

A BALK IN THE WOODS

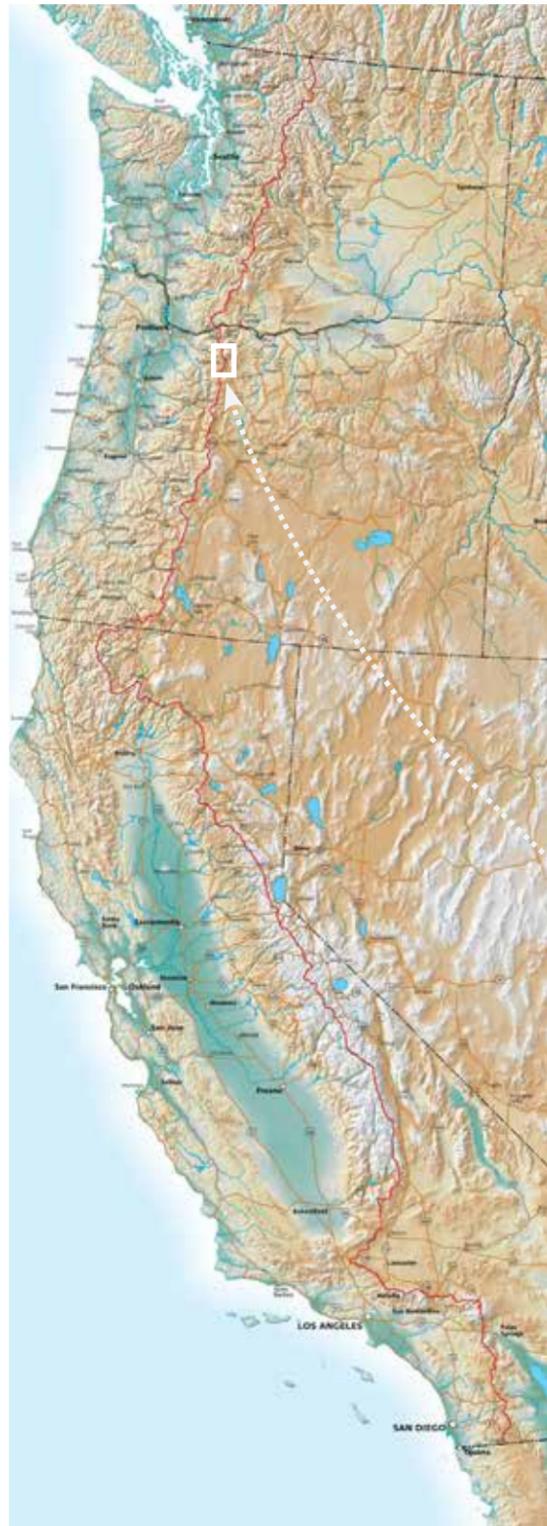


PHOTO: KEN & ANETTA / CREATIVE COMMONS



MT. HOOD

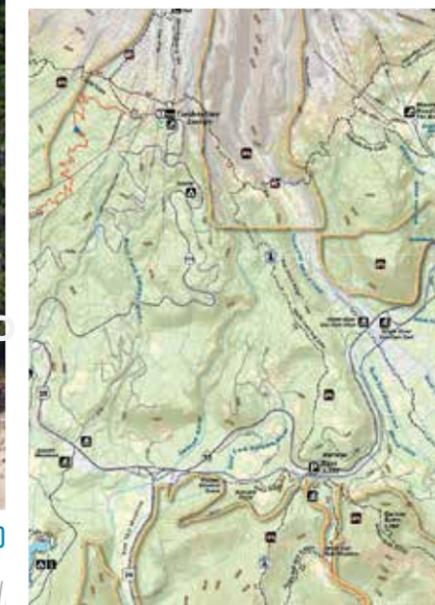
A First-Timer Hikes Part of the Pacific Crest Trail

BY DANA LISE SHAVIN



In 1997, the late David Foster Wallace wrote an essay for Harper's Magazine about his experiences aboard a cruise ship. It was titled *Shipping Out: On the Nearly Lethal Comforts of a Luxury Cruise* and later republished as *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*. It was this later title, and essay, that I found myself thinking about when I awoke in a tent on the Oregon stretch of the Pacific Crest Trail, depressed, cold and not a little bit anxious. My laptop had been stolen on the airplane the day before. My breath was coming out in icy white puffs. And I had three days of mostly uphill hiking ahead of me, shouldering a backpack I'd struggled to lift onto the airport check-in belt the day before. It was the first morning of my first camping trip in over 30 years.

