

The Mountain Guy News:

A Guide to High Mountain Exploration —
On Both Sides of the Continental Divide



John Tuma



This book is about backpacking and high mountain exploration. Explore the wild San Juan Mountains in southern Colorado, the popular but spectacular Maroon Bells in central Colorado, and the remote Gila Wilderness in southwestern New Mexico. Discover the joys and hardships of being out on the open trail. Learn how to make Mountain Jambalaya, and what to do about the inevitable gastrointestinal repercussions of spicy food at 12,000 feet. It's all in here.

The MountainNews Guy

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ISBN 978-1-61434-509-1

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Published in the United States by Booklocker.com, Inc., Port Charlotte, Florida.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

MountainGuy Publishing, 2011
Fremont, California
(510) 366-1476

First Edition

Chapter 1

San Juan Mountains

September 2004

The Perfect Trip

The San Juan Mountains were the venue for the perfect trip. I do not know that it was our best trip, though it was certainly a good one. But everything worked just so.

The San Juan Mountains lie at the heart of the Weminuche Wilderness in southwestern Colorado. The San Juans are really big mountains. Driving in from the west through northern Arizona, one can see the mountains of Colorado rising above the high desert from half way across the state. But as big as the mountains are around Durango, they weren't big enough for Oliver. So I kept driving. Forty miles later I stopped in Pagosa Springs to buy a fishing license and get directions.

A friendly young man named Danny was behind the counter talking to two old guys when I walked in. I told Danny where I was headed, and he looked at me a bit skeptically. "You know," he offered, "those are some really big mountains. You sure you want to go there?" I assured him that I did.

"Well, okay." He didn't seem convinced. "Take the main road to the stop sign. There's a park on the right. Cross the bridge and then take your first left."

"No," said one of the old guys, "you turn left before you cross the bridge."

"You sure?" asked the other old guy. "I think Danny's right." The argument continued and showed no sign of abating as each of the old guys marshaled nuances and details gleaned from a lifetime of living in and around Pagosa Springs to

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support their position. Nothing appeared to be getting resolved, so I looked hopefully back to Danny.

“I also need a fishing license.”

“Don’t worry,” he said, “take the left after the bridge. The park is new and the road was changed. But it doesn’t matter. There’s only one road up to where you want to go and you can’t miss it. Those are some really big mountains. Now, I’ll need to see identification and I’ll need your Social Security number for the fishing license.”

“My Social Security number? What is that for?”

“We put it into a data base to catch deadbeat dads who aren’t paying child support. Just takes a couple of minutes. Did you need any ammunition?”

“No, I’m not carrying a gun.”

The two old guys stopped arguing. All three of them looked at me as if I was crazy. “Those are some pretty big mountains,” said the first old guy.

I was starting to feel uncomfortable. “What kind of ID would I need if I wanted to buy a gun and some ammunition?”

Now they knew I was crazy. “You don’t need ID to buy a gun,” noted Danny. “You just have to certify that you aren’t crazy or a convicted felon.”

“That’s right,” said the second old guy, “you don’t have a Second Amendment right to fish, but you do have a Second Amendment right to bear arms. But if you’re going up into those mountains without a gun, then you’re probably crazy, and Danny can’t sell you a gun or any ammo.”

“You sure about that?” said the first old guy. “Isn’t it the Fourth Amendment that guarantees the right to the pursuit of happiness? I don’t think I could be happy if I couldn’t fish.”

“That’s the Declaration of Independence,” said Danny. “There is no amendment that says you have the right to fish.” At that moment the cash register started to grind out my receipt,

apparently satisfied that I did not owe child support in Colorado. I paid Danny and collected my license, but as I was leaving, I could tell that the discussion was just getting started. “There should be an amendment that guarantees the right to fish. It isn’t much of a Constitution without that...” “You couldn’t catch fish even if you did have a Constitutional right.”

The door slammed behind me as I stepped back out into the bright Colorado sun. I hopped back into my truck and headed up the road. Though it was the first week of September, there was a lot of traffic as the last of the summertime tourists meandered their way through town. Pagosa Springs was still a small town, but it was rapidly being transformed by golf resorts, ski resorts, horseback riding resorts, fishing resorts, and a seemingly unquenchable need for second homes near all those exotic vacation resorts. I turned left after the bridge, and found myself on a narrow road winding my way up to Wolf Creek Pass. From that vantage point I got my first good look at the San Juans. The San Juans are really big mountains.

