

To Diversify the Outdoors, We Have to Think About Who We're Excluding

Ambreen Tariq started the Instagram [@brownpeoplecamping](#) to get people to *rethink what being outdoorsy means*

By: Erin Berger Nov 15, 2016



Ambreen Tariq runs the [@brownpeoplecamping](#) Instagram account. Photo: Courtesy of Ambreen Tariq



You may have seen Ambreen Tariq's selfies and peaceful tent shots in your feed, and you may have noticed that her account isn't the usual outdoor-lifestyle Insta fare. The 33-year-old runs the [Brown People Camping](#) account, which has gained more than 2,000 followers since she started posting in August. Tariq, who lives in D.C., uses the platform to share photos of her adventures, everywhere from Virginia's Shenandoah National Park to New Mexico's White Sands National Monument. But just as important for her are the captions: Tariq talks about how her identities—as a woman, a person of color, an immigrant, and a Muslim—inform her experience outdoors. We had a wide-ranging conversation with Tariq about why she created the account, how it's been received, and why the outdoors community needs to be more welcoming towards newcomers or those who don't fit the traditional mold of the outdoorsy type.



On the Purpose of @brownpeoplecamping

"More than asking people to feel a certain way, I believe you can add value just by sharing your experiences. Part of the success of the project is it's just me—I'm not trying to speak for or about anyone else. I have complete control over how vulnerable and candid I want to be, and I stand behind my experience. That allows people to react, support, question, and engage with me directly.

"You can't just push people to believe in a concept, especially if they live in a place where they've never met someone like me. In addition to saying diversity is important, I break it down on a personal level: this is where I've been, this is what I've seen or felt, and this is why I am who I am today. When people read that, they can relate, reflect on where they've been, and explore their own beliefs. That give-and-take of life experiences has been very empowering for me."

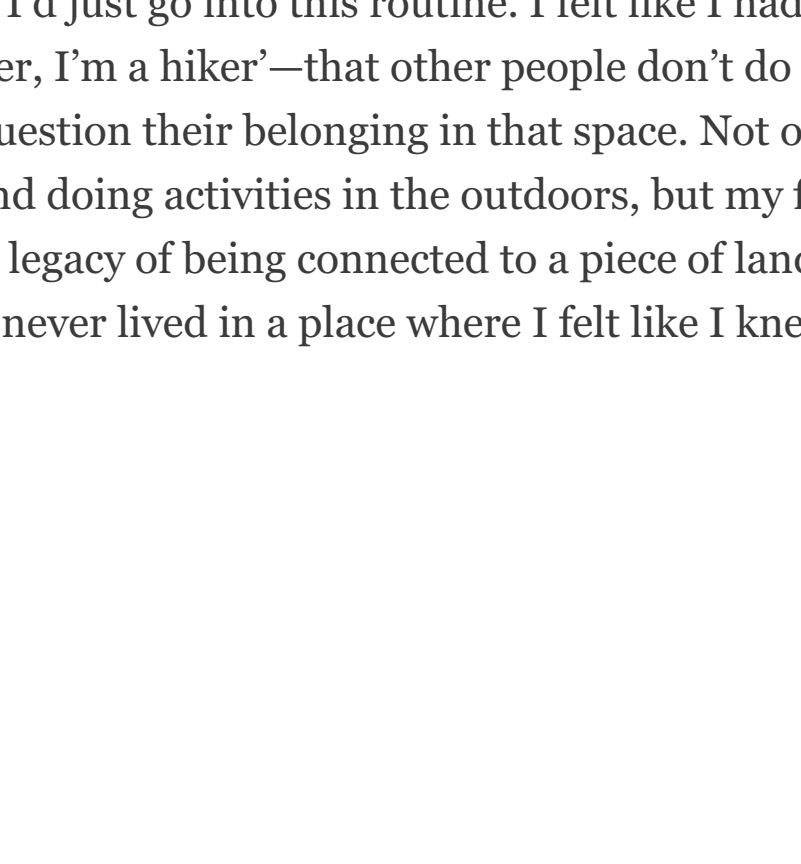
On the Overall Response

"After my first post, things just started growing organically, and the more I shared, the more engagement and support I received. I was immediately getting tons of positive feedback from total strangers, people saying, 'I'm not an immigrant,' or 'I'm not female,' or 'I'm white, but I actually identify with this.' There isn't a happy ending to every story, like how camping with my family was empowering for me during a time when I was bullied in school. As new immigrants, we had a tough transition, but being outdoors was a reprieve. That's not an easy story to tell, but it's true and it's complicated. I think my readers appreciate that and respond with their own complicated experiences."

On Fitting in Outside

"My parents moved to Minnesota from India in 1991, when I was eight, to provide a better life for my sister and me. We moved around a lot—about once every five years.

"To be completely honest, I often struggle with feeling like an outsider. Although I've spent most of my life in this country, I moved here at such a formative age that the immigrant experience and its social challenges have defined my worldview and a large part of my self-esteem—even as an adult, at work and in the outdoors. At a young age, you come into this new place, and everything you felt confident about or so much of what gave you a sense of stability is gone. Self-esteem for me is really connected to that idea of what is normative? What's cool? What has high social value? As an outsider, you're always thinking about that—how can I replicate that?"



