

WHITE MOUNTAIN TRAVERSE

White Mountains

*New Hampshire,
United States*

DISTANCE: 53 miles (85 km) one-way

TIME: 6–8 days

PHYSICAL CHALLENGE: 1 2 3 4 5

PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGE: 1 2 3 4 5

STAGING: Manchester, New Hampshire; Portland, Maine;
or Boston, Massachusetts

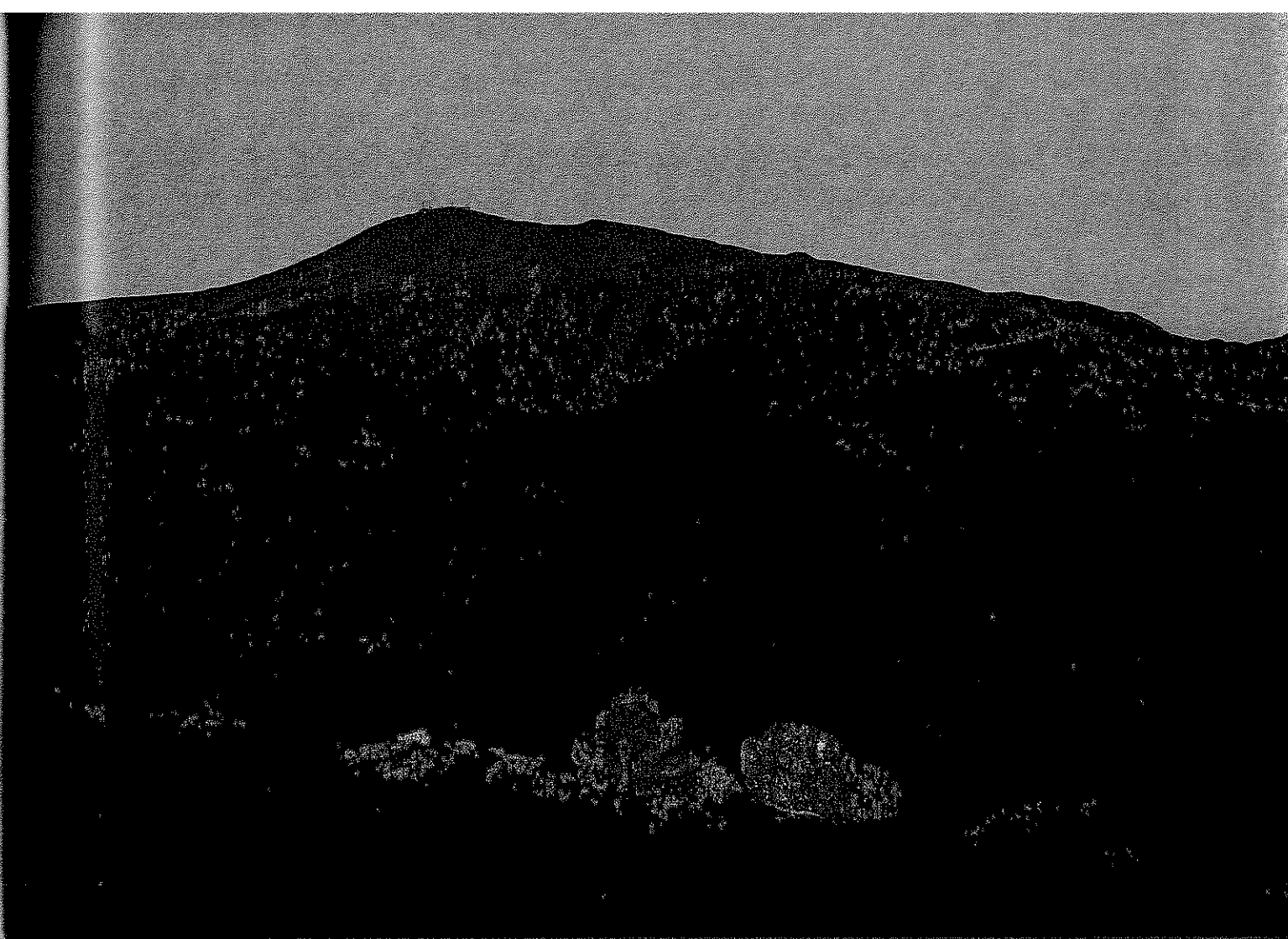
This long traverse through New Hampshire's White Mountains has been the comeuppance of many an arrogant hiker from outside New England. Deep, in-cut valleys combine with the highest peaks in the East to make for daunting elevation gains and heartbreaking losses, even for those who honed their hiking abilities in the Sierra or the Cascades. Add to that the potential for some of the worst weather on the continent and you've got a wilderness outing of both serious challenge and epic appeal. With high ridge walks, rocky summits, expansive views,

