

## **Shasta Adventure – Take 3**

14,162 ft. (unofficial survey 14,179 ft.)

**June, 2010**

“It’s about the journey” he says. I smile and nod, thinking “yeah, whatever,” but knowing I’m “suppose” to feel that way. He asked if I would continue up a mountain knowing I wouldn’t be able to see anything due to weather, I simply say “yeah” trying not to let the “Type A Peak Bagger” that I’m cultivating inside come out. He said he would probably turn around; he wants a good picture and tells me it’s not all about reaching the top. I smile and politely agree, secretly thinking “yeah, whatever, who turns around?”

### **Take 3**

This was my third Shasta experience. On my first trip, I didn’t get much further than Red Banks before being weathered down. The second trip was a very long climb finally ending in success, meaning I made it all the way up and down without injury. On my third journey to the town of Mt. Shasta I was secretly planning the epitaphs I would expel describing my success. “Shasta 1, Natalie 2,” as if Shasta was actually competing with me and I just beat it at some kind of game. Or maybe I would just simply say “Yup” accompanied with a smirk as a way of saying “like duh, of course I made it.” Being a girl that didn’t grow up playing sports, mostly because her parents didn’t like them, and was always considered the “cubby kid” I wondered where this competitiveness came from?

### **Sneaking Up on Shasta**

A few months previously, I asked my Rainier climbing buds if anyone wanted to join me on Mt. Shasta, and E was the only one that answered that call and made the trek to California from Colorado. It would be his first California experience. So much for “Sunny California,” he had no idea how much snow we could offer in the summer. As we drove to Shasta, we had to have faith in the maps because no mountain was in sight; it was protectively wrapped in clouds for an early night. We drove up to the Bunny Flat trailhead to get a sneak preview to discover 6 feet of snow and watch backcountry skiers and snowboarders coming off the mountain for the day. E was in awe, nope, this isn’t barren Colorado in the Summer. Shasta promised to deliver a real mountaineering experience.

### **The Climb**

It rained most of Friday and during the night, we woke to our first partial view of the mountain, with the peak still being shy. I had to convince E there really was a summit. For the first time I’m not nervous before a climb, I actually feel relaxed and not so clueless. I’ve been here and I actually know what to bring, it feels good. We met up with our guide, D, to learn it’ll just be the three of us, I’m stoked! My last experience was painfully slow due to a big group, I’m thinking

this is going to be a piece of cake, forgetting about the critical factor for the moment... weather. After gear check we pack and head to the trailhead for a short hike (1.5 mi.) to “base camp” at Horse Camp (7,900 ft). When we arrive at Horse Camp, I’m dumbstruck... there is SO MUCH SNOW! The Sierra Club Foundation’s hut (Shasta Alpine Lodge) is under snow with the top of the chimney peaking out. I have to keep reminding myself it’s summer. We set up camp and learn a few tricks of the trade for snow camping from our knowledgeable guide (who also guides on Denali). While exploring the camp and killing some time, we met up with student researchers who were on the mountain measuring the weather and conditions, they dug a hole to try and determine the snow depth, with no avail. After digging over 20 feet down, they threw in the towel and decided they didn’t need to get to China that badly. After an amazing dinner by Chef D, we hit the sack around 6:30pm. I spent the night solving the world problems and listening to the buzz and humm from my climbing partner (I love earplugs).

Wake Up Call – At midnight D lets us know there is zero visibility but if we are up for it, we can climb higher to see if it clears or if we can get above the clouds. Absolutely I think, I can’t wait to hit the mountain and get out of my head with some hard work. We hit the trail a little after 1AM. Normally the highlight of mountain climbing (besides the obvious) is seeing the beautiful night sky as we night hike up the mountain. There was no such luck, the white-out conditions made it confusing to determine where the mountain ended and sky began, we couldn’t see anything but white, it was wicked! During one of our breaks at about 9,000 ft., just below Helen Lake we sat on the slope trying to figure out where we were on the mountain. It was 4AM, we turned off our headlamps and it didn’t make much difference, you couldn’t see any more or any less, just white everywhere, it was cool to feel that quiet and protected. We were unaware of how high we still had to go and how high we were sitting; we could have been anywhere with a white blindfold draped over our eyes. E then confessed he was feeling nauseous - not good.

