

EXPEDITION SUBZERO

Gordon DuBois has hiked to the top of Katahdin five times before. This time it will be very different. The last time DuBois climbed Katahdin was in 2007, at the end of the first part of a planned flip-flop hike of the Appalachian Trail that ended up being all flop and no flip when a knee injury forced him off the Trail and under a surgeon's knife. Four years, two operations, and a refurbished artificial knee later, DuBois — or "Gordo" as he is known on the Trail, plans to finish his quest this summer. In late June or early July he will head back to North Adams, Massachusetts, picking up the white blaze southbound where he started northbound in 2007. First, though, he is headed back to Katahdin for a sixth trip up the big mountain — this time in the middle of Maine's inhospitable winter.

"The climbing conditions will be much different," said DuBois, 64, who expects to start in deep snow and finish on ice above the tree line. He and his winter hiking partner, fellow New Hampshire resident Bob Manley, won't be scurrying up rocks with a light daypack on their backs. They will be on snowshoes, or crampons, with full winter packs. "Even on a day hike in the winter, you need to be prepared to spend the night," says Manley, who is 46. Manley and DuBois will carry dry clothes to change into should they get wet, a sleeping bag, and a sturdy four-seasons tent. An ice axe is essential. Maps, a compass, and enough food for two days are also on Baxter Park's list of recommended winter gear.

Weather conditions are whimsical; even when the rangers at Baxter Park bless a day with their most favorable green code, things can change with little notice. Rescue efforts could be delayed for hours, or days if it is deemed unsafe to send rescuers up the mountain, says park naturalist Jean Hoekwater. "It changes fast around here," says Hoekwater. "And we aren't sending our people into those conditions." The idea of hiking Katahdin in winter might come as a surprise to those who have heard of the repeated myth that the mountain closes on October 15. Baxter State Park is actually open year around. But arrive even in late September and you could find yourself hanging out for days at the foot of the mountain waiting for conditions to improve enough for the rangers to allow you to summit. After October 15, there is almost no access until the winter season sets in fully. Restrictions protect rare alpine plants that are particularly vulnerable during the "shoulder" seasons, when there is enough ice on the rocks of the Trail to send hikers seeking better traction off the Trail, yet not enough snow or ice to afford the plants protection. "We call the shots on [the mountain] for

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PHOTOS BY BOB MANLEY

Bob and Gordon return from the summit of Chocorua, in the White Mountains. Inset: Bob's Samoyed-wolf mix Noah — "the greatest dog I have ever had," says Bob — was alongside for many of the more than 75 summits he and Gordon have hiked together.





From top: Bob (left) and Gordon reach the summit of West Bond, their 48th and final 4,000-foot White Mountain summit in the winter; Bob and Gordon celebrate a winter solstice summit of Mount Moosilauke in 2005. Right: The hiking duo ascends Eisenhower during their “presidential traverse.”

preservation reasons,” Hoekwater says. “Someone stepping outside the corridor can do so much damage.”

