



The Flyin' Solo VanLife on the Highways and Byways of North America

RICK'S ROADS

Ride Along and Enjoy the People, Places, and Who Knows What



BLOG POST: 2024.07.29
The Mount Washington Cog Railway (Take 2)



This was not some Bucket List thing. The first time it ever crossed my mind was a couple of months ago when I was planning out the Harvest Hosts and Boondockers Welcome overnights for the May-June tour across NY-VT-NH and ME to start RM24. Needing a stayover somewhere between East Haven VT (Dirt Church Brewery) and Bethel ME (Steam Mill Brewery), I clicked on the only non-farm icon I saw in north-central NH. I was surprised when the little window for Cog Railway opened up.

I thought about it for a second and said, “Nahhhh.” But when I could find no other options, and the right class of hotels did not seem to be around, I came back to it. As a Harvest Host, they expect some sort of patronage in exchange for your free night’s stay. In retrospect, I should have just bought some cheap trinkets in the gift shop,



because this turned out to be a whole lot of money for a whole lot of Not Much.

But I went for the train ticket, picking front-of-the-car window seat so I could take plenty of photos of the wide vistas on the way up the mountain. The cost was \$74, *plus* a \$15 fee for ... ????. Processing? I guess? At any rate, the total was \$89. I should have said fukkit, but I thought maybe it might be a cool New England thing to have on my “Done That” resume.



Marshfield Station (above) is the base station of the Cog Railway. It is at the end of a six-mile-long road from the nearest numbered highway, US-302, which runs right through the small town of Breton Woods.

This depot is due west of the summit of Mount Washington, the tallest U.S. peak east of the Mississippi River. The blurb on the Harvest Host reservation page warns the reader that this is the wrong side of the mountain to be on, and that this station gets the “world’s worst weather.”

I suspect a little hyperbole, but, sadly, only a little. You don’t put a scare-‘em-away line like that in your ad unless you are really, really sick of people angrily demanding rain checks or refunds because *You never told us it would suck this bad!*

And when I showed up around sundown on Memorial Day on the eve of my train ride reservation, the weather was living up to its billing.



Final weekend of May is the unofficial Beginning Of Summer in New England, but this felt more like early Spring. Nighttime temps dropped into the high-40’s and a steady 25 MPH wind, with gusts about 60, and bursts of horizontal rain buffeted and splatted Blue Maxx all night. All I could hope was that all that wind would blow that gray shroud off the mountain by morning.

No such dice, though. Things were every bit as gray. No rain, and the wind had laid down a good bit, but if there was a mountain behind that train station, I didn't see it.

I drove up to the depot, parked, and went in to try to finagle myself some kind of rain check. True, it was not raining down here, but it did not look like it would be at all dry up there. Still, mindful of my experience at Talkeetna AK -- where the airport was socked in, but the peaks of Denali and the Alaska Range were resplendent in dazzling sun shine (photo below) -- I figured it was worth an ask.



As I approached the counter, I said to the woman, "I have a reservation for today --", and she immediately replied, "Would you like to still go, or do you want the credit for another day?" Well, go ahead and read my mind, why doncha?

"Is it clear above the clouds at the summit?"

"The summit is not above the clouds today."

"The credit will be fine then, thanks." And she cheerfully printed out a ticket, handed it to me, and explained that it would be good any day and never expire.

So, I departed and went and did other stuff (see June-July blog posts). In fact, I already told you all that stuff in the post entitled, "20240.05.24 Host-Hopping the Northeast." No wonder it sounded familiar!

Well, *now*, on July 28th, I drove up from Massachusetts to take a second stab at doing this Cog Train thing.

The stay the night before involved the exact same parking spot, but, thankfully, a lot less wind. There was no rain, but the same gray shroud engulfed the mountain. A couple of tiny, teasing breaks appeared now and then, enough to give me hope for the morning.

But, alas, the day dawned overcast again. This time, the ticket window lady offered no hint that anything but All Systems Go would be the theme of the day. It was just as well; it was today or never as far as I was concerned.

Somehow, I still had to pay \$19 on top of the credit coupon, making the overall cost of this adventure more than \$100 (plus gas for the round-trip second journey). A few choice long-vista photos from the summit would soften that blow considerably.



