

My Montana Challenge – A Trip Report

3 Peaks, 3 Mountain Ranges, 3 Days

Summit for Someone Benefit Climb for Big City Mountaineers

August 5 - 10, 2011

“So tell me again - Why do you consider *this* a vacation? Don't you want to relax?” he asked me with furrowed eyebrows as he waited for my response. I broke into a wide grin, peeked into the sky, searching for an answer he might understand. This isn't the first time he'd asked me this question. It's the same question he asks me before each trip. He knows he won't understand, but at least he *wants* to understand, and he tries. The sky was vacant of answers; so I decided to try and convince him that I DO know how to relax. “I went to Fiji in June,” I reminded him. *That* was a nice, tropical vacation. But he quickly reminded me that I swam with feeding sharks while I was there. Ok, so I don't consider it a vacation without vacationing from my comfort zone. He left, muttering “to each her own,” and then I was alone, sitting there in my office dreaming of my next mountain vacation.

Pre-Trip Planning

The “Too Nice Crew” (group I climbed Gannet Peak with last year) had planned a reunion climb to Granite Peak, but our “Leader” bailed on us (something about work taking over his life), and another member couldn't align his planets. So it was down to Patty and me, and we decided a “Girls Trip” was exactly what we needed. Patty promised me an epic adventure in Montana, so I was in.

On the Plane

My sister has this theory that the airlines pump strange gases into planes to make you cry. Maybe. I've teared up to embarrass quite a few male passengers - poor guys didn't know what to do. Well, no tears this time, just some whininess as I cursed myself for not finding a way to spend more time in the gym. I didn't feel prepared. I could have used the last 8 months to get in better shape, but was distracted by trying not to lose my mind. My world was knocked out of its orbit, with a teenage niece who suddenly moved in, a staff member who suddenly went on leave from my already very lean team, and a family member passing. My resilience took a hit. Thinking about getting lost in the mountains was all that kept me sane. So I had some defensible excuses for not being physically prepared. But, something told me the mountains wouldn't care that much. They have no sympathy for the weak. Patty is going to kick my butt! How could I even think that I can jump from sea level to the Montana Mountains in a hop, skip and jump? Who do I think I am?

My pep talks started early.

Day 1 - Emigrant Peak, The hard one comes first

Patty and I woke early and hopped into the car, coffee in hand. Our destination was Emigrant Peak in Paradise Valley, where films like “A River Runs Through It” and “The Horse Whisperer” were shot – a very nice place. After a little navigation fumbling, we made it to the trailhead, wondering why we took the Prius instead of the Subaru. Relatively unscathed, we started off with Patty's dogs, Lily and Tess.

Thank goodness Patty worked her legs hard at Crossfit the previous day, now I can keep up with her. She's cursing herself and feeling lame, but I'm thankful and relieved to be able to keep up. The trail was steep and beautiful as it traced the rushing stream, but soon climbed the ridge and just kept getting steeper. I was surprised by the lack of switchbacks. The “trail” went straight up, and I was reminded that we weren't in California. This trail wasn't used much, and not maintained. So we made our way by visual intelligence instead of signposts. The flowers were sprinkled all along the trail, and Patty pointed out rare flowers, like exquisite White Columbine. As I was in the middle of telling one of my many fascinating stories (***wink, wink***), catching Patty up on the past year, she shouts, “Look at that!! What is

it?!?” It looked like a cute little kitty. Heck if I know, I’m thinking, she’s the Yellowstone Guide. “Mountain Lion,” I said expertly, making a mental note to hit the books when I got back. Maybe it was an alley cat, I’m not a felinologist. But we were in the mountains, right? The little thing had huge pointy ears, and a tail longer than its body. It was just a pup and hadn’t even grown into its hands and feet. We were so close to each other! It was my first mountain lion sighting and I was totally awed.

The real climb began as we scrambled over rocks in an exposed area of the trail. We chatted away to keep ourselves distracted as we sucked air, wondering how much farther, but not daring to ask. We bumped into hikers heading down, and got the inside scoop that we’d have the peak to ourselves. No climbers were behind us, we were it for the day.

Minutes later we finally arrived at the summit. We could see everything. As I mocked a spinning top, I see to the north the Absaroka and Beartooth mountain ranges, the Crazy Mountains, Castle Mountains, Big Belts, and Bridger Range. To the west, the Gallatin range, Madison range, Gravelly range, Tobacco Roots, and Pioneer Mountains. Then Yellowstone National Park and the distant Teton range to the south. Wow, there are so many layers of mountain ranges in Montana. We hugged, snapped a lot of pictures, and got a little nourishment. As we sorted through the summit box we saw lots of mementos left by previous climbers, but no summit log. The Kung Fu Panda windup toy was my favorite. As the clouds darkened, Patty got nervous – ‘it’s time to hightail it down.’ She’s a successful guide for a reason - she’s respectful and wary of the weather. I like her conservative and safe approach. She gently reminded me to hurry off the exposed rock area as fast as I could. After a tired slog, we made it back to the car a little short of breath and just in time to hear fat drops of newly fallen rain land on the car roof. Timing doesn’t get much better than this.

Tired, and cautiously aware this is only day one of three, we stopped at Chico Hot Springs to let the muscles soak in the natural hot spring (hence the name). The pool felt so warm and welcoming, even as the rain poured down. I took a deep breath and inhaled the best beer I’ve had since living in Germany (everything tastes perfect after a long hike). It was the perfect replenishment drink for the end of a perfect day. I’m a very happy camper.