"With the outdoors, I'd just go into this routine. I felt like I had to establish myself —'Yeah, I'm a camper, I'm a hiker'—that other people don't do as much because they don't have to question their belonging in that space. Not only did I not have an authentic background doing activities in the outdoors, but my family didn't do it, and I don't have the legacy of being connected to a piece of land because we were always moving. I've never lived in a place where I felt like I knew a park, a river, a forest well enough."

On Feeling Judged in the Outdoors

"My husband and I had started camping after we got married, and mostly, we went car camping. I have bad knees because I used to fence and wore down the cartilage, and my husband is a PhD student, so he only has weekends free. Based on those limitations, we found an outdoors routine that was accessible for our lifestyle. But whenever we talked to people about it, we'd often hear negative comments about our outdoor choices and activities: 'Oh, you guys are cheating.' 'That's not really camping.' People seem to espouse this extreme concept of what's truly outdoors, and hearing about it got tiring. I found myself adapting to that judgmental gaze by always starting off conversations with statements like, 'Oh no, we're not really outdoors people; we're not real campers; we're not real hikers. We just go out and do things our own way.' My confidence would immediately take a blow.

"But you know, that's not okay for someone to say. It's not just a glib comment. It's hurtful for people trying to build an outdoors lifestyle or get into the outdoors for the first time. Telling people they're not doing it right—I'm not sure why that became acceptable, but I want to disrupt that behavior, that act of cutting people down for the compromises they make and the way they approach making outdoor activities accessible. I am an outdoors person just as much as you or anybody else. Don't tell other people how to experience the outdoors. Celebrate and encourage them for trying to find their authentic place in the outdoors. If you're being destructive to nature, I draw the line there. But other than that, you can be doing whatever you want, as long as you're enjoying being outside."

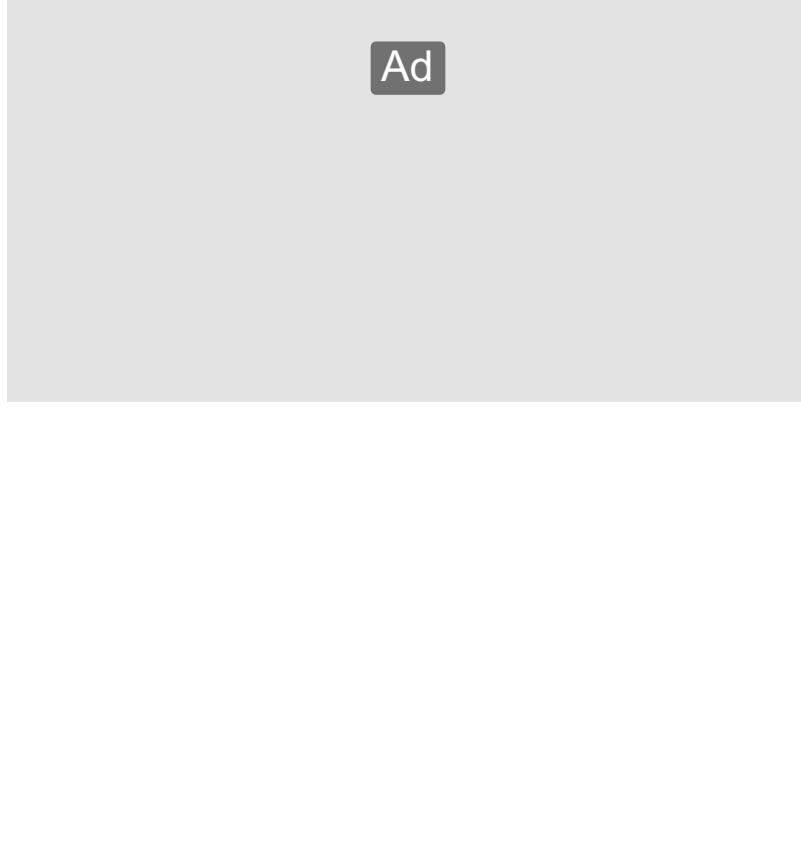
On the Lack of Representation in Outdoor Marketing and Media

"There are so many people who are shouting to be included and made to feel welcome in the outdoors. It's something that's truly frustrated me in the outdoors community—there's an aesthetic of the way outdoor retailers advertise. Thin, usually light-skinned. It's a very particular way of painting a community. It's hard to see yourself in the outdoor community if you don't physically see others like you, and you definitely aren't seeing it in advertising."

On the Backlash

"After the National Park Foundation featured one of my photos on Facebook, I started seeing overtly racist things for the first time. The comments are rare, but they are definitely there. 'Why do we have to talk about race in the outdoors? Why do people of color have to raise the issue of being POC all the time? No one's keeping you off the trails. No one's being racist on the trails. I am tired of these people making everything about race.'

"That brings back up the self-esteem issues I have. But I push myself to not feel angry or resentful. I push myself to remember this is our land too, and it's on us to educate folks about why lack of diversity is a problem and why solving that is critical for our country and the future of the environmental movement. There is a huge level of privilege to visiting our public lands in America. To take the time and money to go is a privilege, of course, but also to see it as an option in the first place. The more of us who can connect to it, the more we can protect it together."



On What Diversity Means to Her

"It's more than just this simplistic concept of seeing more color on the trails. It's about getting people out and embracing the outdoors as a lifestyle, in a way that acknowledges any limitations they face in life. You have to talk about low-income experiences, the immigrant experience, what it means for people to invest in gear, to balance it with work and life and family. You can't just say 'diversify.' You have to see what's barring people from getting to the outdoors."

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