Catskills, in the rain

My first solo trip on the bike, one night in a tent, and a diner that saved my life a little.

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5 MIN READ

I've been saying I'd do a solo camping trip on the bike since I got it. Like, for two summers. Every time something came up. Work, weather, me talking myself out of it at 1am. This week I finally just did it. I booked a campsite on Tuesday night before I could change my mind, and on Thursday morning I left.

I'll say up front, it rained. A lot. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

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Packing a motorcycle for camping is like a puzzle where all the pieces are slightly too big. I had a tent I bought used from a guy in Greenpoint, a sleeping bag, a tiny stove, a pot, coffee, instant noodles, a headlamp, and one change of clothes. I strapped it all to the back seat with bungee cords and it looked like the bike was carrying a small sleeping person. Linda came out and looked at it too. She said "is that safe?" I said probably. She said "call your mother." I said I will.

I left around seven. Over the Williamsburg Bridge, up the FDR, across the GW. Then the Palisades Parkway, which in the morning in summer is just green on both sides, like riding through a tunnel made of trees.

That's where it gets good. 28 goes west into the mountains, and they just kind of rise up around you. The air changes. It gets cooler, and it smells like pine and wet rocks. I took my visor up for a minute just to breathe it.

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The campsite was at Woodland Valley, near Phoenicia, at the end of this long winding road that follows a creek. My site was right by the water. Just a little flat spot with a fire ring and a picnic table and the creek about ten feet away, going over rocks.

I set up the tent. It took me forty minutes. The guy in Greenpoint had given me instructions, but he'd given them to me verbally, and I had remembered maybe half. At one point I was inside the tent, holding up a pole with my head, trying to find the other end with my foot. A family at the next site watched me for a while. The dad finally came over and said "you want a hand?" I said "I think I've got it." I did not have it. He helped. His name was Steve, he had three kids, and he set up my whole tent in six minutes while I held a stake and tried to look useful.

After that I just sat by the creek. I took my boots off and put my feet in the water, and it was so cold it hurt, and then it didn't. I made noodles on the tiny stove. I watched the light go gold and then green and then blue through the trees. There was no signal. Nothing. I couldn't have checked my email if I wanted to.

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That night was incredible for about four hours. I built a little fire. Steve's kids came over and asked if they could roast marshmallows on it, and I said yes, and they did, and the youngest one gave me one that was totally on fire, like a torch, and I ate it anyway because she was watching. The stars were insane. Like actual stars.

Then around midnight it started to rain.

At first it was nice, actually. That soft sound on the tent. I lay there thinking, this is so peaceful, I'm finally going to sleep. And then it got harder. And harder. And then there was thunder, close, the kind you feel in the ground. And then I felt something cold on my elbow, and I turned on my headlamp, and there was a puddle forming inside the tent. Right next to me. Growing.

The guy in Greenpoint had not mentioned that the tent leaks. I guess he didn't know. Or he knew. I'll never know.

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I spent the rest of the night sitting in the one dry corner of the tent, hugging my knees, with my sleeping bag rolled up on my lap so it wouldn't get wet. It got wet. I didn't sleep.

Around five-thirty it slowed down to a drizzle and I gave up. I packed everything up wet. Everything. The tent was heavy with water, the sleeping bag was soaked, my one change of clothes was damp. I bungeed it all back on the bike, which now looked like it was carrying a wet sleeping person, and Steve came out of his tent in a rain jacket holding a coffee and said "rough night?" I said kind of. He said "go to the diner." I said what diner. He said "you'll see it."

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The Phoenicia Diner. It's right on Route 28, about ten minutes away. A silver old-school diner car with big windows, and it was just opening when I pulled in. I walked in dripping. Like, literally dripping onto the floor. The waitress looked at me and said "camping?" I said yeah. She said "sit by the window, it's warmer" and

brought me coffee without asking.

I've had a lot of good breakfasts. This one was the best one. Pancakes, eggs, a side of bacon, and home fries, and I ate all of it so fast. The coffee kept coming. The waitress, her name was Becky, kept refilling it every time it went halfway down, without saying anything, like she knew. The rain kept going outside on the window and everyone in there was quiet and warm and eating, and it was the most comfortable I've felt in my whole life, maybe.

I sat there for almost two hours. I dried out a little. Becky said "you want more pancakes?" I said I couldn't. She brought me a muffin to go anyway.

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By ten the sky cleared up. Just like that. Blue, sunny, everything shining and wet. I rode back the long way through Route 214, through a notch between two mountains where there's a tiny pond right by the road, so still it looked like glass. I stopped there and laid the tent out on a rock to dry for an hour.

Got home around four. Linda saw me carrying everything upstairs, still kind of damp. She said "how was it?" I said it rained. She said "but how was it?" I thought about it and said it was great, actually. She said "good, call your mother."

I hung the tent off the loft railing to dry. It's still there. I'm getting a new one.

– Shay

Thanks for reading. There are more of these on my site, one every couple of weeks.