

North Ridge Adventure

Contributed by weekendclimber
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Mt Stuart from the North

When Rad first asked me if I wanted to do the North Ridge of Mount Stuart with him, I could hardly refuse. It had been one of the climbs that was always on the list, but seemed a bit out of my league, until I took a confidence building trip to the Bugaboos. The plan would be to go light, with only emergency bivy bags, and go up and over in one day. We would shuttle one car to the Esmeralda Basin trail head, and start from the Stuart Lake trail head and approach via Mountaineers Creek. Seemed easy enough when we discussed it over beers after climbing around in the gym on a Tuesday, but little did we know what we had in store.

After not being able to get off work until my usual 5pm on Friday afternoon, I rushed over to get the last of my things before heading out to meet Rad. We had a lot of driving to do and the sooner it was over the more sleep we would be able get. I met Rad on I-90, where he had gotten some Thai food for us both so that we would not have to stop on the way anywhere. From there it was onward to the Teanaway River Road and the Esmeralda Basin trail head.

Once at the trail head, we spent a few minutes sorting out camping gear so that we had sleeping gear and some food once we got back to that car. I filled out a day use pass and placed it on the front of my dashboard and we were off back down the road. Quickly, I realized that I had forgotten my camera and sunglasses in my car and we lost about fifteen minutes as we turned around to retrieve them. Are you taking all the crap!

As we got into Leavenworth, we pulled over to make up the rack and pack in the Safeway parking lot. I was bringing the rope, along with my harness and miscellaneous biners and gear, as well as liner gloves, fleece gloves, fleece top and bottom, a balaclava and a fleece hat. Including my food and water, my pack was pretty light for a trip of such magnitude. Rad was just bringing the rack, and some food and water, confident that we would reach the top in time to get back out before having to stop due to darkness.

Soon we were rolling down Icicle Creek Road and pulled into a bivy spot to setup the tent for the short nap before heading out. I set my watch for 2:05am and we laid down for the evening watching the meteors streak across the sky until we were finally asleep. It was just past eleven o'clock.

It seemed like only a moment until my alarm started ringing and we both piled out of the tent to eat breakfast and drive the last bit of the road to the trail head. Once there, we finished our last preparations and started up the trail head, only so that I could turn back to grab my camera that I left in the car. A pattern had begun to develop for the day and it was only 3:30am. Morning shadows on the North Ridge

We quickly made our way up the trail to where we thought the climbers path up Mountaineers Creek started, with it being marked by flagging. We looked for a several minutes and never found the flagging, so we started to do a traversing bush whack through the woods towards the creek. I was sure we were in the general area, but felt that we may be going in the wrong direction. Rad persevered and we soon found the climbers path that leads up to the basin to the east of the lower North Ridge. Lower North Ridge route

A large boulder field lay between us and our objective when another duo of climbers appeared from below and passed us as we took a quick break. We played leap frog with them on the last grueling mile up the boulder field. One of them finally passed us as we sat to gather water near a nice stream at the top of the gully leading to the ridge. We reached the base of the route at 8:00am and started just ahead of them while they were preparing to simul-solo the lower pitches. Author leading on Pitch 1 Rad leading up Pitch 2

I lead up the first pitch, climbing past a small twisted tree, through a short 5.8 chimney move, and up to a ledge with a small bush that was adorned with rappel slings. I brought Rad up, and right behind him was the other party, who quickly passed us and gave us a bit of guidance as to where the route went. Rad led through a short 5.9 lie-back that the follower of the other party thought was the "sucker" crack that was off-route, and I quickly followed, taking a short fall in which I was able to catch myself. We were moving pretty well so far, but then things started to change. {mospagebreak title=Oh, poop?&heading=Oh, poop?} Author on the ridge

I will bear you the gory details, but it seemed at about the same time we both lost our intestinal fortitude. My stomach started cramping painfully as I led the third pitch which leads to some lower class simul-climbing. We stopped so I could do my business and at the same time our pace seemed also to slow. We simuled up some easy terrain and then Rad as well had to stop so that he too could relieve himself of our Thai food from the previous evening. Rad somewhere on the ridge

We kept climbing with Rad in the lead, since my stomach was in a knot and every time I did a strenuous move the

pressure was almost too much for me to hold back. The climbing was excellent, but unfortunately for me it was overshadowed by the stabbing pains in my abdomen. We reached the notch below the upper ridge around 3pm, which usually is a good bailing point, but since we had only tennis shoes and no crampons our only option was to fail upwards. So we continued. Author on the ridge somewhere

Much of the climbing and route finding are pretty straight forward, though we had to back down a few sections where the path was not so obvious. Spectacular exposure helped to settle my stomach, until I finally was able to somewhat enjoy myself between bouts of stomach cramps. Still climbing slowly, we finally reached the Great Gendarme with an hour worth of sunlight left and a spectacular sunset beginning to form. The sky to the East was already a deep red and purple and the horizon to the West was beginning to darken as well. Author juggling the line

My stomach had finally settled down at this point but I was still feeling rather weak even after eating a power bar while Rad led the first lie-back section. So, when it was my turn to follow the pitch I attached prussics and yarded my way up the rope after he fixed it to the anchor. The same thing happened for the second pitch of the Great Gendarme, with me dragging Rad's pack behind me attached to my daisy chain while I prussiced up the rope. From here the route eased off a bit and we continued to simul-climb as the sun set, and we donned our headlamps for the rest of the climb. The epic begins

The first signs of the moon rising began with a ominous red semi-circle hovering below dark clouds to the East. My spirits rose almost immediately at the stunning sight.