and a chance to sample one of the most spectacular sections of the legendary Appalachian Trail, who can resist?

The real highlight of this 53-mile (85 km) route is the vaunted Presidential Range Traverse, perhaps the most difficult and dangerous section of the 2,000-mile (3,220 km) Appalachian Trail. The route climbs over a succession of peaks more than 5,000 feet (1,500 m) high, and one over 6,000 feet (1,830 m). Mount Washington, at 6,288 feet (1,917 m) the undisputed monarch of the Presidentials, has been branded the stormiest place in the world, a reference to its record for the highest wind speed ever recorded, 231 miles per hour. Conditions are seldom that bad, but the potential for sudden, severe weather means this hike calls for prudence over valor. The Presidentials can be wet and windy and cold, even in summer. These treacherous conditions frequently result in injuries to hikers, even deaths.

It would be a mistake to view this stunning route as some sort of grim ordeal. Summers can be mild, and while you have to be wary of potential storms, this long wilderness walk—much of it above tree line—can be a glorious if strenuous jaunt. Adding to the allure is the fact that the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC) has developed along this route a system of refuges that is unusual in the American backcountry. Six European-style huts, offering meals, bunks, and provisions, are spaced roughly a day's hike from each other. Lodging can be reserved in advance, meaning you can do this physically demanding hike in relative comfort, and with a lighter pack. But this is an area just as well suited to camping. Using your tent and stove, where permitted, is a good way to experience the terrain in a style in keeping with its wilderness heritage.

For all but the final few miles, the route follows the Appalachian Trail. This oldest and best-known of America's



ABOVE: Mount Washington at sunrise. PHOTO BY RICHARD J. BAILEY.

OPPOSITE: The famous "Worst Weather" sign on the Edmands Path, which connects to the Appalachian Trail just above Mount Eisenhower. PHOTO BY RICHARD J. BAILEY.

long-distance continental routes runs for 2,167 miles (3,488 km) along the ridge crests and across the major valleys of the Appalachian Mountains from Mount Katahdin, in Maine, to Springer Mountain, in northern Georgia. The AT, as the route is universally known, began as a vision of forester Benton MacKaye. It was opened as a continuous trail in 1937 and designated as the first National Scenic Trail by the National Trails System Act of 1968. There's more history here: Part of the White Mountains route, from Crawford Notch to Mount Washington, follows the Crawford Path, the oldest continuously maintained foot trail in America, dating from 1819. In fact, the extensive trail system in the White Mountains predates the AT by a century, and most of the trail signs here carry both the local trail name as well as the AT symbol.

LOGISTICS & STRATEGY

The route recommended here covers 27 miles (43 km) from Franconia Notch to Crawford Notch, and another 26 miles

(42 km) from Crawford Notch to the Appalachia trailhead on US Highway 2. While the hike can be done in either direction, it is described from south to north, as that is the better strategy. Going that way gives the hiker a few days to warm up on the slightly less strenuous southern section before tackling Mount Washington and the rest of the Presidential Traverse proper.

