

# “But, why would you want to?”

A Tough and Stupid mountain climbing adventure that turned out OK only because of luck  
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Well, let me see, what can I tell you . . . I did this really kick-behind hike up Mt. Shavano in Colorado, I'm excited about doing similar things in the future, but I'm lucky to be alive to write this. I did the classic beginners thing, I ignored a lot of information that I had available and got myself and a friend in a little trouble that very easily could have turned into a lot of trouble . . . like dead.

I am not an experienced hiker or backpacker and I don't even pretend to know anything about climbing mountains. I boat whitewater rivers as often as I can, even then I feel like I don't get enough experience. On the boating trips I take every precaution and go out of my way to minimize risk to life and equipment. On this trip I thought I was doing the same thing, but I wasn't. I was worrying about things I was familiar with and that I knew how to deal with and I undervalued the risks that I was not familiar with, those with which I had no direct experience. This is a recipe for a really bad trip. My luck held this time. I can't count on it again.

I went backpacking for the first time about a month ago, I spent 4-days with my friend Mary in the California Sierras hiking in King's Canyon National Park in the Rae Lakes region. We were hiking up to nearly 12,000 feet and sleeping at about 10,900 feet. We had a great time, no hitches whatsoever, even the nasty delinquent black bears left us alone, we had no problems.

Back in Tulsa, Mary and I wanted to do another challenging backpack before the end of the warm season, we looked at the possibility of going to Colorado to have some fun, it was 1000 miles closer than California. Challenging for us is doing something in the “Moderate” category. A friend of mine had just moved to Denver, I called her, she talked to an office mate and recommended something in the Collegiate Peaks region of the Sawatch Range. I called the Salida Ranger District and they sent out a really super package of information on hiking the “Fourteeners” in their jurisdiction. The package was, in addition to 8-1/2 X 11 information sheets on some of the individual mountains, a very good recap of basic outdoor survival techniques including hypothermia, wild animals, dehydration, potable water safety, altitude sickness, lightning and navigation. The altitude sickness admonitions were the wilderness medicine standards, acclimate for 2 to 3 days at 8,000 or 9,000 feet, then no more than 1,000 feet per day, although other sources say 1500 feet per day is OK..

OK, I read the stuff, it was an excellent and consistent rendering of a lot of information I had read before. The Inyo National Forest orientation focused on the same things. I was more worried about Yogi Bear than I was about altitude sickness or getting turned into a short-lived light show, smoke included. I read the altitude sickness stuff. I knew the mountain was 14,225

and I knew I wanted to attempt to sleep at around 13,000 feet. I knew all this stuff. I also knew that I had only a few days I could be out of town, 2 of those days were road-trip days and that left a couple of days to do the mountain. I'd had no trouble with AMS (Acute Mountain Sickness, altitude sickness) in the Sierras, Mary had minor, indistinct symptoms there, I figured we'd be OK. If it happened we'd just come down, like the directions said, eh?

We took off on Thursday at 5 a.m., I had been to Salida a number of times for boating. I remembered it being about a 12 hour trip. I hadn't picked up topographic maps of the area yet, I didn't want to go up the hill without them and the Forest Service, where I could purchase them, closed at 5 p.m. I had 13 hours to get there, it looked OK.

The trip out was uneventful except for about 45 minutes of delays in Kansas due to road construction. Mary complained about a mild headache and upset stomach on the way out and I had a slight caffeine buzz from too many cups of stay-awake coffee.

I also must have recalled the drive time incorrectly, by the time we got to Salida it was 6 p.m., the Forest Service office was closed. We went on to Poncha Springs to Homestead Sporting Goods where the folks at the Forest Service had said I could get topos if they were closed. It was 6:19 when we got there, it had closed at 6, Darn! Oh well, we had the Forest Service map to the trail head, Blank Cabin, so we picked up some groceries and took off.

It was nearly dark by the time we turned off of U.S. 50 onto Chaffee County 250. The blacktop turned to dirt then to rutted dirt then, in the last 200 yards, to rutted, rocky, nasty dirt. We went through what looked like the campsite, crossed another cattle guard, then realized we were driving on the Colorado Trail and turned back. As it turns out the actual trail head for the Shavano Trail was still ahead a few hundred yards and had parking, we could have gone on.

Dinner was great, Caesar Salad, coleslaw, deli chicken, skim milk and biscuits. Ummm! It hit the spot . . . but we were left with bear bait, the bones, that was the only drawback. We locked the leftover food up in the truck, pitched the tent and hit the sleeping bags. It was great, a perfectly clear evening and the moon came up later on, brilliant through the mesh tent top. It got pretty cold that night, there was frost on the bags in the back of the truck when we got up.

Dawn was just coming in when we got up. Blank Cabin was a great place to camp. It is a fairly large meadow with aspens shooting up all over the place and a delightful spring-fed creek running along one side. There were cattle in the area, open range I guess. It was beautiful with the sun coming in low and Shavano in the background, very impressive. Just camping here would be worth the trip.

