

# Mt. Rainier

August, 2009

Being a newbie to mountaineering, Mt. Rainier provided so many “firsts” in such a condensed time. I was surprised such an adventure could be had in such a short time and in close proximity to city lights.

## **Orientation & Gear Check**

We arrived SEA-TAC airport Tuesday morning and headed straight to Mt. Rainier, so I assumed. We didn't see much as the shroud of clouds hid it from evaluation. This weighed on me as I contemplated the complications and disappointment weather could provide and remembered Seattle's nickname, “Rain City”... ugghhh.

Climb orientation was scheduled at 3pm and it was nearly that as we rolled into the Paradise Lodge parking lot. We quickly grabbed our duffels and headed to the building marked “Guide Service”, only to be received by a silent room with a nice guy behind a computer wearing a bewildered look.

The nice guy explained they moved the guide location about 5 years ago (strike 1 for listening to someone else instead of reading the material closely). It then dawned on us that we would need to drive back down the mountain (45minutes) to where we just picked up our rental gear (In hindsight, it makes a lot of sense to have the gear check at the same location as the rental gear shop).

To say the least, we made quite an entrance... picture the looks we got as sis walked in with 4 inch heeled boots and sporting a very cute (hot) top. Who says you have to look like a mountaineer to be one? We luckily missed very little and spent the next few hours proving we brought the right gear. We were finally done and off for a well deserved dinner (HA, all we did was sit around all day – but heck, we need to eat well for the mountain).

## **Mountaineering Day School**

Ahhh, plastic boots – the joy of plastic boots! I love the feel of hard boots weighing my feet down and giving me no flex with its wooden insole. Amazing footwear! I wished it was acceptable to wear them everyday, to work, out dancing, to the beach, to the gym ..... OK, I lie.... they are the most evil creation made by man!

We started off with a beautiful 2 mile hike through the meadows of gorgeous wildflowers of Mt. Rainier sporting our plastic boots so we could “test” drive them – fun stuff! The glaciers have melted back quite a bit and there is a lot less snow than I remember from my visit 10 years earlier.

It was quite a delight for me as I didn't expect all the colors and wildlife. The marmots were out in hordes and even gave us a show by dancing together. What a glorious day – crystal clear with an electric blue sky. When we finally reached the snow field which would become our classroom for the day, we had a perfect view of Mt. Adams, Mt. Hood and Mt. St. Helens. Phenomenal!

The day was quickly filled with learning to walk (again) on crampons, using an ice axe to save ourselves (and teammates) and lots of practice sliding down the mountain with a few abrupt “test” falls to see how we'd do. No one was kicked out, so I'm assuming we all passed. The real test would be in a couple of days.

It was interesting to see the different philosophies each guide presents as the “right” way of doing things. My last guide on a different mountain explained one technique regarding how to carry an ice axe and the philosophical controversy in teaching this technique, whereas my current guide simply stated that the last guide was “wrong” and his was the correct method.

Regardless, I did as I have always done when trying to get an “A” in class - do it whatever way the current instructor wants me to do it and then figure out my own way in my own time.

### **Leaving Paradise**

We headed out at 9:30AM with loaded packs for our first “official” day on the mountain. The destination was Camp Muir at 10,060ft a mere 4.2 miles away – this should be a piece of cake (HA, maybe without a pack!). I had a loaded pack with an estimated weight of 40+ pounds. Not my heaviest pack, but I was hoping to go light, leaving the extra amenities behind (who needs clean underwear!), but it didn’t seem to help since I was handed heavy mountaineering safety gear to carry.

We are blessed individuals (by who, I don’t really care), as it was another perfect weather day, the wildflowers delighted me with their brilliance, the marmots were active and the mountain towered in glory. The hike was steep but stunning.