The outdoor waiting area, behind the depot, had several picnic tables and a few classic antique contraptions that must have been cutting edge cog-style transportation stuff back in the day.

The trains we would actually be riding were lined up and ready to go too. The engines were in back, so the passenger car would get pushed up the track by the engine. I guess this was safer, since there was no way

that the passenger car could uncouple and go plummeting down the mountain.



My co-passengers and I were the Platform B people: the banana yellow car being shoved by the orange engine that had the name Kenison painted on the side. Each car could carry about 50 passengers. I had been sure to reserve a window seat near the front of the car (3rd row, left). The word in the street was that the people on the left side got better views.

All staff had been coy about weather and visibility and the like, emphasizing that the weather around here was so “changeable.” The suggestion, of course, was: *It might look crappy now, but it might turn out great! Seen it happen! Never know!*

So, we all rolled the dice and climbed aboard.

It was a pretty cool train car, I have to say. It was not new, but it was well kept. The seats were rows of flat, narrow wooden planks. When you sat down, it felt like you were going to slide right off the front; the angle seemed all wrong.



But the angle was in anticipation of the grade – as much as 38%! -- that we were about to ascend. In all, the 5.5-mile ride to the summit would involve a 3588’ elevation gain. [The summit is 6288’, with Marshfield Station at 2700’, as it says on the rock, page 1.]



We had a narrator for our ride. His name was Doug (I did not see Limu anywhere). He was an amiable chap, as you’d have to be in that job, and he filled us in on various tidbits and trivia as we slowly clunked along on our 45-minute ascension. He did express the hope that skies would be clearer at the summit, but he couldn’t quite muster the conviction to make us believe it.

The air at the depot had been clear enough, but it did not take long for us to climb up into the clouds ... and stay there. The temperature fell rapidly and the white wisps of moisture could be seen streaming through the open windows of the train car. The car

would have been stuffy as all get-out if we had closed those windows, though, so we all just zipped up our jackets and tried to enjoy it.

When we reached the top, we were told that we had an hour before our train would return to bring us back down. There is a small museum up there, as well and a cafeteria and gift shop.

On a nice day, we all would have been strolling around the wide, open, rocky summit, oohing and ahhhhing over the gorgeous views of northern New England, but on this day, the visibility was I dunno, a 100 yards? I could make out shapes and moving people at about 200 yards, *maybe*, but to recognize somebody beyond 100, I don't think so.



I stayed outside for a little while, immersing myself in the misty misery. I went to the rock cairn at the actual summit and had some guy snap my photo, just to prove that, yes, I was dumb enough to do this.

The official temperature was 54.6°, according to weather station thermometer, and the wind was a steady 23 MPH (with gusts of to 36). It felt freaking *colllld*. The wind chill had to be near freezing. (The official visibility was, in fact, 1/16th of a mile, almost exactly 100 yards. Good guess, eh?)



I got a chuckle over that and sent a text to my besties Brian and Jan in Cape Coral (FL), who were enduring a 104° heat index day down there. They are former New Hampshire farm people, so I knew they'd relate.

This was not my first time on this summit. I had driven up on the auto road once in the 70's, and I had hiked up with some friends in the 80's. Both times were in mid-summer and the view from up here was long and clear and outstanding.

The hike was a two-day affair, with tent-camping near the summit on the first night. We

descended by a different route, clambering down the steep trail through the big bowl of Tuckerman Ravine.

Though it was the middle of July, the bowl was so deep that there was still snow in it. The picture →→ (from Google) shows the bowl, but when we were there, there much more snow. It clung to the rocks higher up, and extended down about as far as the trail of rubble did. So, maybe 200 yards or so.



It was crap snow, more like tiny chunks of sopping wet slush, but it was “snow enough”. And, in New England, if there is snow, there will be skiers.

Sure enough, two people – who did not even seem to be together – had hiked a couple of miles up here, carrying skis, poles and boots – got the thrill of a 30-second slow-ass slide on slush, took off the skis and trudged back up to the top of the snow and slid on down again. I don’t know how many times they did it, but however many it was, it was too many. It’s *July*, guys, go *water-skiing*!!

