

Tales from the Appalachian Trail **BKD** *life*

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Going off the grid helps one BKDer realign her values with her life.

When your best friend decides to hike the Appalachian Trail, you don't let them do it alone. At least that's true for Jessica Haag, an audit director based in BKD's Cincinnati office. She's section-hiked the Appalachian Trail every year since 2016, alongside her best friend Niki.

"We considered ourselves outdoorsy people, but when I stopped to think about it, I realized I hadn't been making it a priority. I lost a part of myself, and this was an opportunity to get it back," says Jessica. "But I had no idea what hiking the Appalachian Trail meant."



Jessica and group continue backpacking over a bridge through the forest. Bridges are sometimes used to help cross trail barriers.

Starting from scratch in Shenandoah, Virginia

Niki and Jessica spent nearly 18 months planning their first hike. Eventually, on a hot and muggy day in June, it was time for them and their friend Melissa to put research into practice. Within the first five minutes, the group ran into a rattlesnake in the middle of the trail. It slithered off, but Jessica admits they quickly began doubting their preparation. What do you do if a rattlesnake bites you? They had no idea. While none of them said they should turn around, they were all thinking it.

They continued on the path, which consisted heavily of dense greenery from all sides, also known as a green tunnel, and soon devised a system: The first person looked on the ground for rattlesnakes, the second person looked ahead for bears, and the third person looked behind in case any bears approached from the other direction. They walked tightly, whistled and rattled a tin cup. They continued in this way for the entire day and even joked that if they could only last one night, they could still say they hiked.

Suddenly, the first in line came to a halt and the other two nearly crashed into her. A large black mass was sitting on the ground ahead, and one friend started spraying bear spray even though they were nearly 50 yards away. After hiking for several hours on the trail, they knew walking back wasn't an option. They pressed on, making noise as they went, while a group of 20-year-olds wearing headphones glided past the bear, completely relaxed.

"We finally realized there wasn't a bear, it was just a piece of dead wood, and we had spent the past 15 minutes terrified of this wood," Jessica says. "We eventually coined the term 'bear wood' because we kept getting startled by these large black objects ahead of us that just turned out to be dead logs."

Dozens of hikers were already at the nearest shelter when they arrived, where they made food and rested for the night. The next morning, they saw two real bears poking their heads out from over the hill to smell the food they were cooking.

"Once we realized they weren't really going to attack us, and having seen how cute they were, we felt a lot better," she says. "We almost gave up that first night, but we didn't. At this rate, we'll hike the full Appalachian Trail by the time we're in our 70s."

"Hike your own hike" and other trail quirks

From doctors and attorneys to college students, veterans and 14-year-old kids, there's no shortage of the variety of people they meet out on the trails. Everybody's reason for being out there is different. The hikers also all have trail names, typically given to them by another in their group, based on their characteristics or experiences. After leaving behind their hiking permit and tent on separate occasions, Jessica was from then on known as Deets.

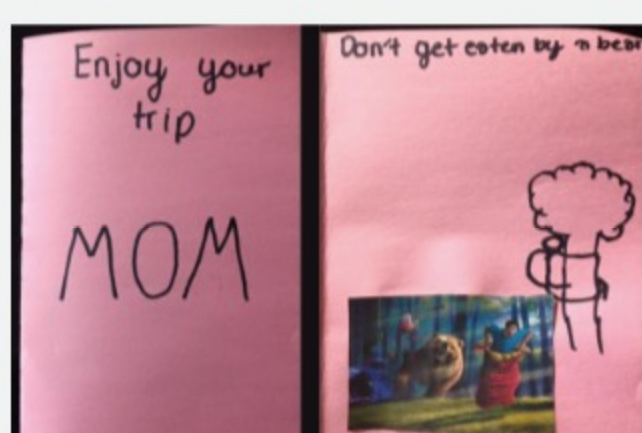
"Full groups also have 'family' names too, so we donned ourselves 'Rattlesnake' because of our initial encounter on the trail," says Jessica.

The terrain also is incredibly diverse and offers open pastures with roaming cows and ponies and private ranches that make you feel like you're in the Irish countryside. You could be surrounded by peace and stillness, rushing waterfalls or arches of mountain laurels. Jessica compares one of her favorite views in Virginia to Narnia, as it looked like something out of a fairy tale. Moss-covered rocks, abundant ferns and few trees created an open, inviting scene that felt completely serene.

Typically, they hike steadily and achieve 7 to 18 miles each day; for comparison, thru-hikers aim for 20 to 30 miles per day.

"Sometimes we hike together, and sometimes we space out. It's your hike," she says. "The best phrase on the trail is 'hike your own hike.'"

Each hike begins with a pre-hike prayer, asking for protection, and ends with a post-hike celebration in whichever trail town they're in. The celebrations are an important end-of-hike motivation and include dining on pizza and beer, listening to local music and exploring the town.



Jessica's daughter Bella, 11, made this card for Jessica's first hike.

When it comes to planning, the trail dictates the trip. Each hike is dependent on the mileage between shelters, as the goal is to hike from one shelter to the next before dark. Jessica emphasizes she uses the term "shelters" loosely, as they're really more like wooden shelves in the woods with a roof and two sides. Jessica and Niki usually rest in their tent but use the shelters for cooking, recovering from rain or poor weather and joining social gatherings with other hikers.

