

**QUESTIONS & ANSWERS CONCERNING
HIKING THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL (AT)
Answers given by Daniel Catzva, Thru-Hiker in 2005
(Troop 209 member 1993-2000)**

1. As close as you know, approximately how many miles did you hike on the AT? How many miles did you totally hike? How many days were you on the AT hiking? When did you start and stop your hike and where were these points?

The Appalachian Trail was estimated (for the current year of 2005) at 2,174.5 miles or something around that. The estimate changes constantly because it is such a long trail and all of the maintaining bodies are acting nearly independently. Individual clubs may at times reroute the trail for numerous reasons, for instance, to limit environmental impact. I began my hike on April 1 down on top of Springer Mountain in Amicalola State Park in northern Georgia. I finished the trail on September 24th when I summited Mt. Katahdin in Baxter State Park, which is in central northern Maine.

2. What kind of tent did you use? How much did it weigh?

For the majority of my trip, I actually slept in a hammock, made by a company called Hennesey Hammocks. Its not like a conventional hammock you would use in your backyard, instead it has a bug net built into it and has an optional rain fly to put over top of it. It weighs about 2 lbs. I also used a single person, non-free standing tent made by Marmot called the EOS1. It is a very nice, but shall we say "cozy" tent that is designed for smaller hikers.

3. If you only slept under a tarp, how did you rig it for sleeping? What size was your tarp?

I did not use a tarp, but I highly recommend tarps for more experienced backpackers who are willing to sacrifice comfort in order to save several ounces from their pack.

4. What kind of backpacker stove did you use? Did it work OK? If it did not work OK, what were the problems? What kind of backpacker stove would you recommend for such a hike? Would you recommend using a backpacker stove or a wood fire?

I do not recommend wood fires for cooking ever! Not practical and prohibited in a couple of States along the trail. I used a small alcohol stove made by a company down in Georgia, called Etowah Outfitters. It weighs a couple ounces more than most alcohol stoves, but is the most fuel efficient stove I have seen on the trail. Alcohol stoves are great if you are traveling

solo, but if you are traveling with a small group it would be best to use a small backpacking stove, like the MSR Whisperlite, which was quite popular on the trail. An alcohol stove probably shouldn't be used for boiling more than 2 cups of water; therefore, a regular white gas backpacking stove is more efficient in terms of weight and fuel for more than one person.

5. If you used a backpacker stove, how much fuel did you carry at a time?

It took me around 0.5 ounce of alcohol to cook dinner, but I would carry extra always just in case. I had a 10 ounce bottle, but rarely filled it all the way to the top.

6. What kind of food did you eat?

For dinner, pasta and rice, "Lipton Sides"; lunch was a bagel, cheddar cheese, and peanut butter, all very calorie dense and they don't spoil. For breakfast, poptarts, breakfast bars, and energy bars.

7. Were there places along the AT to buy food? Were these places on the AT or close to the AT?

There are places along the trail to buy food. Sometimes the trail will actually go through a town which makes your job a lot easier, but the majority of the time the trail just crosses a road that goes into a town, so you would then hike into town or hitch-hike.

8. How did you get more food when you ran out?

I never really "ran out" of food. You plan ahead one week at a time, so you know where your restock points will be. If for some reason you did run out, it was never hard to find a road and hitch-hike into town. I never ran out of food during the trip because whenever I ran low, my fellow hikers would donate some food to me. I was always offering or giving food away; everyone looks out for each other.

9. How much did your pack weigh when it was fully loaded?

At its maximum around 37 lbs, which was down in Georgia. As I learned more about backpacking and as the weather warmed, I made several adjustments to my pack and its contents and cut the weight down to 25 lbs in the summer.

10. How many days' supply of food did you carry at a time?

On average, I carried 6 days of food. In Northern VA, PA, NJ, and NY, you are going through towns a lot more often and re-supplying is a relatively easy experience. You do not want to carry more than you need to.

11. What kind of backpack did you use? Did it do the job? Is this the best pack for an AT hike? If not, what would you recommend?