Our meeting place was the West Fork Campground, just a couple of miles east of Pagosa Springs. Only three of the MountainGuys—Oliver, Dan, and me—plus Oliver’s dog, Ricochet, were able to make this trip, our first since adopting the “week-long” format. Theories abound as to why the other MountainGuys dropped out, ranging from “It’s too hard,” to “My wife won’t let me,” to “I can’t stand the stench for that long.” Grooming has never really been a major issue for the MountainGuys, so most of us lean toward the former theories.

Our plan was to meet at the campground at 2:00 p.m. I pulled into the campground entrance at 2:15, after driving about 400 miles from Flagstaff, Arizona, where I had spent the previous night. I drove through the deserted campground, hoping that I was in the right place, but after winding my way around almost

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every little camping loop in the campground, I finally came upon an occupied site.

“Oh, my God,” exclaimed Oliver, “We only got here 10 minutes ago.” Both he and Dan greeted me with handshakes and smiles, and even Ricochet stopped chasing butterflies in the field behind the campsite to come over and say hello.



Welcome to the West Fork Campground.

“Geez, Oliver. Could you have picked any bigger mountains?” Oliver looked at me quizzically, as if picking smaller mountains would have made no sense at all.

The site they had selected was broad and open, with a few big trees around the picnic table. We had plenty of room to spread out and set up our tents, although it wouldn't have mattered which site they had selected since we had the entire

campground to ourselves. The rest of the afternoon was spent doing the various pre-trip chores: sorting food, evaluating group gear, playing Frisbee, and napping.

The chores done, it was time for the first-night feast. In addition to endorsing the week-long format, the MountainGuy Steering Committee had also acted on the proposal to have a major feast in a car campground the night before setting off into the woods. And a feast it was. Oliver brought steaks and chicken to cook over the grill, onions and potatoes to roast in the coals of the fire, vegetables, and fruit. He brought a loaf of fresh-baked bread. He brought cake. And best of all, he brought all the fixings to make martinis and Manhattans to go along with the crackers and cheese hors d'oeuvres.

The feast was superb, the martinis excellent, but the night was chilly, as befits the second week in September at 8,000 feet, so it was an early night. Oliver and Dan had driven about seven hours from Boulder, and I had driven more than eight hours from Flagstaff, and even the afternoon naps could not undo the road weariness. Nonetheless, the signs were auspicious: this was going to be a great trip.

Day 1: West Fork Trailhead to Somewhere Along the West Fork, or Hot Springs and Scottish Pixies (8 miles)

Morning arrived early, as it often does, but none of us were prepared to answer the bell. The martinis of the night before did not seem such a good idea in the early morning light, and even strong coffee and good breakfast muffins could not fix the problem. It was on this morning that Dan coined the phrase, "Friends of Ibu", a tribute to ibuprofen and the people who depend upon it.

Though none of us were moving quickly, the food had been packed the night before. All we had to do was pack up our

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packs, and load the cars for the short drive up to the trailhead. My last act before hopping in the truck was to grab a bag of garbage that had been sitting on the picnic table. I tied it off, and since there was no place else to put it, I threw it onto the floor of the truck to be dealt with when we got back after hiking.

The parking lot at the West Fork trailhead was surprisingly crowded, and the dust on many of the cars suggested that they had been there a while. Several large horse trailers occupied one whole side of the lot. The trail is popular with horseback riders, but given the thick coating of dust, these trailers almost certainly belonged to hunters, who are allowed to set up camps for up to 30 days. Normally, we seek out places where we are not likely to be competing with hunters, but over the years we've learned a few things about them. First of all, these were bow hunters—it was bow-elk season—and bow hunters generally know what they are doing. Second, the guys who take horses and pack mules to set up camp for up to a month while they hunt really know what they are doing. And finally, bow hunters are a different breed than the rifle-deer guys who lurk in the backcountry on and around opening day of rifle season; this latter group may include some skilled hunters, but from all appearances, most of them are yahoos who will shoot anything that moves just in case it might be a deer.