We reached the summit around 10:30pm with the lights of Ellensburg, Cle Elum, Wenatchee, and many other Eastern Washington towns twinkling far below to the South. At that time the moon had risen above the clouds to the East providing some natural light, but it was not quite enough to make out the details of the ridges near the descent. Rad was intent on descending, since he had drank the last of his water just above the gendarme, and I was not in the mood to argue.

We sat on top for a few minutes, put on extra clothes, signed the register and coiled the rope, all the while eating at the same time. We dropped down to the west of the summit and down-climbed a few short sections until we reached a small bivy ledge where our only option would have been to rappel into the blackness below. Not feeling too keen on doing a rappel into the void and with a little prodding on my part we decided it was time to stop before we made a bad decision. {mospagebreak title=Oh, Poop!&heading=Oh, Poop!} Author after a cold bivy

Taking inventory, we found that together we had the clothes we were wearing, one fleece top and bottom, one wind jacket and pants, one pair of liner gloves, a balaclava, one pair of fleece gloves, and a fleece hat. I gave Rad the liner gloves, balaclava, and wind pants and jacket, while I took the fleece tops and bottoms, gloves, and hat. Rad laid his pack down and flaked out the rope over it for insulation, and I stretched my small day pack out for use as the same. It was going to be a cold night ahead of us, so we finally broke out our emergency bivy sacks and wrapped them around us as well as could be expected and laid down for the long night ahead.

No less than four meteors streaked across the sky in succession as I closed my eyes in order to try and sleep. It was just past midnight.

I woke up off and on, and Rad and I talked throughout the night in order to keep each other spirits up, for we still had a long day ahead of us after this cold night. At one point I stretched out and knocked a rock over onto Rad's feet. He mistook this for a large animal and began to thrash around, as in his mind he was being attacked. After successfully shredding his fragile bivy sack, he calmed down and tried to make the best of the now useless piece of opaque foil. Morning, oh joyus morning!

At 5am, the sky to the East began to brighten, and we began to rustle around on our little ledge that sheltered us from the biting wind. No more than a half hour later we were up and moving around gathering our gear and shoving it back into our packs. I ate a few items of the food I had left, thinking about the marvelous breakfast I had had more than 24 hours prior. My mind began to wander to the valley far below, where in the car waited beer, nuts, and that all refreshing water, of which we had none of presently. It was time to get ourselves off of this rock.

Starting out that morning, we climbed back up where we had mistakenly descended the night before and quickly found ourselves back at the summit. This time we crossed to the East and were able to find cairns that led the way across the upper mountain and to the Cascadian Couloir on the eastern edge of the southern slopes. We followed a well trodden path down through loose scree and talus as I began to pickup the pace and forge ahead of Rad. I stopped briefly and turned to see where he was, when I heard a scream from above.

"ROCK! ROCK!"

A large rock the size of a dog hopped over the horizon above me and was headed directly towards the shallow gully I had stopped in. I quickly looked side to side to see what I could use as shelter. I was able to duck under a large

overhanging boulder and avoid all but a few pieces of shrapnel as it exploded all around, as it whirred past me at a frightening pace. All little too close for comfort, so from that point on we stayed much closer to each other in order to keep rocks from gathering such a pace before passing one another. View towards Ingalls Lake

As we dropped down further into the couloir we kept to the left following the well trodden path, until it petered out well above the valley floor. We traversed to the west, following game trails that were interspersed through the now thickening forest. Soon enough, we found ourselves on the Ingalls Creek trail and near a suitable water source for refilling our water bottles and ridding ourselves of the dehydration that had been plaguing us. While taking a long break at one of the horse camps waiting for the iodine to kill the junk in our water, we met the first people we had seen since more than twenty-four hours earlier.

Though the toughest part of the trip was over, there was still the climb up and over Longs Pass left before we were home free. My legs began to severely cramp as I neared the pass and soon I was left to a slow crawl as I crested the pass and could see to the south on the other side. I stopped to eat the last of my power bars and Rad took the keys to the car and set off ahead of me, intent of soaking in the river before driving back to Leavenworth to get his car. Once I rubbed the cramps out of my quadriceps, downed the last of my water, and shot a packet of GU, I was ready to move again. I kept a fast pace for the last three miles as my muscle finally began to loosen up again, meeting Rad at the car only a few minutes after he arrived. Mt. Stuart from Longs Pass

The drive back around to Leavenworth and home was uneventful but gave me plenty of alone time to think about the adventure we had in the last 36 hours. Thinking back about the clod bivy made me wonder if there was anything that I would have done differently given what I know now. Honestly, I do not think I would have traded the experience for anything else and despite the uncomfortable night, it was one of the most memorable climbs I have done so far. Given a second chance, I would not have done it any other way, with the only exception being the Thai food we had on Friday. No more chicken curry for me for a long, long time.