



# GREAT HIKING TRAILS *of the* WORLD

80 TRAILS • 75,000 MILES • 38 COUNTRIES • 6 CONTINENTS

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 American  
Hiking  
Society



# APPALACHIAN TRAIL



## *United States*

The Appalachian Trail, arguably the most famous long-distance path in the world, was actually not created with long-distance hikers in mind.

Benton MacKaye, the visionary who first proposed the idea of an Appalachian trail, was thinking of an entirely different group of people when he dreamed up the idea of a footpath to run the length of the Appalachian Mountains. MacKaye considered physical exertion in the wilderness a path to sanity in an increasingly urban world. He saw industrialization and the smoky, polluted, soul-destroying cities that went with it as a threat to physical and mental health. MacKaye's

idea was to create rural communities and recreational opportunities for respite and rejuvenation—not for quests, conquests, or personal records.

It wasn't until more than 20 years after work on the trail began that the first thru-hiker arrived: in 1948, Earl Shaffer, a veteran of the brutal fighting in World War II's Pacific theater, took to the trail to walk off his wartime memories. It took another 20 years before thru-hikers started coming in any significant numbers. According to Appalachian Trail Conservancy records (which make no distinction between single-season thru-hikers and section hikes completed over a number of years), 14 people completed the trail in the 1950s, 37 in the 1960s, and 775 in the 1970s.

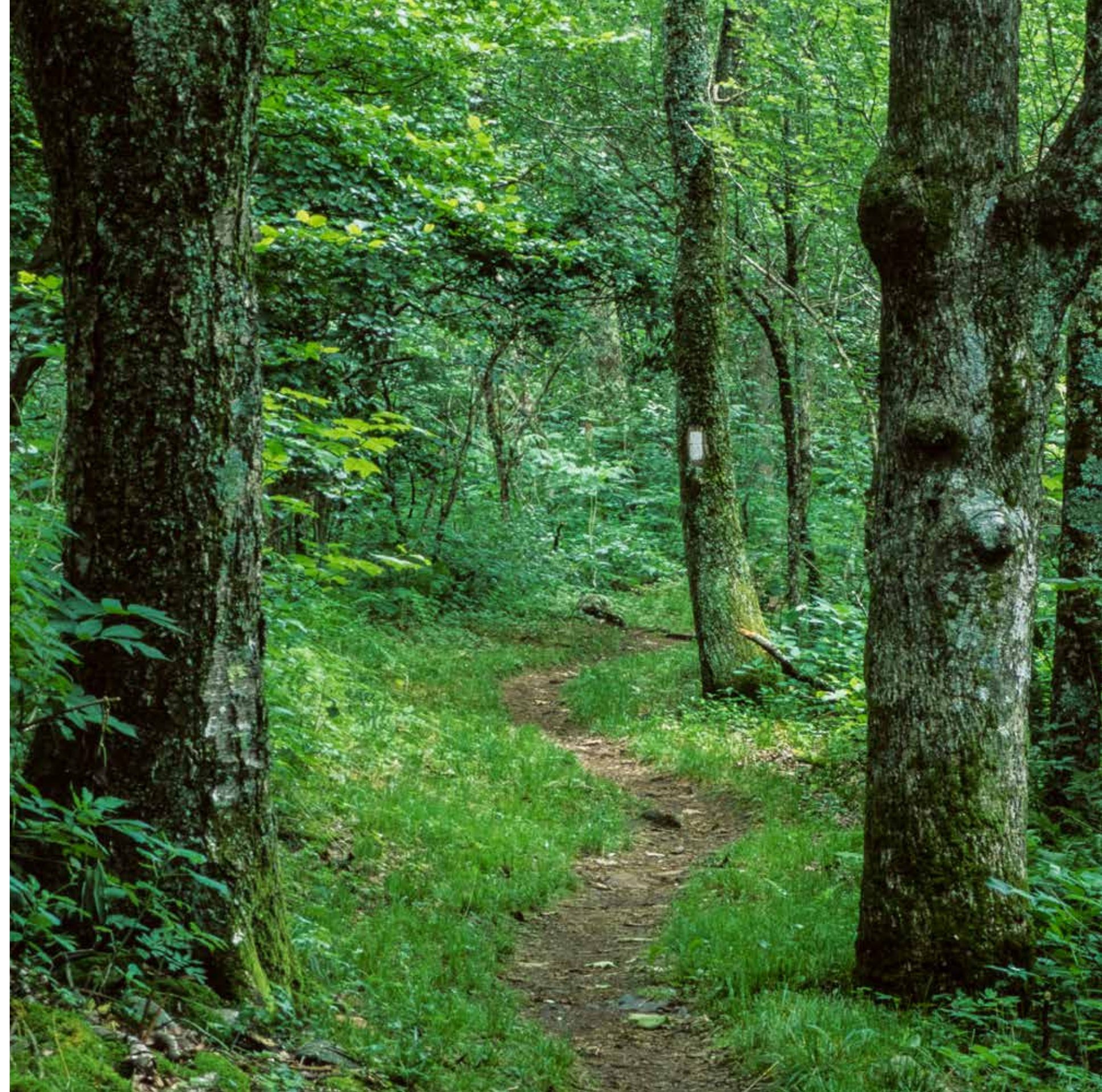
Only in the 1990s did the numbers of end-to-enders (a total of 3,332 throughout the decade) become significant enough to find their way into the popular imagination. Today, some four million people visit the Appalachian Trail each year, perhaps 1,000 of whom complete the entire trail. By far the majority of trail users come for hikes of a few hours, or perhaps a few days.