My only grumbling was the lack of opportunity to stop to take pictures, we were herded and pushed to ascent rapidly (ok, rapid for carrying a pack at elevation) and stay together as a group (single file, close together – not my favorite way to hike). I rebelliously lagged behind and snuck my camera out to snap photos as much as I could and then “jogged” to catch up with the group. This worked until I got the “it’s important to show you can keep up with a group and you’ll get time to take photos later” lecture. Ok fine! Although personally, I think showing I can keep up with the group when stopping along the way displayed much more stamina than was realized, but whatever.... I won’t argue with the guide, I might need his help later.

The hike didn’t get “sketchy” until we reached the final slog up Muir Glacier to Camp Muir – the terrain steepened (to approximately 45+ degrees) with plenty of ice. The boys (b-friends who were just going to hike with us for the day) didn’t have crampons on like Sis & I. I was concerned they might slip so I attempted to create “footsteps” as best I could by digging into the ice/snow on each step, which was a bit tiresome.

When we got to the ice river I started creating steps with my crampons, which took a lot more effort and time. I then got scolded for the second time that day about how it’s important to show I can keep up with the group and cutting steps was not my priority. My immediate thought was “what the hell buddy, not only can I cut steps but I’ll still make it to the top with everyone else!” But since he really didn’t know me, I decided being a “team player” was to my benefit (he did have the authority to send me off the mountain) and so I played “nice” by simply saying ok and pleading with the b-friend to turn around as soon as he started slipping (he’s got decent self preservation so I figured if he kept climbing, he was comfortable).

We soon met our first crevasse, again and again. I later heard this was the “worse” year in “yada, yada” years for Rainier to have this many crevasses opening up – Holy Tomato Bat Man, they weren’t joking. The first time I was on Rainier, I only made it to Camp Muir, but didn’t cross a single crevasse on the way. I was on a different mountain entirely.

Once at Camp Muir we quickly got “settled” into our home for the night which consisted of a little wooden shoebox full of wood platforms with thin foam padding – our princess beds for the night (damn, I forgot my pillows). We took a few pictures with the boys before they headed down for their journey back to the lodge (hot shower, hot meal and plenty of wine was sure to be their agenda) and Sis and I were left to tend to our wounds and prepare for the next day.

After wrapping our feet with fresh (or more) blister care, hearing the “what to expect tomorrow chat”, eating a “bag of slop” (as Sis refers to our dehydrated meals), we settled down for the night at about

6pm. Sis was out in minutes and I spent the next 6 hours counting my blessings, and mentally going through every possible scenario in life except for the ones that might actually happen.

### **Summit Day**

12AM wake up with lights on after a sleepless “night.” The guides prepared us with the clothing recommendation for the start and hot water for breakfast. I tried Java Juice for coffee (note to self, don’t try new things on the mountain) and since I don’t like black coffee, I had to pour oatmeal in mine to be edible. Since the guides warned us not to change any habits today, sis brought Irish Cream for her coffee.

Considering all the factors, I felt good and was looking forward to the day, which made me wonder, “When did I become a Mountain Chick?” -10 years ago being on the same mountain I was wishing I was at the spa.

1AM start with only 2 thin long sleeve workout shirts and no hat – it was a relatively warm morning considering we were at 10,060 ft, on a ridge (wind) and it was 1AM. We started cold, but we wouldn’t stay that way for long. I was assigned to C’s team, which consisted of Sis, Me and Colorado (in that order).

The first leg was a traverse across the Cowlitz Glacier, up and over Cathedral Gap, where we hiked on rock with crampons, which is like wearing Stellets. We had a quick break on the snow field and it took awhile to warm up, but I was feeling good and happy to be hiking in the darkness so I couldn’t see the obstacles ahead.

We were warned the next leg would be twice as long and more strenuous due to the lack of safe places to stop for a break, so if we didn’t think we would make it to the next rest stop we should turn back now because we couldn’t stop again until we made it to the next safe break spot.

