

THE WHITE MOUNTAINS AND BEYOND

Northern New Hampshire's Hidden Gems: A Driving Tour

You don't have to be a hiker to enjoy New Hampshire's majestic White Mountains. This region has so much to offer the curious traveler, from historic towns and cute gift shops to inns and eateries offering broad views of Mount Washington (New England's highest peak, at 6,288 feet), the Presidential Range, and the Franconia and Kinsman ridges, not to mention all the gorgeous surrounding valleys. Join us on this driving tour of approximately 100 miles through parts of Grafton and Coos counties (also known as the Great North Woods) in north-central New Hampshire.

To help plan your trip in advance, download a map and podcast of this tour at YankeeMagazine.com. You can make the drive in one day with few stops, but we recommend taking two or three days to complete the route so you'll have ample time for dallying along the way.

TOUR

Imagine Littleton, New Hampshire — a circa-1784 agricultural town turned grain- and lumber-mill hub when the railroad arrived — as our center point. The tour makes two loops on either side of Littleton to create a figure-eight-like pattern. If you want to be more leisurely on your drive and spend some time in the area, Littleton is a good choice as a base camp. (There's a Hampton Inn and a Best Western on the outskirts of town; Main Street lodging includes historic Thayers Inn and Beal House Inn, a yellow building with green trim on the west end.) You can then venture out to the northeast one day and to the south and southwest the next day. Otherwise, for a more rural setting, pick a nearby favorite lodging, such as the Adair Country Inn in Bethlehem or one of the many options in Sugar Hill.

FRANCONIA NOTCH

Most travelers come and go to and from Littleton by driving through Franconia Notch on Interstate 93/U.S. 3. Few drives in New England are more dramatic than this sinuous squeeze past craggy cliffs. Be sure to make time in your itinerary for a few hours at Flume Gorge, the Basin (a collection of glacial potholes), and Cannon Mountain. This mountain pass is also the access point for trails to the high peaks of Mounts Lafayette, Lincoln, and Liberty on the east side of the Notch, as well as stately Kinsman Mountain to the southwest.

While at the Cannon Mountain base, take a five-minute ride on the Cannon Mountain Aerial Tramway to the 4,200-foot summit. In 1938 the first passenger aerial tramway operated from this site, and you can stand inside it at the New England Ski Museum next door. Also, learn about the Old Man of the Mountain, a craggy profile that was a natural occurrence in the rock formations overlooking Profile Lake (once called the Old Man's Washbowl) until the rock crumbled in 2003.

LITTLETON

As you continue north, the reflection of Cannon Mountain fills your rear-view mirror. Take exit 41 (U.S. Route 302/State Routes 10, 18, and 116), merging right with Cottage Street (also called Cottage Road on some maps), to get to our starting point in downtown Littleton. From its diner to bistro-style fine dining, movie theater to restored gristmill, Littleton today is a lovely example of a reinvigorated center that has been designated

a “Great American Main Street” and “Best Small Town in America.”

Set your trip meter to zero at the information booth on Main Street [1], just across the street from Thayers Inn and in front of the Community House. Parker’s Marketplace, with two of our favorite shops (Duck Soup and Elephant’s Trunk), is also across from the inn and next door to the library.

Make time to visit the Littleton Public Library, home to nearly three dozen White Mountains paintings. Most of the art is by well-known landscape artist Edward Hill; it’s said to be the largest collection of his work in one place.

In front of the library is a statue of Pollyanna, a tribute to the character’s author, Eleanor H. Porter, who grew up here. Both the library and the statue are featured sites on the Chamber of Commerce’s self-guided walking tour. If you’re going to spend the day in Littleton, pick up the brochure to learn more about the rich history of this town.

Then head east on Main Street, following Route 116 toward Whitefield. In about a mile, on the right-hand side, is Apthorp Commons Café and Bakery, a favorite place for breakfast or lunch.

Not quite 4 miles outside town, you’ll find a sign that reads “Moose Crossing.” It’s a good reminder to drive with caution, especially early in the morning and at dusk. If you do have the chance to see moose, deer, foxes, bears, raccoons, wild turkeys, or other native wildlife, please stay in your car, as they can be unpredictable.

