

Wyoming Tour of Grandeur
Gannett Peak - Grand Tetons — Yellowstone
a.k.a. Summit For Someone Benefit Climb for Big City Mountaineers
July 16 - 26, 2010

“We lucked out,” she says. I agreed, we did get lucky. “I don’t think any of us could have hand picked a better team.” I agreed, I wouldn’t have been able to do it, everyone is so unique and beyond my imagination. “It’s funny to read the testimonials with people saying that this is the hardest thing they’ve ever done.” I listened and thought about how hard I had worked to be prepared and all the support I had that made this experience so much less difficult. I’m really lucky, I thought. We were all lucky, the mountain gods were on our side, this wasn’t the most difficult trip – it was perfect!

Tears of Arrival

After 12 years away, I’m back. All of my previous visits were the result of road trips so, landing in Jackson Airport for the first time was amazing; the airport feels like it’s in the middle of Grand Teton National Park. My first view from the tarmac is gorgeous: the Tetons towering above. The memories of my previous trips flow back to me; I had such a different life then. Reminiscing feels good, especially as I think about how wonderful my present life is – tears roll down my cheek (I’m such a girl). Life is good and this is just the beginning of my trip. I spend the rest of the day getting reacquainted with Jackson Hole and the wonders of being in cowboy country – stuffed wildlife everywhere you look and saddle seats at bars!

Gear Shake Down – a.k.a Gear Check

Before each trip I get the benefit of a guide telling me the best gear to bring (since each mountain is a bit different) – sometimes the advice is invaluable and sometimes I gain the experience of knowing that I know myself best and what gear I like to use. This time I shed a few pounds of gear, which I assumed would be greatly appreciated after a few days of pack carrying. One of the items left behind was my pack cover. I was told “We only get afternoon thundershowers and they don’t last more than a few minutes.” After an eyebrow raise, I decided it was best to listen to the professionals, which would later prove to be a lesson learned.

Meet and Greet – a.k.a. Ignorance is Bliss – Day 1

I headed out at 5AM from Jackson Hole to Elkhart Park Trailhead, which took about 2 hours of driving through beautiful scenery and an amazing sunrise. I arrived in the middle of nowhere (by San Francisco standards), which means I was just outside of Pinedale, WY, to rendezvous at the horse corral (Bald Mountain Outfitters), from which we would be fortunate to have our gear carried up the trail by mule the first day. The rest of the trip WE would be the mules. I then finally met the other climbers and guides, and learned two climbers had already dropped out (something about an LA attorney blowing it off and someone else getting in a bar fight in Jackson and being arrested – oh, my) so it would be an intimate group of 4 climbers and 2 guides. A thumbnail background on my fellow climbers:

- ❖ Paul – a Brit who’s lived in the States longer than England who is currently residing in Colorado. He’s on the board of Big City Mountaineers and has a tremendous sense of humor that would keep me in stitches for the entire trip.
- ❖ Phillip – A Yellowstone guide and naturalist living in Bozeman, MT who has an amazing story for every situation.
- ❖ Patty – A Yellowstone guide and paramedic (nice asset when being out in the middle of nowhere) living in Bozeman, MT and one of the strongest/fittest woman I have ever met; she soon became my idol and friend.
- ❖ Our guides, Steve & Darin were both incredible! They were very laid back and allowed us to make modifications that suited our team better. They really knew their trade and I had every confidence that if anything went wrong, they were THE guys to have our backs!

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As you can see, I was the novice in the group and the only one coming from sea level - glad I didn't know this before the trip! I knew right from the start that I would have to focus and push to keep up to not be the weak link.

There were a few "unknowns" to me on this trip. I purposely don't research a trail too aggressively before heading out on an adventure (when I know it's not necessary because we have a guide to show the way) because sometimes knowing about a difficulty beforehand only increases the fretting, when I can't do anything to change the situation.

My first "unknown" was quickly discovered – the mosquitoes were intense. I started getting bit at 7AM, the moment I stepped out of my car. I was quickly informed that the Wind River Mountains were notorious for insane amounts of mosquitoes – they weren't exaggerating. I was happy I was clueless before the trip, although I did pack the precautionary DEET. I prefer to just wear long sleeves and pants, but these demons weren't being stopped by any clothes and would cover your clothing and body unless you sprayed everything you wore with DEET and then coated your body with the same toxin. I normally don't like coating my skin in toxins that would melt a watch band or toenail polish, but this was no ordinary situation – those buggers were determined! So my advice when visiting the Wind River Mountains is 1) to not open your mouth too wide or you'll get a mouthful of buzzing protein and 2) to bring the toxic bug stuff.

