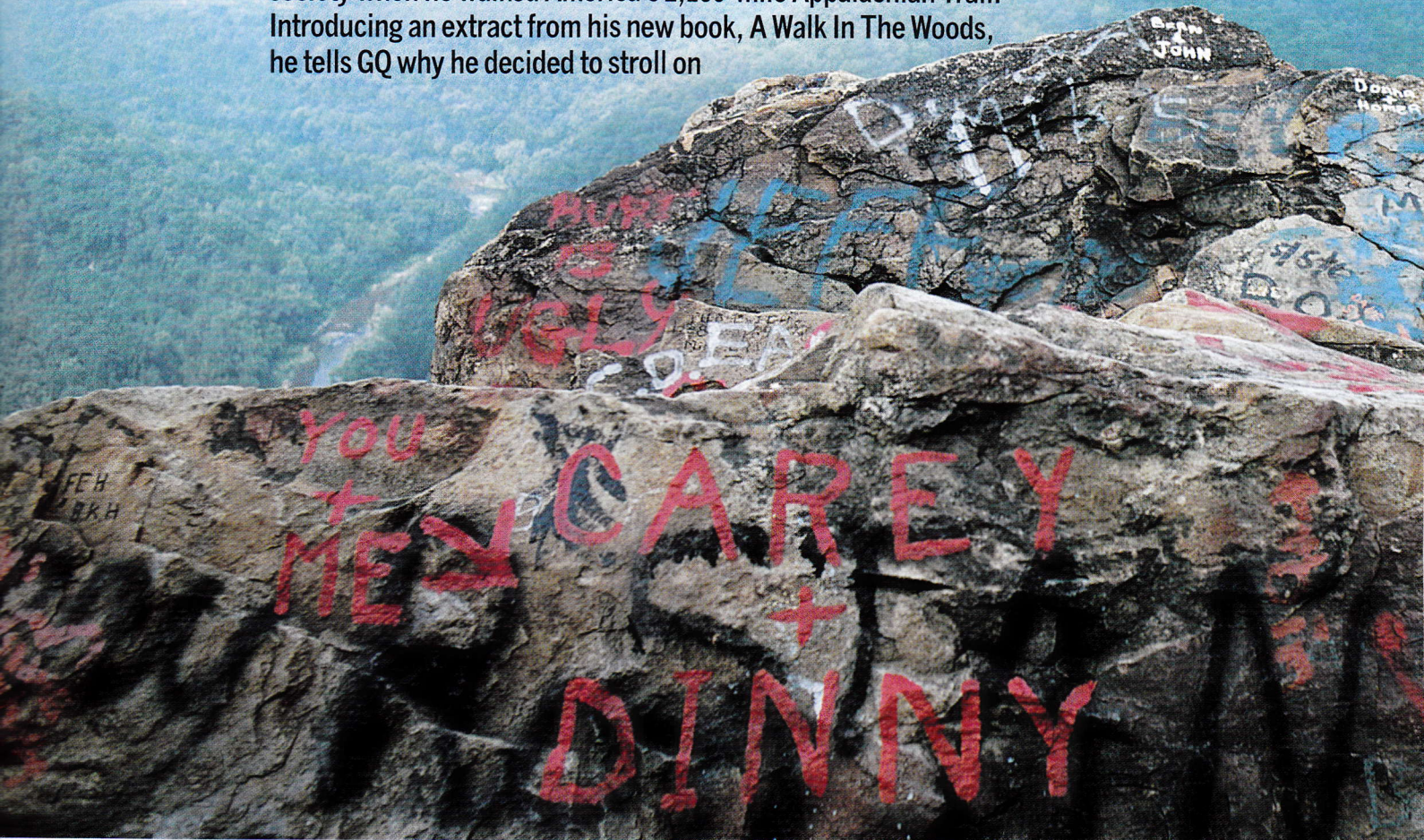


Bill's excellent adventure

Bill Bryson encountered creeks, peaks, geeks and the cream of hike society when he walked America's 2,150-mile Appalachian Trail. Introducing an extract from his new book, *A Walk In The Woods*, he tells GQ why he decided to stroll on



'And here's me again, with some more, er, rocks'

Bill Bryson talking...