And already, I wanted to go home.



BUT I COULDN'T GO HOME.

I was fulfilling a dream. Ever since I was 15 and hiked with five friends down a short mountain in beautiful weather and ended the day in my own twin bed with my stuffed dog Scorpio, I thought I was the kind of person who would one day hike and camp the length of the Appalachian Trail. Not because I was particularly outdoorsy. Or because I was at all hardy or athletic. I thought I'd hike and camp the AT because tents were adorable and knapsacks were cool-looking and, most of all, there might be horses.

But I am not a camper. Neither, technically, were my traveling companions: my husband, Daryl Thetford, a mental health clinician turned fine artist; Tres Taylor, a research biochemist turned folk art painter and Tres' wife Helene, a former debutante who works with Tres in his art business. To be fair, Tres and Helene had camped once or twice before, most recently for a few days in the Grand Tetons. Everything we knew to do would come from them.

Upon learning of our plan to hike and camp three days and three nights in the Oregon woods without so much as a dry run down our own hallway bearing our borrowed packs (in truth I had tried mine on, but empty, and only to see what I looked like) there came a thunderstorm of mirth, disbelief and warnings from our friends.

"There will be grizzlies!" they cried. "And snakes! You don't have proper shoes! Backpacks are heavy!" In fact, the park service steered us away from bear habitats, we did not see snakes, and we did invest in proper shoes beforehand. But about the backpacks, they were right. They were heavy. Soul-witheringly, mind-alteringly heavy. Reorganizing our packs before setting out, Helene helpfully tossed aside our deodorant, razors, soap, extra chamois towels, and body wipes.

"Everything that seems to weigh nothing, when taken together, weighs something," she said. This philosophical gem, cousin to the injunction to be present to your days because in the end they make up your life, was delivered in a delightfully singsong voice that made us laugh and then ignore the awful truth of it.

We borrowed the rudimentary essentials: a propane cook stove, a water-treatment stick, a tent and sleeping bags. We made a last-minute trip to a sporting



THE AUTHOR AND HUSBAND DARYL THETFORD. POSING WITH FELLOW HIKERS HELENE AND TRES TAYLOR



ZIGZAG CANYON

PHOTO: MICK MCCONNELL / CREATIVE COMMONS



MT. HOOD



goods store for water bladders. These are 2-liter plastic balloon-like receptacles you wear on your back, with a sucking tube (sucker) that allows you to drink while you walk. Because I harbor a longstanding antipathy toward hydrating, which takes the form of the completely indefensible "I don't like the taste of water," the bladder, which weighs almost 4.5 pounds per 2 liters, and whose water becomes tepid within moments of hitting the bag, and whose "suckers" were, to my great dismay, traded indiscriminately among the four of us in the process of filtering stream water, was a special nemesis.

After a final stop at Trader Joe's we were all set with \$150 worth of food — vacuum-packed olives with herbs and lemon, a delicate brie, a robust Australian shiraz, bagels, caramel cookies, crackers, chicken sausage, two kinds of hummus, a half-loaf of ciabatta, several packages of fresh broccoli and cauliflower — most of it perishable and all of it significantly heavier (and arguably less important) than the body wipes I'd secretly snuck back into my pack. This collection of delicacies (minus the wine, which we drank the night before setting out) we stuffed into our already morbidly obese backpacks, and waddled out onto the trail.

The Pacific Crest Trail is approximately 2,650 miles long from end to end. It extends from the Mexico/California border to just over the Washington/British Columbia border. It passes through the Laguna, Santa Rosa, San Jacinto, San Bernardino, San Gabriel, Liebre, Tehachapi, Sierra Nevada and Klamath mountain ranges in California, and the Cascade range in California, Oregon and Washington. Almost every bit of the trail unfolds within the embrace of national forestland and protected wilderness, intersecting with civilization only at certain junctures.

