



# American Youth Foundation Merrowvista

## Camper and Family Handbook Four Trails Backpacking Programs



My Own Self, At My Very Best, All The Time

# Table of Contents

<b>Welcome to Four Trails.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Welcome to the MV Backpacking Programs .....</b>	<b>3</b>
Expect the Unexpected.....	3
Four Trails Safety.....	4
Four Trails Fitness and Preparation .....	5
Equipment and Clothing Recommendations.....	6
What equipment does Merrowvista provide?.....	7
Communication and Photographs on Trail.....	8
Meals on Trail .....	8
Weather Conditions on Trail.....	9
Sanitation and Hygiene on Trail.....	9
Removal from Trips .....	11
<b>Odyssey Backpacking Program Specifics.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Merrowvista Contact Details .....</b>	<b>15</b>

# Welcome to Four Trails

Dear Four Trails Camper & Family,  
Whether this is your first year in Four Trails or you're returning for another year of adventure, we are so excited you have enrolled in a Merrowvista backpacking program this summer. Your participation in this program is the start of an experience where you will connect, play, and reflect in the outdoors, and we are thrilled to invite you on this adventure.



The foundation of Four Trails is the believe that, when we explore and discover the wonder of the natural world, we also explore and venture inward. When we pay to the astounding outdoors, we also pay attention to our equally astounding inner selves. We then use that self-knowledge to be better, more engaged community members.

This handbook is a good place to begin your preparations for the adventure ahead. The first section, Welcome to Backpacking Programs, covers many need-to-know topics for Explorer, Adventurer and Odyssey campers, and the following sections offer a thorough explanation of Voyageur campers can expect to do on trail. If you have any additional questions after reviewing this information, please email or call us. Get outside, listen, play, feel, connect, and happy trails!  
*Get outside, listen, play, feel, connect, and happy trails,*

The Merrowvista Adventure Team!  
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# Welcome to Merrowvista Backpacking Programs

## **Expect the Unexpected**

The AYF makes every reasonable effort to ensure a fun, safe camp experience where campers are encouraged to achieve their personal best. However, we cannot foresee or control every circumstance. Group dynamics, failure to follow instruction, missing a turn, interactions with people not affiliated with the AYF, inclement weather, and other environmental hazards can create unexpected challenges on trail. Our staff is trained for unexpected situations, and as a result our unplanned programmatic elements often serve as the greatest catalyst for teaching our participants life skills. Campers gain problem-solving skills as they resolve low-level incidents during their turn as “leader of the day” under the supervision of their trip leader.

Unforeseen circumstances can provide campers a valuable opportunity for critical thinking and problem-solving. Should an incident occur, our priority is camper safety and quality of the overall group experience. Our course of action may include but is not limited to: addressing the incident with individuals involved or the entire trip group, facilitating group collaboration to determine the next best steps, and/or intentionally adjusting the itinerary.

For a positive group and individual experience, it is important campers come to Merrowvista physically fit, mentally prepared, and with the correct equipment. Be sure to follow the specific training and equipment recommendations included in the following sections.

## **Four Trails Safety**

Just as our in-camp programs encourage campers to take social, emotional, and physical risks in healthy and safe ways, our adventure programs are designed to challenge campers to take healthy risks in an environment where they feel safe, supported, and valued. We encourage campers to try new things, to ask questions, and to explore what it means to be their own selves in settings outside of their comfort zones.

We also remain in constant dialogue with those inside and outside of the camp community to help us refine the safety of the Four Trails program. Though specific safety protocols vary based on trip type, most can be categorized into three areas:

### **1. Pre-Trip Preparation and Assessment Protocols**

All campers and leaders must arrive with a base level of physical and mental readiness that will allow them to participate for several hours in physically and mentally rigorous activities.

### **2. Routine Safety Monitoring for All Trip Groups**

Some protocols for monitoring trip safety include: daily group check-ins with camp coordinators, group safety and first-aid briefings, cell phone and satellite phone support, and van and transportation support when applicable.

### **3. Post-Trip Debrief and Route Evaluation**

Our post-trip safety protocols include facilitated trip debriefs between coordinators, trip leaders, and campers, ongoing route evaluations including contact with local and state officials, and annual route review conducted by camp directors and coordinators.

