

Whitney

The accredited semester-long adventure for a group of 18 high school and gap year students embraces community and social justice.

Kroka base camp is hidden in the high country of southwestern New Hampshire, between the Ashuelot and Cold rivers on 120 acres of forests, hills, fields, cliffs and streams located next to protected wilderness area. Kroka brings "intention, connection and simplicity to the work we do," as one brochure states. Kroka is a wood-powered, solar-powered camp "village" featuring yurts, tipis, and tents built around a central cooking station, and includes an organic, and bio-dynamic farm with livestock; a woodworking shop; sewing shop; bike shop; and boat house, in which students actually build the boats they use.

The central part of the Kroka mission involves not only living in this magical "village," but leaving it to go on a journey. Many journeys, in fact, that include white-water paddling; climbing and caving; mountain bikepacking; and open water paddling and sailing.

How does the Arctic connect to New York City? "Arctic to Manhattan" links wilderness and sustainability to urban conservancy efforts through a 750-kilometer expedition from the heart of Canadian winter wilderness to New York City. The first month, Leg 1: Kroka Village – is spent training at base camp in Nordic and Telemark ski training ice skating; sledging; and ice climbing. Academic studies include French language immersion, practical math competency, geography and navigation, exploration of place and expedition leadership skills.

Leg 2: Backcountry skiing and snowshoeing begins when students leave Kroka via foot, skiing and snowshoeing the famous Catamount Ski Trail along the spine of the Green Mountains, to Farm and Wilderness Base Camp in Killington. In Leg 3: Chic Choc Range of the Gaspé Peninsula, students head north for a 14-day hut-to-hut backcountry ski expedition in the Gaspé Peninsula where they learn to navigate and telemark ski in the deepest powder in Eastern North America – sometimes as deep as 18 feet, staying in cabins of the Park National De La Gaspésie with the

comfort of woodstove and bunkbeds.

Leg 4: Uapishka Mountains in Northern Quebec and Labrador: a 200-kilometer backcountry ski trek begins in the remote Uapishka Mountains.

Students ski self-supporting, carrying a heavy pack with an Egyptian cotton winter tent and titanium stove, carrying all the food they will need for three weeks in the mountains, an expedition leg hosted by 82-year-old guide and arctic explorer, Jacques Duhoux, who has lived in these mountains for the last 35 years.

Leg 5: Lake Champlain and Hudson River to Manhattan is a 300-k 30-day trip, beginning with the launching of student-made eight-person voyager canoes to cross the border into the U.S. paddling south on Lake Champlain, then through the locks of the Champlain Canal, connecting to the Hudson River that will end in Battery Park, NYC. Leg 6: New York City, will focus on a week-long study of social and environmental justice, working with and exploring the work of such partners as NYC Composting Project, including service work and cultural immersion. The final leg of the expedition, students travel via train to Bellows Falls, Vermont, and mountain bike returning to Kroka base camp.

Why an expedition? Hannah Billian, 28, and Kroka alum, is passionate about her work as Kroka Semester Coordinator. Billian: "The trail pretty much does all of the teaching. Whether it is bad weather at a juncture when it seems a group cannot take on any more challenges. And still, they rise to the challenge, by allowing the unknown, spontaneity – whatever the group needs to rescue themselves from hardship – to rise. Somehow, the universe gives us what we need."

Billian: "There are many different opportunities for helping each other and for making mistakes. We have a non-judgmental, but serious, response to mistakes made. Though we may be frustrated, as instructors, we trust in the best-self of the student, to learn from their mistakes and seek to put their best self forward. By expecting best-self, somehow students rise to best-self, out of that positive, non-judgmental expectation."

My son Gabe, as a through-hiker, completing the 2,000-mile Appalachian Trail, talks of similar lessons. "The trail teaches you a greater understanding of grati-

tude. You get to a point where everything goes wrong, but when you are stripped down to survival needs, the trail teaches perspective – what really matters. Nothing is really that bad.

"Eventually, you think about what it is you need to think about. You cannot escape yourself. Like looking at the ocean, the journey of walking in the woods means you cannot help but fall into thinking about the deeper questions. The journey in nature makes people more thoughtful and considerate, better people, I guess. If everyone was more thoughtful, we would be doing a lot better."

Kroka offers a smorgasbord of other options: wildly divergent summer camps, creative school collaborations, and off-campus programs such as Suwanee River Expeditions in Florida, Legends of the Rio Grande in Texas, Labyrinth Canyon Expedition in Utah, and the hut-to-hut ski expedition in Gaspé, Canada.

Kroka has its roots in the childhood experiences of co-founder Misha Golfman, who emigrated from his native Russia at the age of 23. By then, he was already a master guide in outdoor wilderness survival skills, born of his family's yearly summer expeditions headed by his boatbuilder father and engineer mother – exploring the multi-ethnic divergent indigenous subcultures of Russia (of which he said, there are at least 180). The family would go in a new direction each year, for a month-long summer expedition experience away from the city, with no money at all, then forage, make all their own equipment and work for food.

Kroka's tag line is: "Where consciousness meets wilderness." It is the wild untamed places of the self, often laid bare by a journey into unknown territories inside and out, that feels risky, but therein lies the reason to pursue it. At the Boston Book Festival recently, Amanda Palmer talked about the experience of watching her best friend die: "Every time death happens, I'm reminded that it's stupid to be safe... Usually, whatever that is, wherever you don't want to go, whatever that risk is, wherever the unsafe place is – that really is the gift that you have to give."

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