

Hiking to the clouds: Family climbs the White Mountains, one hut at a time

The Ottawa Citizen
 Saturday, August 23, 2003
 Page: E14 / FRONT
 Section: The Citizen's Weekly: Travel
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 Dateline: THE WHITE MOUNTAINS, New Hampshire
 Source: The Ottawa Citizen

THE WHITE MOUNTAINS, New Hampshire - The pinnacle of exhilaration came part way down Tuckerman Ravine, a deep natural bowl scooped from the mountainside on the rocky and arduous descent from Mt. Washington.

It is a point of staggering natural beauty, with 75-degree inclines that flow nearly a kilometre into lush forests below and beyond -- a seemingly endless vista of deep, unspoiled green punctuated by speeding mountain streams. It is a place where the much-abused word awesome finds true definition.

But getting there is no walk in the park.

The reward to be found in Tuckerman Ravine comes after a formidable, demanding hike over rough terrain that in places only reluctantly accommodates the human walker. And for us, it was the climax of a five-day family backpacking trip that had meant a lot of hard slogging on steep, unrelenting trails, at a steady pace of less than two kilometres an hour, including stops for snacks, lunches, water and occasional breathers to soak up the view.

This was our first family hiking trip and was long enough to justify the 500-kilometre drive from Ottawa, but short enough to assess the stamina and enthusiasm of our 11-year-old son Jeremy and nine-year-old daughter Rhiannon for whom this was a first. We wanted them to experience hiking in the great outdoors, but leave them at least vaguely interested in doing it again.

The White Mountains of New Hampshire have a system of eight trail-side huts, each a day's hike apart, which were built to accommodate hikers and protect them from the unpredictable turns in weather on that section of the Appalachian Trail.

The first hut was built at the end of the 19th century and the eighth in 1964. The hub of the system is at the relatively palatial Pinkham Notch Visitor Centre, which sits at 600 metres above sea level and is the place where most hikers park their cars before heading into the mountains. The highest hut is Lake of the Clouds and sits above the tree line at just higher than 1,500 metres, about 400 metres below the peak of Mt. Washington, highest in the Presidential Range.

The huts, operated by the non-profit Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC), attract thousands of hikers during the summer and fall -- from the few extremists who attempt to travel the 90-kilometre stretch of the hut system in 24 hours, to local people out for a day's hike.

Most visitors book their July and August bunk space months in advance and stay for several days. (We booked in March and were almost too late).

We arrived at Pinkham Notch during the afternoon of Aug. 12. It was raining; the clouds were low and visibility generally poor. It had rained or been overcast every day for the past

IMAGES



Photo: Brian White

Lake of the Clouds is the highest of eight trail-side huts in New Hampshire's White Mountains. At the mercy of a wild, wet climate, this hut warns (or boasts) of the worst weather in North America. (FPinfomart: Restricted, Canada.com: Restricted)



Photo: Chris Cobb

Novice hiker Rhiannon Cobb, nine, gets ready for rough terrain. (FPinfomart: Restricted, Canada.com: Restricted)

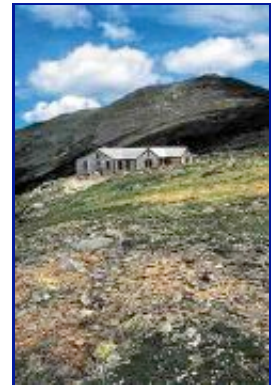


Photo: Robert J. Kozlow

Huts operated by the Appalachian Mountain Club are each a day's hike apart. Be forewarned: the trails are steep. (FPinfomart: Restricted, Canada.com: Restricted)



Uncredited image

An unrelenting climb of nearly four kilometres through wooded mountainside brought Margot Sunter and Rhiannon Cobb and Jeremy

three weeks, said the receptionist, but the prospects for brighter weather were good. We checked in, got our pre-paid dinner and breakfast coupons and hauled our packs upstairs to the small room -- four bunks, a bench and a tiny chest of drawers. For roughing it, this wasn't so bad. We had a couple of hours before dinner, so took a short walk along a nearby woodland stream before being beaten back by an onslaught of particularly vicious mosquitoes.

