

# A WALK ACROSS THE COUNTRY IN 160 DAYS

by Renee Patrick, '99-'01

Little did I know when I pulled a thick paperback from the shelves of the Ouahigouya Regional Center in Burkina Faso in the fall of 1999 that the direction of my life would be irreversibly altered. *There are Mountains to Climb* chronicled the 50-year-old author's hike along the 2,000+ mile Appalachian Trail, a journey that traverses 14 states along the east coast of the U.S. and attracts thousands of potential thru-hikers (those who complete the hike in one trip) each year. No matter that I had never backpacked before, I knew this was for me. This is what I would do after my service ended, even though I had only just begun my time in West Africa.



*Day 1 on the CDT*

Flash forward to 2002. Fellow Burkina Faso RPCV Cindy Ryals and I found ourselves at Springer Mountain in the northwestern corner of Georgia and, over the next 5 months and 2 days, walked 2,175 miles to Mt. Katahdin in Maine. And I loved it. I loved the simplicity of life, I loved how many parallels I found between living in Burkina and living on the trail. I loved the people and the mountains and how my body could hold up to months of walking every day.

I was hooked, and over the next 13 years, I thru-hiked the Pacific Crest Trail, the Colorado Trail, Arizona Trail, Northville Placid Trail, West Highland Way, and Wonderland Trail. Over the 7,000+ miles, backpacking had become a way of life. It was my life. And all those miles prepared me for the next big challenge: The Continental Divide Trail (CDT). Probably the most difficult endeavor of the long distance trails in the U.S., the CDT is referred to as the PhD of hiking trails. It could be for the isolation, the weather, or the animals one could encounter along the backbone of the country; or it could be that the trail isn't complete, is sparsely traveled, and is the longest of the three major trails that make up the triple crown (AT, PCT, CDT) at around 3,000 miles.

*continued on page 10*



## A WALK ACROSS THE COUNTRY IN 160 DAYS (CONTINUED)



*Skiing in Colorado*

I was ready for the challenge, and began my northbound thru-hike on April 14 in the bootheel of New Mexico on the Mexican border. Bring it!

There are always challenges when one attempts to cross the country on foot. The CDT, which traverses New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana, held many difficult barriers including long dry desert

sections, long miles of ridge walking above tree line during the summer storm cycles, distant resupply spots, and the big hulking danger of grizzlies for 1,000 miles of the trail. That's a long time to be worried about getting your face ripped off by a hungry bear.

2015 was an uncharastically difficult year in Colorado. After my hike started about 7' of fresh spring snow fell on the high peaks, and when I got to the state line at the end of May I found conditions were warm and wet, making the avalanche danger high. I had anticipated snow in Colorado, and had my touring skis sent out. To say the other hikers were jealous was an understatement. As they struggled through the feet of snow either postholing or with snowshoes, I was able to glide across many of the long traverses in the Southern San Juan mountains. But as the terrain got steeper and avalanche danger increased, I too left the divide for the safety of lower roads and trails.

Lightening and rain was my constant companion over the 5 months, until fire season started in Montana, then it was smoke-laden air and threat of evacuation.

Despite all the environmental challenges my mantra became "One Step at a Time" because to think ahead too much was to not be present in the moment. To not be present in the moment may mean slipping and falling down a mountainside, missing an important junction or water source, getting caught in a storm above tree line, or surprising a bull moose (note: you don't want to surprise a bull moose). As I was hiking the CDT alone, I needed to be sure I could finish safely, and always tried to make the prudent, often conservative decision.

It hasn't been long since I finished the hike at the end of September, and I'm sure I will be processing the journey for a long while to come, but what has always attracted me to hiking long trails...what attracted me to Peace Corps too...was the chance to dig deep and challenge myself. To take a step outside of "normal life" and see what lies outside my comfort zone. To see the world from a different point of view. In that way my service in Burkina Faso paved the way for my hiking life.

*Renee Patrick is a freelance writer and graphic designer where she lives in Bend, Oregon when not hiking across the country. Visit [www.sherahikes.wordpress.com](http://www.sherahikes.wordpress.com) to read her daily blog from the CDT this year.*