The lead guide checked in with each of us for the affirmative go ahead and we headed out with a traverse across a rock fall area and again glad to not have a visual on the boulders causing the noise. “Holy smokes” was what I thought later in the day on the way back and saw the size and number of the rocks that fell. There was certainly no dilly dallying allowed.

The next hurdle was Disappointment Cleaver (appropriately named) consisting of a rock wall that went straight up in short steep switchbacks full of talus and big rocks. The talus quickly slipped under our footing forcing us to slip at least a step back for each two steps forward, which no help from the glorious crampons. This is where the serious mountaineering experience began.

Heading up “The Beaver” (my little nickname) not only required balance and some skill, but it’s tiresome and we are rapidly gaining elevation. Maintaining focus was key, especially as the wind picked up which hinder our ability to see as boatloads of dust and rock dumped into our eyes. To make matters trickier, we were short roped which resulted in getting tugged by the person in front and held back by the person behind so the only resolution was to climb in perfect harmony. Some might say our rhythm was off, but I’d like to think of it as each of us just playing different genres of the same song. This is when sis hit her proverbial wall.

Sis was having a tough time getting her rhythm for pressure breathing (a critical technique) and the more our guide tugged at her to hurry up, the more anxiety sis felt which meant less focus on pressure breathing. Sis just didn’t have a chance to “catch her breath.” At one point, after the guide kept trying to “motivate” sis by telling her to “dig deep” and stating she can’t stop, I recognized the “stance” that

only a sister would notice. The stance that comes right before an “FU” and a stubborn holding of her ground. I thought, “Oh my, not here.”

I probed (as sweetly as I could exhale) and let her know she couldn't stop here because it wasn't safe. She kept going and allowed each of us to give our motivational pep talk (which we all needed) to keep us going. So we told each other how great of a job we were doing and to keep our spirits up. Colorado (our anchor) was particularly sweet with his enthusiasm and even pointing out constellations along the way to distract us from the pain and remember the beauty of the night.

It was a beautiful clear night. Meanwhile, I kept thinking “Where is the freaking' top of this thing? I'm about to inhale the stars!” I was getting a bit anxious because I wasn't sure how sis was doing. But after a wrong turn, a scramble back down, and another long climb, we made it to the top of the ridge where the other teams were already resting at stop #2 (Stop # 4<sup>th</sup> is the summit, so we are half way there!).

As I mentioned before, at dinnertime the night before a guide from the other group gave us the “what to expect the next day” chat. Part of that chat included indicators we should recognize to know when we should turn back, including “drooling and calling for our mommy.” At the time we laughed, trying to imagine any of us crying for our mommy. When sis was asked on the top of “The Beaver” how she was doing, she could only verbally get out “I'm calling for my mommy and we don't even talk anymore.” The lead guide was a bit perplexed and daunting a nervous look but got the picture that sis was done.

Sis and I bid our goodbyes with hugs and “Love Ya” and I roped up with my new team. Sis made it to 12,300 ft at the top of Disappointment Cleaver – no small feat especially given it was her first mountain climb! I laughed as she apologized that she couldn't go any further, she had no idea how impressed and happy I was that she even considered joining me on a mountain! I was so happy to share the experience this far with her and glad she would soon be put out of her misery by heading down.

### **The Fall Team**

I was assigned to the lead guide's team (87<sup>th</sup> trip) which consisted of Mt. Mom, me, Young J, and the Veteran (7<sup>th</sup> trip) and since they were waiting, no break for me. I quickly tied in, added a layer and off we went for the 3<sup>rd</sup> leg of the climb.

We were finally back on snow/ice which felt much better because we were long roped (less pull/tug), but it also meant the crevasses returned, which were plentiful got quite wide. This was true mountaineering! Mt. Mom was struggling with the new obstacles because they simply “freaked her out” which is tough when you have a lot of obstacles ahead, such as our first ladder crossing (which they neglected to mention in Mountaineering School!)

