

# What is a Thru-Hike?

Peter Pnuel BetBasoo

peteoutdoors.com

Hiking the Pacific Crest Trail from end to end is called a “thru hike.” Hiking eleven miles to the south rim in Big Bend National Park is called a “day hike.” What is the difference? What criteria determine what a “thru hike” is?

Hikes can be classified into two broad categories: day hikes and overnight hikes. A day hike is an out-and-back excursion within a single day. An overnight hike is a minimum of two days and one night of camping. There are also “section” hikes, where one or more sections of a trail, such as the Arizona Trail, are hiked. A section hike can be a day hike or an overnight hike.

## Definitions

Many attempts have been made to define what a thru hike is. Backpacker.com defines a thru hike as follows:

To thru-hike a trail, one must hike along its entire length from end to end in a single trip. Thru-hiking can take anywhere from days to weeks to months. On long trails, thru-hikers might occasionally leave the trail to rest in town, restock on food and supplies, or see the sights along their route. Hiking trail sections out of order—e.g., starting at the halfway point of the Appalachian Trail and hiking to the northern terminus, then flying back to the middle and hiking the southern half—still counts, as long as you finish it in one trip.<sup>1</sup>

Trail and Summit says:

A thru-hike is when you walk the entirety of an established long-distance hiking trail from one end to another. The hike is completed in one-way fashion without leaving the trail for an extended period of time. Recently, a number of trail management organizations have stated that in order for it to be considered a thru-hike, it must be completed within a 12-month period.<sup>2</sup>

Thruhiking.com says:

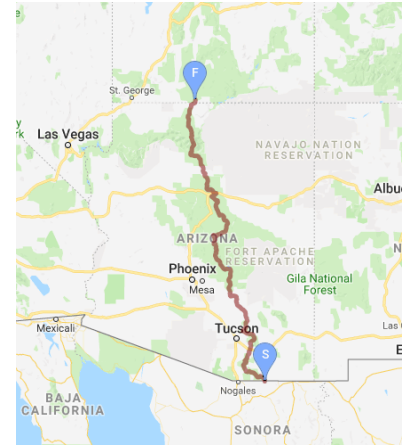
Thru-hiking is walking a long-distance path from start to end. In most cases, you will cross multiple regions or maybe even several countries. However, this is not necessarily the case, since some long-distance paths comprise smaller regions. The aim is to hike the trail in one or connecting season(s) and in one go.<sup>3</sup>

There is agreement that a thru hike involves some distance in miles, but no consensus on that distance. There is agreement that it involves multiple days, but no consensus on the number of days. There is agreement that it involves a certain length of time, but no consensus on the length of time.

## Length

It is clear that a day hike is not a thru hike. But a day hike can cover a significant distance. There are people who hike or run the Grand Canyon from rim to rim to rim (48 miles) in one continuous period (a “day”).

What about overnight hikes covering many days? For example, the Outer Mountain Loop in Big Bend National Park (32 miles, typically three days, two nights), or Tonto Trail in the Grand Canyon, from Hermit’s Rest to Grandview Point (52 miles, typically 5 days and 4 nights). Are these considered thru hikes? Most would say no, and that would be correct.



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.backpacker.com/skills/beginner-skills/what-is-thru-hiking>

<sup>2</sup> <https://trailandsummit.com/what-is-considered-a-thru-hike>

<sup>3</sup> <https://thru-hiking.com/what-is-thru-hiking>

Is there a distance threshold where once crossed a hike becomes a thru hike? I think not. Length alone is not enough to classify a hike as a thru hike.

## Time

How about time? Does that make a thru hike? Is a hike that takes seven days to complete a thru hike? How about a hike which takes two months to complete? Time is relative, it depends on the individual. Some hike faster than others. Time is a poor criterion for defining a thru hike.

What about length and time? Can these together unambiguously define a thru hike? Let's give an example. Let's hike on the Tahoe Rim Trail from Echo Lake to Brockway Summit. This is a 69-mile hike. Assuming 12 miles a day, this would take 5.75 days to complete.

We can agree this is a fairly long hike, with multiple days, but is it a thru hike? I would say no. It's just a long hike.

Length and time do not determine if a hike is a thru hike.

## A Logistics Definition

After pondering this question for some time, I realized the criteria for defining a thru hike was hidden in the word "thru" itself. "Thru" is an alternate spelling for "through," which is defined as: moving in one side and out of the other side of (an opening, channel, or location).

When hiking you are always going through something, a desert, a field, a river, a forest, a mountain. But in a "thru hike" the thing you are going through is a *town*. This is what is implicitly understood when saying "thru" but never explicitly enunciated. The difference between a thru hike and any other hike is in the logistics, a thru hike involves going into town periodically to resupply food and other consumables.

Therefore, I propose the following definition: *a thru hike is a hike that has at least one resupply stop.*

This definition is independent of the length of the hike or the time it takes to complete it. It is also independent of town, because the resupply stop may be cached on the trail in advance or delivered by a friend or other service. The "stop" does not have to be in a town, although that is most common.

Length is not required in the definition, which allows for designating "thru hikes" of trails of disparate lengths.

This definition does not require time. Is it necessary to complete a long trail within a twelve-month period, as the Trail and Summit definition above states? I think this twelve-month period is arbitrary. Why not six, nine or fifteen months?

This definition does not require terminus to terminus hiking. If one starts at the southern terminus of the CDT and stops 1,000 miles later, it cannot be said this was not a thru hike. It can be said it was not completed, but it had all the qualities of a thru hike. The notion of completing should not be conflated with the notion hiking through. This is a subtle but important distinction.

Given this definition, our Tahoe Rim Trail hike from Echo Lake to Brockway Summit may or may not be a thru hike. If the hiker has five days of food and does not resupply at Tahoe City (the midpoint), then it is not a thru hike. If he stops at Tahoe city to resupply, then it is a thru hike.

The qualitative difference between a thru hike and any other hike is in resupplying. Only in a thru hike does a hiker resupply. Based on this, the proposed logistics-based definition of a thru hike seems most appropriate.