

Mt. Shasta

“How was Shasta? Make it to the top?” These are “The” questions when returning from any mountain, but answering them doesn’t come close to telling the story.

Mt. Shasta – Take One

Around 1996

My first time on Shasta, I replied “good, but I didn’t make it.” I told myself that getting to the top was not what “it” was about, it was the journey not the destination, right? About 10 years ago, when my outdoor experience consisted of car camping and a few hikes, B convinced me climbing Shasta was a piece of cake. “You’re tough, you go to the gym, you’ll do fine” was all I needed to hear and I was strapping on the crampons. Underestimation is an understatement. I didn’t get very far – I wasn’t in climbing condition and moving too slow, which meant I was hit by the afternoon weather that comes in fast. This is when I learned to determine a turnaround time before starting and to work backwards of how much time I think I might need. Although I’d never been on the top of a mountain, I knew that standing on the peak was just half the climb, because getting to the top doesn’t matter until you get safely to the bottom. On the trudge down, the rain was speeding up and coating the rocks with slim. Horse Camp was coming upon us and as we turned a corner we saw a group of climbers peering down a short cliff, commotion rose above the chatter of splashes. A climber was down, he slipped off the cliff and landed with a head injury that sent them dreaming. Evacuation would be tricky. B had experience with mountain rescues and took control. Someone already headed down to Horse Camp to retrieve the sled and the rangers were radioed, but due to the weather they didn’t think a helicopter rescue would be possible. I was getting cold, and knew B would be staying, so I told him to hand over his pack since there was no way he’d be able to help carry someone down with it on. I put his pack on my back and strapped mine to my chest and I was off (adrenaline is an amazing thing). The rain was relentless and clouded my vision and soon the cold clouded my judgment. I hiked as fast as a wobbling “pack pregnant” gal could, the lightening and thunder started getting closer. The second ice axe strapped to the pack peaked above my head like a lightening rod. I had visions of being struck by lightening and shot off the trail so far I wouldn’t be found for days, or maybe the next season if this rain turned to snow. I picked up my pace and with great relief finally reached the Bunny Flat parking lot without being singed. I quickly dropped the packs in the car and crawled in to change into dry clothes. Then I waited. Hours go by. It’s starting to get colder and the light is slipping away, no one is coming off the trail. I didn’t notice a helicopter and since 4 guys stayed behind to help, I didn’t think they would be able to take them all down so someone had to hike out. Whew! A few people come off the trail, but not B. I get out, happy the rain lightened and asked one of the guys if anyone else is coming down. I’m told they are the last ones. WHAT? Does this mean I have a rescue to plan? I finally stopped shivering and now I start up again from worry. I gave it a little more time, B is the type to be the last one to leave. 30 more minutes pass. I question myself if I’ve waited too long, its getting dark and would be unsafe to go back up, but I realize B has no essentials with him since I took his pack! I know the rangers won’t head out in the dark so I head to the car and start gearing up. It’s not until I put the blocks of ice, also known as my boots, back on my feet that I see B step off the trail into the parking lot – He’s back! I do the girlish dramatic

scene and run over to give him a HUGE hug! He's perplexed by the welcome but receives it with a smile. He quickly updates me on the helicopter rescue and we head into town for a much needed beer and celebratory dinner - we both made it safely down!

Mt. Shasta - Making Up for the Past

June, 2008

My second time, I replied "yes" with a smile.

It was 10 years later, I have more hiking and training experience and it was time to make up for some past failures. I hooked a newbie climber into my scheme and we trained hard for this little adventure.

We drove to Shasta the night before the trek would begin to check gear and acclimatize a little (even if only at 3500 ft, every little bit helps). About 100 miles away, we had our first glimpse of Mt. Shasta, it was an ominous sight, towering high in its throne – we were in awe of its presence from so far away. The adventure began the following day and I woke with a few butterflies. I didn't want to disappoint myself with another "undone". We packed up our gear, and met the guides and other climbers, then unpacked our gear to verify to the guides we didn't forget something important, then packed it up again with a little added "communal gear" to the pack. Somehow from the car to the trailhead my pack gained some weight. I estimate it was about 40 lbs., apparently doable but this meant I was carrying 35% to my weight! We put on our torture devices (aka plastic boots) at Bunny Flat (6800 feet) trailhead, which started in dirt and rock, and continued this way for the hour hike up to Horse Camp. "Only an hour?" we thought since we had imagined a much tougher first day. But if you've ever hiked with microwaves on your feet with a weighted pack on – you could imagine our relief when seeing the cabin at Horse Camp. We relaxed a bit, set up our home for the night, met our sleeping buddy (3 to a tent to save weight) and waited for snow school to begin.

Snow School gave us a taste of the adventure yet to come, the possibilities of slipping into a crevasse and imagining what it would be like on Everest favored our appetite for adventure. But in reality, we learned the minimal techniques to allow us to survive on this Everest tame hill such as hiking techniques for efficiency on the snow, self arrest, and self belay – we tried it out and were ready to hit the trail. But we had a few hours to kill and sleep was suggested. After dinner (at 4pm) we were told to hit the sack at 6:00pm, yeah right. The sun was luminous and the weather couldn't be more perfect. We chatted up our new climbing friends and finally crawled into our nests at about 7PM to pretend sleep for the next 5 hours.

