

## **New England**

It is early morning when I walk to the sacred spot. A lemon butterfly accompanies me, through maple trees and meadows, up the gentle slope of Mount Assurance. After about fifteen minutes I reach a clearing in the trees, its centre marked by a stone slab: this was once the holy Feast Ground of the Shakers. I stand on a carpet of clover and violets, and try to imagine what it must have been like on days when members of this American religious sect walked up the hill, just as I had done, and gathered here to worship. There would have been picnics, singing, dancing - even communing with long dead spirits. It is quiet today. Peace ripples through me like a prayer. I look up and see a splash of scarlet in the trees. It is a cardinal, a glorious crimson bird who raises his crest and chirrups indignantly at me. Feeling that I have intruded long enough I turn to go, and as I walk away I hear the silence roll back behind me.

I am in the Shaker village of Enfield, New Hampshire, in the heart of New England. It is a part of America better known for its glorious autumn foliage than its great walking. Why that should be I can't imagine, unless the Americans just preferred to keep it all to themselves. Anyway, the secret's out now. There is walking to suit everyone: high mountain climbs and gentle woodland walks; historical hikes and literary trails. And the scenery is not only glorious - there's an awful lot of it. Well, this is America and everything seems big - even the ants.

My first stop was Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Surrounded by the Berkshire Hills, it is all that you would hope of a New England town, with white clapboard houses, a pretty church and plenty of early settler heritage. It is also an excellent base for walkers. On my first day I went for a walk up Monument Mountain (529m/1,735 ft), a short drive from the town. "We're following in the footsteps of Herman Melville, the author of Moby Dick," said Judy my guide. "He walked up here with the writer Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1850. It was the start of a long friendship." A few minutes later Judy bent down and picked a large leaf from a young tree. "That," she said,

handing it to me, "is the leaf of a striped maple. The leaves are so big that they are known as walkers' toilet paper." Mmmm, handy then.

It was an easy walk through the trees, punctuated by the chittering of chipmunks who peered at us from the undergrowth, their little tails raised over their heads like furry caterpillars. When we got to the summit we were rewarded with endless views.

"There is a legend that a Native American girl came up here after she had been refused permission to marry her lover," said Judy. "She threw herself off the mountain in despair."

Mountains were important to the Native Americans. Mount Greylock for instance, the highest peak in Massachusetts which I visited later in the day, was sacred to the Mohican tribe. Some say that they refused to climb it for fear of offending the spirits. The spirits must be furious now because hundreds of walkers come here each year, many of them on the 3379km (2,100 mile) long Appalachian Trail. This stretches along America's East Coast from Georgia to Maine and is the longest continuous footpath in the world. I walked some of the Mount Greylock section and found that, like many of the trails in New England, it is liberally sprinkled with tree roots and rocks just waiting to trip you up. The views however are said to be marvellous, stretching for 161km (100 miles) over the Taconic and Catskill mountains and the Housatonic Valley. Unfortunately I cannot confirm this, as a thick mist swept in from the moment I set foot on the mountain and stubbornly refused to leave until I had gone.

Of course you don't have to go on the Appalachian Trail. There are plenty of other walks on Mount Greylock and you can even stay on the summit at Bascom Lodge, which is run by the Appalachian Mountain Club. If you go there take a look at the wooden steps outside. They have been chewed by porcupines who waddle up at dusk searching for salt with which to supplement their diet.

One of the great joys of walking in New England is the fact that you have a great chance of spotting at least some of its amazing wildlife. For a start there is an extraordinary array of birdlife ranging from sulphur coloured American goldfinches and brilliant Blue Jays, to ruby throated hummingbirds and yellow bellied sapsuckers. And then there are large mammals such as moose, coyotes, racoons, bob cats and black bears. Even if you don't see the animals themselves you will almost certainly see some traces of them. On one of my walks I saw a tree trunk which had been vigorously clawed by a bear, on another I saw a suspiciously fresh paw print of a large cat.