The lodges start dinner at 6:30 p.m. and mostly serve 'family style', which means that diners at the server's end of the long table get first dibs and pass the serving bowls down the line. Because the diners are strangers to each other, they tend to be scrupulously considerate about the portions they take. So unlike authentic 'family style' meals, there are no brawls over relatives up the line taking more than their fair share.

For that first evening meal, they served clear onion soup, braised chicken (or vegetarian cabbage rolls), couscous with red and green peppers, mushrooms with pearl onions, green salad and cinnamon bread pudding with butterscotch source. The lodges recently won a New Hampshire state award for the best food in the 'budget' category and while dining at Pinkham has the edge on other lodges, the food at all of them is high quality. This is not a hamburger, hot dog and beans operation.

At each lodge after dinner, there is a talk of some sort. When the dinner dishes had been cleared away, we returned to the dining room for a slide show and talk by a former smoke jumper -- a person parachuted (literally) behind the line of forest fires to cut trees and dig trenches in an effort to stop the fire's progress.

We bunked down at about 9:30 p.m. to rest up for breakfast and the first day's hike. The rain hammered on the roof of the lodge and someone mentioned raincoats. We had forgotten them.

After a breakfast buffet that was as good, plentiful and varied as any upscale hotel, we bought four \$5-hooded rain capes from the Appalachian Mountain Club store, filled water bottles, soaked the dried noodles in the lunch Thermoses with boiling water and boarded the AMC shuttle bus (fare: \$11 per person), which dropped us an hour later at Crawford Notch, where a new lodging centre is due to open next month and where we started our first hike: an unrelenting climb of nearly four kilometres through wooded mountainside that would take us from 580 metres to 1,151 metres and Mizpah Spring Hut which, at 40 years old, is the youngest hut in the system. (Mizpah is a Hebrew word, meaning watchtower).

Before leaving Pinkham we had weighed our packs, as most people do: The children were hauling nine kilograms (20 pounds) each and ours were about 14 kg (30 pounds). As the trail got steeper, the packs got heavier, which may mean we needed better packs, better training or a combination of both. A young woman carrying a rectangular frame on her back sped by and explained she was carrying supplies for tomorrow's Mizpah breakfast. Nimble human couriers deliver all the food throughout the hut system because it's the only way to get it there.

The rain held off, but the trail was muddy. The children stopped constantly to examine banana slugs, handle and relocate tiny frogs and peer at copious outcrops of brilliantly coloured fungi -- psychedelic mushrooms of another sort. The natural distractions, coupled with essential snack breaks -- dried fruit, fruit bars and trail mix with Smarties -- made the trip to Mizpah relatively painless.

The mountain huts are run by twentysomething students. They cook, wash dishes, clean and are often the experts who present the post-dinner talks on the local environment, plant life or weather. They ooze confidence and good nature and are extremely well trained in the art of customer service -- low key and ultra casual but very efficient.

The hut crews -- or croos, as they like to spell it -- do little skits, partly to generate a warm and fuzzy feeling among the guests and partly to generate tips when the guests depart. Mizpah's pre-dinner routine was a "guess-the-name-of-the-movie" mime.

Indiana Jones, the Last Crusade, yelled out our Jeremy before anyone else (we had rented it the previous week). Our table was rewarded with the first serving of the evening. All the crews pound home the message about taking out what you bring in. No garbage. It's at the core of the AMC's mission, which is to manage the human traffic that trudges the trails. Not once during the trip did any of us see a piece of litter on a trail.