We had already made our first mistake, or actually I had made it. I should have gotten the topos before we left Tulsa, so we could study them. The trail head was about 9700 feet, the summit was about 14,225, the trail was about 3 - 3.5 miles long, that made the rise 4500 feet in 3.5 miles. This is almost a 25% grade, a substantial feat with a fully loaded backpack on your back. Besides depriving us of useful planning information, it cost us time the next morning. We

returned to town early Friday morning, got some coffee, bailed the chicken bones, purchased the topos and were back to camp by 9:30 a.m., heading up the trail at 10. The topos were USGS 7.5 minute maps, excellent detail. I'd also picked up a commercially made map, a Trails Illustrated topo which covered a much wider area. That was the one I decided to carry since it was waterproof, but in retrospect the 7-1/2 minute map would have been a superior choice. It had a lot more detail on it, it would have let us locate ourselves on the trail much more precisely. Our later decisions about whether to proceed or stop would have been based on much better information. Actually, both maps are useful, the Trails Illustrated for regional overview, the USGS for the hike.

The folks at the Forest Service office had told us that there was water about a mile up the trail, we were carrying empty 96 ounce Minute Maid bottles to fill for the overnight. We had food for 3 lunches, 2 breakfasts and 2 dinners, we planned to stay no longer than Sunday morning. We were going to hike in as far as we could, but no further than the saddleback just below Shavano peak, find a sheltered place to camp then make the final mile and 1000 feet to the summit on Saturday. Our plans were fluid at this point, we might play at altitude, maybe hike back down and camp, maybe come on out, we didn't know, we'd play it by ear.

I'd already made 2 more mistakes, but I didn't know it yet. I brought a fish scale with me, my pack had weighed in at 47 pounds, Mary's at 40. This was pretty heavy for this hill, I am convinced too heavy. If we'd come in from the other side, from Jennings Creek, we'd have had a longer walk, but not nearly as steep a grade. That trail starts at 10,500 feet and winds 4.5 miles to the summit, roughly a 13% grade. The packs were heavy because we were prepared for cold weather and the possibility of being snowed in for a day. I'd worried about hypothermia, we'd taken good precautions, but the cost was extra weight.

Just as we turned off of the Colorado Trail onto the Mt. Shavano Trail we met a couple from Breckenridge. They had been hiking the Colorado Trail and were going to leave their packs and day hike up the Shavano trail, maybe to the summit depending on how things went. We went on, stopped and registered at the check-in box and took off. The trail was wide and rocky, the sun bright and it was getting warm. Pine trees lined the trail, it was really a narrow, rocky road at this point even though motorized travel was prohibited here.

The trail gradually changed, the trees encroached closer to the trail, the rocks gave way to damp forest dirt lined with pine needles and pine cone shards that little gnawing rodents had shredded into mulch. These guys had been busy, they must really like pine nuts.

The trail was steep. This was my first indication that we might have some trouble. It had started out fairly easy but had steepened up within the first 1/4 mile. My breathing was quickening and my heart rate was up, but I was having no problems, just noting the strenuous effort required to climb.

The couple who we had seen at the trail head passed us, they were really in good physical shape, they blew right past us. We were envious. I knew that we couldn't move that fast even with just

daypacks, but I also knew that these backpacks didn't make the climb any easier.

We continued on up, stopping frequently, Mary was feeling the grade. There were places where I was amazed how steep it was, I'd look ahead with my eyes level and the trail would rise to eye level in a seemingly tiny distance, 10 or 15 feet. In other places the trail would level out nicely, giving us a nice break on a beautiful path through the pine woods.

We reached the creek and pumped our water bottles full. A granola bar and a short kick-back helped a lot, we continued on up. There was a nice, flat camp spot near the creek, but there weren't a lot of other camp spots. Either the ground was covered with vegetation, not to be camped over, or it was sloped, not comfortable. I noted this, but didn't think much about it.

The trail curved around a bit, giving a few incredible views through the tops of the pine trees of the Arkansas valley below, it was absolutely magnificent. We passed a couple of possible campsites and kept climbing. We were both getting tired, but it looked as if we were well over half way on the map.

As we approached tree line we were both getting very fatigued, it was around 2 or 2:30, bright sun pleasant air temperature. There had been no place to camp for some time now, the trail was narrow and steep on both sides in most places. There were areas of incipient alpine meadow showing up between the progressively sparser pines, but these were far from level, no place to put up a tent.

Tree line came suddenly, we were now on a sunny, warm, steep trail, heading up toward the saddleback that was the final approach to Shavano. Our goal was to reach the saddleback and camp below the ridge to (try to) avoid lightning hazards. We were both really fading now, Mary was requesting more and more frequent stops.

