Long Distance in the Whites

The Presidential Traverse Hike

By Matthew and Brian Plumb

BSA Troop 2
The Presidential Traverse

- The Presidential traverse is considered to be one of the finest hikes in New England: a traverse of 11 mountain peaks - Mt. Webster, Jackson (named after the State geologist, not the president!), Clinton, Eisenhower, Franklin, Monroe, Washington (the northeast’s highest peak at 6,288 ft), Clay, Jefferson, Adams and Madison. All of these peaks are above-timberline and you have fabulous views for miles.

- This hike follows along the most exciting part of the Appalachian Trail in New Hampshire.

- This is a strenuous hike and not for first time or young hikers - 9000 ft of elevation gain and between 18-23 miles of hiking.

- There are two ways to hike it – single day or multi-day. Experienced hikers can do it in a single day in roughly 10-14 hours. The last few miles of the single day hike are extremely exhausting. Also what matters is how many peaks you want to “bag.”

- This presentation focuses on a 2-3 day hike, however, a single day hike can be adapted easily from this information. Many people extend the hike into a full 3 day venture – this provides more time to enjoy this truly unique environment. You also need to give yourself a day to drive up, locate cars, and prep for an early rise.

- There is also the long version and the short version – the long version hits every peak and takes at least 4 hours longer. The shorter version, which is just as much fun, skirts some of the peaks and skips the last two mountains (Webster and Jackson).

- Best time to go is late May to early August. May hiking will be muddy and you will likely still see snow. This window gives you the longest daylight available and it is also the most comfortable time to hike. Bugs attack below the tree line but aren’t around too much at high elevations.
Getting Started

- **Hiking Direction** – Most people attempt this hike starting at the northern end of the range and hiking south. This gets the major elevation climb out of the way early in the hike. It also ends at the AMC Center which offers nice restitute after a long journey. The benefit to the north to south route is that it follows footstep by footstep what most of the AT thru-hikers experience.

- This presentation itinerary follows the north to south as it is more common.

- Two cars are required. The day before the hike (or very early the day of the hike on your way to the northern trailhead), leave one car at the AMC Center in Crawford Notch. Take the other to one of several locations to start the hike:
  - Appalachia (the classic start)
  - Pine Link
  - Daniel Webster Trail

- The route for the Presidential Traverse can vary, particularly the beginning and finish. The traditional traverse begins by ascending up the Valley Way Trail to the Madison Hut. From the hut the traverse follows the Gulfside Trail to the Cog Railroad track below the summit of Mount Washington. From the tracks you follow the Westside Trail around Mount Washington to the Crawford Path. The Crawford Path is then followed to its finish at the top of Crawford Notch near the AMC Hostel.
Northern Presidentials

Start

Midpoint

Blue Line = Traverse
Red Lines = Escapes
Yellow = Waypoints
Overnight

- Do I bring tents or do I use the AMC cabins?
  - The most logical hut to stay at is the Lake of the Clouds Hut below Mt. Washington. Also, if you can get in, the Hut offers six spots under the cabin in a placed called “the dungeon.” These can be reserved for $6/night. Bring ear plugs – it gets very loud with the wind.
  - Tents are cheaper (eliminates $70/night fee and gives flexibility in planning (huts get booked up fairly quickly)), but you have to walk further to pitch the tent (you can’t camp above the alpine zone except in the winter) and you have to lug them the entire way. You should double up and split of tent equipment to decrease the load.
  - There are several good locations to get off trail to camp.
  - Hammock camping is a very good option as you go below treeline, as the ground and surrounding area is very rough.

- Camping Options
  - Hermit Lake Shelters, approximately a one hour hike down the Tukernman Ravine Trail. The eight open lean-to shelters can accommodate 86 people. Due to the fragile vegetation, camping outside the shelter and wood fires are prohibited. Shelter tickets are sold at the Pickham Notch visitor center on a first-come, first-served basis.
  - Down Ammonoosuc Ravine Trail in summer

**US Forest Service Camping Guidelines**

- Unless otherwise posted, camping is permitted throughout the White Mountain National Forest. However, due to concerns about overuse, the U.S. Forest Service offers guidelines to choosing a camping spot in the Mount Washington area:
  - Below treeline (where trees are 8 feet or taller).
  - 200 feet from the trail and water sources.
  - A quarter of a mile from any road or facility.
  - Check "Backcountry Camping Rules" brochure, annually updated by USFS.
  - No tenting or wood fires permitted in Cutler River Drainage, including Tuckerman and Huntington ravines.
North to South Itinerary

Route/Activity Description:

• **Day 0:** Drive 93 N through New Hampshire to the 3 N to the 302 E and leave one car at the AMC Crawford Notch Depot. Return on 302 W, then 115 N then 2 E to Valley Way trailhead. Hike the Valley Way trail to Valley Way campsite, stay overnight.

• **Day 1:** Hike via the Valley Way trail to the AMC Madison Hut. Possible side trip to Mt. Madison. Continue via Gulfside trail past Mt. Adams, possibly over Mt. Adams. Continue via Gulfside trail past Mt. Jefferson, possibly over Mt. Jefferson, to Sphinx Col. Camp east of Sphinx Col at first protected flat spot possibly as far down as treeline. (Alternatively, push on to Lakes Hut if you want to make this a 2 day hike. You won’t be able to bag all the peaks).

• **Day 2:** Hike via the Gulfside trail past Mt. Washington, possibly over Mt. Washington. Continue via the Crawford Path to AMC Lake of the Clouds Hut. Continue via Crawford Path past Mt. Monroe, possibly over Mt. Monroe. Continue via Crawford Path past Mt. Franklin, possibly over Mt. Franklin. Continue via Crawford Path to Red Pond, at the junction with the Edmands Path, the Mt. Eisenhower summit trail, and the Crawford path. Camp southeast of the junction (or alternatively, pass these peaks and head down).

