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By Robert Hirsch

WALKING IN THE FREE WORLD

Two of the nation's most scenic wilderness trails provide the backdrop for a young man's journey of discovery.

“Robert Michael Hirsch.”
I heard the words, and I heard the applause. I had just graduated from Furman University, Class of 1998.

On every graduate's mind is the burning question: What next? I had been trying to answer this question for some time, but all I came up with were more questions. I knew I could continue to think within the established framework and follow the typical paths. I could continue in school. I could get a job. But these options held no appeal for me.

I realized that the existence of an established framework did not mandate that I reside within it. **I decided instead to step out of the box, listen to the voices inside my head, and take a “year on.”** (I used to refer to it as a year off. But “off” from what? The designation “on” seems much more appropriate.) I decided to hike the Appalachian Trail.

Upon completion of this trek, I enrolled, more by default than desire, in the chemistry Ph.D. program at the University of Utah. Perhaps I thought the box had changed. Quickly, I learned that it hadn't.

It was time to get out. I decided to leave the program and go on another excursion — to hike the Pacific Crest Trail.

Through these two journeys, I believe that I have tasted the fruits of life that too many neglect. And I have discovered that the only thing that can stand between you and your dreams is yourself.

The Appalachian Trail (AT) is a 2,160-mile wilderness footpath stretching through 14 states, from Georgia to Maine. From the Great Smoky Mountains in Tennessee to Shenandoah National Park in Virginia, from the White Mountains and Presidential Range of New Hampshire to the northern terminus at Maine's mighty Mount Katahdin, the AT is a brown path surrounded by lush vegetation. There, I truly had the sense of being “in the woods.”

By contrast, the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) extends 2,650 miles from the U.S./Mexican border into Canada via California, Oregon and Washington. Beginning in the beautiful southern California desert, the PCT soon enters the glacially contorted Sierra Nevada and concludes in the volcanic and glaciated Cascades. It's a remote trail and offers plenty of challenges associated with elevations ranging from 100 to almost 14,000 feet.

These kinds of experiences in the wilderness take you to a different level of reality. They are intense and vivid, stunning in a way that is difficult to describe.



Robert Hirsch also supplied the photos accompanying this article. Opposite: The Cascades in northern Washington overlook a field of wildflowers. This page, left: Hirsch on Springer Mountain in Georgia, at the southern terminus of the Appalachian Trail. Far left: Staircase Falls in Maine. Above: McAfee Knob in Virginia.

The theme of both hikes was beauty — unrivaled and overwhelming beauty. How can I describe a butterfly migration in the desert? The swinging arms of the cactus-like ocotillo? The majesty of a yucca in bloom? A snake absorbing the sun? The sound of trickling water — after not seeing it for 25 miles? A hummingbird fluttering right in my face? A bird playing in the wind — not flying, not moving, just hovering and enjoying itself?

I saw cacti in bloom with colors so intense you'd swear they were aglow. I observed the marvelous green shadow of a majestic fern. I saw at least one bear a day for a solid week, and glimpsed a rattlesnake amid the cacti. I traveled in alpine areas where you would swear nothing could live, yet I was amazed at the persistence of the sub-alpine vegetation. I walked on active glaciers. Wearing my faithful tennis shoes, I trudged ("postholed") through miles of deep snow in the High Sierra. I stood face to face with a moose and weathered an intense thunder and lightning storm from the confines of a tent perched atop an exposed ridge.

I wasn't sitting at a desk everyday in a climate-controlled office under artificial, fluorescent light. I was living the life I wanted to live!

Daily life on the trail is about as simple as it gets. You wake, you walk, you eat, you sleep, you spend every day in a postcard,

in awe of where you are. The sun becomes your alarm clock — and the birds, the tumbling streams, the wind, the sound of your breathing and the rhythm of your footsteps become your music.

The main ingredient of each day is walking. You walk until you feel tired, you take a break until you feel rested, then you walk again. You eat when you're hungry (and you're *always* hungry!). The dirt is your seat, and a tree is your backrest. You don't care about getting filthy; in fact, you prefer it. I hiked the last thousand miles of the PCT with no shower or laundry. **Your mind becomes a helium balloon on a string, you've got plenty of slack, and sometimes you just let go.**

The Appalachian Trail's beauty lies in its simplicity. Whereas the PCT offers dramatic, expansive views that extend hundreds of miles, the AT rarely leaves the forest. Filled with lush vegetation and an abundance of streams, the AT is often referred to as the "green tunnel." That tunnel became my home.