WHITEFIELD

As the road descends into Whitefield, about 10 miles past Littleton, you’ll get a glimpse of the yellow Mountain View Grand Resort & Spa, set on a ridge on the opposite side of town, with the northern Presidential mountains in the background. At 10.8 miles, bear left to follow State Routes 116 and 142 into Whitefield center.

Whitefield is one of the few villages in the area that’s built around a town green. Incorporated in 1804, the town’s historic buildings frame King’s Square [2] with its white gazebo, providing a quaintness that may compel you to stop, perhaps for the Black Bear Bistro, The Old Mill Studio art gallery, or Barbara’s Boutique.

Go straight through the intersection with the yellow blinking light, following U.S. Route 3 up the hill. As you head north out of town, look for the Weathervane Theater [3] on your left, 2 miles past King’s Square. This red-barn theater is home to a professional summer stock company that presents musicals and comedies from early July through late August. Look for a schedule at weathervanetheatre.org or call 603-837-9322.

Also, just across the road on the right, is the drive to the Mountain View [4], the area’s grand hotel, which dates to 1865 and reached its present considerable size in 1911. This yellow beauty combines the traditions of an old-time resort with the luxuries modern travelers expect. Set on 1,700 acres, the recently renovated property includes a nine-hole golf course, stables, tennis courts, an outdoor pool, and a children’s play area. Among the indoor amenities are a pool, a spa, a billiard room, and restaurants.

LANCASTER

Continue north on Route 3 from Whitefield to the John Wingate Weeks State Historic Site [5], 4 miles past the Mountain View Grand. On the left side of the highway is a parking area, if you prefer to walk; otherwise, turn right to access the 1.5-mile drive to the summit of Mount Prospect (also called Prospect Mountain, 1,952 feet). From a stone fire tower here you’ll get stunning panoramic views of the Kilkenny, Presidential, Franconia, and Kinsman ranges, as well as Vermont’s Green Mountains.

A couple of miles farther along is the town center of Lancaster, first settled as a land grant in 1763, just north of the junction of U.S. Routes 3 and 2. Stay to the left to visit Main Street [6]. Turn left off Main onto Park

Street for the Great North Woods Welcome Center. This is a great place to park if you want to take some time to stretch your legs, learn more about the area, quench your thirst, or spend a few minutes window-shopping.

Now turn around and head south out of town again. At the Route 2/3 junction, reset your trip meter to zero and bear left to follow Route 2 southeast. At 1.9 miles past Lancaster, turn left to visit Christie's Maple Farm [7]. Load your car with bottles of maple syrup, maple candy, and maple-themed items from the farmhouse shop. It's the perfect place to find gifts for friends and family back home. Plus, there are picturesque views of the Kilkenny Range to the northeast and, on the eastern horizon, the Presidentials.

JEFFERSON

This pastoral town with stunning views of the White Mountains was first granted in 1765 and named "Jefferson" in 1796. At its height as a tourist town, it had more than 30 hotels and four railroad depots to accommodate visitors. Today, many of the tourists are families looking for the thrill of a roller coaster. If you have kids along, you'll want to stop at Santa's Village [8], an amusement park with 17 rides, 4 miles down the road. The top of the Ferris wheel is a great place to catch a view of Mount Washington and the Presidential Range. Don't overlook the neat, tidy grounds and the beauty and variety of the gardens on your way to meet the Village's red-suited resident.

At 7.0 miles, look for a right-hand turn onto Route 115A south. This part of the drive traverses fertile farmlands and is as close as we'll get to the Presidential mountains. Sam Cushing and Peter Guest find it an ideal location for their fine furniture factory. You can visit their Cherry Pond Designs showroom [9], housed in a red farmhouse on a curve, on the right-hand side of the road at 10.4 miles.

When you reach the junction with Route 115 south, turn right. Once again, reset your trip meter to zero. Around the corner is Pondicherry Wildlife Refuge [10], where you can take in the picturesque landscape and look for songbirds and waterfowl. In 2.2 miles, turn right, at the sign for the airport, onto Hazen Road. In 1.5 miles, on the right, is a small bridge with wooden rails. Turn here and cross the bridge to the parking area. A 1.5-mile walk starts off following an abandoned railroad bed and leads to a viewing platform at Cherry Pond.

