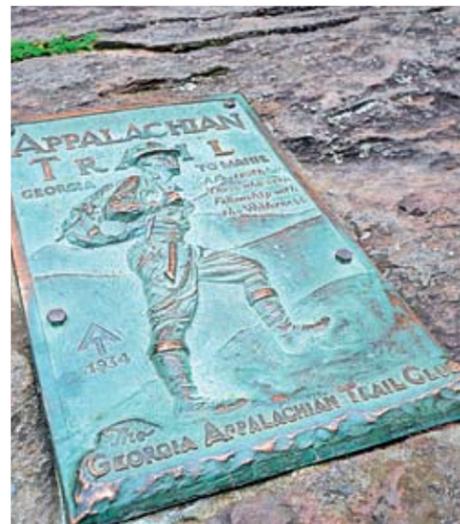


A WALK IN THE WOODS

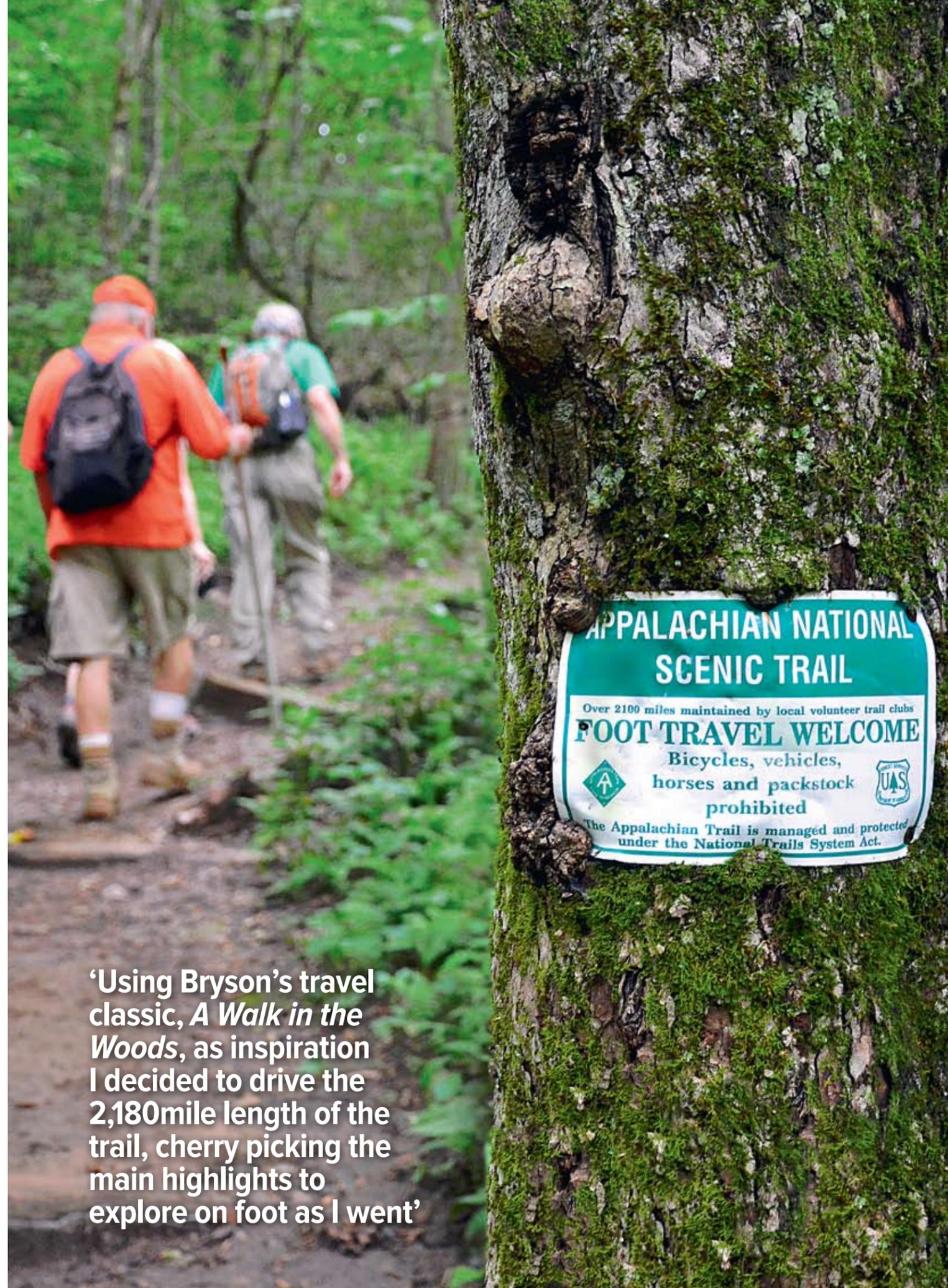
Want to experience the Appalachian Trail but don't have time to hike it all? Forget the backpack and blisters – grab a car, turn on the cruise control and check out the best bits in just two weeks...