The ladder had two planks to walk on and a fixed rope that ran at waist height which had good tension. It was actually a piece of cake (to my glee). The next obstacle was an ice ledge above a sheer cliff, which required facing the ice while rounding the corner standing like a ballerina hugging the wall with your ice axe in one hand and the fixed rope in another. Mt. Mom was hesitant, for good reason, but this unfortunately gave her time to be even more scared, which resulted in her taking a slip (fall seems too abrupt) off the ice ledge.

I saw it, yelled “Falling” and dug into a self-arrest position, while also standing on the ledge – awkward! Luckily she didn't go far and had the fixed rope in one hand as I barely had to hold her much, but I was nervous she would fall again or let go of the fixed rope. It was uncomfortable standing there, but not bad considering I'd rather be where I was at, rather than Mt. Mom. A “human haul” was soon rigged when the guide noticed Mt. Mom was beat and couldn't climb back up.

An hour later, which gave me the opportunity to watch an amazing sunrise (but no pictures allowed since I was in a “get ready” stance to do self arrest); Mt. Mom was hauled up and on her way back down with sis.

One of the challenges with mountaineering is maintaining the mental state since physical ability only gets you so far – so getting scared can be debilitating. Our guide was not a happy camper because we were really pressed for time. My legs were a bit jiggly due to standing in an awkward position in the cold but I know I can be a fast hiker when necessary and was confident we could make up some time. So we were on our way with a vengeance.

### **Crossing the Chasm (a.k.a. Velcro is Amazing!)**

I thought wrong. We crossed several crevasses by stepping over them, which meant I had to trust my body would make it across the wide span. No jumping allowed. I suddenly felt my legs were short stubs and realized the importance of not looking down. So far butterflies were kept at bay and we progressed steadily and swiftly – I was told by our guide several times not to fall (unnecessary advice – I was already trying not to).

We came to our second ladder crossing which consisted of two ladders tied together with a small snow bank in the middle supporting them. This was the deepest and widest crevasse on the mountain. I didn’t want to look down but since I had to look at the ladder as I walked across, I got a glimpse. The blue ice was gorgeous and I couldn’t see the bottom.

The first ladder felt stable although it only had one plank in the middle and the fixed rope was lying on the ground with A LOT of play – very little help for balance or guidance. I came to the second ladder, the plank was along the right side, I stepped on it and then realized my left foot would have to go directly on the ladder. As I picked my left foot up, my weight shifted to the right side and so did the ladder, it apparently wasn’t fixed very well on the left. I felt the ladder shift enough to throw my weight off and carrying a pack meant recovery was difficult - the fixed rope was zero help. I slowly felt myself go over the side and quickly wrapped my right arm in the fixed rope. I was caught by my left gator/boot on the ladder and the fixed rope wrapped around my right arm, but now I was hanging upside down.

I’m sure you could imagine the expletives released. I tried to use my ice axe in my left hand to dig into the side of the crevasse and pull myself up, but wasn’t able to reach high enough to get a good dig. I was stuck. After realizing I didn’t know what to try next, and I felt my energy quickly draining, I called for my guide to ask for advice (I would later be teased - with admiration- for this).

I didn’t hear anything but was told by Young J to hang on (not that I had a choice). I hung out for what felt like a very long time, then called again to ask if he “had” me because I wanted to get my foot down from the ladder because I was nervous my foot was the only thing holding me from bouncing to the bottom, so I didn’t want to move it from the ladder until I knew I was on a belay.

I suddenly felt a very strong urge to get my foot down – it was hurting and that was the only way I could dig my crampons in the side and crawl out. Besides, this upside down thing was making me tired and I was worried I wouldn’t be any help to the guide to get me out of there.

Finally the guide came to me and I asked him I free my boot. He tried lifting me up (by my boot), but that didn’t work – then he realized the ladder was caught in the Velcro of my gaiter – wow, strong Velcro and how did that happened!?! He told me he would have to take it off (He asked like I would have a problem with that?), I said “Ok” (with a slight sarcastic tone – like, duh.... Just get the damn thing off). He undid the gaiter, my boot released and swung down, I was able to dig in and with a tight belay.

