



our neighbors  
feature

200  
DAYS  
2,193  
MILES



## Broad Run grad completes Appalachian Trail

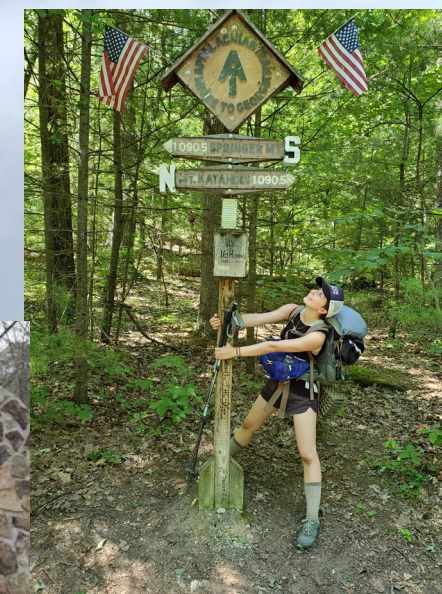
BY JILL DEVINE

**H**iking the entire Appalachian Trail is something many people muse about as a “bucket list” item, something to daydream about. But Sierra Wharton turned that daydream into a reality. On Sept. 28, the Ashburn native climbed Mount Katahdin in Maine, stretched out her hand and touched the iconic sign that marks the trail’s northern terminus.

“I made the final climb and then just stood there staring and sobbing for a few minutes before I could bring myself to touch it,” Wharton said.

Wharton, 25, completed the 2,193-mile journey in exactly 200 days. To reach Mount Katahdin, she hiked through 14 states, from Georgia to Maine. The Appalachian National Scenic Trail — AT for short — is the longest hiking-only footpath in the world. More than 3,000 people try to “through-hike,” or complete, the trail each year, but only a quarter of them actually finish.

**(Left) Sierra Wharton celebrates atop Mount Katahdin in Maine, after completing the Appalachian Trail; (below) Wharton seen at the stone arch in Georgia that marked the start of her journey; (right) Wharton regularly posed for photos along the trail to mark the many memorable moments she experienced.**



### WHEN ONE DOOR CLOSES

Hiking the AT was not always in Wharton’s plans. Less than two years before reaching Mount Katahdin, she was fulfilling her life-long dream as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ecuador.

“I had been preparing to serve in the Peace Corps since high school,” said Wharton, who attended Mill Run Elementary, Eagle Ridge Middle School, and Broad Run High School in Ashburn.

She was hired by the Peace Corps before graduating from John Cabot University in Rome, Italy, in 2019.

Wharton’s ambitions crumbled in March 2020 in the midst of the worldwide response to COVID-19. She had just completed 10 weeks of Peace Corps training in Quito, Ecuador, and was about to be stationed in the city of Guayaquil when bad news came — the program was canceled, and the volunteers had to go home immediately.

Within 24 hours, all transportation routes were shut down. Wharton’s group caught the last flight out for American civilians.

“I was heartbroken,” she said. “Once I realized the gravity of the situation, I knew we weren’t going back anytime soon.”

During the shutdown, Wharton worked at Blend Coffee Bar in the Broadlands. “I thought about the AT while at the coffee shop,” she said. “It finally sunk in just how much life had changed, so I decided to just take a walk while the world was ending.” →





## INTERESTING CHOICES

Aside from a two-day backpacking trip with her brothers a few years earlier, Wharton had little hiking experience, and even less equipment. Her training consisted of AT blogs and YouTube videos.

“I bought my gear at REI just two days before I left,” said Wharton. Her gear list was not typical.

Wharton carried no stove and wore no boots. “I decided to eat cold or raw,” she said. “And I chose Altra brand Lone Peak 5 trail runners, because they are light and dry quickly.” (The first pair of trail shoes lasted 1,400 miles until New York. She is still wearing the second pair she bought on the trail.)

Most surprisingly, she took no tent, opting instead for a hammock with a bug net, a tarp and a sleeping bag. An underquilt

— a second layer for under a hammock to keep warmth in — was added later, when the weather got cold.

Before starting her hike on March 13, 2021, Wharton bought a baseball cap at a thrift shop that had the words “Couch Potato” printed on the front. Other AT hikers liked it and started calling her Tater Tot.

“I wore it every day,” she said. “Everyone has a trail name on the AT, and Tater Tot became mine. Some of the close friends I made on the trail still don’t call me by my real name.”