• **Day 3:** Hike via the Crawford Path past Mt. Eisenhower, possibly over Mt. Eisenhower. Continue via the Crawford path to past Mt. Pierce, possibly over Mt. Pierce to the Crawford Path, Mizpah Cutoff junction. Continue via the Crawford Path to the AMC Highland Center.
Approximate Miles/Times

- 3.8 mile hike up Valley Way to Madison Hut (2 hrs). (The good news is that, beyond Washington, there is no sustained elevation gain, though late in the day even the 300 foot climbs required to summit Monroe and Eisenhower seem long. Also the Crawford Path is a good smooth trail.)
- 2.2 miles Madison Hut to Edmands Col (2 hrs)
- 3.8 miles Edmands Col to Mount Washington (3 hrs)
- 1.5 miles down Mt. Washington to Lake of the Clouds Hut (2 hrs) (end day 1?)
- 4.8 miles Lake of the Clouds Hut across the ridgeline to Mizpah Hut (4-5 hrs)
- 4.2 miles Mizpah Hut to Mt. Jackson to Crawford Notch (4 hrs) (end day 2)

- Simple formula for time: 1 hour for every 1 ½ miles plus 1 hour for every 1000 feet. In other words if a leg were 1 ½ miles long with an elevation gain of 1000 feet the estimated time would be 2 hours.
- Usually the terrain below tree line has better footing and is out of the weather so travel is easier. Traveling down mountains (such as Washington) down glacial moraine is slow and tiring.
South to North Itinerary

3 Day Typical Itinerary

Day 1: Start off from Crawford Notch, by the Elephant Head marker. Hike up along the Webster Cliff Trail to hit Mt. Webster. Loop out of the Webster Cliff trail to connect to Mt. Jackson. It is a steep climb, more like non-technical rock-climbing! (additional time to bag Mt Jackson, and Mt Webster allow extra 2 hrs)
Crawford to Lakes 7.4 distance, 4,250 altitude gain, 5:50 time, taking in Mt Pierce, Mt Eisenhower, Mt Franklin, Mt Monroe Therefore total time to complete all is approx 8 hrs.

Day 2: Lakes Hut to Madison Hut 7.4 distance, 4,250 altitude gain, 6:30 time, taking in Mt Washington, Mt Clay, Mt Jefferson, Mt Adams.

Day 3: Madison Hut to Appalachia, over Mt. Madison 4.7 550 2:40
Coming back down from Mt. Madison, take the Valley Way Trail. It’s more protected, and affords a cool view of cascades coming down from Snyder Brook.

• To do the 2-day traverse, have 2 cars, or take the hiker shuttle (603-466-2727), which should take you from Appalachia to Crawford Notch, where the hike begins.

• To do the 1-day traverse, ideally you should spend the night before and the night after the traverse in northern New Hampshire. Cars should be spotted the night before and plans made for a very early start. Most people try to start some time between 4 and 5 AM.
Gear and Logistics

- Carry at least two nalgene bottles of water. You can refill at the AMC huts (filtered water available). Be careful not to spend too much time at the huts. (Since Madison Hut is less than four miles from the trailhead you can fill one before starting, refilling it and filling the other there. This saved about four pounds on the climb to the hut, which is about 40% of the total elevation gain.)

- Always bring raingear – and stay ALERT for sudden changes in weather

- Always bring a map

- Bring snack food and if susceptible to cramping, load up on bananas (also bring Gatorade mix to add to water to replace potassium and sodium lost).

- Don’t rely on a cell phone as an emergency tool

- Pack light – it is a long, tiring, (but rewarding) hike
Safety

- Always tell people where you will be.
- If it starts lighting, spread out and stay low. Move quickly to an unexposed area – get below the tree line as quickly as possible.
- Plan in escape routes on your trip itinerary. Local cars to facilitate emergency transport.
- As a minimum you need one car at the end of the traverse, and a second one to take you to the start. If more cars are available it is a very good idea to leave one at the Cog Railway base station, this will allow you to bail out by either the Jewell or Ammonoosuc Ravine trails in case of bad weather or fatigue. If planning to exit by the Webster Cliff trail a car should be left at the Crawford trailhead, that allows you to bail out at Pierce or Jackson.
- Make sure you have the right equipment and weather gear (no jeans!). The weather can change on a dime, so packing rain gear and an extra top is definitely worth it.
- Make sure you have a map and compass. The trail above tree line is only marked with rock pylons in most places, making it easy to get lost — especially in poor conditions.
- Don’t underestimate the difficulty that such a trip presents, even if you have experience doing technical hiking on much higher peaks. The White Mountains can be unforgiving.
- Get a good forecast before you leave. You may even want to arrange to get a forecast while you are on the traverse. This is another use of the cell phone, be careful though your cell phone battery drains quicker in the extreme cold of the traverse. You want to keep your phone use to a minimum and only for good reasons.
- You are only as fast as your slowest hiker. Gauge energy exertion levels and don’t push others to hard.
Emergency Planning

Nearest Ranger/Hospital and Contact Info:
• NH Fish and Game (rescue): 603 271 3361
• Ammonoosuc Ranger District: 603 466 2713
• AMC Pinkham Notch Visitor’s Center Phone: (603) 466-2725
• Press 0 to speak to a real person between the hours of 6 AM and 11PM.
• Press 6 to speak to a real person between the hours of 11PM and 6 AM.
• AMC Highland Center: (603) 278-4453
• Memorial Hospital at 3073 Main St. in N. Conway, NH: (603) 356-5461