You can improve your chances of spotting wildlife by taking with you - wait for it - a llama. On my second morning, after breakfasting on fresh muffins, followed by blueberry pancakes laced with maple syrup (don't bother packing your willpower, you'll never use it here) I met Laurie Moon who runs guided 'llama hikes'. She introduced me to Cuchulain and Booray who were tied up outside my hotel and, to the amazement of passers by, we set off for nearby Ice Glen.

"People find llama hikes very relaxing," explained Laurie as we walked through the thick dark woods. "For a start the llama carries your pack for you. And you can't walk too quickly when you're leading a llama, so you take in your surroundings more. They're also very observant and tend to spot wildlife you would otherwise miss." Right on cue Cuchulain came to an abrupt halt, and twizzled his ears furiously. I followed his gaze and saw a red squirrel scampering silently through the undergrowth. Cuchulain curled his lip and flapped his long, dark eyelashes as if to say: "Told you."

After the gentle Berkshire Hills the rugged slopes of the White Mountains in New Hampshire came as something of a surprise. The barren, rocky slopes, which bear a striking resemblance to the wilder parts of Scotland, were regarded with terror by the

early settlers. It was once described as: '....daunting terrible, being full of rocky Hill as thick as Mole-hills in a Meadow." This is understandable when you realise that the highest peak in the White Mountains, indeed the whole of New England, is Mount Washington (1917m/6,288ft) which, locals tell you with pride, experiences some of the most extreme weather conditions on earth. It was here that scientists once logged a wind speed of 372 kmph (231 miles per hour), the highest ever recorded. That's just a tad breezier than a hurricane which officially starts when winds reach a mere 121 kmph (75 miles per hour).

I considered taking the Tuckerman Ravine Trail to the summit, but changed my mind when I saw how busy it was - not only with walkers, but also with skiers. Instead I walked to Zealand Falls on the edge of the gloriously named Pemigewasset wilderness. The route took me past a large number of primeval looking bogs, dotted with the skeletons of long dead trees. Rob, my guide, told me that this was the sort of habitat favoured by beavers and moose. (In fact this part of New England is one of the best places in which to spot moose and I saw one the next day, grazing contentedly at the side of the road.) As we walked through woods of fragrant balsam fir and yellow birch, we passed a spruce tree. Some sap had oozed from a gash in the trunk and hardened into a ball. "Before the turn of the century people used to chew these sap balls like chewing gum," said Rob. "It's a bit like chewing turpentine." I decided not to bother.

Perhaps the loveliest part of New England is Vermont. Home of the gentle Green Mountains, it is America's most rural state. Everything about it flows slow and easy from the snores of the old men rocking on their front porches, to the maple syrup that is sold in abundance at the local stores. There is plenty of choice for walkers. If you want you can follow the Long Trail, a 434 km (270 mile) long waymarked ridge walk that stretches across Vermont to the Canadian border. You can walk from one

country inn to another and have your pack sent on ahead (birdwatchers should make sure they stop at the Mountain View Inn). Or you can do as I did and just take your time exploring some of the many different trails that run deep through the green heart of the countryside.

The poet Robert Frost loved Vermont and dined several times at the Blueberry Hill Inn where I stayed. It is easy to see why the landscape inspired so much of his poetry. I picked up some trail guides from the inn and found it immensely relaxing just to walk up slopes covered with blueberries, watch garter snakes rippling through the grass, investigate sugar houses where locals make maple syrup, and clamber round ponds listening out for the slapping of beaver tails in the water. I followed the rocky trail around Silver Lake and stared into the deep cool water to see if I could make out the outline of the Abenaki birch canoe that lies at the bottom. And at night I watched the stars reflected in the lake at Blueberry Hill and listened to the ancient sounds of the wilderness: the tropical peeps of tree frogs and the mournful howls of coyotes. It was quite perfect.