

2026 Camper & Family Four Trails Handbook



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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 Four Trails 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 belief that when we explore and discover the wonder of the natural world, we also explore and venture inward. When we pay attention 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, bringing our own best selves to the things we do off the trail.

This handbook is a good place to begin your preparations for the adventure ahead. The first section, *Welcome to the Merrowvista Four Trails Programs*, covers many need-to-know topics for Explorer, Adventurer, Wayfinder, and Odyssey campers, and the following sections offer more details about what campers can expect on trail.

If you have any additional questions after reviewing this information, please email or call us. And be sure to check the Family Resources page for links to join one of our upcoming Four Trails Zoom calls to connect with your Four Trails coordinators, your fellow Four Trails campers and to get excited for the adventures ahead of you this summer!

Get outside, listen, play, feel, connect, and happy trails,

The Merrowvista Four Trails Team

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Welcome to Merrowvista Four Trails 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 and critical thinking skills as they resolve low-level incidents during their turn as “leader of the day” under the supervision of their trip leader.

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 the involved individuals 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 for their trips. Please read this manual closely and 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

Adapting to the weather conditions on trail is all part of the experience. You may set up camp in the rain or hike several hours in hot, humid conditions. The weather is beyond your control, but having the correct clothing and equipment for the situation is something you can manage.

Merrowvista provides as much group gear and equipment as possible, such as canoes, tents, dry bags, stoves, tarps, first-aid supplies, and backpacks. In general, campers are responsible for personal gear including clothing, headlamps, sunscreen, 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.

It may seem that all the items on the [Four Trails packing lists](#) are not suited to summer weather; however, **campers must bring all required layers of clothing**, including insulating and synthetic layers for warmth. Temperatures on trail can range from 40 to 90-plus degrees F, and the weather is variable. Review the following information and recommendations and contact us if you have questions.

If you are unable to obtain the recommended gear or clothing for your camper, please email us at merrowvistacamps@ayf.com out to us so that we can help provide it to them.

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 bring both options to have available for fluctuating temperatures and weather. [Learn more about outdoor clothing basics.](#)

Layers

Layering 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 the 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. Many rain layers are labeled as “water resistant” but not waterproof. Make sure you check tags or look up the model if you’re not buying new rain gear. 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. **If your camper opts to bring an inflatable sleeping bag, they must also bring a patch kit.** [Learn more about sleeping pads.](#)

Hiking Boots

A key part of preparing for adventure backpacking is purchasing and breaking in quality 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 their 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 of 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. Our packs are high-quality and come in many sizes. They are made to withstand the rigors of our trips and to hold the amount of gear and food campers will carry. **We do not recommend campers bring their own pack** unless they have used it for backpacking numerous times and are comfortable

adjusting it. If you are bringing your own backpack, please make sure it is a rugged backpack intended for a multiday trek. **You will need 75-90 liters** (4,500-6,000 cubic inches), less for external frame packs. Please avoid travel-backpacks.

- **Bikes:** Merrowvista will also provide bicycles to campers who are going on a cycling trip this summer. We have a fleet of bikes of varying sizes to ensure that all campers are comfortable and can travel efficiently. Like the backpacks, our bikes are high quality and are made for the type of cycling we will be doing, which is mainly on gravel. **We ask that campers do not bring their own bike for their cycling trip.**
- **Group Equipment:** Groups will carry a variety of equipment that will include tents, stoves, fuel, emergency food, water containers, and sanitation items.
- **Safety:** 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 and Voyageur Campers: Odyssey and Voyageur 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.**

Service Learning

Some Merrowvista Four Trails programs have a service-learning component. The specific project and length will vary depending on the program focus. These projects will give campers an opportunity to work collaboratively on a project that will have a lasting and positive impact on the site and program at Merrowvista. They will also foster teamwork, leadership development, and teach campers skills through fun and hands-on experiences.

As part of this project work, campers may have the opportunity to learn to safely use several types of power tools and other non-powered construction equipment. Campers will first be safely taught by a trained Merrowvista staff member and then demonstrate competency and safety before using these tools.