This is New England, where nothing is too far from anywhere else, and so Bostonians and New Yorkers will drive to the trailheads. For those coming from farther afield, Boston is a good choice of airports; from there it's a three-hour straight shot up I-93. Airports at Manchester, New Hampshire, and Portland, Maine, also are within a three-hour drive. The route begins off the Franconia Parkway, at the Flume trailhead parking area in Franconia Notch Park, and ends at the Appalachia trailhead, on US Highway 2, about 5 miles (8 km) west of Gorham. The AMC also operates a shuttle service between popular trailheads in the White Mountains, making it easy to get back to your car—or get to the trailhead from which you want to start. Shuttle rides can be reserved in advance.

At present, no permit is required to hike the route from Franconia Notch to Appalachia, but you will need to follow the rules on backcountry fires and camps. These regulations,



which change yearly, are posted on the White River National Forest Web site under "Rules for Campers." Keep in mind that much of the Presidential Range is designated either as wilderness or other restricted-use status, where camping is controlled or prohibited. The route also passes through three state parks, which have different regulations. You will need to buy a Forest Pass, a parking permit that can be purchased on an annual or weekly basis, if you intend to park at Franconia or Appalachia.

Six of the eight huts operated by the AMC—Greenleaf, Galehead, Zealand Falls, Mizpah Spring, Lakes of the Clouds, and Madison Spring—are spaced along this route. The huts offer bunkroom accommodations, running water, basic provisions, and breakfasts and dinners prepared by the hut crew. From Franconia Notch to Appalachia, the huts make it unnecessary to bring a tent or brave nighttime temperatures, a fact that opens up the possibility of doing this route a bit earlier or later in the season. You'll need to know that you have a bunk, so if you intend to stay at the huts be sure to reserve in advance through the club's telephone reservation system. It is possible to purchase space on arrival, but that depends on vacancies, a rare thing at the popular huts during summer. At about \$70 per night, the huts may seem expensive, but you get a lot in return, including a kitchen staff; meals are included in the cost of accommodation.

Be aware that this is a rugged route despite the proximity of huts and other surprising amenities, such as the cafeteria near the summit of Mount Washington. The section

from Franconia Notch to Crawford Notch traverses 27 miles (43 km) of hardwood and coniferous forests and crosses high summits, including Mount Lincoln (5,089 feet, 1,552 m) Mount Lafayette (5,249 feet, 1,600 m) South Twin (4,902 feet, 1,495 m), and Mount Guyot (4,560 feet, 1,390 m). Conditions here, though not as bad as in the Presidentials, can be dangerous on the exposed portions. Significant elevation gain results from the steep ascents and descents over summits along the way. From Crawford Notch to Appalachia, you're on the Presidential Traverse proper, one of the most difficult sections of the AT. Much of the 26 miles (42 km) is above tree line, where camping is strictly prohibited. The weather can be horrible, even dangerous. Elevation gain and loss on this section are extreme, so allow a few days to traverse this route over peaks such as Mount Eisenhower (4,780 feet, 1,452 m), Mount Franklin (5,004 feet, 1,526 m), Mount Washington (6,288 feet, 1,917 m), and Mount Madison (5,363 feet, 1,635 m).

The start of the hike is in Franconia Notch State Park, second only to the Mount Washington area as the most popular hiking destination in the White Mountains. The most famous feature here, the Old Man of the Mountain, sadly came to a bad end in the spring of 2003, when its craggy features collapsed.

HAZARDS

Weather in the Presidentials can be deadly, and for that reason this hike isn't recommended for novices. Mount



An early morning view from the top of Zealiff into the Pemigewasset "Wilderness." PHOTO BY RICHARD J. BAILEY.

