



TrailGroove™

Issue 4 - September/October 2012

Contents

September/October 2012

- 4 Editor's Note
- 5 How to Contribute to TrailGroove Magazine
- 6 TrailGroove Product Review Policy
- 7 Jargon
- 8 Random Trail Tip
- 9 Yosemite National Park
The Mist Trail
by Jessica Smith
- 19 Review: Vasque Breeze GTX Hiking Boot
Waterproof/Breathable Protection for Cooler
Weather
- 27 Manistee National Forest
Manistee River Trail Loop
- 37 Hiking Across the Country:
Lessons Learned
by Tyler Coulson
- 45 Review: Exped Synmat UL 7 Sleeping Pad
Exped's Solution for Lightweight Warmth
and Comfort
- 53 Backcountry Photography Tips
by David M. Cobb
- 57 Backcountry Cuisine
CampfireHashbrowns
- 59 The Drive Home
In the Know

Note: You are viewing the PDF version of TrailGroove Magazine.
For the optimal viewing experience please view the magazine
online at: <http://www.TrailGroove.com>

Direct link to this issue: <http://www.TrailGroove.com/issue4.html>

[Subscribe to TrailGroove Magazine](#)

* A special thank you to our contributors for this issue:
Jessica Smith, Tyler Coulson, and David Cobb.

Copyright © 2012 TrailGroove Magazine LLC, www.TrailGroove.com



Editor's Note

Lately I went out for a quick trail run that climbs steeply up a local trail to a small waterfall that is a popular hike in the area on nice days. The day was quite hot, (I'm sure we're all used to that this year) but it was evening and the sun had begun to dip behind the hills. Since I was running, I passed a few people on the trail as I made my way up the switchbacks, mostly out of breath. After a mile and a half, a small side trail led to the waterfall – If you went straight you'd head into the heart of the Wind River Range. While the waterfall is great, it always seems like I should just keep going straight...

But turning left I soon found myself soaking in the sound and sights of the waterfall, the mist cooling the air. I turned around and began running downhill back to the car. On the way back I passed a few of the people I'd seen earlier. One gentleman remarked, "Now you're heading the right way!" to which I replied "It's definitely a little easier in this direction, that's for sure!" But as the parking lot came into sight, I realized the right way was into the hills, no matter the steepness of the terrain. At home Jen and I were back at the maps and we were soon back on the trail. Headed uphill and straight instead of left at the popular junction we pressed forward, with the September / October issue of TrailGroove fresh on our minds.

In this issue Hike the Mist Trail in Yosemite and check out a great weekend destination with fall colors in the Michigan hills. You'll find reviews of the Exped Synmat UL 7 sleeping pad, and if you're thinking about footwear choices for upcoming cooler and perhaps snowy weather, we're reviewing the Vasque Breeze GTX mid boot. We also feature a great photography tip in a new rolling feature, and we'll take a look what hiking across the country is really like. Don't forget to check out the Drive Home, our latest trail tip, and more. Thanks to all of our readers for the continued and amazing support!

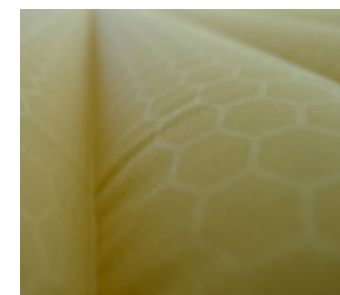
Contribute



Interested in contributing to the magazine? Please email us at info@TrailGroove.com with your idea. We're always on the lookout for quality content, and compensation is offered for quality submissions. Our list of requirements isn't too long, but please keep the subject focused towards backpacking or hiking. However, submissions related to other outdoor activities will be considered. (Backcountry fishing or wilderness photography, for example). Page through our magazine for the general idea of what we're all about, but even if you have something you haven't yet seen in an issue our ears are open. Please send us a note with a broad overview and sample of your idea, as well as an approximate word and picture count. Original and factual material is a requirement. Once received, we'll evaluate your submission and contact you for further discussion. Questions before you start? Just let us know.

