



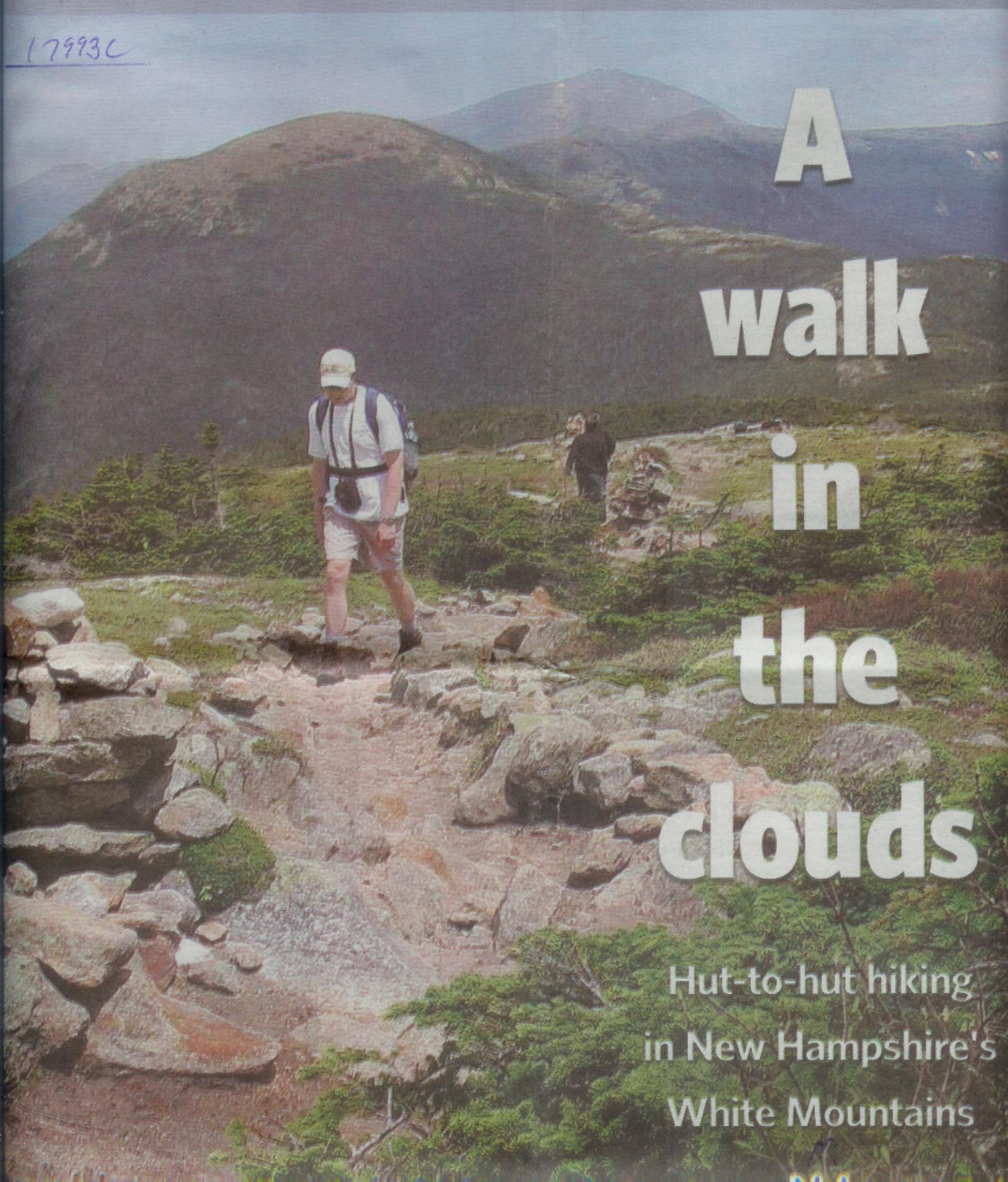
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Travel

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A walk in the clouds

Hut-to-hut hiking
in New Hampshire's
White Mountains





PHOTOS BY ANTHONY ELIA

A school group hikes away from the Madison Spring Hut in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. These huts are a relief from conventional camping at high elevations.

BY MELANIE LEFKOWITZ
STAFF WRITER

It was like climbing to the clouds. After four hours of trudging straight uphill on a rocky White Mountains path that sometimes seemed more like a stream than a trail, we were rewarded with 360-degree views of grayish mist.

We were cold and wet and cranky. But as we maneuvered across the suddenly alpine terrain, dotted with rare wildflowers, we saw it, rising out of the mist like a forest mirage: the Madison Spring Hut.