## Four Trails Fitness and Trip Preparation

It is important campers arrive with a base level of fitness that allows them to participate in physical activity up to several hours at a time. We have created Four Trails Fitness and Training Program and strongly recommend campers complete it to ensure their safety and enjoyment and that of their trail group.

Suggested activities to prepare for a Four Trails trip include:

- Cycling on a bike or exercise machine.
- Swimming, running, or another cardio-intensive activity.
- Yoga or other activity that increases flexibility and core strength.
- Strength-training exercises including push-ups, sit-ups, chin-ups, pull-ups and supervised weight training.
- Practicing healthy levels of hydration, diet, and rest.
- 

**Cardiovascular Endurance Assessment:** Find a 1.5-mile course (local running track or set a back road course with a car) and run and/or walk the course as fast as you can. Ideally, a Four trails camper should be able to complete this 1.5-mile course in less than 15 minutes.

### Suggested Training Program:

Week	Cardiovascular		Strength	
	days per week	minutes per day	days per week	minutes per day
1	3	30	2	15
2	4	30	2	15
3	4	30	3	20
4	4	30	3	30
5	4	40	3	30
6	4	50	3	30
7	4	30	3	45
8	4	60	3	45

These activities will boost a camper’s physical and mental readiness and minimize the stress related to these physically demanding trip experiences.

## Equipment and Clothing Recommendations

Merrowvista provides as much group gear and equipment as possible, such as kayaks, tents, dry bags, and backpacks. In general, campers are responsible for personal gear including clothing, sleeping bags, and sleeping pads. Please carefully review the [Four Trails packing lists](#) to ensure your camper has all the items necessary for a safe, fun experience. We encourage campers to consider cost-effective and environmentally sustainable gear options like borrowing from friends and family or purchasing secondhand items in good condition.

Campers must bring all required layers of clothing, including insulating and synthetic layers for warmth. Temperatures on trail can range from 40 degrees F to 90-plus degrees F, and the weather is variable. Review the following information and recommendations and contact us if you have questions.

### Fabrics

Synthetic fabrics such as polyester or wool are excellent insulators, and we indicate which clothing and gear items should be made of these materials [on the packing list](#). Cotton loses its insulating properties when wet and won't keep campers warm, comfortable, and happy on trail.

Conversely, many campers prefer cotton, nylon, or quick-drying fabrics that keep them cool during long, hot days of hiking and canoeing. Campers should both options available to adapt to fluctuating temperatures. [Learn more about outdoor clothing basics](#).

### Layers

Layering trip clothing is the best way for campers to adjust to changing environments. We recommend three layers, starting with a thin base layer (long underwear, tops and bottoms), a second layer (long-sleeve shirt, pants), and a heavier fleece outer-layer. The camper's raincoat should be able to fit these three layers underneath without feeling too tight or restrictive. [Learn more about layering basics](#).

### Rain Gear

Waterproof rain gear is necessary to keep campers dry and comfortable. Campers should test their raincoat in the shower before arrival. Families can purchase re-waterproofing sprays if the raincoat is several years old. [Learn more about rain gear basics](#).

### Sleeping Bags

There are two important factors to consider about your sleeping bag for this trip: warmth and compressibility. Sleeping bags must have a **synthetic fill**. Like polyester and wool, synthetic fill sleeping bags maintain their insulating properties

when wet. This is especially important for canoe trips, when so much time is spent on the water. Sleeping bags must also have a temperature rating of at least 30 degrees F. Warmer ratings (10 to 20 degrees F) are also adequate. Sleeping bags must also have a **compression stuff sack** with straps on the exterior that can be tightened to compress the bag. [Learn more about sleeping bags.](#)

### **Sleeping Pads**

Sleeping pads help campers sleep comfortably in a wilderness setting. There are many different kinds, but the main considerations are weight/size, insulating ability, and comfort. The most basic requirement for a sleeping pad is that it keeps your camper off the ground, such as the Therm-a-Rest [Ridge Rest](#) or [Z-Lite](#) sleeping pads. [Learn more about sleeping pads.](#)

### **Hiking Boots**

A key part of preparing for Adventurer backpacking is purchasing and breaking in boots. We recommend **high-cut, waterproof synthetic or leather hiking boots that provide ankle support**. [REI has an excellent guide](#) to choosing the right hiking boots.