I used a Gregory Zpack. It weighs around 3 lbs, has a carry capacity of 35 lbs, and a volume of 3500 cubic inches. It did a great job and is a very popular pack for thru-hikers. It is considered a "light weight" pack and therefore has minimal internal support structure or frame. I highly recommend this pack although someone in the Boy Scouts probably should use a higher volume pack (4000 cu. in.) and should probably have a beefier support frame.

12. What kind of general clothing did you take and how many pair of each?

Minimal. I had one (1) pair of spandex boxers for hiking; one (1) T-shirt; one (1) long sleeve shirt; one (1) pair of shorts; one (1) rain coat; two (2) pair of socks, and one (1) fleece pullover.

13. What kind of hiking boots did you use? Were they low or high topped? What kind of soles did they have (lugged or smooth)? What kind of soles would you recommend?

When you carry less than 35 lbs of gear, you can wear a lighter smaller shoe. I went through two pairs of trail runners, a slightly glorified running shoe. I'd say that if you are not carrying too much weight and find trail runners more comfortable than boots, go for it. I felt a lot more comfortable in trail runners and it helped improve my mobility, although I did roll my ankles once a day for the first three weeks. If you have weak ankles and are carrying more than 30 lbs, you probably will want to use a full boot.

14. What were your socks made of? How many pair did you take?

I had 2 pairs – 1 on my feet, the other in my pack. They are made of Merino wool. Never wear cotton anywhere on your body.

15. How did you keep from getting blisters on your feet?

#1, a good fitting shoe. I broke my first pair of shoes in before I started the trail. Also a wool or synthetic sock helps manage moisture. I also started the trail using a pair of sock liners in addition to the sock which helps even

more to wick moisture away. Most of the time blisters are a moisture management issue. Knowing this I would take breaks often during the day and take off my shoes and socks. [Airing our shoes and socks helps to keep them dry.]

[Foot powder in dry socks will lubricate the foot allowing it to slip slightly and thus warding off a blister. Use foot powder when you feel a blister coming on.]

16. If you got blisters on your feet as you hiked, what first aid did you do for the blisters and when did you apply the first aid?

Aiding a blister is a highly debated procedure on the trail and everyone will tell you something different. If the blister was small enough and I didn't think it would burst on its own while I was hiking, I would leave it alone and do nothing. If it were a larger blister, I would drain it and coat it with "New Skin". "New Skin" comes in a small glass jar and you can paint a bandage over the blister skin in order to prevent infection.

17. Did you wear a hat? If so, what kind? Did it have a brim on it and if so, where was the brim?

I had a visor and usually would wear a bandanna. Brim hats are nice when it is raining, but I didn't want to add extra weight to my backpack.

[A light weight baseball type hat can aid keeping your rain hood out of your eyes when it is raining.]

18. What kind of rain gear did you use (rain suit versus a poncho)?

I used light weight backpacking rain gear, pants and jacket. I recommend using a jacket; it is more versatile and I would often wear the jacket at night in my sleeping bag when I was cold. If you get a rain jacket try and get one with "pit zips" which are zippers in the arm pits. This will allow you to get some air circulating while you're hiking; otherwise, you'll be sweating so much it would defeat the purpose of even wearing a rain jacket.

19. Did you have a pack cover to use when it rained?

I started with a pack cover and sent it home. I used a heavy duty (commercial or yard grade) trash bag on the inside my pack and just stuffed everything that was dry into the trash bag; anything wet or damp went on the outside.

20. What kind of water bottle did you use? How many ounces of water did you carry at a time? How many water bottles did you carry?

Gatorade or Powerade bottles one (1) liter each; they are several ounces lighter than a nalgene; when they get a little funky, you can recycle them; they are cheaper; and they come with Gatorade! I carried only one (1) liter of water at a time for most of the trip. During the summer when we had droughts and the springs were running dry, I sometimes carried more than three (3) liters. I had a back-up reservoir, a platypus bag, which weighs nearly nothing and equally compactable. I would recommend carrying at least two (2) liters of water at a time.

