

Mt. Hood Jaunt

July, 2009

Prologue

After a rush at the airport we arrived Timberline Lodge at Mt. Hood Oregon just in time to go for a short walk before dinner. It's a very unique lodge and although the rooms are a bit pricey for a very basic 4 walls, the views are spectacular. Mt. Jefferson (46 miles away) on one side, and Mt. Hood on the other – sandwiched between immensity. For those of you unfamiliar with Timberline Lodge, allow me to give a short synopsis. It is one of the few (if only in the US) mountains that provides year-round skiing/snowboarding. In fact, they make more money on skiing/snowboarding in the summer than they do in the winter and it's one of the premier training grounds for Winter Olympians. To say the least, this is “the” place to be if you are a trendy snowboarder who wants bragging rights about ripping it up on the slopes without a shirt. We saw quite a few “hipsters” sporting only a very red chest (sunscreen isn't hip apparently). With all this said, the result is Mt. Hood does not cater much to climbers. This became clear when shopping at the lodge gift shop (that stocks enough board wax for an entire snowboard gang for a decade) and asked if they had any carabineers. Instead I received a perplexed look from the clerk who simply said “cara-what?” Nuf said, these are not climbers, although the mountaineering guide's office was just next door.

Snow School

Bright eyed and bushy tailed at 8AM the next morning, we met our guide, Rodney - the man we are trusting to guide us safely up AND down the mountain. He brought us to a nearby slope to show us the latest mountaineering dance, play with crampons, and practice getting roped up (those things can trip you up - literally). As I was day dreaming about what a lucky girl I am as I would soon be short roped with two very attractive men, I experienced my only slip on the mountain (luckily just while we were practicing) and slid down the hill on my back (actually turned out to be quite fun). Little did I know this would be my only sliding experience, which is my preferred method of easily getting down a mountain (glissading rocks!). After school, it was off to bed for our “night” which actually started around 4:30PM.

The Climb

After a few hours of “sleep”, we headed out at 11:30PM with a warm breeze on a snowy mountain. It was a quiet climb, if you ignore the night workers grooming the slope for the morning boarders – which only confused my buddy even more as he kept wondering why one of them couldn't take us to the top of the ski lift (I tried explaining that lots of mountains have roads to the top, but if you drive to the top, it's not climbing... but he kept trying to convince me that there is usually a few feet you have to walk before getting to the actual summit and felt that might “count” – nice try silly boy.).

Right off the bat, I realized my plastic boots were going to be trouble (some of you may remember me swearing I wouldn't put these things back on after my last Shasta trip... I'm quickly remembering why). We stopped at the top of the ski lift and I applied blister bandages (already sporting quite a few as a precaution – but obviously not enough). Another short period, I got another hot spot on the other foot so we had to stop again for more applications of wonderful blister bandages. I rarely experience blisters (losing a toenail maybe, but blisters... not really) so I suddenly felt a bit wimpy and was wondering if this was a reason people turned around.

As I questioned how I would get up the rest of the mountain, which was still quite a LONG way from here, we trudged up Palmer's glacier further and suddenly it became apparent I wasn't the only one experiencing issues. Bud was getting debilitating cramps in his quads, which he never experienced before. I loaded him up with Advil and we kept moving, checking in periodically. All the while, I was secretly thinking- maybe he would call it and I would have an excuse to go back to bed. But as I day dreamed about how he would insist that I keep going if he

turned around and how miserable it would be to do the climb alone – we finally hit our stride. Bud’s cramps subsided, I no longer felt my blisters, and we finally got past all the ruckus of the snow cats and talus (miserable hiking terrain).

At long last, the mountain opened up to pure night hiking beauty. Ahhh, this is why I do this. A sliver of a moon appeared that lit up the snow just enough to see the silhouettes of the slope we just climbed and the neighboring peaks, incredible. Although this was one of the most urban night climbs I’ve done due to Portland’s nightlights drowning the Milky Way, it was still powerful.

As we approached Hogbacks we inhaled the rotten egg stench from the volcanic sulfur springs - a bit nauseating. When it was time to rope up and climb the final 750ft straight up a 60% + incline, the sky glowed blue with the anticipated sunrise. As we climbed up the beautiful snow cups (which are warn scoops in the snow that act like large steps up the mountain) I watched out for Bud’s crampons (danger of being shot roped on a very steep slope) and took in the view – holy smokes Batman, this is steep. I’m secretly thanking Lyon Street stairs in San Francisco which helped us train for such a steep “stair climb.”

