

Susan Rather – Thousand Miler Essay

On Memorial Day 2020, our group of friends gathered at our home in Waunakee for a hike and a “socially distanced” BBQ on our patio – that’s what we learned to do 8 weeks after the outbreak of the COVID pandemic. Our core group of seven had been hiking together for several years, with a big adventure each year: Chilkoot Trail in Alaska, Julian Alps (Slovenia), Grand Canyon, Salkantay trail in Peru. We’d arranged for a Kilimanjaro climb the fall of 2020. With the uncertainty of the pandemic, at that gathering we decided to postpone that trip until 2021. One of our members, Gary Molz, had been researching the Ice Age Trail and had the guide book and atlas with him, and suggested we start the IAT instead. I’d heard of the IAT before and had hiked segments around the Madison area, but I also knew it was about 500 miles of walking on roads and that to me seemed like no fun. Regardless, with the helpless feeling of the COVID pandemic, we all said “Let’s Do It” and planned our first hike for June 6, 2020. At the same time, we agreed that we’d do the hike all together, and that we’d do it contiguously versus “cherry picking” segments.

Our group consisted of 3 couples (Dan & Tam, Lynn & Kent, Jeff & me) and Gary (whose wife was supportive but not at all interested in our adventures). Dan and Tam were recently retired, and the rest of us were business owners with some flexibility in our schedules. We set out for 4 days initially. We had some difference of opinions as to if we should car camp, backpack, or stay in hotels. We ended up compromising and doing most of those options (very little backpack camping however). Looking back at my journal entries from those first days, it only took me a mile or two until I was completely hooked. The beauty of the trail, an esker in the middle of St Croix Falls, fording creeks, seeing newborn fawns and beautiful woodland flowers in bloom was fantastic. Our third night out, Dean, the chapter president invited us to camp at his lake. We had a great dinner with lots of laughs and stories, and were able to wake in the morning on one of the most beautiful lakes in the state. We came back for 6 additional days in July, 11 days in September, 6 days in October and 2 in November. We experienced hiking in the snow in October, hiking in the dark in November, as well as detours for hunting and fording very cold creeks by walking barefoot. We car camped a lot, but also found some wonderful cabins to rent, which increased the camaraderie of our little group. We knew we were supposed to have trail names, and other than some nicknames tossed about, we struggled with names for the individuals. However, we started calling our group the “Magnificent Seven.”

The new year (2021) found things relaxing and travel starting to open up, so it became more challenging for our group to find large blocks of time. It was a good lesson in patience for me, as I’m the sort of person who sets a goal and then works hard to knock it off. By the summer of 2021, we were close enough for day hikes (we’re all in the Madison area), and we started increasing our mileage in preparation for our Kilimanjaro trek (the seven of us plus another friend successfully climbed in Lemoshoro Route of Kili in September 2021).

We spent the winter picking off segments and road walks closer to home, and spent the next few months doing day trips to get through the beautiful Kettle Moraine area. By November, we were far

enough away that we were back to renting houses or staying in hotels. On my birthday, November 4th 2022, we hiked the Point Beach segment on an uncharacteristically warm day – barefoot on the beach.

We took some time off after that, and resumed hiking this past April. Then we timed out our final hikes so our last hike would be on the third anniversary of when we started in 2020. We spent June 4-6 camping at Potawatomi State Park and reminiscing about our 97 days on the trail. Our favorite accommodations, the fun and interesting people we'd met along the way, the rain – cold – snow – heat – ticks – mosquitos, and the days that were absolutely perfect.

I grew up in Wisconsin and thought I'd seen a lot of the state, but the places the IAT took us were incredible – gorgeous forests, pristine lakes, wonderful parks, even beautiful county roads with farms, trees, and flowers. My husband and I were so moved by the serenity we found in Northern Wisconsin that we've recently purchased a lake home up there.

Besides the beauty of the trail, the bonds that our group formed were an unanticipated outcome. We were good friends before we started, but we're like family now. To be able to do SOMETHING in those first few months of the pandemic was good for our mental health. And in the following years we supported each other through death of a parent, the sale of the businesses for two of the couples, and serious health issues of family members. Besides Kilimanjaro in September 2021, we rented a cabin in Colorado in August 2022 to celebrate Tam's 60th birthday and hiked 60,000 vertical feet in the course of a week! Next month, the 7 of us are going on a 6 day backpacking trip in Glacier National Park!

Our love and support of the IAT and the IATA will be everlasting. Gary is responsible for maintaining a section of the trail in Verona, and Jeff and I have participated in several trail building/maintaining sessions. We find it such a great way to give back to the trail that did so much for us, as well as meet other like-minded adventurers.

Although I've not yet updated the 3rd part yet, my IAT stories can be found on my blog page:
www.sandjtravels.com