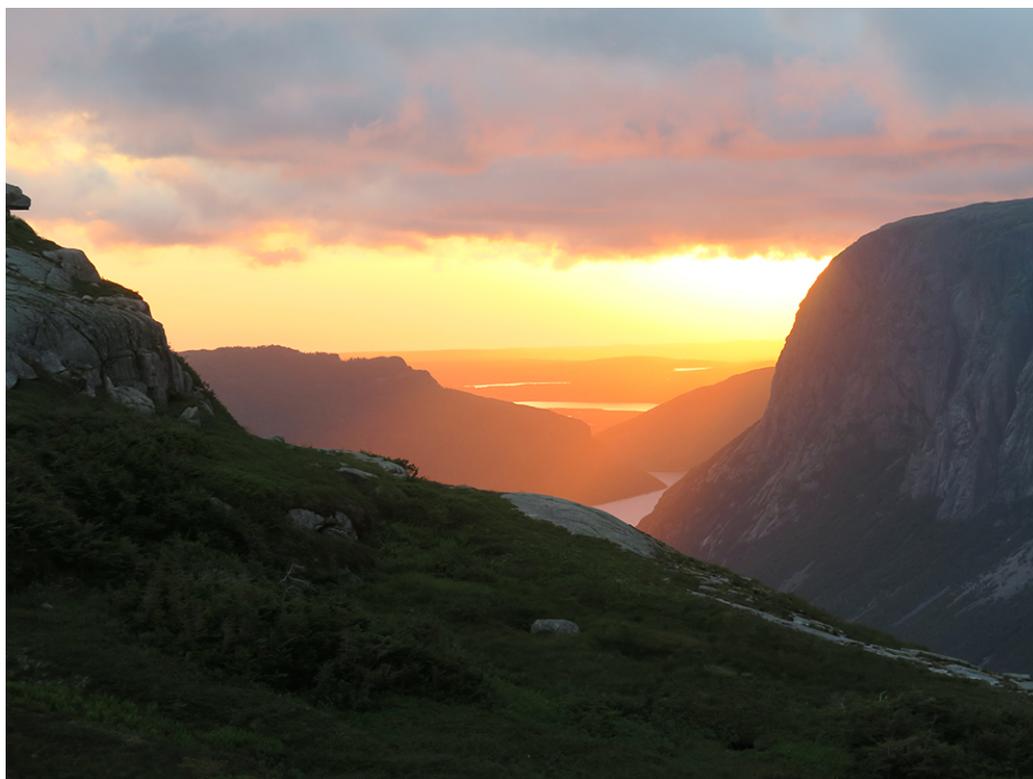


# NATIONAL POST

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## The answer to 'why hike?' is in the journey

*Sydney Loney: If you can reach your final destination safely in a pair of sneakers, that's a walk. If you require thick-soled boots lined with Gortex, that's a hike*



Sunset. Sydney Loney



SPECIAL TO NATIONAL  
POST

September 26, 2017  
10:00 AM EDT

Last Updated  
September 26, 2017

**By Sydney Loney**

The question “why hike” first presented itself to me on the second floor of a MEC store in southern Ontario. I was standing in a sea of fleece, trip notes in hand, trying to sort out the gear required for a four-day, back-country trek up the Long Range Mountains in northern Newfoundland.

The list was two pages long. It included: a water purification system so I

wouldn't get gut-wrenching giardia from drinking glacial water; gaiters so my hiking pants wouldn't be torn to shreds by the spiky branches of tuckamore (stunted alpine spruce trees); long underwear; energy bars; Band-Aids, bug spray, trekking poles; extra hiking socks for when my feet slipped into peat bogs...and a 45-litre pack so I could lug all this stuff up the side of a mountain.

As my pile of purchases grew, it occurred to me that this was going to be hard.

My mother was the second to pose the question, although it was more along the lines of, "Why are you doing *this* hike?" followed by, "Are you sure you *can* do this hike?"

The truth was, I wasn't sure. I like a good "hike" as much as the next fair-weather, nature-loving, outdoor enthusiast, but when does a walk in the woods actually become a *hike*? Is it determined by the time it takes you (four days, four hours, 45 minutes)? Maybe it's a matter of distance, 10 kilometres vs. five? Or perhaps it comes back to the gear. If you can reach your final destination safely in a pair of sneakers, that's a walk. If you require thick-soled boots lined with Gortex, that's a hike.



. Sydney Loney

I was holding the latter in my hands as I stood in line at the MEC checkout, worrying about what I'd gotten myself into. Three weeks later, and about an hour into my trek up through the mountains in Gros Morne National Park (part of the Canadian Appalachians with an average elevation of 2,000 feet), I was glad I'd splurged on the pair that seemed least likely to cause blisters.

