

Trailing Ahead

Living in Norfolk, Virginia my whole life, a city adjacent to miles of beaches, I was in for quite the adjustment when I moved to the mountainous Blacksburg for college. During my freshman year, I had a rough transition, as I was homesick and overwhelmed by the drastic difference between high school and college. Once I became more acclimated to college life, I, along with the entire world, was shocked by the COVID-19 pandemic that turned everyone's lives around.

After spending most of my summer indoors with my eyes glued to my laptop screen, I was both nervous and excited to return to Blacksburg for my sophomore year. With only one class in person and several COVID restrictions, I worried that my second year would be uneventful. Due to several capacity limitations and social distancing guidelines, many places on campus had reduced hours, causing my group of friends to expand our whereabouts to a place with less restrictions: Mother Nature. Our first hike was Cascades Falls Trail.

It had only been about an hour, but it felt like an eternity in the dreadful heat. The scorching August sun beat down on us as we powered through. The only thing keeping me going was the refreshing cascade pool awaiting me at the end of the trail.

“Does anyone want to take a break?” one of my friends, an avid hiker asked.

He turned around to check on the rest of us, who were huffing and puffing. Everyone nodded in agreement, so we found a group of rocks nearby to sit down and hydrate.

“Alright, up and at ‘em guys. We are almost there!” he said after a couple of minutes.”

We all sighed in unison before getting up and continuing to trudge along. After about another mile, I could hear the cascades flowing. We all began heading towards the pool of water

ahead of us and changed into our swimsuits. I eagerly rushed over to the water, where a few of my friends seemed apprehensive to step in.

“Why are you guys taking so long?” I questioned as I excitedly headed into the water.

I took one step into the water and—*Slip! Thud!*

I quickly realized why they were taking their time, as I lost my balance and fell on my bottom.

Before my friends could rush over to help me, I made a maneuver and steadied myself before standing up again.

“See, we were going to tell you that it was slippery!”

After serving as a cautionary tale, everyone moved carefully while stepping on the rocks to reach the cascades. The cold water was revitalizing as we sat on the rocks and dipped our feet in the water.

There was a small area adjacent to the cascades that people were using as a takeoff point to launch into the water. One of my friends looked over to me and said, “We have to jump in!”

I looked at her with wide eyes, “The water is way too cold, are you crazy?”

Within a couple of seconds, three of my friends lined up, preparing to jump in. After thinking, I decided, “Hey, why not? We hiked all the way here; I might as well jump in too.”

We all looked at each other, shaking nervously.

“Okay we’re going in on the count of three,” one of my friends took the lead.

“One!”

I took a deep breath.

“Two!”

I grabbed the hand of my friend next to me.

“Three!”

Without thinking, we all hopped into the freezing cold water. After being submerged for a few seconds, we all resurfaced and began paddling back to the shallow area.

“I’m freezing!” I shouted, but the feeling of doing something outside of my comfort zone was well worth a couple minutes of cold discomfort.

Another notable hike occurred on an uncharacteristically warm day in December with three of my friends. After a thirty-minute drive, we walked up a dirt road to Stiles Falls trail in Shawsville. It was a scenic route filled with foliage and boulders of varying sizes covered in layers of moss. Although it seemed like a simple hike at the beginning, we began facing difficult creek crossings, challenging us to find our own unique ways across. At the end of the hike, we encountered a towering waterfall, which unlike the cascades, was not safe to swim in.

On the way back, we took a different route. At one point, the path was no longer visible, likely rained out. There were not enough stable rocks for us to cross over, so after a couple minutes of unsuccessful brainstorming, one of my friends said, “Okay fine. I’ll just carry you guys over.”

He began taking off his shoes and socks and placing all his belongings into his backpack. Before we could stop him, he began walking through the water to get to the other side. He took three back and forth trips carrying each of us on his back. When it was my turn, I hopped on his back and he said, “Ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” I replied.

He began wading through the water. For the first couple of feet, it was smooth sailing, until he encountered a small rock under the water and nearly slipped while carrying me.

“Sorry about that!” he exclaimed as some of the water reached my leg. Luckily, he was able to steady himself and make a safe trip back to the other side.

He sat down for a break once we all made it across but noticed a cut in his foot. He was prepared with a first aid kit and was able to patch it up before we headed back to the car.

Although COVID-19 was an unpredictable time, it gave me the opportunity to become more in tune with nature, going from doing two hikes in my entire life to seven memorable hikes with my friends within just a few months.