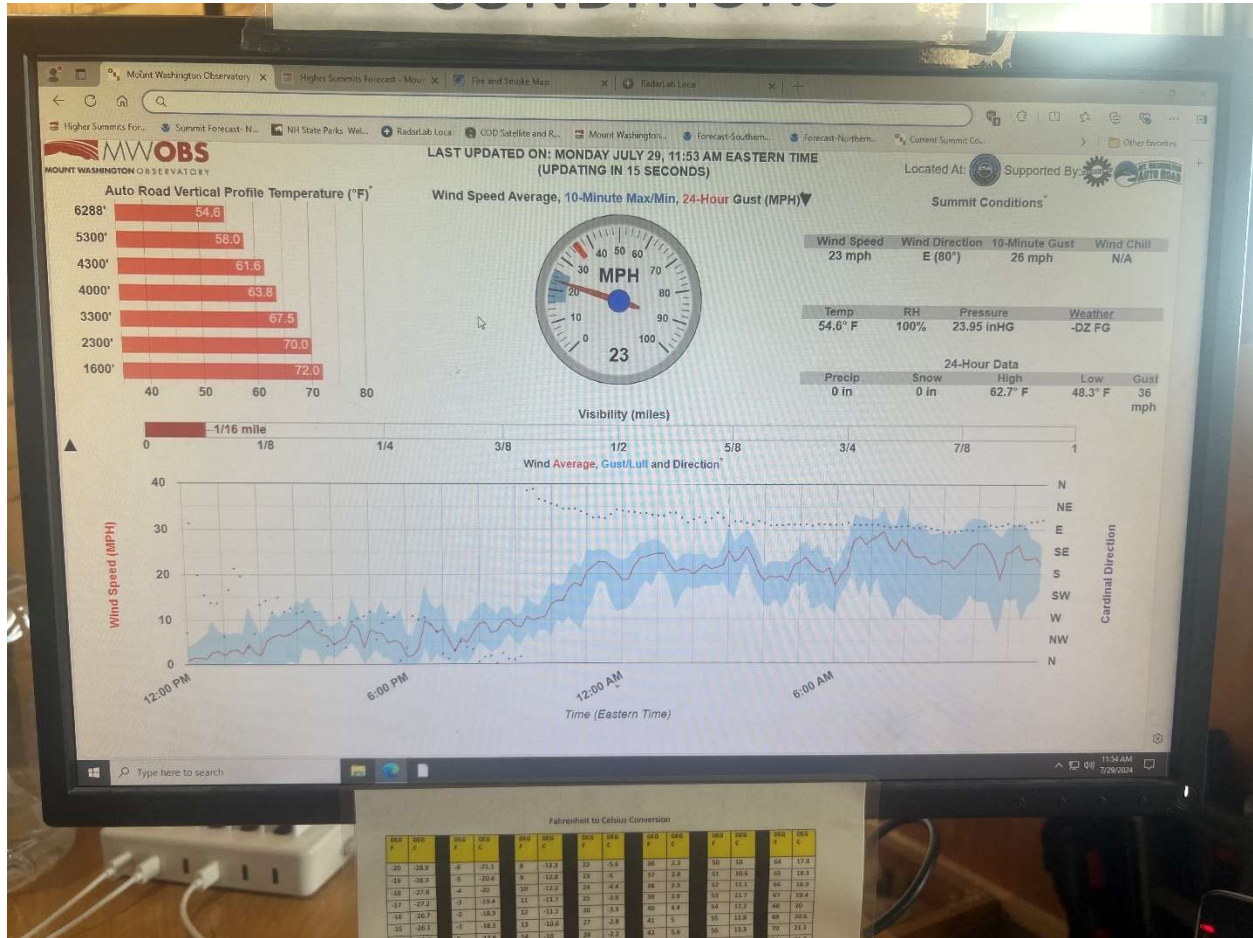


Anyway, back to the Cog Train Episode.

It was too cold to stay outside for long – especially in shorts. So, I sought warm shelter in the museum. That lasted about 10 minutes.

The only thing I found interesting was the wind gauge that had recorded the highest gust ever – 231 MPH on April 12, 1934 – before being blown right off the building. That record still stands for the Northern and Western Hemispheres, but a gust of 253 MPH hit Barrow Island in Australia in 1996 to steal World Record status from this mountain.

But the one-room museum was uncomfortably crowded, so quickly abandoned my pursuit of knowledge and went into the eating area. I picked a seat near the window and ate the sandwich I had smuggled up in my bag. There was nothing else to do up here. The place was full of people hiding from the elements and eagerly waiting to be taken back down.