Moments later, we were crouched over mugs of hot cocoa in our driest clothes. A colorful chalkboard listed the dinner menu — corn chowder, fresh salad, stuffed shells Florentine — and our gear was laid out on our bunks. And suddenly that sodden uphill trek didn't seem so bad.

A network of high-mountain

huts zigzags across the ranges of New Hampshire's White Mountains, spaced about a day's hike apart from each other and offering hot meals, running water and dry beds. The huts are a welcome relief from the rigors of the backcountry, particularly in a mountain range where 48 peaks exceed 4,000 feet and hurricane-force winds or snowstorms can strike even in midsummer. In addition to providing shelter in bad weather and lightening hikers' loads of tents and stoves, they're places to exchange tips, compare routes and create traditions, often hosting the same groups of friends and families year after year.

Charms of the wilderness

After encountering rain, cold and several boisterous school groups, we learned that a trek in the White Mountains can take patience, flexibility and luck.

See **WHITE MOUNTAINS** on D12

ON THE COVER

The view of New Hampshire's Presidential Range from the top of Mount Pierce included some welcome blue sky.

Rain didn't dampen

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High mountain hut system and other AMC facilities

(Not drawn to scale)

● Easy hike

■ Moderate

Lonesome Lake Hut
2,760 feet

Greenleaf Hut
4,200 feet

Galehead Hut
3,800 feet

Mount Lafayette

four-day mountain trek

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IF YOU GO

It's a long drive to New Hampshire from Long Island — more than seven hours. We broke up the trip halfway in Brattleboro, Vt.

The Appalachian Mountain Club's Web site is full of helpful information about the huts, the trails, weather forecasts and what to bring. See www.outdoors.org.

WHERE TO STAY. Joe Dodge Lodge, a rustic lodge at the foot of many trails in Pinkham Notch, has private rooms and bunk rooms furnished with bunk beds, hot showers and a communal living room with fireplace. High season rates (July 1 to Oct. 31) are \$45 for lodging only, and \$64 per adult for lodging, breakfast and dinner.

Highland Center at Crawford Notch is a somewhat more luxurious lodge, with larger rooms and better views. High season rates are \$64 per adult for lodging, breakfast and dinner.

The full-service high mountain huts have flush toilets, drinking water and

bunk beds. They supply a pillow and wool blankets. The rate, which includes breakfast and dinner, is \$79 Sunday to Friday, and \$87 for Saturday nights. If you stay three or more nights, the rate goes down to \$67. There are nine full-service huts, which supply meals, and one self-service cabin, the Carter Notch Hut, which requires you to bring your own food and sleeping bag.

The Madison Spring Hut, elevation 4,800 feet, is most easily reached by the Valley Way trail, 3.8 miles one way. The hut sleeps 52 in two bunk rooms.

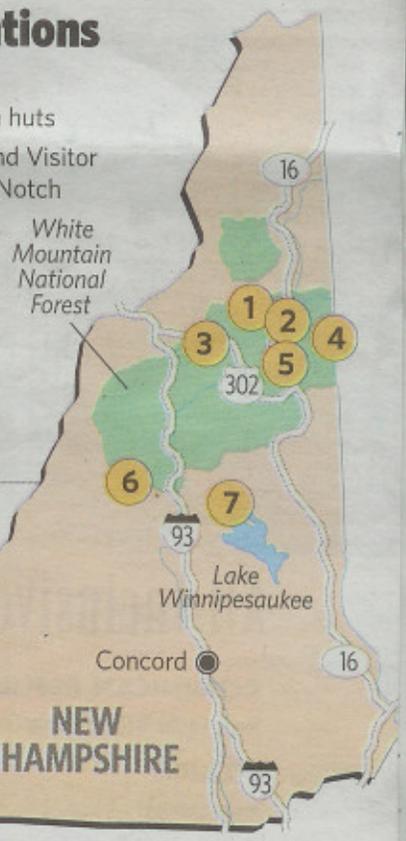
Lakes of the Clouds Hut is the most popular and the highest, at 5,050 feet. It's a 7-mile hike from Madison Spring to Lakes, but various trails lead from the valley to Lakes in about three miles.

Mizpah Spring Hut, at 3,800 feet, sleeps 60 in several bunk rooms. It's five miles from Lakes and 2.6 miles from Crawford Notch.