The stats:

Emigrant Peak, Western Beartooth Mountains

Elevation: 10,921 ft.

Elevation Gain: 4,687 ft.

Distance: 12 miles

Time: 6.5 hours

Day 2 - Mount Blackmore - A day of Alpine beauty

After a yummy breakfast of eggs and fresh summer veggies, we headed to Mount Blackmore, located in the Gallatin National Forest. It is a beautiful volcanic peak located just south of Bozeman, with the trailhead starting at Hyalite Reservoir. Only Lily was with us so Tess could get a rest day. Our legs needed a little warm up, so we started swiftly up, and I could tell Patty was feeling much better (or I was feeling much worse). After the initial warm up, I launched into the day’s stories. The trail was well worn with a steady incline, but reserved compared to the previous day’s start. That quickly changed as we climbed steeper. The breeze cooled as it surfed the snow patches that a heavy winter and a short summer had left. It kissed my face and caressed my core, sending shivers down my spine.

We saw the wildflowers in full bloom. The varieties ranged from Spring to Fall because of the strange weather earlier in the year. I enjoyed all the colors and was duly impressed as Patty named the flowers. Or, maybe she was just making things up? I’m not a philatelist. We reached a meadow where the ridge

and summit sprawled out before us, with the Crazy Mountains on one side and Spanish range on the other. The views were spectacular.

This time the trail did have switchbacks, very long switchbacks, and we were on the ridge in no time compared to the previous day., We asked a couple to take pictures of us as we stood on our second peak together. The view was breathtaking and the breeze obedient. We nourished ourselves and chilled out with Lily before deciding to make our way down for a dip in the reservoir to relieve our tired legs. The jaunt down the hill was a BLAST! I was totally focused on a refreshing dip in the freezing water followed by a glass of wine, so I ran, actually I sprang down, using my hiking poles as pole-vaults to spring me along the trail. We made it down in excellent time to strip and dip, forcing ourselves to stay in the numbing water for at least 15 minutes.

Later that afternoon, a mountain hailstorm came down upon us. But we were already inside, safe and dry with glasses of wine in our hands. We toasted ourselves for having another peak to notch on our belts. Then onward to check out the town to walk off the looming soreness for a few more hours. We ended the trek in the town's only wine bar. Thank goodness for a delicious numbing agent to help my tired dogs.

The stats:

Mount Blackmore, Gallatin Range

Elevation: 10,154 ft.

Elevation Gain: 3,434 ft.

Distance: 10 miles

Time: 5 hours

Saddle Peak – A girl's hike

A longtime girlfriend of Patty's, Annie, arrived back in town the night before. She was ready to hit the trail and get the gang back together after being away for several years. After a very casual morning of more awesome eggs and veggies, we picked up Annie and her friend Christine and headed to Saddle Peak, which is off the popular "M" trail in the Bridger Range. Saddle Peak is a prominent bump on the Bridger Range, and it promised to have impressive views. We arrived at the trailhead and met up with even more girlfriends. Annie is a hoot and the spunky leader. She ran up the trail ahead of the group so she could "get her ya-yas out." I'm not sure what that meant, but figured it best not to question it.

I hiked at a swift pace, still behind her but also ahead of the group. It turned out that I was the only one who wanted to summit the peak. They were all "been there done that". So I hustled so as not to keep the group waiting on the return. The hike was peaceful but lonely. I was glad Patty had new hiking partners as I'd run out of stories. The hike was tough and it's probably good that I had no one to whine to. My legs were heavy, but the flowers illuminating the mountainside entertained me. I made many stops along the way for pictures.

I finally arrived at the saddle to breathe in the view. It was gorgeous and I knew it would be even better from the top. I threw my head back to get a full view of the peak ahead of me. This is where the trail got steep, very steep, and lined with loose rocks. The top turned out to be deceptively far. My first estimates were that I would be on the summit in a manner of minutes, but it took longer, a lot longer. I crowned the summit - fiddlesticks! It was a false summit, the real one was along the ridge. I snapped some pictures, and started munching on snacks as I trotted along the ridge to the real summit. I'm glad I remembered to pack my tripod, but a little sad the final summit picture wouldn't include Patty. I beamed my smile and posed for the self-portraits.

The view was vast and included the Gallatin and Madison Ranges, the Crazy Mountains and the Absorkas. It seemed like most of Montana was visible from this point. Wow. After a breather, I packed it up and heaved down the trail as fast as I could – it was time to catch up with the group that surely reached the saddle of the peak and had turned around by now. I “jogged” down the trail as best as my beaten legs could take me, eventually reaching the group to hails of congratulations. I was smiling but ready to relieve my weighed legs, so I maintained my lame jaunt. When we got to the river, Annie, who was naturally ahead of the group had already identified where to soak our legs. The water was pooled and the perfect depth for a leg dip. It was cold, feet numbing cold, but felt oddly good, and revived us for the last mile of the trail. It was another exceptional day, and it was awesome knowing that it wasn’t over yet. We made plans to meet up for dinner at a local hot spot and headed back to the Walton Resort (Patty’s place) to freshen up and head into town for a much-deserved drink, which lead to several more. Patty and the gang helped me celebrate my goal of 3 mountains in 3 days. It was perfect – my daydreams didn’t do the views justice.

The stats:

Saddle Peak, Bridger Range

Elevation: 9,162 ft.

Elevation Gain: 4,352 ft.

Distance: 9 miles

Time: hours