

'The Second Greatest Show On Earth'

Mount Washington Attracts More Than 150,000 Visitors And Thrill-Seekers Each Year

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CONCORD — Offering up to 21 feet of snow and the Earth's highest recorded wind gust, Mount Washington attracts thrill seekers to scale its wintry slopes and practice for more famous climbs.

But danger is never far behind. More than 100 people have died on the mountain since 1849 — three this year.

"The advice I would give climbers going up the mountain is to be mature enough to know when to turn back," rescuer and mountain guide George Hurley said. "Conditions can change a person's thinking. Hypothermia can cause a person to become foolish."

Hurley is featured on "Mount Washington: The Second-Greatest Show on Earth," a 57-minute video about the Northeast's highest peak.

The documentary was produced by David Wittkower, who looks at the 6,288-foot peak in the White Mountains as it changes from a vacation spot in summer to an arctic-like desert inhabited only by weather watchers in winter.

About 145,000 people visit Mount Washington from May to October, when weather is less apt to change from a sunny day with 125-mile vistas to a foggy snow storm, said Howie Wemyss, manager of the Mount Washington Auto

Road.

About 5,000 to 10,000 skiers, ice climbers and others visit in the off-season, said Guy Gosselin, executive director of the Mount Washington Observatory.

The eight-mile auto road, only half of which is paved, is closed in winter. When open, it challenges drivers, runners and bicyclists in various races, and vacationers in their motor homes, cars and vans.

The shortest trail from the base to the summit is about 2½ miles.

The average annual temperature at the top of Mount Washington is 26 degrees; the summit never has exceeded 72 degrees and snow has fallen in every month.

The mercury frequently drops to minus 80, and winds routinely top 100 mph. Snowfall averages 25 inches per year.

The Earth's highest record wind gust — 231 mph — whipped Mount Washington in 1934.

The more-common 75-mph blasts are forceful enough to knock over a man and pick up a woman. When combined with snow, it can be so disorienting that experienced hikers don't know which way is up.

Mount Washington is so windy because it's at the juncture of the three major storm tracks affecting the North-

east. The tracks are from the Eastern seaboard, the Ohio Valley and the Great Lakes region, and the high winds are due to incoming air being compressed between the mountain range and the atmosphere above.

Wittkower, 34, has hiked the mountain and seen its weather.

"A lot is known about the mountain, and they take what they know for granted when they hike it," the former Rockport, Mass., resident said in a telephone interview from Los Angeles.

Much of Wittkower's video is devoted to rescuers such as Bill Aughton.

"The mountain is not big. It's not technical. It does demand the same type skill (as more famous mountains). The weather can be worse and temperatures colder than Mount Everest. We have people who come here to train for expeditions in other parts of the world — McKinley, the Himalayas, so forth," he said.

With people getting lost or dying on Mount Washington, some outsiders have called for it to be closed to winter adventurers, Aughton said.

"We want people to be educated, well-prepared and to gain experience and learn that experience go out and use it," he said. "With good education and experience and good equipment, people should sample the mountain in what-

ever conditions they care to go out in."

Two knowledgeable hikers from New Jersey were the mountain's latest victims. The bodies of Erik Lattey, 28, of River Vale, and Monroe Couper, 40, of South Orange, were brought off the mountain last week — three days after they started a climb and encountered subzero temperatures and wind gusts above 100 mph.

They died of hypothermia.

In January, a University of New Hampshire student froze to death while hiking on Mount Washington. His companion walked and crawled about three miles in temperatures that reached minus 42 and winds that gusted to 103 mph for help. He suffered a frostbitten face and hands.

A week later, a Massachusetts man hiking with four other men was rescued after he turned back alone. He suffered frostbitten feet.

Hikers who are a short distance from the summit often don't realize the difficulty reaching the summit and may think they can make it, Wittkower said.

"But terrible things can happen," he said. "You have to learn to be respectful of the mountain — to be respectful of any mountain that you climb. It's not that big from its height, but it packs a wallop that people should know about."