



There & Back Again

A few months ago, Francis Tapon became the first person to complete a round-trip hike of the Continental Divide Trail—starting and finishing in New Mexico. Find out what inspired him and how you can follow in his footsteps—on a day hike or all the way to Canada.

By Ashley M. Biggers



PHOTO BY ASHLEY M. BIGGERS

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PRIL 2007: Francis Tapon stands under the denim-blue sky at the U.S.-Mexico border and gazes at lands that are still winter-dry. Here, at the Southern Terminus of the Continental Divide Trail, Tapon will begin

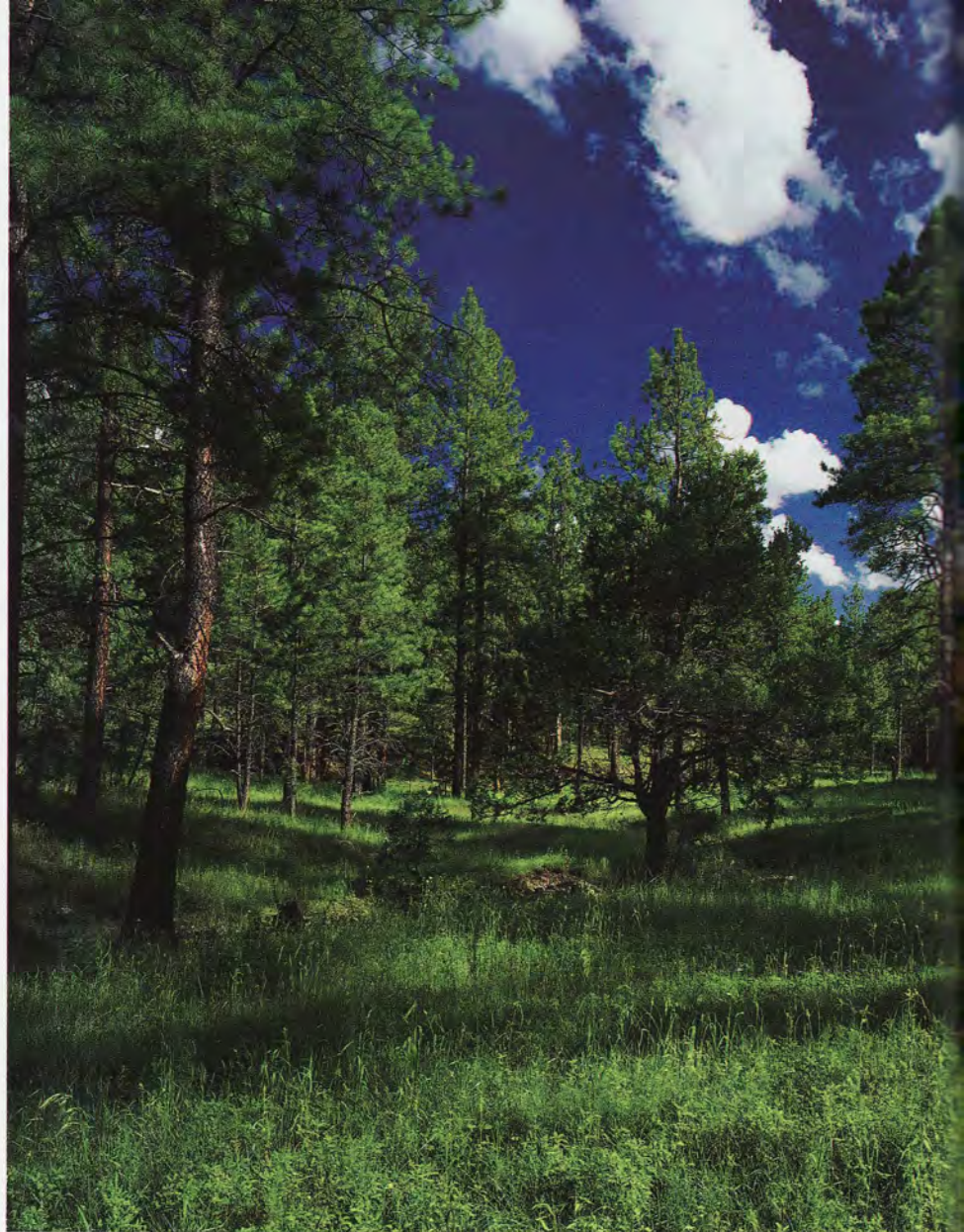
his nearly seven-month, 6,000-mile march to Canada and back. Head shaved, he looks battle-ready.

