

# New Brunswick Telegraph-Journal

## N.B. trail system attracts wide variety of hikers

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Byline: Tamsin McMahon Telegraph-Journal

RILEY BROOK - New Brunswick may be a well-known tourist destination in the summer, but few visitors arrive in the province on foot from the tropics of Florida.

So it may come as a surprise to some that forests of northern New Brunswick are a vital link on a footpath that spans more than 9,000 kilometres from the southernmost tip of the continental United States to the northern end of Newfoundland.

Even more surprising is that every year a handful of hikers set out to walk the entire length of what's known as the Eastern Continental Trail, an amalgam of trails on the East Coast of the U.S. and Canada, including the Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine and the International Appalachian Trail through New Brunswick.

But if your keep eyes peeled in the area of Mount Carleton Provincial Park this week, you might catch a glimpse of one such hiker walking Highway 385 on his way to the Quebec border with a faded backpack and a pair of well-used hiking poles. L.P. Kiatoukaysi of California started his trek from Key West in January. He arrived in New Brunswick early last week and hopes to reach Belle Isle, a tiny uninhabited island off the coast of L'Anse aux Meadows, by the end of September.

Look in the other direction and you'll find 20-year-old Ivan Lien, who started in Gaspé, Que. in June and hopes to make it to Key West by next spring.

If you're lucky, you may see him hiking the ATV trails around Plaster Rock on his way to Perth-Andover and into Maine.

Although they started months and thousands of kilometres apart, the two hikers both landed at Don and Evelyn McAskill's Bear's Lair lodge on the Tobique River on the same day.

It's a journey that anywhere between 20 and 100 hikers have made since it was first attempted 13 years ago by 23-year-old John Brinda from Washington.

The trail's name comes from its most famous hiker, M. J. Eberhart, who goes by the name "Nimblewill Nomad." In his early 70s, he has hiked the trail at least three times, including once hiking north to Quebec and then turning around and hiking back south to Florida.

"There's quite a few hikers and the ones that start seem to go all the way," said Poul Jorgensen, executive director of the New Brunswick Trails

Council, which oversees the 274 kilometres of the Eastern Continental Trail through the province.

"They're definitely a breed of their own. They're our heroes. We use them to help promote the rest of our trail system and to get people active."

Nearly all of the hikers who make it to the province pass Bill Miller's house in Nictau, a village of 12 people on the banks of the Tobique River.

"John Brinda is about the only hiker that I've never met," said Miller, who runs his handcrafted wooden canoe business, Miller Canoes, from his home. "I saw him walking by here, but I was fibre-glassing a boat. I hollered, but he didn't hear me."

Over the years, Miller has become known as a "Trail Angel," someone who lives along the trail and who allows hikers to stay in their home, eat their food, and use their showers and laundry.

Miller has even built a small wooden shelter on his property for hikers with materials donated from the provincial government.

"I'm right on the trail," Miller said. "So when a hiker walks to Nictau all the way from Key West, Florida, I thought: Gee, they probably have an interesting story. So I thought I'd like to hear it."

If he finishes the trail, Kiatoukaysi will be the first to hike the new route of the Eastern Continental Trail. Newfoundland joined the trail in 2003, while Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island were added in 2007 and 2008.

There even are plans to extend the trail through Greenland and into Europe.

Until recently, Kiatoukaysi, 34, was a full-fledged member of the real world. In 2001, he ran dust-covered from the falling twin towers during the September 11 terrorist attacks when he was working in New York's financial district.

Later, he worked in marketing for a health-care company in the San Francisco Bay area.

Then last year he decided to quit his job, withdraw all of his savings and go hiking.

"It's scary," he said. "I think my family is scared for me as well. But I feel for the first time I'm spending my time and my money the way I really want to."

Going by the name Lil' Buddha, Kiatoukaysi hiked the Pacific Crest Trail, a 4,700-km footpath from

Mexico to British Columbia, last year.

He finished the trail in October and went home. But like many who have loosened the shackles of responsibility, he found it hard fit back into a 9-to-5 lifestyle. So in January he set out again, this time to hike clear across North America.

