

Mountain 137
Gazette

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Ski Vittlers speaking CB in the Wallowas smack-dab in the middle of a Rex Block

Marriage can make you do things you might not otherwise have considered.

Ever. Like shopping at Home Depot. Investing in life insurance. Or in the case of my husband, holding a job that doesn't have the word "bum" hyphenated to it.

For me, raised in New Jersey, where the skiing amounted to standing upright on a Flexible Flyer for several feet before crashing and burning down the local sledding hill, a backcountry ski trip in eastern Oregon was certainly not on my radar screen before I said "I do." But there I was, packing strategically for weight and compactability, determining the minimum number of toiletries I could get away with for five days. Toothbrush: yes. Daily moisturizing regime: questionable.

Obligatory background info

Leaving Jersey for Salt Lake City, I got a two-for-one deal on a Masters Degree and Roger, general outdoors guy and amateur philosopher, who was at the time, directing traffic at Solitude Ski Area in the a.m. so he could ski the rest of the day for free. Among other finer things in life, Roger introduced me to the world of winter sports, first getting me into the backcountry on telemark gear, then making the mistake of introducing me to alpine. It took two lift runs before it occurred to me that I was not defective; it was that silly free-heel making me fall down the mountain.

Alpine it was. And in four years, which coincided with a move back east to Vermont, I'd attained slightly better than intermediate status. With the purchase this year of alpine-touring gear, I no longer had any excuses for avoiding the backcountry.

Joseph and the amazing Technicolor ski slopes

There were seven of us signed on for the trip to the Wallowa (pronounced wuhl-OW-a) Alpine Huts, located in the Eagle Cap Wilderness Area just beyond Joseph, Oregon. It would be Roger and me; my work colleagues: Pete, Reid, Geoff and Doug; and Paul, a friend of Roger's from the Ski-VT online community, a.k.a. the "Ski Vittlers." Never mind the fact that there were no other women on the trip, I was — if not terrified — at least rather concerned that I a) would get my ass kicked by the terrain, b) wouldn't be able to keep up and/or c) might end up crying.

After several early mishaps, including our flight being overbooked by one person who happened to be Geoff, Doug missing his flight out of Montreal and having to bail on the trip altogether and our van reservation being, well, de-reserved, we found our way to Joseph. With a final shower Monday morning, we met up with our Wallowa Alpine hosts at the Wildflour Bakery, which, normally closed during the winter season, had opened just for our group.

Connelly Brown, aka CB, was the outfit's CEO — that is, Cool and (most) Excellent Operator. It was clear even after first introductions that by week's end, we'd all be speaking "CB," a kind of hybrid dialect of surfer dude, excited 14-year-old and the "Makin' Copies" guy from SNL way back when. We also met Mike, a second guide on the trip, who was often referred to as Mystery Mike, though appropriately, we never found out why.

CB set our expectations for trek to base camp: four miles, elevation gain of 1,800 feet. If we made it in two hours, we were rock stars; three hours not unrespectable; four hours, perhaps we should have done winter break at Disneyland. (If only ...)

Death waivers signed and our packs stuffed to max capacity, we headed off to the trailhead that would take us into the Wallowa wilds.

Monday: The Rex Block, Pieps and infusions of grandeur

Arriving at the McCully Basin base camp, a mile-and-a-half inside the wilderness area, we met Morgan, host number-three, and as we would soon learn, backcountry culinary whiz. The camp consisted of four yurts: the kitchen/dining/guide-sleeping yurt, the sauna yurt and two guest yurts, which each slept five, but we split three and three — Roger, me and Paul in Yurt 1 and Geoff, Pete and Reid in Yurt 2. The spaces were clean and comfortable, the cots set with foam pads and sleeping bags.

We crossed paths briefly with the outgoing group, a mix eight of men and women whose apparent average age of about 50 and lack of bandages and limps gave me some degree of comfort.

After a snack lunch, we trekked to an open field for a lesson in weather and rescues. CB was pleased to report that not only had we arrived just after a nice healthy dump of powder, but that we had been delivered a gift: The "Rex Block" had parked itself over our heads.

"The Rex Block, for you dudes who don't know, is a stationary weather pattern where sweet, high pressure off the Canadian coast has plopped itself down just north of low pressure off the California coast. Dudes, we're smack dab in the middle of it."

In practical terms, that meant we were in store for bluebird days and temps in the 30s all week long.

As CB was playing professor, Mike went off to bury his avalanche beacon, or Pieps, as I was told to call it. Though it seemed like a

simple game of treasure hunt as we crawled around the empty field shouting, “Getting closer,” the steady beep and static were stark and eerie to me. There was no disguising what these beacons were used for and why we were practicing zeroing in on a buried target.

