

Exhilaration

without exertion

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Two of the nearby peaks in New Hampshire's White Mountains are accessible by mechanical means, and that means that visitors can enjoy the exhilaration of high-elevation adventures minus the exertion factor.

Thanks to the **Mount Washington Auto Road** and the **Wildcat Mountain Gondola Skyride**, two major summits can be visited by casual excursionists who don't have the time or the physical stamina for an all-day hike that involves thousands of feet of elevation gain.

Visitors can drive their own cars to the 6,288-foot summit of Mount Washington, loftiest in the Northeast, via a steep and winding road that was opened in 1861. Or they can make the eight-mile ascent in vans, called "stages," piloted by experienced driver/guides.

The first half of the trip climbs through a lush boreal forest that is characteristic of northern New England. Midway up the mountain, the road bursts above tree line into a brutally harsh alpine environment which stunts tree growth but hosts a variety of hardy animals,

plants and wildflowers that are found nowhere else in the region.

After arriving at the top, there's an incredible view that extends from the Maine Coast into Canada. The rocky summit is also home of the World's Worst Weather. Example: On April 12, 1934, the wind howled at 231 miles per hour, the fastest velocity ever officially recorded on the earth's surface.

The summit is also home to the Mount Washington Weather Observatory, two small museums and a gift shop, snack bar and post office.

Those who drive their own cars can linger and explore as long as they please at the summit. They can also stop at several turnouts along the road for photography or even hiking. The toll fee also includes the world-famous "This car has climbed Mount Washington" bumper sticker.

Chauffeured stage trips take an hour and a half, including 30 minutes at the summit. New this year, the Mount Washington Auto Road is offering expanded three-hour stage tours. Geared toward adults with an interest in natural and so-

cial history, these tours are scheduled twice daily.

Across Pinkham Notch, the Wildcat Mountain Gondola Skyride whisks visitors from the base area to the summit in about 12 minutes. Carrying four per car, these unique gondolas ride up the continuously moving cable of a winter ski lift.

After arriving at the upper terminal, visitors can make a five-minute fairly steep hike to the observation platform atop the 4,062-foot summit, where panoramic views of Maine and New Hampshire await.

New for 2007, Wildcat's ZipRider is geared toward thrill-seekers who take a ski lift part way up the mountain before hurtling downgrade at speeds of up to 45 miles per hour in a sling-harness that rides below a 2,100-foot steel cable.

Wildcat's ZipRider is a twin-cable design that allows two people to descend side by side, sailing over treetops, ski trails and the Peabody River at heights of up to 70 feet.

Photos: Upper courtesy Mt. Washington Auto Road; lower courtesy Wildcat Mountain

