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FALL 2024



AT THE TOP

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At The Top

Story by Casey Ryan Vock

Photography courtesy of
Whiteface Mountain/Olympic Regional Development Authority

At Whiteface Mountain, a seasonal road extends from Route 86 in Wilmington and rises more than 2,300 feet, offering locals and visitors a like a chance to take in the expanse of the Adirondacks. This is called the Whiteface Veterans' Memorial Highway — a curvaceous trek that offers unique and stunning glimpses of the park, especially during the fall season.

There's no settling the debate about how to best spend a day enjoying the Adirondacks and all the mountains have to offer. But after a ride along Whiteface Veterans' Memorial Highway and seeing what awaits at the top, most visitors would agree it to be an essential and inviting way to take in the expanse of the nation's largest park.

The seasonal mountain road extends from Route 86 in Wilmington and starts at an alpine-style toll booth, winding along five paved miles and rising more than 2,300 feet to find one of the most storied of the 46 Adirondack High Peaks — Whiteface Mountain.



It passes Lake Stevens, a gorgeous pond stocked with fish and surrounded by a walking trail, where visitors might get a look at some of the trees and possibly bird species found only in the Adirondacks and a few locales around the world.

The curvaceous highway eventually traverses both Whiteface and Esther mountains, and each sharp turn offers a unique and stunning glimpse of the park. Nine different outlooks entice travelers to stop and bask in the vastness, hued by bright wildflowers in the spring and summertime and turning foliage in the fall.

Assigned New York State Route 431 before it was even completed, the roadway cuts through ancient bedrock boulder on its climb to the park's fifth tallest point, ultimately making it accessible to just about anyone, not just adventurers.

"It's by far my favorite thing that we do as the Olympic Regional Development Authority," says Lauren Garfield, marketing and sales manager for Whiteface Mountain, which is operated by ORDA. "It's such a spectacular spot, and the idea really was to make it accessible to everyone."

The Whiteface Veterans' Memorial Highway was previously managed by the Department of Environmental Conservation, but in 1982, the road and structures were moved under ORDA in the wake of the 1980 Winter Olympics.

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With an elevation of 4,867 feet and charming nearby villages like Lake Placid and Saranac Lake, Whiteface is a favorite destination not only for the increasing number of hikers aiming to become 46ers, but more beginners than ever before, too. And with its vertical drop of 3,166 feet, the greatest in the United States east of the Rockies, Whiteface is on the bucket list of skiers from around the globe.

But Whiteface's distance from most other High Peaks gives it a unique perspective, and the summit's famed 360-degree views have long been appreciated by locals. Well before tourists were skiing down it, Whiteface was already the centerpiece of the Tri-Lakes area, and a highway leading up to it was first proposed by Saranac Lake businessman Marcellus Leonard as early as the late 1800s.

What was then a bold idea would take shape decades later as an ambitious, state-funded project requiring a careful planning phase and start-and-stop mountainside construction. Work began in September 1929 when then-New York State Governor Franklin Roosevelt was on hand to start the dig himself.

When he returned as president of the U.S. in September 1935, he cut the ribbon at a ceremony officially dedicating the highway to soldiers who died in World War I.

But Roosevelt — who'd been diagnosed with infantile paralysis, also known as polio, when he was 39 — noted the planned rest



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cabin at the end of the road was not yet built, nor was there any way for the elderly or handicapped to reach the pinnacle, which was still another 276 feet above.

Though it's unconfirmed, common sense would support the idea that the former governor and president — a champion for the disabled — encouraged the additions that would allow just about anyone to savor Whiteface's sweeping perspective on the rest of the Adirondacks.

Not long after its opening, native stone was harvested from the highway excavation and used to construct a marvelous two-story complex at the road's end, complete with parking space. Known as "Whiteface Castle," it was a grand sight upon its completion and still is to this day for all who arrive. Now, it houses the Castle gift shop as well as 4610' Café, serving up rustic mountain cuisine.