Located in what was America's first mountain wilderness, the Appalachian Trail has aspects of almost all the key elements that bring walkers to wild places. It is both an accessible and an attractive destination. Located no more than a three-hour drive from most of the major metropolises of the East Coast, much of the trail is remarkably wild. The combination of large tracts of forest and mountains that are accessible to nearby towns for transportation and resupply eases some of the logistical challenges of planning a hiking vacation.

The Appalachians are tired mountains, worn down by time, and long since done with challenging the sky. Topping out under 7,000 feet, they lack the overpowering drama of the big western ranges: there is

Lake Umbagog and  
Barren Ledges, Maine

OPPOSITE  
Appalachian Trail  
through Shenandoah  
National Park, Virginia





no permanent snow on the Appalachian Trail, and few long stretches above tree line. But what the AT lacks in big-mountain majesty, it makes up for with a unique diversity of landscapes, some of which are found nowhere else. The subdued blue ridges of the Great Smoky Mountains are instantly identifiable, as are the rhododendron-covered balds of the Tennessee-North Carolina border. Also instantly identifiable are the rocky ridges of Pennsylvania and the fiercely rugged trails of the White Mountains and western Maine.

In between the mountain landscapes are rural valleys, farmlands, and the forests that give the Appalachian Trail its nickname of “the long green tunnel.” In spring, the palette expands to include redbud, dogwood, azalea, and mountain laurel; in autumn, it means blazing foliage in every shade from purple to yellow.

The AT also offers up a variety of sites that showcase different periods in American history. Mountain life is represented in the folk styles of housing and fencing seen along the route. Civil War history surrounds the trail from Virginia to Pennsylvania; the battlefields and memorials at Harpers Ferry, Antietam, and Gettysburg are close enough to the trail to schedule in a visit. In New England, towns proudly proclaim birthdays that make them older than the United States. Popular imagination sometimes says that the Appalachian Trail follows old Native American paths, but unlike so many other hiking paths, the AT actually follows few historic routes of travel, Native American or otherwise: scrambling up and down virtually every mountain to be found is rarely an efficient way to get from here to there, and many of America’s historic travel ways went east-west across the mountains. North-south routes sensibly avoided the summits and ridges.

Although thru-hikers are only a small minority of Appalachian Trail hikers, they are a highly visible group, especially at the beginning of the season. Compatible hikers form traveling communities, resembling nothing so much as Chaucer’s medieval storytelling pilgrims

Appalachian Trail near  
Little Haystack Mountain,  
New Hampshire







on their way to Canterbury. Indeed, the Appalachian Trail—which has no associations with formal religious pilgrimage—in many ways resembles the ancient pilgrimages more than the ancient pilgrimages themselves. Today’s pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela can be done on a bicycle, and all a pilgrim has to do to earn the revered *compostela* is walk a mere 62 miles. To get the certificate from the Appalachian Trail Conservancy requires walking 2,180 miles—more than 30 times as far.