WORDS **PHOEBE SMITH** PHOTOGRAPHS **NEIL S PRICE**

**New York
state of mind**
From the top of Bear
Mountain, the AT
continues on for over
a thousand miles



Books, Bryson and boots... Reading up on Bill Bryson's route at Amicalola Falls Lodge (*far left*) where many walkers sign in with Interpretive Manager Heather Wilson (*bottom left*); the sign on Springer Mountain that marks the start of the AT for walkers heading north (the most common direction); blown-out boots hang in the tree at Mountain Crossings; (*right*) the only way to tackle the AT is on foot... or is it?



'Using Bryson's travel classic, *A Walk in the Woods*, as inspiration I decided to drive the 2,180-mile length of the trail, cherry picking the main highlights to explore on foot as I went'

"After the first week my feet had grown from a size eight to a size 11," declared the girl – known unsurprisingly as Superfeet – over breakfast. "They were so swollen and purple that it wasn't new boots I needed, it was clown shoes," she happily continued as most of the other diners slowed their chewing. "And the blisters..." At this point the man next to me dropped the egg on his fork and made an excuse to leave the table.

Such is the conversation around the table of a hikers' hostel along the Appalachian Trail. Especially here in Monson, Maine. By

the time most northbound walkers have reached this point, they'll have hiked all the way from Georgia, over 2,000 miles, for the best part of 5-6 months, across 14 US states. Gone are the niceties of breakfast-appropriate small talk; by this stage, nothing is off limits. And even if it doesn't put you off your pancakes, it's more than enough to make any sane person vow never to thru-hike one of America's oldest long-distance paths.

Only 2,180 miles to go...

Thankfully blisters weren't something I had to worry about. I had already decided that walking that kind of distance was way beyond my capabilities, my budget and – more crucially – my annual leave allocation. Instead, using Bill Bryson's travel classic *A Walk in the Woods* as my inspiration (in which he decides, three states in, that the AT

is too large an undertaking and decides instead to do prime chunks of it), I'd already hired a car to drive the length of the trail instead, cherry picking the main highlights to explore on foot as I went.

"Sounds like a good idea to me," agreed Tom Lamb, member of the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club, as we hiked together up Springer Mountain, the trail's southern terminus, on the first day of my AT journey. Tom began walking the trail with his son Murray back in 2004, starting at the northern end on Katahdin mountain in Maine. He put in over 100 miles and 28 days but then decided to come home. "It became a job," he explained. "You're under time constraints and have to do the same thing every day no matter how you feel. Doing it in sections is much more fun – you can actually enjoy the experience." ▶

Wild woods
(clockwise) The stone summit shelter on the ominously named Blood Mountain, Georgia; the hikers' nickname for the Appalachian Trail is the 'green tunnel' and it's easy to see why; the highest point of the trail is Clingman's Dome, in the Smokies; a pileated woodpecker chows down; a black bear in Shenandoah National Park, Virginia



‘Lacing up my boots I hit the trail and within five steps from the

car park I had left the road and been swallowed up by trees’

◀ We were certainly doing that now. Whereas most thru-hikers have to start at the more accessible Amicalola Falls State Park and hike an 8.5 mile approach trail before they even reach the official start of the route, we had made use of an unpaved forestry road to take us almost within a mile of Springer's summit. We strolled, in no particular hurry, with small, light daypacks on our backs. Cicadas hummed, a refreshing breeze tickled my neck, and slices of sunlight broke through the leaves and fragmented on the forest floor as though bouncing off a disco ball. At the top a simple plaque informs you that thousands of miles of trail lie ahead, each marked by a rectangular white blaze. Navigationally the AT isn't too technical an undertaking, but that doesn't mean that people don't drop out; statistically, of the

