

As a well-traveled backpacker, I've slept comfortably under the desert sky while the call of hyenas echoed in the distance. I've snoozed soundly beneath the jungle canopy as malarial mosquitoes buzzed overhead. So it is with some embarrassment that I admit to the insomnia I suffered on a recent camping trip to the Appalachian Trail.

Perhaps I had absorbed the skewed messages of violence and danger perpetually served by the media. Or perhaps I was experiencing an artifact of parenthood—the compulsion to wear our children's fears until they grow into them. Whatever it was, I felt an unfamiliar vulnerability sleeping with my family in the relative safety of a log cabin in Western Maryland.

It is a lovely cabin, a single room with a wooden table and six bunks triple-stacked against the back wall. A kerosene lantern supplies light. A wood stove provides heat, and wash water hauled from the nearby creek is cool and clear. From the outside, fat interlocking logs striped with wide bands of white chinking, and glassless windows with real shutters that serve a necessary purpose speak to another age altogether. We had come to step back in time, to live like homesteaders, if only for the weekend. My husband and I had brought our two girls here before. They were much younger and much less independent. Now they are adolescents, and our camping gear has spent too many years collecting dust in the closet.

During the four-hour drive we talked about our weekend with anticipation. Sienna, our fire builder, was ready to get the fire pit blazing. Ellie, the herbalist, was studying pictures of sassafras to collect for our tea. I was noticing a strange feeling in my stomach and trying to remember if the wooden shutters locked from the inside.

Years ago, I had chosen this cabin from the many shelters rented by the Potomac Appalachian Trail

Club. The one feature I loved about it then was the very thing that gave me pause this time around. The way I remembered it from years ago, the half-mile wooded hike from the car to the cabin would give us the illusion of isolation while not overburdening the kids, with their little legs and heavy backpacks. This time, I noticed that our car was the sole vehicle in a remote church parking lot, miles from any other sign of people. I struggled with crazy thoughts of delinquent youths and transient ex-cons prowling the area for a little nefarious fun. Our car was the beacon that shouted "Hey, there are people alone in that cabin up there!" I told myself it was silly, but I was glad we brought the dog.

Shortly after entering the woods, however, I began looking forward to the smell of wood smoke and must. My mood seemed to shift with the sunlight dappling the backs of my children as they ran ahead. Tucker, now unleashed, bounded with happy-dog exuberance. The hike actually did give the illusion of remoteness, and we all felt unburdened with the change in our surroundings.

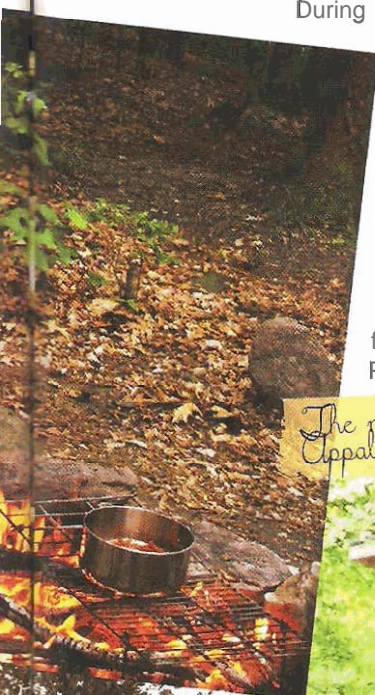
At the cabin, my husband, Mike and I noted that a little pavilion with a concrete slab had been built to house the picnic table. The new outhouse was bright and airy, and vermin were successfully thwarted by the raised platform and the wire mesh enclosure. Things were certainly looking good.

All the cabins owned by the PATC are maintained by volunteers. Many of them were built by the club for work parties developing the trail. Some were built by the forest service, and others have been donated over the years. A few were actually the homes of early settlers. Ours, Bear Spring Cabin, may have been built in the early 1930s. It was donated in 1938.

Within an hour of our arrival, we had opened the cabin and aired out the mattress pods. We had installed the mosquito screens in the windows and duct taped the damaged screen back onto the doorframe. We were ready to explore. During a short hike up the hill, Sienna snapped dozens of photos and Ellie collected tender sassafras roots that grew in abundance.

In the evening we read the log, a memoir of sorts chronicling the life of our cabin through the entries of her visitors: careful naturalists, romantic escapists, and beer-inspired partiers. We played cards and talked around the fire. When I pulled out my smart phone to look up the history of the Appalachian Trail, my daughters chided me in synchrony, "Mom, put that away." I was surprised by the ferocity with which they had disconnected from our modern life.

