

# **Hiking up Mt. Sunapee: A Vacation for Your Mind**

by Patrick Olszewski



*At the top of Lucia's Lookout*

I shivered, lying down on my blow-up mattress in the middle of the old and treacherous Mt. Monadnock-Sunapee Greenway trail, New Hampshire. I was cocooned in my sleeping bag, wiping away the runoff coming from my runny nose, ignoring the chills coursing through my body. You might think it was cold outside, but it was only September, and the leaves hadn't even begun to change yet.

I was facing the worst cold I'd had in years, in the middle of the New Hampshire wilderness, and yet, I fell fast asleep in my cocoon regardless.

My Dad and my brother started the Mt. Monadnock-Sunapee Greenway trail before my brother left for boot camp, and my dad and I decided to finish the remaining 20 miles of the trail once and for all in September. You can find a map to the trail using the [Mt. Monadnock-Sunapee Greenway trail website](#).

The trail totaled 50 miles, starting from Mt. Monadnock at an elevation of 3,165 ft, and ending at Mt. Sunapee. It is a long, constant uphill trail from mountain to mountain, but the trek is worth the pain it may induce on your calves. The trail doesn't end at the Mt. Sunapee ski resort, contrary to popular belief. The true Mt. Sunapee, conserved by its beautifully well-kept state park, hidden shelters, lookouts, and lakes, is behind the very popular Mt. Sunapee ski resort. More info can be found about [Mt. Sunapee State park](#) on their website.

My Dad convinced me to go on the hike with him. I was in high-school, uninterested in the joy that can be found in blisters and broken backs from long, arduous hikes. I'd rather be a homebody, staying at a hotel swimming pool, getting pizza delivery, and turning off my brain for a weekend. I went on the hike anyway, despite my reluctance to go. Maybe I'd be wrong, or maybe things would be different. Only one way to find out.

It had taken us a few hours to get to where my Dad and my brother had left off on the trail, but there was one big problem – finding a place to park.

## **Parking in the Middle of a Trail**

While it may not have been the smartest idea in the world, seeing as there was no real parking sign in sight, my Dad and I parked along a back road off Route 31, just south of Mt. Lovewell. After being lost for an hour and failing to find some sort of official parking spot for the Sunapee Greenway trail, I highly recommend finding a parking spot *before* you arrive to your hiking destination. You can either park at Mt. Sunapee, next to Lake Solitude, or you can start all the way at Mt. Monadnock, where most people start and finish the trail within a weeks' time. Parking in the middle of a trail, however, I'd advise against.

The Sunapee Greenway trail is very old and harsh to the unprepared. My Dad and I carried hiking backpacks ranging from 20 pounds up to 50, with clothes, tents, food, blankets, and all other essentials that you'll need for a long, unpredictable hike. Better to be prepared for the unexpected, than be unprepared for the worst!

The trail is engrossed in stubby rocks and overgrown roots that may or may not haphazardly laugh at you as you accidentally trip over them for the second, third, and hundredth time. It's best to watch your step! There's no harm in looking down if you don't want to trip for a hundredth time.

## **Falling Ill**

The Sunapee Greenway trail offers luxurious wooden shelters for any lone hiker walking on the trail, and in each shelter, the company of a hard pine floor and a pine roof awaits. To my Dad's surprise, I needed to rest in one of these shelters *badly*.

Out of nowhere, a cold overtook my senses. A blistering runny nose overflowed my face, I felt fatigued, muscles aching and shaking like the rickety beat of a broken drum, and I was no longer appreciating the sights and sounds the trail had to offer. We could have traveled more than 6 miles our first day, but we had to stop. I was too weak for the trail. I was feeling too weak for my own body.

We settled at the Max Israel shelter for the night, just about 6 miles north of where we had started. The shelter was the newest one constructed for the trail, having been built in 2009. You can find out more about the [Sunapee Greenway trail shelters](#) on their website.

The Max Israel shelter had an overhang to rest under, and thankfully my Dad and I made it to the shelter just in time. The rain had only just begun to pour.

I brought a notebook to journal my thoughts, take notes, and even write poetry if the inspiration came. However, I couldn't even open my eyes once I unpacked my thin, weightless blow-up mattress and fell asleep. My cold was terrible, but the rain soothed me to sleep.

Try getting that type of character-building experience sleeping in a hotel room and ordering a house special pizza.

## **Stranger Danger**

The next morning, I slept in. A little too much sleeping in. Thankfully, my runny nose was no longer a gushing river, my body ached a little less, and I was fully ready to continue our trek through the New Hampshire wilderness. But I woke up closer to noon than we would've liked, due to my random illness and the calm rainfall lulling me to sleep.

Regardless, we kept the trek going, and I ignored my red Rudolph nose and frequent exhaustion.

My dad had packed a water filtration device in our packs, and towards the end of our second day, we had stopped at a small creek right before we settled down at the next shelter. The water tasted like refreshing, moldy dirt. I had never been more thankful for moldy dirt in my entire life.

I was starting to no longer wish for a hotel room and a calm, scheduled vacation. I know, it sounds ridiculous and lazy of me to still be thinking of that dream. But I was quite boring, and I had only just begun to understand the appeal of long hikes. Apart from the painful exercise.

The next shelter we stayed at was the Steve Galpin Shelter at Moose Lookout. Like the Max Israel shelter, Galpin was one of the newer shelters built on the trail. Constructed in 2008, it had a rustic wooden exterior, overlooking a nice camping pit and open dirt area for both long and short stays. In our case, we stayed there for the night, with unplanned company.