3,000 or so thru-hikers who start each year, only 25% finish. This was underlined at my next stop, 30 miles north: a hostel and gear shop called Mountain Crossings. Located on the first proper road to cross the AT, it offers an easy escape route for those who've already had enough. I arrived to find boots dangling from the tree branches and a noticeboard plastered with shuttle company adverts offering to rescue hikers from months of misery. "We do get lots of drop outs here," said Jason Hulsey, one of the live-in staff, who has thru-hiked the trail. "Some of the boots in the tree are from people who gave up, but inside we hang the boots of those who made it all the way – like a hall of fame." Eager to get some more boot-miles in myself, I laced mine up and hit the trail, bound for Blood Mountain. Within five

steps I had left the road and been swallowed up by trees. The AT is known as the 'green tunnel' as most of the route leads under branches; when the canopy parts to show open sky hikers get very excited. And I did too when, from the top of Blood Mountain, I had a view over the forest that seemed to stretch on forever.

Picking up the pace

Back in the car, I drove into North Carolina and stopped at Nantahala Outdoor Center. Here, in the hot summer sunshine, people were drifting down the river in inflatable tubes and restaurants bulged with hikers drinking beer, aptly brewed in Bryson City, while dangling their tired feet in the water. After crossing Fontana Dam, the trail leaves the road and heads into the trees of Great Smoky Mountains National Park,

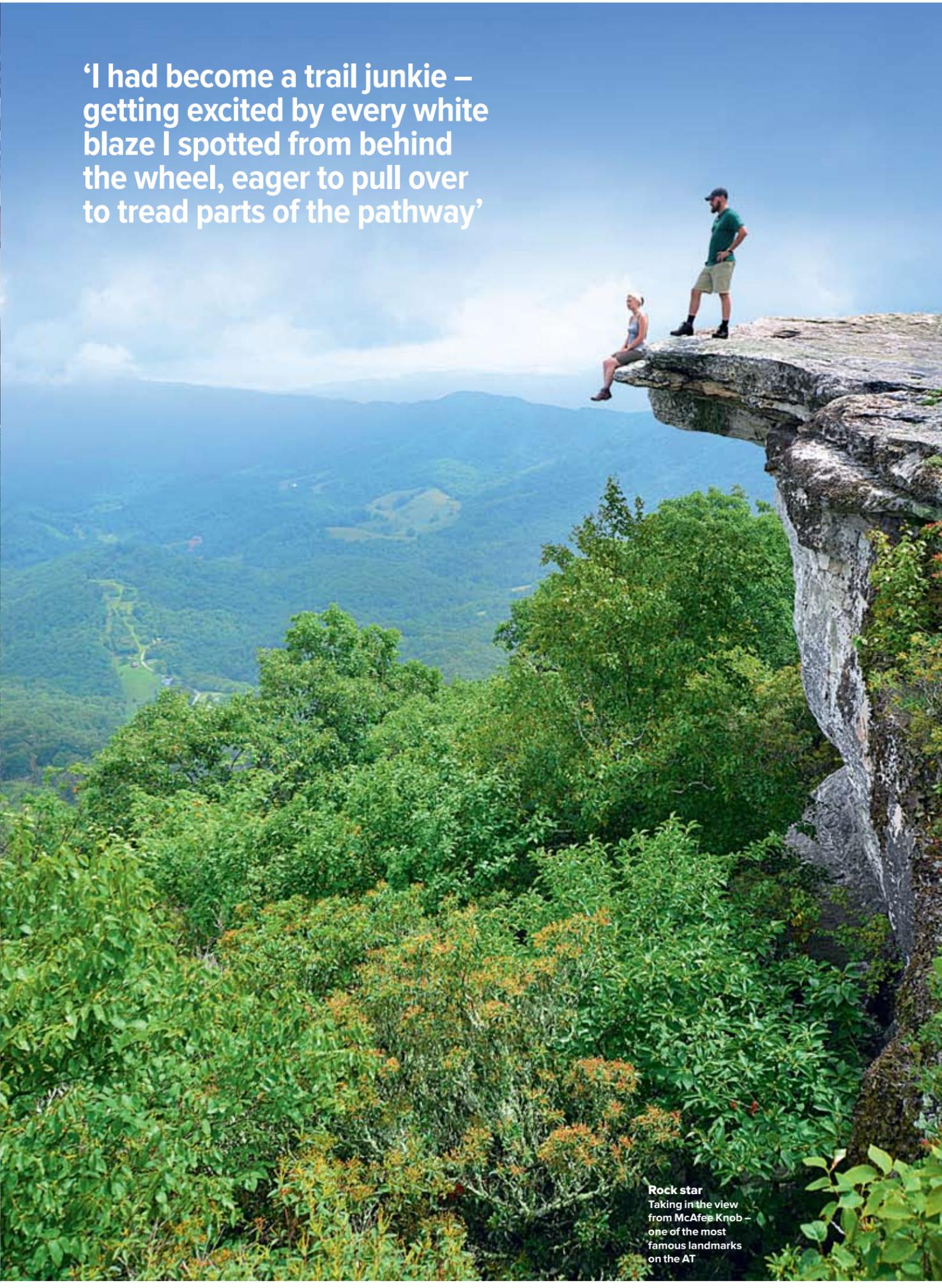
where it constantly crosses between North Carolina and Tennessee. As I arrived, a thunderstorm blew in. The rain hammered on the hot tarmac with such ferocity that the road itself started to steam. When it eased I swapped tyres for trail once more and hiked up Clingman's Dome – the highest point on the whole AT – just in time to see the mountains before they disappeared into the darkening sky. Leaving the Smokies a funny thing happens. Suddenly you're not in the woods anymore, but in a sprawling jungle of neon lights and concrete buildings: Gatlinburg. This was where Bryson realised just how long the AT is, and concluded he couldn't do the whole thing as a thru-hike. By now, I was on day four and felt like I'd made a good dent in the mileage; however, a few hours later in the small town of