Comfort, especially in the toe box, is the most important quality in hiking boots. While tightly laced up, knock the toe of the boots against the ground. If your camper's toe touches the front of the boot, they should buy a larger pair to avoid bruising toes on long down hills. They should also try on the boots late in the day when their feet have swelled to see if they still fit.

Finally, break them in. There is no such thing as breaking your boots in too much. Three days per week of daily wear plus a few practice hikes over the course of a couple months should provide appropriate wear before the start of camp.

### **What equipment does Merrowvista provide?**

- **Backpacks:** It is important to have a well-fitting pack of the appropriate size and quality. Merrowvista provides backpacks for all campers. If you are bringing your own backpack, please make sure it is a rugged backpack intended for a multi-day trek. Please avoid travel backpacks. In general, you will need about 75-85 liters (4,500-5,500 cubic inches), less for external frame packs. Please avoid travel backpacks.
- **Group Equipment:** Groups will carry a variety of equipment that will include tents, stoves, fuel, emergency food, water containers, and sanitation items.
- Trip leaders carry an extensive first aid kit and are trained in high-level first aid. Leaders also have cell or satellite phones and are in regular contact with Merrowvista. Finally, leaders also carry maps and resources to assist in route navigation and camping arrangements.

## Live Simply, Pack Less!

While on trail, every ounce of gear adds up. The [packing lists](#) detail exactly what is needed to keep you happy, safe, and comfortable while on trail. Please stick to these lists as best you can and contact us if you have any questions or concerns.

**Odyssey Campers:** Odyssey campers will spend minimal time at Merrowvista before and after the trip. Anything left behind at camp will be transported and stored in a secure location. Please refrain from bringing any additional heavy, bulky, or delicate items. **Please pack as few belongings as possible that will not go on trail with you.**



## Communication and Photographs on Trail

All Four Trails leaders carry a cell phone while on trail, as well as a satellite phone for more remote adventures. Merrowvista has regularly scheduled check-ins with trip leaders, and when possible, trip leaders notify Merrowvista when the group arrives at its daily destination.

Campers will can receive and send mail at camp before, between, and/or after their trips. All camper mail and care packages received while they are on trail will be stored until they return. Please review our care package and mail guidance in our [Merrowvista Camper & Family Handbook](#).

Due to the remote settings of thee experiences, groups cannot provide regular detailed real-time updates or photographs. Photos from Four Trails trips will be available online when groups have returned to camp. Families will receive SmugMug login information via email once their camper's session begins. Learn more about our [revised Photo Policy](#).

## Meals on Trail

Backpacking trip food is supplied, and our leaders are trained to plan and provide menus that are in line with the values of the [Merrowvista Food Program](#). Where possible, we offer premium fuel options, including whole grains, fresh fruit and vegetables, and alternative proteins. Some meals and snacks include: oatmeal with granola and dried fruit, bagel thins with hummus and summer sausage, soy butter and jelly tortillas, Southwestern chili, chicken and rice curry, trail pad thai, Clif Bars, various granola bars, and fruit leather.

Our goal is to ensure all campers are eating healthy meals in sufficient quantities. Junk food, candy, and soda do not provide the same level of nutrition as other food options, and in some cases may harm a physically active body. Campers cannot bring these items to camp or on trail.



## Weather Conditions on Trail

Weather on trail can be quite severe. Wind, rain, and extreme temperatures in particular can affect the plans of a trip group. Rain can cause less than adequate conditions, including slippery terrain, increased workload for the paddler or hiker, and loss of body heat on cool days. All these conditions are manageable, and Merrowvista has policies in place to respond to various weather conditions. It is important that all campers are physically fit and come prepared with the correct equipment. Please follow the equipment recommendations in this handbook.



## Sanitation and Hygiene on Trail

Sanitation and hygiene are just as important on-trail as they are in camp. For the health and safety of all group members, we encourage the following:

- Hand washing/sanitation is mandatory before all meals and after going to the bathroom.
- Groups use public facilities when available and practice Leave No Trace ethics.
- Personal and group dishes will be washed and sanitized after every meal. All food scraps will be disposed of responsibly.