His backpack weighs 30 pounds at best. He has a single outfit, two pairs of socks, a small tent and stove, a sleeping bag and an inflatable mattress. His medical kit consists of a few Band-Aids, some gauze and some antiseptic cream.

He is on his fifth pair of running shoes.

For breakfast and lunch, Kiatoukaysi eats powdered milk and cereal, saving the noodle soup or pasta side dishes for dinner.

He hikes around 40 kilometres a day - although he hiked a 134-km stretch of road in Alabama in a single 18-hour stretch.

"That was an all-night affair," he said. "I started in the morning and walked day and all night and finished the next day. I was hallucinating at some point."

Despite travelling through some of the most remote scenery in North America, he has rarely found himself far from a town. He carries about three days worth of food at a time, and visits towns and villages along the way to rest, eat, take a shower, do laundry and buy supplies.

Eight months on the trail has taught him to challenge his fears. It has taught him that stories of animals and people out lurking in the woods ready to attack are more urban legend than anything.

"I feel like being on the trail makes you a better version of yourself," he said. "It kind of restores your faith in humanity, in how kind and generous people really are. The reality is that all the animals run away from you, and the people are really nice."

Still, Kiatoukaysi has seen his share of wildlife. He has been stalked by alligators and rushed by a wild boar in Florida, fended off angry dogs in Alabama, dodged moose in Maine and had a few run-ins with bears.

"The bears aren't scared of you in the national parks because they aren't hunted," he said. "You do everything you're supposed to do. You make a lot of noise. You say: 'Hey bear.' You sing. But they bears will actually walk right up to you. You could literally touch them."

He's still hoping to see caribou, ptarmigan and snowy owl on the Canadian portion of his trek.

His hike took him through Mount Carleton Provincial Park on Saturday, where he narrowly missed a run-in with Premier Shawn Graham. The premier was climbing the Maritime's tallest peak to announce that he wanted the federal government to assume control

of the 17,000-hectare park.

Although Kiatoukaysi and Lien are walking the same path, their journey to the trail couldn't have been more different.

Raised in the sprawling desert suburbs of Albuquerque New Mexico, Lien was studying biology and geology at university in Alaska. Uninspired by his classes, he left this year to hike the Eastern Continental Trail going south from Quebec to Key West.

Until he started in June, Lien was more accustomed to watching hours of TV and playing video games than seeing the world. His longest hiking trip was 60 kilometres. He sleeps in a hammock and doesn't carry any maps - although he does wield a machete to cut down overgrown portion of the trail.

His biggest challenges so far haven't been fending off wild animals, but treating the blisters on his feet, trying to communicate in the Francophone towns in eastern Quebec, and coping with thick clouds of mosquitoes.

"My female relatives think I'm going to die out here and my male relatives think it's going to make me into more a man," he said. "They're just happy I'm out here doing something. They were thinking I was pretty lazy back in high school. It's definitely a new leaf from how I used to be."

Travelling through Eastern Canada has opened Lien's eyes to the beauty of the natural world, he said, especially while travelling through the Chic-Choc Mountains in Quebec's Gaspé peninsula.

"You can see a long way," he said. "There are these amazing sunsets and you can see these massive thunderstorms rolling around somewhere in the distance."

Both hikers say New Brunswick has been beautiful hiking through remote woodlands and picturesque farms, even though about a third of the trail through New Brunswick actually consists of roads and highways.

New Brunswick Trail Council's Jorgensen said it has been a challenge to move the trail, which follows the Appalachian Mountain range, off of the road and into the woods.

"To develop an off-road trail, it's the same challenges here as everywhere," he said. "That is land-ownership, terrain and finding the funding to actually develop the trail. Land ownership is usually the toughest one to deal with."

Still, the long stretches of asphalt don't bother the hikers, who are out to explore the vast reaches of North America on foot.

"For me, the motivation is really to see the continent," said Kiatoukaysi. "I think in the States and Canada we sometimes take for granted where we live. That's something I've realized on the trail, just

how pretty this whole entire land is."

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