about the entire bar) and three beers. While the waitresses probably lost 10 pounds running back and forth serving us, we probably each gained that much in food and drink. We may have single-handedly closed the place down for good. Today, they probably have a sign that reads "No Appalachian Trail Hikers Allowed."

There's only one thing better than lots of cheap food and that's lots of free food.

One of those memorable consumptive experiences occurred in a little park near Pawling, New York after a long 22-miler on a hot, humid New England summer day. On a grassy hill in the park, four of us ragged hikers flopped down, as breathless as runners at the completion of a marathon.

Below us at some picnic tables a retirement party began breaking up and we stared wide-eyed as the first of the leftovers slid slow motion-like into a garbage can. I don't recall which of us spoke first or what was said, but suddenly a few in the group looked up and asked if we'd like to come down and help finish up. They didn't have to ask twice.

The next thing I recall is two picnic tables pulled together, the fork in my hand and a variety of foodstuffs piled in front of me. An hour later, we would have made the Grinch proud since there wasn't a scrap left big enough for a mouse. At that moment the four of us looked at each other, overjoyed at our good fortune and suddenly burst out in such hysterical and uncontrollable laughter that we almost lost a perfectly good gratuitous meal.

Another great food experience occurred when nine of us hikers became monks for a day. Near the Hudson River in New York, we stayed at a monastery that takes in hikers, bikers and other similarly sorrowful souls. Given the choice between a meal and a bed, the meal always wins out, but here we got both. The friars get offended if anyone walks away hungry and I certainly didn't want to offend a friar so I had three heaping plates of beef stroganoff, rice and green beans. Dessert consisted of apple turnover, carrot cake and four glasses of milk.

Later that night, I crawled into a real bed and found myself between paper sheets. Lying there anticipating a deep night's sleep, I felt like a bloated piece of beef awaiting the butcher for wrapping.

If I ate now like I did on the trail, Iâ€™d probably weigh 350 pounds. We set one eating record in Virginia when Frank and I ate 22 servings of food in one setting including 12 servings of mashed potatoes, six servings of peas and four servings of macaroni and cheese. When finished we laid there on the ground like a couple of beached whales.

Although there was lots of wildlife along the way, I never feared for bears. I realized that any growling heard at night, or during the day, emanated from our begging stomachs. Besides, no respectful bear would attack two bony hikers anyway.

Of course we always craved sweets while hiking. Pop Tarts became a personal favorite of mine. I was especially fond on the frosted variety with sprinkles. No meal is complete without your eight essential colors.

One tradition known to all hikers on the Appalachian Trail is the Half-Gallon Club. In order to become a member of this highly-esteemed, little-known organization, one must consume an entire half-gallon of ice cream in one sitting. I donâ€™t know why we waited until over 1,800 miles into our hike, but we attempted this feat in Maine.

After a relatively short 10-mile hike, we bought our ice cream in the small town of Andover, dug the spoons out our packs and got to it. About 20 minutes later, with the deed accomplished, I wondered what all the big hoopla was anyway. To relieve the remaining hunger pangs, we cooked up a few servings of mac and cheese.

All food on the trail had to meet some rigorous requirements. It had to be cheap and it had to fill us up. Hence macaroni and cheese, instant mashed potatoes, spaghetti, stuffing and Ramen noodles became staples. Good thing we took mega-vitamins and were only in our early 20â€™s or we may have never made it out of Georgia.

After the hike, it took some time to regain the normal everyday eating routine. For several months it seemed Iâ€™d totally lost my appetite. At a restaurant, a waiter would arrive to take my order and Iâ€™d reply with something like, â€œOh Iâ€™m not too hungry tonight, maybe only three burgers.â€•