Like the ancient pilgrimages, a thru-hike of the AT is a months-long affair, a physical journey with a spiritual component—although in the case of some AT hikers, that spiritual component may be at first unintended and little understood. But as the ancient pilgrims knew, walking day after day through nature becomes a spiritual process, whether intended or not. And then there is the aspect of community and the traditions and rituals that community creates. Birth names are dropped in favor of trail names in a bonding process that rebirths the hiker as part of the new community, and allows, if only for a time, a break with the old. Some hikers, hoping to interact on their own terms without the baggage that comes with being known as a doctor, a high school dropout, or even (as has happened) a criminal, manage to hike the entire trail without revealing their real names or discussing their professions.

Other parallels pile on. Like the *albergues* of the Spanish pilgrimage, hostel owners welcome hikers, offering cheap beds and meals. So-called trail angels offer rides and help to stranded hikers, perhaps for the same reason that residents along Japan’s Shikoku Pilgrimage offer small gifts and encouragement. And, as happens along all the major pilgrimage routes, the discussion of the rules of the journey goes on and on, as hikers try to sort out who is doing it right, what it means to do it right, who is cheating, and whether or not anyone cares.

On the AT many of those discussions take place in trail shelters that are spread along the route, each a day’s walk—or less—from the last. The AT is one of the few trails in the United States to have a trail shelter system, although during the high season, hikers need to bring tents because shelter space is limited. The AT has other amenities that endear it to hikers, especially beginners: it’s marked so conscientiously with its signature white blazes, precisely two inches by six, that if you walk more than

a couple of minutes without seeing one, you can assume that somehow you missed a turn. Map and compass skills are rarely used. Loads don’t have to be heavy: every few days, and sometimes even more frequently, there is an opportunity to go off trail to a nearby town to resupply.

All of the foregoing—the community, the shelters, the blazes, the information available, the accessibility—leads prospective long-distance hikers to gravitate to the Appalachian Trail for their first thru-hiking experience. The logic is obvious: lower mountains, a more settled and populated environment, fewer extremes of ecology and climate, more shelters, an established long-distance culture, and plenty of information suggests that the trail will be somehow easy. It is a completely logical conclusion. It is also completely wrong.

“Easy” is in the eye of the beholder: some hikers find going downhill more difficult than going uphill; some hikers find road walking fast and easy while others find it punishing and painful. But however you look at it, physically, there is nothing easy about the Appalachian Trail. It is characterized by a defiant habit of going straight up and down every mountain, hill, or hillock it can find, leading thru-hikers to invent the term PUDs—“pointless ups and downs”—to describe a day filled with small but grueling grinds to viewless summits. Large or small, the elevation changes are relentless: the trail gains (and loses) about 515,000 feet of elevation in its course of nearly 2,200 miles. The profile map is more erratic than a stock market graph.

Yet, at the same time, almost anyone can do it. The oldest person to thru-hike the AT was 81; the youngest was five. The trail has been hiked by families, by several blind hikers, by hikers walking barefoot, even by an amputee using a prosthetic leg; it has been hiked by people hoping to walk off an addiction, a divorce, the passing of a loved one, the loss of a job, or the horrors of war. The community in this wilderness, this rollicking band of modern-day pilgrims, comprises every age, social class, profession, and level of education. Hiking the Appalachian Trail may be about the best way there is to discover America and Americans—not only the hikers, but the local residents, trail angels, trail maintainers, and volunteers, all of whom have made a place in their lives for this thin ribbon that ties together all of the lands and peoples from Maine to Georgia.

