

Bright and early on the Saturday morning of Columbus Day weekend eleven MIT students and, Meredith, a PE administrator, met in the Z center, loaded into a twelve passenger van and headed off to the White Mountains in northern New Hampshire. A few had met before, but the majority signed up for this PE class independently simply because it sounded awesome. Some had previous hiking experience, but many did not, because any student can sign up for this relaxing and fun weekend.

For us, loading the van was a simple matter because the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC) provided most of the gear we needed, another reason why this trip is fabulous for beginners. Many planned on sleeping during the four hour drive up, but the varied anecdotes from the group made the conversation too interesting to miss. Meredith talked about the Fenway House, where she is a resident advisor and a long discussion on various dorms followed. Every corner of campus was represented by our group, along with many clubs, departments, and sports; including two Cambridge-MIT exchange students.

When we arrived at the AMC Highland Center, we were greeted by a delicious lunch buffet and checked out our gear. Ready for adventure, we did a short but intense hike while learning the basics of Leave No Trace and hiking. As we climbed up on an out cropping of rock above the highway named "Elephant Head." From there we looked out at the Highland Center and the vibrant foliage surrounding it, we decided to take the first of many group photos.

That night we returned to another delicious feast and explored the Highland Center, a very active, dorm style rustic hotel where we all had bunks and shared a hall bathroom. At night, talks were given downstairs in the common room. Outside the stars shine bright in the clean air. That first night we walked around in the dark, gazing up at the outline of the mountain we would soon climb, discussing the constellations we cannot see from Boston, and feeling nature's calming presence.

In the morning we arose with the sun, ate a hearty breakfast and were soon on the trail. As we passed creeks and rocks, our guides told us about the geological history of the area; how it was once covered by a sheet of ice, and how the movement of the glaciers molded the mountains we passed. We hiked Mount Tom (4051 feet), with a view of the imposing Mount Washington, continuing on to one of the eight huts owned by the AMC. The "Hut Kroo," who ran the hut, provided us with composting toilets, running water, food, sleeping bunks, and hilarious skits.

The Zealand Hut, where we stayed the second night, had such a strong culture it could have been an MIT dorm. With two rooms of bunks in three high stacks, we felt like sailors sleeping below deck, except for the crisp, clean mountain air. Lying in bed we could hear the murmur of a waterfall dancing down the slope adjacent to our hut and the soft snores of others asleep.

When we awoke, another guest at the hut was teaching Tai Chi and a man who was hiking the entire Appalachian Trail was packing his bags to continue along on his two-thousand mile journey. Our group bonded in a way groups do when they are in complete isolation together. We folded our blankets, packed up our bags, and hiked back down to the van. The inside jokes were endless and many friendships started. Upon reaching MIT, we exchanged numbers and plans to reunite. We separated, for the first time in three days, relaxed and content as we returned to our lives at MIT.

-Sara Falcone, 2015



At Elephant Head