It was late afternoon when we’d finished the drills, but there was just enough light to take our first runs after a short hike up above the Avi Meadow. Though it was tempting to head back to camp to help Morgan with dinner, I was determined not to be “the girl” on the trip just yet. So I tightened my pack straps and followed the group up to the top of Snag Hill where, looking out over McCully Basin, we got our first thrilling panoramic views of the snowy peaks all around us, sunset-pink and massive.

It was like going into battle the way we clamped on our helmets, locked into our bindings, secured our goggles and checked for loose straps. And before I knew it, the first skiers had taken off and disappeared into the pines of Mystic Meadow. Roger gave me a quick wink before pivoting and taking off.

It was just me and Mystery Mike, whose job, I eventually caught on, was not to keep me company, but rather to make sure that Reid and I — ever the slowest ones of the group — were never left behind.

Diving in among the tight-ish trees, skiing powder unsteadily, I found myself clutching my snowplow security blanket. I needed to get my “ski legs.” Still, I managed to make a turn or two and avoided having to test my helmet. When I was able to broaden my concentration a little, I could hear someone below, Geoff, I think, giving a hoot of happiness at the quality of the snow and his own sweet line.

The terrain leveled off and, as I caught my breath, I watched the boys, each running through his personal obstacle course of trees. Five full days of nothing to do but ski. They were psyched.

That night, we were treated to the first of several of Morgan’s gourmet meals. He had cooked up salmon coated with crushed graham crackers and mustard. (The flavors worked happily together and with the warm herb bread and salad we were also served.)

“Eat up hearty, gang,” said CB. “Tomorrow we’ve got a big, big, big, big, big day. Right, Coog?” he rumped the big square head of Cougar, a barrel of a Chocolate Lab whose stamina and ability to summit, power down, summit again and again in snow up to his chin put us all to shame.

The evening’s only ritual, *The Canine Smackdown*, was a feeding frenzy of any and all leftovers, including carrot cake, split into two big bowls. The bets were on to see whether Cougar or the Bodhi, the big Bernaise — another wonder dog — would be the first to devour all the contents of his bowl. This night, Bodhi was champ.

We said our good nights and thanks for the great meal.

“Good night’s sleep, everyone. Remember tomorrow’s a big, big, big, big ...”

Strolling back to our yurt, the stars were bright enough to keep our headlamps off. Paul had left early to stoke the fire so, while not exactly warm yet in the yurt, it wasn’t freezing. And once in our sleeping bags, it was actually quite comfortable.

Lights out and Paul was already sleep-breathing. Roger and I were head-to-head in our separate cots, not able to talk about our day like we do when we’re home. Our hands were touching though, communicating far more tenderly than many couples we know do with words. Another adventure together.

A side note on waste management

The story goes, God said to Eve and Adam, “I’m in a collaborative mood today, why don’t you tell me what kind of perk you’d like me to bestow upon each of your particular genders.”

Ever the assertive one and anxious lest Eve try to grab it first, Adam blurts out, “Ooh, I want to be able to piss standing up.” He casts a smug look at his female counterpart as if to say, “Ha!”

With equanimity, Eve smiles at God and says, “Multiple orgasms, please.”

Well I’m sure Eden was full of golden boughs to bear her weight and green mossy carpets to cushion her lovely backside, but at night when the snow around our yurt’s pee hole, polished from foot traffic, was a skating rink, and the next foreseeable opportunity to get laid was a week away, I cursed that stupid Eve.

Tuesday: Going big, big, big, big, big

Having passed the night in an extended scuffle over Reid’s excessive and highly vocal snoring, the Yurt 2 crew was a bit edgy as they filed in to the dining yurt, with Pete, the lone snowboarder of the group, scowling hard and making threats. Reid was equally pissed, having been awakened periodically by balls of socks and ski gloves that had been hurled hard at him.

“Won’t matter, Pete-ster,” said CB. “You guys are gonna be so freakin’ spanked tonight, you’ll sleep through a bear attack.”

It was a carb-tastic breakfast of giant dried fruit and granola Super Pancakes with (amen) real maple syrup, which, is to a Vermonter, what Hatch Green Chile is to a New Mexican. CB took the opportunity while our mouths were full to prep us for the day.

“First, we’re gonna toddle up to the summit of Hidden Peak, for most excellent panoramic views. Then, we’ll take some utmost excellent turns down Big View Run. Then — “ he looked around, lowered his voice and said, “Then we’re gonna take you guys for a little O.B.E. Ohhh yeah!”

For the uninitiated, that meant an “Out of Basin Experience.” Going places we were not supposed to go.

