

Author Interview with Danny Bernstein *The Mountains-to-Sea Trail Across North Carolina*

1. What piqued your interest in the Mountains-to-Sea trail?

Before I thought about the MST, I had been hiking in the Southern Appalachians for almost ten years. I finished the iconic hiking challenges of the area, all the trails in the Smokies and the South Beyond 6000, (the forty mountains over six thousand feet), but I really didn't know much about the rest of North Carolina. Sure, I'd been to the shopping centers in Charlotte and Raleigh but not much else, so the trail seemed to be the perfect way to see North Carolina's wildness, culture and history.

I'm fascinated by the intense relationship between hiking and observing. I love to hike, and this was the obvious next project.

2. How long did it take you to do the whole thing?

I walked the trail in sections, so it took me seventy-eight hiking days. That includes days where I drove for several hours before I got on the trail. If I had done it straight through, I probably could have knocked off a few days.

3. Have you always been a hiker?

I've been hiking since my early twenties, and that's a long time ago. My husband and I started hiking after we saw an ad for a hiking club in our area. We learned that adults go hiking without children. On our first hike, we brought all the wrong gear and barely kept up with people older than my parents. But I loved it. I have been hiking and leading hikes for various hiking clubs ever since. Of course, once we had a son, we took him hiking. The kid had no choice; he grew up hiking.

4. What do you get asked the most?

Did you walk the whole trail?

Yep, except for two bridges that I thought were too dangerous to cross on foot, I walked the whole thing.

But I hear that it's not finished?

The route is completed, but some of it is on the small back roads. It's just not all on footpath between two sets of trees. And I hope it never will be.

Wasn't it dangerous on the road?

The road sections of the MST are on back roads, usually North Carolina bicycle routes. I wasn't walking on interstate highways. I waved to every car that went by. I wore an orange vest for visibility and watched for cars on blind curves. I felt that road angels were watching out for me: police officers, letter carriers, UPS and FedEx drivers and others in company vehicles.

5. When did Mountains-to-Sea come into the public eye?

In 1977, Howard Lee, then secretary of the North Carolina Department of Natural Resources and Community Development, announced the concept of a trail across North Carolina at the Fourth National Trails Symposium at Lake Junaluska outside Waynesville. But it was just a concept, and the trail was put on the back burner for a long time.

A big step forward occurred when Allen de Hart walked the MST with a friend in 1997. Allen then created the Friends of the MST group and wrote a hiking guide a few years later. Now hikers knew about the trail because of the hundreds of miles blazed in the mountains. Hikers, travelers and even Blue Ridge Parkway drivers recognize the white circle blazes on trees and posts. The trail became part of the North Carolina State Park System in 2000, raising its visibility.

6. How does the Mountains-to-Sea fit into the broader historical picture of North Carolina?

Every state wants a hiking trail that will show off its best features. The Vermont Long Trail, the first state trail, was completed in 1930 and predates the Appalachian Trail. But the MST is a multimodal trail. Sections can be biked and canoed. Not me, mind you. I am a hiker, and I like my feet firmly on the ground.

You can learn a lot of North Carolina and U.S. history while walking the MST. For example, what is the Overmountain Victory Trail? Why does Glencoe Village look so old-fashioned? And what are British cemeteries doing on U.S. soil?

7. Which is better, the mountains part of the trail or the sea?

I like pistachio ice cream and chocolate ice cream so please don't make me choose. With the mountains, you get amazing views, shade trees, and wildflowers from March to November. When you walk the beach, you see sanderlings running back and forth into the water, and pelicans overhead, and you can dip your feet into the sea.

8. Colonial, Civil War or other eras—which has most colorful stories pertaining to the trail?

You can find Revolutionary War artifacts everywhere along the trail. The MST crosses the Overmountain Victory Trail several times in the mountains and in the Piedmont. New Bern was the colonial capital of North Carolina and its first state capital. Those are the big historic icons.

But there's the story of fourteen-year old Bugler Boy Billie who died at the hands of the British. The MST uses the Nathanael Greene Trail, named after a Revolutionary War Patriot.

9. What famous figures have explored the trail?

President and Mrs. Obama walked a mile of the trail when they visited Asheville a few years ago on a private vacation. Hikers were thrilled.

I don't know if you would call this famous, but in the outdoor world, Diane Van Deren is famous. Diane, a global endurance athlete, ran the MST in a little over twenty-two days, breaking the previous record by a couple of days. But most of us just hike the MST at our own pace.

10. Did anything surprise you in your research for this book?

Lots surprised me. I followed a set of directions—turn left, turn right. Therefore, I had to discover the significance of what I saw for myself.

Besides the Revolutionary War history in full view across North Carolina, I was surprised by the amount of tobacco and cotton still grown in the state. The number of family roadside cemeteries also puzzled me. Why were these graves on private land rather than in a church cemetery?

11. Future trails to hike/projects?

Too many trails, not enough time.

I'm planning to do Le Chemin de St. Jacques in France which is about 440 miles. It's the French section of the famous El Camino. I really like the combination of forests, back roads and small towns, just like the MST. I'll meet locals and try to understand the culture.

12. What books are on your nightstand right now?

The novel *Sweet Tooth* by Ian McEwan; he's one of my favorite novelists. But I always have a trail guide as well. Now it's *The Way of St James, France*, a Cicerone Guide, for the next adventure I'm planning.