

I STARTED MY “FLIP-FLOP” THRU-HIKE ON MAY 3, 2015 AT THE FIRST ANNUAL

Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) Flip-Flop kick-off event. I chose this option for a few reasons. The timing was perfect for me — my lease was up in April, giving me ample time to clear out my apartment, quit my job, and do a few training hikes. I was nervous to go into the trek as a woman on my own and the ATC event seemed like the perfect place to make some hiking friends — and Harpers Ferry the perfect starting point to “walk myself into shape” toward the north. This particular flip-flop appealed to me most of all because it meant hiking north with the spring and south with the fall, which meant using the same moderate-weather gear the whole time, saving me money and hassle, not to mention the pleasure of hiking in a temperate climate. I’d done a few long-distance, guided hikes before and didn’t appreciate the forced togetherness or the large group size, so I was ready to embrace the principle of “hike your own hike.” The ATC defines a thru-hike as completing the 2,185-mile journey within 365 days. To flip-flop, you must give up the preconception of hiking from point A to point B, and once you’re there, you’re set up to embrace your own unique version of your thru-hike.

Being a flip-flopper means pioneering a new version of thru-hiker and you will have a different relationship with the Trail than either north-bounders or south-bounders. If you start in Harpers Ferry, you get to experience Pennsylvania with fresh eyes and you will probably even enjoy it. Instead of lamenting Blood Mountain and the frigid Smokies, you and your fellow flip-floppers will always remember that “brutal” climb out of Harpers Ferry into Maryland and the day you hauled your backpack through the Lemon Squeezer in New York. At the end of that day, your instant mashed potatoes never tasted so glorious. For me, the Lemon Squeezer day ended on a hilltop budding with mountain laurel and the Smokies were a brilliant orange. I have experienced the middle of the Trail in a way that neither NOBOs nor SOBOs get to, and I have a deeper understanding that the Trail is not just about Georgia and Maine — it’s about everything in between too. Nothing will remind you of that better than hiking the A.T. “out of order.”

The biggest challenge for flip-flopping is making the switch from “flip” to “flop.” Katahdin makes such an excellent finale that some decide that’s enough for them. Some go home with the intention of coming back and remember how nice a real bed feels and wait too long. It helps to consider what lies ahead...

the “hiker highway” of the Shenandoahs, where — after Katahdin — you will feel like you are flying; the Smokies in their autumnal glory; the southern hostels in their off season; the chance to actually sit down and have a cup of coffee with Neville at Woods Hole or Bob Peoples at Kincora.

In the south now, I feel the experience is much shorter and quieter than the North...a time to rebuild and reflect as the year and my experience draws to a close. For me, the “flip” was a flash of new experiences and finding myself, the “flop” a time for solitude and witnessing the person the Trail has made of me. I no longer feel like “a woman on my own.” I feel like a thru-hiker and a part of something big and magical called the Appalachian Trail. ⚡

Emily “Spice” Walker completed her thru-hike in November.

SHE LIVES IN LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY.



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Emily in the Roan Highlands during her flip-flop thru-hike

“As I See It” is a column from guest contributors representing the full range of ATC partners, members, and volunteers. To submit a column (700 words or under) for consideration, please email journeys@appalachiantrail.org or write to Editor/As I See It, Appalachian Trail Conservancy, P.O. Box 807, Harpers Ferry, WV 25425.