Washington weather is indicative of what you'll face in the Presidentials. The summit lies in the path of historic storm tracks, and because of its elevation, the peak is biologically and ecologically similar to the subarctic zone. Washington has received measurable snowfall during every month of the year, and average annual snowfall is more than 250 inches (6.35 m). As of 2003, the highest temperature ever recorded on the summit was 72°F (22°C), but the annual average temperature on the mountain is only 27°F. The summit is in cloud 70 percent of the time, and hurricane-force winds—75 miles per hour (120 kph) or higher—occur on average an unbelievable 104 days per year. Hikers contemplating this route must come prepared to deal with extreme conditions. In the 150 years that records have been kept, more than 100 hikers have perished from falls, weather, exposure, and other factors.

One often overlooked hazard is the nuisance of mosquitoes and blackflies. These insects can be unbearable without appropriate measures, such as effective repellent and head nets.

SEASON

The hiking season in the White Mountains is June through September, with July usually seeing the warmest temperatures.

OPPOSITE: Mount Madison and the Madison Springs hut, viewed from the Gulfside Trail. PHOTO BY RICHARD J. BAILEY.

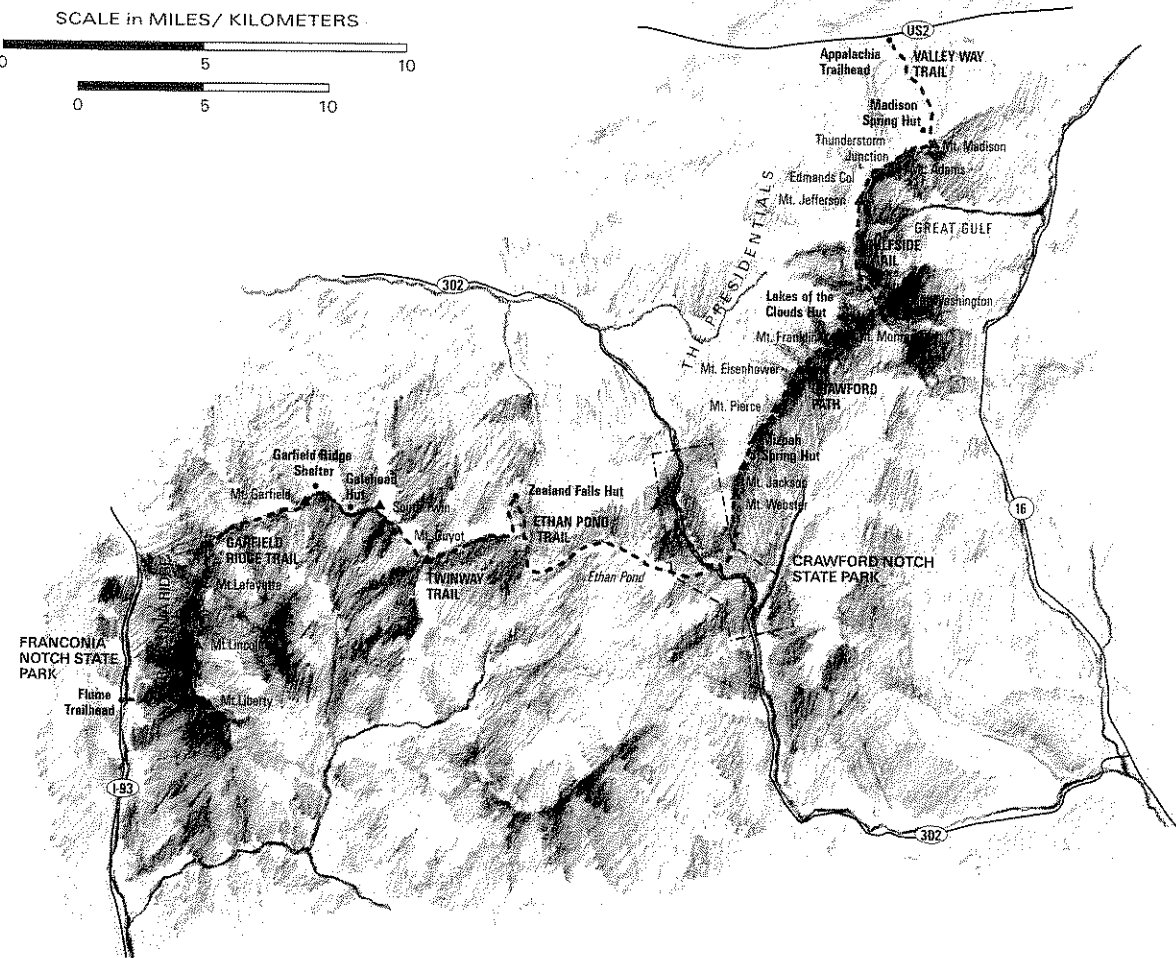
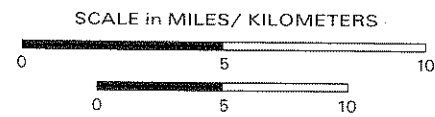
September, and even October, can have some of the best hiking conditions, with stable weather patterns, clear skies, and fall color. April and May often produce difficult conditions, with deep, wet snow. Winter months are surprisingly busy in these mountains, as hikers, skiers, and snowshoers with appropriate skills venture in as weather permits. At any time of year, however, severe storms can produce dangerous conditions.

