



Introduction

+ DEFINING THE DREAM

Thirteen years ago, I huffed and puffed my way to what I could only hope was the top of my climb up Mt. San Jacinto in California. Instead, I found a trail intersection and sign for the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT), Mexico to Canada. I had a hard time believing that one footpath could go from where I stood all the way to Canada, but when I got home, I immediately googled the PCT. And that is when long trails became an obsession for me.

For years after, I dreamed about long trails. I pictured myself out on the trail, accompanied by the sound of my footsteps crunching the leaves underfoot and the smell of fresh dirt. I spent my free time (or procrastinating time) reading hikers' blogs. I wished I could make it happen. But there were so many skills I didn't have. I didn't have the time or money. I was scared. But mainly, as much as I wanted to hike a long trail, I didn't know where to begin.

The book you hold in your hand is the one I wish had existed back in 2004. It is designed to give you the familiarity, confidence, and case studies needed to make informed decisions when you set out on your first long-distance hike. If you are anything like I was, the idea of hiking a long trail has inserted itself in your mind. But you have some questions.

Fast forward to present day. After completing twenty distance hikes, I breathe and sleep long trails. But I always keep one foot rooted in where I came from.

Unlike a lot of thru-hikers, I didn't grow up backpacking. By the time I wanted to go on my first thru-hike, I was an adult learning the how-tos of thru-hiking from the bottom. As a result, I keenly remember all the fears and

anxieties I had before ever stepping foot on the trail. And, even more painfully, I remember the numerous mistakes I made on the trail—money wasted on gear and food I didn't need, painful foot injuries, awkward social interactions, and, most of all, having to explain to the folks back home that what I wanted to do wasn't crazy. I know there are others out there like me, and I want to help get them and you on the trail feeling prepared and confident.

Whether you plan to be out there for five days or ten months—whatever distance you consider a “long-distance backpacking trip”—this book will help you develop a plan to succeed. Be it an end-to-end thru-hike, a section of a long trail, or simply an individually crafted longer route, there's something here for everyone.



PHOTO CREDIT: STEVEN "TWINKLE" SHATTUCK

Finding your inspiration is easy with views like this.



This book encapsulates not only the lessons I've learned from twenty different long-distance hikes but also the perspectives of other long-distance hikers, to capture a wide variety of thoughts from people of different ages and backgrounds, who have different paces and different goals. Keep an eye out throughout the book for these perspectives in the Hike Your Own Hike sidebars. "Hike Your Own Hike" (HYOH) is a core tenet of the long-distance hiking community, and a phrase you'll hear often. It's the belief that there's no one right way to do a long hike. What's important, rather, is that you hike in a way that's authentic to you.

On the trail, you're the boss. The HYOH philosophy says, "Hey, being outdoors is the one chance I get in life not to have to fit into someone else's box and someone else's schedule." This book is aimed at empowering you to create your own hike, and to give you the information to help you form your own opinions on how to do it. Instead of telling you exactly what to do, I offer tips on what has worked for me and what works for others. By planning, prepping, and reflecting on your hike before you go, you'll set yourself up for success in your goals—whatever they may be.

FIND YOUR "WHY?"

There are a lot of things you can't predict about a thru-hike, but here's one thing I guarantee will happen: At some point on your journey, you will ask yourself, "Why am I here?" The honeymoon phase when you're just psyched to be out there will have worn off. Maybe you're slogging through your third day of rain while missing your family's annual trip to the beach, with no prospect of a warm bed for weeks ahead. What's to stop you from just quitting right then and there?

A lot of hikers quit when it gets hard. Seventy percent of folks who start the Appalachian Trail don't finish. The biggest difference between those who meet their goals and those who don't? It's not that they're younger or fitter or richer or more disciplined. It's that they're better at winning the mental game that thru-hiking demands.

You're already planning to exercise your body and get fit for your hike. But you also need to exercise your mind. And the most important mental exercise of all is one you can do right now, today: Take the time to truly understand why you want to hike. Spend some time thinking about your motives. Unlike many other situations in life, the only person you're accountable to on a thru-hike is yourself. No one else will tell you what to do or why you have to keep going. No one else





PHOTO CREDIT: JOHNNY CARR

A wonderful world awaits those willing to try a thru-hike.



Sentinel Peak, Olympic National Park

will be there in the rain reminding you that defeating obstacles is an amazing way to grow as a person. That's why you need to be super clear before you begin about what you hope to get out of all this hard work.

Set aside at least 30 minutes of quiet time alone to invest in the hard work of understanding what's important to you. Remember: Successful long-distance hikers aren't necessarily the strongest physically, but they are the strongest mentally and emotionally. Here's how you start getting strong.





PHOTO CREDIT: WHITNEY ALLGOOD LARUFFA

Reflection Lake is one of the most iconic spots on the Wonderland Trail.

THOUGHTFUL REFLECTION: QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

By finding your meaning for your hike, you give yourself the mental tools to succeed. The more time you put into creating a thoughtful reflection, the more it will serve you when you need it the most. If you're not sure about your answers right now, think it over for a few days and then write something down.

1. Why do I want to take this journey?
2. Why do I want to do it now (or next year, or in a few years)?
3. What rewards will I get if I meet my goals? Be positive and as specific as possible. This is your vision for what your hike can achieve for you.



4. What will I be giving up to do this hike? Am I truly willing to give that up for a while to make this happen?
5. If I weren't hiking, what would I be doing? (e.g., working 80-hour weeks, mowing the lawn)
6. What are my fears or apprehensions about this hike?
7. What am I most excited to learn about?
8. What parts of my personality are going to help the most on this hike?
9. What parts of my personality may get in the way of my success?
10. What can I do before this hike to set myself up for success?

Now, take what you've learned by answering these questions and write yourself a letter to read when times get tough on the trail. Practice visualizing the moment of success for yourself, as if you've already achieved your goal. Be as detailed as possible. How does it feel? What do you see? Who's there with you? What do you hear? It sounds hokey, but there's strong scientific evidence that this type of visualization technique really works.

Being explicit with yourself about your motivation and goals helps give you a reason to push through the hard times. When I set off to thru-hike the first time, I didn't quite know what the trail would give me, but I knew I wanted to find out. Hiking gave me plenty of time to ask and answer questions like, "What do I want to do with my life?" and provided me with the pause to reflect on my transition from one phase of life to another.

As I learned after the fact, prepping for a thru-hike is not just about picking the right gear. It's also about gearing up mentally and physically, prepping resupplies, managing schedules, and establishing budgets. This book gives you the tools you need to turn your dream into reality. It gives you the confidence to start at mile zero of your hike with the knowledge and skills that most hikers usually get only after a thousand miles of hiking. Thanks for picking up the book, and see you up the trail!

—LIZ "SNORKEL" THOMAS





PHOTO CREDIT: ISTOCKPHOTO / TOMAS SEREDA

PLAN & PREP





A thru-hike is not just about the photo at the finish point, but the journey required to get there. This book will help you understand what is involved on that journey and prepare for success along the way. Pictured: Liz Thomas at the northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail.