There is a common misconception about traversing the Long Range Mountains, says Andy Nichols, one of our guides with Great Canadian Trails. "People think, 'Oh, it's just the climb on the first day and then you're only walking across the top,'" he says. "But, as you can now attest, the climbing is

far from over after the gorge.”

It's true, I can definitely attest to that. And the “gorge” he's referring to is where the trek begins, after an hour-long boat ride through the modestly named Western Brook Pond (it's actually a long fjord flanked by towering granite cliffs). The boat deposited us on a tiny square of dock and then, with a last tightening of laces and adjusting of straps, up the wall of the gorge we went.

Nichols, who grew up in the mountains, has been across the Long Range Traverse about 15 times. For him, the answer to the question, “Why hike?” is easy. “When you step off the boat at Western Brook Gorge, you disconnect from the world as you know it,” he says. “Over the next four days you find strength from within to meet the challenges — both mental and physical — and find a sense of quiet and peace that's unattainable in your everyday hustle and bustle.”

It's true. With no suggestion of a cell signal, the outside world falls away fast and everything you worried about a few hours before (looming work projects, your next mortgage payment, whether your kids are eating enough vegetables) is replaced by an overriding need to focus on where you're putting your feet.



. Sydney Loney

There is no trail on the Long Range — it's the epitome of unspoiled backcountry. (Only 12 hikers are allowed access each day.) The first stretch of the journey found us switch-backing our way up, bushwhacking through trees, pulling ourselves up using roots and branches and scrambling over slippery rocks and boulders.

There are those who come just for those rocks and boulders alone. Gros Morne National Park is an UNESCO world heritage site and a mecca for

geologists. It's renowned for its billion-year-old blocks of granite and Precambrian mountains topped with glacial erratics (boulders that travelled by glacier until they came to rest, many quite precariously, at the top of the cliffs).

The Long Range Mountain landscape is kind of like Game of Thrones meets The Lord of the Rings. It's wild, desolate and beautiful —and you feel as though you could easily happen upon a hobbit or a dragon (or, in our case, a lone caribou). Moose, although more plentiful, proved elusive. They're there, you just don't see them, Nichols said as we sidestepped what must have been the twentieth pile of droppings we'd encountered (it was hard to pitch a tent without landing on a moose latrine).

Spending quality time with nature is a universal reason to hike. To *really* see flora and fauna you may never have noticed before (if you're hiking in your own backyard) or to encounter plants you never knew existed, like the soft Arctic cotton and carnivorous, orchid-like pitcher plants (the province's official flower) that we discovered as we trekked from peak to peak along the plateau. We also stumbled on a nest of ptarmigan, an alpine, rock-dwelling bird, at the top of one fog-shrouded summit.

Another good reason to hike is that food always seems to taste better after you've navigated 10 km of tough terrain. In addition to a hearty laugh and the ability to lead us through the mountains with neither map nor compass, Steve Wheeler, our second guide and Nichols' business partner, specialized in Thai rice and homemade cheesecake cooked over a camp stove (this last we topped with bake apples — aka cloudberryes — that we'd foraged for on a hill near our campsite).



. Sydney Loney

For Wheeler, one good reason to hike is the opportunity it offers to connect with other people. "Take away the buildings, the intricate social structures, the

jobs and the distractions and you get a glimpse at the thin line on which we truly live," he says. "Hiking gives us a taste of that. And even though you're facing your own personal tough points during each day, you also have to come together as a group to achieve the simple goal of finishing the hike."

Conversations during water breaks ranged from best-live-concert-ever and favourite Seinfeld episode to somber tales of personal hardships and relationship hurdles. When you're supporting one another during a tricky descent or handing off the communal shovel during bathroom breaks (the Park has a strict "leave no trace" policy), conventional barriers break down fast.

My tent-mate, Kristin Edge, was a crime reporter and outrigger canoeist (who has also swum with great white sharks and raced tuk-tuks in India). Naturally, her answer to, "Why hike" was "Because it tests you."

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"You don't have to be the fittest or the fastest, you just have to be determined," she says. "Just when you think, 'What am I doing here?' you get to the top of a hill and see an incredible vista — and it's all worth it."

Every day, our efforts were rewarded by incredible vistas. Whenever I took a moment to look up from my feet, it no longer mattered that they'd gotten soaked crossing the last icy mountain stream, or that the blackflies had found the tender spot behind my ears despite a healthy application of DEET.

On our last night, we camped in sight of the most spectacular view of all. By this point, we were tired. Everything ached. But still we couldn't retire to our tents until the sun had finished its spectacular evening performance, bending orange light around the cliffs overlooking Ten Mile Pond (again, not really a pond but another fabulous glacial fjord).

For me, the answer to "why hike?" came every time I paused, turned around, and saw how far I'd come. There was usually a moment of incredulity, followed by the cool feeling that, hell, if I just did that, I could do anything.

*The writer was a guest of Great Canadian Trails. The company did not review this article.*