I learned two valuable lessons that day. The first was that I didn’t need to keep pace with the rest of the crew, particularly Paul,

who, despite being the oldest, was a locomotive ascending even the steepest pitches. Instead, I could excuse rather than curse my meager 5'2" frame and find a pace that, yes, ensured a wide gap between the rest of the caravan and me, but enabled me to breathe rhythmically rather than gaspingly. And there was always company, be it Reid leapfrogging me during rest breaks, or Mike or Morgan taking turns as sweepers. In fact, it was Morgan who taught me to go as slowly as I needed by engaging me in an impassioned discussion about the unhappy state of political affairs in our country.

"It's the Jedi mind master trick," he told me later. "To carry on a conversation, you must not be out of breath. To not be out of breath, you must slow your steps. Your mind is distracted by composing thoughts while your body adapts to the pace it requires."

Clearly, Morgan was the Wallowa Alpine Hut's center of Zen sensibility.

As one by one the group disappeared behind the highest point of Hidden Peak, the wind kicked up and the snow became hard-packed. As I finally took the last steps to the summit, I could see the unhindered sweeping panorama of the flat desert plains to the north where the town of Joseph lay, the bowl of McCully Basin to the south, Hell's Canyon beyond the basin and the Wallowa River Valley to the west.

The wind made our lunch break brief, and we were soon fumbling our way, skis in hand, down the rocky peak to Big View Run. Like lemmings, the group took off down the slope, quickly learning that the snow here was iced over and chunky. In other words, just like Eastern skiing. And Roger and Paul and Geoff managed to carve good turns, while Pete on his split board took the prize for prettiest run, until he had a spectacular wipe-out at the near-bottom. Like Jack and Jill, Reid and I came tumbling after.

And Jill was pissed. Where was the Holy Grail powder we were promised? If I wanted to spend the week cartwheeling and face-planting into icy shards of snow, I could have stayed home and shoveled my driveway.

As the rest of the group was

pulling on their skins, I caught up with Reid, who was nursing his own bruises.

"Phf. Boy, was that a lot of fun," I said.

But my sarcasm missed its mark. "I know, man. This is just so awesome. I am so psyched you talked me into doing this trip."

And here was the second lesson of the day (and I will confess, it is one I am constantly learning and relearning): There is so much right in front of you to be grateful for.

There was a Victorian philosopher named Thomas Carlyle who used the perfect analogy to explain this most important point. Unfortunately, it took him several convoluted pages of text to express what essentially boils down to: Stop pissing and moaning that you can't stretch out your hand and grasp the sun. Ponder for a moment what an exquisite miracle it is that you can stretch out your hand and grasp things at all.

I can't say too much about the general vicinity of the OBE, where we were headed next, since that was the point of the OBE, it was out of bounds — pronounced off-limits by some authority. But like the cookie jar placed just out of reach, the rewards were sweet and the snow quality vastly improved. A gentle slide at the top of the bowl we were entering, and then the momentum took us down, with our knees slicing turns like shark fins through water.

With no trees to avoid crashing into, I could concentrate on movement and what it felt like to glide rather than wrestle with the snow. It felt loose and a little scary to be left to my own balance and muscle strength. At the resorts, the hard-packed groomed slopes were my partner; I learned what I needed from them in order to get down even the steepest terrain. They were predictable and cooperative. Here in the untamed backcountry, it was a whole new and wobbly relationship. I tumbled occasionally, but in the deep fluffy powder, it felt like playing rather than punishment.

Three-quarters of the way down, big smiles all around. This was why we flew 2,500 miles from our homes and paid to get up at two and five o'clock in the morning to stoke the fire and keep from freezing. I can't say I had yet seen

the light in the powder religion, but I got why they did.

We'd come down about 500 feet from the top and looking up the steep run we'd just completed, Pete, Reid and I decided to start the trek up, while Paul, Roger, Geoff and Morgan continued down another 500 feet into what Morgan warned would likely be "variable and unpredictable conditions."

Living at a 400 foot elevation for the last five years combined with the uphill effort seemed to have contributed a mild case of altitude sickness, though we were only at roughly 10,000 feet; a searing headache and queasiness were exacerbated by each deliberate step taking me from switchback to switchback. Pete felt it too, and the two of us, slowing to a snail's pace, were too hurting to care when we were lapped by the guys coming back up from their run.

When we'd all gotten to the top and rested and refueled, CB suggested we cap off the day with a hike up the ridge just north of Hidden Peak and ski down a run called "Hidden Majesty." So this was what he meant by big, big, big, big, big.