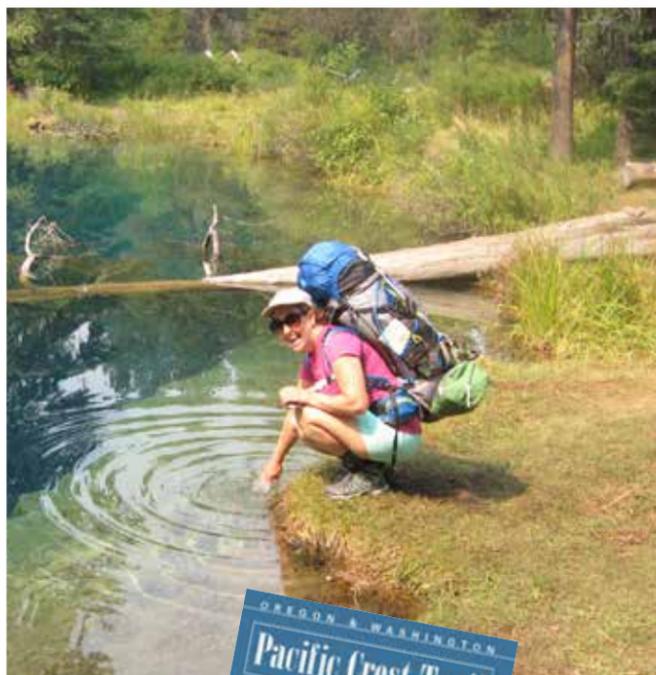
There are numerous hiking trails. You can hike for an hour or a day, or you can, like several hikers we met, start at one border and hike out months later at the other. The best maps are waterproof and compulsively detailed, with distances between campgrounds, elevation information, where to find roads that cross the trail, and the availability of water in the form of streams, rivers, lakes and campgrounds. The paths are minimally but well-marked and maintained, except in winter when heavy snowfall makes them impassable.

WE CHOSE A ROUTE THAT STARTED AT Little Crater Lake campground: elevation 3,230 feet, approximately 75 miles east of Portland. The campground, considered one of the most scenic spots in the Mt. Hood National Forest, is famous for its beautiful 30-foot-deep, icy, clear pond, the result of years of spring water pushing through volcanic rock. We would car-camp there the first night (I thought this meant we would sleep in the car, possibly with the heat on, but this was not the case). From Little Crater Lake, the trail would take us through Wapinitia Pass (elevation 3,910 feet) to Barlow Pass (elevation 4,157 feet) and then spit us out, 20 miles later, at the historic Timberline Lodge (elevation 6,000 feet) on the south-facing side of Mt. Hood.

Mt. Hood is Oregon's largest and most active volcano. This did not stop President Roosevelt, in 1937, from ordering the building of Timberline Lodge as part of the Works Progress Administration. The 55,000-square-foot lodge boasts almost all local stone and timber, with furniture and fixtures carved and forged almost exclusively by hand from oak and iron. Declared a National Historic Landmark in 1977, it is truly a work of art. But to many of the through-hikers we met, who walk 20-30 miles per day, it's most famous for its massive breakfast buffet, which features pancakes, waffles, house-made yogurt and granola, a variety of breads, oatmeal, eggs, quiches and breakfast meats. At \$15, it's an inexpensive way for them to get a start on the 4,000 calories they consume daily.

