

It's Never Too Late for That First Long-Distance Hike

And you never know what you'll encounter,
from whooshing wind turbines
to beguiling gals in hula skirts



Bill Moore of Vista, Calif., completed his first PCT section hike at age 63. Fellow hikers teased him about the old-school "theater screen" on his back.

My 63-year-old feet felt like shredded car tires, but I was happy as I completed my first section of the Pacific Crest Trail. Before my PCT trek, I was an avid day-hiker who enjoyed the luxury of a comfortable base camp and the prospect of a cold beverage, hot dinner and warm bed at the end of the day.

here suggested we should tread lightly lest the facilities be removed. We appreciated the trail magic and practiced the ethic of “leave no trace.” We finally hit the sack at 11:45 p.m.

The next morning we arose with frost on our sleeping bags. It was a pleasant hike into the pines and snow patches of the Tehachapis.

It's a funny thing about long, miserable nights. As soon as we were up and walking, those hours of discomfort were forgotten.

What changed my idea of the perfect hike? A friend, **Read Miller**, talked me into attending a crazy event in 2005 called “ADZPCTKO” (Annual Day Zero Pacific Crest Trail Kick Off) at Lake Morena near the Mexican border. I met a lot of interesting people and a seed was planted that finally bloomed last year when I hiked the infamous 109-mile Mojave section (“Section E” on the map) between Highway 58 and Aqua Dulce in Southern California.

My guide and hiking partner on this adventure was my buddy Read, trail name **Reader**. Read is a veteran PCT thru-hiker and has completed many other long treks in the United States and Europe. A fan of ultralight everything, he loaned me an ultralight pack for some practice walks. I have a couple of worn disks in my back and wanted to carry most of the weight on my hips, so I elected instead to stick with my trusty, 35-year-old Kelty rigid-frame pack with a good hip belt. It was a decision I hoped I would not regret.

Our hike began before dusk on March 9 at Highway 58. We hiked south, switch-backing our way up to the wind turbines that crown this region of the Tehachapi Mountains. Our headlamps provided enough light to follow the trail until a full moon rose. The city lights of Mojave sparkling behind the whooshing turbine blades created an eerie sensation. We continued to Willow Springs Road, where we had cached water and planned to stop for the night. However, the wind was blowing so hard that we decided to press on. Within a mile we dropped into a sheltered area with a picnic table and graded level spot by Oak Creek. A sign

This was nice country to walk through despite the overly numerous and sometimes confusing paths made by dirt bikes.

Continuing through a large burn area, we dropped into Gamble Springs Canyon. This section of the PCT, both into and out of the canyon, seems impossible to maintain, as loose slope detritus keeps sloughing downhill and covering the faint line of the path. Any step forward requires well-planted hiking poles.

Since there was no water in the canyon, we stopped only to empty the sand from our shoes and munch some trail mix. The next stop was Tylerhorse Canyon, with its clean-flowing but seasonal stream. Our quest for a level, windless spot to camp in this area was futile, and we ended up at the side of the Trail. Although Read slept like a log, I was miserable and spent an uncomfortably long night listening to the wind.

It's a funny thing about long, miserable nights. As soon as we were up and walking, those hours of discomfort were forgotten. Soon we lost the trail markers and had to take an alternate route into Cottonwood Canyon.

Ranchers in this area are friendly to hikers, but if you have a motorcycle under your rump, you may be a moving target. We chatted with some modern-day cowboys who pointed us to the PCT

and were quick to complain about the erosion damage caused by bikers.

Another two miles found us at our water cache. From there it was a long, boring, 16.4-mile walk along a road bordering to the California Aqueduct to Hikertown along Highway 138. Temperatures were in the low 70s and jackrabbits provided us with some company.



*Hula girls passing out water? Did this really happen?
Bill Moore (on right), Read Miller (center) and Glen Van Peski lapped it up.*



Southern California desert in bloom.

Hikertown is a private home owned by **Richard Skaggs**, who graciously provides a sheltered place to rest, refresh, and water up before the next leg of the journey. Unfortunately, due to sand in my shoes, I developed a couple of nasty blisters before we got there. I didn't think I would finish the section with a good attitude about multi-day hikes, so we terminated our journey with the intention of coming back later to complete it.

Five weeks later, wearing new sand gaiters, Read and I were back on the trail with a mutual friend, **Glen Van Peski**. A seasoned hiker, Glen is the founder of Gossamer Gear and a former board member of the Pacific Crest Trail Association. During the hike south there was a lot of talk about the virtues of going "lite" - and a lot of good-natured teasing about my classic Kelty pack.

"It's nice walking behind you Bill, because your pack creates a lot of shade." Or, "Gee Bill you could rent your back pack out as a drive-in theater screen."

It was a pleasant day with the trail climbing through patches of colorful desert wildflowers and oak woodlands. We camped that night under the big-coned Coulter pines.

During our hike we met several others who had decided to do this section while temperatures were tolerable and water sources more reliable. Everyone had comments about the "theater screen" on my back. I took their friendly jesting in stride and enjoyed checking out their equipment as well.

Next we found ourselves in the midst of a 50-mile ultramarathon involving about 120 runners from all over the Western states. They were more than 30 miles into the race, and some of these crazy men and women smiled and chatted with us as they ran by. Their aid stations provided music, water, ice and food served by women in hula skirts. Perhaps their example could become the new standard for PCT trail angels?

The last day of the hike, through dusty chaparral, was anticlimactic. The last green place we saw was Bear Springs, a long 8.3 miles

from the finish line. Our hike ended in Agua Dulce with a cool shower in the fine hiker facilities provided by trail angels **Jeff** and **Donna Saufley**.

My dad always loved to quote the old adage "A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step." I may have completed only 109 miles, but I finished my journey through Section E with a great sense of satisfaction and a desire to do more.

Oh...and by the way, I since have retired the theater screen on my back. 🍷



Bill Moore during a road-walk section of his hike.

"Waterbill" Moore lives in Vista, Calif., where he recently retired from an engineering position with the Vista Irrigation District. His hobbies include birding, traveling, gardening and hiking, and he sometimes helps maintain the water source for PCT hikers at Barrel Springs.