Finally, our Platform B train arrived. It was the not same one we had trekked up in, and the personnel was different. There had probably been a midday shift change. More than a couple of rides up and down this hill at the breakneck speed of 7 MPH would be too much to handle for most people.

Also different was the orientation of the seats. The rows were in exactly the same places, but they were facing the other way.

As we had dismounted earlier, I was the last one off. I wanted to get a photo of the empty car. As the passengers disembarked, the third train employee was following the end of the line, flipping the seats as he went. Each flips quickly, with what was my seatback becoming the seat itself for the downbound traveler (and my seat becoming his/her seatback). Quite clever, really. That way the trains never have to turn around.



The ascent, at least, was new, and so were the facts and yarns along the way. The descent, however, was just long and boring. Our new narrator (Mark, I think) tried to come up with new stuff, but we were an unresponsive group, despite his efforts, so after a few attempts, he just spilled out some odd tidbits and shrugged us off as not giving a shit. I thought some of it was mildly interesting, like his description of the Fisher Cat and its howl, but it didn't bother me when he clammed up either.

One thing that I had not realized on the way up, was that the engine and the passenger car were not attached. On the descent, the engine was in front of us (so between us a free-fall), whereas it was behind us going up (also between us and free-fall). The passenger car simply



rested against the front of the engine car as it pushed us upward, or slowly backed downward.

Each narrator was officially the Brakeman. They both professed that the cog system was absolutely 100% safe, leaving them without a whole lot to do. At least, I hoped they would have nothing to do.

So, we got back to the depot. It was significantly warmer down here. Like jacket and sweatshirt off, T-shirt is plenty. It was still overcast, though. That aspect did not change.

Mark had mentioned that there was a point of interest a few miles down the exit road, where the Ammonoosuc River ran every close to the roadway. There was a small turnout there, which I had noticed on the ride in. He said that we should check it out, and that sometimes local wildlife could be seen there.

So, I pulled over when I saw the twenty or so cars parked on both shoulders. It was very short stroll to the fence and info board. And it was immediately obvious that it was a different kind of wildlife than I had thought.



This was, officially, Upper Ammonoosuc Falls, where the river plunges into a narrow gorge, creating several deep pools among the sheer cliffs before leveling off again. It is a classic jumping site. The level area at the bottom is a dirt/rocks beach with a flat walk-in to the water, but a 100-yard walk put you on top of your choice of cliffs with a free plunge of your own into the chilly flow.

Dozens of young'uns were showing off their courage and skills. Some went a bit timidly from the medium rocks across the river, while others eagerly sought out the highest points on this side.

The pair who had sat behind me on the train ride – a



spry old coot (Walter) from New York and his long-haired, 14-year-old grandson (Jake) – were surprisingly all over this. When he recognized me, Walter proudly bragged that he brought Jake here to be the **sixth** generation of his family to jump the cliffs here. Walter himself was not jumping, but he zealously egged Jake on.

Jake had seemed like a quiet dude who might well have been stoned out of his head and who never took his face out of his damn phone. He certainly looked at it that device for about 80% of the train ride – not that I fully blame him, with nothing to see out the window but the inside of a cloud.

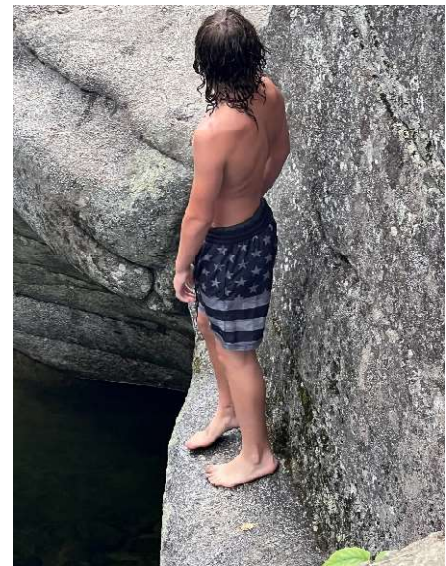
But Jake was not going to chicken out in front of grandpa. This was what he had come for, not the dumb train ride. He peeled off his shirt and climbed

to the medium rocks. He peered down to make sure where the rocks were, and a kid his age shouted over to coach him, “Just aim for the blackest part!”