Time passed amazingly fast. I'd look at my watch and it would be 30 minutes or an hour later than when I'd glanced at it last, even though it seemed just minutes ago. We were making progress, the saddleback finally came into full view, I could see lines on the slope that looked like trail, we continued on up.

Mary was getting pretty tired now. She wanted to stop, although we both agreed that there was no place to do so. We discussed going back, I didn't remember any spots to camp for quite a ways back, I wasn't sure that would work too well, but in retrospect it would have been by far the best call. We shouldn't have been planning to camp above treeline in the first place.

We dropped our packs, Mary kicked-back to rest, I hiked ahead a ways to scout the trail. Just around a gentle bend in the trail we would be in clear sight of the final approach to the saddleback, it looked no more than 20 or 30 minutes away, it was about 2:30 p.m. We talked about it, donned our packs and headed on up, moving slowly. Mary was winding down rapidly.

I wanted to hike out 10 minutes to see how far I'd get, Mary stopped and I went on out. I closed

a good bit of the remaining distance to where the meadow was the predominant feature around the trail, but there was still a good bit to go. Mary saw me stop, she got up and started moving up. I sat down and waited for her to catch up. While I sat there I saw a couple of furry gray picas, a red ferret or weasel and two marmots! Wow! Being totally whipped to the point of near collapse has it's advantages. This place must be lousy with wildlife, I was amazed.

Mary closed the gap and sat down. It was 3 p.m. now, Mary caught a glimpse of the 2 folks who had passed us, they were hiking down along the saddleback, just about to pick up the trail down. I looked at my watch, 3:05, and timed their descent.

It took them 25 minutes to reach us, I figured it would take us twice that long to climb, I was getting worried. We chatted with them a while, the fellow mentioned that he thought we could probably pitch a tent in some of the depressions just below the saddleback and be pretty safe from lightning and wind. It was getting close to 4, they needed to hurry, off they went. We were alone up here now, we were definitely going to spend the evening on the mountain, we just didn't know where.

Mary had a headache, I didn't have any symptoms of trouble except fatigue, extreme fatigue. I wasn't particularly worried, I just wanted to get Mary into camp as quickly as possible. My feet were moving very slowly at this point, just barely getting a full boot length with each step. It looked like something out of a survival movie, bedraggled adventurer just barely able to make forward motion. Only this was no movie, it was real, I was getting very close to the end of my strength. We kept moving up, to see how far we could get.

Not very far. Mary finally said we were stopping, period. OK, that's what I'd been waiting for, a concrete expression of resolve on her part. It isn't always easy to read her true condition, she is very tough physically but not so tough in dealing with being tired. We stopped right where we were, in the middle of the trail about 100 - 150 feet below the saddleback, maybe 1/4 of a mile or less of trail to the top. The trail here was steep but, fortunately, pretty wide. There was a nearly flat, wider spot up a ways, but it was the home of some little alpine creatures and I didn't want to disturb their homes just because big, stupid animals were visiting their range, neither did Mary. We were home for the evening.

Now, 20-20 hindsight is wonderful, everything is so clear and simple in retrospect. This is where we made one of two potentially fatal mistakes, only a large helping of luck preventing the need for a helicopter extraction. We put our tent up right in the middle of the trail. Alpine meadow alternating with small patches of granite gravel lined the trail. The alpine meadow might or might not conduct electricity well enough to toast us in a thunderstorm but the granite gravel would have been a good conductor. We were well below the saddleback, but even so we stuck up from the slope of the mountain. This didn't bother me too much at the time, I was thinking about how far below the ridge we were, but later I reconsidered my earlier evaluation. As a charged cloud moved over the ridge, the closest point for a discharge would gradually move down the face of the slope. At some point we would become the closest point and we had obligingly set up a nice metallic antenna firmly grounded in the granite gravel - we'd pitched our aluminum-poled

tent. I can't help but think of the smell that you get when a piece of meat falls through the grill onto the coals, even though I'm told that lightning seldom leaves deep burns except under metal objects like belt buckles and keys.

Lightning kills over 300 folks in the U.S. every year, it is the single largest weather-related cause of death. Rumor has it that only 30% of the strikes end up in a fatality, so that means roughly 1000 folks are victims each year, a pretty big number. Blindness, deafness, temporary or permanent paralysis, ruptured internal organs and burns can result from a direct or indirect lightning strike, assuming it doesn't kill you.

The fatality rate should be put in perspective. CPR apparently saves lives in lightning accidents and is administered in a substantial number of cases, so the potential for fatalities is larger than the 300. You don't have to be hit by a direct strike to be a victim. A strike in the proximity of your position can, if you are improperly contacting the earth, jump to you and travel through your heart. I've been told that the safest position in a lightning storm is crouching as low as possible, only contacting the earth with your (rubber-soled) feet or sitting on a rubber pad.