Hot Springs – the first time I saw a map of the entire route – I realised I wasn't even a quarter of the way through. If I wanted to finish this, I would need to pick up the pace. Before I left town, though, I stopped at Sunnybank Inn, one of the oldest hiker hostels on the trail. It's run by Elmer Hall, who walked the AT in 1976. "The biggest change has been in numbers," he explained as he creaked in a rocking chair on the porch, wafting away flies with his hand. "Back then there were only a handful of us doing it; maybe 30 people finished. We did it for the solitude, to be alone with nature, now it's much more of a social thing." **Living vicariously** The trail doesn't get more social than my next stop – Damascus, Virginia. Home to winemakers (who produce an Appalachian

Sunset rosé), breweries (whose trucks offer lifts to beer-deprived thru-hikers) and a top coffee shop (Mojoe's), Damascus is known as the friendliest town on the trail. So it wasn't surprising when I met a master brewer who told me he'd decided to stop thru-hiking three years ago and settle down here. He's not the only one to find a place he loves via the trail. The next day I hiked up to perhaps the most iconic landmark on the AT – McAfee Knob – with Andrew Downs. After thru-hiking several years ago, Andrew opted not only to move closer to the path but got a job at the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, the organisation responsible for maintaining it. This theme continued in Shenandoah National Park where – while watching a black bear mooching along just metres in front of me – I met a ranger called Woody. ▶



‘I had become a trail junkie – getting excited by every white blaze I spotted from behind the wheel, eager to pull over to tread parts of the pathway’



Meet the Thru-Hikers

Every year around 3,000 people start on the Appalachian Trail intending to thru-hike it, only 1 in 4 will complete it. Even after they finish, most find some way of remaining on the trail – if only in spirit. We met some of them...

Clockwise from top left

A group of five thru-hikers we met at Pawling, New York – (from left) Trial and Error (a couple who were doing their first half starting in Pennsylvania and had only been on the trail 5 weeks), Whoopie and Squirt who’d met and fell in love on the trail (now 4 months into their hike), and John Wayne Jr (also 4 months in); the legendary Elmer, who thru-hiked back in the ‘70s before the proper path was established as it is today, now welcomes hikers to his hostel in Hot Springs; Frank ‘Copperhead’ Wright who thru-hiked it in 2000 and now volunteers to maintain the first (or the last) mile of the AT in Georgia; Little Bean and Gadget Girl currently walking the trail, who had met and become friends on the way; Murray ‘Lazarus’ Lamb who thru-hiked in 2004 after finishing 6 years of active service in the US Navy; Kim aka ‘Hippie Chick’ and Jarrod aka ‘Poet’ Hester with their daughter ‘Little Chick’ who thru-hiked in 2008 and now run Shaw’s Hiker Hostel in Monson, Maine.