After sunrise, which was only known by a lighter glow of white, we climbed higher and hoped to see breaks in the sky above, but no such luck was bestowed upon us. It was wonderful being in such a small group, we didn’t tie in so I was free to take pictures and hang out to gaze upon the mountain at any time. I managed to catch the clouds separating at just the right moment to see a bit of pink in the distance behind us, it was gorgeous after a morning of pure white. It was like seeing color for the first time.... ok, not that dramatic... maybe like the first time I saw color TV. We got to Helen Lake and I was amazed how many people were camping there, lots of colored tents on the plateau. E said he was feeling better so a break wasn’t necessary, we continued on and the snow got deeper. I was happy to be the last one (one benefit of being a girl, men assume they need to work harder – but that’s a topic for another story), so the postholes were fairly solid by the time I stepped in them, but I was thinking I need to climb with shorter people, as I struggled a bit with the length of the strides. Again, I was just thankful I didn’t have to break trail and I was feeling strong.

The weather was staying thick and our guide was a bit concerned how warm it felt as he talked about avalanche danger. We peered over and noticed a few avalanche trails from the previous days, along the mountain. E recently took a course on avalanches that gave him heightened awareness, so he too was concerned. I was enjoying my ignorance until D told us the prediction of thunder and lightning in the late morning – fiddlesticks! I’ve previously been caught in a bad lightning storm on a mountain - my ignorant bliss dissipated. We continued on to see how far we could go and about a thousand feet above Helen Lake (11,500ft) E called it – his nausea returned with a vengeance. We took a break to see if it would pass and to discuss the weather. At that precise moment the wind took reprisal on Shasta and we were exposed to the crossfire. We watched the groups below arrive at Helen Lake and quickly turn around without even stopping for a break – the wind must have gotten to them as well. We were the second group this high up the mountain, the first were 2 climbers about 1,000 ft. above us. We later heard that a climber slipped off “The Heart” (surviving but with a lot of “road rash”), which meant one of those climbers went down and it probably happened around the same time we were sitting there. We decided glissading down the mountain was a good idea and started down about 6:30 AM. D mentioned something about brunch and mimosas, which was enough motivation for me to speed up the pace (even if I knew I was faking myself out since I had a long drive ahead and drinking was not in the plan). Glissading was not as easy as we hoped, either difficult to gain speed or difficult to control the speed. I finally figured out how to glide effectively, but after getting the big-eyed look from D who then asked me to “stay in control,” I decided to relax my fun and not give our guide a heart attack – fiddlesticks again! We meandered down the mountain slower than any of us wanted, E was a trouper and didn’t complain, but I could see in his face, he wasn’t doing well. We arrived at camp and I packed up with efficient speed. It was time to get off the mountain so E could get a real break from misery. One of the guides told me 8,000 ft was the sweet spot for mountain sickness relief and as we left Horse Camp E started taking pictures and joking, ahhh, the sweet spot was working. We headed out and arrived at Bunny Flats just in time for me to start cursing my plastic boots at about 11AM.

### **The Lesson**

On our way back to Bunny Flat, we got the standard questions from climbers heading to base camp, “Did you summit?” I was glad I was in the rear and didn’t have to answer because simply stating “No” didn’t describe our success and how beautiful it was just BEING on the mountain. I wanted to yell “It’s not about getting to the top, don’t you know how beautiful of a morning we had?” I started thinking how dumb that question is because the response never shares the experience. Then I chuckled at myself, wasn’t I the one internally rolling my eyes at E as he talked about mountaineering being about the “journey”? “Ok, fine” I thought, every mountain provides a lesson; this was mine to be learned. It is about the journey... but don’t think I won’t keep trying to get to the top.