

arrested in a public toilet with a sailor—"the seams are lap felled rather than bias taped and the vestibule is a little cramped."

I think because I mentioned that I had done a bit of hiking in England, he assumed some measure of competence on my part. I didn't wish to alarm or disappoint him, so when he asked me questions like "What's your view on carbon fiber stays?" I would shake my head with a rueful chuckle, in recognition of the famous variability of views on this perennially thorny issue, and say, "You know, Dave, I've never been able to make up my mind on that one—what do you think?"

Together we discussed and gravely considered the relative merits of side compression straps, spindrift collars, crampon patches, load transfer differentials, air-flow channels, webbing loops, and something called the occipital cutout ratio. We went through that with every item. Even an aluminum cookset offered considerations of weight, compactness, thermal dynamics, and general utility that could occupy a mind for hours. In between there was lots of discussion about hiking generally, mostly to do with hazards like rockfalls, bear encounters, cookstove explosions, and snakebites, which he described with a certain misty-eyed fondness before coming back to the topic at hand.

With everything, he talked a lot about weight. It seemed to me a trifle overfastidious to choose one sleeping bag over another because it weighed three ounces less, but as equipment piled up around us I began to appreciate how ounces accumulate into pounds. I hadn't expected to buy so much—I already owned hiking boots, a Swiss army knife, and a plastic map pouch that you wear around your neck on a piece of string, so I had felt I was pretty well there—but the more I talked to Dave the more I realized that I was shopping for an expedition.

The two big shocks were how expensive everything was—each time Dave dodged into the storeroom or went off to confirm a denier rating, I stole looks at price tags and was invariably appalled—and how every piece of equipment appeared to require some further piece of equipment. If you bought a sleeping bag,

then you needed a stuff sack for it. The stuff sack cost \$79. I found this an increasingly difficult concept to warm to.

When, after much solemn consideration, I settled on a backpack—a very expensive Gregory, top-of-the-range, no-point-in-stinting-here sort of thing—he said, "Now what kind of straps do you want with that?"

"I beg your pardon?" I said, and recognized at once that I was on the brink of a dangerous condition known as retail burnout. No more now would I blithely say, "Better give me half a dozen of those, Dave. Oh, and I'll take eight of these—what the heck, make it a dozen. You only live once, eh?" The mound of provisions that a minute ago had looked so pleasingly abundant and exciting—all new! all mine!—suddenly seemed burdensome and extravagant.

"Straps," Dave explained. "You know, to tie on your sleeping bag and lash things down."

"It doesn't come with straps?" I said in a new, level tone.

"Oh, no." He surveyed a wall of products and touched a finger to his nose. "You'll need a raincover too, of course."

I blinked. "A raincover? Why?"

"To keep out the rain."

"The backpack's not rainproof?"

He grimaced as if making an exceptionally delicate distinction. "Well, not a hundred percent. . . ."

This was extraordinary to me. "Really? Did it not occur to the manufacturer that people might want to take their packs outdoors from time to time? Perhaps even go camping with them. How much is this pack anyway?"

"Two hundred and fifty dollars."

"Two hundred and fifty dollars! Are you shi—," I paused and put on a new voice. "Are you saying, Dave, that I pay \$250 for a pack and it doesn't have straps and it isn't waterproof?"

He nodded.

"Does it have a bottom in it?"

Mengle smiled uneasily. It was not in his nature to grow critical or weary in the rich, promising world of camping equipment. "The straps come in a choice of six colors," he offered helpfully.

tiny, tiny numbers. Just before we set off, my local newspaper in New Hampshire had an interview with a trail maintainer who noted that twenty years ago the three campsites in his section averaged about a dozen visitors a week in July and August and that now they sometimes got as many as a hundred in a week. The amazing thing about that, if you ask me, is that they got so few for so long. Anyway, a hundred visitors a week for three campsites at the height of summer hardly seems overwhelming.

Perhaps I was coming at this from the wrong direction, having hiked in crowded little England for so long, but what never ceased to astonish me throughout our long summer was how empty the trail was. Nobody knows how many people hike the Appalachian Trail, but most estimates put the number at around three or four million a year. If four million is right, and we assume that probably three-quarters of that hiking is done during the six warmest months, that means an average of 16,500 people on the trail a day in season, or 7.5 people for each mile of trail, one person every 700 feet. In fact, few sections will experience anything like that high a density. A very high proportion of those four million annual hikers will be concentrated in certain popular places for a day or a weekend—the Presidential range in New Hampshire, Baxter State Park in Maine, Mount Greylock in Massachusetts, in the Smokies, and Shenandoah National Park. That four million will also include a high proportion of what you might call Reebok hikers—people who park their car, walk 400 yards, get back in their car, drive off, and never do anything as breathtaking as that again. Believe me, no matter what anyone tells you, the Appalachian Trail is not crowded.