He breathes the clean, fresh air and sets off from the Crazy Cook Monument, near Antelope Wells, for Lordsburg. The hard dirt crunches under his Innov-8 shoes, the first of nine pairs he'll wear out during his journey.

His pack is light—he carries his sleeping bag and pad, a tarp, rain gear, food, and little else. Water will be the heaviest thing he shoulders through this barren landscape, where hydration sources are few and unreliable.

The yucca-dappled mesa is a long way from the Silicon Valley boardrooms Tapon abandoned two years before to pursue his passions for adventure and travel. Living without regrets, he sports wisdom far beyond his 37 years: "One of the ways I stay so focused and I live a life I enjoy so much is that I think a lot about death. To me, thinking about death is actually very invigorating and very motivating," he says. Tapon's quest for a life fulfilled continually spurs him to push beyond even his own ambitious expectations.

His pioneer spirit led him to attempt not just a border-to-border thru-hike (a term for hiking a long-distance trail from end to end) of the Continental Divide Trail (CDT), but a "yo-yo," or round-trip hike. If he finishes, he'll be the first person ever to have done so: "You have to think



about it in stages," he advises. "If you thought about the whole thing, it would be too overwhelming."

Tapon should know. He's hiked the two other National Scenic Trails—the Appalachian and the Pacific Crest—the inspiration for his book, *Hike Your Own Hike: 7 Life Lessons from Backpacking Across America* (SonicTrek Press, 2006). Though he completed those hikes with buddies, this time, Tapon ventures into the wilderness alone. From Antelope Wells, he'll trek 2,000 miles before encountering a fellow hiker.