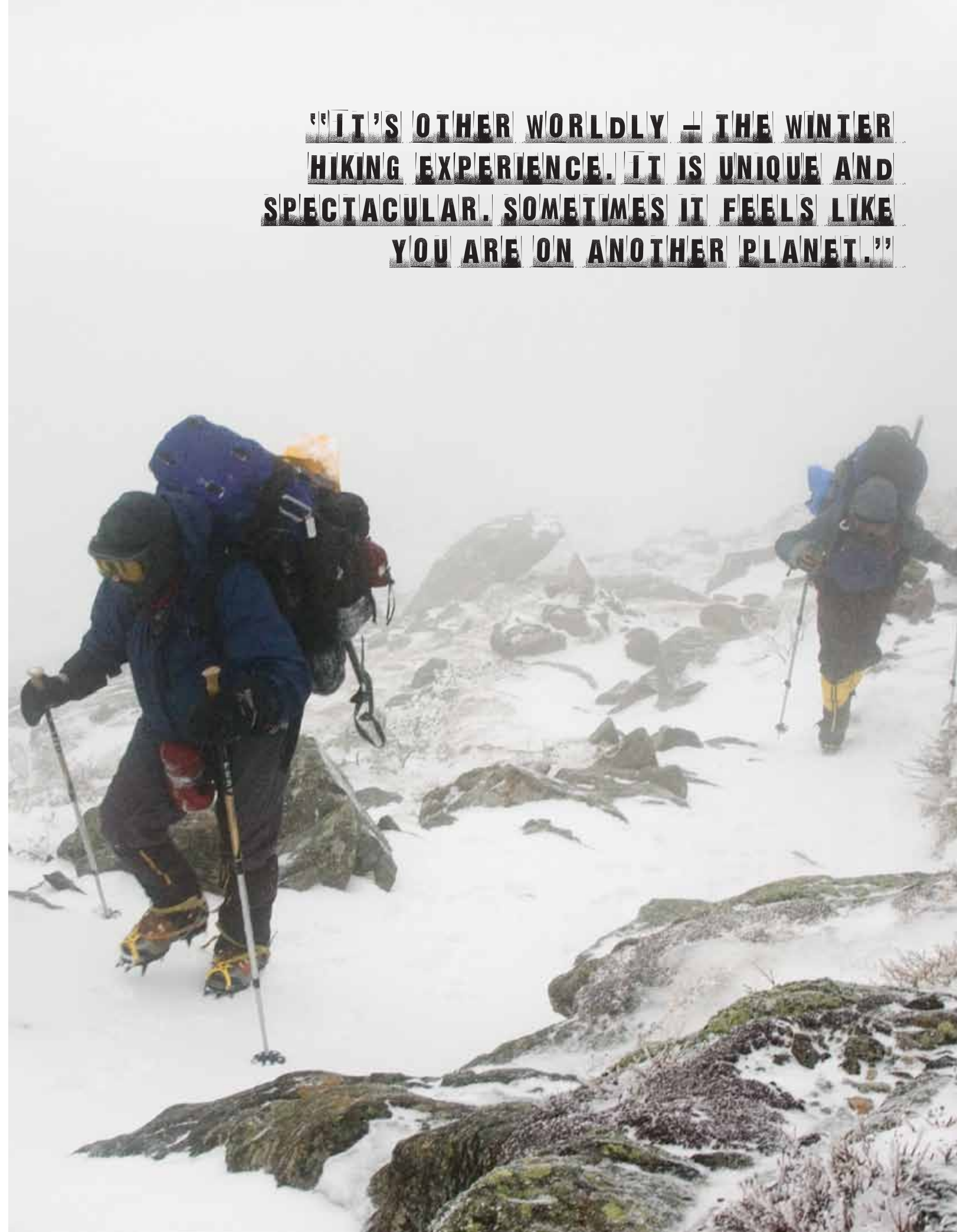
Like most winter hikers, DuBois and Manley will not be following the A.T.’s white blazes up Katahdin. The preferred winter route is up the other side of the mountain from Chimney Pond, where a bunkhouse with a wood stove provides a cozy base camp at 2,900 feet. There are tent sites and lean-tos available in the winter — all camping accommodations are by reservation — but they can be a frigid experience, especially in windy or snowy conditions. No open fires are allowed. Hoekwater says winter hikers should view their trip as an “expedition.” DuBois and Manley will need to hike 10 miles just to reach Chimney Pond. Roads in Baxter are closed in the winter. The park does not plow them and blow downs are not cleared until spring.

This won’t be DuBois and Manley’s first hike under extreme winter conditions. The pair hasn’t written the book on winter hiking, but they did build a Web site, complete with photos and journals. Together they have hiked the 48 highest peaks in New Hampshire and 70 of the 100 highest in New England — all of them in the winter. Their goal winter hike: all of the 100. Katahdin is next on their list. Katahdin in winter is “probably the most challenging of all summits,” Manley explains. “Conditions on the mountain can be really harsh because it is all by itself out there. Just getting to the beginning is a two-day hike.”

