

The Grand Teton

Teton Range in Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming

(13,770 feet)
July, 2015

The three Tetons: Grand, Middle, and South were named in the 1800's by French Trappers of the Hudson Bay Company. They called them Les Trois Tetons, which meant "the three breasts."

This is my trip report about attempting to climb the largest breast in The Tetons to benefit Big City Mountaineers. This was a special Backpacker Magazine sponsored trip, which meant we had a Backpacker photographer and everyone heard about the trip through the magazine's advertisement. It promised to be full of awesome people and I was not disappointed.

The Grand Inspires

"So, why The Grand?" I asked, wondering why someone who doesn't climb mountains would choose such a challenging one as their first. "It started when I was in 7th or 8th grade, I went to science school in Kelly [Wyoming], and I looked up at The Grand and said to myself, *one day*. It took a while [aged 39] but now it's time." "What about you?" she asked. "Similar story. This was the place I went on my first backpacking trip. It kicked my butt. I wore borrowed boots, so my feet were bloody within the first few miles, and I had an elevation hangover most of the way. I was a mess. I didn't return to The Tetons for over 15 years and when I drove through the park from the airport, I cried, it was so beautiful. It was like I was seeing the park for the first time. I didn't see its beauty before, I just saw this scary butt-kicking mountain range, which sort of haunted me. I think in that moment I decided to climb The Grand, it just took another 5 years for its time to come."

Day 0 – Gear Check

Finally a gear check, where I didn't feel like a newbie idiot. I actually remembered everything and they didn't take anything away. Nailed it!

Day 1 – Cats and Dogs

Rough start, a migraine was looming... this will be interesting. I picked up my new tent mate in town and we headed to the Lupine Meadows Trailhead (6,780 ft.) to meet the others: Nick, Eddy, Kristen (Nick is Eddy & Kristen's dad), Kristi, Craig, Keri, Michele (tent mate), Andrew (Backpacker photographer), and our guides: Nate, Jacob, and Paul. Since I jumped on this trip last minute, I didn't get a chance to get to know anyone before the trip (my original trip was canceled due to not enough participants, so I'm climbing a month earlier and a bit nervous I'm not trained well enough). There are 9 climbers and 3 guides, wow, larger group than I'm used to, but everyone seems game and friendly. Intros all around, community food packed and we're off.

Within our first 1.5-miles we see a bear eating about 15 feet from the trail. HOLY SMOKES! I REALLY wanted to snap a picture (so close), but we were reminded by guides "it's still a wild animal, guys" so I got nothing but a quick snap in passing. And then it began... learning about Kristen's twisted desire to hug wild animals without logic (luckily her brother and father won't have any of it and I suspect (hope) she is just joking).

Then just a few moments passed before our next excitement: the skies opened. I hoped for a 5-minute raincloud common in the mountains, so I forgo the rain jacket. I'm wrong; it's a downpour! We eventually stopped, giving me a chance to layer on my rain jacket, but I forgo the rain pants, still hopeful it'll pass. Wrong again! By this time I'm soaked and there is a stream of water running into my shoes from my drenched "wicking" hiking pants. I recanted my decision to only bring one pair of shoes, the approach shoes needed for rock climbing; these shoes were not made for weather and I wondered if I made the wrong choice. I dreamed about my one other pair of dry socks and how good they'll feel when I get to camp.

I see little on the hike to Corbet High Camp (11,000 ft.), my head is down trying to stay safe on wet boulders and focusing on breathing. I'm making good time, but am the only one pressure breathing - stark reminder I live at sea level. We successfully land at high camp, change into dry clothes and eat our way out of exhaustion before bed.

Day 2: Sleepless in The Tetons

No one sleeps. We all stumble our way to breakfast and peer at the ugly sky. We swap stories of feeling like we were going to fly away in our tents with 30 mph winds whipping the tent all night long and the rain pounding. Regardless, the guides are determined to get us out and start our climbing class to ensure we all have at least basic principles for being on a rope team. The clouds start to part slowly and by the afternoon it turns into a GORGEOUS day of climbing. We all revel in the beauty of being just below The Grand, the Tetons are inspiring and it feels great to be "in" the middle of it all.

Dinner comes early, and I'm sure to eat and drink A LOT to prep for the next day. We hit the sack about 6pm for a 2:30AM start. We are feeling pretty good, the weather seems to have passed and tomorrow is the big day!