"Everybody talks about their luxury item on the trail, like a coffee press. We always take little boxes of wine for the end of the day when we're just sitting around a fire, relaxing," she says.

Other necessities include bear bags, pepper spray, plenty of high-protein snacks and a special card made by her daughter that reads, "Enjoy your trip mom" and "Don't get eaten by a bear."

Overcoming the lowest lows and finding power in discomfort

In addition to being physically grueling, hiking also takes immense mental fortitude. The second hike on the Appalachian Trail nearly brought Jessica to her wits' end. She and Niki had just camped their first night of the trip when they decided to turn back to escape an incoming tropical storm. Unfortunately, they had to take the shuttle back, which meant calling the driver. With no cellphone reception, they began hiking in a downpour in hopes they were headed the right way out.

"We hiked up the main road and just started walking. We were on a mountain somewhere, soaking wet, with zero plan," Jessica says. "Luckily, our shuttle driver circled back an extra time to see if we were there. After hiking probably 13 miles in a quick period, it all worked out."

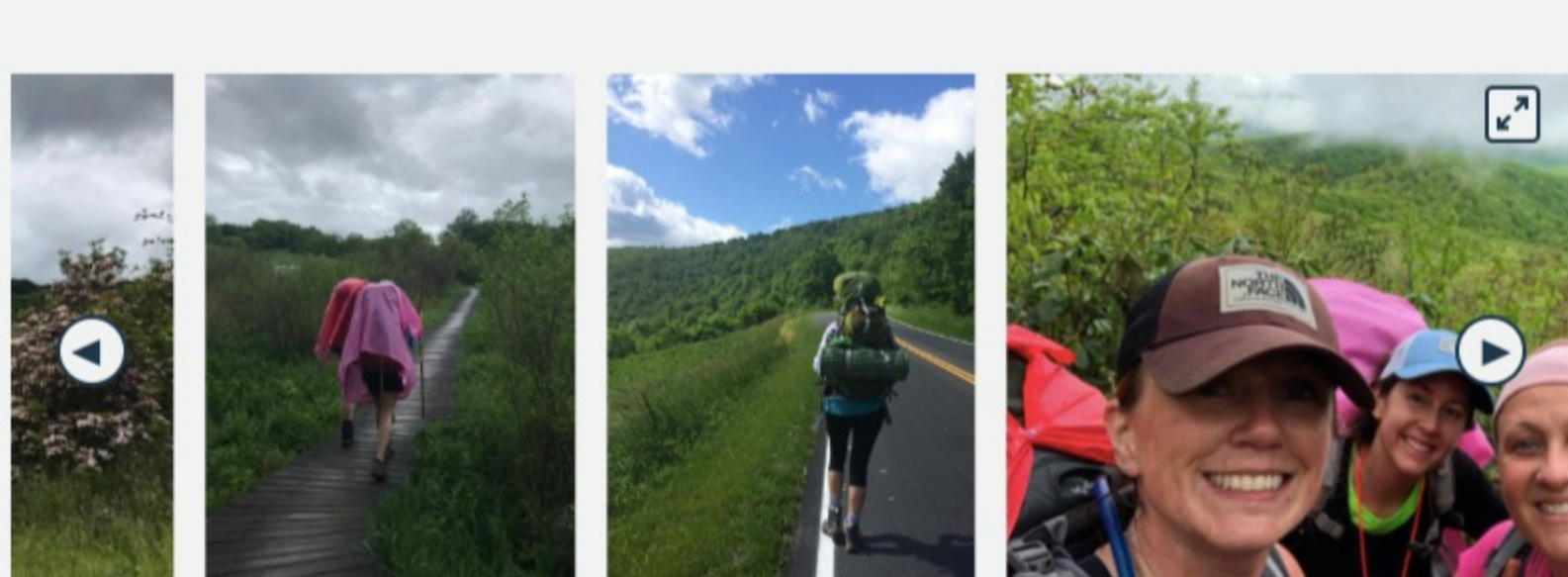
Working through low points on the trail can be a challenge, but you become better equipped to do so as you gain experience, Jessica explains. During the storm, it became a mental game of having to push herself through. As she did, her confidence level rose and comfort levels adjusted.

What started as potentially a one-time hike easily turned into a lifelong goal and passion for the outdoors. Jessica and Niki have since hosted various backpacking trips for other women in Cincinnati who otherwise wouldn't have had the opportunity or who didn't know what to bring.

"It's amazing to see how empowered others are when they realize it's okay to let yourself be uncomfortable," Jessica says. "You'll move past this discomfort and find this brand-new level of yourself that you're proud of. Everybody should have their hike."

Jessica's Trail Tips

- ▼ Just do it! Many people think they wouldn't like backpacking or couldn't do it. But if you've never done it, you just don't know.
- ▼ Take the time and effort to invest in a good backpack and have it fitted specifically for you. If your backpack isn't adjusted appropriately, you'll be miserable. Same with footwear.
- ▼ Be aware of your surroundings, trust your gut, and always bring some sort of protection.
- ▼ Eat plenty of salt and sugar to keep your body balanced.
- ▼ Pack light. There are no garbage cans on the trails. Everything you bring in, you take out: wrappers, toilet paper, etc.
- ▼ Be present. From the tiny wildflowers to the grand vistas, look around and experience it.
- ▼ Watch out for bear wood!



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