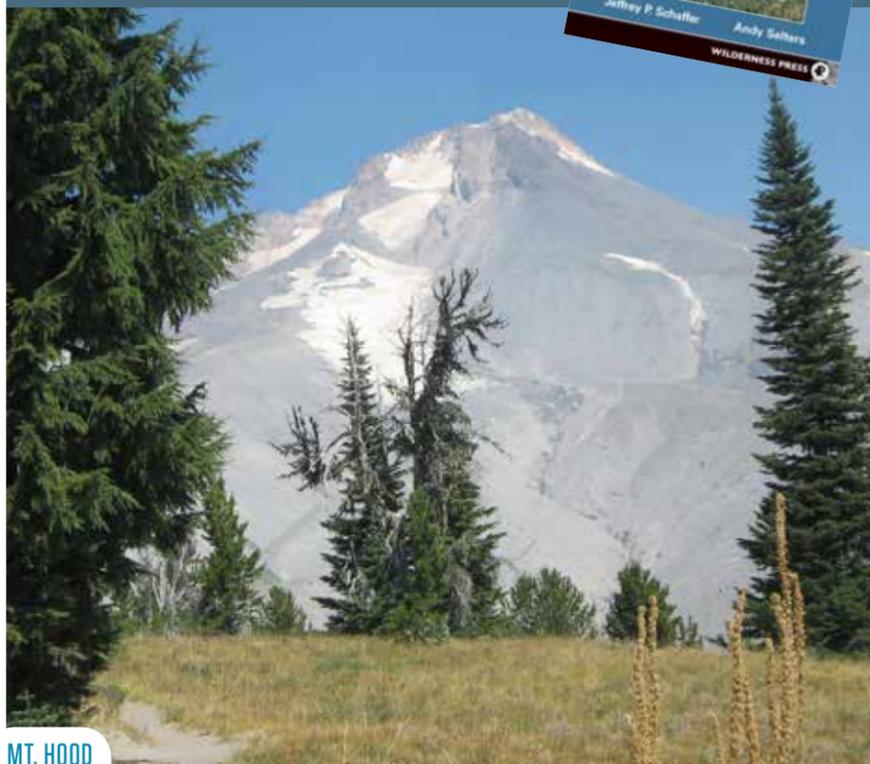
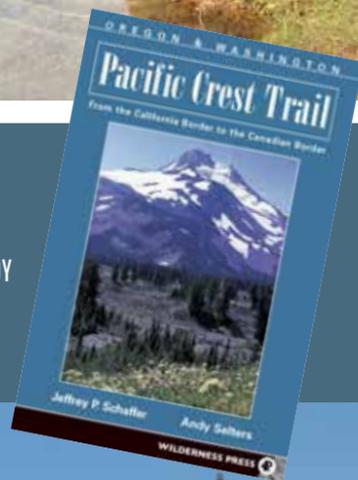
Our first day on the trail, we hiked an arduous, mostly uphill 8 miles. A week earlier I had made the mistake of reading a story in *New York Times Magazine* about a man in excellent physical shape who pushed himself too hard in the weight room and ended up with a torn carotid artery and teetering on the edge of a stroke. I did not know what a carotid artery was or where it might be housed. But I was pretty sure, 30 minutes into our hike, that I could feel mine shredding and a blood clot rapidly building a case against my brain.

Our destination that first day was Frog Lake campground, where Tres hoped to snag a few trout for our supper and the hardest of us (i.e. not me) might swim. By the time we reached the campground, however, each of us had hideously sore body parts which, added together, formed an entire hideously sore person. As if to make matters worse, the next morning we discovered that our breakfast bagels



FOR MORE INFORMATION

- THE PACIFIC CREST TRAIL ASSOCIATION: PCTA.ORG
- TIMBERLINE LODGE: TIMBERLINELODGE.COM
- *PACIFIC CREST TRAIL*, BY JEFFREY P. SCHAFER AND ANDY SELTERS, FOR DETAILED HIKING INFORMATION. CHOOSE A STATE (CALIFORNIA, OREGON OR WASHINGTON) AND GET THE CORRESPONDING BOOK.



MT. HOOD

had been quietly mouldering away in my pack, as if mirroring how the formerly robust moves inexorably toward ruin.