The crux of Mt. Hood is the final climb through the chute and over the lip of the ridge - it is the final push that tests our ability to “hold it together” when feeling fatigued. The snow disappeared, the talus turned to powder sugar and the rocks were no more than a facade with the stability of a sand castle. Rodney decided to do a top rope belay so Bud was left to lead the way. As he “carefully” displaced sand rocks out of the way so they wouldn’t fall on my head, he was scolded aggressively by Rodney – something about tumbling rocks and house of cards - lesson learned. We popped over the final lip and were greeted by the sun cracking its eye open - spectacular.

The sky’s palette of pink, orange and blue with a foreground glacier was more than I expected. We weren’t to the summit yet (just a short walk across a jagged, wind swept ice field), but I couldn’t contain myself from starting the photo session. Rodney decided to head off, in hopes we would follow, which we eventually did. We made the top of the summit at 5:30AM! As soon as we got there we quickly threw on our warm layers (it was a bit windy and we were glad we brought the “puffies”), started fueling up on fantastic PB&Js (yummy cranberry jam), and took a ton of pictures. Our 360 degree view presented Mt. Rainer, Mt. Adams, and Mount St. Helens in one glance, wow! After some well earned inhalation of the view, it was now time to begin our real hike – the climb down.

On the way down, I was able to capture all the views masked in darkness as we made our ascent. This is the best part, the views heading down! Although it felt like a casual descent, we hiked a lot faster than any of us anticipated (even if the snow conditions didn’t warrant a nice luge ride down). This elevated us to “Rock Star” status with our guide as he explained that his clients who take the snow cat assist (which cuts out 1 mile and 2500 ft elevation out of the hike) usually take 10-12 hours to hike and we did it in less than 10 hours without the ride. Regardless, it felt strange hiking with our final destination in view – it felt close enough to touch, but was still hours away. At last, we arrived at the lodge by 9AM in good spirits with no injuries – all in all, a successful climb!

Mt. Hood is the highest peak in Oregon. It’s not a very high mountain, but considered dangerous due to its technical difficulty at the top, which we clearly understood but were relieved to know we could “handle” it thanks to our awesome guide.

Epilogue

Anyone that’s been on a few mountains understands that coming down the mountain and getting home safe is the most difficult part of the climbing experience. In fact, our guide shared that more accidents happen when the climber drives home (tired after an all night climb) than on the mountain. We were no exception. After turning in

the rental gear and having our decompression chat with the guide, we headed back to our hotel room just in time for checkout. It's amazing how long it took us to shower and pack, we were moving slowly, but in good spirits. Although I was experiencing a strange nausea (my guess is due to my high heart rate because I was working off pure adrenaline to keep me moving). After a celebratory drink and ingesting some much needed energy we got in the car to head to Portland – rally time! All I can say is I barely kept it together before we could find a Starbucks. We arrived at my good friend's house just in time to crash for a short time before heading to dinner to celebrate.

Mt. Hood stats:

Mt. Hood: 11,245 feet

Total Distance: 7.4 miles (from Timberline Lodge – no snow cat assist)

Start Elevation: 6,000 ft

Total elevation gain: 5,249 (and loss)

Total hiking time: 9.5 hours (6 up and 3.5 down) – earned us “Rock Star” status

Weather God status: On our side!

Number of fatalities so far this year (that I found): 4

Greg's Suggestions for Mountain Improvements;

- Have a bar at the summit.
- Guide carries all personal gear.
- Take the ski lift down the last mile of the mountain.
- Guide carries ingredients for margaritas in his pack.

Memorable quotes:

- “You're going too fast” said a stressed Greg to me as I'm dangling on the end of the rope below him with zero control of the rope (Rodney above us is releasing the rope). Little did he realize I'm just his soft landing should we fall – lucky guy.
- “You are one of the most hydrated women I know,” said Rodney as I went for my 4th pee on the mountain. He said it was a compliment, as he can't usually get women to go on a mountain, but I'm not so sure.