

Spring Break Hiking

Hiking on the Appalachian Trail in March and April

Weather. Winter holds its grip on the entire Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine during the traditional “spring break” period of March and early April. Though temperatures in lowlands may be springlike in the South, the high elevations of the mountains experience weather comparable to New England. Annual snowfall in places (most notably the Smokies in Tennessee/North Carolina) exceeds 100 inches a year. Snow in March and April is common.

But, wide temperature swings are the norm. Be prepared for temperatures in the teens (or even colder at elevations above 5000 feet in the South); also be prepared for some warmer days. Trees at high elevations will be bare until May in the South, so pack sunscreen.

The least severe weather on the entire A.T. typically occurs in the northern Virginia/Maryland section of A.T., and Georgia, which have the most favorable combinations of low elevation and/or a southerly latitude.

Georgia. The Trail in Georgia in March and early April is crowded with “spring break” hikers and beginning thru-hikers. As many as 30-40 people a day start their thru-hikes on Springer Mountain hiking north in March and early April.

Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. Harpers Ferry makes a convenient starting or ending point for a hike, whether you chose Maryland to the north or Virginia to the south. There are also lots of day-hikes in the area. Harpers Ferry offers a number of conveniences for hikers: ATC’s visitors/information center (open weekdays during winter), an outfitter, train access from Washington, DC, and several lodging options. More information about local services is available in the *A.T. Thru-Hikers’ Companion*, available free of charge online at <www.aldha.org>.

Maryland and Northern Virginia. The ridges north and south of Harpers Ferry have the lowest average annual snowfall of any part of the A.T. other than Georgia. The terrain is only moderately difficult, and notably easier than Georgia.

Other parts of the A.T. Not content with Georgia or the Harpers Ferry area? If you’re an experienced winter hiker and are considering other parts of the A.T., here are a couple of web sites that can help you choose: ATC’s “A.T. Essentials” provides state-by-state descriptions of terrain and elevation ranges at <www.appalachiantrail.org>. For maps showing average annual snowfall for the Appalachian Trail, visit <friends.backcountry.net/snowmaps>.

Experience Level. If you attempt a hike on the A.T. in March or early April, it’s best to have at least one person with winter experience in your group. Being unprepared can lead to discomfort at best, disaster at worst.

Hypothermia. Rain- or sweat-soaked clothing and cold wind are the factors that most often contribute to this life-threatening condition. A cold rain can be more dangerous than snow, because your body loses heat rapidly when wet; wind greatly accelerates this process. Prevent hypothermia by dressing in layers of synthetic clothing and a wind-resistant outer layer, eating high-energy snacks, staying hydrated, and avoiding overexertion. Avoid cotton, which holds moisture close to the skin instead of wicking it away, as synthetics do. Know the warning signs of hypothermia and how to treat it. For more information, visit the Appalachian Mountain Club’s hypothermia page (<www.outdoors.org>; click on “activities,” then “hiking.”)

Alternatives. Other trails further south, such as the Florida Trail, the Pinhoti Trail in Alabama, or trails at lower elevations, such as the Pine Mountain Trail in Georgia or the more rugged Foothills Trail in North Carolina/South Carolina, offer better opportunities for true “spring” hiking.

For further information on other spring break hiking opportunities, contact:

Alabama Trails Association (for information about the **Alabama Pinhoti Trail**)

P.O. Box 3100, Birmingham, AL 35202

<www.alabamatrailsasso.org>

At just over 100 miles, the Pinhoti is the longest trail in Alabama. Lots of solitude.

Florida Trail Association

5415 SW 13th Street, Gainesville, FL 32608

<www.florida-trail.org>

(877) HIKE-FLA

1,000+ miles of scenic trail, bordered by rivers, lakes, forests of palms, pines, cypress and moss-draped live oaks. Winter and spring are best hiking times.

Foothills Trail Conference

P.O. Box 3041, Greenville, SC 29602

<www.foothillstrail.org>

(864) 467-9537

76-mile trail running from Oconee State Park to the Mountain Bridge State Natural Area along the South Carolina/North Carolina border. It crosses some of the most rugged, most beautiful terrain in the Carolinas.

Pine Mountain Trail Association

P.O. Box 5, Columbus, GA 31902

<www.pinemountaintrail.org>

23-mile footpath, following the Pine Mountain ridge in West Central Georgia, with numerous side trails and loop trails (four to nine miles in length) to overlooks and waterfalls. Highest elevation: 1263'. Weather in March is much milder than on the A.T.

Learn how to minimize the impact of your backcountry visit: Leave No Trace <www.lnt.org>

Enjoy your hike!

**Appalachian Trail Conservancy
799 Washington Street / P.O. Box 807
Harpers Ferry, WV 25425
(304) 535-6331
<www.appalachiantrail.org>**