

Mt. Whitney

May, 2009

“Did you top out?” We hesitated with slight confusion on what was being asked of us, exhaustion had set in. We thought about it and simply responded “Yah.” With that, the climbing shop clerk started asking a slew of questions just as we were trying to make our escape out the door, knowing full well that we still had a long drive ahead. “How was the weather?” Another simple answer - “great.” “Did you feel like you packed the right gear?”, “Yah.” He finally got the message, we were spent.

I want to climb Mt. Whitney. This idea was planted late the year before, on one of our hikes when I was, as M puts it, “throwing things against the wall and seeing what sticks”, referring to my constant pursuit of a climbing partner. M having no idea where or what Whitney was at the time and having never climbed a mountain before, later came back to me with a newspaper article about an average reporter guy who had managed to successfully climb Whitney. After reading his account M concluded, “If this guy could do it, then I’m sure I can do it.”

With a commitment in place, the real planning began in earnest. First, we had to obtain a permit. Someone mentioned to me that, with only about 100 permits granted per day, it’s easier to get Rolling Stones tickets for one of their last tours than to get a pass onto Whitney – it certainly felt true. After giving the Forest Service a plethora of date options, as of the first week of April we were officially denied but strangely undeterred. We tried once again in the next round of the permit lottery (April 22nd) with a willingness to accept less desirable dates and finally found success! We were now on for Memorial weekend with a two-day Sunday/Monday permit. It wasn’t completely ideal, due to possible early season high altitude snow conditions and a long drive home on Monday (M had the misfortune of needing to report to work on Tuesday), but, knowing the alternative was to wait until sometime in 2010, we were game. Now it was time to organize the gear and buy a bear canister (as an aside: that sucker keeps humans out too! We might have starved to death if our fingers had been any colder)!

After a few U-turns and 8 hours of chatting and listening to audio books, we rolled into Lone Pine in the early afternoon of Saturday. One disappointing lunch later (despite a surprisingly clean kitchen!) we set out to pick up our permit and get some trail condition information from the Lone Pine ranger station. At the start of this holiday weekend the building was predictably buzzing with outdoor loving folks looking for advice. We chatted up the Park Ranger at the head of our line but, unfortunately, she was obviously not a hiker and probably had never been to the summit of Whitney. Upon asking about the snow level at the summit, she less than helpfully rehashed the 5 day-old report of trail and weather conditions that we had just read on our own. We were repeatedly told to “expect winter mountaineering conditions” and “you’ll need winter mountaineering gear”. When she asked if we were prepared for these conditions, we simply smiled, said yes, grabbed our permit and Wag bags, and left. Once outside I asked M, given the wintry conditions, if he was comfortable renting gear at the local climbing shop and still heading up the mountain the next day. He gave the perfect response, “We’re here, aren’t we?” My weeks-long denial about the earliness of our climbing date was finally confronted as I came to the hard realization that cold and snow were going to be a strong possibility.

M & I next rented our crampons (the only thing they had to rent – no ice axe) and headed to Lake Diaz to find a camp spot and finally decompress from the early morning and long drive. We had a mountain to climb the next day.

The next morning, we started our trek from Whitney Portal at 9AM, right on schedule. I was sporting a stylish red pack with lovely exterior patches expressing my “groovy” feeling and displaying the various national parks I’ve visited. My heavenly waist band was cinched to the max supporting a total weight of 41 pounds. M’s ensemble was a bit more retro. He chose the earthy forest green pack with an exterior mixture of equipment too plentiful for the inside. Later he would learn his waist belt had much to be desired as his shoulders took the brunt of his 42 pound traveling home. We crossed our first landmark

at Lone Pine Lake, 2.8 miles into our hike at the start of the “permit only” section of Mt. Whitney. We were in remarkably good spirits as we took pictures along the way and chatted between heavy breathing (yes, we were feeling the altitude), but mainly focused on the steep incline ahead. Just one foot in front of the other, that’s the steady mantra that would carry us through.

