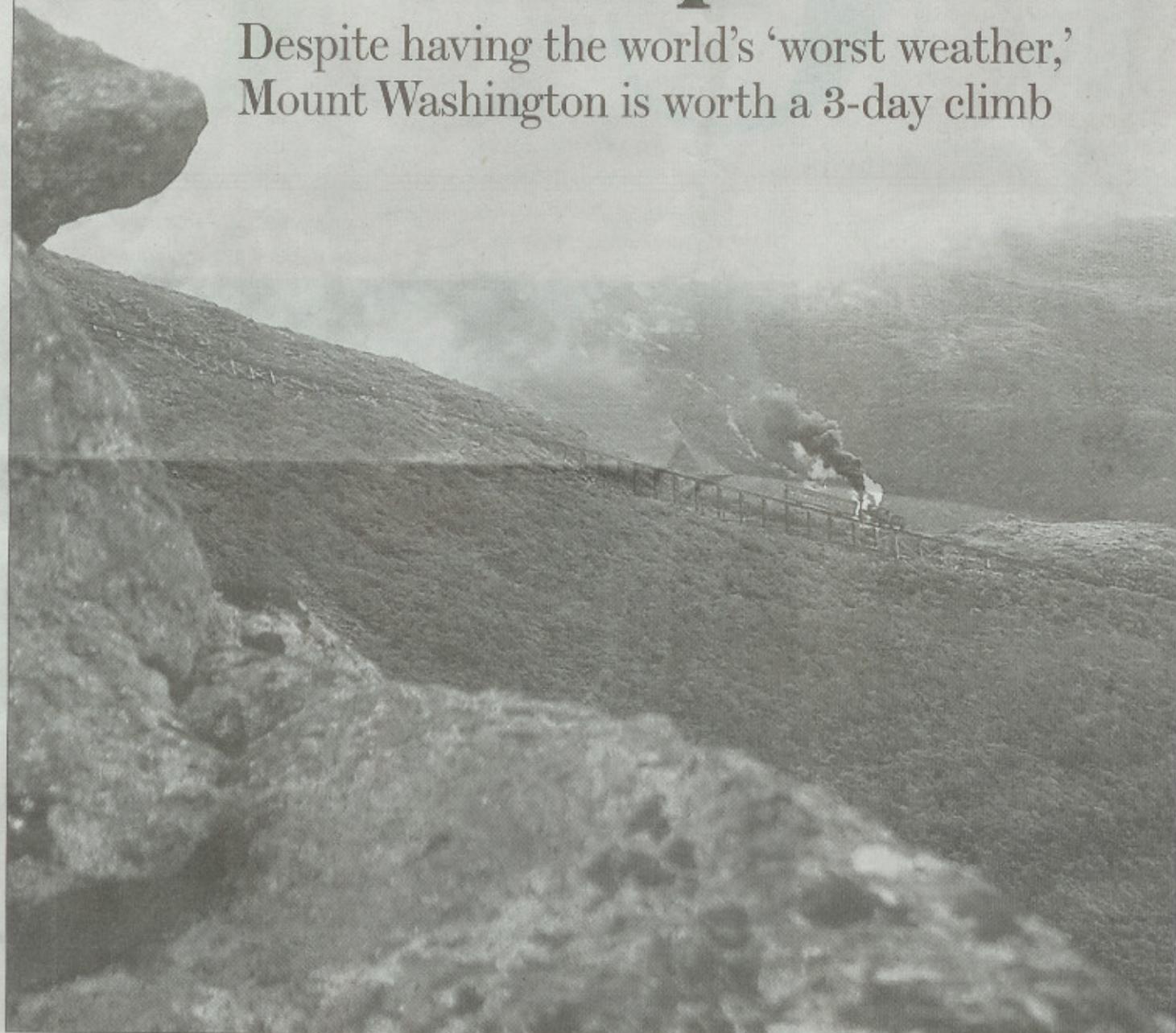


Peak Experience

Despite having the world's 'worst weather,'
Mount Washington is worth a 3-day climb



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If you've climbed up the Jewell Trail on the flanks of Mount Washington, you almost feel sorry for the poor folks who chose, instead, to coop themselves up inside a train car and ride to the summit

Back in 1819, a visionary named Abel Crawford figured that tourists might pay good money to relax in a beautiful setting amid the White Mountains of New Hampshire, and that some of them might want to see the view from the summit of Mount Washington. So he and his son, Ethan Allen Crawford, cut a footpath from Crawford Notch to the top of the great mountain. Boy was old Abel ever right!

