

Travel to the Summit

September 15, 2005

Participants in the celebration of the 14th National Landmark of Soaring may be interested in visiting the top of the mountain, where the Landmark plaque will be installed.

Before you decide to go to the summit, you should be aware:

- The plaque will be at the dedication ceremony on the evening of October 8, at the Mount Washington Hotel in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire. It will not be installed in its permanent location the same weekend.
- Participants are welcome to make the trip to the summit, but there are no formal Landmark events scheduled to take place there.
- Travel to the summit is challenging! Read on.

Other than hiking, there are two ways to get to the top of the mountain, the "Auto Road" and the "Cog Railway." Each one has its source of official information:

Auto Road <http://www.mt-washington.com/autoroad/> 603-466-3988

Cog Railway <http://www.thecog.com/> 800-922-8825

The two enterprises have base stations on opposite sides of the mountain. The Cog Railway base station is on the same side as the Mount Washington Hotel. There are tolls for both. Although they are both considered normal tourist attractions, neither one is for the faint-of-heart.

1. THE AUTO ROAD

It is a 50-minute drive from the Hotel to the base of the Auto Road (the drive happens to take you through Gorham, the current site of the Mount Washington wave camps).

On the Auto Road, under perfect conditions, it is a 30-minute drive each way (up and down).

Some driving skill is required. The road is steep, winding, and partially unpaved. They ask you to use first gear both ways and maintain separation with the other traffic (including the traffic behind you). There are turnouts where you are advised to stop occasionally to cool your brakes.

The changeability of the weather and the unpredictability of the other drivers makes it difficult to predict how much time you will actually spend on the Auto Road. One cloud can stop traffic, as can one unskilled driver.

There is an option to make the trip in one of their vans (which are called "stages" for historical reasons). The stages are driven by professionals who are also trained to deal with motorists' problems. You "catch the next stage." There are no reservations or schedule.

The roundtrip toll is \$11 plus \$7 per person (i.e. \$25 for two people in a car). Stage trips cost \$24 per person.

It is a 3-hour drive from the base of the Auto Road to the Manchester, New Hampshire airport. Doing everything on the same day is certainly possible. However, you should consider carefully the implications of planning a trip up the Auto Road on the same day you need to catch a plane out of Manchester.

2. THE COG RAILWAY

It is a 10-minute drive from the Hotel to the base of the Cog Railway. Trains depart hourly and the trip takes just over an hour each way. The minimum stay at the summit is 30 minutes.

Although nothing is independent of the weather, the Cog Railway is more reliable than the Auto Road, since it can operate in zero visibility.

The Cog Railway is a tourist attraction that has not changed much since 1869. A ton of coal and a ton of water are consumed on each trip. The trip is loud, smoky, and straight up! Do not wear your best clothes, and bring your ear plugs. Your brain will be rattled when you reach the top.

The Cog Railway fare is \$57 round trip. One-way tickets (down) are available for \$35.

The drive from the Cog Railway base station to Manchester airport takes 2 hours and 15 minutes.

3. SUMMARY

Both methods of reaching the summit are a lot of fun. Both methods are meant for tourists, and both methods have museums, gift shops, overpriced food, etc. Tourists are invited to "make a day of it." Delays on the Auto Road are opportunities to take in the spectacular views. The Cog Railway is a throwback to a less-hurried time.

The point is this: if you are on a tight schedule, you will be forced to skip a lot of truly enjoyable experiences, and you may not make your next appointment.

Traveling to the summit is enormous fun, but it cannot be compared with normal travel. Nobody routinely "commutes" to the top of the mountain.

Finally: it will be colder than you expect on top. Bring a winter jacket!