

Baird: Turning over a new leaf via the road not taken

By Esther C. Baird/ The Baird Facts
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On Saturday we drove to Mount Washington for the day. The foliage reports for New Hampshire were great, and the summit of Mount Washington sounded rugged and adventurous, the perfect autumnal day trip.

Both I-93 and I-95 go to Mount Washington. All the advice said I-95 was best. I wasn't sure. I-95 peters out into Route 16, a pink road on my Rand McNally, and pink roads mean single lanes through quaint towns with farm stands. Pink means traffic lights and RVs. Still, Web research said it was the fastest route.

Sure enough, no sooner had we turned onto pink-road-16 than we found ourselves puttering behind a leaf-peeping RV. The joy could be in the journey, but not when our two-year-old daughter was in the back seat. It was pink-road torture. To add to the puttering agony, we had no sooner gotten around the RV in one of the rare, death defyingly short, passing zones, than there was a wail from the back.

Our daughter has been teething her two-year molars. I'd packed down-jackets for the mountain summit; I'd packed snacks and sandwiches for a small army; I'd even packed a bag of stimulating toys to hold her interest. But had I packed the Children's Tylenol? I had not. Not more than five minutes after our RV-passing victory, we pulled into a Rite-Aid. We tried not to groan as the RV caravan putt putted past.

The pink road wound into Conway, a charming town nestled in the mountains with boutiques and pubs inviting us in far from the madding crowd. But Conway also had one insane intersection where a traffic light and a stop sign conspire in a way that probably maddened the crowd in the first place. After 20 minutes creeping through Conway's fun-house equivalent of a traffic intersection, we were all a bit twitchy.

Finally, after more than three hours on the road, we pulled onto the Mount Washington Auto Road - up, up and away. We were told we could go up, but, due to ice on the top half, not away. Getting to the top was the point of the whole trip. We certainly weren't going to turn around without a semi-summit attempt.

The halfway point was fairly interesting in that it was, you know, high. We had a vista and it was nippy, but it certainly wasn't arctic. It felt a lot like Lynch Park on a breezy day. And Lynch Park only takes three minutes to get to, not three hours. It was hard to not feel gypped. But then, miraculously, the upper half of the mountain opened and a ranger announced that we were free to drive to the summit.

The final four miles were fabulous. The trees fell away and we ascended into scrub brush covered in a clear, sparkling layer of ice. Everything shimmered and glistened. Each weed was an ice sculpture. The temperature plummeted: We were approaching our arctic circle. The actual summit was utilitarian and sparse, favoring function over form and looking like photos of Ice Stations in Antarctica - low buildings with lots of gadgetry for serious science and observation. This was no kitschy tourist trap. Best of all, every single surface - from buildings, to stairs, to the ground itself - was covered in rime ice, a thick coating of frost that looked like the ice crystals had taken life and grown like plants jutting up and out at strange angles in elaborate hand-size chunks. It was an alien landscape - exactly what we had hoped for. It was our adventure!

We had our picnic in the summit canteen surrounded by hikers who had all actually trekked up the mountain. They smelled of sweat and granola bars and had banged up multi-colored water bottles. They were the real deal. But so were we, with our pre-packed lunch in our clean-smelling clothes. They had hiked, but we had driven on the pink road, behind RVs, with a toddler. There are different sort of challenges for everyone.

After spending an hour or so on the summit looking at the radio towers and original 'Tip Top' house, after marveling that meteorologists live there all winter monitoring the brutal wind and cold, we decided it was time to head back down to the warm, sunny fall day and the road choices that awaited us.

We opted to take I-93 home because, despite its longer mileage, once we crossed over to central New Hampshire, it was just a straight shot down the gloriously blue, double-lane highway. It depends on your temperament, but the knowledge that there was a left lane for passing, made the foliage, the mountains, and even the RVs, scenery we could enjoy at the end of our day.

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