

Sharing the Ups and Downs

Friends undaunted by the challenge of N.C.'s Mountains-to-Sea Trail

Stephen Craig Hassenfelt '71 had been planning a sabbatical from his investment business for quite a while, but it was North Carolina's Mountains-to-Sea Trail that finally put the plan into action. All he needed was another hiker to go along with the idea of covering some 500 finished miles of the 1,000-mile trail that includes a climb up and down Mount Mitchell (elevation 6,684 feet) in the west and a trek across the sands of Jockey's Ridge State Park on the coast. Enter **F. Cooper Brantley '73 (JD)**, whose compatibility had been tested.

"We had gone on an Outward Bound trip," says Brantley, a lawyer. "We'd been friends for a long time, and ... Steve said he wanted to talk to someone about this hike, and I was the only person who might be willing or stupid enough to do it. We both hike about the same speed, which is slow."

They started out on April 18 and stepped onto the beaches of the Outer Banks as the 17th and 18th Mountains-to-Sea through-hikers on June 29. The hiking sections are completed for about 500 miles, with about 350 miles of connectors that require a mix of lifts between trailheads, biking and road-walking. According to the Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail, that's approximately 2,112,000 footsteps of trail. Here's Hassenfelt and Brantley's analysis of the adventure.

Preparation

Hassenfelt handled maps and set an intricate schedule for resupplying food and clean socks provided by a support team of friends and family, who delivered or mailed items to drop points. Brantley reports no problems hiking with only



Stephen Craig Hassenfelt '71, left, and F. Cooper Brantley '73 (JD) pose to commemorate their stop at the North Carolina-Tennessee state line on the Mountains-to-Sea Trail.

a regular gym routine for conditioning, but both admitted they were not really ready for those 45-pound packs.

Timing

In April, blown-down and fallen trees hadn't been cleared yet, keeping things quiet. Early on Hassenfelt and Brantley had the trail to themselves for three days. However, even with this early start, they hit 100-degree days on the coast, two scruffy guys with backpacks pushing past families tucked under beach umbrellas.

Pace

To qualify as a through-hiker, you must complete the trail, but there's plenty of room for "zero-mile days." Younger hikers might go six or seven days without a break, but for older

folks, five is good. On Mount Mitchell, the plan called for five days without a break — too fast a pace at grades where it took eight hours to hike nine miles. The team also took a break after Brantley's father died and for the birth of Hassenfelt's grandchild. The biking sections also were a welcome change.

Where to sleep

Most of the time, it's camping on bare ground, but there are no rules against stopping at a bed-and-breakfast for those zero-mile days. Along the Blue Ridge, it can be hard to hike fast enough to find official campsites, so it takes planning. One night, too exhausted to go on, Brantley admits, they dropped into sleeping bags in an "illegal" spot.

Cell phones

They work about half the time. Good for emergencies, but too much connectivity runs counter to the pleasure of a long hike like this.

Advice

Get the logistics down at the beginning, and plan to take your time. "It's such a beautiful area with a wonderful park system," Hassenfelt says, seated back in his Greensboro office. "We did the Linville Gorge in only seven days. We could have used more time just to enjoy the beauty of the places we were passing through."

— Susan Simone

 **ONLINE:** Learn more about the Mountain-to-Sea Trail at ncmst.org.

The Mountains-to-Sea Trail at a Glance

- **Highest elevation: 6,684 feet** (on Mount Mitchell)
- **Lowest elevation: sea level** (Cape Hatteras National Seashore)
- **Takes approximately 2,112,000 footsteps to complete**
- North Carolina's longest marked footpath passes through **37 counties, three national parks, two national wildlife refuges**, through **three national forests**, by **three lighthouses**, connects to **seven**



- **state parks, includes three ferry rides**
- Being built and maintained by **trail clubs, local communities and state parks: 800 volunteers** worked more than **20,000 hours** to build and maintain the trail in 2009
- Was proposed in 1977 and added to the state park system in 2000