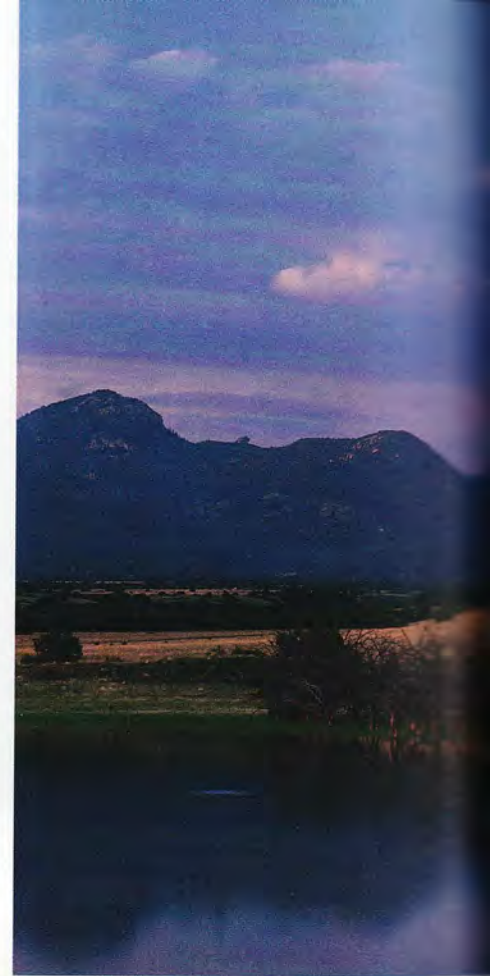
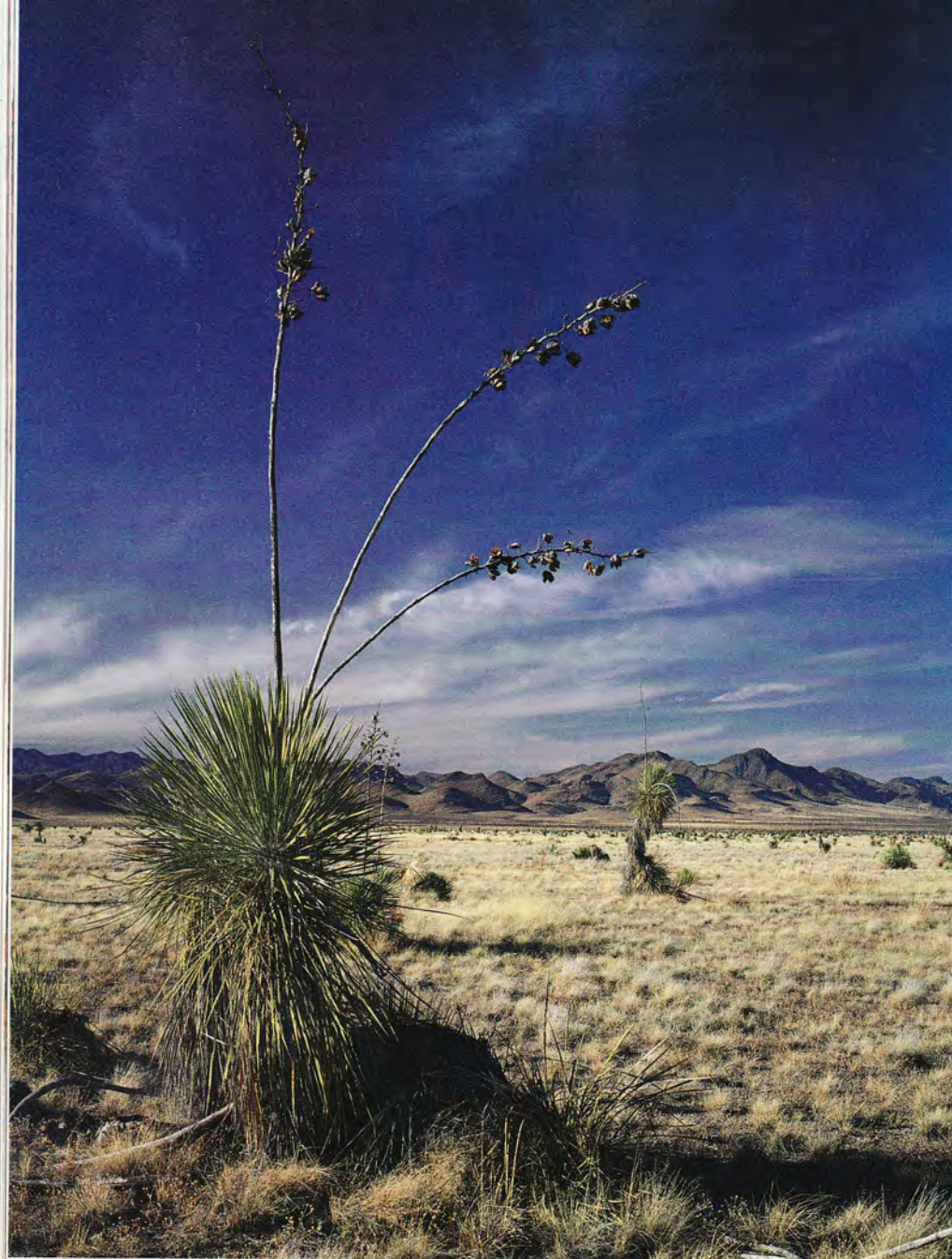
Crowned the King of Trails, the CDT is the most remote and challenging of the National Scenic Trails. Unlike its brethren, it isn't demarcated with well-trodden paths and regular signposts—it demands self-reliance. The punishing trail will test Tapon's physical and mental limits as he pushes himself farther than any hiker before him.

Today, he's headed toward New Mexico's Black Range, in the Aldo Leopold Wilderness, outside Silver City. Only 5,999 miles to go.