Bunkrooms in the huts are co-ed and accommodate 10 or a dozen strangers. Snoring is a big issue and the huts sell ear-plugs as 'Anti-Snoring Kits' for \$1. Rhiannon recklessly informed two young girls who were to share our room that her father snored and this fictional slander immediately had the girls digging for their dollar bills. As it happened, the overcast weather had left the hut short of power so all lights were out by 9 p.m. and our room bedded down by 9:30 p.m., at which point two others in the room began snoring and another emitted bursts of garble every 10 minutes or so.

and Kniannon, Chris and Jeremy Cobb to Mizpah Spring Hut. Their trek took them along part of the Appalachian Trail. (FPinfomart: Restricted, Canada.com: Restricted)



The Ottawa Citizen (New Hampshire) (FPinfomart: Restricted, Canada.com: Restricted)

It's true that only people who snore get a good night's sleep and for most, it probably takes a few nights in the company of strangers to get remotely comfortable. I rose gingerly and went back into the dining room where a dozen or so people wearing lamps attached to their foreheads sat reading. This trip is a great education for those who wonder about the uses of all those gadgets they sell at Mountain Equipment Co-op.

I returned to bed, attempted to read buried with my basic flashlight inside my sleeping bag and waited for morning, which came, eventually. We were out on the trail again, with noodles primed, before 8:30 a.m. to begin the five-hour haul from 1,150 metres to Lake of the Clouds, which sits above the tree line at 1,539 metres and comes with warnings of the worst weather in North America -- a wild, unpredictable climate unto itself. As the clouds rushed by at eye level, both children fell, or slipped, occasionally but nothing some minor patching from the first-aid kit couldn't cope with. And they didn't complain, not once. And still it didn't rain. This would have been an entirely different experience in the wet.

The crew at Lake of the Clouds said it was the first day of sunshine in nearly three weeks and the first day in even longer they had seen the top of Mt. Washington, which, of course, we just had to climb. Another three-hour round trip, including a snack at the summit, and back in time for dinner. Strange, there are no stickers that say 'This Body Climbed Mt. Washington'.

And the next morning, in even more spectacular weather, we headed down Tuckerman Ravine -- nerve-racking in its inclines and narrow paths, but a generous reward for all the hard work.

And yes, we've agreed to go back next year, all being well.

Chris Cobb writes for the Citizen.

If You Go

Getting there: Pinkham Notch is about 500 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 from about \$20 per night to \$72, depending on whether or not you're an AMC member, whether they're full-service or self-service, whether you're an adult or a child and according to the length of your stay (discounts for three nights or more). The Cobb family's five-day/four-night trip cost slightly less than \$1,000 (Cdn) for lodging and food.

Some general 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 may slow you down.)
- Leashed dogs are allowed on trails but not in lodges.
- Some basic physical fitness is recommended before tackling the mountain hikes.

Booking: Space is still available into October; you can make reservations from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday. Reservations for next summer can be made starting Nov. 1.

Call 1-603-466-2727.

More information: Read the AMC Web site (www.outdoors.org) for rates, reservations and general information.

Illustration:

- Colour Photo: Photo: Brian White / Lake of the Clouds is the highest of eight trail-side huts in New Hampshire's White Mountains. At the mercy of a wild, wet climate, this hut warns (or boasts) of the worst weather in North America.
- Colour Photo: Photo: Chris Cobb / Novice hiker Rhiannon Cobb, nine, gets ready for rough terrain.
- Colour Photo: Photo: Robert J. Kozlow / Huts operated by the Appalachian Mountain Club are each a day's hike apart. Be forewarned: the trails are steep.
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- Map: The Ottawa Citizen / (New Hampshire)

Idnumber: **200308230083**

Edition: Final

Story Type: News

Note: Ran with fact box "If you go", which has been appended to the story.

Length: 1934 words

Illustration Type: Colour Photo Black & White Photo Map

PRODUCTION FIELDS

BASNUM: 3978110

NDATE: 20030823

NUPDATE: 20030823

DOB: 20030823

POSITION: 1

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