During a late-season snowstorm in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the park was essentially closed. Near a road crossing, a ranger on patrol told me to go home. But he didn't understand. I was home — atop the "balds" (mountainous areas where no trees



A dead tree overlooks a portion of the Great Smoky Mountains in Tennessee; Hirsch parodies a trail sign in New Hampshire; celebrating journey's end on Mount Katahdin, the tallest peak in Maine and the northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail.



grow, only grass and flowers) of North Carolina, amid the unique Grayson Highlands of Virginia, through the swamps of New Jersey, over the rugged terrain of New Hampshire and Maine. Swimming in lakes and streams, watching a moose feed in a pond, listening to the owls, getting dumped on by rain, leaning against a tree to write in my journal — I was home, far from the asphalt and concrete and plastic and pollution of what I call “uncivilization.”

The AT helped me appreciate the value of living simply in the natural world. On the PCT, I came to appreciate extremes.

Once, in the desert, I had to deal with snow falling sideways and winds so intense that I would lose my footing and literally be blown off the trail. This after a day of piercing heat. As the storm wreaked havoc in the desert mountains, I walked all day, crossing some hairy snow chutes. I then reached the northeast side of a mountain, which doesn't get any sun. So there was no trail — it had disappeared beneath the heavy snow.

I had a map and compass and knew where I needed to be. But I was alone in the icy snow and knew that if I slipped, it would be hard to find me because I was off trail. Blessedly and unexpectedly, I met another hiker facing the same dilemma, and we went for it together. We eventually found our way, but every step we postholed through snow up to our knees. It was incredibly exhausting.

The next day was the same. Over two days we walked about 25 miles, but we made only about eight miles of northward “progress.” In the evening we tried to cross Fuller Ridge, which faces the northeast. Slowed by the snow, we realized halfway through that we couldn't make it by nightfall. So we stamped out tent platforms in the ice and camped on top of the ridge. Not a very restful night, but an incredibly beautiful one.

The following morning we managed to find our way off the ridge. And the fun was just starting. Awaiting us were 23 waterless miles

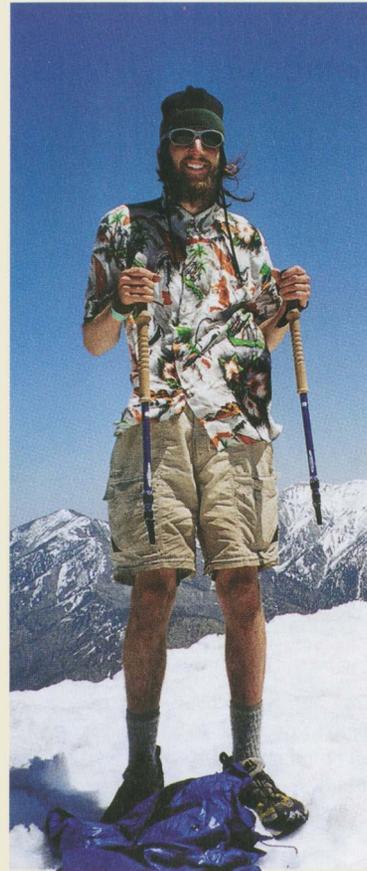
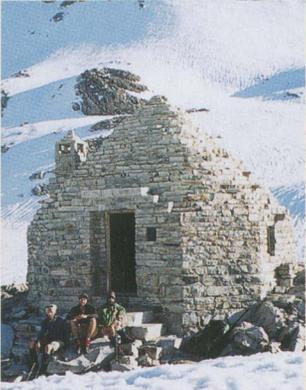
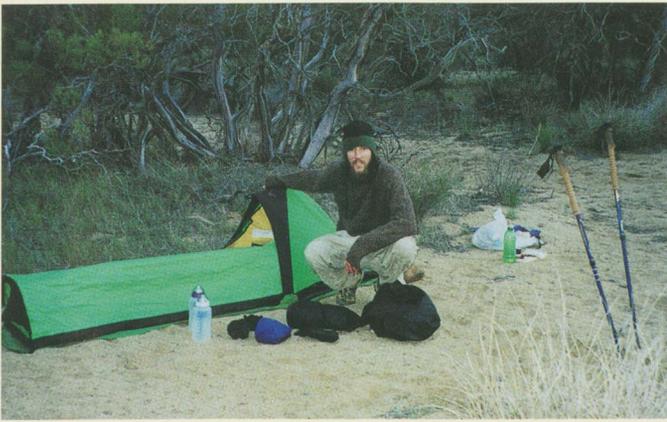
as we descended 8,000 feet to the floor of the desert, where the temperature was 101 degrees. Thoroughly parched, we reached a water source with a big rock nearby that provided minimal but much needed shade. We crawled under it and barely spoke to each other. As the earth rotated, so did we, trying to fit as much of our bodies as possible in nature's air conditioning.