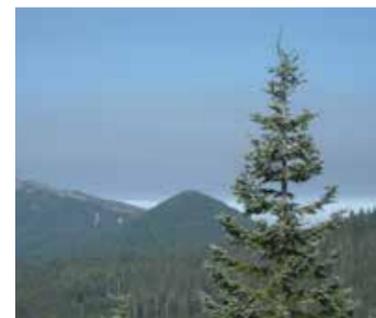
The second day we had only to make 6 miles to put us within 6 or so miles of Timberline Lodge. This leg of the trail was fairly level, which made for much easier walking, and allowed us to focus on something other than pure survival. I looked around, maybe for the first time, and was awed to realize that I was deep in the belly of the pristine Oregon woods, enveloped in a forest of massive, magnificent firs, a place untouched and unseen by most. A woodpecker rattled excitedly nearby. A deer made a brief, furtive appearance, like a celebrity caught in the glare of the paparazzi. The air, tinged with smoke from the nearby wildfires just a day earlier, seemed to clear, and the sun spotlighted the path importantly.

This, I thought for the first time since waking up in my tent that first morning cold, depressed and anxious, is spectacular. We walked on. Things hurt less. I let go of the thought that I might die and embraced the fact that I was alive.

We reached our final campsite in the late afternoon. It was nothing more than a clearing strewn with large and small fallen trees. The sun dropped, and we ate the last of the macaroni and cheese and fresh



THE CASCADES



vegetables and talked about the day ahead.

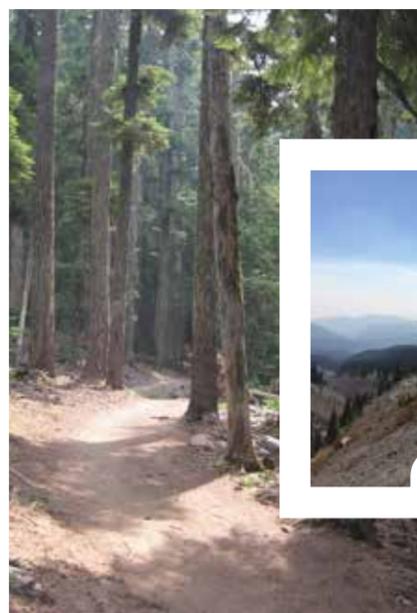
With only 6 miles left to go, we should have been feeling confident. But

we'd have to ascend almost 2,000 feet, the last mile-and-a-half the steepest — and through deep, shifting sands of volcanic ash. After a final breakfast of oatmeal, dried mango and coffee, we made the decision to hide our packs close to an intersecting road and take only essentials for the climb: crackers and cheese, energy bars and water.

We broke camp just as the air was warming up. The initial ascent was gradual, and the path narrow, winding through

dense, lush woods. We passed a few hikers going down. We crossed a stream that literally burbled. A couple of hours later we stopped for a quick lunch on the lip of the cavernous Zigzag Canyon. Another gradual mile-long climb, and the path took us out of the woods and into high desert where we came, thrillingly, face-to-face with the 11,239-foot-high, glacier-robed Mt. Hood.

The air was dry and quiet. Nothing stirred. The deep-blue Cascades encircled us as far as we could see. Our final ascent, up a steep beach of volcanic ash that pushed us backward with every step, was more difficult than expected. But another hour brought Timberline Lodge into view, and gave us fuel to push on. It seemed that we would make it — and in plenty of time for happy hour.



THE END OF THE TRAIL

“THE GREAT LIE OF THE CRUISE,” SAID DAVID FOSTER WALLACE, SPEAKING ABOUT *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, “is that enough pleasure and enough pampering will quiet the discontented part of you.”

If that is true, then perhaps the great truth of camping is that enough pain and enough hardship will awaken the contented part of you. I flew home two days after walking out of the Oregon woods. I was clean, considerably less sore, and absurdly well rested. Camping had awakened me to great beauty, but also to great truth: surrendering — to difficulty, to pain, to vulnerability, to the unknown — brings tremendous peace.

But something dogged me. I thought about the joke whereby a writer asks his partner, following sex, “Was it as good for me as it was for you?” In this vein I wondered: With respect to my traveling companions, and to all my fellow hikers and campers, was I moved enough by the experience? Was I humbled enough by nature, by beauty, by wilderness, by stillness? Did I appreciate enough this small but bountiful journey?

Was it as good for me as it is for other people?

And then I remembered: Everything that seems to weigh nothing, when taken together, weighs something. So it is with journeys. Long after we're home we find, deep inside ourselves, the welcome weight of everywhere we've been.