

Mountaineering at Midlife

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Among America's great midlife diversions, mountaineering hardly competes with golf, sports cars, and Harleys, not to mention that ancient pastime, fretting over the irreducible love handles that lard your flanks after age 40. Yet my wife Adele and I — at ages 45 and 50, respectively — chose precisely this stage of life to ramp up our mountaineering skills. After three decades' worth of backpacking and scrambling, mainly in the Rocky Mountains of Wyoming and Colorado, we wanted to up the ante. Three years later, after four sessions with professional mountain guides, we've acquired glacier savvy, sure-footed rock climbing technique, and solid rope skills. Let's not exaggerate: we'll never be certified mountain guides. By the same token, we've also missed our chances to be major league shortstops and concert pianists. But I don't think it's a stretch to call us mountaineers, at long last.

In retrospect, the whole adventure was less a sharp turn than a way to add dimensions to our time in the mountains. We'd poked around extensively in the Wind Rivers, the Colorado Rockies, the Sierra Nevada, and other North American ranges, rambling off trail, scrambling up third-class peaks, and skiing high cirques and bowls whenever our indoor jobs allowed. Mountains felt like home in many respects. But our treks on glaciers were distinctly inept, and our sporadic climbs on technical rock were at the mercies of folk whose skills were, to us, a black art. It's hard to feel truly at home where someone else has to lead you.

Impetus: the Ptarmigan Traverse

Not long after the turn of the millennium, one of my backpacking buddies mentioned the Ptarmigan Traverse, a famous North Cascade mountaineering route draped along the icy crest south of Cascade Pass. "We're not getting younger, you know." That logic was compelling. In July 2002, five of us — Jamie Angell, Ben Roth, Paul Stockton, Adele, and I — shouldered packs in a foggy drizzle south of Marblemount, Washington, and humped up 33 switchbacks to timberline at Cascade Pass. We successfully navigated the whiteout, climbed over the col above Cache Glacier, and camped near our first day's destination, Kool Aid Lake. As it turned out, we camped on that heathery bench for three cold, wet, pea-soup days and nights. By the time the sun came out, there were too few days left to continue along the crest. So we packed up and grunted back over Cache Col. At the saddle, taking a break among mountain goats, we got an eyeful of the astonishing terrain we were bailing from. That view told me that we'd need more skills to do this trip right, even in good weather.

By 2004, Adele and I seemed to be the only ones still lusting for the Ptarmigan. But I thought it foolhardy to navigate glaciers as an inept twosome. I called the American Alpine Institute in Bellingham, Washington, and started talking with their domestic trips coordinator, Coley Gentzel. After swapping a few emails, Coley suggested hiring a guide to teach us glacier travel as *part* of a Ptarmigan Traverse expedition, a solution that meshed well with our experience. We'd build new skills based on our existing ones, and we'd have a party of three to negotiate the glaciers.



Figure 1: Dome Peak from White Rock Lakes, in the heart of the Ptarmigan Traverse.

Our guide was Seth Hobby. Seth recommended a day of rock climbing and anchor instruction at Mount Erie, a crag-climbing area on Fidalgo Island south of Bellingham. Not being rock climbers, we consented with some reluctance. Seth might simply have been looking for some assurance that he wasn't launching into serious mountains with a couple of maladjusted, terrain-challenged oafs. Whatever he concluded, that day of easy cragging planted a seed in my mind: to be well rounded mountaineers, we should learn how to conduct ourselves safely on fifth-class rock.

The Ptarmigan Traverse is a stunning route. Between Cascade Pass and Bachelor Creek it follows an improbable trajectory along one of the remotest sections of the North Cascade crest, threading glaciers and perennial snowfields connected by high passes. There is no easy bail-out. Each evening in camp you look back in disbelief at the route you've just covered and ahead at the sphincter-tightening landscape that you'll confront the next morning. On the route itself, you're keenly aware of how steep the snow is, how much steeper the land gets as it falls thousands of feet away from you into the timber-choked drainages below, and how important it is to be confident in your footwork and your ice axe. Along the way, Seth taught us how to work as a rope team, how to read glaciers, how to kick steps, how to make snow anchors, how to effect a crevasse rescue, and how and when to glissade. All that education aside, it was perhaps the most beautiful mountain trip of our lives at that point.