A few examples of what we are looking for:

- | | |
|--------------------------|---------------------|
| Destinations | Art / Illustration |
| Gear Reviews (Objective) | Short Stories |
| Photography | Interviews |
| Video | Backcountry Cuisine |
| Skill & Technique | Your New Idea |



TrailGroove Magazine Review Policy

The products we review are obtained via normal consumer retail channels. We do not ask for or accept review samples from manufacturers, and we do not obtain the products we review under the TrailGroove Magazine name. As such, we're reviewing the same products that you would obtain - Not hand-picked review samples. Even though we like free gear as much as the next person, but we won't bend on this rule! As a result of this philosophy, we are also able to experience and comment on the same level of customer service that the typical consumer would receive.

Note that this policy does not apply to any pre-release products that we're able to obtain prior to market release for review. In such cases, we will clearly state that the product was obtained from the manufacturer for a sneakpeak, pre-release evaluation in the review.

We use a 5-star rating scale for our reviews:

- | | |
|-------|-----------|
| ★★★★★ | Excellent |
| ★★★★☆ | Very Good |
| ★★★☆☆ | Good |
| ★★★☆☆ | Average |
| ★☆☆☆☆ | Poor |

Jargon

R-value \ 'är 'val-(,)yü\

A measurement used to gauge the thermal resistance of insulation. In the backpacking world, R-value is a way to determine and compare warmth among sleeping pads. The higher the number the warmer your pad will be. Foam sleeping pads are able to increase offered warmth mostly by increasing the thickness of the pad but also to some extent by altering the type of foam used and the outer surface design of the pad itself. Inflatable sleeping pads use various techniques such as internal synthetic or down insulation, internal baffles and reflective barriers, and the volume of the trapped air itself. We've found an R-value of about 2.5 to be the minimum for temperatures down to freezing. A lesser value can be used in warmer climates, which should result in a lighter pack weight. For temperatures below freezing, select a warmer pad or mix and match several pads to create a warmer sleep system. When combining pads, the insulation value is cumulative. A warmer weather inflatable pad combined with additional foam insulation can result in a warm as well as comfortable cold weather setup.



Random Trail Tip

Groundsheets

Groundsheets help protect and prolong the life of your tent or shelter's floor while helping in the waterproofness department as well, but often groundsheets come in at such a heavy weight that many backpackers have been leaving them behind to lighten their packs. While not a required piece of gear by any means, you can to some extent find the best of both worlds by using window insulation film purchased from a local hardware store. This is very thin plastic sheeting that is remarkably tough - Instead of puncturing it will usually stretch and can usually make it through many, many trips. It's much more durable than the traditional 2mm plastic hardware store offering often used for a DIY groundsheet, while being lighter. It's not as durable as add-on groundsheets offered by many tent manufacturers, but the material is cheaper and really light - Cut to a size suitable for a 2 person tent or shelter results in a weight easily less than 3 ounces. The material is designed for heat shrink applications, so be careful to keep it out of hot and direct sunlight. This won't result in disaster, but may cost you just a bit of length and width. It's a good idea to cut your groundsheet just a bit larger than needed if you plan to be out in such environments. You can find the film at most hardware stores or online [Here](#) for about \$10. Gossamer Gear also offers their Polycro Ground Cloths, made of the same material. Either way the material offers a great solution for weight-conscious backpackers - The peace of mind and protection that a groundsheet offers, all in a very light and durable package that won't break the bank!

Yosemite National Park

The Mist Trail

By: Jessica Smith

“There she is Pops,” I slapped my father on the back as we sat in the middle of Curry Village starrng in awe up at a rock face known as Half Dome. The sun was just starting to set and the early June sky was changing color rapidly from blue to gold, but it was Half Dome that was stealing the show. She glowed a brilliant orange on her massive face, providing a tempting distraction from the evening ranger program we had come to see. Half Dome was, after all, the inspiration for our family trip. The six of us (my mother, father, sister Claire, brother-in-law Dan, best friend Kelly, and I) had been lacing up our hiking boots for months back home in preparation to climb the mighty icon of Yosemite National Park, California. As fate would have it, even after securing the necessary permits, we arrived a week too soon. With the final leg of the Half Dome ascent clinging to the extremely steep rock slope around the back of the Dome, poles and cables are put in place each year by park rangers to assist in the climb. When the poles will go up is always a bit of a mystery. If snow persists on the mountain, the placing of the poles may be delayed later into the summer season, making a climb up Half Dome with out them an extremely dangerous undertaking. Like most hikers, we had decided that with out the poles, we would not attempt the Dome, and starring up at its tremendous height from the comfort of Curry Village, I thought that perhaps it was a blessing that we arrived when we did.