— MELANIE LEFKOWITZ

AMC destinations in New Hampshire

1. Eight high mountain huts
2. Joe Dodge Lodge and Visitor Center at Pinkham Notch
3. Highland Center at Crawford Notch
4. Cold River Camp
5. Harvard Cabin
6. Cardigan Lodge
7. Three Miles Island



Lakes of the Clouds Hut
5,050 feet

Madison Spring Hut
4,800 feet

Spring Hut
0 feet

Mount Washington

Joe Dodge Lodge and Visitor Center at Pinkham Notch
2,032 feet

Carter Notch Hut
3,288 feet



Climbing to new heights

WHITE MOUNTAINS from

8
 it even with only one day of clear skies and mountain rest, orchids and other wildflowers. And the huts, sturdy, windproof structures that often fill up on summer weekends, let us enjoy the feeling of being a million miles from civilization without giving up the comforts of tasty food, soft pillows and good company. I first tried hut hiking in the state's Tatra Mountains, and immediately loved the experience of ending a day of rugged wilderness hiking with a hot mug of goulash and a mug of cold beer. Since hut hiking is more widespread in Europe than here, I was excited to learn about the White Mountains' huts, operated by the Appalachian Mountain Club. A few weeks ago, my husband and I set off on the seven-hour drive from New York to the White Mountains in western Hampshire, preparing to traverse the Presidential Range, a challenging, mostly above-treeline four-day trek that would include a climb of Mount Washington, the high-peak in the Northeast. We spent our first night in the Joe Dodge Lodge, a rustic, old-fashioned structure in the Pinkham Notch valley where our private room had two narrow single bunks and a rack of boots was drying in part of the communal fire-escape. We made our way across the road for the four-hour, family-style dinner,

which, like every meal we had in the White Mountains, featured fresh-baked bread, soup, meat and vegetarian entrees, dessert and a weather report. And like every meal we had in the White Mountains, the food was far better than the weather report.

Sure enough, when we woke up the next morning, the skies were overcast and a cold rain was falling. As we carefully made our way uphill to the Madison hut, dozens of hikers on their way down told us this was the best weather they'd seen all weekend, and we hoped it was the start of an improving trend.

The hike was gradual at first, with ferns, birch trees and lady's slippers, a kind of orchid found in the northern woods, along the trail. It soon grew steeper and more challenging, however, and by the time we arrived at Madison Spring, we were ready for a rest.

High huts

Madison Spring is one of two White Mountains huts above the tree line — that is, high enough that the wind and weather are too harsh for anything but the hardiest alpine plants. The other, Lakes



PHOTOS BY ANTHONY ELIA

Hikers eating breakfast, top, at the Madison Spring Hut in the White Mountains; above, bunk beds are stacked four high.

of the Clouds, is the most popular in the chain, less than a mile from the peak of Mount Washington and sleeping 90 in co-ed bunk rooms. Soon after we arrived at Madison hut, a trio of Canadians materialized in the mist outside — they'd set out for the Lakes hut but bad weather forced them to turn back. The forecast, displayed in each hut, called for 75 mph winds in the highest peaks, and they were blowing all over the trail.

We had about an hour of peace and quiet before the eighth-graders arrived. There were only about 15 of them, but it sure seemed like more when they began swinging from the tops of bunk beds stacked four high, singing "Spider-Man, Spider-Man." Meanwhile, the grown-ups — my husband and I, the Canadians, and a father and son who'd been taking trips here together for more than a decade — were sprawled out on bunks, napping or resting.

The full-service huts are staffed by college students, known as a "croo," who cook the meals and include a naturalist who leads educational programs throughout

the day. Some hikers had brought wine to drink with dinner, and afterward, the solar and wind-powered lights were turned on so guests could read, plan trips or play games on the long wooden tables beneath them. In the morning, we were woken by a guitar-strumming croo member's rendition of the Beatles song "In My Life" and the announcement that breakfast would be served shortly. After breakfast — coffee, oatmeal,

pancakes and fruit — we had bad news: Weather forecasts would be a day before, with high winds and little sun. Discouraged, we headed instead of heading to Washington, we left the valley, where it wasn't raining.

We transferred to the new lodge, the Appalachian Mountain Center at Crawford. More modern, sparsely furnished, but more luxurious than Joe Dodge, we had down quilts were balm for the hut's hikers. We hoped today's weather would be enough for us to complete the trip, to the Madison Hut near the peak of Pierce. And, though almost lost hope,

Finally, we put on our rain gear and took our sunscreen and peaked Mount Pierce rocky peak just above the tree line. The hills are so high; the views, glacial, the top the entire Presidential Range was before us, and in the distance we could even see Washington, with its nae, weather tower and railway. It would be more satisfying to climb it, but after a day of relentless clouds, we felt great just to see it.

It's a good thing to have a long look.

The following day, the weather was again.