Figure 2: Adele and Myron on Dome Peak.

Germination: Part 1

A trip like that leaves you far from sated; in fact you just want more. Adele and I felt that “more” had to include better mountaineering skills. We're lucky enough to live in Laramie, Wyoming, which is 40 minutes away from alpine snowfields. And we're just 20 minutes away from a superb array of crystalline granite crags. Vedauwoo has a rock climbing tradition stretching back over half a century, with a huge catalog of graded routes ranging from bolted face climbs to hand cracks to cheese-grating off-widths. (It has some notoriety for this last category.) Fortunately, the University of Wyoming has an outdoor program that offers basic climbing instruction. We signed up for several weekend courses.

As we were puzzling our way through Vedauwoo's bizarre landforms, AAI sent us a course catalog. That's when we started thinking about the three-part, 36-day Alpine Mountaineering and Technical Leadership program. Once again, Coley gave us some great advice. He suggested capitalizing on our Ptarmigan Traverse experience by taking a privately guided version of AMTL Part 1.

We mapped out a four-part itinerary for the summer of 2005:

- A three-day, unguided warm-up trip on Ruth Mountain, east of Mount Shuksan.
- A three-day visit to Mount Baker, with a guide leading us through snow skills, crevasse rescue practice, and a summit excursion on the Cascades' northernmost volcano.
- A three-day stay near Washington Pass, to develop rock climbing techniques on the spires above the pass.
- A three-day round trip to the summit of Mount Shuksan.

Our long-time backpacking friend, Paul Stockton, joined us for the first two segments.

As we hiked back to our car after summiting Ruth Mountain, we happened briefly to meet our guide, Jason Martin. Back in Bellingham, Jason shook down our gear, then led us to a camp at the toe of Coleman Glacier, on Mount Baker's northwest slope. There we honed our snow travel and self-arrest skills, practiced ropework, and built snow anchors. The material seemed elementary at the time, but since that day we've spent many hours on steep snow in the Colorado Rockies, the mountains of Wyoming, and the North Cascades, gaining a gut feel for the stability and security that these skills give you when applied systematically.

We also practiced crevasse rescue, lowering each other into the dripping blue solitude of a crevasse on the “Football Field”, a fissured expanse of ice at about 6600 feet on the Coleman Glacier. Hauling a companion out of a real hole in the ice is harder than practicing it on dry land! That night we camped at

7100 feet on Heliotrope Ridge, with a clear view of the 10,778-foot summit to the east and of the sea-level lights of Bellingham blinking in the west.

Actually, we spent much of the night — from about 2:30 am onward — climbing Mount Baker. Despite tales of woe and suffering on Baker, our memories are of a diamond-clear, calm, moonlit night on the glacier. We cramponed up the steep Roman Wall at first light. After 40 minutes of attention-demanding footwork on the Wall, we unroped on the summit and stood in cold, brilliant sunlight, watching steam drift out of the crater below.

The Baker excursion extracted a toll. Adele had an inflamed Achilles tendon from the snow-skills session, and I sprained an ankle on dry ground as I was hauling a heavy pack down the trail after descending from the glacier. These injuries didn't send us home, but we hobbled on every downhill stretch for the rest of Part 1. There's a lesson here that isn't part of AAI's official curriculum: when you're over 40, spread a 6000-foot descent over more than one day.

Clients weren't the only ones who nursed sore tendons. Jason admitted to having twisted an ankle on a previous trip and to having some concern about whether his fiancée would notice when he walked down the aisle with her a couple of weeks after the end of our trip. We learned later that he had a fine wedding day.