Rock star
Taking in the view from McAfee Knob – one of the most famous landmarks on the AT

Appalachian Trail, USA



Out of the woods (clockwise from top left) The cog train on 'bald' Mount Washington dates back to 1868; some of the wildest woods on the trail are found in Baxter State Park, Maine; one of the halfway markers in Pennsylvania; Wayne Crosby of Bluff Mountain Outfitters, Hot Springs (who gave up his thru-hike 27 years ago to settle in the town), shows the AT passport hikers can get stamped as at points along the trail



To greener pastures
The trail crosses Bear Mountain Bridge in New York state, along with cars full of Manhattanites escaping the city

Now retired and living in Colorado, Woody volunteers here during the summer in order to meet thru-hikers. "I know I'll never do it myself, but I enjoy living vicariously through them," he confessed as we watched the large bear pad silently into the bushes.

"Most people are going through a transition when they walk the trail," agreed Laurie Potteiger, who featured in Bryson's book and who thru-hiked in 1987. "But there are other reasons why people do it. When *Wild* came out, the film about the Pacific Crest Trail, we had an increase in numbers. And then there was what we call the 'Bryson effect' when his book came out; we expect numbers to increase further after the film."

Eager to beat the crowds I continued north, whisking through Maryland (where the trail crosses the freeway, via an arched metal bridge), Pennsylvania (home of the AT Museum where I learned about 'Grandma Gatewood' who thru-hiked solo in 1955, aged 67, in a pair of hi-top trainers) and New Jersey (where the mapping is so bad that a woman with a guidebook struggled to confirm even our car park location).

By the time I reached New York state I had become a trail junkie – getting excited by every white blaze I spotted from behind the wheel, eager to pull over to tread parts of the pathway. I did so at Bear Mountain, a popular weekend escape for Manhattanites who utilise the AT to reach the summit.

"They say around three million people visit a part of the trail each year," said Sona Mason from the New York Trail Conference, as we climbed up the well-worn path to the top (currently being re-routed due to erosion). Looking down at the swarms of city folk picnicking, swimming and dragging reluctant family members uphill in the heat, it looked like 2.99 million of them were here today. Around us wild bush turkeys clucked nosily as they fought to share the path too. It was all very beautiful, but I was keen to push on and lose the crowds. ▶

Big finish

All northbounders end their AT journey on the summit of Katahdin, but when you're 'Bryson-ing' the trail you can do it in a more relaxed way



'I stood watching some thru-hikers while the sun blazed above, illuminating the AT markers like white jewels, all pointing north'

◀ Bald and beautiful

Following backroads, I plunged back into woodland. I caught glimpses of the trail as I bounded through Connecticut. I watched Appalachian hardwood trees merge into sub-alpine boreal forest on the summit of Massachusetts' Mount Greylock – capped, rather oddly, with a stone lighthouse. Then I temporarily lost my way when the AT joined and shared its route with Vermont's older 438 mile Long Trail.

However, the biggest highlight was waiting in New Hampshire. Ask most thru-hikers which is their favourite section of the trail (I did) and most name this state, and in particular the Franconia Ridge and the Presidential Range. Why? The absence

of trees. Indeed, even after 12 days I was looking forward to some 'bald' mountaintops.

With thunder hitting the Franconia Ridge, I set my sights on the highest of the Presidentials, Mount Washington – once said to be home to 'the worst weather in the world'. Today, however, it was basking in full sunshine.

The walk up would take a whole day, and the drive up was unappealing given my already epic-length road trip, so I opted to take the cog train. Dating back to 1868, it is one of the steepest rack railways in the world; moving at a little over 2.5 miles an hour, it was the perfect way to take in the scenery. Around me, treeless peaks spread out like a crumpled

green blanket – I felt like I could reach out and smooth them with a single gesture.

On Washington's top is a museum explaining the extreme climate the mountain usually experiences. Outside I stood beneath the summit watching some thru-hikers approaching while the sun blazed overhead, illuminating the AT markers like white jewels, all pointing north.

