

A 5-mile drive to the top of the world

VISITING THE WHITEFACE VETERANS MEMORIAL HIGHWAY

By Lee Manchester, News Staff Writer

WILMINGTON — The timing couldn't have been better for the annual opening last weekend of the Veterans Memorial Highway up Whiteface Mountain in Wilmington township. The weather was perfect, and the fact that it was Memorial Day weekend made a drive up New York's fifth-highest peak on a roadway dedicated to the memory of America's servicemen and women just that much more appropriate.

From Lake Placid, the trip up Whiteface Mountain starts with the 10-mile drive north on Route 86 to the little hamlet of Wilmington. At the Wilmington stop sign (yes, there's only one), take a left — you'll see the marker pointing you up the mountain to the Memorial Highway. Climb past Santa's Workshop, America's oldest theme park, on your right and past the road to the Atmospheric Sciences Research Station on your left. When you get to a fork in the road, bear left (there's another sign, so you're not likely to lose your way).

The tollhouse, and the history

Just ahead, you'll see what looks like a Swiss alpine chalet. That's the 1934 tollhouse that marks the beginning of the 5-mile-long Veterans Memorial Highway. It's more than just a toll gate where you'll pay your part for the upkeep of this amazing feat of civil engineering — it's also a visitors interpretive center highlighting the historic and natural significance of the area.

The center has been run since 1999 by the Whiteface Preservation and Resource Association, and it's worth a stop inside before heading up the highway. On display are exhibits highlighting area geology, flora and fauna, along with maps, aerial and satellite images, and historic photographs depicting the planning and construction of the Memorial Highway and its associated buildings.

A road up the mountain was first suggested over 100 years ago by a Lake Placid entrepreneur, but it was not until the 1920s that a highway up Whiteface was promoted with real vigor — after a

road was paved up Pike's Peak in Colorado.

The prospect of constructing a new road through the Wilmington Wild Forest split the membership of the Adirondack Mountain Club and was opposed by other leading conservationists, but it won support from one highly influential group of Empire State voters: the network of American Legion members all across New York.

The owner of the four acres at the peak of Whiteface contributed them to the project with the proviso that the road be dedicated to the memory of America's Great War veterans. It was later

rededicated to the memory of all American veterans.

Built in the 1930s, the highway itself has been nominated for the National Register of Historic Places.

"It was really an amazing feat of engineering to put this road up the mountain," observed Steve Engelhart, executive director of Adirondack Architectural Heritage, "and there's a certain aesthetic to the road, to the retaining walls, that sort of thing, that's of the era. Even the very idea that there should be an aesthetic element to a road-building project was a reflection of the time."

The construction project was dedi-

Visitors tips

- *Dress for the weather* — On the day our reporter drove up the Memorial Highway, the temperature was in the upper 70s in Wilmington but close to 40 degrees Fahrenheit at the top of Whiteface Mountain. Just because it's spring down here doesn't mean it's spring up there! To check weather conditions before you set out, call (518) 946-7175.
- *Observe highway signs* — You'll see several signs on the drive up and down the Veterans Memorial Highway: the 25-mph speed limit, for one, and the suggestion that you use your low gear to help save your brakes on the downhill trip. Both signs are well worth observing.
- *Visit the Castle first* — Whether you plan to climb the 26-story staircase, which starts from the Castle driveway, or take the elevator to the top of Whiteface, stop at the Castle first. In addition to the grill and gift shop upstairs, it has the only restrooms you'll find on the mountaintop.
- *Elevator up, staircase down* — Once you get to the parking lot at the top of the Veterans Memorial Highway, you have a choice as to how you'll get to the summit of Whiteface: by elevator, or by stairway. Our suggestion: Take the elevator up, and take the staircase down. Neither is to be missed, but the steep, rocky staircase is best experienced as a downhill journey.
- *Bring a picnic lunch* — There are plenty of tables on the drive up, or you can lay out a mountaintop luncheon at the summit. The menu at the Castle grill isn't especially pricey, but the selection is quite limited.
- *Essential equipment: map, compass and camera* — The view from the top of Whiteface Mountain is truly unique, because Whiteface stands apart from all the other Adirondack High Peaks. To get the most from the view you can only get atop this mountain, bring a good topographic map and a compass to help you identify the geographic features laid out below. (The map that comes along with the Adirondack Mountain Club's hiking guide to the High Peaks region suited our purposes just fine.) To bring home a record of the stupendous views you'll see up there, make sure you take along a camera, too — even a disposable camera with a fixed lense is better than no camera at all.

