

Peak performance: Pushing kids' limits in the White Mountains -- first the whining, then the rewards

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We were about 10 kilometres into the uphill hike when my 13-year-old son Jeremy turned around, waited for me to catch up and said: "I hope you realize Dad, there's no way I'm doing this again next year."

"Next year?" I replied sympathetically. "You'll be doing it again tomorrow."

His sister, 11-year-old Rhiannon, appeared to have been gliding along effortlessly but apparently she too was reaching her limit: "When are we going to get there?" she asked, as if I was personally responsible for each incline, each loose rock and the heat emitted from the sun. "You said we would be there by now."

At what age, I murmured to myself, do children stop asking "Are we there yet?"

But they had a point. We are not fanatical types inclined to take military-style hikes in the great outdoors, but we hiked in the Whites a couple of summers ago as a family experiment and it was a great success. So this time we decided to play with the route a little and add a little distance on the trail to the top.

As fatigue was setting in we passed over the first of several ridges that, from a distance, appeared to be the end of the day's hike. I optimistically announced that we were "nearly there" but after being wrong three times, I stopped predicting and suggested that a little "we'll-be-there-when-we-get-there" stoicism might be in order. We overdid it a little, but the one thing you can't do is turn back.

We were a kilometre away from the foot of Mount Washington and the steep first leg through the Presidential Range was hot and often arduous -- or "challenging" as the brochures might say. It was made more so because we were hiking for several days so needed to carry necessary supplies on our backs.

So here's Lesson One: If you're hiking with kids, however willing and able they are, know their limits. Seven, maybe eight kilometres in White Mountain distances may be enough, even for the most energetic young hiker.

So much for the negative picture. Hiking in the mountains is not a visit to Disneyland or an all-inclusive holiday resort, but the rewards are plentiful. My wife Margot experienced the rigours of family hiking holidays as a child and now looks back fondly at these trips -- fondly enough to want her kids to experience something similar. (Yes, she does love her children.) Margot predicted, quite rightly, that our kids would get over the initial disgruntlement.

"They don't realize it but they are challenging themselves," she said. "They'll feel better about it tomorrow."

We eventually got to our destination, an overnight "hut" called Lake of the Clouds, which at 5,050 feet is the highest in an eight-hut system operated by the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC). The Presidential Range scenery, viewed from above the tree line where the hiking paths ultimately lead, is spectacular and as the leaves turn, is entering its most spectacular season of all.

After a swim in a cold mountain lake, a belly full of food and a good night's sleep, the kids were gung-ho again and all

IMAGES



Chris Cobb, For Style Weekly Travel & Leisure

Rhiannon Cobb, 11, experiences the elation of completing the long climb. Linked by an elaborate hut system, the White Mountains offer some of the most spectacular hiking anywhere. (FPinfomart: Restricted, Canada.com: Restricted)



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The new Highland Center is a model of energy efficiency and is the closest of all AMC accommodations to a hotel. (FPinfomart: Restricted, Canada.com: Restricted)

notions of independent vacations in 2006 apparently forgotten.

The Appalachian Trail begins in Springer Mountain, Georgia and finishes at Mount Katahdin, Maine. It stretches through 14 states and passes through more than 60 U.S. federal, state and local parks and forests. (There is an "International" Appalachian Trail embracing New Brunswick and Quebec but that's another story.)

Those who have hiked the whole thing -- we met a retiree and a college student who began in March and are probably still going -- say the White Mountain section is among the toughest terrain on the trail. The system of eight huts, all pretty much a day's hike apart, also makes it one of the more agreeable tracts, especially for families, because you can sleep comfortably and eat well at them.

The huts are staffed by enthusiastic, welcoming students in their twenties who cook, wash dishes, clean and present the post-dinner talks on the local environment, plant life and weather. There are a few small rooms for families in the system, but mostly sleeping accommodation is in co-ed bunkrooms.

One focus of our trip this year was the new Highland Center lodge, a remarkable feat of environmental engineering at Crawford Notch, a 26-acre site many hikers use to begin their upward treks. Highland opened just last year and comes closest of all AMC accommodations to fit the description of a hotel.

It has a computerized reception desk, a spacious lounge, lots of meeting rooms and sleeping accommodation that covers the gamut from the bunkhouse to the room with en-suite and a mountain view. You can get a bunkhouse bed and breakfast for \$29 U.S., share a room for \$77 U.S. or get a private room for \$191 U.S.

Prices drop after the last of the leaves, but throughout the year are cheaper at all huts for members of the AMC.

Some quick facts about the Highland Center:

- Constructed with 98-per-cent recycled steel and timbers from a shipping wharf.
- Low-flow toilets, linked to composting facilities.
- Insulated in recyclable polystyrene.
- Environmentally sensitive materials throughout, including carpeting, glues and paints.
- Rooms specifically designed for guest with allergies.
- "Biomass" heating system burns low-grade wood and stores heat until needed.
- More than 60 per cent of the triple-glazed windows face south to maximize solar energy.

Those who aren't quite up to tackling the mountains, and who have more money to spend, have a choice of staying at either the Highland Center or Joe Dodge Lodge, which is the AMC's local operational base. Both offer day, or half-day hikes with spectacular mountain views for the price of minimal effort. These aren't necessarily strolls in the park, so to speak, but if you're a reasonably fit walker, getting up and down the local hiking trails in these two areas should be little problem.

We found a remote swimming hole fed by a mountain stream a short distance away from the Highland Center. The water was clear, ice cold and deep enough to jump into from the scary heights of surrounding rocks. While local, death-defying teenagers took that route, we crept in at ground level and re-emerged shortly before hypothermia set in.

For those who are planning to hike the high trails, it's worth knowing that the Highland Center is not a five-star hotel but relative to some of the more rustic huts, it sure has that feel. We erred in deciding to stay there before heading higher into the mountains. Better to plan a trip that ends at the Center. That way it feels like a reward and, especially for first-time visitors to the area, doesn't create false expectations of "luxury."

That's what we will do next time. And yes, on the ride home we unanimously decided that there will be a next time.

Chris Cobb writes for the Citizen.

If You Go

Getting there: Pinkham Notch, the

AMC base and main parking lot, is about 520 kilometres from Ottawa. From Montreal, take Highway 10 east towards

Sherbrooke. At Magog, turn onto Highway 55, which takes you to the border and becomes Interstate 91 in Vermont. Take Highway 91 to St. Johnsbury, New Hampshire and Highway 2 east to Gorham. Then take Highway 16 south to Pinkham Notch.

Cost: Rates at AMC huts vary in price depending on several factors. Calculate whether joining the AMC will reduce overall costs.

When: All huts operate to mid-October and some later.

Tips:

- Wear polypropylene or woollen underwear. Not cotton.
- Take a trail map, high-energy snacks, a compass, a headlamp, a good book, a deck of cards, a pillowcase, rainwear, a sleeping bag, good hiking shoes and socks. (Alcohol is permitted in lodges but is not sold. Hiking with full wine or beer bottles will slow you down.)
- People snore in the bunk rooms so take earplugs. If you forget them, the huts sell "Anti-Snoring Kits" for \$1 or so.
- Leashed dogs are allowed on trails but not in lodges.
- Basic physical fitness is recommended before tackling the mountain hikes.

How to book: Reservations are taken from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday at 1-603-466-2727 or 1-603-466-3871

More information: www.outdoors.org

Illustration:

- Colour Photo: Chris Cobb, For Style Weekly Travel & Leisure / Rhiannon Cobb, 11, experiences the elation of completing the long climb. Linked by an elaborate hut system, the White Mountains offer some of the most spectacular hiking anywhere.
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