21. What kind of eating utensils did you use and what were they made of?

One (1) titanium spork, which I lost in NJ and I had to whittle a spoon out of a stick. Then I just used a heavy duty plastic spoon that you can find at any outfitter.

22. What kind of cook ware did you use? What were the sizes of the items? How many did you carry?

Since I was only cooking for myself, I carried a very small Snow Peak titanium mug, it weighs around five (5) ounces, and can hold just enough for me to cook dinner in. Twenty-four (24) ounce capacity.

23. What items did you carry in your first aid kit and how many of each?

A couple of BandAids; two (2) gauze pads; a lot of Ibuprofens; ten (10) Benedryl –used for bee stings and allergic reactions to food; toe nail clippers; tweezers; medical tape; and 2-3 (two or three) antacids. When I had a blister issues, I would also carry “New Skin” or 2nd skin.

24. What kind of cell phone did you use? When did it work the best? What cell phone service were you using?

No cell phone.

25. How often did you need to recharge your cell phone batteries and where were you when you recharged them?

No cell phone.

26. What kind of sleeping bag did you use? What was the insulating material in the bag? How much did the bag weigh?

I used an REI sleeping bag which was rated at 10+ degrees. It is a mummy bag and designed for light weight backpacking. It weighs around 3 lbs. I wanted a synthetic bag so I could have the security of knowing that if I got wet, I would survive the night. Down is a good alternative, lighter weight, and a better insulator, but totally useless if you get it wet.

27. Did you sleep on any kind of pad? If so, what was it made of? How big was the pad?

I used a foam pad, called the Therma Rest "Z rest". It has an egg crate pattern, weighs a lot less than a blow-up pad, but is no where near as comfortable. The pad was 72 inches long. [A 48" pad would weigh less.]

28. What were the dimensions of your backpack when fully loaded?

[Daniel's pack is 3500 cu. in. capacity which is about two (2) cu. ft. (See question 11. above)]

29. Did you use insect repellent and if so, what kind did you use? How much Deet did it contain.

I used insect repellent sparingly. Wearing repellent is one thing, but when you know you're not gonna be bathing for a week you only want to use it in dire situations. I used "ultrathon" 25% deet, it's a cream instead of an oil, feels better on the skin.

[25% deet will keep the bugs at bay for about an hour depending on how much you were sweating.]

30. Did you put your food and other smellables in a bear bag each night and hang it in a tree? If you did not, why?

I ALWAYS hung a bear bag! Sometimes at night, I would hear bears and other wildlife moving around me and was always thankful for hanging it.

31. What kind of wild animals did you see while on your hike? Did you ever see a bear? If so, in what States were they found?

I did see bears and they are found in pretty much every State the trail goes through. You are most likely to see bears in NJ and NY although in terms of bear populations these two states are not the biggest, but a dwindling suitable habitat forces the bears to be more visible. Maine, I believe, has the biggest population of bears, but I didn't see a bear or track the entire time [I was in Maine]. A Maine local told me that although I didn't see them, they were surely watching me.

32. Did you have any encounters with any animals? What animal(s)? What were the specifics of the encounter(s)?

I saw several bears, more rattle snakes than I can recall, tons of moose tracks, and skat. Those are the most interesting animals I encountered.

33. Would you recommend hiking the entire AT at one time or would you suggest that it be hiked in segments?

Thru-hiking the AT is a lot different than Section Hiking the AT and are both for distinct and separate purposes. Thru-Hiking is not a good way to "enjoy" the AT, instead you're challenging yourself. You are not backpacking; you are marathon backpacking and you are also participating in the "Thru-hiking culture". Section Hiking is the best way to really enjoy the AT. I recommend both.

34. What were your low and high points of your hike (mental and physical)?

That's tough to answer. Emotionally, I was constantly fluctuating and although physically, you get in better shape as you continue up the trail, after awhile your body begins to degrade, you get sore and develop chronic aches and pains. Also the terrain in VT, NH, and ME becomes more physically challenging.