Granite is a good conductor of electricity, so talus slopes and boulder fields are prime targets for hits. Alpine meadows may be somewhat less conductive than the granite. One of the best places to avoid lightning strikes appears to be low-growing groves of trees, one of the worst places is under a single tree or on a granite talus slope or boulder field. An experienced hiker told me you could sometimes feel the charge building on you just prior to a strike taking place. Don't take my word for any of this, I'm a poor source of information on this particular subject. I've listed a few references at the end of this that you can believe if you wish.

We were not in any imminent danger, the sky was crystal clear, a deep, glorious blue. But things can change quickly in the mountains and if it had been earlier in the summer we would have almost assuredly had the opportunity to experience a high-mountain thunder storm. My stupidity boggles my mind sometimes, I can't understand why I wanted to camp that high.

Mary was suddenly full of energy, I was suddenly completely drained of energy. I still had no symptoms of anything serious, just dog tired. I crawled into the tent and started to derig the bags and set up the sleeping gear while Mary started a soup and brown rice dinner.

Have you ever tried to sleep in a nylon bag on a nylon ThermaRest all of which is laying on a slope? Well, I had tried to do that once and I knew it would be futile this time, I knew there would be no sleep to speak of but we needed to stop and this is where we were. No matter where you go, there you are.

I set up my bed and laid down on it, I was barely conscious I was so tired. I fell asleep almost immediately. I woke up not too long afterwards, Mary was wolfing down the soup she'd made, she was raving about her outdoor cooking prowess, claiming the stuff was wonderful. I couldn't get too excited, but I did eventually crawl out and eat. She was right, it was great. I'd heard that the Trangia stove I had didn't work too well at high altitude, but at 13,100 feet it seemed to do

just fine.

The sun had dropped down over the saddleback, we were in bright indirect light on the slope and the valley below was still bathed in the last of the evening sun. It was a great view out the door of the tent. We cleaned up and hit the sack. Or, more accurately, we hit the slide. Mary's side was fairly level, but my side was like a ski jump - a short level part where my head and shoulders were and a steep slide for the rest of my body. There was no way I was going to get any sleep, I could see that, but I figured I'd at least get to rest so it would be OK. I was starting to get a headache.

I fell asleep for a few minutes and woke up with a splitting headache, it had escalated rapidly. Mary was complaining of her head as well. I tried to get back to sleep but it was impossible. It seemed cool outside my bag, but it was too hot inside. My heart was pounding and I was sweating. At one point I had chills and felt overheated all at the same time. I wondered if I'd gotten whatever Mary had on the way out here, whatever had given her a headache down on the flatland.

This was probably my second biggest planning mistake, wanting to camp high. I'd wanted to experience it and now I was. Be careful what you wish for, you might get it. I have never spent a more miserable night in a tent in my entire life. My heart was pounding most of the time, my head was hurting and if I relaxed the muscle in the leg that was holding me up on the ThermaRamp I'd slide into a heap at the bottom of the tent. Mary claimed to be in a similar situation, although I'm sure mine was much worse. I shared that thought with her, she wasn't amused. I looked at my watch regularly, wanting this night to end. It seemed to last forever. I was thirsty, very thirsty, even though I tried to be sure and keep hydrated.

Sleep disorder is one of the symptoms of AMS, but the descriptions I've seen make reference to breathing irregularities. I had no symptoms of breathing irregularities, except that I became uncomfortable quickly when I covered my head with a sheet. At the time I attributed that to the buildup of carbon dioxide in an already oxygen depleted environment. These nuances of AMS and this detailed analysis of whether I did or didn't have it came after the fact, my wilderness medicine library was safely stashed in my living room in Tulsa.

This horrid sleepless night wasn't without redeeming features, however. From the door of the tent the lights in the Arkansas valley looked like a sparkling jewel box, it was incredible. The moon finally came up and drenched the whole place in bright moonglow. It was awesome, even in my altered state.

I kept looking at my watch, discouraged at how slowly time was passing. Occasionally I could see the glow from Mary's watch, she was doing the same thing. I was thinking about tomorrow. We were about 20 minutes below the saddleback and the folks who we had talked to yesterday had said it took them 45 minutes to the top. I figured at worst we were only 1-1/2 to 2 hours away from the summit, if that. But I also felt very concerned about the possibility of becoming helicopter bait up here, about becoming incapacitated due to AMS or sustaining an injury due to

AMS symptoms such as lowered quality of decision making and loss of balance. I like to joke about Tough and Stupid Adventures, but I really don't want any trouble, I just want to have fun. And I usually go to extremes to make sure it turns out that way, even when I'm doing something a little close to the edge, which I hadn't really thought this was when I started.

I decided that I'd make no decision tonight, but I also mentally confirmed that I was leaning toward starting back down at first light, get us off of this darn hill as fast as possible, before something unpleasant happened. I was very concerned about the consequences of going on.