An element of luck will come into play for the two to complete the Katahdin climb. Once you get to Chimney Pond, you cannot summit if the ranger there deems conditions unsafe. And it’s not like you can watch the weekend forecast and head to Baxter when it looks favorable. Reservations are tough to get, especially for “out-of-staters,” since Maine residents get first priority, Manley says. Hikers also have to register at least seven days in advance if they are planning to head above the tree line. “The weather will determine if we can even get up,” say DuBois. Even then, they won’t hesitate to turn back if conditions start to deteriorate. That is one of the keys to safely hiking in winter conditions. “You need to know when to say ‘hey, it’s not a good idea to go any further,’” DuBois says. The two have encountered some pretty extreme conditions in the more than 1,000 miles of winter hiking they have done. They have spent the night in a tent when temperatures dipped to 30 degrees below zero. They needed a full day to bushwhack a mile through four feet of unbroken snow once. During one hike, the snow was so deep in the “tunnel” of a trail they were hiking that they had to crawl to avoid the untrimmed branches.

There are other challenges to winter hiking. Staying dry is essential. Manley suggests lots of layers of wool and synthetics. No cotton. Carrying enough water can also be a challenge. “In the winter, everything is frozen. Often your only source of water is melting snow,” Manley says. “And winter is drier than summer; you actually dehydrate faster, so you go through a whole lot of water.” The old hiker trick of sticking a bottle of hot water in the bottom of your sleeping bag for extra warmth on cold nights is a must. Water left outside your bag will be

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Clockwise from top right: Noah takes a break on the trail near the summit of Mount Moosilauke; Gordon ascending North Baldface, with a view of the route across the ridge to South Baldface; Gordon watching the sunset just off Lowe's Path on the west side of Mount Sam Adams below Edmands Col on the first night of their winter presidential traverse.

frozen in the morning, leaving you nothing to drink. Melting snow for water means extra fuel should be in your pack. You need to carry more food in the winter too. Between the amount of energy expended to hike through the snow, and the fuel your body uses to stay warm, you burn a lot of calories in cold conditions. Manley says plan on needing 5,000 to 6,000 calories per day. "You need high calorie food. Eating 5,000 to 6,000 calories is not easy," he says. Instead of the rich-in-carbs freeze dried fare of summer backpacking, Manley suggests richer foods with higher fat content, which takes more energy to break down and generates more body heat. Carry a stick of butter; it is an ideal survival food. Two sleeping pads are good to provide insulating separation from the heat-draining snow. This is not the season for ultra light hiking.

Other winter hiking essentials include a LED headlamp with lithium batteries, which last longer than alkaline in the cold. With the short days of winter, it is easy to get stuck in the woods after dark. Don't forget backup batteries. Manley also says winter hikers should know how to navigate using a map and a compass and should be sure to carry them, even if they have a GPS unit. Batteries can go dead. Technology can fail. Blazes can be buried by the snow. "If you know how to use a map and compass you can always find your way out," says Manley.

Winter hiking's extra preparation and tough conditions are worth it for the rewards of the experience, Manley says. It's a more isolated experience; you can go days without seeing people. Manley also is big on winter because "there are no bugs." The bigger reward, Manley says, is a chance to experience the beauty of the wilderness in the winter. "It's other worldly — the winter hiking experience. It is unique and spectacular," says Manley. "Sometimes it feels like you are on another planet." Dry winter air means there is no haze to limit your view from mountain peaks and overlooks. "You can see forever," Manley says. "It's crystal clear and the sky is as blue as it gets." DuBois doesn't look at the Katahdin hike as a warm-up for his summer effort to complete the A.T. "Winter hiking is such a totally different experience, it is a completely different thing," he says. They didn't pick Katahdin for any symbolic gesture about his upcoming A.T. hike. It's next up; that's all. At the same time, when he gets to the top he plans to take a moment to think ahead to summer. Says DuBois, "I'll look south and I'll know I can't wait to get back on the Trail." ▲

FOR MORE ABOUT BOB AND GORDON'S ADVENTURES VISIT: WWW.WINTERHIKING.ORG

* DOGS ARE NOT ALLOWED IN BAXTER STATE PARK, AND CAMPING IS RESTRICTED TO CERTAIN AREAS.