Annapolis Rocks, Maryland (top left); Amicalola Falls, Georgia (top right); wild ponies in Grayson Highlands, Virginia (bottom left); Appalachian Trail through cornfield near Boiling Springs, Pennsylvania (bottom right)

**FOLLOWING SPREAD**  
Round Bald, Roan Mountain Highlands, North Carolina



# PACIFIC CREST TRAIL



## United States

The Pacific Crest Trail has historically resided in the long shadow of an older but smaller sibling. Simply put, the Appalachian Trail came first, and with all the advantages of a firstborn, it enjoys an iconic status in the world of long-distance hiking.

But there is room for more than one iconic trail in our collective imagination, and in recent years, the Pacific Crest Trail has stepped up to play its trump card. Trail boosters call it the “Everest of hiking trails.” And they have good reason. As the real estate agents say: location, location, location.

The PCT’s 2,780-mile-long path from Mexico to Canada traverses most of the pinnacle wildernesses and mountain ranges of the West Coast of the United States. A *New York Times* best-selling memoir and a major motion picture brought the trail into the public spotlight. Having hooked the attention of the outdoors world, the PCT will have no trouble keeping it: with its superb mountain landscape, the trail no longer sits meekly as a western counterpart to a famous sibling from back east. The PCT has come into its own.

And about time, for this is a very different trail—more wild, less peopled, more scenic, less convenient. It has all of the aspects of a great long trail: an element of pilgrimage, mountains, wilderness, other varied landscapes, culture, and history. But the proportions and overall effect are different.

Here, the journey is less about a community of pilgrims traveling together with rituals intact and more about the shrines themselves: the great cathedrals of wilderness that have given America its understanding of what this wilderness means and why it is important. Much of this understanding was honed right here in the lands adjoining the Pacific Crest Trail. Would we even have wilderness without John Muir and Ansel Adams?

The PCT passes through their eponymous wilderness areas, and through other lands they worked to save. The place names are legendary, one after the other: Yosemite and Kings Canyon, the Mojave Desert, Mount Hood, Mount Rainier, Crater Lake, the North Cascades, all—in the words of trail founder Clinton C. Clarke—“strung like pearls, the mountain ranges of Washington, Oregon, and California. The Pacific Crest Trail is the cord that binds this necklace, each gem encased in a permanent wilderness protected from all mechanization and commercialization.”

This is a place where the landscape dwarfs everything, including the humans who have sought to cross it, and the history they have left behind. Partly, this is because the trail deliberately avoids areas of settlement. The high mountains are inhospitable for most kinds of development, and many of the ridges along the PCT’s route are protected as wilderness. In those areas that have been settled, the local history tells us not heroic tales of how humans imposed their will on the land, but rather stories of hardship. Donner Pass, through which Interstate 80 now passes, reminds us of our vulnerability in the face of nature’s wrath. The California Gold Rush mountain towns tell tall tales of nature’s immense riches, and the equally immense struggle to claim them. Life on the edge of the Mojave is a scrappy affair, harsh and dusty, as seen in the hardscrabble settlements that serve as town stops for hikers.

It is that enormous and powerful landscape, ultimately, that defines the Pacific Crest Trail. Each of its component parts—its mountains, its deserts, its old-growth forests—is almost a platonic ideal. The mountains of the Sierra define what mountains ought to be; the old-growth forests of northern Washington are the epitome of great trees.



Deep Creek,  
Hot Springs, California



An overview of the PCT's landscapes can barely scratch the surface: from south to north, the trail passes through the desertlike mountains of the Laguna, San Jacinto, San Bernardino, and San Gabriel ranges before crossing a spur of the Mojave Desert and climbing into the Tehachapis. That adds up to a journey of four to six weeks, during most of which the hiker will be consumed with thoughts about water: where the next water will be found, how much water to carry, how much is left in a canteen.

The trail's character completely changes in the High Sierra, where thru-hikers usually find themselves navigating snowy passes and raging mountain streams in

Lost Lake, California

**OPPOSITE**  
Descent into Whitewater  
Canyon, California





one of the world's most pristine mountain wildernesses. Here, the PCT follows the John Muir Trail for nearly 200 miles through Sequoia and Kings Canyon and Yosemite National Parks, passing just below 14,494-foot Mount Whitney (hikers can take a side trip to the summit of this highest point in the contiguous 48 states) before bounding over a series of high passes between 10,000 and 12,000 feet in elevation, each more spectacular than the one before. Later in the summer, this stretch of trail becomes one of the most beloved hiking areas in the United States.