I was also somewhat concerned about what some disgruntled rodent was doing to my tent. I'd gone to some length to make sure that putting the tent up on the trail didn't cover up any burrow entries. My karma was at risk enough from sheer stupidity, let alone damaging it by being thoughtless to the indigenous critters. So when something came up to the back of the tent and started scratching I was surprised. Whatever it was, it was persistent and came back a few times during the night, I guessed to try to break in and steal something. I was more concerned about him chewing a hole in the tent than about what he'd steal, but not concerned enough to get up and look for the cause of the ruckus.

The first hints of dawn began to show up, the clouds over the mountains to the east started to lighten almost imperceptibly. It slowly changed from light gray to a stunning gold as the sun, still behind the clouds, cleared the mountains. Well, if I had to have a night like I'd just been through, at least this incredible sunrise helped make up for some of the pain. What an incredible place!

Mary got up, I followed her out of the tent and presented a tentative plan for consideration. I told her I was leaning toward going down, but I didn't feel as bad outside the tent as I did in it. I was very aware of the condition of my lungs, pulmonary edema is one of the consequences of AMS. My lungs were clear, not even a slight crackle. If I'd felt anything there I'd have bailed in a heartbeat. Mary was tired and had a headache, but she allowed as how she didn't feel too badly. I proposed that we break camp completely, load up the backpacks and get ready to hike down, leaving out our daypacks. We could then hike toward the saddleback and see how it felt. If it was uncomfortable we could immediately turn around and come back down, if it seemed OK we could proceed. She said she probably wouldn't go for the summit under any circumstances, she just wanted to see the mines on the top of the saddleback. That struck me as really the smart call anyway, we heated some water for tea, loaded up our gear, donned our daypacks and started climbing. I like to carry lots of water, I ran out once on a desert hike and vowed to avoid that experience if at all possible. I was carrying a 1-qt water bottle in my pack and a 2/3 full 96 oz Minute Maid bottle. I love those bottles, great handle, good color and lots of capacity. Plus they're cheaper full of juice than a commercial water bottle. Bargain.

My legs were tired. I hadn't gone 10 feet and I could tell I was very, very tired. Muscle tired, not cardio-pulmonary deficiency, although I could see that coming too. I reduced my pace and continued on, Mary close behind. On up, I timed the ascent, it took us 25 minutes. Mary felt OK, but she reiterated that she wasn't going to continue on, she'd stay there and keep an eye on me if

I wanted to go on. I was in a real quandary.

My headache was, if anything, abating. It could be due to Mary's sickness, she'd had a headache in the vehicle on the way out. Or, it could be AMS. AMS can kill you. High-altitude pulmonary edema (HAPE) can cause blue skin (cyanosis), coma and collapse. This would make you a candidate for a helicopter extraction even if you were alive to experience the \$500 - \$2000 ride that your insurance may or may not cover. But the even more insidious impact of AMS is in its effect on your brain. High-altitude cerebral edema (HACE) is the umbrella term for alteration of mental status that can take place at high altitude. The symptoms include headache, confusion, difficulty walking, loss of balance, dizziness and difficulty speaking. If the name is a proper representation of the physiological event, your brain is swelling up inside your skull. Ummm. How attractive. Now, if you have HACE you could fall off the trail and be injured. And even worse, if your judgement is impaired, how would you even be able to make the decision as to whether you were capable of continuing on?

I made my worst safety call of the trip when Mary and I got to the saddleback. I felt OK. My respiration rate would get high and my heart rate would increase, but I would recover quickly upon stopping the exertion. So I wasn't worried about imminent collapse, but I did have a headache, a strong symptom of AMS. I had no indication that my AMS symptoms might get worse, but I also had no assurance they wouldn't. If they got worse I could be a casualty on the mountain and I knew darn well who'd be paying the helicopter bill - me or, if things got out of hand, my estate. I didn't want any mistakes.

But the peak was right there, standing up in the morning sun, it was barely 8:30 a.m. One mile and 1000 vertical feet away, the summit of Mt. Shavano. No big deal, it would be there when I came back. People do this mountain all the time, it was not a big deal. But there I was, not feeling great, but not feeling very bad, either. The right call, the conservative call, was to go down. Especially since if I walked toward that summit I'd be doing it alone. Doing even relatively benign outdoor activities alone increases the risk immensely. I had recently had the experience of evaluating a relatively modest whitewater river trip as a solo and the simple change from a 1-boat, 2-person trip to a 1-boat, 1-person trip made a world of difference in the risk. Self-rescue was the only option and that wasn't always feasible.

We still had 3+ miles to walk down to get back to the truck. The most potentially fatal decision I'd made so far was setting the tent up on the trail, the mistake that led to that was planning to camp above the tree-line. I knew I was making a potentially bad decision when I started to walk across the saddleback toward the summit. Mary was going to stay there and keep an eye on me, I had on bright white pants and shirt with a red daypack, I was easily visible. My plan was to walk across the relatively level part of the saddleback and see how I felt. If my condition moved even slightly in the wrong direction I was coming back, no problem.