The next day was merciful on all three swollen ankles: Jason, Adele, and I drove over Washington Pass to Mazama and spent the day on a crag called Fun Rock. We practiced placing protection, building anchors, rigging for rappels, and climbing on top-ropes. At day's end we set up a car camp at Early Winters campground, amidst the ponderosas and sage of the dry-side Cascades, then drank stream-cooled beers in the long, mid-summer twilight.

The next two days were outstanding. Jason led us up the South Arete of South Early Winter Spire (II, 5.5) and the Beckey Route on Liberty Bell (II, 5.6), two classic moderate routes on the Washington Pass spires, which themselves rank among the scenic highlights of the range. Our leading skills were virtually nonexistent, but after the homework we'd done at Vedauwoo we felt comfortable belaying, following Jason, and handling the ropes and gear.

Although we'd planned to spend the last three days climbing Mount Shuksan, we reached the Marblemount ranger station too late to secure a two-night permit for the Sulphide Glacier approach. Instead, we settled for one night on Sulphide Glacier and two nights of car camping at the Shannon Creek campground, in the mossy, low-country forest on nearby Baker Lake. A flat tire kept us from spending the extra day ice climbing on Mount Baker's south-side glaciers. After we fixed the tire, Jason salvaged the afternoon in camp by teaching us elementary rock-rescue techniques: escaping belays, passing knots, and stabilizing injured climbers in the "baseline" configuration.

It's too bad that we lost that night on Shuksan. On the penultimate day of the course we hauled our packs and gear up 3,400 vertical feet to the foot of Sulphide Glacier. As we listened in camp, the NOAA radio station forecast that a storm would move in during the night. The prediction was distinctly counterintuitive as we basked in the crystal clear twilight, but it proved all too true when the alarm rang at 2:30 am on the last day of the trip. Thick fog, darkness, and cold, steady drizzle notwithstanding, the



Figure 3: Adele on Mount Baker's summit.



Figure 4: South Early Winter Spire on the left, Liberty Bell on the right.

three of us clipped into the rope and groped our way up the west rim of Sulphide Glacier to the base of the summit pyramid. There, at first light, I bailed out on climbing technical rock, reasoning that cold hands, wet footing, and a whiteout constituted poor climbing conditions. Our guide, who would have had to lead, didn't argue. Cascade weather had struck again.

The next level: Part 2

After a privately guided part 1, we decided to take Part 2 with a group. This way we could gauge our skills against those of other students and work with more than one guide. When we gathered in Bellingham in July 2006, we met fellow clients Pierce Adams (Phoenix), Claude Burton (New York), and Sarah Moles (Atlanta) — all youngsters by our lights — and our guides, Paul Ivaska and Mark Johnson.



Figure 5: Adele on mock lead in the Coleman ice fall.

After orientation, we loaded a van and drove to Johnny Creek Campground, south of Leavenworth. We spent a sweltering afternoon on Mountaineers' Dome reviewing rock gear and anchor systems. For the next three days, on various Icicle Canyon crags, Mark and Paul led us through a progression of rock climbing skills: crack climbing, mock leading, lead climbing, and multipitch climbing. Here's where our weekends at Vedauwoo paid off: Adele and I now felt quite comfortable climbing intermediate cracks, and we could place protective gear and build anchors without too much fumbling. The Leavenworth segment of the course culminated in the clients' leading a three-pitch climb of Sabre (I, 5.4) on Castle Rock, overlooking Tumwater Canyon. After downclimbing in a light drizzle, we drove to Bellingham, pitched tents in the rain in Larrabee State Park, and took the guides for Italian food.