cated in 1929 by New York Governor Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Six years later, Roosevelt returned as the American president to cut the ribbon opening the highway. It was the suggestion of a wheelchair-bound FDR that led to the blasting of an elevator tunnel to carry visitors from the parking lot to the summit of Whiteface Mountain, rising 4,867 feet above sea level.

The memorial drive

The drive up the Veterans Memorial Highway takes visitors from 2,351 feet above sea level at the tollhouse to 4,602 feet at the Castle driveway, 5 miles away, an increase in elevation of 450 feet per mile. Besides the steady climb, the narrowness of the road, and the hairpin turns, there's one more good reason for the 25-mph speed limit: frost heaves, the washboard-like deformations left by water freezing beneath the macadam surface through the long, cold Adirondack winter.

Information posted on the chalkboard at the tollhouse last Saturday said that the clear skies allowed for up to 80 miles of visibility. Visitors had a chance to test that boast in about a mile when the first big view sprang up through the trees at the Union Falls overlook, elevation 2,700 feet. A light haze made it

impossible to distinguish features in the very far distance, but there below lay Taylor Pond, lying like a dark blue blanket across a valley nestled against the next range of mountains north.

Higher still, past the 3,300-foot elevation marker, Taylor Pond could be seen even more clearly below — and looking up over their shoulders, visitors could get their first glimpse of “the Castle” above, a cut-stone-and-concrete structure erected at the end of the Veterans Highway.

Despite the lateness of date, fossil snow banks still lay in shaded curves along the Whiteface roadway over the Memorial Day weekend, becoming more common the higher visitors drove.

At about 3,900 feet, visitors caught another hint of just how alien the weather of the Adirondack High Peaks could be: The road swept past a thin layer of ice draped like a transparent curtain across a northern rock face cut into the mountain, the snow melting in the direct sunlight above it dripping down into the shade and freezing again.

At 3.7 miles along the mountain highway, just past a hairpin turn, drivers should slow down, preparing for a big surprise: the first fabulous view from Whiteface to the south and west, where Placid Lake with its southern peninsula and three signature islands rests, the Olympic Village nestled just beyond it, the High Peaks rising behind it.

The Castle

From there, it's just 1.3 more miles to the parking lot at the top of the Veterans Highway, just below the Castle, built in 1936. From the parking lot, the Castle doesn't look like much, but the Moorish stone arches along its driveway and inside, and the view from the upstairs gift shop and snack bar, are stunners. The Castle has two other signal attractions: It's heated, and it has the only bathrooms available for use by Whiteface summit guests.

Outside the Castle is the start of an iron-railed staircase that climbs a fifth of a mile up a bare granite ridge past dwarf pine forests, lichens and other vegetation that can be found only at alpine heights. These are among the oldest plant communities in New York state, and they are similar to what is found a sea level hundreds of miles closer to the Arctic Circle. Five inter-

pretive markers along the trail describe some of the features you'll find there.

Before you embark on the walk (make that, hike!) up the 26-story summit staircase, here are a few things to consider:

1) Though the “staircase” starts with cut-stone steps, and though there are stone, metal or wooden steps built into many segments of the trail, there are also long stretches that climb across smooth, bare rock. Granted, the iron guardrails that line both sides of the trail are a great help — but still, the climb to the summit is much more than just a long walk up a staircase.

2) If you are going to climb the staircase, make sure you've worn a sturdy pair of shoes.