The Maine event

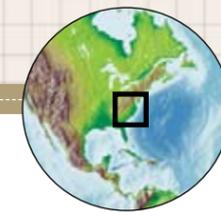
With two days and one state left I had nearly finished – but Maine is a truly sprawling state. Its roads are slower, the distances between its towns greater and the towns themselves tiny. I was bound for Monson, a place where hikers are the lifeblood of the community. It sits on the edge of the 100 Mile Wilderness, an untamed expanse of trees, and the final big challenge for thru-hikers before they summit Katahdin.

"Hikers are different when they reach this point," said Kim Hester, who co-owns Shaw's Hiker Hostel with her husband Jarrod, and thru-hiked in 2008. "If they're going south they've just done the wilderness and are normally fairly quiet as they reflect on that and the journey ahead. If they're north-bounders, they're confident and less excited about talking to us about it."

I certainly found this to be true at breakfast. Everyone was more subdued – apart from our friend Superfeet, who delighted in shocking the non-thru-hikers with her blister stories. And, on my final day on the trail, I felt a little pensive myself, sad to be leaving what had become such a large part of my life for the past 14 days.

Due to bad weather, the summit of Katahdin eluded me. But I didn't want to give up, so in a final act of 'Bryson-ing' the trail, I decided to cover the last section by seaplane. As we soared, I saw two tiny dots – actually thru-hikers – disappear into the trees. Then the pilot gestured ahead: it was Katahdin, surrounded by a fluffy feather boa of cloud, every bit the showstopper.

Back on land, I was driving past the entrance to the 100 Mile Wilderness when a lone woman – a thru-hiker – stuck out her thumb. I pulled over and she hopped in. Having been starved of conversation for days, she was like a geyser, her words spewing out in an uncontrollable burst. She talked of moose encounters, lake swimming, falling asleep to rustling leaves and howling wolves, standing alone on mountain tops engulfed in wilderness. Indeed, she gushed effusively, non-stop, until she left the car. It was enough to make a perfectly sane person decide that one day, just maybe, they would in fact come back, minus the car, to attempt a thru-hike for themselves. █



Appalachian Trail, USA Footnotes

VITAL STATISTICS

Trail HQ: Harpers Ferry, West Virginia
Trail length: About 2,180 miles
States crossed: 14 (Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine)
Time: GMT-4 (Mar-Nov GMT-5)
Visas: UK nationals require an ESTA (US\$14; valid for two years; Apply at least 72 hours before travel; <https://esta.cbp.dhs.gov/esta/>)
Money: Dollar (\$), around \$1.58 to the UK£

When to go

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec

- Start of thru-hiking season. North-bound hikers start early from Georgia to avoid summer heat; south-bounders wait until June for snow to clear in Maine.
- Good weather in all states. Humid in south. Chance to meet thru-hikers.
- **Fall** – Climbing Katahdin and camping in Baxter State Park restricted after 15 Oct.
- **Winter** – Great for southern states or winter sports in north, not good for hiking.

Health & safety

No jabs required. Do not attempt backcountry trails unless able to navigate well with map/compass. Be aware of bears, ticks and changeable weather. Always boil/treat stream water before drinking.

Further reading & information

A Walk in the Woods (1998) by Bill Bryson, a must read; the movie based on it is released 18 September
The Appalachian Trail (Rizzoli, 2012) by Brian B King – archive material and images at attrailstore.org – The Appalachian Trail Conservancy sells trail guides and maps
discoveramerica.com – Invaluable resource for planning a USA trip
nps.gov – US National Parks Service

More online

- Visit www.wanderlust.co.uk/160 for links to more content:
ARCHIVE ARTICLES
- ◆ USA roadtrip: Taking the road less travelled – issue 152
 - ◆ USA's wildest national parks – issue 148
 - ◆ How to read US trailblazing signs – online exclusive
- PLANNING GUIDES**
- ◆ USA Travel Guide

THE TRIP

Getting there

Virgin Atlantic (virgin-atlantic.com) flies direct several times daily to both Atlanta (Georgia) and New York from London Heathrow. Prices start from £589 return; flight time from 7.5 hours.

Getting around

All major car hire companies can be found at Atlanta Airport. The author booked through **Affordable Car Hire** (affordablecarhire.com). Expect to pay around £480 to hire a compact car for 14 days, including one-way drop off charge and unlimited mileage.

Note, all distances here are given in miles rather than kilometres, as is standard in the USA.