But that night, while everyone was dozing off in bed, I logged on and read to them about the trail. I got an "uh huh" when I read that the trail is the longest marked footpath in the U.S., stretching 2,178 miles from Georgia to Maine. They "mm hmm'ed" when I suggested that land-use planner Benton Mackaye must have had us in mind when he first conceived of the trail in 1921. To him, it would be a place for East Coast urbanites to reconnect with nature. But by the time I hit the nerve I had been carefully avoiding, everyone including Tucker was sound asleep. I was alone when I read about the occasional attacks and the nine murders that had occurred since 1974. That's 37 years, and with three million hikers visiting the



The new outhouse on the Appalachian Trail



BEAR SPRING TRAIL
 MT. CHURCH RD. 0.35 M. →
 ← APPALACHIAN TRAIL 0.69 M.
 ← BEAR SPRING 0.20 M.
 ← WHITE ROCKS TRAIL 0.52 M.

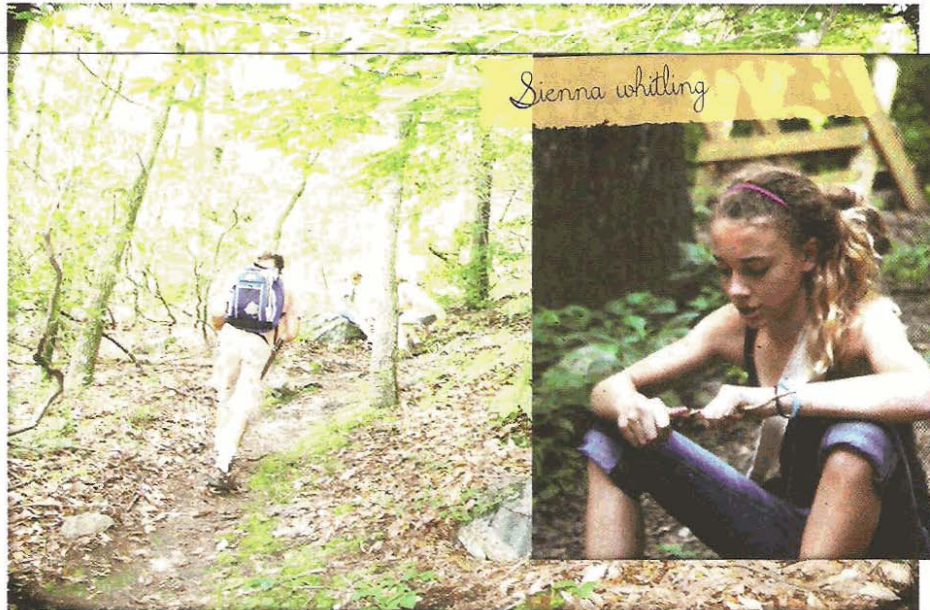
 adventerous spirit

trail every year, the incident rate is probably lower than it is at home. Nonehe-less, after reading about those events and the vision of our car in the parking lot, I did not sleep well.

The next morning, realizing we had made it through the night, I felt both ridiculous and relieved. Mike made coffee in our old percolator and the eggs he scrambled were infused with garlic and the smoke of the open fire. Fatigue did not deter me from hying to race everyone up the mountainside to the AT almost o mile away. Once there, we were treated to the same beautiful vista Mike and I remembered. Along the trail we passed stands of white birch and large patches of mountain laurel in late bloom. Other hikers smiled and greeted us. No one looked villainous.

On the way down, we clambered over rocky outcrops and found the source of a trickling spring. We watched minnows and crawfish on the sandy bottom of a small pool. At the end of the hike, salty From the sweat of a day well spent, I taught the girls the art of taking a complete shower with just two gallons of water. It is a skill I developed by necessity in my adventurous years. I boiled a pot of water to mix with the bracing stream behind the cabin, ond we laughed at each other as we poured, lathered and rinsed with one precious cup at a time.

That evening, the girls split wood and collected kindling for a dinner of black beans and rice. We read stories from the log and played cards. I kept my phone off, and we all Fell into bed exhausted. I watched the one window we had intentionally left unshuttered. It was high on the front wall, in the peak of the cabin. In the blackness of the room, it glowed with a midnight-blue light. The oir wafting in felt fresh and light. For a long time, I lay awake remembering an easiness I had forgotten. I fell asleep listening to the cricket music in a little log cabin in the Blue Ridge. ①



Primitive cabins along the AT

The Potomac Appalachian Trail Club owns and rents a variety of cabins and modern houses near the AT from Pennsylvania to Virginia.

For non-members, 14 primitive cabins and one modern house are available for rental. Hike-in distance ranges from 0 to 4 miles with most being one mile or less from parking. Primitive cabins can accommodate between 4 and 14 people and range in price from \$20 to \$45 per night.

For club members, o total of 38 cabins and houses are available. Annual membership is \$35 for an individual, \$50 per year for family with varying rates for couples, seniors, groups, and lifetime.

More information is available at patc.net, or email cabins@patc.net