But in a truly remarkable feat of human ingenuity, engineers in 1938 also put the finishing touches on an elevator that operates in a shaft drilled deep inside Whiteface. To get to it, visitors make their way from Whiteface Castle down a 400-foot underground corridor for a ride up to "Summit House," the round hub located on the crest of the mountain.

Alternatively, an adjacent .2-mile-long staircase and handrail were also installed, and this option still helps travelers reach the summit by foot, and of course, see unforgettable views on the ascent — all without the need for a full-day hike or the use of the gondola during the winter season.

"I recommend doing one of each; hike one way, [and] ride the other way," Garfield says. The air temperature in the corridor and elevator shaft, she pointed out, is always kept just below 50 degrees, offering a cooldown for guests in the summertime or a potential warmup on cold spring or fall days.





“It’s a 28-story elevator right to the top, so it is pretty spectacular. [...] It was done in the 1930s, with no computers or anything. That they were able to drill down in and meet in the middle and have that work is amazing.”

In 1985, the greater significance of the Whiteface Veterans’ Memorial Highway was renewed when then-New York State Governor Mario Cuomo rededicated the road to the veterans of all wars. In 2008, the highway was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, another mark of distinction.

Over time, the highway, buildings and elevator have each undergone extensive restoration. Most recently, the elevator was replaced from 2017 to 2019 as part of a multi-million-dollar

rehabilitation that made it compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Whether they close the gap by way of the upgraded elevator or traditional steps, visitors will undoubtedly find themselves on the Whiteface summit in awe of the wide-open landscape and immense visibility. From the roomy lookout area, Lake Champlain and Vermont’s Green Mountains are easy to see on most days, and with the right conditions, Mount Washington in New Hampshire can be spotted, as well.

“On a really, really clear day, you can see the sun shining off the buildings in Montreal,” Garfield says. “Whiteface is offset from all the other peaks a little bit, so we have that amazing panoramic view.”

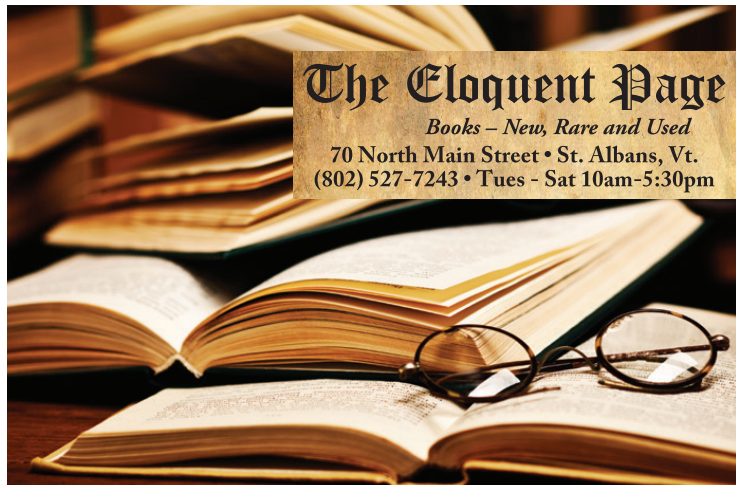


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The highway brings tens of thousands of guests to the summit each year, including groups and family events like wedding parties. Just as telling, many hikers who take on all 46 High Peaks choose Whiteface as their final hike, allowing them to meet with friends and family at the summit and to rejoice with those who couldn't be there otherwise.

Though its originator didn't live to see it, Leonard died at the age of 90, only months before Roosevelt's second visit; the local merchant's vision became a phenomenon, and it's helped so many to conveniently enjoy one of the most coveted spots in all the Adirondacks.

"I go up all the time," Garfield says, "and it's one of those places where it takes your breath away every time."

The Whiteface Veterans' Memorial Highway is now open daily through Oct. 14. Admission to the highway is included with the Lake Placid Legacy Sites Passport. For more information, visit whiteface.com.

Casey Ryan Vock is a writer and photographer who grew up west of the Adirondacks in Jefferson County; a SUNY Plattsburgh alum, he now lives in Maryland. He can be reached at caseyrvock@gmail.com.