Wrong again! By 6:30pm as I lay snuggled in the sleeping bag, the skies fall. Light at first and then it turns out to be a repeat of the night before, but this time we are besieged by thunder and lightning (which is a show stopper in the mountains). I'm still hoping it'll cease before we have to get up; my fingers and toes are crossed.

I'm extremely well hydrated so I wait for a slight break in the downpour to get relief. I'm in luck...and that is how the night went...up and down between the drenching rain.

Day 3: Up, down and all around

"Natalie, what time is it? I hear voices" asks Michele. "2:52. Damn, my alarm failed again!" I must have just gotten to sleep. We scramble to pack and prepare ourselves, departure time is 3:30 am and we need food and organization. I'm in the kitchen tent 15 mins later scarfing a breakfast burrito down. I'm not hungry, but that's not a requirement in the mountains, you eat anyway knowing you'll need it. My stomach resists, but I ignore and continue – I know this routine.

3:30 am – headlamps on, poop bag packed (yup, everything is carried out), and we are off. It's the first time I see stars in the sky and it feels warm, I am wearing WAY too much! I strip off some layers as we cache a few things under a boulder, to grab on the way down from the summit. Ahhh, I feel much lighter! It's a calm morning and we plug along making good time. Kristen is still nonstop; amazing how awake and talkative she can be this early, it livens me up.

The first fixed ropes are awkward. I'm pulled up, down and to the side all at the same time, but we were all successful. The hike was straight up, and I'm thankful for all the stairs I climbed in my building. I'm doing well and consistently pressure breathing to keep oxygen in my legs. It's hard to know what to wear since it's cold when we stop, and the wind is likely to pick up. I keep getting it wrong... either too cold or too warm (this is my ongoing struggle both on and off a mountain, I never know what to wear!). I'm looked to as the experienced one on this trip, it makes me laugh!

The sun is peaking, shooting its warm golden pink glow on the mountainside, this IS the reason I love alpine starts, such beautiful mornings. I try to quickly pull my snuggled camera out. It's a struggle to get it out of the protective inside pocket without getting behind or missing a key bit of info regarding what rocks others have tested for black ice or looseness. The climbing is slippery with snow and black ice so paying attention to the person in front of me is key, but this view is too good to resist capturing. I want to remember these moments when my mind fails me.

We take a break at the upper saddle; we are getting close to the top. The next hurdles include 3 pitch climbs and a few traverses, the summit is close. Nate is assessing the route, and to our surprise, he calls it: we are not going any further, it is way too icy and dangerous, guaranteeing way too many falls. WHAT? I thought the warm morning and clear sky ensured success; I was wrong again! We decided to head down a bit and head over to The Enclosure, the Plan B summit. As I start hiking down I'm acutely aware of the danger and fully support Nate's decision. If the conditions were worse at the top, with more difficult climbing, we would have had a very eventful day, likely including a rescue. Not today – safety first.

The Baby Summit: The Enclosure (13,280 ft.)

We arrive on The Enclosure, about 500 ft. below the summit of The Grand Teton, at about 8:30AM. We have a clear view of the icy route to the top [of The Grand] and see a climber who looks stranded; he's in the same spot for over 30 mins. Eventually he moves and disappears around a rock. We find out later he came down without summiting as well. It's a non-summit day for all teams on The Grand.

While on the summit, we are ecstatic by the blue bird day and at being on the top of something – our cameras are getting a workout. The chill is getting deeper in our bones; it's time to make our way back to the parking lot. We are only half way through our climb and the second half promises to be tough. Down climbing rock and ice isn't easy and my head is pounding (darn migraine is striking harder).

It's a precarious down climb with a rock fall included. We tried not to play the "what if" game and just kept climbing. As we finally entered the valley below, the surroundings were lush and I captured all the views I missed on the way up. It was an extraordinarily beautiful day! About 1.5 miles from the parking lot, my good friend Patty met me, such a wonderful reunion! We chatter like high school girls and when we finally make it back to the car around 4:30pm she had an awesome surprise for me - champagne and snacks! Patty ROCKS!

It was a great climb with super fun people. Together we raised \$35,550 for Big City Mountaineers. As for The Grand, I'll be back to finish it for sure!

Stats:

- Gained 7,000+ feet in elevation and estimate (round-trip) 20 miles in distance