Or, stay with the road-trip pace by driving on to the Route 115 scenic viewpoint [11], which provides an overview of the terrain through which you've just driven: Instead of making the turn to the refuge, continue on Route 115 just past the junction with Hazen Road. You'll find a pull-off on the right. Sited straight across the valley are the buildings of the Mountain View Grand; to the left, the mountains of Vermont; slightly to the right, the Kilkennys; and, just below, the bright-blue waters of Cherry Pond, within the bounds of the 43,000-acre refuge.

Back on the road (Route 115 south), you're skirting the northwestern edge of White Mountain National Forest. If you want a vigorous hike without the crowds, check out Cherry Mountain Trail (parking area on the left, 4.7 miles past the Route 115A/115 junction).

TWIN MOUNTAIN

Route 115 dead-ends at U.S. Route 3; just south of here is the junction of U.S. Routes 3 and 302. To get there, turn left to follow Route 3 south to Twin Mountain, a village within the town of Carroll that was chartered in 1772. This is the home of Foster's Crossroads [12], a true northern New Hampshire version of the general store and a well-known landmark and gateway to the White Mountains. The store has old board floors, and its shelves are packed with hardware, groceries, and everything else you need for camping. To find it, travel straight through the stoplight intersection and then turn right in 0.2 mile for the store's parking lot.

BETHLEHEM

Back at the light, set your trip meter to zero and follow Route 302 west toward Bethlehem center. In 4.2 miles, look for Bethlehem Flower Farm [13], with its pink-painted barn, on the right. This farm has been growing and selling more than 150 varieties of daylilies for 21 years now. Owner Michelle Schafer insists that if the daylilies can

survive the harsh conditions of the local climate, they can survive being shipped to your home and planted in your garden there. Stop to enjoy the gardens and order a few of the stunning pink, purple, yellow, and orange blooms.

In 8.2 miles past Twin Mountain you'll come to the eastern end of Bethlehem's Main Street [14]. Incorporated in 1799, the town grew up in the late 1800s as city folk came looking for an antidote to hay fever; they found it here in the crisp mountain air. More than half of the town's acreage lies within the National Forest, and today its popularity as a summer destination continues. The compact downtown caters to residents and visitors who want to linger, whether at a table (Cold Mountain Café) or browsing antiques or arts-and-crafts (at wrenOVATION). The Colonial Theater, which offers independent films and live entertainment, is also a local favorite. See what's playing at bethlehemcolonial.org or call 603-869-3422.

Heading out, 2.3 miles past downtown on the left-hand side of the road, walk the trails at The Rocks Estate [15], built in the 1880s as a summer retreat for John Glessner, a successful Chicago businessman. Today the estate is a Christmas-tree farm and North Country headquarters for the Society of the Protection of New Hampshire Forests. Although the main estate buildings were torn down long ago, many outbuildings — including a large carriage house — and a formal garden remain. These, along with the stunning views, give you a sense of the grandeur of this gentleman's farm.

Just ahead is Interstate 93, where our tour divides. To return to Littleton, stay to the right, following the I-93 north on-ramp. If you're staying at the Adair Country Inn, turn right on Guider Lane, 0.1 mile before the interstate. If you're lodging in Franconia or Sugar Hill for the night, take I-93 south.

LITTLETON

Back in Littleton [1], there are many good choices for dining and shopping. If you haven't already discovered all the offerings along Main Street, make some time to explore. Some of our favorite eateries here are Tim-Bir Alley, Bailiwick's, Miller's Café and Bakery (with a riverside deck), and the Littleton Diner (with pancakes made of locally milled flour, served all day). The latter is a favorite with children, as are the circa-1798 water-powered Littleton Grist Mill (restored, but not working), with its large cogs that once turned the machinery; first-run movies at Jax Jr. Cinemas; and Chutters, which offers 600-plus types of candy. Have your credit card handy when browsing Bella Funk Boutique, Northern Lights Music, Sterling Works, Village Book Store, the League of New Hampshire Craftsmen gallery, and Lahout's.

When you're ready to continue the tour around the second loop, head south on Cottage Street (Routes 18 and 116). (If you've just exited off I-93 northbound, make an immediate left at the end of the off-ramp.) Continue straight under the I-93 overpass. At this point, set your trip meter to zero. Start up the hill and follow the curve to the left. At 0.5 mile, a handful of narrow road signs mark the boundary with the town of Bethlehem.