Shortly after a steep climb and wondering if the weather would hold out long enough for us to make it to our evening destination (Trail Camp); we came across a spectacular meadow just before Outpost Camp (3.8 miles). The meadow shimmered of fall colors despite the fact that we had yet to experience summer! The color display of dusty mauve, amber and electric green was nearly visual perfection. “Hey M, you know what would make this perfect? If we saw a bear jaunting through the meadow - on the other side of the water and going the other direction, of course.” M soon corrected me, “Nah, a golf course would be perfect here.” Ahhh, spoken like a true golf course architect.

The trailside views continued to impress as we witnessed waterfalls at Outpost Camp, Mirror Lake’s beauty and the enormity of the surrounding mountains. The only thing that perplexed us was when would we see the elusive Mt. Whitney (and would we know it when we saw it)?

Our first snow crossing came shortly after Trailside Meadow, a mile before we reached our camp. It was narrow and would be the first time M had done this type of hiking on steeply graded snow. We opted at this time to not put the crampons on since it was only a short distance to camp and we had spoken to a pair of hikers who just had come across the narrow pass and who told us that the snow ahead wasn’t dangerous. No problem we decided. “Make sure your lead foot is secure and don’t look down, no matter what!” was my advice to M. Piece of cake (so I thought)! Snow crossing soon became snow fields and, as I was attempting to reach a rock outcrop for an elevated view of our surroundings (we’d lost the trail in the snow), I discovered just how deep the snow was below us. One leg sank in, up to my hip, and the second leg followed, making my left foot stuck – really stuck. M later confessed that at this point he seriously considered gnawing off my leg so we could finally go to camp. Instead, he decided it would be better to hand me my mountaineering gloves so I could dig myself out. Wet, tired, hungry and a bit cold – we set up camp in a gorgeous location next to a frozen lake. Wotan’s Throne and Mt. Muir dominated our views. Our first glimpse of our ultimate destination remained elusive.

Monday at 1AM the watch alarm finally goes off after we’ve both been pretending to sleep for hours. We later agreed that it had been a mixture of anticipation and cold that had kept us up. The howling wind had finally stopped a couple of hours ago, which I was very thankful for. We rustled ourselves up and hit the pitch-black “trail” by 2AM with headlamps in place. At this point the term “trail” is used lightly as it took some effort and climbing up a partial snow field to finally find the 99 switchbacks so eloquently named by “99 switchbacks”. This would constitute the most challenging section of the entire hike with a 1,595 ft elevation gain in a little over 2 miles. I would say that we counted the switchbacks to verify but that would presume we were able to find the trail the entire time, which we didn’t. Instead the intended trail was often covered by deep snow which required a little searching and climbing to overcome – at this moment I was SO grateful for crampons and frozen hard packed snow. Two-hours later we had gotten past the worst of it and were relishing in reaching the end of the 99 switchbacks. We quickly lost the trail again and finally found Trail Crest after doing a little bouldering down a “cliff” (well, not technically a “cliff” but steep enough in the pitch black as there was no moon) to finally find Trail Crest and the summit trail once again. At this point, we were getting to be pros at staying on the route while hiking over snow and rock (pro enough for Whitney anyway). This is when I realized that, with energy falling as fast as the wind-chill, I was starting to freeze my ass off.

For those of you who still haven’t gotten past our 2AM start time, I’d like to enumerate the amazing qualities of the dead of night hike. First, when I think back on the few times that I’ve felt an inner peace and quiet, as well as a sense of the overwhelming beauty of life, it’s usually been while hiking at night on a high mountain. This night was no different. I managed to briefly stop (for fear of getting colder), cover my headlamp and look up to try my best to inhale all its wonder. I couldn’t breathe in the

inspiration deeply enough or consume enough, there was so much to observe. The stars were so populous the concept of infinity started to become clear. The glow of the snow enhanced the outline of the vast mountains surrounding me and I could actually feel the power of nature's beauty and strength. Simply phenomenal. I begrudgingly uncovered my headlamp and continued on, wondering how I could best savor this feeling.

The pre-glow of the sun started to lighten the sky and we finally captured our first view of the Whitney Summit just before sunrise. I must admit that I was hoping to see an enormous summit, one that clearly towered above everything around it. Unfortunately, that doesn't seem to happen on mountains, they are more often than not subtle and, honestly, I was just happy to finally see the end of our ascent. An hour later we finally saw the summit hut and found that we were the first to sign the summit log for the day at 6AM. My hands were stiff from the cold so it took me a long time to write my name and city down. My message was simple, "Yeah!"