Of the many job titles Bill Bryson answers to, it is ironic that the one that seems to suit him least is "travel writer". Satirist, certainly. Social commentator, maybe. Etymologist and English language expert, most definitely. Yet the man who has sold almost one million copies of his British travelogue *Notes From A Small Island* has always eschewed the notion of the travel writer as trailblazing, jungle-trekking, jogging-across-the-Sahara adventurer-hero. "I will not sleep with the Bedouin or bed down with the camels," he has said. "I'm simply a tourist who writes books."

It comes as some surprise, therefore, to discover that his latest work is a story of hardship, endurance and even mortal danger. *A Walk In The Woods* is a typically modest record of Bryson's travails while hiking sections of America's Appalachian Trail (AT), a 2,150-mile mountain path that runs through 14 eastern seaboard states from Maine to Georgia. The AT involves wilderness walking, sleeping out, harsh weather and the prospect of friendly encounters with wolves, rattlesnakes and grizzly bears. While the book is shot through with the author's genial brand of wry mockery, it also details weeks upon weeks of intense physical and mental challenge – especially for a traveller who readily admits to "years of waddlesome sloth".

"It is the hardest thing I have ever done and probably the closest I will ever come to writing a conventional travel book," says Bryson. "The

other travel books I have written have mostly involved rail travel, hotel rooms and tourist-type comforts. This involved being soaked to the bone huddled up in a small hut somewhere freezing my nuts off – that kind of stuff."

Fortunately Bryson had company for much of the walk in the form of an old school friend from his infamous home town of Des Moines, Iowa. Stephen Katz, the pseudonymous hitchhiking companion Bryson so splendidly falls out with in his account of wandering around Europe, *Neither Here Nor There*, reappears 25 years on and almost steals the show. A dissolute, woefully unfit and overweight reforming alcoholic, Katz is also blessed with a very appealing and caustic sense of humour.

"What was nice for me in writing the book was that I didn't have to single-handedly carry the burden of keeping the reader amused and entertained," says Bryson. "I still play the quipster in the narrative, but almost everything you might laugh at in the book is generated by Katz. He's a Rabelaisian, larger-than-life sort of a guy and he took over not only the book but the experience in a way that I hadn't really expected. I found myself becoming the straight man."

It is a novel role and one that, occasionally, allows Bryson to adopt a tone very different to the one for which he has become so renowned. Although it will no doubt disappoint the legions of fans who have come to love his subtle power of understatement and lightness of touch, there are sections in *A Walk In The Woods* that, for Bryson

at least, are almost polemical. After Katz has briefly returned home and Bryson is left to walk alone, he becomes free to vent his frustrations on the US National Park Service and the funding, maintenance, management and pollution of the AT. These passages can jar and disrupt the narrative but should help rebuff critics who accuse Bryson, sometimes justifiably, of sacrificing depth for the throwaway one-liner.

"I'm still learning and finding my way writing these humorous books and it seems to me that a book is too long to sustain just jokes – the reader starts to get burned out," he says. "I decided with this one that I'd be more sparing with the humour in the hope that it would be more effective when it appeared. Also, there are things that I feel reasonably strongly about and it seemed inappropriate to write about them in a jokey way."

Although a UK resident for 18 years, mostly in North Yorkshire, Bryson returned to America two years ago. He now lives with his wife and four children in Hanover, New Hampshire, a college town situated near to the northern end of the AT. But this confirmed Anglophile plans to return to England and remains a keen student of all things idiosyncratically British.

"I get English papers and gossip from friends who visit, so I'm usually only a few weeks behind, but I did feel terribly dispirited last time I was back in Britain. Just when I thought I was getting back to speed someone told me about a phenomenon I knew nothing about. I mean, I'd never even heard of *Teletubbies*." PW

Edited by
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