North of Yosemite, the trail continues through the rest of the Sierra before entering the volcanically unstable North Cascades, passing within sight, and sometimes on the slopes of, 11 glaciated cones that line up like sentries: Lassen, Shasta, the Three Sisters, Jefferson, Hood, Saint Helens (off to the side), Adams, Rainier, and Glacier Peak.

The statistics are nothing short of astonishing: according to the Pacific Crest Trail Association, the trail crosses 57 major mountain passes, dips into 19 major canyons, and passes more than 1,000 lakes and tarns. Land units include four national monuments, five state park units, six national parks, seven Bureau of Land Management field offices, 25 national forest units, and 48 federal wilderness areas.

To hike the trail in one season is an enormous challenge. The long length combined with the short snow-free window of the high country forces hikers to maintain a rigorous pace: 20-mile days are common. And to hike in a single season, most thru-hikers encounter some combination of extreme heat in the desert, extreme cold in the mountains, and many miles of sometimes frightening travel on snow and ice. Nonetheless, the number of prospective thru-hikers on the PCT has grown exponentially in recent years, continuing the trend of increasing interest seen since the 1970s, and fueled by recent high-profile media attention.

As with the Appalachian Trail, the vast majority of hikers on the PCT are day hikers or weekenders, followed by those out for journeys of a few days to a few weeks. The trail's location near the metropolises of the West Coast—and in some of the most spectacular national parks and wildernesses of the West—makes it a popular getaway, providing the sort of rejuvenating wilderness respite that is at the heart of the long-distance hiking movement in the United States.



Thousand Island Lake,  
Ansel Adams Wilderness,  
California

**FOLLOWING SPREAD**  
Pacific Crest Trail through  
Mount Hood National  
Forest, Oregon (left);  
Tipsoo Lake, Chinook Pass,  
Washington (top right); pond  
in Goat Rocks Wilderness,  
Washington (bottom right)







# CONTINENTAL DIVIDE TRAIL



## *United States*

On a relief map of the United States, a jumble of brown bumps fills most of the West. If you look in the middle of that jumble—in New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana—you will find a line that snakes from the Mexican border north to Canada. It is not a line of state boundaries, nor international ones (the line continues both south and north of American borders). It is a geographic boundary between east and west: the Continental Divide.

Stand on top of it, face west, and pour some water out from your canteen. The water will fall downslope, and head to the Pacific Ocean. If you face east, the water will go to the Atlantic—at least in theory. In reality, your cup of water will probably puddle into the ground and disappear a few inches beneath your feet. But on a grand scale, if not always visible to the eye, the Continental Divide separates the Atlantic and Pacific Watersheds.

It is both a powerful idea and a powerful reality. During the decades of America's westward exploration and migration, the Continental Divide stood as the great barrier to the West. Carriages, walkers, railroads, roads, tunnels: all had to cross it, and it was never easy. Through most of the 19th century, only two passages allowed for significant routes of travel: the Butterfield Stage Route crossed the Continental Divide in southwestern New Mexico, and the Oregon Trail crossed at South Pass in Wyoming. Today, there are roads and railroads and tunnels, but even so, some of the passes are closed in winter. The Divide remains a formidable obstacle.

Hikers who tackle the Continental Divide Trail from Mexico to Canada hug this intimidating 3,100-mile landmark, sometimes just to the east, sometimes to the west, and sometimes walking right on top of it, challenging the heavens for miles at a time. The Divide runs through five western states, 25 national forests, 21 wilderness areas,

three national parks, one national monument, eight Bureau of Land Management resource areas, and five states—Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico. Along with the Appalachian Trail and the Pacific Crest Trail, the Continental Divide Trail is one of the three so-called Triple Crown hiking trails. But it differs from the other two in that it is not yet complete, requiring hikers to do significant amounts of route planning and navigating. (Approximately 75 percent of the trail is considered to be in its more or less permanent location, with another 25 percent following a combination of dirt roads, temporary trails, and cross-country routes.)

