

Hiking the Dipsea & Finding Home

By Nancy Fawson

When my friend, Lucy, told me about the 600 plus stairs at the beginning of the Dipsea Trail, I politely listened and nodded my head. I couldn't imagine wanting to climb that many stairs for any reason -- let alone for fun.

As a New Yorker, my "hiking" forays were very limited and typically didn't include much physical exertion -- unless you count running up and down subway stairs as exercise. But since our move to Marin I had been making a real effort to embrace the outdoors. This has traditionally been outside my comfort zone, but I felt like I was adapting pretty well. For instance, I didn't run away when my son picked up a snake on our walk home from the playground. Nor did I scream in horror at the sight of my daughter holding her friend's guinea pig, which to me looked like she was nuzzling a huge subway rat. My husband, a former Eagle Scout, instituted a hike-a-week policy and each Saturday the entire family began exploring the trails on Mount Tamalpais, Muir Woods and Pt. Reyes. I even outfitted myself with the Southern Marin mother's fitness uniform of yoga pants and a down vest. I was really getting the hang of this whole outdoor thing! So when Lucy recently suggested that we hike a portion of the Dipsea Trail, I agreed. Surely I could handle a bunch of measly stairs, right?

Wrong! The Dipsea Trail is 7.1 miles long, starts in Mill Valley and ends at Stinson Beach. It begins with interminable stairs, followed by hills with names like Suicide, Cardiac and Insult. The trail is narrow, rocky and root-laden with a ton of poison oak thrown in along the way. It is as grueling as it is long, with steep and slippery terrain but the stairs are what make it infamous. Both dreaded and beloved, there are 688 of those suckers climbing as high as a fifty-story building. They will leave you sweating and panting before you even hit mile one. Lucy jogged up the stairs. I huffed, wheezed and cursed my way up each and every one. We hiked for a little over two miles before I called it quits. The next day my entire body ached. I felt like I was being punished for my lazy, city-girl ways. Our



weekend hikes, though a great way to spend time with my family clearly had done nothing to prepare me for this.

Determined to do better, I decided to tackle the trail in smaller bites, beginning with the stairs. But starting out was so hard. At first I constantly looked for excuses to get out of completing even the first flight; they were so steep and there was just so many of them that as soon as I began climbing my resolution would crumble. My mind raced to all of the other things I could be doing. Even my least favorite chores (laundry, dishes and dusting) suddenly seemed pressing -- I had only felt this desperate to get out of pain before childbirth. However, as the weeks went by I got stronger. The stairs became easier and I was able to focus on my surroundings. Each morning, after the hectic rush of sending the kids off to school, I made my way through the quiet, lush, sweet-smelling Redwoods

to the foot of the stairs, took a deep breath and felt calm. I hiked a little more of the trail each time and eventually made it all the way to Stinson Beach. These days I try to hike the trail, or even just a portion of it, any chance I get.

The Dipsea Trail has somewhat of a cult following and on any given day you will see many people running or hiking along the path. No doubt each of them has their own reasons why they do it. I've come to love walking among the fragrant Redwoods, through the thick forest, along the coastal hills and even up and down all of those stairs. You can go through fog, full sun, shade and everything else in between while enjoying amazing views of the San Francisco Bay, Mt. Tamalpais and the Pacific Ocean along the way. I started out feeling completely out of place on the trail and now, quite unexpectedly, I feel a deep sense of belonging every time I set foot on it. For someone who for the past year has felt "new here," this is a great feeling.

The Dipsea Trail is home to the famous "Dipsea Race," the oldest trail race in the nation. First run in 1905, the Dipsea Race is 7.4 miles long and is held each year on the second Sunday in June. Because of safety concerns and potential environmental impact, it is limited to about 1500 runners (though they receive about four times as many applicants) and is notoriously difficult to get into. If you get shut out of the Dipsea Race (like I did) or if running is not your thing, the organization "Zero Breast Cancer" holds an annual non-competitive, all ages run/walk on the trail (approximately a six mile loop). All proceeds benefit the research, education and community outreach programs of "Zero Breast Cancer." This year the "Dipsea Hike for Zero Breast Cancer" will be held on Saturday, September 7, 2013.

Nancy Fawson is a former attorney turned writer and blogger. She recently moved to Belvedere with her family after living in NYC for over two decades. You can read more of her writing on her blog, www.nycgirlbythebay.com.