## Removal from Trips

It is never easy to decide a camper should be dismissed, and we know it is a difficult thing for families to hear. **Behaviors that result in immediate dismissal include but are not limited to: threat to harm self or others, possession or use of drugs or alcohol, or possession of a weapon.** AYF staff must balance what is best for the group and community with the needs of an individual camper. If a camper's actions, statements, or attitude negatively affect their cabin or the wider AYF community, or if a camper is physically, mentally, socially, or emotionally unable to participate in camp activities, they may be dismissed. Please review Merrowvista's full Behavior and Dismissal Policies in the [2022 Camper & Family Handbook](#). If a camper is removed from a trip, AYF staff will return the camper to Merrowvista or a local airport. Families are responsible for picking up their camper as soon as possible.

If a camper is injured or becomes ill on trail, staff will arrange for the camper to be transported to the nearest hospital, and a Merrowvista staff member will contact the parent or guardian with the hospital's contact information.

If a camper cannot continue the trip, Merrowvista will arrange transportation back to camp, and parents should pick up their child as soon as possible. Parents are responsible for all medical and associated evacuation costs. Families may be eligible for a prorated tuition medical refund. Please review Merrowvista's full Withdrawal and Dismissal Policy in the [2022 Camper & Family Handbook](#).



# Odyssey Backpacking Program

Odyssey is the culminating backpacking trip offered at Merrowvista. During this trip, campers will have the opportunity to work on their low-impact camping and hiking skills, as well as build bonds within their mobile community. This trip is self-supported, so campers will carry loaded backpacks containing personal and group gear. They will also carry and prepare their meals daily. Odyssey will receive a resupply during the trip when the group will obtain new food rations, supplemental gear, and a change of clothes they have set aside prior to their departure. They will also have the opportunity for a rest day during the trip.



Toward the end of the experience, Odyssey campers will enter Baxter State Park where they will camp at the base of Mt. Katahdin and have one or more opportunities to summit, depending on weather.

## What is an average day like for Odyssey backpacker?

Odyssey campers will hike the most remote and rugged portion of the Appalachian Trail. It is crucial for groups to arrive at their campsite with enough time to set up camp, prepare dinner, share in a reflective activity, and get the sleep they need for the next day. Therefore, days will start early to account for weather, varying physical demands of terrain, etc.



Throughout the day, campers and leaders will exercise all Four Folds to work toward logistical,

personal, and group goals for the trip. Villages will also engage daily in a reflective activity to round out growth and understanding of the group experience.

All leaders will be equipped with first-aid kits and satellite phones and will have Wilderness First Responder training in order to manage illness or injury in the backcountry.

## Where do Odyssey backpackers hike?

Odyssey campers will start their trip near Shaw’s Boarding House in Monson, Maine. The following day, they will begin hiking the Appalachian Trail (AT) until they reach the northern terminus and highest summit in Maine, Mt. Katahdin – an overall itinerary of roughly 125 miles. This stretch of trail is known as The Hundred Mile Wilderness, for its remote access and undeveloped beauty.

Odyssey campers hike between 3 and 13 miles a day, depending on terrain. Along the trail, groups will encounter river crossings, diverse flora and fauna, boulder fields, and steep ascents and descents, which contribute to some of the most breathtaking scenery in New England.

## Resupply

Odyssey campers will have a resupply around the midpoint of their trip. At this point, we provide the group with all the food, gear, and clean clothing (set aside prior to leaving camp) necessary to complete their journey. Additionally, we will bring them fresh food for celebratory meals that day. They will have the opportunity for a rest day at that time.

An important part of resupply for campers is hearing from camp and from home. We’re happy to deliver letters of support from family, friends, and loved ones. However, due to the added weight from new food and supplies, we ask that you refrain from sending packages or other items that would need to be carried by your camper while on trail. Campers will receive packages when they return to camp after their triumphant return.



If you or someone you know wants to have a letter delivered to your child, please

have it sent to Merrowvista to arrive on or before the first Thursday of camp. Letters received by that time will be delivered with the resupply.

### **How can campers prepare for their backpacking trip?**

The best way to train for a backpacking trip is to practice carrying weight on your back! Take a hiking backpack or another large pack with a hip belt and put some weight in it. You could even just fill your everyday backpack with a bunch of books and walk around with it. Getting used to walking with weight on your back will make doing so for long stretches easier.





# American Youth Foundation

[www.ayf.com](http://www.ayf.com)

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In your preparation for the summer, please direct any questions regarding the information contained within this handbook or other questions about the Four Trails program to our team at [merrowvistacamps@ayf.com](mailto:merrowvistacamps@ayf.com).