Cost of travel

Petrol is **much cheaper** in the US than the UK. Expect to pay around \$2.60/gallon (£1.64). **Entrance fees** to National Parks range from free (Smokies) to \$20 (Shenandoah). Food and drink are also a little cheaper than the UK, prices vary state-to-state but expect to pay around \$10 (£6.30) for a main course and \$10-12 (£6-7.50) for a bottle of wine from a winery and around \$3 (£1.90) for a beer.

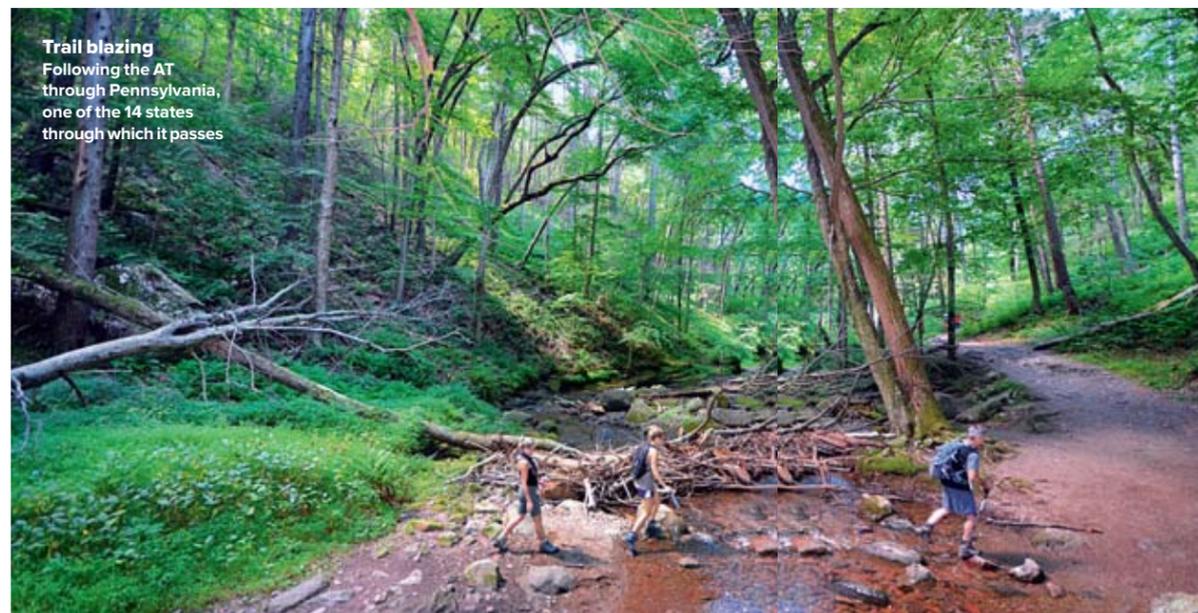
APPALACHIAN TRAIL IN 14 DAYS: State by state

Georgia

Stay: Artmore Hotel, Atlanta (artmorehotel.com), a great base from which to start an AT adventure.
Visit: Amicalola Falls State Park (amicalolafallsstatepark.com) features in the *Walk in the Woods* movie. The Approach Trail, which leads to the start of the AT, is here; browse the sign-in books to see who's currently hiking. Spend a night at the lodge, which has views over the forest.
Hike: Climb Springer Mountain, the start (or end) of the AT; the nearest town is charming Dahlonega.
Stop-off: Mountain Crossings at Neel Gap (mountaincrossings.com) – the AT cuts through the 1930s building. Buy a souvenir, then hike up Blood Mountain.
More info: exploregeorgia.org

North Carolina & Tennessee

Stay: Park Vista, Gatlinburg (parkvista.com) is a good base from which to explore the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, it offers views of the neon jungle and the



Trail blazing
Following the AT through Pennsylvania, one of the 14 states through which it passes

Smokies too. Further north check-in at Sunnybank Inn, Hot Springs (sunnybankretreatassociation.org) to meet the legendary Elmer who cooks gourmet organic vegetarian meals too.
Visit: Fontana Dam (tva.com) features in the film. Here you can follow the trail right across its top. Hike to the trail shelter known as the 'Fontana Hilton'.
Hike: Lots of day-walk options in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park (nps.gov/grsm) including a hike to 2,025m Givinsman's Dome (the AT's highest point).
Stop-off: Go to Hot Springs, North Carolina, where the AT runs down the main street; cross over, then visit Bluff Mountain Outfitters to buy a T-shirt stating you've walked the entire width of the trail.
More info: uk.visitnc.com; tnvacation.com