I pulled myself up to the ladder (with lots of loud grunts) and crawled to safety. I stood up, caught my breath (adrenaline rush!) as the guide quickly belayed everyone else across (they all crawled). I then noticed all the teams waiting behind me also crawled across. I just made every man on the mountain crawl on their knees because of me – not bad!

When Young J was across and sitting next to me, I asked him if he got a picture (he was a fellow picture taker that often slacked off with me). He said he didn't, but seriously thought about it, but didn't want to get bawled at by the guide. Bummer, but I don't blame him, I guess its better he is ready to do a self arrest for my benefit instead of taking pictures of me. Although it felt like forever, the entire fall experience took 15-20 minutes from start to us hiking again.

I was later told the guide that I was his first fall in a crevasse and he never had two "hauls" in one trip. Glad to provide a few "firsts" to an experienced mountaineer. I also later learned this was our guide's last trip on Rainier (he planned this before my fall) so I was even happier to have given him an epic experience for his last trip. He was the "Man" on the mountain and my Hero!

I also apparently impressed a few others on the mountain (the story spread like wildfire) because I didn't scream for help or tell the guide to get me the "%\*@! Out of there", but simply asked for some advice. The fact I am a "girl" and continued to climb impressed the chauvinists on the mountain. Regardless, our guide received handshakes and friendly nudging the rest of the day for saving two women in one day.

Later I was asked if I saw my life flash before my eyes, and I didn't. I remember thinking that our guide was going to be pissed at me that I fell so I needed to get out of there and continue the climb as fast as possible. I was also a bit freaked that I might lose a critical piece of equipment, such as my ice axe, which would end my climb. Death – that didn't cross my mind that just seems too dramatic.

### **The Never-Ending Climb**

At some point the excitement drifts away and suddenly I felt like I was on a mice wheel, this was the last leg. I could see the top, I could almost taste the top... but it just doesn't seem to get any closer. The last leg of Rainier is an abuse campaign, its' steep, long and slow. The wind started really picking up so being blown over was a real possibility (or in my case a reality).

Digging in and deep (physically and mentally) was a necessity. It was a mental struggle because my body just wanted to take a break. As I was pressure breathing every step of the way, I remember being thankful for each breath, it really does make you feel better! I felt since I delayed things enough (with my fall) I couldn't hold us back, so I was determined not to allow tension in the rope in front of me and insisted on pulling Young J up if he held me back. I was determined to prove we could do it as a team.

After several hours, we made it to the summit. I didn't realize, as we crested the ridge and headed down into the crater, that this was it. I noticed other teams resting (who passed us up when I was "hanging out") and knew we didn't have another rest break until the summit, so I asked "is this it?" The affirmative was confirmed.

We were told to take a short break because the clouds were rolling in so we had to leave soon. WHAT! The summit is a crater without a view! We still have no time??? To say the least, the top of Rainier leaves much to be desired and this guide isn't into allowing much time for pictures. We didn't even have time to hike across the crater to "The Summit Book" so I didn't get to officially sign in.

This is when I had to remind myself that life is about the journey not the destination (I thought mountaineering was different, but I was proven wrong). I forwent the food/drink and quickly handed

my camera over to Young J to document my experience at summiting Mt. Rainier. After several pictures we were off in no time at all.

### **Heading Home**

The journey down was a quick one although it took several hours. Basically we ran down the mountain, I say this in just because the way my legs were feeling anything faster than a mall walk pace felt like running. Veteran was now leading and he was told by our guide to get down as fast as he could, so he did.

Young J stumbled behind him and I was being yanked out of my footsteps to join them. I kept thinking about what our guide said before we left the summit “don’t fall or you just might be on your own” – he clearly had it with the rescues for the day. Although I knew in my heart he would at least save me (I was the girl of the group), I had no intention of testing my theory. I tried to chant my “no injuries” regimen that has swiftly carried me down several mountains, but it still didn’t seem to help me with the yanking stumbles.