We went up again. And continued up. And three-quarters of the way to the peak, I reached my limit. I threw down my poles and shouted, "That's it. I'm not going any farther."

Oblivious to what I had intended as declaration of frustration and near-tearful exhaustion, they all just shrugged their shoulders and kept skinning up.

(Warning: gender stereotype approaching.)

I believe that the need to summit is an inherently masculine trait — that to the guys I hang with, the ski, run, hike, climb, bike ride, name your sport, is somehow less valuable or legitimate if you don't "bag the peak." But I had no qualms about dropping my skins right where I was and had not a moment of sideways longing to gain another 20 feet of run. The turns were just as good, and they were plentiful. And besides, it was a long, thigh-cramping downhill ride back to the camp.

That evening, we were all zombies of fatigue, barely able to sit up to eat another Morgan creation of chicken, sausage,

peppers and hazelnuts. We were nearly dozing sitting up and forewent dessert. We headed back to our yurt where our day's damp clothes were drying on stretches of line like colorful Tibetan prayer flags.

Wednesday: Appreciating the D-cup

It was surprisingly easy getting geared up and out of camp in the morning after hearty servings of McCully Cali Scramble (eggs with everything), bacon, biscuits, fruit and coffee, coffee, coffee. Though the path through the tree-lined "Tunnel of Meditation" seemed to require quiet introspection, we were like sled dogs eager and energized for the snow. Geoff, with his near-Tourettic habit of breaking into song when something reminded him of a particular lyric, was singing "Walking on Sunshine." The Rex Block was indeed fulfilling its promise with a staggeringly big, blue sweep of sky.

It was a steep climb out to the far moraines, up Pinnacle Bowl to the President's Hourglass. Here was the area for showboating as we took turns launching into a wide, untracked powder bowl. We cheered from the top, where a few of us waited our turn, or from the bottom, where the first runners were snacking.

The falling S-turns were interpretive art displays on an otherwise giant blank canvas. And it was apparently poor Wallowa etiquette to cross and thereby "mess up" the track created by another skier/rider. CB scolded Roger for doing it, so on his next run, Roger did a perfect spoon of CB's tracks without infringing even an inch. We looped our way back up the skin track and cut off to our right, looking down into the D-Cup, which Mike assured me was not a reference to a healthy breast size.

"So how did you end up doing this?" I asked him on the way up. It was his first season working as a guide.

"Used to be a carpenter," he said. "Had a few friends who were big backcountry skiers. I started to see the wisdom in spending the winter outdoors."

But it was hard work. CB, Morgan and Mike were up pre-dawn chopping wood, prepping breakfast and getting their own

gear together for the day. Hiking up with us, skiing down, making dinner in the evening, washing pots, pans and nine people's dishes, all the while telling stories, giving tips and being generally upbeat and personable no matter how tired of Geoff's singing they got. And their season was booked with back-to-back-to-back trips from December to April.

The top of the D-Cup was steep. My breath caught a little, realizing there was no other way except down. Sensing my apprehension, Mike said, "Just like jumping off the high-dive. Thinking about it is the hardest part."

I nodded and didn't give myself a chance to second-guess. With a quick weight shift, I was swooping down, using all the strength I could muster to keep from turning into a snowballing cartoon character.

Halfway through the long run, my quads quit. I turned out of the fall line for a 10-second rest, cut a few more turns, another rest, then a fall, and wound my way slowly to the bottom. It wasn't smooth and flowing, but it felt OK.

And we climbed and we skied away the afternoon. Dipsy Doodle Chutes. President's Parallel. We went rapid fire, descending like a small horde of space invaders.

We skinned up one more time up through Lazy Boy in order to ski down Love Seat. At the top, CB was saying his good-byes, since he was headed to town to celebrate his birthday with his girlfriend from South Carolina, whom he'd met on a rafting trip he guided the previous summer.

"Gotta watch out for those river hookups, CB," Roger said, pointing with his chin to me. "I met Amy on a trip down Westwater Canyon. Before you know what hit you, you'll be married, have a mortgage and have to pay someone to guide you on ski trips to the backcountry."

"Happy Anniversary to you too," I said.

In fact, it was three years to the day that we stood in front of a handful of family and friends and promised to stick together through stomach flus and ingrown toenails, sudden unemployment and tax filings, joint family barbecues and friends' kids' bar mitzvahs. In all our time together, nine years total, the

only real relationship stress had come from bad weather, when long stretches of it keep us restless and unhappily holed indoors. That, and when we played backgammon. When we married, Wendy, our officiate should have said, "I now pronounce you eternal playmates."

With a "Yeah, gang, yeah. Great hanging with ya. Tear it up, dudes," CB was off, swooping lazy, big, big, big, big turns all the way down until we lost him in the trees.