ROUTE

The start to the hike is found within Franconia State Park, on the east side of the Franconia Parkway, at the Flume Trailhead parking area. From the parking lot, take the access trail about ¼ mile (1 km) to the Appalachian Trail, here signed the AT/Liberty Spring Trail. Turn right on the trail and ascend toward Franconia Ridge, passing the Liberty Springs campsite and hitting the ridge just north of Mount Liberty (4,459 feet, 1,359 m), on the southern section of Franconia Ridge, about 3 miles (5 km) from the parking lot. At the junction of the AT/Franconia Ridge Trail, turn left to follow the crest of Franconia Ridge as the AT runs along the narrow ridgetop, finally coming out of the trees at Little Haystack (4,800 feet, 1,463 m). From here you can see Mount Washington behind the Twins. The route continues up through this scenic section, crossing Mount Lincoln (5,089 feet, 1,551 m), the second tallest peak in New Hampshire outside the Presidentials. From here you get views into the Pemigewasset Wilderness, locally known as the Pemi, and its prominent peaks of Garfield and Owls Head.

From Lincoln, you continue north on the ridge to cross Mount Lafayette (5,260 feet, 1,604m), about 7 miles (11 km) from the trailhead. Along the ridge leading to Lafayette you can see Greenleaf





Hut to the west, exposed on a westerly ridge a 1½ miles (2½ km) and 1,000 feet (300 m) below the summit of Lafayette on the Greenleaf Trail, about 8 miles (13 km) from the parking lot. From the summit of Lafayette, the AT descends over large boulders to below tree line on rugged Garfield Ridge. This section, famed for its exhausting topography, descends almost 2,000 vertical feet (610 m) to the Lafayette-Garfield Col before climbing up to Mount Garfield (4,500 feet, 1,372 m), an open summit between Franconia Ridge and the Twins. Past the summit of Garfield, the Garfield Ridge Shelter is to the north on a small spur trail. The trail descends again to a major col before climbing gradually up to the completely rebuilt Galehead Hut, perched on the ridge at 3,800 feet (1,159 m), with good views into the Pemi. This is one of the most remote huts in the system, almost 15 miles (24 km) from the Franconia Notch trailhead, just over 7½ miles (12 km) from Greenleaf hut.

From the hut, the AT/Twinway trail gains 1,100 feet (370 m) as it ascends sharply to the summit of South Twin, 4,902 feet (1,494 m), in about 1 mile (2 km). The route then winds towards Mt Guyot. At the junction with the Bondcliff Trail, which heads east to Mount Bond, the AT/Twinway turns left and climbs gently to the exposed summit of Guyot and spectacular views. At the summit, the AT drops again before climbing steeply to a high point on the shoulder of Mount Zealand. A small spur trail leads to the true summit at 4,260 feet (1,299 m). The AT continues to Zeacliff, high above Zeacliff Pond. From Zeacliff, take in spectacular views of the Pemi, an impressive chunk of "wilderness" here in long-settled New England. (The Pemi is not true wilderness; it was heavily logged around 1920, and is not a designated federal wilderness area.) After descending for more than 1 mile (2 km), the Twinway crosses Whitewall Brook, here a shallow

stream flowing over rock slabs, and reaches the venerable Zealand Falls Hut, at 2,780 feet (850 m), 7 miles (11 km) from Galehead Hut.