When it came time to cross the ladders again, I did so without hesitation and got another beautiful view of the deep blue crevasse. It wasn’t until I stood back up that I realized I was having a serious adrenalin rush. Young J asked if I was ok and I sort of chuckled, I guess I was a little more apprehensive than I thought.

We finally got off the steep snow and I sighed relief as we were able to have our first moment to breath, take a swig of water and take off our crampons (only to put them on again later). We short roped (uggghh) and headed down The Beaver, this time with our guide back in the lead. Now I was clearly being yanked in both directions from our speeding guide and Young J trying to keep up. I forwent careful footing, that would normally be so important on this terrain and went straight for stumbling speed, figuring if I move fast enough then maybe the falls can’t catch up - it was nerve racking, but that was the day so far.

The sand/rock “storm” didn’t help as it impaired our vision and made opening our eyes futile. I was brail stumbling at this point and my left big toe was taking the abuse. When we arrived at the rock fall area we traversed this morning, we were warned to listen and watch the rock coming towards us but to only jump out of the way at the last minute because the rocks quickly change direction at the end. I tried to reassure Young J that no rocks would fall, but I was a liar in an instant. Luckily they were all false alarms.

We moved swiftly and I was happy to get to our final rest stop before we arrived at Camp Muir. We all caught our breath and relaxed a bit because the dangerous spots were behind us. There was still talus to down climb and another glacier to traverse, but it was all a piece of cake (in comparison) at this point. Another hour later, I popped my head up on the ridge where Camp Muir sat to see sis sitting there chatting with a fellow hiker that decided to stay with the comforts of Camp Muir.

She was such a welcoming sight and she chuckled that we were not only the first group back from the summit (we passed a few groups on the way back); but that I was the first one to arrive (our guide told us to go ahead to coil the rope at the bottom of the ridge). Somehow she thinks I did this on purpose, personally I wouldn’t of minded taking my time so I could snap a few more photos – but there just wasn’t time for any of that.

Sis was a sweetheart and helped me off with my boots so I could apply more blister care and had the gear packed up so I could just load my backpack. She also showed me the cupcake she brought to share with me on the summit – she’s so thoughtful! I packed up my bag and we were off to our final leg of our adventure.

### **Support Crew**

The trip down was slow and uneventful, which was perfect. I finally took the time to snap a few photos, although I was still being urged to hurry it along by the guide, but I ignored him now... try and throw me off the mountain now buddy! So we enjoyed the sights and tried to save our knees. Our feet were on fire from the boots so all we could think about was getting the "shoes built in hell" off our feet.

About a mile from the parking lot, we were welcomed by my b-friend who came to help me with my pack. I now felt as light as a feather! We arrived at the car to chilled recovery drinks (chocolate soy milk and V8), Champagne, cheese and crackers. We were even presented with souvenir books of Rainier. It was so incredible to have a support team to help us off with our boots and hand us a flute of champagne – we are lucky women!

### **Reflections**

This was a difficult climb for me. I was so glad to have had my previous mountain experiences earlier in the year to prepare me. I felt Rainier was each of their difficult sections combined. With this realization, I was even more impressed with sis's feat. She made it to the second of four legs to the summit without having any previous mountain experience – wow!

### **Mt. Rainier stats:**

Mt. Rainier: 14,410 feet

Total Distance: 16.7 miles

Total elevation gain/loss: 8,990 ft.

Day 1: 5 hours (4.2 miles), started at Paradise (5,420 ft) to Camp Muir (10,060 ft)

Day 2: 16 hours (12.5 miles), started at Camp Muir (10,060 ft) to Columbia Crest (Crater Summit)(14,410ft) and then all the way down to Paradise (5,420 ft)