It was my father’s dream to summit Half Dome, and it came out of nowhere. Back home in Florida we spent cool fall weekends exploring sections of the Florida Trail together. I suppose it was on one of those

day hikes that he first mentioned Yosemite National Park. It was surprising to me because he rarely traveled or even expressed an interest in it, but once he had Half Dome and Yosemite on the brain, it stayed there. Fast forward seven months and the family is watching climbers on the face of El Capitan and sleeping in the canvas wall tents that make up Curry Village. There were mixed emotions in the group about the hike not being possible after all of the preparation. I believe we were all a bit disappointed, and at the same time secretly relieved. After all, were we really prepared for such an epic day hike? It had been my father’s choice to come the week that we did. We could have played it safe and waited until July when we knew the poles would be up, but then we would have missed out on the other thing that drew him to the park. Water.



Falling water to be specific. With record setting snowfall the proceeding winter he knew that the best show to be put on by the waterfalls would be in early June, just as the warm days of summer started to set in. Once inside Yosemite Valley, we began to realize that the whole place was like one giant natural sink, with water pouring down from high places all along the rim. Just because the poles were not in place didn't mean we couldn't set out on the trail towards Half Dome and alter our route back. With reaching the summit out of the question, we instead decided to hike what portion of the trail we could and then turn back, specifically with the goal in mind of reaching the top of Nevada Falls. This section of trail is known as the Mist Trail and

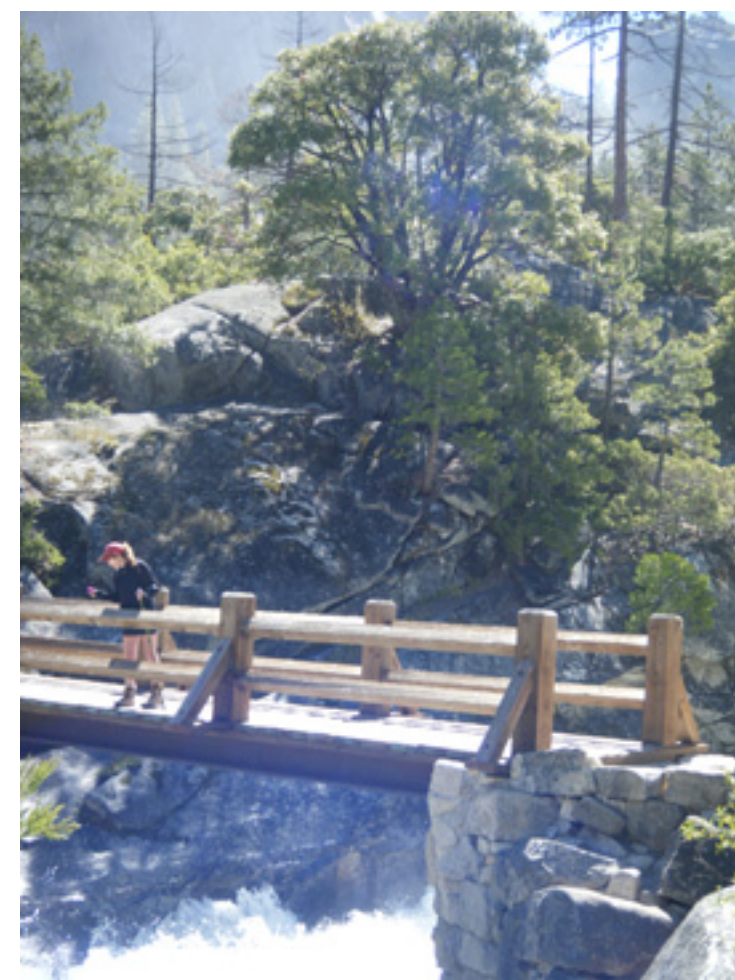
promised a refreshing spray from Vernal and Nevada Falls as they are hiked past.

