

INTRODUCTION

A venturesome minority will always be eager to set off on their own, and no obstacles should be placed in their path; let them take risks, for Godsake, let them get lost, sunburnt, stranded, drowned, eaten by bears, buried alive under avalanches—that is the right and privilege of any free American.

— Edward Abbey. *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*

On September 28th, 2017 we got a ride from the Albuquerque Route 66 Hostel to the base of the Sandia Crest Tramway where by hiking the trail up to the ridge, rather than taking the Tram (as any sensible person would do), we would be starting The Grand Enchantment Trail (GET). The GET is a 770 mile route that runs from Albuquerque to Phoenix through some of the least inhabited areas of the lower 48 through New Mexico and Arizona. The route, created by Brett Tucker—a hiker familiar with the area, is an attempt to link up as many of the spectacular hiking spots in the region in one continuous path as possible.

Our venturesome heroes, Agnès and I, met on the Appalachian Trail (AT) in 2015—her first time hiking in the U.S. and my seventh long distance hike here. I had a thing or two I could tell her—namely that although the AT is interesting, challenging, rewarding, and in it's own way beautiful, the best hiking is all out West. Our second hike together was on the *Haute Randonnée Pyrénéenne* (HRP) - the high route through the Pyrenees Mountains—a rugged, beautiful, frequently above treeline, often off trail and hard to follow route. Thus the bar to impress her after this trip was high indeed. And so I conceived a route—Denver to Phoenix on the Colorado Trail and Grand Enchantment Trail, connected by a section of Continental Divide Trail to show off hiking in the West—the best of extended alpine hiking in Colorado, and through New Mexico and Arizona something no Europe hike can claim—extended, remote, desert travel.

The experience on the GET is that of high mountain ridges with sweeping desert views, well built but unmaintained trails and an eclectic collection of routes connecting one ridge to the next. The route utilizes dirt roads—well traveled and abandoned, hiking trails, as well as sections of cross country. In the guide there are a dizzying number of synonyms used for these various walking surfaces—2-track, 4x4 road, 4WD road, Jeep trail to describe roads in the various possible conditions; cross country, x-country, bushwhacking for areas without any trail. Aside from hunters, who we only encountered when the route was on or crossed a road, there was almost no one out on the New Mexican trails. Through Arizona the route was extremely varied, often more overgrown, the hiking tougher, and the elevation lower. We became acquainted with catclaws (*Mimosa aculeaticarpa*), a particularly nasty bush with hooked thorns and the apt nickname wait-a-minute bush for its ability to wrap itself around your limbs, snag in your clothes, and not let go. We hiked through the Aravaipa Canyon, the "Grand Canyon of the Sonora", and saw more hikers there than we had on the entire rest of the the GET to date. As we got closer to Phoenix we hiked on the well traveled Arizona Trail—the trails overlapping for some 70 miles, and in the Superstition Wilderness—a regionally popular hiking area, and ended in a November heatwave, requiring us to use desert hiking tactics to manage the heat.

In this account of our travels we've transcribed entries from the journals we each kept while hiking, telling overlapping but not identical stories in French and English. We hope this book gives you a glimpse of what's out there, or better yet the push to get out and explore it yourself.