I reached the foot of the peak, it was a talus slope about half-way up then a combination boulder field / talus slope on the final leg to the summit. I didn't see a trail of any sort at this point, I scoped out the talus slope and chose a route up the side.

The ascent was fairly rapid, my heart rate and respiration increased accordingly, I stopped frequently. I had the barest hint of a headache and seemed to be having no balance problems, but I was still very nervous. If I fell and injured myself Mary would have to bail me out and that wouldn't be easy. I was very careful.

A few hundred yards up the talus slope I encountered a fairly well traveled path, not really a trail. This boosted my confidence somewhat, someone before me had read the talus slope the same way I had - of course, I didn't know whether they had to be helicoptered out or whether they walked out, so my confidence boost was minimal. I just kept climbing, taking it slow. The bushy tail of what was probably a marmot ducked between some rocks just a few feet in front of me. I like marmots, they seem to be good survivors. They are also rumored to rip backpacks apart in their search for "Something Tasty". I briefly thought of our packs laying unattended beside the trail but soon returned my attention to foot placement.

On more than one occasion I reviewed the possibility of turning back. My general response to these situations was to pick a goal some distance ahead and plan to head for it. If I made it OK I'd reassess my condition. This all sounds so analytical, it wasn't. I was nervous, I was tired, I was concerned. And I didn't want to turn back without good cause, but I was willing to if such cause presented itself. This was getting a little dicey.

The talus slope gave way to boulder field, the summit was getting closer. The granite rock was rough and grabbed the bottom of my boots quite well. The possibility of a foot slipping off the rock was quite low, but I measured each step carefully nevertheless. If I fell and injured myself, I'd have to lay here a long time before help came.

I looked back often, checking to see if Mary could still see me. I'd wave, sometimes she'd wave back. She said later she could barely see me. Just after entering the boulder field that sits on top of the summit I saw a line of hikers coming up the trail that we had hiked yesterday. It boosted my spirits considerably, knowing that there would be more folks up here within a short time.

I was a little tired but having no difficulty. Very near the summit I lost sight of Mary because of the curve of the peak. There were a couple of wood fence posts stuck in between the rocks and, a little to the east, a single square wood post. I'm not sure what they were, I guessed USGS markers. I toyed with looking to see if there was a metal bench mark on the summit but my concern about getting down interfered and I opted to take a quick set of panoramic photos and start down. There was still plenty of opportunity to mess up, I took the pictures and started down.

The descent required care but it was much easier. I was on the way home now, I felt relieved. I had been on the summit maybe 2 minutes. I wondered why I'd done that, I really couldn't figure it out. I guess this is probably what gets lots of folks in trouble. They get close to the goal and it's difficult to turn around, even if the situation warrants. When that happens it's just like dropping a round in the cylinder of a revolver, spinning it, pointing the gun to your head and pulling the trigger. The revolver trick is a 1 out of 6 chance of losing. I don't know the odds of losing on this particular bad call were, but it was the same deal, just different numbers.

The problem was that I had gotten myself in the situation where I had been forced to make a decision between two unattractive alternatives. By making some stupid moves I'd gotten myself within 1100 feet of the summit with symptoms that could be very serious, but which weren't at that very moment. This is the worst possible situation and one that, in different incarnations depending on what sport is involved, probably leads to plenty of accidents and deaths every year. My last bad call was the nearly inevitable result of previous bad calls which set up the dangerous situation. Not good, Richard.

At the base of the summit I met the first of the hikers coming up. They had started at 5 a.m., I was amazed. The fellow said they'd gotten off the trail only once, they'd been hiking with headlamps before it got light. They asked about a trail to the top, I pointed out the best one I had found, we exchanged well wishes and went on. They told me Mary had gone back to the packs after they had passed her, no problem, she had done well.

On down, another group, women from Boulder. "Is that it?", "No, you can't see it from here, but it's real close, it just curves over.", "So is it very far?" She was tired, I could understand that. "Just around the bend!", a well used river phrase when folks start asking how far camp is, "Well, I know it must be a ways now!", she was wise to me. She smiled, her companions came up, we exchanged greetings, wished each other well and went on.

Another small party, 2 guys. They stopped in the middle of the only easy path down, we chatted a tiny bit, they started talking between themselves. Apparently another member of their party was coming up somewhat behind, they were saying "(name) better drink lots of water. I'll bet he's going to have a huge headache!" Hmmm. Sounded like another case of incipient AMS.

I encountered the young fellow a few yards on down, he said he was from Wisconsin, I asked the altitude of his home, he said 2200 feet. Better than nothing, but not much. I wished him well, he was moving very slowly, I hoped he'd make it OK.