After a good night's rest we laced up our boots and adjusted our hiking poles before setting out in the direction of the falls. From Curry Village we had two options to reach the Happy Isles trail head where the Mist Trail began. We could have either walked an extra mile there, or taken the tram. From Curry Village the road that the trail head is on is a loop and is not open to traffic. Wanting to conserve our energy we took the tram to the trailhead. The trams began running at 7am and if we had been planning on making it to the top of Half Dome and back (a difficult 14 miles) we would have had to have left in the early morning hours



before the trams began running. With our goals scaled back a bit, the tram seemed like a smart option for our group.

Starting out the family was full of excitement, taking pictures by the mileage sign and marveling around each turn. The first section of the Mist Trail is a 1.6 mile leg stretcher to the Vernal Falls footbridge. Here the trail was wide as it curved upwards towards the falls, and it began to dawn on all of us what we were in for. Huffing and puffing with the 400 foot elevation change, we were happy to stop and take a breather at the footbridge. The water of the Merced river was raging below us and it was difficult to hear what each other were saying. Smiling required no words to convey meaning, and in high spirits we moved along. At the Vernal Falls footbridge there is a place to refill water bottles if needed and on top of that there is actually a restroom in place. With the cool mountain mornings some of the group had bundled up a bit. Here they took the leg stretcher to the Vernal Falls footbridge. Here the trail was



wide as it curved upwards towards the falls, and it began to dawn on all of us what we were in for. Huffing and puffing with the 400 foot elevation change, we were happy to stop and take a breather at the footbridge. The water of the Merced river was raging below us and it was difficult to hear what each other were saying. Smiling required no words to convey meaning, and in high spirits we moved along. At the Vernal Falls footbridge there is a place to refill water bottles if needed and on top of that there is actually a restroom in place. With the cool mountain mornings some of the group had bundled up a bit. Here they took the opportunity to shed a few layers and, after looking up the trail, donned ponchos.

Gazing up at the path ahead I saw my sister Claire and her husband Dan spring along and disappear into the blinding white spray from





Vernal Falls. Before me the trail looked like a surreal path to heaven. Winding tight around the mountain side over 600 stairs had been cut out of the rock, each one slick with cold mist from the pounding falls. My father and I glanced at one another sharing looks of amazement. We wouldn't find a set of stairs like this on the Florida Trail. Fastening ponchos and windbreakers tight we began the climb up into the haze. The further we went the more intense the wind coming off of the falls became. The light mist turned into a whipping torrent, blasting us from ahead.

"Mist trail!?" my father turned and yelled back at me, "Hurricane trail is more like it!" It seemed as if the record snow fall had decided to come down the mountain all at once, turning Vernal Falls into an intense powerhouse of spring run off. Using my father as a wind break I was able to glance ahead to the rest of the group. Ponchos were flapping with ferocity as the members of our party clambered up the slick steps. Most impressive to me was the image of my mother up ahead. Having in the last year had both a hip replaced and a surgical procedure done to her foot, seeing her climbing her way up the steep slope ahead had a fantastical quality to it, something I never thought in a thousand years I'd see.

One by one we reached the top of Vernal Falls, exhausted and soaking wet. Finally we were able to regroup and share excited chatter over the stretch of trail we had just conquered. As we took in the view looking back down on the trail and the rainbows the mist made, one thought ran common through all of our minds. There was no way we'd be going back down the way we'd come

up. It was too steep, slick, and soon to be crowded to make the unbalanced shuffle down. There was only one way down off this mountain for us and that was the John Muir Trail, which we could join at the top of Nevada Falls. Having already ascended 1000 feet, we stopped to rest a bit at the top of Vernal before continuing on upwards.

The water ripped past the banks and thundered over the falls. Here and there small signs were placed to discourage anyone from stepping out into the water. It seemed like common sense to all of us, but only a week later three young people would lose their lives being swept over the falls, two having lost their footing in the swift moving current and another who attempted to rescue them. The harsh reality of Yosemite is that though many trails in the valley are paved and accessible to all, once up in the mountains anything is possible and accidents happen. There are multiple deaths in the park every year from hikers slipping off the Mist Trail or losing their footing at the cables of Half Dome. Yosemite is a popular park and hosts a great numbers of people every year, not all of whom have much experience in the outdoors. The combination of inexperience, population, and rugged unforgiving mountains can be a tragic one. Well aware of our limitations, we stayed clear of the water and headed up the trail.