The West Fork trailhead lies at 8,400 feet of elevation, and the trail just goes up from there. The first couple of miles parallel the West Fork of the San Juan River, but river access is limited to places where one can scramble down the steep embankment. The day was fine and warm, with just a few small clouds decorating the bright blue sky. We had not been hiking for more than ten minutes, when Oliver looked over to Dan and said, “Dan, if you need to pee, we can stop.”

Dan sniped back, “I don’t need to. . . , Oh, shit!” The bite valve on Dan’s water bladder had pulled off, and he was indeed producing a stream of water as he walked along.

Oliver chuckled, “I guess that’s one way to keep your boots clean.”

By this point most of the water in Dan’s bladder had leaked out, and since he wasn’t carrying any other water bottle, the loss of the bite valve would have been a serious problem. Dan dropped his pack and pulled out the bladder to save what water he had left. “Hang on, guys. I’m going to see if I can find the valve.” With that, Dan headed back down the way we had come.

He returned two minutes later, victoriously holding the valve. Oliver offered to share some of his water, and the crisis was averted. But it proved a valuable lesson: always carry a spare valve and a real water bottle (even if the latter is carried empty), and never pack the bladder in such a way that it is under compression. If you do lose a valve, it will stream out just that much faster.

The West Fork of the San Juan River is a popular fly-fishing stream, and there was quite a lot of traffic on the lower reaches of the trail. Once the trail intersected the river about two miles above the trailhead, however, most of the fishermen left the trail to work their way down the river. I did take the opportunity to try and learn what I could about the fishing, but since the fishermen I talked with were speaking a foreign language involving nymphs and quill bodies and McDougals, I did not learn much. I was hoping that they would use more descriptive phrases, like “use the big black flies”, or “the yellow bushy guys work well”, or “I like the red sparkly ones.” But I guess one thing about being a successful fisherman, other than lying, is to create the appearance of being helpful without really revealing too much.

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The eastern side of the canyon had been steep from the beginning, and as we worked our way up the canyon, the walls on the west side became increasingly steep as well. The trail followed the river closely here, and stream crossings were common. About four miles up from the trailhead, we reached the intersection of the West Fork Trail and the Beaver Creek Trail. Our plan was to return via this trail after making the climb up to the Continental Divide.

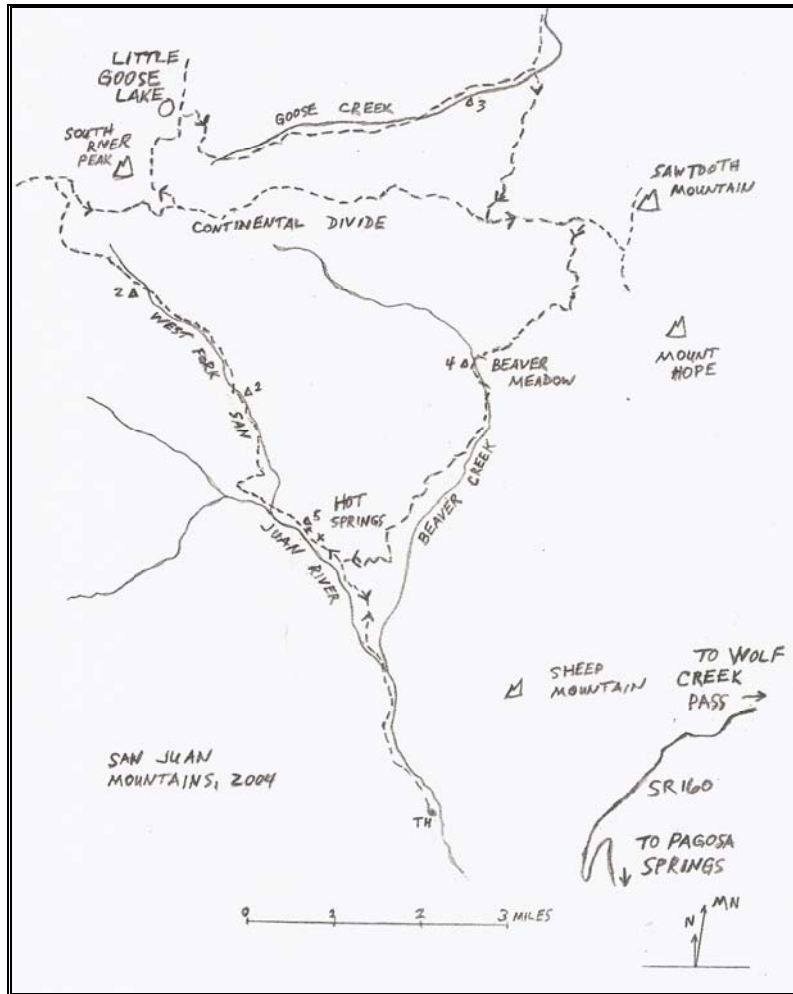
We stopped for a moment to rest in the shade of some large pines, but hadn't been sitting long when we were greeted by a loud, friendly voice as two horseback riders came slowly up the trail behind us.