On down the saddleback, navigating toward a couple of sticks that marked the start of the main trail down, finally catching up with Mary and the packs, it was 10:15. "Not bad, Mary, the whole thing only took a couple of hours!" We'd estimated noon for the round trip packs-to-peak and back. I'd consumed nearly 2 quarts of water on the hike, I was glad I'd carried the extra. Mary felt better, both of us complained about not getting any pictures of each other up there, it was too late now. We put on our backpacks and started down. It wasn't easy, the trail was no less steep today than it had been yesterday.

Foot placement was paramount, even a slight misstep could roll your foot and put your ankle at risk. Scary. Maybe I should get rid of these cheap boots and get a good pair, ones with substantial ankle support. The load on the legs was also different, more of a shock load even when extreme care was being used. It was going to be a long, slow trip down.

Some of the stretches were ridiculously steep. On the trip up these had only caused increased respiration and heart rate. On the way down they caused general weariness and leg muscle

fatigue. I had led on the trip up the hill, Mary had been the one who called out the rest stops. On the way down it was Mary who was leading and me who was bringing up the rear and calling out the rest stops. How interesting.

We both mused that the folks in Colorado must not have discovered switchbacks, they just looked up the hill, pointed to the top and walked straight up . . . or so it seemed. Time passed, we kept going down, finally encountered the water we had passed on the way up. We went on by at first, but about 100 yards past it I decided we'd better fill up. We weren't very far from the Colorado Trail, maybe a mile, but my left knee was whining a little now and if we didn't make it today, if we chose to overnight in the pines, we'd need the water. I don't like being without water.

We encountered a group of young folks, two guys with backpacks, two girls with daypacks, they were going to camp below treeline tonight. Good idea, below treeline.

I didn't do it, because I knew it would sound stupid and provide no useful information, but I wanted to ask how far it was to the trail head, I really wanted to ask bad. I suppressed the urge only with great effort. We continued on down, my knee having changed it's tone from whine to scream, I was now having to adjust my gait to avoid the shooting pain. The knee has kicked up in the past, but working out regularly had seemed to fix it, I guess I went too far this time. This was when I started to wish I'd brought the USGS Quadrangle map, it had enough detail on it that I'd have been able to pretty much pinpoint our position on the trail from the contour features around us. Too bad

Chatting as we hiked wasn't easy, I was concentrating on getting down with my knee and leg hooked together, but one thing was noteworthy enough to discuss. We had not seen one single piece of trash, not one. This was remarkable considering how many folks must climb this hill every year. It is a credit to the folks who hike these trails that they are so clean, I wished everyone who used the outdoors had this much respect for it.

Finally the trail started to become rocky and wider, a sign that we were reaching the end of it. A motorcycle buzzed in the not too distant forest, another good sign that we were getting close. Ah! The sign-in box! I stopped, marked out the 17th that I had originally put down for our exit date and we headed for camp. My shoulders hurt from muscle strain, one of the muscles was actually bunched up into a little lump.

Camp loomed up, the truck was still there, always a bonus. I unhooked my waist belt and noticed no difference on the weight held by my shoulders, my pack adjustment must have slipped, accounting for why it felt like little arrows were stuck in my upper back.

We got out of our packs, hung up the cleverly preplanned sunshower that was full of almost-too-hot water and rinsed away the olfactory evidence of having climbed Mt. Shavano. Even with the air temperature and wind putting a chill on the body as soon as it was wet, the hot water felt fantastic. The sun was bright, a quick towel-off and everything was wonderful. I was tired, but

my knee had quit hurting the minute I removed my pack. We planned a dinner of Caesar salad, the linguine with red clam sauce we'd carried up the hill, all to be washed down with a bottle of red wine. We headed for Salida, it was just a little after 2 p.m. The sun was shining brightly and there wasn't a cloud in the sky.

Mother nature chose this moment to emphasize her mercurial personality, to confirm beyond a shadow of a doubt that things could have turned out quite differently. By the time we hit the blacktop on Chaffee County road 250, less than 15 minutes from when we'd left camp, the top of the mountain was shrouded in clouds and it looked like rain was dropping, although not yet hitting the ground. We had pitched our tent to stake a claim on our campsite and our bedding and dry clothes were just sitting in front of it. If it rained, everything we had would be wet. And not a hint of this 15 minutes ago.

We went on, all I wanted was a cold beer and something to eat, we'd skipped breakfast and lunch had been a granola bar. The shopping trip worked out OK, we returned to camp and were elated to find that everything was still dry. Mary was driving, she turned the truck around, pointed it downhill so we could roll-start it if need be, and shut it off. It immediately started to rain, softly at first, then picking up intensity quickly. I jumped out, rigged the rainfly and stashed our bedding and clothes. Boy, were we lucky! Again!