Thursday: A day at the beach is a walk in the park

It was early. Before breakfast. I was wrestling with my contact lenses. Paul was chopping firewood. Roger was headed to the "skybox," an outhouse that was all out and no house other than the beach umbrella that afforded the barest of privacy.

Suddenly: a shrill, piercing shriek from Yurt 2. Then two more short cries. Something bad. I went out and hurried after Paul to see what had happened.

We could see Geoff holding his head, taking deep breaths as he paced outside the door of the yurt.

"What is it?" Paul asked. "What happened?"

"Are you OK?"

"Aggggh. Gaggh!" He spit. And then he spit again.

"He walked face-first into the crotch of Reid's long johns!" It was Pete's voice coming from inside the yurt, punctuated by gleeful laughter.

"Man, they REEK!" said Geoff.

More howls of laughter from inside the yurt.

In that moment, I had a vision of these grown men — now in their late-20s and early-30s — as 10-year-olds, at Boy Scout camp, daring each other to eat spiders, pouring warm water in the loser kid's sleeping bag to make him think he wet the bed, bluffing what they know about sex. Their voices were probably the only thing that had changed since those days.

It was a low-key day, relatively speaking. We hiked our way up to the top of a wide-open bowl called "A Day at the Beach." Though it was snow instead of sand, there had not been

a more appropriately named area for the lazy fun it afforded the group, taking run after run, the snow fanning out behind us like waves. Pete was not snowboarding; he was surfing.

That afternoon, I had my most skillful run. Ever. Or at least the most memorable. The angle was high enough to get good speed, but not so steep as to get ahead of my gear. I figure-eighted Roger's graceful line and though it may have been a kind of training-wheel approach to getting the timing of my turns right, it worked. And it felt good.

We were all grins that day. The sun, the deep powder. We were stars in our own low-adrenaline Warren Miller movie. In fact, it occurred to those of us with digital cameras with video capability that here was the perfect opportunity to record our lovely turns for posterity.

Except, I goofed.

We had taken our turns down the untracked side terrain of Day at the Beach. Roger and I were at the bottom shielding our eyes from the bright afternoon sun as Paul launched into what was about to become the prettiest run of the week. Each turn was a perfect, in-synch rhythm. Not a hesitation, not a stumble or even a flinch. It was elegant.

Paul knew it too. He glided the rest of the run to where Roger and I waited.

"Did you get it?" he asked, all aglow and smilier than we'd ever seen his generally reserved self.

It took a second for me to understand what he meant. Then I felt the weight of the camera, still in its case, still in my hand. I nearly wept for the utter disappointment he must have felt. And with just a half-day of the trip left, the opportunities to catch perfect runs on video were dwindling.

That evening, Geoff, Pete and I melted in the sauna, breathing deep and feeling our sore muscles let go. Afterwards, we ate our last Wallowa dinner: pork loin in a cherry wine reduction, green beans and mashed potatoes so indulgent with butter and delicious they rivaled my mom's. We lingered after the meal, enjoying a beer for the first time on the trip (a highly unusual omission for this group). "Content," was the word that came to mind as I looked around the cluttered yurt at

everyone's tanned or perhaps just grubby face.

We relived our favorite trip moments. The spectacular tumbling wipeouts, Paul's perfect-10 run, the easy indulgence of our Day at the Beach. The group unanimously gave Reid the award for "Best Attitude" and Geoff got "Best Worst Singing." We seemed to give a collective sigh and I imagine were all thinking that we could have happily stayed another five days. Even me.

Friday: The party's (almost) over

We had until noon before we had to start the trek out. Packing quickly and wolfing down some granola and fruit, we were determined to squeeze in as many last runs as possible and so started hiking up to a treeless, low-angle area just behind the base camp. All the while I was stealing glances out at the peaks we'd skied. Our tracks were everywhere; you couldn't see an unmarked face.

Catching my look of incredulity, Morgan smiled knowingly, "It's amazing where your feet can take you, isn't it?"

I nearly responded, "Yeah, except we still needed a plane and a van to get to the place where our feet could take us."

But I didn't. Because it was amazing. Miles and miles of skin tracks and artful S-turns, each one a tiny journey unto itself from Up to Down. A physical and flowing expression of skill, of concentration, of frustration sometimes, of joy.

And I got this vision of CB as today's philosophizing Thomas Carlyle, and he said, "Dudette, don't get yer panties in a wad cuz you're not a pro ripper, just be stoked we got some sweet pow, the Rex Block gods smiled on us and we got a ton of killer terrain on which we carvaholics could tear it up."

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