## HAVE NO FEAR

“I was a little nervous, but those nerves were definitely planted by other people,” she said about her decision to hike alone. “I’m careful talking about fear, because a lot of young women don’t attempt the AT because of the very few horror stories out there that don’t paint an accurate description of the trail. The AT is a very social trail, and anyone who harasses someone immediately becomes known to every hiker within 200 miles, and the response by the hiking community to those with a bad reputation is instant.”

Instead of starting at the southern terminus at Springer Mountain, Georgia, Wharton chose to begin where most through-hikers begin — at an approach trail

about eight miles away at Amicalola Falls State Park, famous for the stone arch where many hikers pose for photos.

“Everyone starts out together, and I met many hikers within the first two miles,” she said. “Of course, I was hoping to make friends and meet other hikers, and I did.”

Lisa Ingram, Wharton’s mother, was excited about her daughter’s plans.

“Sierra has always been adventurous and independent, and the timing was perfect,” Ingram said. “It’s usually hard to take six months off from life, and Sierra had no big responsibilities and no pets to worry about. I knew it was a very social trail and that she would make friends.”

Wharton said she worried more about twisting an ankle and having to leave the trail than she did about other people. “I can count on one hand how many days I ended up hiking alone,” she added. “You develop trail families, we call them ‘tramilies,’ and you tend to stay with them along the way.”

Although she never saw a bear and just missed stepping on a rattlesnake near Glasgow, Virginia, Wharton says her scariest experience was when a bull moose was snorting and stomping just inches from a tent she was sharing with a friend in Maine.

“My heart was pounding, and we stayed →

frozen for at least 25 minutes before daring to peek under the tarp,” she recalled.

## **BAD DAYS AND GOOD**

“Some days were harder than others,” Wharton said.

On her fourth night, camping near Low Gap in Georgia, Wharton discovered that her small tarp was not adequate when her hammock flooded during a heavy rainfall. “I was so wet and miserable and was struggling to fix it, but a trail friend, ‘Turtle,’ saw and let me share his tent.”

She soon found a free, bigger tarp left by another hiker at a “hiker box” in Hiawassee, Georgia.

Other challenges included a vicious mosquito attack in southern Massachusetts that left her legs looking “like they had been burned with boiling water, bright red and bubbling with bites.”

And she describes her hike through southern Maine as three days and 40 miles of misery. “It’s a long section of flat granite slabs where it’s very common to fall and get hurt. I had to sit and crabwalk for eight miles, and I went through 72 hours of being so sad and crying.”

Her favorite memories are those she shared with trail friends, such as camping in the White Mountains in New Hampshire.

“The weather at the Whites was perfect, and to camp on Mount Washington and have the utter beauty of that space all to ourselves was amazing.”

Wharton also fondly recalls spending the Fourth of July in Warwick, N.Y., at a drive-in theater that allows hikers to camp on the property. “The whole day was so much fun, playing guitars, filling up on snacks, and watching free movies together.”

Grayson Highlands, near Damascus, Virginia, was another highlight. “It looks like Ireland, and the wild ponies come right up to you and lick the salt off your hands.”

## **THE NEXT STEP**

After reaching Mount Katahdin, Wharton said she and her friends had a good cry before taking some side hikes together, notably the difficult Knife Edge Trail.

“We couldn’t just end it so suddenly,” she said. She traveled with some of those friends to Bangor and Portland, Maine, and Boston before returning to Ashburn.

Her mom was thrilled to host Wharton’s friends at their Ashburn home.

“We had 21 AT hikers visit us over a two-week period,” Ingram said. “Sierra told friends along the way to come see us, and they did. We shuttled some from Bear’s Den, gave them rides to the Metro, helped with laundry, got them haircuts and even helped some find COVID vaccinations. Every bed, sofa and blow-up mattress in the house was used.”

Bear’s Den is a spot on the AT at the western edge of Loudoun County near Bluemont — and a popular spot for Ashburn residents to access the trail.

The next step for Wharton involves leaving the Ashburn community that provided so many opportunities that prepared her for life. Peace Corps plans are unfortunately off the table for now.

In October, she moved to Philadelphia with a college friend.

“As long as my family is in Ashburn, I’ll always call it home, but I’m excited to try new things,” said Wharton, who is job-hunting and considering heading west to hike the Pacific Rim Trail and the Continental Divide. Along with the AT, Wharton says that’s known as the Triple Crown.

“I’ve definitely caught the hiking bug,” she said. “So, who knows what’s next.” 

*Jill Devine is a freelance writer and former magazine editor from Loudoun County who writes for a variety of Virginia publications.*