When people bleat on about the trail being too crowded, what they mean is that the shelters are too crowded, and this is indubitably sometimes so. The problem, however, is not that there are too many hikers for the shelters but too few shelters for the hikers. Shenandoah National Park has just eight huts, each able to accommodate no more than eight people in comfort, ten at a pinch, in 101 miles of national park. That's about average for the trail overall. Although the distances between shelters can vary enormously,

there is on average an AT shelter, cabin, hut, or lean-to (240 of them altogether) about every ten miles. That means adequate covered sleeping space for just 2,500 hikers over 2,200 miles of trail. When you consider that more than 100 million Americans live within a day's drive of the Appalachian Trail, it is hardly surprising that 2,500 sleeping spaces is sometimes not enough. Yet, perversely, pressure is growing in some quarters to reduce the number of shelters to discourage what is seen—amazingly to me—as overuse of the trail.

So, as always when the conversation turned to the crowdedness of the trail and the fact that you now sometimes see a dozen people in a day when formerly you would have been lucky to see two, I listened politely and said, "You guys ought to try hiking in England."

Jim turned to me and said, in a kindly, patient way, "But you see, Bill, we're not *in* England." Perhaps he had a point.

Now here is another reason I am exceptionally fond of Shenandoah National Park, and why I am probably not cut out to be a proper American trail hiker—cheeseburgers. You can get cheeseburgers quite regularly in Shenandoah National Park, and Coca-Cola with ice, and french fries and ice cream, and a good deal else. Although the rampant commercialization I spoke of a moment ago never happened (and thank goodness, of course), something of that *esprit de commerce* lives on in Shenandoah. The park is liberally sprinkled with public campgrounds and rest stops with restaurants and shops—and the AT, God bless it, pays nearly every one of them a call. It is entirely against the spirit of the AT to have restaurant breaks along the trail, but I never met a hiker who didn't appreciate it to bits.

Katz, Connolly, and I had our first experience of it the next morning, after we had said farewell to Jim and Chuck and the Boy Scouts, who were all headed south, when we arrived about lunchtime at a lively commercial sprawl called Big Meadows.

Big Meadows had a campground, a lodge, a restaurant, a gift

Tussey—stand to the north and west. For various practical and historical reasons, the AT goes nowhere near them. It traverses no notable eminences at all in Pennsylvania, offers no particularly memorable vistas, visits no national parks or forests, and overlooks the state's considerable history. In consequence, the AT is essentially just the central part of a very long, taxing haul connecting the South and New England. It is little wonder that most people dislike it.

Oh, and it also has the very worst maps ever produced for hikers anywhere. The six sheets—*maps* is really much too strong a word for them—produced for Pennsylvania by a body called the Key-stone Trails Association are small, monochrome, appallingly printed, inadequately keyed, and astoundingly vague—in short, useless: comically useless, heartbreakingly useless, dangerously useless. No one should be sent into a wilderness with maps this bad.

I had this brought home to me with a certain weep-inducing force as I stood in a parking lot in a place called Caledonia State Park looking at a section of map that was simply a blurred smear of whorls, like a poorly taken thumbprint. A single contour line was interrupted by a printed number in microscopic type. The number said either "1800" or "1200"—it wasn't possible to tell—but it didn't actually matter because there was no scale indicated anywhere, nothing to denote the height interval from one contour line to the next, or whether the packed bands of lines indicated a steep climb or precipitous descent. Not one single thing—not one single thing—within the entire park and for some miles around was inscribed. From where I stood, I could be fifty feet or two miles from the Appalachian Trail, in any direction. There was simply no telling.

Foolishly, I had not looked at these maps before setting off from home. I had packed in a hurry, simply noted that I had the correct set, and stuck them in my pack. I looked through them all now with a sense of dismay, as you might a series of compromising pictures of a loved one. I had known all along that I was never going to walk across Pennsylvania—I had neither the time nor the

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In the morning, I drove to Pennsylvania, thirty miles or so to the north. The Appalachian Trail runs for 230 miles in a northeasterly arc across the state, like the broad end of a slice of pie. I never met a hiker with a good word to say about the trail in Pennsylvania. It is, as someone told a *National Geographic* reporter in 1987, the place "where boots go to die." During the last ice age it experienced what geologists call a periglacial climate—a zone at the edge of an ice sheet characterized by frequent freeze-thaw cycles that fractured the rock. The result is mile upon mile of jagged, oddly angled slabs of stone strewn about in wobbly piles known to science as *felsenmeer* (literally, "sea of rocks"). These require constant attentiveness if you are not to twist an ankle or sprawl on your face—not a pleasant experience with fifty pounds of momentum on your back. Lots of people leave Pennsylvania limping and bruised. The state also has what are reputed to be the meanest rattlesnakes anywhere along the trail, and the most unreliable water sources, particularly in high summer. The really beautiful Appalachian ranges in Pennsylvania—Nittany and Jacks and