**Katahdin, ME, 5,268 ft. –August 27, 2019, HP #21: The 360 degree views are expansive seeming to never end almost as though one is looking into space.**

August 25, 2019 I caught a 9:30 am flight from Salt Lake City to Dallas, then another flight to Washington DC, and finally a third flight to Portland ME, arriving in Portland around midnight local time – after having traveled for more than 13 hours. First I checked in with Budget rental car and arranged to pick up my rental car the next morning, as my hotel, The Embassy Suites, was only a stone’s throw away. As I walked the one-block to the hotel a fox darted across the street in front of me then paused to look at me. I clapped my hands and he then took off. I knew then Portland ME was still cool, and had to be uncrowded.

August 26 – after breakfast I picked up my car around 10 am and drove to Millinocket about 300 miles to the north (slightly east). Once I got past Bangor on I-95 people disappeared. First I located my motel, The Baxter Inn, and I waited until 3 pm to check in, picking up a few groceries in the meantime. I had a late lunch/early dinner, in my hotel room then drove the 18 or so miles to Baxter State Park home of Maines tallest mountain Mt. Katahdin (5,267 ft.). My purpose was to know where I needed to go early the next morning.

At Baxter Park, I drove to the toll booth, and chatted with the employee, and found no reason to pay a fee to go in. On the way back to Millinocket I checked out the NEOC (New England Outdoor Center), and realized camping would have been an okay option, in spite of the annoying bugs. Back at the hotel, which was expensive ($140+ per night), old, broken down, and less then clean, I got everything ready for the next day’s hike. I had to be up at 4:30 am (2:30 am Utah time), and on my way to Baxter State Park before 5 am to arrive by 5:30 am. Park opens at 6:00 am and I wanted to be one of the first people in, plus my parking reservation could only be held till 7 am and wanted to arrive early so as not to risk being late. Not surprisingly I didn’t sleep at all that night and was up before the 4:30 am alarm.

I arrived at Baxter pretty much at 5:30am and was the third car in-line at the gate, others soon arrived after me. The 30 minute wait allowed me time for breakfast and to get my boots on. It took till pretty much 6:20 am to get through the gate and drive, at 20 mph, to the Roaring Brook trailhead parking area as I had to follow some “do-gooder” all the way in who wouldn’t speed. Since my rental car had a Maine license plate they must have thought I was a resident and didn’t charge me a park entrance fee.

I wasn’t the first one to sign in at the trailhead for the day, but I did seem to be the first one on the trail. I used the Helon Taylor route to the Knife Edge to the peak. The route is 4.3 miles from its departure from the Chimney pond trail, and climbs 3778 feet to the 5267 foot summit. En route the trail crosses Pamola Peak (4902 feet) after 3.2 miles, and Chimney Peak where the route becomes the Knife Edge and crosses South Peak before reaching Baxter Peak (the highest summit on Katahdin). The Knife Edge is about 1.1 miles and climbs 365 feet. Tree line is at around 3500 feet.

I was very happy to be on this mountain as it is one I have had my eye on for some time, as such the experience was even more than another high point for me.

I all but sprinted to ensure I’d stay ahead of other hikers, and I was in a hurry to break out of the trees so I could get views of the area. Around tree line I heard voices behind me, and once they broke out of the trees I caught glimpses now and then of a two man party, but they never caught up to me. Before reaching Pamola I crossed paths with a party of two hikers descending from watching the sunrise, and after Chimney Peak I encountered one other fellow coming down. So no crowds, which made the hike all the more awesome. Once above tree lines I was able to see just how many lakes cover Maine and there were tonnes of them. Below tree line the environment reminded me of hiking in Virginia as well as the movie Last of the Mohicans. I love hiking in east coast forests as it is such a pleasant experience.

I reach the peak in 3 hours and 10 minutes arriving well before 10 am. It was a stout hike, with some upper 3rd class sections between Pamola and Chimney Peaks, and a very worthwhile and rewarding hike. On the peak were several folks who had just completed the full Appalachian Trail and more of them continued to arrive during the 45 minutes or so I spent at the top of Maine. The AT trail comes up from the south west (heading north east) whereas the Knife Edge which I took reaches the peak from the east (heading west). Another hiker, also not an AT hiker, pointed out to me how strange it is that the 2000 plus mile AT trail ends at the top of a mountain which requires hikers to then hike even more to get to ground transportation – valid point I thought. Why not end at a lodge, parking lot, or restaurant?

To descend Katahdin I decided to make a loop hike around the cirque formed by its South and Great basins so I dropped down to the north west reaching the saddle then proceed up to the 4765 ft. Hamlin Peak - a distance of 2 miles. From Hamlin I descended Hamlin Ridge and the North Basin Cut off trails to the Chimney Pond trail and back to the Roaring Brook Ranger Station, a distance of 4.9 miles (that is 6.9 miles from Baxter Peak).

The descent required 4 hours 20 mins which put me back to the car before 3pm having hiked over 4000 vertical feet and over 11 miles. Katahdin is an impressive mountain which lived up to the expectations I hoped it would. I appreciated the strictness of Baxter State Park, which prevents crowding, and helps provide a true wilderness experience.