Feeling only slightly rested from our brief break, we crossed a footbridge and began the climb up to Nevada Falls. This section of the trail was much drier than the previous. Here we didn't have to worry about water spraying in our eyes, but rather we focused on the seemingly endless switchbacks heading up the side of Nevada Falls.



The view was brilliant, as we always had Nevada Falls in our sight, but despite the scenery we began to lose our steam. This section is where endurance became a factor. Slow and steady we made our way up to the top of Nevada with our legs burning from the work of approximately 1000 more feet of elevation. We rested again at the top with other hikers, feeling accomplished and inspired by Yosemite Valley and the Merced stretching out below. Looking up behind us we could see the back of Half Dome in the distance and I took a moment to digest the fact that at the top of Nevada Falls we were only about half way up. It was then more than ever that I was thankful for the cables being down making Half Dome an impossibility at the time.

Connecting with the John Muir Trail was easy and well marked and we felt good about the decision to take it down rather than back tracking down the mountain for several reasons. For one, despite being slightly longer, the John Muir Trail was much more gradual which was all around safer, and easier on our knees. Secondly, the views of Nevada Falls and the back side of Half Dome were magnificent from the curve that the John Muir Trail takes around. As we descended and eventually reached the valley floor, it was clear that our group was happy but wiped out.

Though exhausted and achy I could see in my father's eyes that he hadn't given up, and Half Dome was still on his mind. Prying my boots off back at Camp Curry, I slumped down onto my cot and assess my blistered feet. Staring up at the canvas

ceiling to our tent I had little doubt that we'd be back again. Next time we'd be wiser, we would know what to expect, and would have a better idea of how to prepare. Though completing the Mist Trail had not been our original goal, it was a tremendous accomplishment for our group and one that would stick with us in our minds, most prominently in my father's as he once again begins to plan his conquering of Half Dome.

IF YOU GO:

Plan ahead! Booking a place to stay in Yosemite can be an ordeal and most lodging gets reserved months in advance. While Camp Curry provides a great base camp, there are other options in the park worth looking into as well, such as the Ahwahnee Hotel (given the distinctive four diamond status by AAA).

If you intend to climb Half Dome, you now must obtain a permit, no matter what day of the week it is. The poles and cables are typically up between Memorial Day and Labor Day, but as I've mentioned, these dates are flexible depending largely on weather. A poncho is a good idea to help keep the icy mountain water off your clothes, and a sturdy pair of hiking poles for the down hill slopes are invaluable. As always bring plenty of water, and whatever you do, stay out of the water above the falls. There are many beautiful hikes for people of all abilities around Yosemite.

For more information on the park you can visit www.nps.gov/yose/index.htm

Happy Trails! ❖





Review: Vasque Breeze GTX Hiking Boot

The hour was late as I stared into the cold glow of my computer screen, a shopping cart from a popular online shoe site staring back at me. I had my shipping address and card information entered, all I had to do was click the “Submit Order” button and the mailman would have a box for me in a few days. I almost couldn’t bring myself to do it. In my cart were a pair of Vasque Breeze Gore-Tex boots. They looked slick – And from everything I could tell they seemed like a good choice in the world of waterproof boots. But as an avid minimal shoe convert, it was just against my mantra. Despite my conflict, I clicked the order button.

I knew that under certain circumstances, my feet would end up thanking me. I tried to push the limits of my favorite trail runners on a snowy trip a few months prior – With temps in the single digits and rough, uneven terrain I paid the price. I had brought along a pair of “Waterproof socks” that ended up not making the grade. The snow melted into the mesh of my trail runners and my feet gradually turned from cold to numb, nearly useless frozen blocks. As I lost feeling in my feet I stumbled along, the snow shifting under each step in an unpredictable manner from the unknown rocks and

roots hiding underneath. Any incline or decline became dangerous. Two sprained ankles and several falls later I was in my car wondering why it took so long for the heater to get up to speed. For less severe conditions I still go for my trail runners every time, but everything has its place.