The previous night, I was in the ice and the snow with no trail to follow. Eight hours later, I was in the desert with the sun sucking every ounce of moisture from my body. A 70-degree temperature differential and a change of 8,000 feet in elevation in the course of half a day! Hiking in the desert posed such a challenge, and the name of the game was water! I gained a new appreciation for faucets and ice cubes.

There is nothing better than walking in the wild knowing that everything you need is on your back. Indeed, the essential ingredient to long distance hiking is going lightweight. Every extra ounce puts more pressure on your joints, and when you're already subjecting your body to heavy physical demands, you want to minimize that impact.

Without food and water, my pack and everything in it weighed about 12 pounds. I carried a bivy sack (a one-man tent roughly the size of a coffin), a light sleeping bag and pad, a nylon wind/rain jacket, an extra pair of socks, a wool sweater, a toboggan, an LED headlamp (Light-Emitting Diodes are known for their long life and dependability), a journal and a pen, some medical tape, some thin rope, a small camera, and minimal toiletries. I wore a Hawaiian polyester T-shirt, nylon shorts and tennis shoes. **One lesson applied not only on the trail, but everywhere: keep it simple. Separate your needs from your wants.**

For water, I depended on natural sources such as lakes, streams



Along the PCT: Hirsch and his bivy sack, roughly the size of a coffin; hikers find a welcome respite at Muir Pass (more than 11,000 feet high) in California; plant life is often intensely beautiful; in shorts and T-shirt atop a snow-covered California peak.

and springs. I often drank the water untreated, but sometimes I treated it with bleach. One of the most difficult tasks on the trail was rationing out two liters of water so that it would last through 35 miles of hiking through the desert.

Food was another issue. You could never have enough! To get it, I would hitchhike into a nearby town with a Mom and Pop grocery store, or to a post office to which I had previously mailed food to myself, care of General Delivery. When I had the chance, I would eat as much food as I could. In one town, I ate a large pizza, slurped down a milkshake and happily devoured a half pound of M&M's . . . all in one sitting! An hour later, I was hungry again.

But all this hunger made sense. Each day I was hiking through rugged terrain. My calorie intake never equaled my expenditure, thus the steady hunger pangs. No matter how much food I carried between resupply points, it was never enough.

I never got lost on the well-marked Appalachian Trail, but the PCT was another matter. Hiking early season (late May) in the High Sierra meant there were no trails above 9,000 feet. They were hidden under the snow, so I depended on map and compass work to find the correct passes.

Island Pass and Donahue Pass, both in the northern Sierra, took their toll. As I approached Island Pass, the snow gradually became more sun-cupped. To explain: Imagine a lake. Add some strong winds. Now freeze the lake. The topography of the lake equals the topography of sun-cupped snow. It's like frozen waves.

This snow offered new postholing challenges. The crust was hard and icy, and the snow below was still soft. The crust's thickness varied enough that about half of the time I could stand atop it, and the other half I would fall through. If I had a nickel for every time I fell, I'd have many dimes.