Now you're on Gilmanton Hill Road. This narrow paved byway, without markings and roughly patched in places, is typical of the state's country roads. At the intersection, go straight. The drive continues through a beautiful hardwood forest, with glimpses of Cannon Mountain's summit, and opens up a bit, with meadows on both sides of the road, at a white New England farmhouse with red barns and stone walls.

The road comes to a stop sign a few tenths of a mile before the 3.0-mile mark. Take this slight right, which merges back with Routes 18 and 116, toward Franconia.

FRANCONIA

In a mile, views of Kinsman Ridge command the horizon; it's landscapes like this that inspire well-known photographer Chuck Theodore. To visit his gallery [16], make a right-hand turn 3.8 miles past Littleton down Streeter Pond Road (0.3 mile on right).

Back on Routes 18 and 116, it's about another mile from here to Franconia, settled in 1772; for now, skip this

workaday village, which claims world-class skier Bode Miller as its son. Instead, set your trip meter to zero, turn right onto Route 117 (4.7 miles past Littleton), crossing the Gale River, and wend your way west toward Sugar Hill, a hilltop town named for its abundance of sugar maples. It's the youngest town in the state (declaring independence from Lisbon in 1962).

SUGAR HILL

Here a handful of inns dot the landscape. Just a few tenths of a mile up the hill is the circa-1789 Sugar Hill Inn. When Bette Davis used to stay here, she always had the room overlooking the mountains and the fields of lupine (Sugar Hill is home to an annual lupine festival each June). Innkeepers Steve Allen and Theresa Spear have recently redecorated the main floor of the inn, which offers intimate gathering spaces, including a front parlor, a library complete with tour books and area maps, a bar, and the inn's dining room.

Along Route 117, at 0.9 mile past the junction with Routes 18 and 116, the end of Lovers Lane comes in on the right, featuring a historical marker commemorating the first ski school in America [17].

Start the day with breakfast at Polly's Pancake Parlor [18], another half-mile along Route 117 on the right. Polly's is a must for its no-sugar pancakes topped with pure maple syrup. The folks here grind their own grains for six different pancake mixes, and all the baking is done on the premises. They've also been charting peak foliage for more than 40 years (you can buy a copy of the records).

Turn left in another 0.7 mile onto Sunset Hill Road [19] — views just don't get any better than those you'll find here. Just before you reach the Sunset Hill House, a pull-off on the left features a small viewing platform with a horizon map noting the names of all the peaks. At the end of the drive is the inn — with 29 rooms, it's the largest lodging establishment in town. It's also home to the oldest nine-hole golf course in the state. From its ridgetop location, you can see the Green Mountains to the west and the Whites to the east. As you return to Route 117, stop at the Sugar Hill Sampler, which houses a museum with family artifacts, heirlooms, photos, tools, and crafts, and a gift shop featuring miniatures, pottery, jams, candy, quilts, and antiques.

Continue west on Route 117. The other end of Lovers Lane enters from the right, 0.4 mile past Sunset Hill Road, and is a pleasant extension to the drive if you want to double-back to the east.

The Hilltop Inn, on the right, offers spectacular mountain views, handmade quilts, and a delicious buffet breakfast prepared by innkeepers Mike and Meri Hern. Just after the inn is the village center, with fire department, post office, and Harman's Cheese & Country Store.

About 1 mile past Sunset Hill Road, bear right to continue following Route 117 west. In a little over 0.5 mile, look for Center District Road on the right. If you're interested in small craft businesses, turn here to visit P.C. Anderson Handmade Furniture (0.5 mile on left) [20]. Peter Anderson, a Brit by birth, makes traditional pieces with modern updates, such as a desk with sliding top that lets you stash your laptop or computer keyboard.

Route 117 has almost no shoulder as it snakes alongside Salmon Hole Brook, through mixed hardwood and white-pine stands, down toward the intersection with Routes 302 west and 10 south and the Ammonoosuc River.

LISBON

At the junction, set your trip meter to zero and turn left on Routes 302 and 10 toward Lisbon center. Now the road is much more open, with fields on either side; it feels like a valley, as befits a river like the Ammonoosuc. On the far side of the river, perched up on the high bank, you can see the grand white-clapboard building of the Ammonoosuc Inn. The inn, on Bishop Road, is a local favorite for its candlelit dining room and casual pub.

At 2.3 miles past the turn onto Routes 302 and 10 is the next town center [21] en route, with its globed lamp-

post in the center of the road. Lisbon was settled in 1763. As you pass through, note the three brick blocks (and the town hall and public library on the opposite side), evidence of a one-time bustling mill and factory town with two railroad depots.