Beyond the hut, the AT follows the Ethan Pond Trail as it goes through Zealand Notch and along the grade of an old logging railroad. This wide, easy track is a pleasure as it heads towards Ethan Pond and the Ethan Pond shelter and campsite, about 5 miles (11 km) from Zealand Falls Hut. From the campsite, it's 3 miles (8 km) and 1,800 feet (550 m) down to Crawford Notch State Park on US Highway Route 302. The Appalachian Trail crosses railroad tracks and enters a parking lot off the highway. On the east side of the highway, the AT/Webster Cliff trail crosses the Saco River and climbs up to fine views of Crawford Notch. Above, the route turns northward and continues climbing over several steep knobs on the way to Mount Webster.

From Crawford Notch a very tough five hours and more than 3,000 feet (910 m) of elevation gain lead up and over a number of false summits to the top of Mount Webster at 3,910 feet (1,192 m). From the top, the trail descends slightly along the ridge only to climb up again toward the summit of Mount Jackson, 1½ miles (2½ km) distant. Jackson is only 200 feet (60 m) higher than Webster, but it's a strenuous climb from the col over boulders to reach the top (4,310 feet, 1,438 m). There are good views of the entire Presidential Range, notably Mount Washington, and even the Mizpah Springs Hut on the side of Mount Pierce. From Jackson's summit, the trail descends slightly to reach the Mizpah Springs Hut, 6½ miles (10½ km) from the parking lot at Crawford Notch State Park, and 10 miles (16 km) from Zealand Falls Hut. Built in 1965, the Mizpah Springs Hut is one of the most modern on this section of trail. The Nauman campsite is next to the hut.

The 5-mile hike (8 km) from Mizpah Springs Hut to Lakes of the Clouds Hut is a highlight of the Presidential Range Traverse, traveling the entire way above tree line and offering the summits of Mounts Pierce, Eisenhower, Franklin, and Monroe. But beware, this bald ridge can be extremely exposed in bad weather, so be prepared for temperatures on the ridge to be 20 or even 30°F (11–17°C) colder than at the hut. From Mizpah Springs Hut, the AT/Webster Cliff Trail climbs steeply to the bare rock summit of Mount Pierce (4,310 feet, 1,438 m) and good views of Eisenhower, Franklin, and Washington. Just past the summit the trail drops, and at a junction on a shoulder connecting Pierce and Eisenhower the route turns right and becomes the AT/Crawford Path, which leads all the way to Mount Washington.

The AT goes not to the top of Eisenhower, but around the peak, so take the short Mount Eisenhower Loop Trail if you want to go to the 4,780-foot (1,457 m) summit with its great views. The AT/Crawford Path traverses the east flank of Eisenhower and continues over Mount Franklin (5,004 feet, 1,526 m). Beyond, the AT traverses the east flank of Mount Monroe, so take the Mount Monroe Loop Trail if you want to enjoy the view of Mount Washington from the 5,385-foot (1,642 m) summit of Monroe. The AT/Crawford Path reaches the Lakes of the Clouds Hut, on the broad flank of Mount Washington, 5 miles (8 km) from Mizpah Springs Hut.

This hut, so close to Mount Washington's summit, is one of the largest and most popular of all the huts along the trail, hence its nickname, Lakes of the Clouds. Though it has a capacity of almost 100 people, it is frequently full. If you arrive here without reservations, be prepared to be turned away, except in emergencies, when the hut crew may let you pay for a sleeping space on the dining room floor.