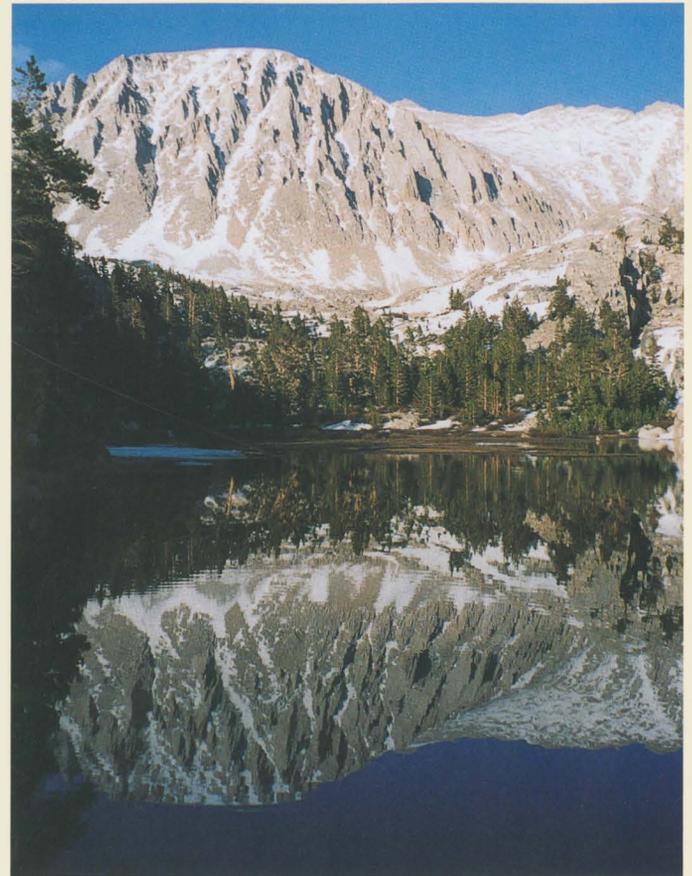
Island Pass was completely iced over and unrecognizable. I walked to a ridge to get a better vantage point, pulled out my map and compass, and argued with myself for a while. I finally committed to a plan of action and walked for almost 45 minutes, knowingly going the wrong way. I was banking on seeing a lake 1,500 feet below. If I could find the lake, I figured I could find the inlet, and if I could find the inlet, I could then walk upstream. If I walked upstream far enough, and if there weren't too much snow, I rationalized that I could discover where the trail ultimately crossed the inlet.

The only thing I didn't particularly like about this plan was the number of "if's" involved, the most important one being, "What if I'm wrong?" Since I was down to three ounces of peanut butter, a little bit of cheese and some bread, I knew I had to try. Success meant I would be near a town, and a town would mean food!

It turned into a crazy cross-country adventure. **I'm certain that I walked where no one else ever has (or should).** I finally arrived at the lake and eventually found the inlet. As I walked further and further upstream with no sign of the trail, though, I began to doubt myself. Finally, just as the doubt became more intense, I noticed something across the inlet. I walked across the water, and there was the glorious PCT! Home sweet home.

But not really, because I had gone over only one of the two passes for that day. Next was Donahue Pass, which was also totally iced over. Although I had maps, they covered a limited area, so navigation was difficult.

Once again, I relied on guesswork. On my ascent up Donahue, nothing felt right, but I plunged ahead. When I was almost to the crest, I took a break — and suddenly felt as if I had a rock in my mouth. I spit it out and realized that somehow, I had chipped a crown on my tooth. Could the day get any better? I decided to test the sensitivity of my tooth with some cold water and sugar. Luckily,



Hirsch says of the Pacific Crest Trail, "While the hiking was truly draining, I could not believe what I was seeing. I was living in a postcard every second of every day. There weren't brief moments of incredible views, but rather constant and eternal beauty. I just stopped and stared so many times."

it didn't send me leaping over the Pass, so the tooth's nerves were still covered.

But there I stood, lost and in need of a dentist, looking for something recognizable to correspond with my maps. **There is no lonelier feeling than being disoriented in a white abyss of snow and ice, with a cold wind blowing.** I could see for hundreds of miles, but all I could see were rocks and snow. Fortunately, I was able to find the valley where I knew I ultimately needed to be. After a steep descent (partly on my feet, partly on my butt) to where the snow began to break up, I could see the trail in the distance. I was ecstatic and relieved.

Long distance hiking is a powerful experience in its own right, but it exposed me to so many unanticipated things. For example, whenever I went into a town, people amazed me with their incredible kindness.

Once in northern California, in the midst of three straight days of rain, I stopped in a small town to purchase food. I met a family, and within five minutes they invited me to stay in their home. I was filthy, stinky and soaking wet, yet they still extended this gracious invitation.

In New York, during the Appalachian Trail excursion, a woman insisted on taking me into town so I could buy food. Along the way she said it was her treat. I politely declined but soon realized that she wouldn't budge. Because she was treating, I selected only some orange juice and cookies. Meanwhile, she was shopping for herself . . . or so I thought. When she brought me back to the trail, I thanked her for the food. Just before I closed the door, she pointed to "her" grocery sack and told me I was forgetting something. Turns out the whole time at the store, she had been shopping for me!