"Hello! Where you guys headed?" The speaker was a tall bearded man with a cowboy hat sitting atop a large chestnut-colored mare. A handgun was strapped to his belt.

"We're doing the West Fork-Continental Divide-Beaver Creek loop," said Oliver.

"Oh, that's a great hike!" The man positively beamed as he considered it. "I did that once, a long time ago, before I started riding these things." He patted his horse gently. "I miss being able to make that kind of hike. Horses are great, but they are a pain in the ass." The man's companion was a study in contrast. She sat quietly on her small dappled horse, smiled thinly in response to the man's enthusiasm for carrying a pack, and looked positively cross when he suggested that horses were a pain in the ass.

"We hear there are some hot springs up here somewhere," said Dan, "you know them?"



West Fork—Continental Divide—Beaver Creek Loop.

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“Sure,” the big man responded. “There are two. One’s not too far up the trail—there are some campsites right near by—but you have to climb down a steep embankment to the river. The second one is better, about half mile further up the trail.”

We thanked the riders for their hospitality, and as they started off, the man asked, “You boys armed?”

“No, we don’t carry guns,” I answered. Both riders stopped abruptly, and looked at us as if they were trying to decide if we were up to something or just crazy.

After contemplating us for a time, the man leaned over and said quietly, “Well, you guys look like you know what you’re doing, but I don’t think I’d go back there without a gun. These are some pretty big mountains. Enjoy the hike.” And with that, they were gone.

About a quarter of a mile up the trail, we found the campsites that the man had referred to. Oliver offered to make the climb down to the river, so Dan and I dropped our packs and sat down to wait. Fifteen minutes passed by, then 20. Dan and I were starting to get concerned when Oliver climbed back up to the campground about 200 yards to the left of where he went down. He looked flush and excited.

“Did you find the hot spring?” asked Dan.

Oliver smiled. “Yeah, I found it. It’s a bit of a climb down, we’d probably have to leave our packs up here, and it’s pretty small.”

“So not really worth it?” Dan was a bit disappointed.

“Oh, it was worth it,” crowed Oliver. “There was a beautiful blonde woman sitting in the hot spring all by herself. She was very friendly. And naked. And she had a Scottish accent. She invited me to join her.”

Dan and I looked at each other. Something about this story did not ring true. “You met a beautiful, blonde, naked, friendly

Scottish woman soaking by herself in a hot spring?" Dan wanted to know.

"Yes," said Oliver.

"And she invited you to stay?"

Oliver nodded.

"So why did you come back?" both Dan and I asked at the same time.

"Well, I wanted to get back to you guys."

Dan and I both started laughing. "That was great, Oliver," I chuckled, "you really had us going there. I really thought you'd met a beautiful naked English woman. Wanted to get back to us guys. That's a good one."

"Scottish woman. Really. Climb down there if you don't believe me."

Dan and I looked at each other and again started to laugh. I hefted my pack, and Dan followed suit. Oliver seemed a bit cross that we did not believe him, and we had to admit there was a certain ethereal alpine glow about him that suggested he was either telling the truth or hallucinating, perhaps both.

Oliver whistled for Ricochet, who had snuck off at some point in the conversation about Scottish pixies. Ricochet came bounding into camp, clearly excited to be getting back on the trail. As soon as Oliver picked up the dog pack, however, Ricochet laid down, the excitement drained right out of him. Oliver had to lift Ricochet into a sitting position to fasten on the pack, and once fastened, he refused to move. A look of sadness and suffering clouded his usually ebullient features. But as sad as he was, Ricochet is a dog, and he soon forgot why he was sad. There's a lot to be said for that. Oliver fastened on his own pack, and we were back on the trail.