Wake up call was 12:30AM with breakfast brewing. It was as cold as I imagined and I was happy to be shiver-free cuddling in my puffy. We ate a little oatmeal, sipped some coffee (the guides are gods) and packed up to hit the trail with full gear climbing gear (crampons, ice axe, helmet, headlamp, harness, and pack – although much lighter) at 1:41AM. I love hiking in the dark while half asleep, you can hike for hours and not even realize you're awake – it's wonderful.

We were not alone on the trail, the mountain ahead and below were covered with aligned fireflies slowly making their way up the trail. I turned my headlamp off to enjoy the sky - AMAZING to see an ocean of stars and realize they are up there every night but SF forbids me to see them. We hiked an hour before our first break. Immediately we were told to put on our puffy, eat, drink and do what we needed to do. I learned the hard way to always put on your puffy before getting cold, it happens FAST! Since there isn't enough time to do it all... eat, drink, or adjust equipment, it's important to choose wisely and do it fast. Stopping is a curse due to the cold but a blessing to eat and put on some moleskin (an ounce of prevention...). This continues for hours as the sun winks over our shoulder. I peel my eyes from the boots in front of me that keep me moving forward and sneak a peek at the serene sky. I am a lucky woman. Why do I deserve this beauty?

We are just below Red Banks and a few members decide to head back, which takes a guide. We are tired, but with that our impatience grows for wanting to continue heading up, but we must wait for the guides to retie ropes and make adjustments. Soon more members lose patience and this that their desires, so they want to head down which takes another guide. Only 3 of us left out of 8 and now we must wait for a guide below with their own climbers to show up. Brrrrr, it cold sitting on the snow at a 20% grade waiting for slower climbers to make their way up the slope. We are all split up and added on other rope teams to tag along. Unfortunately find out they were behind us not because they slept in, but because they simply went slower and spent too much of their much needed breath to whine. "L (our new guide), I'm done" we hear a climber say from the rear when we are on the steepest part of the climb. Not good timing. L does a great job of explaining there is no choice but to go forward (why didn't they turn back 10 minutes ago with the other group?). "L, can I take off my down jacket?" says another climber. L, has the patience of a Saint and explains this is not a good place to stop and adjust, we need to get over the lip. We climb forward, after much encouragement from L (and a little rope tugging), we make it over the lip – twice as long as it should have taken. The top of Red Banks is amazing since it's the first view out of the "bowl" and I get my first sense that I am really climbing a mountain. Although Misery Hill is ahead, I felt like I was on top of the world and decided I wanted to be a bird in my next life.

Camaraderie is growing as we get closer to the top of this mountain. It's no longer a hill in my mind, this mountain is big. I hear B, another guide ask L if she wants him to take a few climbers, he only has one and isn't roping up. I ask L our chances, she says at our pace we may not make the turnaround cut off time and she is roping up to keep the team moving. I shed my niceties and ask if I could switch to B's team if they are moving faster – next thing you know I am back with my original rope team of 3, plus a new guy and B. We are a team again and we power up Misery Hill passing all the groups ahead – we have a deadline to meet, turnaround time is 11AM. I had it in me and I'm focused. We rest at the top of Misery Hill for a short time and now it time to Rock and power up the next short section to the summit of Mt. Shasta, 14,162 feet. The tail end of the climb went so fast compared to Red Banks, it's hard to believe we are on the top. Pictures and congratulations all around! The view is indescribable - you can see everything! You can see the world!

B is in a hurry to come down, all my time was spent with pictures – no time to eat and drink. Besides, I wasn't interested in consuming more since I really needed to pee but since my harness is "jimmy rigged" I need someone to help get it off and I don't feel that close with these guys to help me in my private

moment. I regret this later. We down climb due to the snow conditions, and not seeing a good line for glissading. I'm not a happy camper – I hoped for a much easier time coming down by. We head to the far left of the heart and head down the chute after taking off the crampons – tough call, I felt better with them on. We are slipping and sliding all over the place, its slow moving. The sun is in full effect, I'm wearing too much but want the protection – I'm heating up and starting to feel the effects of not drinking enough water. My brain is too big for my skull. I see hope ahead, a clean route for glissading – ROCKIN! We glissade for most of the way down, but I feel like I need to wax my butt to go faster since the butt flap on my bibs and the bottom of my pack is slowing me down. I have to use my ice axe as a paddle in the river of snow. This is work. After 14 hours of climbing, I make it back to Horse Camp at 3:45pm, it was a hard hike back – longer than I anticipated and going up seemed much easier. The rest of our team is there waiting for us with the gear packed and ready to be carried out for the last leg back to the car. We load up and hiked out with the group, to add another hour to the total time – it was a great hike out, easier than I thought it would be. I was hydrating and much happier to strip off some layers (except I have to still wear those damn plastic boots). I started thinking about mountaineering and if it's for me and why I didn't feel strong coming down even though my knees and legs still felt good. Mountaineering, like any challenging sport is primarily mental. I failed to take care of myself due to other people's schedules and their pace - it wearied on me. But after a great meal and free beer (they give a beer to those that summit) at Billy Goats Tavern my perspective changed and I was ready to try something challenging like this again – although something that doesn't require plastic boots – they are evil.