Virginia

Stay: Dancing Bear Bed & Breakfast in Damascus (melissatnc.wix.com/dancingbearrentals) is well located. While you're in town, go to Mojoe's, which serves the best coffee.
Visit: Shenandoah National Park (nps.gov/shen) offers plenty of walk options; stay at the wonderful Skyland Lodge (goshenandoah.com/lodging/skyland-resort) situated in the park itself. From Damascus, sample the Creeper Trail, a 35-mile downhill cycle route that continuously crosses the AT; Sundog Outfitter (sundogoutfitter.com) rents bikes and runs transfers.
Hike: Climb to McAfee Knob then celebrate with a tour and tasting at Parkway Brewing Company, Salem (parkwaybrewing.com).
Stop-off: Taste local tipples at Abingdon Winery (abingdonwinery.com), home of Appalachian Sunset wine, and Damascus

Brewery (thedamascusbrewery.com).
More info: virginia.org

West Virginia

Stay: Hillbrook Inn & Spa in Charles Town (hillbrookinn.com) is set in beautiful surrounds.
Visit: Harpers Ferry is home to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy HQ (appalachiantrail.org). Learn about the AT, meet volunteers and look through the archives, then explore the historic old town on foot.
Stop-off: Dish in Charles Town (wvdish.com) offers great food and live music.
More info: wvtourism.com

Pennsylvania

Stay: The Shawnee Inn in Shawnee (shawneeinn.com) can arrange canoe trips, island camping and AT section walks; it's about to launch glamping too.
Visit: The small Appalachian Trail Museum (atmuseum.org) in Pine Grove Furnace State Park is a fascinating insight into the AT's history and characters – a must visit.
Hike: Walk to the AT's halfway marker (near the museum), where you can sign a visitors' book.
More info: visitpa.com

New York

Stay: Manhattan's Soho Grand Hotel (sohogrand.com) is a good choice for your last night, before flying home.
Hike: Bear Mountain Inn (visitbearmountain.com) is perfectly placed for a hike up the eponymous peak. Stay overnight and wake early for a sunrise hike. Stroll to the Trails Zoo, which houses animals that can't be returned to the wild; the zoo also marks the AT's lowest elevation point.

Stop-off: Visit Pawling, where the AT crosses a railroad where hikers can catch a train to Manhattan.
More info: iloveny.com

Massachusetts

Stay: Williams Inn, Williamstown (williamsinn.com), is 30 minutes from Mount Greylock.
Visit: Walk in Mount Greylock State Park, where the forest changes from Appalachian to sub-alpine boreal. Check out the oddly placed lighthouse on the summit.
More info: massvacation.com

New Hampshire

Stay: Highland Lake Lodge (outdoors.org) is one of the Appalachian Mountain Club's lodges, a great place to chat to walkers.
Visit: Hike, drive or take the train (thecog.com) to the summit of Mount Washington, weather permitting.
Hike: Walk up Mount Lafayette in Franconia Notch State Park (nhstateparks.org), taking in the Greenleaf Hut.
More info: visitnh.gov

Maine

Stay: Shaw's Hiker Hostel (shawshikerhostel.com) is an institution, and the best place to chat about the AT with those who know it best.
Visit: Take a seaplane over the 100 Mile Wilderness with Carrier's Flying School (carrierflyingsevice.com) for the best views of Katahdin mountain.
Stop-off: Lakeshore House in Monson (thelakeshorehouse.com) has long been serving meals to hungry thru-hikers.
More info: visitmaine.com



TRAIL VOCABULARY

- Thru-hiker** – A person walking the entire trail in one go (average time taken is 5-7 months)
- Section hiker** – A person completing the whole trail in sections, usually over a period of years
- Trail name** – The identity a hiker takes on the trail (this usually comes with an amusing backstory)
- NOBO, SOBO, flip-flop** – A Northbounder (walking Georgia-Maine, the more usual direction), a Southbounder (Maine-Georgia) or a person who starts in the middle, does one half, then returns to the middle to complete the other
- Trail magic** – When something happens at just the right time (eg someone gives you food when you've run out or gives you a ride into town)
- Trail angel** – The person who delivers the trail magic