The trail continued its course right along the river, and the hiking was gentle and pleasant. Thick forest duff cushioned the feet under a dense canopy of pines and firs. About a half a mile

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past the first hot springs, the trail emerged from under the forest canopy out into the open along the river, and it was here that we came across the second hot springs. The time was a little past noon, so it was time to stop for lunch.

This hot spring did not feature a naked blonde, and I think we all felt that it was a little worse for that, but even so, it was a good hot spring. We had to cross the river to get to it, and the water in the river was cold. I don't know how hot the spring really was, but after wading through the icy river, it felt plenty hot enough. Without human help, the spring would have fed directly into the river. But a rock berm had been built up around the area of the spring so that it was akin to a separate hot tub. Four large rocks provided nice spots from which to dangle one's feet, and also divided the pool into a couple of different soaking areas. With our packs off, soaking in the hot spring, the bright, clear sky overhead, and a week in the wilderness to look forward to, it would have been hard not to be at peace with the world. This was going to be a great trip.

After a bit of a soak, we had lunch along the side of the river. It was a simple meal of bread and cheese, trail mix, and cookies, but it was satisfying nonetheless. Oliver briefly lamented that we didn't have an orange, but a couple of apple slices made up for that, and once again all was right with the world.

The bliss did not survive putting on the packs. After a good soak, a nice meal, and a chance to relax with boots off, the transition back to hiking mode was a difficult one. I think we all wanted to sit there looking sad, just like Ricochet, but unlike him we weren't going to forget why we were sad.

The afternoon hike did not start out too bad. The trail did not follow the river as closely, but it was still shaded and relatively gentle. However, after perhaps half a mile the trail crossed the river and immediately started climbing up a steep rock outcropping that was formed by the confluence of Cimarron

Creek to the northeast and the West Fork of the San Juan to the north. We had gained 800 feet of elevation in just over four miles from the trailhead to the hot springs, but from the river crossing we gained another 800 feet in just half a mile.

When the trail finally leveled off, we found ourselves perched on the edge of a cliff with the river far below and a commanding view of the West Fork valley. We had been hiking an hour since lunch, and the view and the brief respite from climbing seemed as a good a reason as any to stop.

“Why did we have to leave the hot springs behind?” Dan asked, not for the first time.

“Because we want to do the West Fork loop,” Oliver replied, also not for the first time.

“When did we decide to do that?” Dan persisted.

“Right after I asked you if you had reviewed the planning materials I sent out about three months ago, and you said you didn’t care what we did.”

“I care now.”

“Too late.”

“But why?”

This conversation had been going on since we started climbing, and I was only too happy to stay out of it. My head was pounding, and even my friendship with Ibu could not make the pain abate. Fortunately, the debate was ended by the arrival of Evan the Forest Ranger, a cheerful young fellow who was hiking down from Piedra Pass. Evan the Forest Ranger did not linger long, but in our brief conversation, he confirmed that, yes, it was a steep hill, and yes, it was all uphill for the next six miles, and yes, we would gain 3,000 feet of elevation between here and the high point on the Continental Divide Trail, and no, there wasn’t a lot of great camping along the way.

“There’s no water for the next mile, mile and a half, or so,” Evan continued with his litany of good news, “but there are a

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couple of decent campsites where you rejoin the river. So you guys doing the loop?” he asked, finally taking a breath.

“Yeah, we are.” Oliver jumped in quickly before Dan could ask Evan to elaborate on his catalogue of hardships.

“Oh that’s a great hike. Just be careful. On the way down from Beaver Meadows, the trail washed out last year. Haven’t been able to fix it yet. It’s not too bad, though we lost a couple of stock earlier this year. By the way, you guys aren’t hunting are you? It’s bow season. You can carry a firearm, but you can’t use it for hunting. You guys armed?”

“No,” said Oliver, “we aren’t hunting. We aren’t carrying guns, either.”

For the first time since meeting us, Evan was silent. He pondered for a minute. “Well, okay. Just try to stay clear of the hunters. They can get kinda territorial. You sure you don’t want to be carrying guns? You know, it’s not like a national park. You can carry a gun out here. In fact, you got a Second Amendment right to carry a gun.” Evan paused. “These are some pretty big mountains.” Then, he was off.