*Resting at the Steve Galpin Shelter at Moose Lookout*

Two hikers we had never met before decided to stay with us for the night. We had already set up shop in the shelter, displaying our water bottles and camping equipment around the shelter as if we owned the place. However, my Dad and I are not the unwelcoming sort, and we moved our packs to make room for the new couple staying with us.

Normally you're supposed to approach and welcome strangers with open arms and a cautious eye, but when you're in the wilderness with company you can trust, it's easy to feel at home and safe in an unfamiliar environment. Weekend long hikes can be fun to do alone, but for someone who gets anxiety and stress from sleeping with strangers in the middle of the New Hampshire wilderness, having family or friends with you makes a huge difference.

Luckily, my Dad and I made some new friends that night. We cooked our salty, freeze-dried mac-n-cheese and chicken parmesan in a bag, and one of the new campers staying with us offered some sour patch kids to snack on. He carried them to regulate his sugar intake, but he had some to spare. It was a nice gesture, but instead we traded tall-tales and life stories instead of questionable candy.

The idea of a hotel room and a forgettable pizza had almost completely faded, and I fell asleep with nostrils clear as day.

We never remembered the two hikers' names, but we'll never forget their company. Who needs names in the wilderness, anyways?

## **Foggy Vistas: Lucia's Lookout & Lake Solitude**

On the third and last day of our hike, we made it to one of the best vistas on Mt. Sunapee.

Lucia's Lookout is approximately 2,500 ft in elevation, and it is one of the few parts of the trail that has a wide, rocky clearing. The lookout is sparse with thin, spaced out birches and pines, patches of grass growing in-between the rocky floor, and mountains as far as the eye can see.

Unfortunately, when we reached the summit, the entire area was incredibly fogged, and we couldn't see much of what was below. Once I sat down at Lucia's Lookout, I learned that sometimes the fog makes for a better picture than what clarity has to offer.



Our hike had met its end, and the descent was long, incredibly steep, but mostly refreshing. Down towards the bottom of Mt. Sunapee is Lake Solitude, where my Dad and I saw casual hikers staying at the Sunapee ski resort. We trekked along the lake, watching them with baggy eyes. It was odd to see families dressed up in regular, non-hiking attire, but the change of pace was a great reminder of our journeys end. All around Lake Solitude, the grass was mossy and damp, while the lake was as crystal clear as the blue sky above us.



*At the top of Lucia's Lookout*

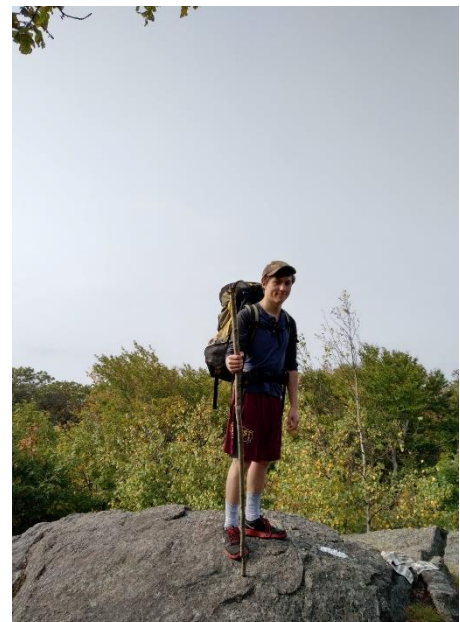
I was no longer as sick as I once was, huddled in my cocoon of a sleeping bag under the roof of the Max Israel shelter. I could smell the pines again, and my nose was no longer a red puffy mess. Our friend picked us up near Route 103, north of the lake, and I watched the mountain we had just explored pass by in the window.

And I fell asleep, the dream of hotels, comfortable vacations, and mediocre pizza, replaced by something more real.

## **The Noise You Make in Silence**

When most people think of vacations, usually what comes to mind are trips to Paris, seeing Big Ben in real life, immersing oneself in the heart of a foreign culture, or even a simple resort or cruise that costs hundreds, if not thousands of dollars. But, what about the vacations designed to cost absolutely nothing? What about the vacations that will turn off parts of your brain, and let the clogged parts of your mind flourish?

The entire time my Dad and I were hiking up steep cliffs and grassy hillsides, overlooking flowing creeks and halted beaver dams, my brain was at work, filling the silence that nature was playing for me. Of course, I was paying attention to all the old pines and birches that stood tall around us, and I couldn't



*Walking off Lucia's Lookout*

ignore the bird songs fluttering above our heads. My brain, however, was still *working* – and yet, I felt relaxed.

A simple vacation to a state park near you or planning a hike with family can do wonders for your mental health. Even though I was still thinking about school, my future career aspirations, and my part time job dishwashing for minimum wage and free dinners, I liked how much I was using my brain for once. I liked the clutter of thought running through my mind. It was new, and familiar.

Nature is a backdrop for all types of thought. I took my time to soak in the beauty of the Sunapee Greenway trail, but if there's one thing I've learned about weekend long hikes in the wilderness, it's that nature can sometimes tap into the hidden beauty of your brain. Also, the low-cost is nice, and if you're on a tight budget, you must visit a state park near you. Take advantage of the vacations nature has to offer – you never know what might come out of it.