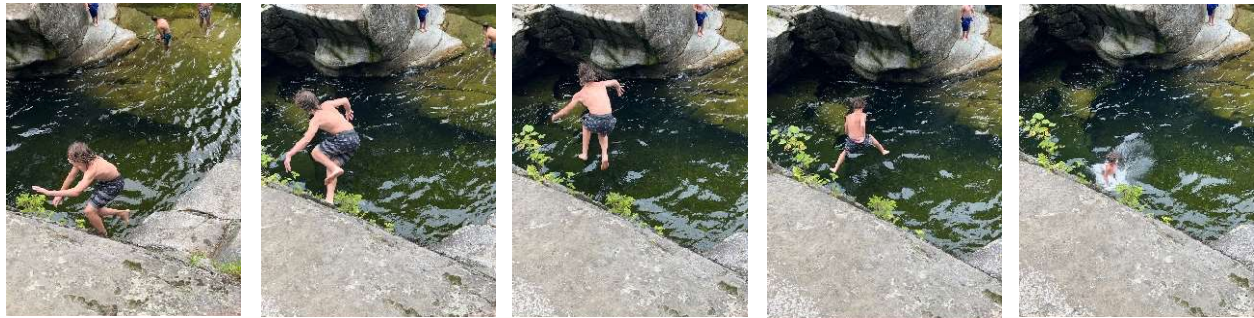
Jake nodded but still looked a tad daunted. Walter was all “Come on, jump!” Finally, he did, made a big splash, and came up gasping from the cold water.

But the exhilaration of it had stoked his fire. He eagerly climbed out and clambered a little higher. Walter called to him, “Go all the way up!” but Jake had a better plan.

He clambered across that primary rock, and squirmed himself onto a narrow ledge, only about a foot wide and 20 feet long. There, the ledge widened out a couple of feet but ended at a sheer wall.

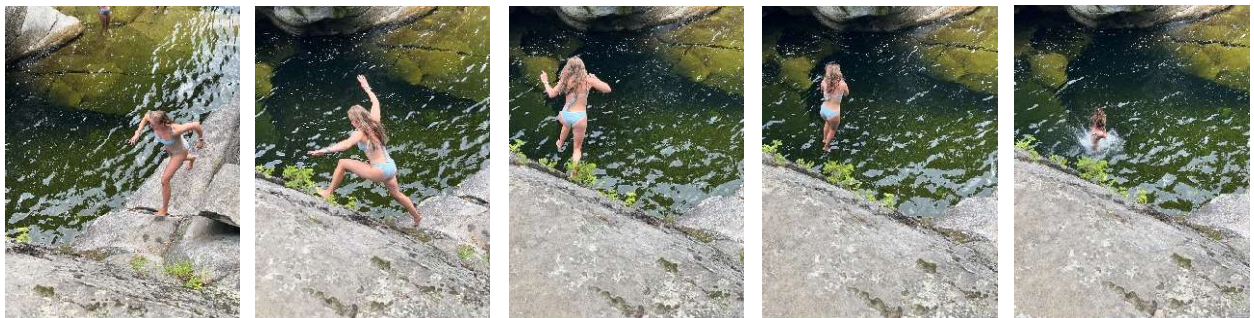


Walter looked puzzled. So did quite a few of the other kids who were watching. Jake looked *inspired*. With a mischievous grin, he turned and ran along the ledge, took a high running stride up onto the sheer wall, and used that as his launching pad up and out. It was brilliant! His dive bullseyed right into the perfect landing spot, and he emerged to loud cheers and huzzahs.



Then, *everybody* had to try it. Well, not everybody. Quite a few waved it off, openly admitting that Jake had more moxie than they did. Walter was beaming with pride.

Then a *girl* did the Ledge Leap. All the jumper boys were like, *Oh shittt, a girrrrr! is gonna show us up???* And she nailed it first try.



I did not think of it at the time, but I should have brought Little Bird out there and got some drone shots of them all jumping. From directly above, from halfway down, or a moving shot following them as they plummeted. Damn, I should have done that.



Oh well, maybe next time. Maybe the sun might even be out.

I drove down to the entrance of Railway Road and had lunch beside the big display.

From there it was back to Portland (ME) for another thrilling Sea Dogs game, and another delicious Sea Dog Biscuit.