BATH

Leaving the center of Lisbon, set your trip meter to zero as you head south along Routes 302 and 10 toward the town of Bath, which was incorporated in 1760. From the north, you first arrive at Upper Bath Village [22], a remarkable collection of Federal-style brick homes, 4.2 miles past Lisbon center. The stately architecture speaks to the wealth of the residents in the 1800s.

Ahead in another 1.5 miles is Bath's village center [23]. Stop to visit the circa-1824 Brick Store, which claims to be America's oldest continuously operated general store. Don't worry whether that's true — just enjoy strolling the wooden floorboards that sigh from 180 years of use. Try some of the homemade fudge, or go next door for ice cream "At the Hop," a 1950s-style parlor with black-and-white checkerboard flooring. The walls are decorated with records, movie bills, and concert posters, including some rare and valuable Beatles memorabilia.

Just behind The Brick Store is the longest covered bridge in New Hampshire, and one of the oldest in America, built in 1832. Drive across the one-lane bridge [24], which arches over the Ammonoosuc River, to a small picnic area at the junction of West Bath Road and Railroad Street. Park here to walk along River Road a few paces for a nice view of the falls.

You'll find another covered bridge south of town on Route 112 as you head toward Easton. To get there, turn left off Routes 302 and 10, 1.3 miles past Bath village center. The road parallels water as it heads back toward the mountains. In another 2.1 miles, take the left-hand turn for Porter Road and the circa-1849 Swiftwater Bridge [25], which crosses the Wild Ammonoosuc River at a place where logs once frequently floated downstream to the sawmills. Go through the bridge, return to our loop, now heading east on Route 112, and zero your trip meter again.

EASTON

At 4.3 miles, there's a sign welcoming you to White Mountain National Forest, which encompasses nearly 800,000 acres. Through this part of the drive you'll get a sense of the wilderness that the Forest protects, providing critical habitat for wildlife and ample recreation opportunities such as hiking, biking, and fishing for us.

At 7.5 miles, turn left onto Route 116, heading north to cut through Easton on your way toward Franconia. Note the marshy area, which is good beaver habitat, on the left just after the turn. The route gains elevation as it follows some tight curves through the woods, until it opens onto meadows and a stunning view of Kinsman Ridge off to the right, at 10.9 miles. Easton town hall [26], on the left at 12.4 miles, serves as the political center for a community that was formed in 1867 after breaking away from the neighboring town of Landaff.

FRANCONIA

From the south, you know you're approaching the village of Franconia when you pass, on the right, what looks like a mown field but is actually an airstrip for the Franconia Soaring Center/Glider Port [27] (at 16.3 miles). Take a glider ride to enjoy the scenery, or, for the less adventurous, sit on the porch of the Franconia Inn, an 1886 New England Colonial on 117 acres, on the left.

This side of Franconia is also home to The Frost Place [28], a farm where Robert Frost and his family lived from 1915 to 1920, and now a literary center. To visit, turn left at 17.8 miles onto Bickford Hill Road. Cross the bridge of metal grating over the Ham Branch of the Gale River. Stay to the left at the "Y," as the small "Frost Place" wooden sign points. It's worth driving up here if only to sit on the porch and meditate on what our most beloved poet must have felt as he took in this grand view each day. Park in the dirt lot on the right-hand side

0.3 mile up the road, just before the farmhouse. If you come in early July, plan to be here for the annual celebration, Frost Day.

Return to Route 116 and continue 1 mile north. The town of Franconia is home to Garnet Hill, a catalogue company specializing in high-end linens. (You'll find some deals at the firsts and seconds store.) To get there, turn left onto Main Street at the Route 18 junction, with the yellow blinking light. It's only 0.1 mile on the right to the outlet, which is in the same building as Wendle's deli and café.

In another 0.3 or 0.4 mile along Routes 116 and 18 is a pull-off on the left. Look across the river to see the only stone iron furnace [29] still standing in New Hampshire.

This is the end of the loop, and the end of our tour. To return to Littleton, continue straight on Routes 116 and 18, or head back to the blinking-light intersection in Franconia to access I-93 north- and southbound. We hope you've enjoyed your drive and discovered a few favorite places of your own in this area of the White Mountains, north of the Notch.