Fully appreciative of our journey thus far yet respectful for the work that still lay ahead, we ended up hanging out on the top for about 45 minutes. I was bundled in my down jacket, trying to warm up in the morning sun since I got the "freezerchills" as M snapped pictures (my camera was frozen at the least opportune moment). After getting our fill of the unparalleled views I choose to start hiking down with my down jacket on in an effort to warm my core; it finally worked after hiking for about an hour. Finally, the sun was slowly warming the air and we could shed some layers. The hike down was gorgeous as we took in all the sights we couldn't see on the way up. In retrospect I'm really glad I couldn't see all the switchbacks on the way up, it would have been disheartening (another benefit to night hiking – you have no idea how far you have to go since you can only see a few steps ahead).

Hours later, and after covering the final few 100 vertical feet on our butts, we were finally back at camp, cursing our crampons after wearing them for 7+ hours while hiking on primarily rock with some snow (just enough to not want to take them off!). We ate our final delicious PB&J's, packed up camp and once again lifted our heavy packs to our sore and tired backs. We avoided many of the switchbacks by hiking down the snow fields. M was a gem, he led and became the sacrificial soul by landing in the unexpected snow-melt holes. The holes (mostly unseen) were like landmines as we tried to tiptoe around them and be light on our feet (with a 40 pound pack it was futile). By the time we met up with the trail again I was done and ready to get my boots and pack off so I double-timed it down. By the time I arrived at Lone Pine Lake I thought I was almost home free (believing I only had 1 mile left, instead of the actual 2.8 miles) – little did I know that this section of the trail somehow lengthened the more I hiked down. It was like the twilight zone. I thought I'd never get to the trailhead, especially as the last half mile my body started to really feel the pound of every step. Finally, success! The parking lot was in view! Another pack weigh-in at 38 pounds (no more water to carry) and finally at the car for our long drive home.

We were exhausted, but suffered no major injuries (just a possible lost toenail and sore muscles) – it was an awesome climb!

"Hey M, was it what you expected?"

"There was a lot of snow.... I think I'd rather run another marathon before climbing another mountain."

Climbing mountains isn't for everyone, but I really appreciate it when friends give it a shot to experience the challenge and beauty. Personally, I'd rather climb another mountain before giving a marathon a try but, who knows? Maybe I'll give it a shot one day to see what I'm missing out on.

Mt. Whitney stats:

Mt. Whitney: 14, 505 feet (most recent but unofficial measurement).

Total Distance: 22 miles

Total elevation gain/loss: 6,486/ -6,486

Day 1 total hiking time: 5.5 hours (6.3 miles)

Day 2 total hiking time: 12 hours (15.7 miles)

Weather God status: On our side!

Number of comments on the size/load of Nat's pack even though M was carrying one lb. more: 3

Possible reasons for the attention to Nat's pack:

- a. Nat's pack is a stylish Red and more noticeable.
- b. These guys thought it was a compliment and wanted a date.
- c. Nat carried her gear feminine style (inside the pack) whereas M liked to let it all hang out.
- d. Men don't think a woman can carry as much as a man.

Things left behind (that maybe M would have appreciated me bringing): Deodorant and a bottle of wine.

Things we consciously brought, but probably didn't really need:

- Dental floss (M would disagree – he is a good influence on my dental hygiene)
- Extra dehydrated meal
- The gazillion "just in case" Gu
- Sam splint (thank goodness – no major injuries)

M's Major Impressions;

- All of the comments from fellow hikers on our lack of trekking poles
- The abandoned tent at our campground, especially once Nat remarked that it may have belonged to one of the climbers who had already died on the mountain this spring
- How great dinner tasted after hiking up for 5.5 hours – the different concept of time when measured only by the sounds of your own boots.
- The freaky sounds outside the tent on a windy, sleepless night. The bizarre waking dream of 10-12 people in headlamps running past our tent between 11 & 12 pm
- Being given the right-of-way by another hiker due to the dangerousness of my crampons. I guess I hadn't thought about their danger until then.
- The unbelievable joy at reaching the summit / reaching our campsite (both times) / getting back to the car. How accomplishing something more difficult than most people are willing to try seems to intensify one's emotions.