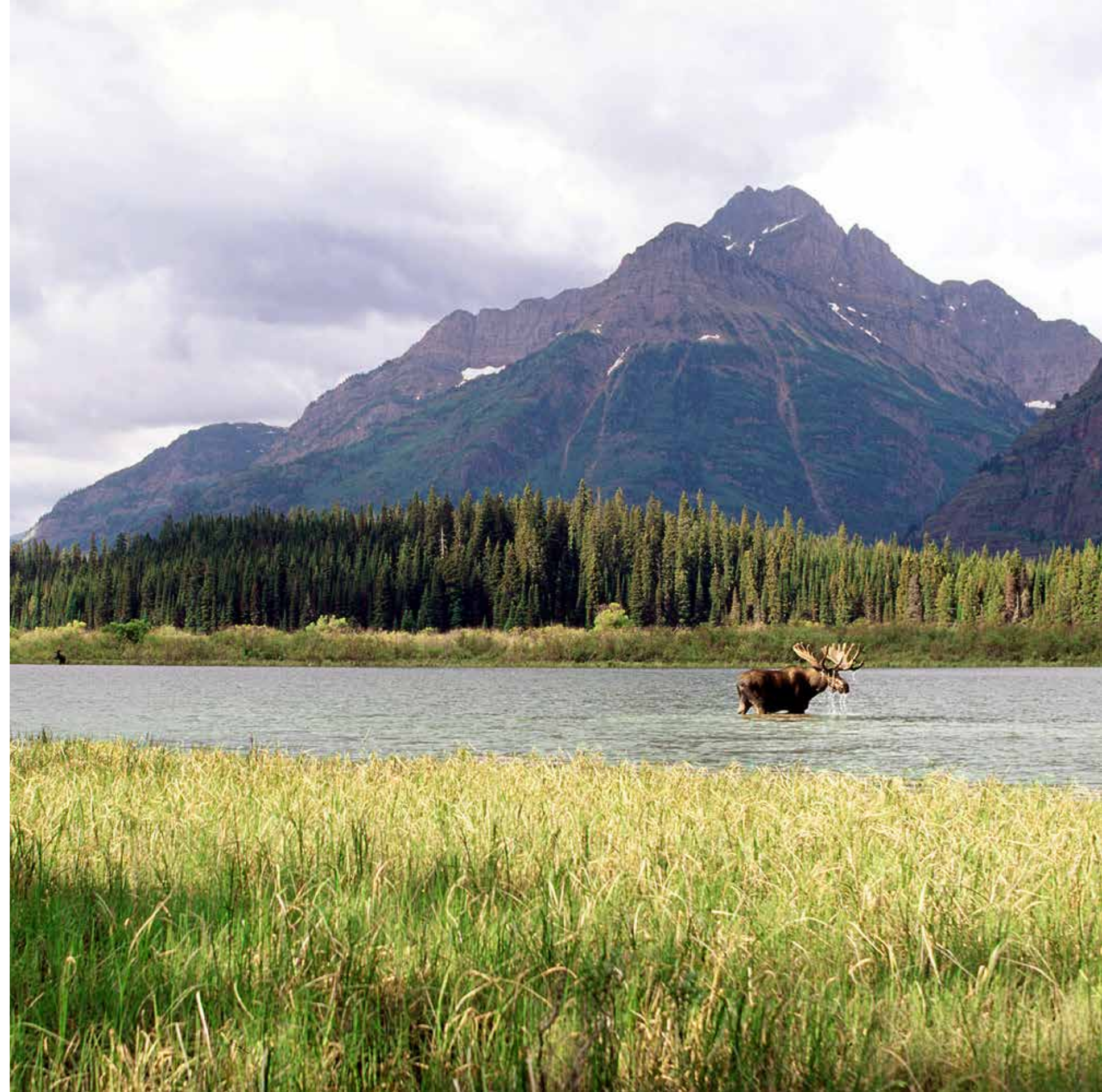
Another difference is its remote location: unlike the AT, which is a short drive from many of the East Coast's most populated areas, and the PCT, which is accessible from Seattle, Portland, Sacramento, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego, the CDT is close only to Denver and Albuquerque. As a result, far fewer people—current estimates are between 150 and 200—attempt thru-hikes of the trail every year. In its more remote sections, day hikers and weekend hikers are few and far between: it is possible to hike a week or more and not see another backpacker.