For the service-learning projects, campers will benefit from sturdy shoes and a good work outfit (long sleeves and pants). Gloves, hard hats, safety goggles, and other necessary safety equipment will be provided. Spare boots and other clothing that may be available if needed – don't hesitate to ask!

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 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 these experiences, trip leaders cannot provide real-time, detailed 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

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, hummus and summer sausage wraps, 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.

Menstruation on Trail

If your camper will be menstruating on trail, please make sure they pack the following:

- period products (pads, tampons, etc.)
- brown paper bags
- moist towelettes (Wet Ones)
- additional Ziploc bags

Sanitation is incredibly important on trail, and these products will be handled, stored, and disposed of with care.

Merrowvista Four Trails Programs

Explorer

Merrowvista's Explorer program introduces campers to extended multiday trips in the backcountry, while living as a low-impact mobile community. Campers are introduced to the technical campcraft skills with emphasis placed on the journey as much as the destination.

Explorers will embark on a 5-day hiking trip, a 3-day canoe trip, and a 4-day cycling trip.

Campers will hike in the Mahoosuc region of the Appalachian Trail in New Hampshire, averaging 3 to 9 miles a day. They will stay at pre-determined campsites, so it's important they make it to camp in plenty of time to find an adequate place to stay overnight.

Explorers will also canoe on the beautiful Richardson Lakes in Maine. Much of this trip will be dedicated to learning the ins and outs of canoeing, allowing participants to cement canoeing as a lifelong skill. Campers will stay at backcountry campsites along the lake, exploring historical sites and wildlife.

Finally, Explorers will cycle on the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail, which spans the width of Vermont. Mileage will be 20 to 30 miles per day. The trail is mostly gravel, and campers will only travel on roads for brief periods to get to campsites.

Throughout the day, campers and leaders will exercise the four folds to work towards logistical, personal, and group goals. Staff-led Village Insight discussions help campers make connections between discoveries made on trail with real life challenges at home and school.

In addition to their time on trail, Explorer campers spend a portion of their camp experience onsite at Merrowvista, providing opportunities for training and team building.

Adventurer

Merrowvista's Adventurer program is designed to build foundational hiking and paddling skills into longer expeditions. **Adventurers will embark on an 8-day hiking trip and a 6-day paddling trip.** Our days are intentional, designed to develop best self, encourage balanced living, and help campers create a positive community.

Campers will hike the Saddleback region of the Appalachian Trail in Maine, averaging 3 to 10 miles per day. Adventurers also stay at pre-determined campsites along the trail. Campers will also canoe on the Allagash River. Adventurers will practice navigation and water reading skills on their first river trip at Merrowvista.

Throughout the day, campers and leaders will exercise all four folds to work towards logistical, personal, and group goals. Trip groups will also engage in a staff-led reflective activity that adds meaning to their individual and group experiences.

Voyageur

The Merrowvista Voyageur program engages our oldest campers in a **16-day, multi-element trip in several iconic locations in Maine**. On their penultimate Four Trails Trip, Voyageurs will continue their leadership development through taking ownership over their trip. They will be given agency to curate the experience for themselves, practice group decision making and pioneer a new trip this year. Voyageurs will be challenged to discover and develop their personal best, to live a life in balance, and to foster a positive community.

Voyageur campers will cycle in Baxter State Park, home of Mount Katahdin, in a true multi-element expedition. They will cycle 10 to 15 miles per day between beautiful and rugged campsites. They will spend two nights at each site, using their full day to explore their incredible surroundings through challenging day hikes and reflective day paddling opportunities.

Voyageur campers will also backpack in the Bigelow range, just south of the Hundred Mile Wilderness, a precursor to their Odyssey trip next year, and sea kayak in the Stonington Archipelago, a stunning coastal area in Midcoast Maine.

Resupply

Voyageur campers will be resupplied twice on their trip at each transition between elements. 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 next leg.

An important part of resupplies 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.

Odyssey

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 one 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 Monson, Maine. The following day, they will begin hiking the Appalachian Trail 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.

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 [2026 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 [2026 Camper & Family Handbook](#).



American Youth Foundation
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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.