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The Continental Divide cuts down from Alaska's Bering Strait to Patagonia, Argentina. This continental backbone literally separates the waters flowing to the Pacific Ocean from those flowing to the Atlantic. The Continental Divide Trail, which traces the switchbacks of the yards-wide divide from New Mexico's Bootheel to the U.S.-Canada border, was recognized as a National Scenic Trail in 1978.

The CDT stretches 770 miles across New Mexico alone. In those miles, it wends its way through the volcanic caldera in the Gila Wilderness, the sandstone bluffs of the Cibola National Forest, and the granite cliffs of the Zuni Mountains.



Trail Mix: Part of the CDT's appeal is the variety of scenery. *Left*—Yuccas dot the landscape in Hidalgo County, near the U.S.-Mexico border. *Above*—The Mogollón Mountains frame the western portion of the Gila National Forest.

It climbs from desert mesas and tufted grasslands into pine forests and alpine meadows.

Only the most experienced backpackers attempt thru-hikes. Although there is no official registry, the Continental Divide Trail Alliance estimates that of the 50 to 100 people who attempt border-to-border thru-hikes in a season, roughly half finish. (In 2007, 21-year-old forestry student Erin Zwiener attempted the CDT on a mule. She'd made it through Colorado when an injury to her other pack mule brought the quest to a halt.)

During thru-hikes, backpackers balance avoiding snow in Montana and Colorado with finding relief from the New Mexico heat. It's an obstacle course to avoid the most extreme conditions—one that Tapon didn't always win.



Early in his journey, during an overnight in Silver City, Tapon cowboy-camps (under the stars, no tent) as usual, with the Big Dipper, Orion, and Cassiopeia for company. He wakes to snow: "Wouldn't that be funny? Instead of dying gloriously, high in the mountains, I end up dying of hypothermia in downtown Silver City," he muses on his blog, www.francistapon.com, updated whenever he's in civilization.

At first, the weather doesn't faze him: "To me, what a lot of people associate as adversity, such as mosquitoes, high winds, monotonous food, days where you're going through desert without much water ... sleeping in a sleeping bag, getting rained on, I don't see as adversity. I enjoy the

challenge." Only loneliness threatens to penetrate his adamant enthusiasm.

From Silver City, Tapon continues into the Gila National Forest, one of his favorite places and one of five national forests on the CDT in New Mexico. As he walks under the canopy of aspen and pine, he listens to audio books on his MP3 player. His steps fall to the cadence of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, or Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, to name a few.

Suddenly, Tapon has company: only 30 yards away, a mountain lion. He creeps forward. The deer locked in the lion's hungry gaze bolt. He wonders if he'll become the prey instead.

Without acknowledging his presence, the lion slinks off, into the forest. He steals



down the trail, listening for the sound of feet padding behind him. It never comes.

Up with the sun and hiking well after sunset, Tapon is always moving. Even setting up a tent or cooking food means time wasted. As he walks, he eats Pemmican Meal Pack bars, good ol' raisins and peanuts, and the occasional piece of fresh fruit. Eventually, his body adjusts. "Most of the trail is mental after 500 miles," he says.

On his northbound trek, Tapon savors a slice of green-chile apple pie in Pie Town, sleeps under Ghost Ranch's iconic cliffs, and treks through the Cumbres Pass outside Chama. Once he's across the state line in Colorado, he'll kick-step through waist-deep snow. With his green Jacks 'R' Better sleeping bag zipped around his shoulders like a *serape*, he summits several peaks over 14,000 feet.

On another day, he walks 50 miles just to keep warm. Alone and unable to escape the cold, wet conditions, he finds his limits: "I was unhappy more than 50 percent of the time," he reflects now. "But I had the skills, confidence—and stupidity—to keep walking."

When Tapon finally reaches the trail's Northern Terminus, at Glacier Waterton

Giddyup



PHOTO BY KELLY D. GATLIN

Hiking isn't the only way to see the Continental Divide Trail. Montana adventuress Erin Zwiener also set out to traverse the trail in 2007, along with buddies Yoakam (named for Dwight) and Kershaw. Like Francis Tapon, she began in New Mexico, where she was photographed here, outside Pie Town. Unfortunately, the trail proved too tough even for mules, and a threat to Yoakam's health forced her to stop before reaching the U.S.-Canada border. However, her resolve remains strong. Her next ambition: to win a National Geographic Expedition Grant so she can embark on another adventure.



