

Thousand-Miler Essay
Brianna Grace

If you would have told me one year ago that I would be completing a thru hike on the Ice Age Trail in 2021, I would have been genuinely confused. Thru hike? Yes, that sounds right up my alley, but what in the heck is the Ice Age Trail? I can tell you one thing, it is not flat! The trail takes you on an adventure through areas that were shaped by the glaciers, offering a wealth of information along the way on why the landscape is the way it is. It is beautiful, challenging, and surrounded by an amazing community of volunteers. The Ice Age Trail Alliance makes it easy for prospective hikers by offering the guidebook, atlas, databook, and a variety of different resources available through their website to include contact information for the trail coordinators. We found coordinators to be quick in their responses, offering information on the trail and/or connecting us with someone in the area who could help us out as needed. We even met people who knew little to nothing about the trail, but still offered us things, from an ice cream bar, to a night in their home with promises of laundry, hot showers and good food!

My biggest challenge would come the day we reached Devil's Lake. As we climbed the rock steps and took in all the beautiful views, I began to feel a familiar twinge in my back. You see, when I was younger I was involved in a car accident that resulted in four compression fractures in my spine along with a herniated disc. Unfortunately these are not injuries that heal and go away without a trace. Experience told me that I was about to need several weeks off trail before I could finish. The conundrum? My husband, Marty, only had so much time off of work. In order to finish in time, he needed to pull off big miles and definitely didn't have time for a break. The solution, get Marty to the finish line!

My mother brought me my car and I supported Marty as he finished his hike. It was difficult for many reasons, but I knew he wanted to get to the end and I was going to do whatever I could to make that happen. Driven by a combination of determination and stubbornness, I donned my hiking shoes on Marty's last day so I could walk the 17.8 miles he had left to reach the eastern terminus. It was a beautiful day and I was so proud of his accomplishment, however, I knew this would not be the end for me. I would be back to finish the Ice Age Trail.

September 19th was my first day back on trail. My plan was to start in Sturgeon Bay and make my way back to the Merrimac Ferry, which is where I had been rescued previously. There was something special thinking about finishing by walking back to the place where I had left so broken. So much had changed since I left Wisconsin! Fall was making an appearance and I was hiking solo for the first time. I am grateful that I got this experience, it was empowering to be out there on my own, to know that I could do it by myself. That being said I prefer hiking with my best friend and luckily for me he came out to meet me at Gibraltar Rock and hike the last few miles to the Merrimac Ferry with me. Certainly not the way we planned things, but I could not have asked for a better last day on trail. I was not only joined by Marty, but also Carla Wiessing. Carla is the one who came and got me from the Merrimac Ferry when I could hardly

walk. She treated me like family then and when she knew I was back, she was quick to join me and support me once more as I neared the end of my journey.

Thank you Wisconsin, your state is beautiful and so are your people.

Happy trails!

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