The rest of the afternoon hike was a blur. My head was pounding, and I couldn’t see straight. When the trail finally met up again with the river, I looked for the first place to stop. Oliver and I were walking together, and as soon as I saw a little trail veer off to the river, I told Oliver I had to stop. Dan had forged well ahead, but Oliver dropped his pack and ran up the trail to catch him.

The campsite was adequate. Well, actually, it was pretty lame. The little trail led through a thick understory of ferns and small bushes, and the site consisted of a small, disused fire ring, a couple of small, flattish tent spots, and decent water access. Despite the warmth of the day, the site was damp, reflecting the dense canopy of spruce and fir and the thundershower activity that had been prevalent the week before we arrived. I felt bad

that our first campsite wasn't more comfortable and exciting, but I was experiencing symptoms of altitude sickness, and for the last mile on the trail, all I wanted was to lie down.

As is so often the case, by the time we got done setting up our tents and arranging a cooking area, the site no longer seemed quite so miserable. Oliver set up a cooking area, and Dan and I collected wood to get a fire started. We had hoped to use fires to supplement our fuel supply, but the wood supply in this location was so damp that getting the fire started nearly overwhelmed us. Dan and I worked long and hard getting that fire going, first trying traditional methods like small tepees stuffed with dried moss and fir needles, and slowly graduating our efforts until we were using the stove—and the fuel we were trying to supplement—to ignite a small bundle of sticks that could then be used to light a fire. This was the first time we were carrying a canister stove, and a little dab of white gas would have been most welcome right about then.

Eventually, our efforts were rewarded and we had a small fire going. It only took 45 minutes and consumed perhaps half the fuel we had hoped to save, but we got it started. Oliver brought over all of the fixings for spaghetti, which he had been working on while Dan and I struggled with the fire. With the spaghetti water heating, Oliver offered around a Frisbee full of crackers and cheese, along with a can of wine. As much as I loved the idea of wine, my pounding head said no, but the reviews were good and the consensus was that it was something we should do again.

The river canyon was very steep on both sides, and once the sun set behind the western ridge, the air started to get cold and damp. The fire was a warm and cheery presence, but not enough to keep us up after such a long day. The first stars were just peeking out when we decided to call it a night. Dan and I carefully covered the fire with large, flat stones in an effort to

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preserve the coals for morning. The night was calm and there was a lot of moisture in the air, so it seemed like a pretty good idea. However, about 10:30 p.m. or so a raucous wind came blasting down the canyon as warmer air rose out of the valley below and the cold night air was rushing down to fill the void. I peeked outside of my tent, and watched to my horror the winds sweeping coals from the fire and swirling them down onto Dan's tent.

This was bad, although in all honesty it was better than if the wind was blowing coals onto my tent. Still, I felt obligated to do something. I tried shouting. But repeated efforts to roust Dan were unsuccessful over the roaring wind, so in the end I had no choice but to crawl out of my warm cocoon and out into the frigid night air to douse the coals. It was a sad moment. But my melancholy did not last long. It was too damn cold and I scurried back into my tent. I could be sad from in there.

Day 2: Somewhere Along the West Fork to Somewhere Else Along the West Fork a Bit Higher Up, or Life In The Fast Lane (2.5 miles)

Day two started early. But unlike day one, which had been preceded by a night of food, drink and merriment, day two was preceded by an early night and ibuprofen. The fire was completely out, and I wondered if the rock cover might have worked if I had not had to douse the coals in the middle of the night. Dan's tent had escaped unscathed from the blowing embers, and neither he nor Oliver even noticed the wild winds of the night before, so my heroic efforts went unappreciated.

The sun was still at least an hour away from appearing over the ridge, and it was cold in the deep canyon, so I set about lighting a fire using kindling from the night before that we had managed to dry by the fire. Ricochet looked up from his

sleeping spot by Oliver's tent. Since I had no food and so far no warmth to share, he just curled back up to wait for one or the other, perhaps both.

Our plan for day two was still uncertain. The trail Oliver had charted out for the trip included a seven-mile stretch along the Continental Divide Trail, which, as one might surmise, follows the Continental Divide. Elevations along this piece of trail ranged from 11,800 to almost 13,000 feet, but barring a large snowfield on the north side of the ridge, we would have no water and the camping would be treacherous in any case. From our present location, a long day of hiking, say eight to ten miles, would put us somewhere in the middle of that stretch of the Divide. A short day of hiking would put us in position to camp by water, but then we would still have at least a ten-mile day, most of it at very high elevations along the Continental Divide, before climbing down below Sawtooth Mountain and into the Elk Creek drainage. Oliver and I had discussed this troublesome feature of our chosen trail many times, but when no obvious solution presented itself, we did what most people would do. We punted. After all, it was a problem that didn't have to be solved yet, why worry?