From the Lakes of the Clouds Hut the AT/Crawford Path winds between the two Lakes of the Clouds and starts the ascent of Mount Washington's summit cone. The upper part of the mountain is basically a big boulder field up which the trail climbs with only a few switchbacks. The way through the rocks is marked by white-painted blazes that identify the AT route.

Mt. Washington's summit, which is also a New Hampshire state park, is a busy place. There's a road as well as the venerable Cog Railway; the railway, built in the 1860s, is said to have the steepest grade of any railroad in the world—14 percent. There is also a visitors center, cafeteria, a weather observatory and various structures including radio antennas. Wilderness it is not. The summit is visited by up to 250,000 people per year, about a quarter of whom are hikers. Though the area is famous for having the worst weather in the world, Mount Washington's most notorious conditions occur during winter storms, although summer storms can be severe as well. Conditions are legendary for turning very bad very quickly. The entire route from Pierce to Madison is exposed to weather, so be prepared.

From the summit, continue on the AT/Trinity Heights Connector for a few hundred yards to where it ends at the AT/Gulfside trail. Turn right here. The AT will follow the Gulfside for the rest of the Presidential Range traverse to Madison Springs Hut.

The summit of Mount Washington, showing the weather observatory and the Northern Presidentials beyond. PHOTO BY RICHARD J. BAILEY.

FOLLOWING SPREAD: The well-worn trail along Franconia Ridge, second in popularity only to trails on Mount Washington.

PHOTO BY RICHARD J. BAILEY.

The rocky trail drops steadily from the summit of Washington, crosses under the cog railroad tracks, and skirts the Great Gulf on the way to Washington-Reagan col. The Great Gulf is the largest ravine in the White Mountains. Washington and the peaks of the northern Presidentials (Jefferson, Adams and Madison) arc around to form its headwall. The AT winds around the west side of the recently renamed Mount Reagan (formerly Clay) and down to Sphinx Col, then along the ridge to the junction with the Mount Jefferson Loop Trail. The loop trail leads over the summit with its great views, while the AT/Gulfside passes to the east of the summit and drops steadily to Edmands Col. Several trails meet at Edmands Col, including the north end of the Mount Jefferson Loop. The AT continues, ascending from the col past Storm Lake (a seasonal pond) and on to a place famous for bad weather, Thunderstorm Junction, a major trail intersection marked by a gigantic cairn.

From here the Lowes Path goes up Mount Adams, to the south. (The Lowes Path and the Air Line Trail can be used as a loop over the summit of Adams for more great views.) The AT/Gulfside descends to Madison Springs Hut in the col between Adams and Madison. The historic hut, built in 1888, was rebuilt in the 1940s after fire destroyed the original.

If you don't want to go to the summit of Madison, take the popular Valley Way Trail ¾ miles (5½ km) from the hut to the parking lot at Appalachia. Take care to stay on the Valley Way as there are many trail junctions on the way down. The summit of Madison, 5,367 feet (1,626 m), is ½ mile (1 km) above the hut via the AT/Osgood trail. If you go to the top, the easiest and most protected—if slightly longer—route down is to take the AT/Osgood trail back to the Madison Hut and pick up the Valley Way Trail for the descent to Appalachia. Appalachia is on the south side of US Highway 2, approximately 5 miles (8 km) west of Gorham and 1 mile (2 km) east of Lowe's Country Store.

Information

WHITE MOUNTAIN NATIONAL FOREST

Federal Building
719 North Main Street
P.O. Box 638
Laconia, NH USA 32460
(603) 528-8721
www.fs.fed.us/r9/white

New Hampshire Division of Parks and Recreation
www.nhstateparks.org/parkspages/parks.html

HUT AND SHUTTLE INFORMATION

AMC hut reservations and trailhead shuttle service 603-466-2727,
Monday to Saturday, 9 AM to 5 PM, (603) 466-3871 (fax)
www.outdoors.org/