Dinner was great, we snacked on chips, salsa and beer until the rain stopped then cooked the linguine and red clam sauce and swilled a small glass of wine. We cleaned up the dishes, locked up the food and were in bed by 7:00, both of us totally beat. Sleep did not elude me this night, I was gone within seconds of laying down. It was wonderful to feel it wash over me and pull me into it.

The grayness of early dawn peered over the mountains to the east, we got up, ate the remains of last night's salad and pasta and prepared to hit the road. We chatted with a couple who worked with the Colorado Trail Foundation, I recounted our experience to them. I'll bet they thought we were nuts, I certainly do. They were going to go up in a few minutes, they'd be down in mid-afternoon. Their dog was rigged with a backpack and was anxiously anticipating the climb, apparently she had done this before.

The hikers walked by on their way up, I contemplated what we had done. Virtually every mistake I had made was based on poor planning. Late getting the topos, this caused me to underestimate the intensity of the climb until the last minute, this caused us to allow overloading of our backpacks, this brought on extreme fatigue. Desire to camp above treeline, this put us in peril of a lightning strike and exacerbated any AMS symptoms we might otherwise have encountered. Failure to allow time to acclimate to the altitude, I knew I should do it, I planned to, it just didn't happen . . . and we paid the price.

The one bad decision I made on this trip that wasn't in place before we even walked past the trail head was the call on going up to the summit with what were very likely AMS symptoms, alone to boot. This is the kind of stupidity that gets folks killed. Things could have changed very

rapidly, as evidenced by our experience of yesterday when the weather changed dramatically within 15 minutes. The bad thing here is that when the goal is that close it is really hard to be rational about the risk versus the reward. Nobody wants an accident, nobody wants to put a rescue crew in peril attempting an emergency extraction, but most of the folks who hike these kind of hills aren't prone to turn back readily, either. This is a real dilemma. There's the goal, here are the risks, what should I do?

My approach in the future is going to be to try very hard to avoid getting in that situation in the first place. Easy to say, of course, if I'd known then what I know now it wouldn't have happened. I'd have spent a day at 9,700, camped at maybe 11,400 feet or less, below treeline, made a daypack run for the top and possibly had no problems other than being jabbered at by irritated squirrels concerned about the neighborhood going down. But I didn't fully appreciate all of the risks, so I messed up and, just by pure luck, got away with it. It could have turned out differently, I'm grateful.

We pulled out of camp and started for Tulsa. Mary had noticed the Royal Gorge Bridge sign on the way in, we turned off and did the tourist thing at the park. It was really neat, the bridge, the tram, the inclined railway, the history of the Gorge. It was great. We spent a very pleasant 3 hours there. But 15 minutes out of the place the experience was already being overwhelmed by the hike. Naturally to some extent, the hike had taken lots longer, but there were other reasons as well. The Royal Gorge Park was an intellectual experience - you saw the bridge, you felt the sun on you, you smelled the food stands, your senses processed all this neat information and sent it to your brain.

But the hike was different. It was partly an intellectual experience - the texture of the trail, the pine smells, the piles of shredded pine cones, the marmots and picas and other creatures. But it was also very strongly internal, sensual, carnal, almost glandular but not with any sexual connotation. Qualitative as opposed to quantitative. Pain, physical stress, screaming muscles and joints, pushing just to make slow forward motion, tough-no-win-dangerous decisions to be made, the worst night I've ever spent in a tent. Sounds like fun, doesn't it? Why would you want to? Well, offset the negative with quicksilver moonbeams, a black canopy studded with brilliant spots of light, glowing jewels in the valley below, a stunning sunrise, the satisfaction of completing a moderately tough hike, spontaneous wildlife displays and getting close to a substantial mountain, just for starters. I can't really explain the best parts.

I'll tell you . . . If I don't mess up too badly before I figure out how to do it safely, I'll be back up on one of these at my next opportunity. Maybe this mountain, maybe Mt. Elbert or Mt. Whitney, or maybe some of the spectacular "Thirteeners" in Colorado, who knows. This was seriously real and seriously fun. I screwed up pretty bad, but I learned a bunch. If I didn't drain my Karma too much I'll probably be OK.

Books I own:

Pocket Guide to Wilderness Medicine, Paul G. Gill, Jr., M.D., 1991, Simon & Schuster, N.Y.

Medicine for the Backcountry, 2nd Ed., Buck Tilton M.S. and Frank Hubbell D.O., 1994, ICS Books, Inc. Merrillville, IN

Medicine for the Outdoors, Paul S. Auerbach, M.D., 1991, Little, Brown and Company, Boston

Climbing Guide to Colorado's Fourteeners, 2nd Ed., Walter R. Borneman and Lyndon J. Lampert, Pruett Publishing Co., Boulder, CO

Trails Illustrated topo map # 130, Salida, St. Elmo, Shavano Peak, 1995, Trails Illustrated, Evergreen CO, 1-800-962-1643

USGS Maysville 7.5 minute quadrangle

Read 'em before you go, not after.

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