This is a trail that offers an increasingly rare experience—not only wilderness, but isolation. The John Muir Trail in California—where you can hike for more than a week without seeing a road, a telephone pole, or a place to grab a hamburger and a shower—may be a more complete wilderness experience. But in midsummer, hikers share the JMT's wilderness with hundreds of others. On most of the CDT, you're more likely to cross the occasional road, but less likely to share a campsite.

The Divide also gives hikers plenty of opportunities to ponder the relationship between humans and the mountains. Miners, traders, settlers, and railroad builders did not always move gently on this land, and

Bull moose, Kootenai Lake, Glacier National Park, Montana

FOLLOWING SPREAD  
Chimney Rock, Ghost Ranch, New Mexico





the Divide is sometimes littered with the detritus of history. Some, like old mines, excite the imagination: there could still be gold and silver in these hills, untold riches just there for the taking. Other remains, like boom-and-bust mining towns, decrepit and rotting, tell the downside of the same story. On an open stretch in Wyoming's Great Divide Basin, a settler's cabin sits in solitary decay, surrounded by the dusty dun earth under a blazing sky, the only soundtrack a howling wind. What would it have been like to live here? To anchor one's hopes and dreams in such a hostile, unlikely place? Farther north, the Northern Rockies remind us of the early explorers like Jim Bridger, who came this way a mere 200 years ago and brought back tales of landscapes so extreme, so weird, so utterly different that his reports were thought to be myths and fables. "We don't publish fiction" was the acerbic response of one East Coast editor to an article in which Bridger described the wonders of Yellowstone.

Ranging in elevation from 4,200 to 14,200 feet, the Continental Divide Trail crosses a remarkable variety of ecosystems. New Mexico is arid, with long stretches traversing wide-open spaces covered with creosote, mesquite, ocotillo, and the ubiquitous prickly pear. Interrupting the arid drylands are greener higher places like the Gila Wilderness and the San Pedro Parks Wilderness; adding color and variety is the red and gold high-desert landscape of Abiquiu, most famously painted by Georgia O'Keeffe. In Colorado, hikers head straight uphill to the 10,000-foot elevation, and stay there—and higher—for some 700 miles. Colorado's CDT is one of the longest sustained high-country hikes in the world, following endless above-tree-line ridges with views of more and yet more mountains stretching as far as the eye can see. Wyoming's Divide is split into two distinct sections. The southernmost part includes a fierce and dry basin, around which the Continental Divide itself actually splits into two semicircles to form the Great Divide Basin. Hikers usually follow the basin's East Rim to South Pass, where the two prongs of the Divide rejoin. This is where the Oregon Trail settlers, the Mormon immigrants, and the Pony Express crossed the Continental Divide as they made their way to the Willamette Valley in Oregon, California, or Salt Lake City, Utah. The next section includes the spectacularly beautiful Wind River Mountains and Yellowstone







National Park. In Idaho and Montana, the trail is in the Northern Rockies ecosystem, explored by Lewis and Clark. Highlights include the Anaconda-Pintler, Scapegoat, and Bob Marshall Wildernesses, and a grand finale at Glacier National Park. An entire thru-hike needs to be completed in about five to five-and-a-half months in order to fit into the snow-free window.

With the growing interest in long-distance hiking trails and the fact that the Continental Divide offers the chance to backpack through some of America's most dramatic mountain landscapes, it only stands to reason that traffic will continue to increase as the number of thru-hikers from other trails look for new adventures, and as new sections of trail continue to be built. For the moment, though, the CDT is a rarity—still underused and less well known, yet offering an experience that takes hikers into the heart of the western mountain landscape, its variety of ecosystems, and its history.

**OPPOSITE**  
Waterfall in Wind River Range, Wyoming

Trail along Thunderbolt Mountain, Deerlodge National Forest, Montana