The first day entailed a gorgeous 13-mile hike of rolling hills that went along Pole Creek Trail to Photographer's Point and then to Seneca Lake and Island Lake. We landed just below Indian Pass to set up our home for the night. We were provided the typical mountain weather, meaning it changed every 10 minutes. We experienced bright sunshine, rain, hail and then sunshine and a wide range of temperatures to match. I felt like Mr. Rogers as I kept taking off my jacket and layers, then putting them back on again. But somehow I didn't mind because the extraordinary views of neighboring mountain ranges, alpine lake-filled meadows, valley overlooks, waterfalls and wildlife glimpses kept me distracted and in awe. Our camp for the night certainly didn't disappoint. A rock nearby provided viewing of a meadow below that held our evening entertainment: a marmot and weasel both protecting their babies. The chase lasted at least 20 minutes as they all did crazy eight laps in the meadow – amazing!

Casual Day – Day 2

Day two was our "casual day" meaning we wake up when we wake up, pack up when we pack up and start hiking when we start hiking – nice schedule (although we didn't believe the guides at first and kept asking what time we needed to leave by... we obviously all come from very scheduled lives). I went to bed at 8PM the night before and finally dragged myself out of my tent for cowboy coffee at 7AM – it felt great. To my surprise I wasn't the last one up. We hit the trail with a fully loaded pack at 9AM for our 5 mile hike to Titcomb Basin. It was a wonderful day of more awe inspiring views and lots of company along the way, especially the buzzing type (yup, they are hyperactive all day). For a section of the trail, the mosquitoes were so bad that I didn't open my mouth and was glad I had sunglasses that could act as a bug shield. Having the two-mile long bright blue Titcomb lakes to hike along made it worth it.. As we moved closer to Gannett Peak (still not visible from our angle) we were able to check out competing peaks such as Fremont , Sacagawea, and Mt. Helen. We had some company in the glacial carved valley so some of our prospective camp sites were occupied or wet due to the mini-rivers of melting snow. We finally settled on a perfect location at the base of Mt. Helena and the Bonney Pass (formally known at Ditwoody Pass) with an elevation of about 11,000 ft. Streams ran all through

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camp, which you had to jump over to get to the “kitchen” or a fellow climber’s “bedroom”. The main river was just down the hill from our camp and provided the soundtrack for the night.

After a little snow school and dinner we all hit the sack early for a restless night before the climb. I poked my head out of my tent in the middle of our night to see a star-covered sky, with one shooting at that precise moment – wow! As I gazed in a 360 degree arc I was breathless with the view of snow-covered mountains on one side and an overlook of two beautiful lakes on the other side. I don’t think it could be any more beautiful or inspiring. It was nice to see the Milky Way and constellations as they can only be seen in remote locations away from city lights – something I rarely get to enjoy. I had forgotten what it was like to be in such darkness, and I was glad the moon was there to provide a little nightlight for me.

Summit Day – Day 3

We “woke” at 2AM (no one had really slept) for a 3AM start. It was a bit later than I was used to (I usually hit the trail at 1AM for an ascent) but, since we were only the second team on the mountain, I relaxed a bit. After about 45 minutes we passed the first team and within 90 minutes we were at the top of Bonney Pass, 1700 ft. above our camp (12,700 ft) – we were smoking! As I got my first glimpse of the full route at the top of the pass, I realized my second “unknown” of the trip. We would now have to descend the elevation we had just gained (and a bit more) to the bottom of Gooseneck glacier, walk around Gooseneck Pinnacle and start our ascent again. Oh my, this is like climbing two mountains!

We worked our way along the glacier, took in the glow of the sunrise and were awed when the sun hit the tip of Gannett Peak causing it to glow a brilliant orange. I was also finally able to catch a first glimpse of the real summit (not visible on the opposite side of the pass). It was gorgeous and seemed so incredibly close, so it was bizarre to be told we still had several hours of climbing before we would reach the top. We were all feeling pretty good and ecstatic that our skill levels were so compatible. Since we were comfortably on the snow with our crampons and ice axes, the guides went easy on us and forewent the rope for a majority of the steep accents. It wasn’t until we reached steeper areas, where slipping meant immediate death or severe maiming, that the guides insisted an additional tether would be a good idea. So now we were one large team joined by a string, which meant we were in closer proximity and created an audience for all our jokes and side comments. I don’t think I ever laughed so much while being so physically challenged, where just breathing was difficult. The team kept things light as the terrain steepened and was in high spirits when we reached the top of Gannett Peak after only 6 hours of climbing (according to the guides we were the fastest team they had ever taken up). We all felt insanely lucky to be on the summit in such amazing weather. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky and the wind was still - a perfect situation to hang out for an hour on the summit and more than enough time for our guides to take a nap.

Many pictures and a few snacks later, we woke the sleepyheads and started heading down. We knew we had finished only half the climb and we were already thinking about relaxing at dinner! I was experiencing a little boot bang on my left ankle, which I was trying to ignore, even as it continued to demand attention. After a little self pep talk (mind over matter), I was able to maintain focus and pace with the group. The crazy thing about coming “down” from Gannett Peak is that you have a lot of climbing UP to do towards the end of the day to get over the pass. It was a slog and I just kept dreaming of the glissading I would get to do on the other side. We topped Bonney Pass and took our last glimpse of Gannett Peak and gazed upon the terrain we had just covered – wow! Now for the last leg of the day: coming down the pass.

