



Mercy Rule

Sometimes, the only thing better than camping is not camping.

BY ELISABETH KWAK-HEFFERAN

AS WE APPROACHED THE COAST, the conversation in the car slowed, then died completely. Over the past 50 miles, the rain had gone from mere storm to deluge to a wretched, windshield-smearing torrent that painted the world outside with an impressionist's brush. The day's plan was to hike out to Olympic National Park's Shi Shi Beach for a long-overdue backpacking trip with my two close friends, Laura and Matt. But the weather was not cooperating.

I'm not going to be the one to call it, I thought, as we pulled over to pick up a permit at a Neah Bay gas station. As the Rocky Mountain Editor of this magazine, I had a certain amount of professional pride at stake. Laura and I were waiting in line for the outdoor bathroom, huddled under the building's awning, when Matt came up to us. "You know what I was thinking in there?" he said, pointing to the Porta Potty he'd just emerged from. "It was probably more enjoyable in there, watching the steam rise from my pee, than it will be backpacking outside." Laura and I looked at each other, then out at the rain, and I imagined my socks getting soaked with wet mud within three minutes of setting out on the trail.

We piled back into the car and turned around.

It wasn't the first time I've tasted the singular joy of bailing when conditions warranted. There was the time an unexpected October blizzard turned the "last trip of the season" into the "first margaritas of winter." Or a trip to Canada, when three days of driving rain and mid-30s temps drove me out of the mountains and into a cheap motel; that night, the Four Seasons couldn't possibly have felt more luxurious. Hiking out of Washington's Alpine Lakes Wilderness a day early for brats and beer instead of choking down another cold, soggy sausage wrap in a waterlogged tent? I regret nothing.

Don't get me wrong, I'm no fair-weather backpacker. I've ridden out

enough storms to know the blessings of bad weather: blissful solitude, electric skies, a peek at a landscape made new by fresh snow. And for better or worse, there are simply times you have no choice but to tough it out and "enjoy" an episode of Type 2 fun. But when you do have a choice, there's no glory in self-inflicted misery. Deciding not to spend the next 24 hours crouched in your tent, shouting to be heard over the drumming of raindrops on nylon and your own chattering teeth—that's not failure. That's sweet surrender.

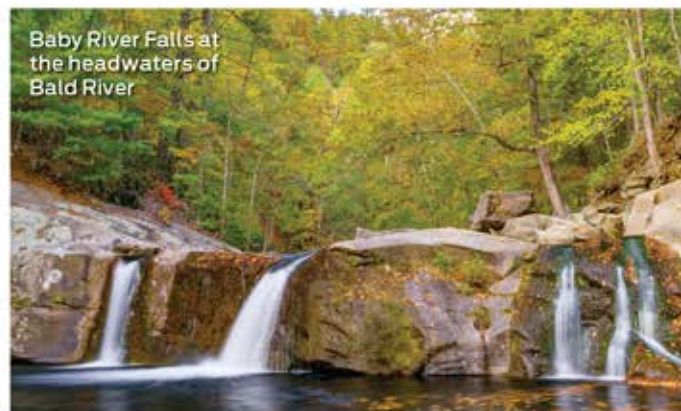
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Why does this matter? With all of our technology and fancy gear, it's easy to think we've triumphed over nature—that we have total control, and can be just as comfortable outdoors as in. But the backcountry can strip those illusions away in an instant, rendering us helpless, chilled, and miserable in the face of an all-powerful force. Hike long enough, and you'll encounter such an occasion.

Some would argue you should embrace the misery, let it harden and transform you. My view: That's not a lesson I need to learn over and over again. The most important takeaway is not about bad weather, but good. A beautiful day in the mountains is not our right—it's a gift to be treasured. And when the wilderness is putting the hurt on, sometimes the only sensible thing to do is raise the white flag and bail. Suffering

through it? That way lies madness. I'll be at the dry, toasty bar with a cold beer in my hand, thanks.

That night, we caught the evening ferry back to Seattle, took hot showers, and gathered 'round the table for pan-seared halibut and salad from Laura's and Matt's garden. I love backpacking, especially with these two, but I wasn't longing for the coast that night. I was looking out at the rain, cozy and not even a little bit wet, raising a glass to a higher power. ■



Baby River Falls at the headwaters of Bald River



THE GOOD FIGHT CHEROKEE NATIONAL FOREST, TENNESSEE

If you've hiked in the Appalachians, chances are good you've sampled at least some of the 655,000-plus-acre Cherokee National Forest and its spring-perfect waterfalls, wildflowers, and balds. But only 10 percent of the tract, which extends north and south around Great Smoky Mountains National Park, is designated as wilderness. Conservation organization Tennessee Wild seeks to add nearly 20,000 acres—which will increase the amount protected by more than 30 percent—in order to preserve the headwaters of the Bald River and prevent logging and road-building. Visit tnwild.org to learn how you can help.