What would he think if he could see the crowds that converge on the mountain these days... especially during the glorious days of early autumn and foliage season? At 6,288 feet, Mount Washington is the highest peak in the Northeast. The summit (which used to have a hotel and its own newspaper) is home to a weather observatory and museum which boasts of "The worst weather in world."

It's visited by a whole lot of tourists who arrive via the Cog Railway (www.thecog.com), or by van or private car on the Mount Washington Auto road (www.mt-washington.com)

But, unless you're under 8 years old, or legitimately restricted by some infirmity you have no control over, that's clearly cheating. The real way to experience Mount Washington is to hike it.

There are many hiking routes to the summit of Mount Washington. Some are easier, harder, longer, or shorter; some can be hiked up and down in one long day, others require an overnight at either one of the tent sites on the adjoining ridges and spurs of the mountain, or in one of the huts operated by the Appalachian Mountain Club (www.outdoors.org).

My sweetheart Marilyn and I have been challenging our leg strength and lung capacity

Weather or not

The claim that Mount Washington has the "worst weather in the world" is not one that should be taken lightly. They aren't kidding.

The highest verified wind speed (231 mph) ever observed on the Earth's surface was recorded here in 1934. In daily observations since 1932, the highest temperature ever recorded on the summit is 72 degrees F. (which often surprises the ill-prepared tourists who arrive on the Cog or the Auto Road from the warm valleys), the average annual temperature is 26.5 degrees F., winds average 35.3 miles per hour, fog is common, and the summit records an average of 86 inches of precipitation annually, including 21 feet of snow.

Plan and prepare

When you go hiking on Mount Washington, always watch the weather, always choose your clothing and equipment carefully, always prepare for worse weather than you can possibly imagine. The other day, while climbing up the Ammonoosuc Ravine Trail, we were passed by three hikers wearing blue jeans, cotton t-shirts, and sneakers. Despite the fact that there was rain in the immediate forecast (it started pouring less than an hour later) none of them appeared to have rain gear or emergency equipment in their tiny day packs. They did indicate that

on the slopes of Mount Washington this year, both day hiking and on a hut-to-hut adventure. These have been her first forays onto the big mountain and we have yet to make the summit. But that doesn't mean we

they planned to turn around if the weather got bad, and, since there were no deaths reported on the mountain that day, I assume they did.

If you hike Mount Washington, don't wear cotton clothing which robs your body of heat if it gets wet. Instead, choose wicking materials like polyester for your underwear, quick drying fabrics like nylon or polyester for your shirt and pants, and materials like fleece or wool, which offer warmth when wet for your insulation layers. Be sure you always carry top-quality rain gear on your hike.

In addition, carry a map and compass in case fog limits visibility. (Getting lost on this mountain is an invitation to tragedy.) It's also a good idea to have a contractor's 55-gallon trash bag or a light tarp along for emergency shelter. Finally, carry enough food and water to help your body maintain heat as you hike.

Visitor information

For hikers, rough weather on Mount Washington can be much more than an inconvenience. To date, 135 people have died on the mountain, many as a direct consequence of being caught unprepared by bad weather. So don't be ashamed to turn around if bad weather threatens. Mount Washington will be there another day, be sure you're alive to enjoy it.

haven't enjoyed the beautiful scenery and had a wonderful time.

Back in April while staying in Jackson (www.mountwashingtonvalley.com) I took her up the snow-covered Tuckerman Ravine trail to watch the

final leg of the Tuckerman Inferno race. Beautiful scenery, great hike. She wanted more.

In July, on our annual "splurge" at the Mount Washington Hotel (603-278-3333; www.mtwashington.com) in Bretton Woods, N.H., we took a day off from their wonderful mountain bike trails and climbed the Jewell Trail to the junction with Gulfside just below the summit. We debated resting and then continuing on, but an approaching cloud bank encouraged us to turn around.

Last week, in the quiet days before busy Labor Day weekend, we spent three days hiking on Mount Washington.

The weather reports from the Mount Washington Observatory (www.mountwashington.org) told of an approaching rain storm, so we started early and ascended the direct Ammonoosuc Ravine Trail to Lakes Of The Clouds Hut where we settled in snugly just as high winds sent heavy rains cascading against the windows.

It dropped to 34 degrees on the summit while we read and visited with other hikers. After a great dinner and a good night's sleep, we set out (I say "strolled;" Marilyn says "struggled") on a clear morning along the Crawford Path and Webster Cliffs trails to the Mispah Hut and another great dinner and overnight before descending via the Mispah cut-off and Crawford Path.

We still didn't make the summit! But Marilyn has indicated that she's ready for a rematch. Maybe some warm day this fall you'll meet up with us on top of the crown jewel of the Northeast.

Life isn't a spectator sport. Get out and enjoy!

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