The second segment of the course focused on ice climbing. We drove to the Heliotrope Ridge trailhead (3600') on Mt. Baker, then shouldered packs and hiked among massive Pacific Northwest conifers to a camp known among mountain guides as Mirkwood, after a gloomy forest in Middle Earth. We spent the first afternoon on the Coleman Glacier icefall, practicing French and German crampon techniques and learning the rhythms of steep ice climbing. On the Ptarmigan Traverse, Adele and I had stared awestruck into several icefalls; two summers later we now found ourselves in the very maw of one, learning to negotiate its chaotic terrain. Following a tent-bound night of hard rain, we spent another blue-sky day in the icefall, learning to place ice screws and practicing multipitch ice climbing. Adele and I had enjoyed two previous days of waterfall ice climbing through the University of Wyoming, but our experience lacked attention to the details of technique that make for stable footwork and confident placement of protection. On our third day on Mt. Baker we practiced running belays and multipitch climbing on steep snow, then hiked down to the van. That afternoon we drove to a roadside car camp in Marblemount for an evening of civilized pleasures: Frisbee and cold beer.

The third segment of the course integrated all of our skills in a true alpine setting. Early on the eighth morning we clambered out of the van, hoisted packs, and grunted up a steep trail to a camp at 6200 feet in Boston Basin, above the Cascade River Road. Boston Basin is an alpine gem: a gargantuan cirque perched above the thick, rainy-side timber, ringed by mountaineering classics, and opening northwest for a view into the core of the Cascades high country.

The next day, starting well before first light, Mark and Paul led us up the west ridge (II, 5.6) of Forbidden Peak, one of the most noteworthy climbs of North America. Forbidden is a true alpine experience, with ice on the approach; a long, airy ridge; and an exquisite summit.



Figure 6: View north from Forbidden Peak, toward Eldorado Peak.

But the most important *lesson* of the day was that a steep approach and descent over mixed snow and rock can demand more risk management than the technically rated portion of the climb found in guidebooks. Rockfall on the descent was arguably the day's most significant objective hazard, and it was instructive to watch how the guides managed the problem.

On our third day in Boston Basin, we climbed Sahale Peak via Quien Sabe glacier. This was a relatively simple (II, 4) route whose main difficulties included navigation through crevasses, a short section of steep snow, and a short, exposed rock step. From the summit we saw most of our old friend, the Ptarmigan Traverse, sprawling along the Cascade crest to the south.

Our last full day in Boston Basin was a perfect capstone experience: a client-led climb of Sharkfin Tower (II, 5), a three-pitch rock summit between Forbidden Peak and Sahale Peak. Here, as on Forbidden, one encounters the greatest objective hazards on the approach and on descent from the ridge. The rock climbing itself was arguably the easiest we had done, but the work done getting to and from the tower impressed on us the importance of deliberate footwork, scrupulous care with loose rock, and attention to detail in rappelling. It was a superb finish to Part 2.

Overall, Part 2 helped us turn a significant corner. We were now confident in our skills on steep snow, comfortable at lead climbing on easy and intermediate rock, and capable of recognizing and managing the chief hazards of an alpine setting. We still needed work on transitions. Mark assigned homework: work on accurate gear placements, timely anchor building, and crisp, effective rope handling.

Solidification: Part 3

Having come this far, I felt compelled to finish Part 3, the centerpiece of which was a client-planned expedition. We had plenty of time to practice our rock skills near home and an entire winter in which to study maps and guidebooks. And we spent a few days in Ouray, Colorado, tuning our ice climbing skills.

Planning was the hard task. It's one thing to plan a trip when the expectations are your own, but things are less straightforward when you're trying to guess at the expectations of a mountain guide you don't even know yet. We focused on the Picket Range, mainly because of the love we had developed for the North Cascades but also because of the romance of that sub-range. Owing to their remoteness and breathtaking ruggedness, the Pickets hold a special place among mountains of the American West: a region of deep virgin forests, expansive glaciers, fickle weather, few trails, and hard summits that stab the sky.

Our AAI contact Coley Gentzel offered as much advice as he could, but in the end it was our guide, Dawn Glanc, who settled the itinerary. She recommended sticking with the first part of my plan, a six-day expedition to Mount Challenger, near the north end of the range. But she wisely suggested replacing a second six-day trip into the southern Pickets with a sequence of day climbs near Washington Pass. This way we could top off a strenuous expedition with a set of day climbs designed to solidify our abilities to lead in the mountain setting.