So the morning fire provided an excellent venue for some timely reflections on what to do next. We had punted our last. With the fire lit, I started heating water, and then went to retrieve the food bags. This was promising enough to get Ricochet's attention, so he decided to help get the bags. By the time we got back with the food, both Oliver and Dan had emerged from their tents and were warming themselves by the fire. Over a fine breakfast of fresh coffee and instant oatmeal fortified by dried fruit, we discussed our options.

"Perhaps we should make for Piedra Pass," I suggested, "there is a gauging station there, so we should be able to find water. It looks to be about four miles from here."

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“I’m not so sure we’d find water that high up this late in the year,” said Oliver. But maybe we could head for Little Goose Lake, which is on the other side of the Divide below South River Peak. I estimate seven miles.”

“That’s an interesting idea.” I studied the map where Oliver was pointing. “We could spend the night at Little Goose Lake, then hike back up to the Continental Divide Trail tomorrow.”

“We could even hike down Goose Creek. It parallels the Divide, but we’d have water the whole way, and then we hike back up on the Sawtooth Trail. Wouldn’t add more than four or five miles to the loop,” Oliver enthused. He always gets excited about making a hard trail even harder.

“You know,” chimed in Dan, “this is a really nice spot. We could just spend a relaxing day here. Maybe hike back down to the hot springs tomorrow, and then spend a couple of days there. Perhaps your Irish friend would still be there.”

Oliver and I looked at Dan trying to determine whether he was serious. Apparently he was. “But that would mean that we don’t finish the loop,” said Oliver slowly, trying to grasp what Dan was saying. “And she was Scottish.”

“Yeah. So?” Dan seemed a bit exasperated.

I grabbed my compass and held it out before me to protect myself from such heresy. Oliver took two steps back. Clearly Dan had been infected by a fever. We might even have to bleed him.

“The MountainGuys are all about loops. We do loops. You know that.” I waved the compass at Dan menacingly as if to send the dark spirits of lassitude fleeing.

“Okay. Okay. Don’t get all freaky. I’ll do whatever you guys want to do. It was just a suggestion. It would make for a relaxing week. After all, these are some pretty big mountains.” Dan put down his coffee and went over to his tent to start packing.

Oliver and I breathed a sigh of relief. Never before had a MountainGuy suggested that we not do the loop. Where did he even come up with such an idea? It was as if he had all of a sudden gone all crazy. Fortunately, that was the last time we ever heard such talk from Dan. He's a MountainGuy.

Our plan was set. We would hike to Piedra Pass. If it looked nice and we had water, we would stop. If not, we would continue on to Little Goose Lake. As for the decision to return to the Continental Divide Trail or go down the Goose Creek Trail, we didn't have to make that decision now, so why worry?

The morning hike took us through a dense forest of pines, firs and spruces. The trail followed the river closely, threading its way around fallen trees, large boulders, and thick stands of ferns and brush. The valley had a primeval feel to it, damp, green, wild. Even in the middle of the day, very little light penetrated all the way to the forest floor, and many of the rocks and trees were covered in moss and lichen. The trail was well marked and seemingly well traveled, but we didn't see anyone all day. We had the primeval forest to ourselves.

We had not been hiking long before the steep trail began to take its toll. Even though the hiking was pleasant and the air cool, I quickly found myself struggling to keep up. Dan and Oliver disappeared into the ancient forest ahead of me, and soon I could not even hear them talking. Every once in a while, Ricochet would return down the trail to check on me, but then he would run ahead to catch up with Oliver and Dan, his visits becoming increasingly infrequent as they stretched out their lead. I continued up the trail, but my head was pounding and each step was a labored effort. Piedra Pass seemed increasingly remote, Little Goose Lake an impossibility, all that excellent planning gone to waste.

