

Youth & Families »



The authors (from left: Tia, Maia and Emily) all age 16, on the Olympic coast. For eleven years, these friends and their families have faced the joys and rigors of backpacking each summer.

Teen Power

Three teen girls learn to expand their limits by backpacking with their families

Tiramisu, cinnamon rolls, cheesy hash browns, corn crab chowder, steamed mussels, the freshest Dungeness crab, fat and juicy burgers, hobo stew and “sumpin in a pouch.” What do these things all have in common? These are all foods we’ve enjoyed over a campfire on backpacking trails in the Pacific Northwest.

For the past eleven years, we three best friends have grown up together as we’ve faced the rugged trails of the Pacific Northwest. Our names are Laetitia, Emily and Maia. The summer we turned six, our parents took us on our first backpacking trip. We hiked 1 mile up the shore from Rialto Beach to Ellen Creek, where we set up camp and spent the night. We loved it. We didn’t know any better.

Since then, our three families have spent a week or so in August backpacking together. When we were little, we felt important carrying our beanie babies and a few snacks. Now we carry everything we need to survive for over a week—including our iPods and digital cameras.

Our favorite trips are multi-day hikes along the coast. Once we took the boat up Lake Chel-

an to the trails around Stehekin, but we didn’t like the rattlesnakes and the dust. Another time we tried Seven Lakes Basin in the Olympics, but had to abort the mission due to a “hundred-year rain.” We always seem to come back to a coastal hike.

When we were barely nine, we hiked the 26 miles from Cape Alava to Rialto Beach. Many of the rocks were bigger than we were, and slipperier than slug slime. The ropes and ladders used to tackle the headlands were a challenge, but the stunning views and gorgeous beaches made it all worthwhile. Our rewards were private sandy beaches, building forts in the driftwood, beachcombing, exploring tide pools and sitting around the campfire at night.

When we were eleven, we did the 29-mile Juan de Fuca Trail on the south end of Vancouver Island. (Hiking in Canada is great, because the distance markers are in kilometers, so it seems like you’re making faster progress.) On this trip, we coined the term “Canadian steps,” foot placements carved into any kind of fallen log or vertical face, but always just beyond an

Laetitia Lehman- Pearsall, Emily Safford & Maia Wolf

Laetitia, Emily and Maia are from Bainbridge Island.

eleven-year-old's stride. We also found that the Canadians make remarkable suspension bridges in remote places! Again, the rewards on the beach at the end of the day made it all worth it.

Another summer, we hiked from La Push to Oil City (no oil, no city) on the Olympic coast. Here, after a long hike through the forest, crossing a river that seemed to run backwards and descending a very steep headland with the aid of a very old rope, we found heaven. The sandy beach stretched for miles and the sun glistened off the gentle surf. As we relaxed in the warm sand, Tia's dad remarked, "This is what I live the rest of the year for." We all knew what he meant.

The next summer, we hiked from Cape Alava to Shi Shi, completing all the trails accessible to the public on the Olympic Wilderness coast. Here we learned how quickly weather can change on the coast.

One day we were frolicking in the hot sun, building a spa in the sand; the next day we awoke to an epic downpour. Our original plan was to hike all the way to Shi Shi, then turn around and go back to the cars at Lake Ozette. But now we decided that the rain made that plan too dangerous. The clay cliff we had descended the day before would be too treacherous to climb with fully-loaded packs. Two intrepid parents lightened their loads by sharing their gear among the rest of us and returned to get the cars. The rest of the party slogged on to meet them at the Shi Shi parking lot. At the end of the trip, we were happy to stop at Sol Duc Hot Springs on the way home.

Since we've hiked all of the Washington wilderness coast we can, we've looked for other coastlines. The Lost Coast on the isolated northern California coast looked interesting, but everything we read made it sound too challenging. We were lucky to have wonderful weather and only saw bear tracks, but no actual bears. We found, however, that nothing compares to the challenge and beauty of the Olympic coast. Much of this trail was flat with no ladders and no ropes! When we finished the Lost Coast hike, someone said, "Is that it?" We'd been spoiled by the Pacific Northwest.

In 2006, we decided we'd go for the ultimate coastal hike: The West Coast Trail on Vancouver Island. This was as if the Juan de Fuca Trail and all the Olympic Coast Trails were combined—with hundreds of ladders, a couple boat trips, several cable cars—and everything covered with a thick coat of boot-sucking mud. We did it! We survived! We can do anything!

Last summer, we took a break from the coast. We headed for Mount Robson and Berg Lake in the Canadian Rockies. We loved the wildflowers, the glaciers, the freezing meltwater lakes, the spectacular waterfalls and the Artesian well bubbling up from the ground. But we missed the salt air, driftwood, seals, tide pools, gorgeous vast ocean, camp fires, rope swings,

swimming every day. This summer, we're headed back to explore more coastline.

Through these annual backpacking experiences, we've formed a bond that can only be described as sisterhood, and is stronger than any friendship. In addition to connecting with each other, these trips have helped us connect with ourselves. We have all grown in our teamwork skills, determination, physical strength, our connection to the natural world, and our ability to concentrate on what is most important in life.



As a group, we've learned to recognize each other's strengths and weaknesses and to be able to accommodate accordingly. There is always a point during a trip when all three of us become emotionally and physically drained. This moment usually occurs after the most strenuous day on the trail, when we have pushed ourselves to the limit, and we can get extremely cranky with each other. In our earlier years our behavior resulted in tears and tantrums, but as we have matured, we have learned how to work through these times by recognizing each other's differences, and the fact that this usually happens right before dinner.

We've also learned that while something is fun while you're doing it, we often look back at it later and say, "What were we thinking?" We've learned that being pushed to our physical limits can make anything so funny that it's bearable. We've learned that we can carry about a third of our body weight up and down, up and down and up and down...and more. We've learned that the run-off from rain can get so wet it's impossible to tell a stream from a trail. We've learned that one can hike for hours without seeing another person, until you drop your pants to pee and then someone comes around the corner.

We've learned we can do anything! ♦

Tia, Maia and Emily (and their adults) on their very first backpacking trip in 1996. They were five years old, and hiked Rialto Beach on the Olympic Wilderness Coast.