The Continental Divide Trail Alliance estimates that only 50 to 100 people attempt thru-hikes (from the U.S.-Mexico border to the U.S.-Canada border) each season.

International Peace Park, on the Montana-Canada border, he'll have to find his way back again.



This year the CDT celebrates its 30th anniversary, but much of it remains undeveloped. In some instances, the actual route is still under discussion. Because the path can't always trace the narrow Divide itself, the trail's location has become a much-debated topic among the numerous organizations with a stake in it. The Continental Divide Trail Alliance (a nonprofit advocacy group), two State of New Mexico departments, the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Forest Service, and

FRANCIS TAPON'S SEVEN PRINCIPLES

- Hike Your Own Hike.
- Beware of Summit Fever.
- Hike with Passion.
- Learn from Trail Lore.
- Eat Well, Walk Hard, and Sleep Soundly.
- Perform Trail Magic.
- The Journey is Too Important to Take Seriously.

the Acoma Indian Tribe formed the first formal partnership of its kind to complete and maintain the trail. In planning the CDT's route, the groups strive to keep the trail close to the actual Divide and water sources, avoid private land, and maintain a scenic, offroad experience for hikers. Only 65 percent of the trail through New Mexico is cleared and marked with signs or small cairns (rock piles). Often, backpackers walk on a road or whack through sagebrush to reach their destinations.

Funding is central to the trail's development—it can cost up to \$13,000 to clear a single mile. Governor Bill Richardson declared protecting the CDT's cultural, natural, and historic treasures a priority in 2007. Over the past few years, the state has awarded \$4 million for extensions and improvements on the CDT and other trails.

A thousand-strong volunteer corps has helped develop the trail through New Mexico in the past year. In 2007, hiking enthusiasts from the New Mexico Mountain Club also completed a 55-mile stretch north of the Cibola National Forest outside Grants, on one of three BLM districts along the trail. A clearer route promises to give hikers of all levels the opportunity to enjoy the CDT.



Although the CDT's route is ill-defined, Tapon spurns the global-positioning systems many hikers use. Instead, he

navigates with a wrist compass and altimeter, and topographic maps: "People don't like to get lost ... whereas I'm thrilled ... I'm going through some place nobody else has seen," he explains.

On his October return passage across New Mexico amid a landscape of creosote bushes and prickly pear cactus, he scouts landmarks to guide his way: "I've finished this mountain. I just have to get to that one next." During his sojourn, his hair has grown long and disheveled, his muscles lean.


In Columbus, the final countdown begins as Tapon nears his starting point—now his finish line. Three miles to go. Two miles. His pace quickens. The fastest mile is the last.

When he reaches the zero-mile mark, his victory seems anticlimactic. There's no one at the border checkpoint to celebrate his glory, save a couple of suspicious guards whom he persuades to take his picture. Emotions flood through him. Satisfaction. Elation. Relief.

Off the trail, civilization's modern conveniences—indoor plumbing, riding in cars, cooking food—will soon become habit again. In the meantime, when he spots a city park, he can't help but think what an ideal campsite it would make.

On the CDT, Tapon truly walked his talk and followed his own seven principles about hiking—and life. He hiked with passion. He walked hard—around 11 million steps.

However, at trail's end, the wayfarer reneged on his philosophy of going the distance all by himself: "Don't hike alone," he concludes. "You go into the wilderness to leave civilization, but then you realize how important human relationships are. When you come off the trail, you don't talk about what you saw; you talk about the people you met."

Perhaps he'll remember the generous New Mexicans who invited him into their homes for the night—the only people on his entire journey to do so. That's where the hike becomes a metaphor for life: "To live a truly fulfilling life," Tapon says, "you have to create community." 

As an occasional day hiker, **Ashley M. Biggers** enjoyed learning about the natural beauty and physical challenge of hiking the Continental Divide Trail—while having someone else do the walking.