

Erik Schlimmer's Ten Favorite U.S. "Short Long Trails"

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Among American long-distance trails, the Appalachian, Pacific Crest, and Continental Divide trails are legendary. But they're 2,190, 2,650, and 3,100 miles long, respectively, and require five to seven months to traverse. Who's got time for that? Beyond these three trails that comprise the "Triple Crown" of hiking, the United States has at least twenty other "short long trails" that require one to seven weeks to traverse. You've got time for that. Here are ten I can personally recommend for a brief yet fulfilling commitment.

100-mile Rainbow Trail of Colorado

The Rainbow Trail that measures precisely 100.0 miles flies under the radar by being the "little sister" of the state's far more popular 480-mile Colorado Trail. The Rainbow Trail runs along the eastern side of Colorado's mightiest range, the Sangre De Cristo Mountains, which span 220 miles from south-central Colorado to northern New Mexico. While the Colorado Trail requires hikers to acclimate to high elevations since its average elevation exceeds 10,000 feet, the Rainbow Trail hovers around 8,000. This trail climbs a stout 24,000 vertical feet end-to-end, but the overall grade is surprisingly gentle.

170-mile Cohos Trail of New Hampshire

It's pronounced "COE-ahs." This trail traverses northern New Hampshire from the Canadian border to the Presidential Range. During its course it passes forty summits, enters three river watersheds, and reaches a handful of lakes and waterfalls. Its founder Kim Robert Nilsen has dubbed it "a no-nonsense wilderness route.... If ending up in nowhere land on the border of another country is your idea of a wild time, then the Cohos Trail is your pathway to heaven." Moose encounters are almost guaranteed, and if you go during September or October you'll see impressive fall foliage.

171-mile Tahoe Rim Trail of California and Nevada

The Tahoe Rim Trail is arguably the most scenic long trail in the United States. Of the dozen I've hiked, this one was prettiest. All 171 miles wrap around shimmering Lake Tahoe. It was Mark Twain who called this body of water the "fairest picture the whole earth affords." The Tahoe Rim Trail has a short hiking season due to deep snowpack. Squaw Valley ski resort near the trail receives 450 inches of snow annually. It's advised you not begin a thru-hike until July and end a thru-hike by October. The Tahoe Rim Trail climbs a thigh-burning 31,000 vertical feet, but like the Rainbow Trail, the overall grade is gentle.

237-mile Katy Trail of Missouri

And now for something completely different. The Katy Trail is the most polite path among the ten here. It's a rail trail that winds through civilized areas and is open to foot, bike, and equestrian travel. It's technically a park, Katy Trail State Park. It ranks "the longest developed rail trail in the country." The trail tread is the abandoned Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad that was referred to as the "MKT," hence "Katy." The thing's almost dead flat – end-to-end the Katy Trail climbs 1,500 vertical feet. Campgrounds along it make it backpack-able, but don't expect wildness.

243-mile Trans Adirondack Route of New York

The Trans Adirondack Route lives up to its name by bisecting New York's 5.8-million-acre Adirondack Park, the largest park and forest preserve in the Lower Forty-Eight. As the Northeast's newest pathway, the Trans Adirondack Route opened to thru-hikers in 2013. This route comprised of 200 miles of trails, 33 miles of road walking, and 10 miles of cross-country travel is tough. About half of those who set out for a thru-hike actually make it to the other end. The route is impressively scenic, pleasingly wild.

270-mile Long Trail of Vermont

If you're looking for a rugged hike, look no further than this one that spans the Green Mountain State. Of all long-distance trails in the U.S., this one climbs the most per mile. A thru-hiker who recently earned the fastest known time by scorching 270 miles in less than four days recorded 74,400 vertical feet of climbing. That's almost 300 vertical feet per mile. It tackles four of the state's five peaks above 4,000 feet – Camels Hump, Killington Peak, Mount Abraham, and Mount

Mansfield. All the climbing may be worth it, though. Punctuated with high summits, long ridgelines, and idyllic bodies of water, the Long Trail aims to please. If your knees can handle it.

288-mile Benton MacKaye Trail of Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee

The eponym of this path coined the idea of a trail spanning the entire length of the Appalachian Mountains. Today it's called the Appalachian Trail. MacKaye's idea was first presented in a 1921 paper titled "An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning." This forester lived from 1879 to 1975, taught forestry at his alma mater Harvard University, and worked with the U.S. Forest Service. The Benton MacKaye Trail begins at the southern terminus of "its elder sibling" the Appalachian Trail in Georgia and ends in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. It traverses seven wilderness areas and includes fine views, acceptable solitude, and dozens of waterways.

480-mile Colorado Trail of Colorado

If you love mountains, you'll love Colorado. The Centennial State has more than 2,600 peaks above 10,000 feet, and 54 of those are ranked "fourteeners" by surpassing 14,000 feet. This trail has the highest average elevation of any U.S. long path – 10,000 feet. The high point is 13,240 feet near Coney Summit 110 miles north of the southern terminus. The trail passes within five miles of a dozen fourteeners. If you're not acclimated before your thru-hike, go southbound. From the northern terminus it takes seventy miles of hiking to reach timberline around 12,000 feet. The Colorado Trail is best described with two words: popular and pretty.

500-mile Palmetto Trail of South Carolina

The Palmetto Trail spans the entire state of South Carolina, from the mountains in the west to the sea in the east. Approximately 400 marked miles are in place, and 350 of those are designated foot travel only. If you're looking for a warm weather destination where you won't see other backpackers, this is the place. When I hiked a 220-mile section in 2022, I saw two backpackers. The managing body of this trail, Palmetto Conservation Foundation, reports thru-hikers will experience "Revolutionary War battlefields, Native American paths, urban to rural, swamps to mountains, maritime to sandhills to piedmont, and much more."

800-mile Arizona Trail of Arizona

Running the full length of the Grand Canyon State, the Arizona Trail is desert trekkers delight. It traverses Grand Canyon and Saguaro national parks as well as Coconino, Coronado, Kaibab, and Tonto national forests. The Arizona Trail is fairly popular. Hundreds of thru-hikers are now finishing it each year. The occasional crowding at some of its popular sites is offset by remote stretches where you'll see few others. Besides the 1,300-mile Florida Trail, the southern half of the Arizona Trail is the warmest wintertime long-distance locale in the U.S. Diligently plan where you're going to get water. An excellent resource is the Arizona Trail Water Report page available on the Far Out app.