

1,000 Nights: Into the Darkness

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I can still remember campsite number one. Rising a modest 300 vertical feet above abandoned farmland in the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains, 1,370-foot Remington Mountain was all ours. My high school buddy Pete and I hiked to the forested top at dusk to set up our summit campsite. Loaded down with cans of beef stew, water, newspapers for starting a campfire, a two-person tent, flashlights, wool blankets, and sleeping bags for a cold November night, our external frame backpacks bulged as we completed the half-mile hike from Stock Farm Road to the summit.

For years I had gazed at little Remington Mountain from my parents' home two miles away. For some reason Remington Mountain caught my interest, and I often wondered what it would be like to camp on top of it. That November of 1990, when I was seventeen years old, I found out.

It turned out that camping on top of Remington Mountain was fun. Actually, a lot of fun. Seriously fun. I found camping in general, and on summits in particular, so fun that as I sit here writing this article more than twenty years after my Remington Mountain christening, I have managed to sleep outside an additional 999 times. From the 14,000-foot peaks of Colorado, to the tidal shores of Alaska's Prince William Sound, to the mangroves and swamps of the Everglades, to the snowy forests of the Northeast, some campsites have been good, and some campsites have been bad. But I enjoyed all of them.

The good ones stood out with dramatic scenery, clear water, cool nights, and remoteness. The bad ones? They stood out for other reasons, but they made for good stories of misfortune and risk. No matter how good or how bad the site though, a lousy night in the woods usually beats a great night in civilization. So as I dozed off to enter my 1,000th night of camping this past July, in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, I felt comfort and happiness, and excitement, in this unique milestone.

What sets day hikers apart from backpackers is obvious. Backpackers experience the night, which day hikers may just well be jealous of. However, the majority of hikers tend to

never see the dark of night, which is a damn shame. Four aspects of an overnight stay make it worth the trip.

First, the night is as different from day as you can get. While daytime animals go to sleep, nocturnal animals awake. As the sun fades, the moon shines. Noise is replaced with silence. Cool extinguishes heat. Animal calls, grunts, and steps go bump in the night, which seem eerie at first but are comforting once you get used to them. These unique noises become old friends soon enough.

Second, day hikers are always doing something. They're checking their maps, eating, photographing, drinking, and, of course, hiking. Campers find themselves with hours of downtime, which provide opportunity to reflect on their lives, their place in the world, and the world itself.

Third, backpackers reach remote places. While day hikers can usually only trek ten miles into the wilderness before it's time to turn around, backpackers, depending on their schedules, have extended time to explore the backcountry. Having completed a half-dozen stays of more than thirty days each, I have learned the value of time in the wilderness.

Fourth, backpackers escape, albeit temporarily, from mass media, pop culture, news, and technology, things that were billed to make our lives simpler and ourselves better informed. However, these intrusions make our lives confusing, and they make us superficial. Camping with children and young adults is particularly important today. Nowadays it's downright awkward to realize that young people know more about pop stars and technological gizmos than what peace and quiet feels like. Through camping we reconnect with a world of darkness, where things still go bump in the night, unheard by most.