Compared with earlier trips, the expedition to Challenger was a bit light on technical climbing. We spent two days hiking through deep forests on the Big Beaver trail and bushwhacking up the steep, 2100-foot grunt to timberline on Challenger Arm. We then spent a day traversing the trailless ridge to a 7000-foot high camp overlooking Wiley Lake. Still, climbing Challenger was a singular experience — well within our technical abilities (glacier travel, II, 5.5 from camp), wild to a degree that few alpine places are in the lower 48, and utterly gorgeous.



Figure 7: Camp near Wiley Lake, below Mount Challenger.

After two days retracing our steps to the trailhead, we car-camped in Marblemount and plotted the rest of the trip. Dawn suggested a day at Fun Rock, near Mazama, to work on rock technique (and, I'll admit, to give our knees a rest), followed by some climbs near Washington Pass. It was rewarding to visit Fun Rock and compare our rock climbing abilities with our memories from two years earlier.

Even more rewarding were the two days that followed. On day eight, we revisited the South Arête of South Early Winter Spire (II, 5.5), where we led the fifth class pitches and learned rope management and terrain belay techniques on the fourth class segments. Now we were beginning to integrate the skills needed to move efficiently on technical terrain. On day nine, we hiked three hours over Kangaroo Pass to Kangaroo Temple, where I led the three-pitch north face (II, 5.6).



Figure 8: Myron terrain-belaying on South Early Winter Spire.

Then weather began to move in. Day 10 brought a cool, steady Cascade rain under a low ceiling. Dawn salvaged the day by taking us to a roofed bleacher in Winthrop, where we spent the day practicing ropework, including two-rope technique, rock rescue, escaping belays, and passing knots. The following day also started with a none-too-promising look, but I was keen to lead the Beckey Route (II, 5.6) on Liberty Bell, just to measure how far we had come since Jason Martin led us up that route in Part 1, two years earlier.

It was not to be. After slogging up the two-hour approach through fog that reminded me of New England's White Mountains, we donned harnesses and rock shoes at the base of the climb, only to be pelted by a sudden, cold sleet as I placed my first piece of protection. Not eager to cope with slick footing and frigid fingers, I pulled the plug on the climb. Neither Dawn nor Adele protested. We descended to dry weather at Mazama, warmed up over hot coffee, and spent the rest of the day climbing in the rain shadow at Fun Rock, with successes up to 5.10b (a soft rating by standards we're familiar with).

Upshot

It's interesting to take stock of how much we learned between 2004 and 2007. Before completing the Ptarmigan Traverse, our glacier travel skills were incomplete at best, technical rock was mysterious territory, and steep ice too exotic a medium for us even to imagine. After four guided trips to the North Cascades, we now possess solid glacier skills; we can lead intermediate rock climbs with confidence in our safety systems; and we can assess, make judgments about, and manage the major hazards of technical terrain in the high mountains. We've seen some of the most dramatic country in one of the truly alpine ranges of the lower 48. And, most important to us, we've learned how enriching it is to feel at home on steep terrain in a mountain range that you love.

These trips are the only ones Adele and I have taken with professional mountain guides. My natural inclination is to guide my own trips, and I resist the idea of yielding responsibility for the success of an expedition. But there's a ceiling on what you can accomplish if you're stubbornly unwilling to let others lead — a ceiling that's not much higher than the one you bump against when you dump all of the leadership on someone else. Our guides were genuine role models, dedicated to the craft of safe mountain travel and insightful in their teaching and leading. In the many hours we spent with them in the wilds, sometimes in places as new to them as to us, we had ample opportunities to witness the aspects of character and outlook that shape their craft. They are exceptional people.

I doubt we'll be setting any records as alpinists; indeed, our best strategy at this stage of our outdoor careers is arguably to avoid being the subjects of mountaineering headlines. But we're delighted, grateful, and even a bit astonished to have come this far. There's plenty left to learn and a long list of places to visit.