

[Comparison Shopper]

Travel by Trail

Check out three long-distance American trails. **By Hope Hamashige**

Certainly, there are easier ways to see the country. Yet, every year, millions of people see at least a part of it by stepping onto one of the nation's long-distance trails. And why not? It's a healthy and inexpensive way to connect

with history and nature. The Arizona Trail, now just 60 miles shy of completion, is poised to become the next elite venue for hiking, trekking, and walking. Here's a look at what the Arizona Trail offers and how it compares to a couple of old standards.

Arizona Trail



On display: Where but in Arizona can trekkers share footpaths with roadrunners, javelinas, and Gila monsters? Or make lunch stops at secluded Indian ruins and copper mines? One of the newest entrants to the nation's collection of long-distance hiking trails, now nearly complete after some 20 years, is a long walk through the Old West. The Arizona crosses sunbaked saguaro and ocotillo forests, red-rock canyons, the rugged Sky Island Mountains and passes through off-the-beaten-path western towns like Patagonia, where ranching still reigns.

Bragging rights: A 21-mile segment of the Arizona Trail crosses the Grand Canyon and the Colorado River.

Lay of the land: The Arizona Trail makes its way from Coronado National Memorial near the Mexican border to the Utah border north of Kaibab National Forest. In about 800 miles, it travels through two national parks, two national monuments, and seven mountain ranges.

Fair warning: Prickly pear spines can pierce skin and bristly cholla shed spikes that make their way into shoes, clothes, and packs. Carry tweezers and watch where you sit.

Special spot: Four ecosystems collide in the southernmost part of the trail. In spring, the desert floor is blanketed in wildflowers.

Timing: Arizona scorches in summer. Temperatures in spring and fall are typically more agreeable. (www.aztrail.org)

Pacific Crest Trail



On display: Tracking the crests of western mountain ranges, the Pacific Crest is all about taking in the view from above. From the desert floor near the Mexican border, the trail quickly climbs into California's coastal ranges before tackling the giants of the west—the Sierra Nevada and Cascade ranges. The scenery is wild: glaciers, ice-tipped volcanoes, old-growth forests, and mossy grottoes.

Bragging rights: The trail crosses just below Mount Whitney and connects to Yosemite. This region is reputed to be one of the most beautiful spots in the U.S. Think of Ansel Adams's images of the Sierra Nevada.

Lay of the land: The trail's southern terminus is in Campo, Calif., near the Mexican border. The northern end is a spot called Monument 78 in Washington at the Canadian border. In between it crosses seven national parks and 24 national forests.

Fair warning: Imagine 2,650 miles of hiking trail that rarely cross paths with even tiny towns. What is possibly the country's most isolated trail really is about getting away from civilization.

Special spot: The Oregon portion of the trail is fairly gentle but yields unsurpassed vistas. It begins near Crater Lake and ends near Mount Hood, Oregon's largest volcano.

Timing: Summer is the season on the trail and, because of the high altitude, it doesn't last long. (www.pcta.org)

Appalachian Trail



On display: More than any other trail, the Appalachian is equal parts cultural exploration and wild beauty. More pastoral than other trails, it ascends few high peaks, but it's also the only one that crosses crumbling Revolutionary War-era cemeteries and Civil War battlefields like Antietam. It's also the most social of the trails. Many people spend at least part of the day hiking with new friends. It's a tradition not to use first and last names and to adopt a trail name. If you neglect to choose your own, other hikers will come up with one for you.

Bragging rights: The trail takes people right into the middle of some of the best fall foliage spots in Vermont's Green Mountains, New Hampshire's White Mountains, and Virginia's Shenandoah National Park.

Lay of the land: The end points are Springer Mountain in Georgia and Mount Katahdin in Maine. The trail crosses 14 eastern states, though 25 percent of it is in Virginia.

Fair warning: The low-lying trail is consistently hilly, so it packs serious climbs and descents into short segments.

Special spot: Harpers Ferry, W. Va., is the quintessence of the trail. The charming town was the site of John Brown's raid, a key event leading to the Civil War. There are sweeping views of the point where the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers meet.

Timing: From April through October, activity on the trail is in full swing. (www.atconf.org)