In northern Washington I met a woman who asked many

questions about my hike — then went out and purchased a load of fruits and vegetables for me. From these and many other similar experiences, I learned to assume kindness in everyone I meet, an assumption too often reversed in this "other" world. (Most people refer to the "real" world, but from my perspective the only "real" world is out on the trail.)

Why did I hike these trails? What was my motivation? All I can say is that I saw no reason to enter, much less rush into, the repetitive rat race, because to me it's a race that is never over, much less won. Life does not have to be a record that skips every 24 hours. And I decided that I wanted to dedicate my life to living, to experiencing, and to following my dreams. I didn't want to point and click my life away. I resolved to live in such a way that when I'm 60, I won't look back with regrets. Many people live with the empty promise of a better someday. I decided to make someday today. The world is my playground, and I'm on permanent recess!

Both trails provided an abundance of what is too often in short supply back in the "other" world. I'm talking about time — non-distracted time. Just me and the mountains and the streams and the sky and the flowers and the dirt and the rocks and the animals and the insects. None of the modern "inconveniences."

There's also a lot to be said for silence and solitude. If talking to yourself is a sign of intelligence, then I'm a genius. During my uninterrupted time on the trail, I realized that I had neither fully probed nor fully examined many of my most meaningful beliefs. In fact, I had barely scratched the surface. And my personal revelations can be summed up in a single statement: One thing is for sure — nothing is for sure.

Now, a new adventure awaits. As you read this, I am in Vanuatu



with the Peace Corps. Vanuatu, a country composed of 83 islands, is in the South Pacific, west of Fiji and east of Australia. For the next two and a half years, I will be teaching science to the indigenous people. But I know I will learn more than I could ever teach.

After the Peace Corps, who knows? Another trail has caught my attention: the Continental Divide Trail, which extends more than 3,000 miles from Mexico to Canada via New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming and Montana. But nothing's set in stone — and that's exactly the way I like it! I want to live life through no other medium than myself.

Because I seem to be constantly on the move, people often ask if I'm looking for something in particular. This question used to cause me some anxiety, because I had no answer. But I've finally come up with a response:

i'M iN sEArcH oF wHAtevEr MaY cOMe. 🍷



UPdATE FROM VANUATU

At press time, Robert Hirsch was in Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu, awaiting completion of his quarters so that he could move to the island of Gaua. His report:

All I really know about Gaua is from a guidebook I have. I'll give a little preview. It has the second largest freshwater lake (Lake Letas) in the South Pacific, plus extensive coral gardens and white sandy beaches. It has a rugged west coast where cliffs, pounded with waves, fall straight down into the sea. It has stone monoliths covered with mysterious petroglyphs scattered in the bush, and a 120-meter waterfall plummeting from Lake Letas into the ocean.

And then there's Mount Garete.

I'll quote directly from the guidebook so as not to be accused of exaggerating: "White smoke billows from a great rupture in the south-eastern flank of the mountain. . . . Below the cleft, the mountain is stained by the orange-coloured sulphurous emissions that bubble out as thermal geysers and boiling mud. Mount Garete erupted in 1965 and made loud rumbling noises in 1973, the latter causing a temporary evacuation of the whole island. It's considered the most dangerous volcano in Vanuatu (and arguably the world) as far as the potential for disaster is concerned. There is only a thin layer of rock between the magma chamber and the bottom of Lake Letas. . . ."

Furthermore, there is apparently a bush path through which you can walk. You go through the 35-meter root system of a banyan tree up to Lake Letas, paddle across the lake, trek to the volcano, check out the craters around the volcano, hope it doesn't erupt, come back across the lake, catch some freshwater prawns, take them to the parts of the lake that boil, cook them up, eat them, camp on the sandy shores, take another path down to the waterfall, swim, and return to where you began. Potentially a perfect loop hike.

I have spoken with the head honchos here at Peace Corps, and I believe I will be able to swing a joint project on Gaua. First and foremost, I'll teach science and math. But also, I will help out with environmental preservation of the lake, volcano and waterfall. I plan to help institute a "Leave No Trace" policy. I also plan to help out with mapping the trails and helping to guide those who wish to see it all.

Will this smile on my face ever leave?