35. What would you recommend to do to get over any low spots? [See the answer to question 40.]

36. Did you have logistical help along the way? Who helped you and how did they help?

I did have help; my parents would send me care packages, food drops, and the maps that I needed for specific sections.

37. What type of people did you meet on the AT? Were they in hiking groups? Did you meet many lone through hikers?

I met a very wide range of people I can't even begin to describe. A lot of people, like myself, were traveling solo and a lot of people were traveling in groups. And even though I was traveling solo, I was most often still with some form of a group.

38. Did someone hike with you? If so, when. If not, why?

I had groups of people throughout the hike that I "hiked" with. That means that at night we would meet up and camp together. But during the day when we were actually walking, I preferred being alone. When you walk by yourself it's a different experience, its quieter, more peaceful, you will see 5 times more wild life, and you can actually think!

39. If you hiked alone, what precautions did you take for your safety?

No precautions. The AT runs through the metropolis that is the East Coast. There aren't very many secluded or wilderness areas. Besides, while I was walking, I always knew there was someone ahead of me and behind me. If I got lonely, all I had to do was take a 20 minute break.

40. How often did you take a break from hiking? Were there any times that you stopped hiking for one or more days; how often was this, for how long, and what was the occasion?

I had several days where I didn't hike; we call those "zeros" and there were also days that I didn't hike much at all; we call those "neros" (near - zero). And it is extremely important to reward yourself with these little breaks; otherwise, the monotony of the trail life will wear down on you and you will become jaded to what brought you out there in the first place.

41. How often did you stop for a break during the day?

When ever I felt like it.

42. What was the shortest day's hike in miles? What was the longest? What section of the Trail did you hike when you hiked the longest?

The shortest day was in VA; it was 5 miles to a shelter with a swimming hole. The longest day for me was 26 miles. Although it wasn't uncommon for some hikers to have 30-mile days.

43. What was the most dangerous thing that happened along the way?

Eating at an Italian restaurant in New Jersey.

44. How many times during the day did you change your socks?

I never changed them during the day. I would sometimes take them off to air them out.

45. Where or how far along the way did you most feel like not continuing, if you ever felt that way at all?

I felt like quitting all the time; sometimes more than others.

46. What is the best thing about being a Through Hiker? What is the worst?

The best thing about being a Thru-Hiker is a sense of freedom. When you are sitting in a park and talking to someone out for the weekend, it's the most liberating feeling to think to yourself "tomorrow morning this chump is either gonna be stuck in traffic or behind a desk and I'm out here playing on mountains." The worst thing about being a Thru-Hiker is probably the smell; even when you do get to bathe, it is hard to get a week's worth of sweat off of you.

47. Does it take a lot of planning to do the AT and if so, how long?

No it doesn't. I spent about a year planning my mail drops and ended up only using them for the first couple weeks. Instead of planning for a year, you need to really think about what life will be like for you on the trail and if its right for you. The thru-hiking Trail life isn't for everyone, even very experienced backpackers.

48. Did you spend a lot of time working out and training before you did this trip?

Not really. I used to jog, mountain bike, and did day hikes. I hadn't really ever gone backpacking.

49. What were the 3 best sights you got to see along the way?

The Balds of Tennessee, The Whites of NH, and Maine. (not necessarily in that order)

50. If somebody isn't all that serious about hiking, what should they do besides Through Hiking?

Debatable. There are a lot of people who have never even gone hiking who complete a thru-hike. But there are even more people who quit the trail, tons in the first week. Its mind over matter; if you want it bad enough, you can do it. Being a Thru-Hiker is 90% mental and 10% physical in my opinion.

51. What kind of water purification equipment did you take on the hike?

[There is light weight water purification equipment on the market. However, one drop of unscented, original Clorox per quart of water will do the trick.]

52. What kind of flash light did you take on your AT hike? How much did it weigh? What kind of batteries did it use?

[There are many light weight light sources on the market. Take your pick.]

NN. What were your overall impressions of hiking the AT?

I wish I was still out there or I could do it again. It's the way life should be.

NOTE: The bracketed [] items were inserts by the typist and experienced Scout leader.