When I eventually caught up, my companions already had been resting for perhaps 20 minutes. We hadn't hiked more than

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a mile and half, and I was completely spent. I was once again suffering from the effects of altitude sickness, and even Ibu couldn't help. Oliver suggested I take off my pack and rest for a bit. I felt better almost immediately. With the pack straps no longer pressing on my shoulders, my head stopped pounding so badly, and a bit of trail mix did much to revive my spirits.

The revival did not last long. We had not been hiking more than 15 minutes before my head started pounding again. After perhaps a mile, I had to stop. We were now at about 11,400 feet of elevation, Piedra Pass was still about one and half miles distant, and the river was flowing only intermittently.

"Guys," I said, probably somewhat pathetically, "I can't go any further. My head hurts so bad I can hardly see straight. Whatever you want to do tomorrow I'll do. But I have to stop now."

Something in my plaintive cry convinced them that I was serious. "Okay," agreed Oliver, "we'll find a place to camp."

I set my pack down and sat while Dan and Oliver scouted for a campsite. Oliver returned a few minutes later with Ricochet in tow. "We found a site just up over that rise—it's a small plateau with a great view down the valley. Looks like no one has ever camped there before. This'll be great. We can build our own campsite from scratch." Ricochet wagged his tail in approval. Leave it to Oliver to find the bliss even in such unfortunate circumstances.

And a great campsite it was. There were several flattish spots up under the trees at the back of the plateau on which to pitch tents, and a nice cooking rock and fire area out on the edge of the plateau, overlooking the valley. We were not yet quite above treeline, but from the kitchen we had a filtered view through the trees of the high alpine meadows that adorned the peaks to the north and east.

I picked a flat spot, set up my tent, and immediately crawled in to take a nap. I think it might have been 11:00 in the morning. I woke up maybe two hours later feeling a whole lot better. Dan and Oliver had transformed the plateau into a fine home away from home. Their tents were pitched, the food-hanging rope had been hung, the water bottles were full, and the fire pit had been carefully constructed on the rocky spot at the edge of the plateau. The top layer of soil had been removed, and the bottom of the pit was lined with rocks to protect the ground and underground roots from the fire. For their fine work in finding and transforming the site, they receive the LocationLocationLocation badge, with the Eco-Friendly Engineering Endorsement. High praise for sure.

When I crawled out of my tent, all three of my companions were lounging around the fire pit, munching on snacks. “Feel better?” asked Dan, “Hungry?”

“Yes, and yes. But what I really want is a cup of coffee.”

“That does sound good,” said Oliver. “I’ll get my stove.”

There is something wonderfully decadent about an afternoon cup of coffee when backpacking. There often isn’t enough time to stop for that long during the day, so when the opportunity arises, it is a time to savor. With the sun still bright overhead, but the light now angling in from the west, the view was even more spectacular than it had been in the morning. The coffee was strong and hot, the air crisp and cool, and the snacks plentiful. In short, it was a perfect moment.

“Thanks, guys. I really wanted to stop. Whatever you want to do tomorrow I’ll be up for.”

“I’d really like to go down into Goose Creek,” said Oliver. “It adds a couple more miles and some elevation—the Sawtooth Trail looks pretty steep. But it means that we don’t have to hike all the way to Elk Creek to find water.”

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Afternoon coffee.

“Another trip to the hot springs would be good.” Dan looked hopeful. “Then we have a short hike to get out on the last day.”

“All sounds good to me,” I replied, lying down to relieve the stress of savoring the moment. “It all sounds good.”

The rest of the afternoon was spent in various pursuits. Dan retired to his tent for a nap, while Oliver and I clambered up the streambed for a ways just to see what was there. For the most part, the stream was dry. Had we continued on further, the next water would have been Little Goose Lake. Dinner that night was MountainGuy jambalaya, a perennial favorite, and a meal that is well suited to such a slow day. It takes some time to prepare, plus the ingredients are heavy. The next two days looked to be long and tiring, and I don’t think any of us wanted to be carrying all that extra weight over the Divide and back.



This book is about backpacking and high mountain exploration. Explore the wild San Juan Mountains in southern Colorado, the popular but spectacular Maroon Bells in central Colorado, and the remote Gila Wilderness in southwestern New Mexico. Discover the joys and hardships of being out on the open trail. Learn how to make Mountain Jambalaya, and what to do about the inevitable gastrointestinal repercussions of spicy food at 12,000 feet. It's all in here.

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