Francis Tapon

The first person to yo-yo America's wildest trail talks heating, eating and the philosophy of lightweight

Words: John Manning Photos: Francis Tapon

When Francis Tapon tackles something, he does it just a bit more thoroughly than most. After hiking the 2100-mile Appalachian Trail in 2001 he wrote a book based on his experiences, Hike Your Own Hike. Unlike most post-trail publications, it wasn't a "how to" backpacking textbook or a collection of journals, but a full-blown self-help guide, based on life lessons derived from his trail experiences.

In 2006 Tapon, a Californian, added to his wisdom pool on the 2665-mile Pacific Crest Trail, and last year he completed the triptych of American long-distance trails known as the Triple Crown by hiking ultralight along the most demanding, the Continental Divide Trail. But, Francis being Francis, he didn't just hike the trail south to north: when he reached the Canadian border, he turned south and headed all the way back to Mexico to become the first person to complete a "CDT yo-yo".

The Continental Divide is the wildest, longest and least complete of the Triple Crown trails. A good portion of its desert-to-mountain length is undefined, long stretches are unmarked and even the two organisations that independently promote the trail, the CDT Alliance and the CDT Society, can't agree on the precise route it should follow. Only a handful of people complete it each year and it's unlikely that any two follow precisely the same route; they could hike anything between 2600 and 3100 miles.

"That's one of the reasons I did this yo-yo," said Francis. "When I was planning it I looked at all the different options and just couldn't decide which way to go. But if I did the round trip, I could take the most circuitous, scenic, high, difficult route north, then take the more expedient route on the way down; I'd estimate that I saw something new more than 70 percent of the time on the return journey.

"When I was going through Colorado in May, for example, there was so much snow – but when I returned in September it had all gone. To all intents and purposes, it was a new trail."

Kitting out for a seven-month hike demanded special discipline. Factors such as Francis's intention to stay warm by hiking a 35-mile daily average played a part in determining just how light he could go. The 28-year-old started by asking himself what were the genuine essentials. "For example, you need a shelter and some way to keep warm at night," he said. "I'm not saying 'I need a tent and a sleeping bag', I'm saying 'I need a shelter' and that 'I need to keep warm at night'. I think of functionality. The second question is 'what items would help me do that?' Then I ask myself: 'What's the lightest version that helps me accomplish that goal?'

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"If you systematically go through every item with that philosophy, you'll rapidly get down to a pack weight that's around 10lb or less."

In fact Francis's pack, without food and water, weighed under 6lb (sub-3kg) for the seven months. He forsook stove and hot food – "In town I looked for cooked food and gorged just like any other thru' hiker; I think I made a dent on the profit and loss statement of certain all-you-can-eat restaurants!" – and didn't bother with trekking poles – "one of the secrets to being able to do over 35 miles a day was simply eating while you're walking".

"One of the things I carried for the seven months was a tarp. It's made out of Cuben fibre by a company called Mountain Laurel Designs and weighs just under 6oz, so it's very light, yet very strong and spacious.

"I used a sleeping bag made by Jacks R Better, a small, innovative American company that most Europeans won't have heard of – a lot of Americans haven't heard of them! They've created a quilt that converts into a serape [shawl], or poncho: imagine cutting your sleeping bag in half so it's like a quilt or a blanket, then cutting a hole in the middle, so you can stick your head through and the rest drapes over you like a poncho. Effectively I had a blanket which, when I got up in the morning, I could just wear as a serape, so I didn't need an insulated jacket the entire journey. When things got really cold I'd just wear my sleeping bag, though that was rare; most of the time I wasn't that cold because I kept moving.

"An ultralight backpacker has to factor in the ability to generate heat while you move. So there has to be an assumption that you're going to be moving most of the time and when you're not moving you're going to be sleeping or in your sleeping bag.

"I would also almost always camp near the bottom of a hill so that when I woke up in the morning, even though it was really cold, the first thing I would do would be to start walking up that hill. That immediately would warm me, then I'm good for the rest of the day."

There are those who would criticise his punishing 35-mile, 16-hour-a-day schedule as being too fast to observe the landscape around him. But Francis has a ready response: "I do it because I love it. I enjoy hiking, I enjoy backpacking, I enjoy the thrill and adventure. And no matter how fast I walked I could never make the scenery blur!"

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