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As we peered over the pass to the terrain below, we realized just how STEEP it was! Did we really climb up this? The guides were debating if we should rope up but, since the snow was fairly soft and none of us wanted to be tethered to each other (regardless of how much we liked each other, it's just harder to climb with a rope attached), the guides allowed us to head down on our own. Patty and I hung back a bit, being by far the shortest members in the group and amazed at how long legs really help for quickly down climbing. We also didn't really feel like taking the chance of sliding out of control since the rocks below didn't offer much forgiveness and we weren't entirely sure if we'd be able to stop before slamming into them. "Sure footing" is my usual mantra as I head down from any mountain, especially when I'm a bit tired. But down climbing gets old fast – it was a lot of work and we were beat so, after Darin gave us the "go ahead", we decided to rely on our self-arrest training and glissade the rest of the way.

Glissading ROCKS! It is so much fun and I wished the steepness lasted a bit longer and all the way to my tent – I kept trying to get the other guys to push me when the slope decreased my speed but for some reason they weren't game (something about being tired). At times like this I start dreaming up inflatable devices that could be easily powered by the sun to speed me down the mountain and into my cozy sleeping bag. But mountain climbing isn't just about the ascent, you need to make it down as well, so I picked myself up, shook off the accumulated snow under my waist belt and kept hiking back to camp.

Boots off – ahhhhhh! I felt immediate relief from the boot bang. I cleaned up a bit in one of the snow melt streams and suddenly my energy rebounded! I joined my team for a celebratory toast (Score! Patty brought up a little wine and shared a cup with me – wow, it tasted yummy!) and to chat about our view of the day's events. We also made dinner as the guides napped (they were happily surprised to be woken up to warm food). We then just waited for the sun to go beyond the pass so it would be cool enough to crawl into bed, we were tuckered out!

And Then the Skies Open – Day 4

The following day I was surprised to not be sore, and I couldn't find a single blister.... holy smokes, that's never happened! We packed up and started heading out with a few possible camp destinations in mind. It was then that I felt a drop, and a few more, and then the mountain gods decided our weather luck had run out and the skies opened. We all quickly got our rain gear on and happily hiked along, thinking the weather would change in 10 minutes – and it did. The rain got harder and, after a few hours, turned to hail, then rain. It would occasionally stop for about a minute (just long enough to question if you should take off the warm rain gear) and then rain even harder. The entire time I kept hearing the guide's advice in my head, "Nah, you won't need your pack cover."

We decided to cover a longer distance that day instead of unpacking our tents in the rain, and hope the weather would clear. After 10 miles and finding our camp spot for the night, we were fortunate to have the rain to stop just long enough for us to put up our tents and eat a wonderful dinner of mountain pizza with a side of laughter. As the rain started again, we were ready to hit the sack, it had been a long day. That night I lay snug and toasty in my sleeping bag as I listened to the thunder and lightning get stronger and more frequent. Then the skies opened wider and threw its hard balls of frozen glory – the hail came with such an immense impact, I thought frogs were falling from the sky. When I realized what it was and that the pounding of the hail was causing the rain to soak through my tent, I had to laugh – this was NUTS! I was warm and it was the last night, so I just didn't care and I tried to get some sleep. What a crazy night!

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Heading Out – Day 5

We “woke” (not much sleep was had) to everything we owned being soaked and a gorgeous clear day. We packed up, made our arrangements for rendezvous later in the day in Jackson (I was the only one with a hotel in town and the shower became the most sought after amenity). It was a long 8 miles out as we went through the never-ending forest (our guides had warned us about the magical properties of this forest that seems to continue growing at the end of the hike) but we eventually made it out and back to our cars.

Later that day, after showering and while eating fresh organic veggies with adult beverages in our hands... we sat there just wearing BIG ASS GRINS! What an amazing trip and the best part is, I still get to have more.

Wyoming Extended

I was fortunate to be able to extend my wonderful Wyoming experience into the Tetons and Yellowstone. The following day a girlfriend, Suzee, flew in to help me tour the hot tourist sites in both parks. We saw it all and had an amazing time of wildlife gazing and geyser viewing. It was so wonderful to share my recent experience with her and to create more of our own. I never had a trip with so much wildlife viewing, which included elk, bison, deer, marmots, pikas, grizzly bear and her 2 cubs, coyote, fox, rabbits, chipmunks, sage grouse and lots of quick moving furry things I couldn't identify fast enough. We had such a great time gazing on the bizarre vistas of Yellowstone and immense beauty of the Tetons.

Gannett Peak Stats:

Elevation: 13,804 ft (highest point in Wyoming)

Location: 70 miles southeast of the Grand Teton NP in the Wind River Range

Distance hiked: Over 40 miles roundtrip

Elevation gained/loss: I don't want to think about the total, lots of rolling hills... but over 6,000 ft. on summit day alone.