3) Remember that upward climbs are also downward climbs — it just depends upon where you start from. You can avoid a strenuous hike while still partaking of the stairway ridge trail by leaving the Castle and heading down through the parking lot to elevator tunnel entrance. Take the elevator to the summit, and walk back down the Castle staircase.

The ride to the summit

Beneath a cut-stone archway is the entrance to a 426-foot tunnel cut into the living granite. The ceiling of the gradually rising tunnel is perhaps 7 feet above the floor, and there are maybe 6-1/2 feet between the walls. Lamps are affixed every 10 feet at about knee height beneath the metal handrails on either side of the path. The low lights and narrow tunnel lend a distinctly subterranean tone to this short walk through the heart of the mountain nearly a mile above sea level.

The smallish elevator car — it holds 15 kids or 12 adults, jam-packed — rises into the middle of the Summit House at the top of Whiteface Mountain. When you step out of the circular stone house onto the wide porch surrounding it, though, the spectacular 360-degree view will give you the impression of being on top of the world.

While the other High Peaks are all grouped together, Whiteface rises alone. Nothing close by is anywhere near its height, giving visitors a viewing experience they can't get on any other mountaintop in the Adirondacks. Add to that the facts that you can motor up Whiteface and ride in an elevator to the sum-

How do they stack up?

From the top of Whiteface Mountain, visitors can see the entire High Peaks region of the Adirondack Park, including New York's highest, Mount Marcy. Here's how the highest peaks in several eastern states rank with the top of the Adirondacks:

- Mount Mitchell, N.C., 6,684'
 - Clingman's Dome, Tenn., 6,643'
 - Mount Washington, N.H., 6,288'
 - Mount Marcy, N.Y. — 5,344'
 - Mount Katahdin, Maine, 5,268'
 - Mount Mansfield, Vt., 4,393'
- All of these are dwarfed by the Western mountains, many of which climb over 14,000 feet, and the Alaskan peaks, the highest of which is Mount McKinley, whose summit rises nearly 4 miles above sea level to 29,028 feet. Mount Everest is 29,028 feet high.

mit, and you begin to appreciate how extraordinarily accessible is the experience there.

The Shelter House and the elevator tunnel rising into it were the last pieces of the Memorial Highway construction project, completed in 1938.

Atop the Summit House shines a lantern. A plaque affixed to the wall explains, "This Memorial Light ... is a mark of tribute to the war veterans of the nation. It burns constantly from May 15 until the Memorial Highway is closed to the public at the end of October."

There are two exits from the Summit House: one due north, and one due south. The north-facing doorway opens onto the portion of the surrounding patio that looks out toward Canada; the southern exit leads to the rocky summit and the view of Placid Lake and the High Peaks. Standing with his family last Saturday on the southern patio, a little boy was heard to exclaim, "You could never

hit Lake Placid with a rock from here. It's impossible!"

Adjacent to the Summit House is a shingled tower rising several stories above the granite, the Whiteface Mountain Summit Weather Observatory, affiliated with the SUNY weather research facility headquartered down the mountain near Santa's Workshop.

Past the weather observatory, the mountain summit vista opens out at last. As many visitors hike up from Wilmington or the Marble Mountain trailhead to the summit as ride the elevator or climb the staircase, and the rough granite mountaintop was crawling with guests last Saturday, all entranced by the glorious view presented for them there, many munching on lunches packed up in knapsacks or picnic baskets.

Flying level with the summit, a passing small plane dipped its wings in greeting before cruising on.

Hours, fees, info

The Veterans Memorial Highway on Whiteface Mountain will be open daily from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. until June 28. Starting June 29, the hours are 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. From Sept. 3 through Oct. 14, the hours of operation go back to 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily. If the weather allows, the highway may stay open past Oct. 14.

The toll for trips up the Veterans Memorial Highway is \$8 for car and driver, \$5 for motorcycle and driver, and \$4 for each additional passenger up to a \$25 maximum for a non-commercial vehicle. Children 6 and under can ride for free. There is a group rate of \$4 per person. There is no additional charge for parking at the top.

For more information, visit the Web site for the Olympic Regional Development Authority at orda.org, or telephone (518) 523-1655.