I knew I didn’t want something too extreme – After all I’m not planning to go for the summit of K2 anytime soon. I wanted something lightweight, with decent breathability that would last and offer good support without feeling like a tank. The Vasque Breeze seemed to fit the bill.



Pros: Well-built for cooler temperatures and rugged terrain. Runs true to size and wide widths offered with tons of protection.

Cons: Clunky feel for those used to a lighter shoe. Gore-Tex XCR adequate, but falls short of eVent caliber breathability. Extra socks needed for especially cold temperatures. Sole not quite as “Sticky” as we’d like.

Rating: ★★★★★

Design

Overall the shoe is less like a boot and more like an overbuilt trail runner that takes the height up above and over the ankle a bit. Lined with Gore-Tex XCR the shoe offers waterproof protection while allowing more breathability than Gore’s standard product. (25% less resistance to moisture vapor transmission compared to standard Gore-Tex) One feature that really put the Breeze ahead of some offerings from other manufacturers was the combined leather and mesh construction – As opposed to the near complete leather encasing that many other



Gore-Tex boots seem to feature. It doesn’t really make that much sense to make a shoe utilizing a waterproof breathable membrane and then totally encase that in leather. While leather can breathe, it’s pretty easy to see the advantage of a mesh panel in this circumstance. With the

combined nubuck leather and mesh construction that the Breeze offers you gain breathability while maintaining the durability and support that leather provides. The Gore-Tex lining extends up to the gusseted tongue and just above the waterproofing through the

tongue area and keeps debris out. A gusseted tongue should be standard issue on any boot or trail shoe for that matter, but is all too often overlooked by some manufacturers. EVA foam provides the cushioning and a full length thermoplastic polyurethane (TPU) plate offers rock protection and torsional stiffness. A thickly lugged, but not overdone Vibram sole completes the package. Wide sizes are also offered in most sizes for both the men’s and women’s models. A size 13 wide, as tested here comes in at a weight of 51 ounces. Removable foam insoles and standard round laces with an upper speed lace system round out the package.

BELOW: GUSSETED TONGUE AND GORE-TEX LINING



Impressions

So how does it all pan out? In hand, the boot feels and looks well-built with an overall light yet solid feel. While not top of the line in the boot world, the Vasque Breeze gives the impression of solid utility. Construction was great – No loose or sloppy stitching here. The upper seems more trail-runner esque than you might expect while the sole is very solid, reminding you that this is indeed a boot. The boots heel seems a bit over-exaggerated on hard surfaces, but for traction is quite nice on snow. (The best

application for this boot) On the foot the boot fits true to size. Adequate length and volume with a nice roomy toe box was the experience at hand here. If you have a wide foot, the wide size will fit nicely and may even be a good option for those with an average width foot for extra thick socks and layers in cold temperatures if desired. The lacing system allowed for precise adjustments to the fit from the ankle to the toes.

Performance

We tested the Breeze GTX over more than 300 miles of mixed terrain and

temperatures, ranging from casual on-trail hikes to rather difficult off-trail and snowy routes. All of this in temperatures ranging from below zero up to a balmy by comparison 60 degrees. We did find that a brief break-in period was required - They are pretty stiff out of the box. With this in mind we wouldn't suggest heading for the hills on a long trip upon receipt, but after about 15-30 miles of combined shorter trips the boots were nicely broken in and a lack of flexibility was not an issue. Waterproofing lived up to expectations, surviving even full immersion tests in



running streams up to the ankle with no leakage. Breathability was on par with what you might expect from a Gore-Tex product. In cooler temperatures, the Gore-Tex membrane was easily able to keep up with any internal moisture and dry feet were always the end of day result. However, when temperatures climbed above the mid 50's clamminess set in and a switch back to a more ventilated footwear option (No waterproof membrane) was desired. On the flip side, due to the mesh construction and breathability very cold temperatures might leave

your toes on the chilly side. Layering with extra socks (If you sized the boot to allow for this) or switching to another option all together will be in order when the temperatures hit the single digits. Overall we think the temperature range sweet spot for the Breeze is from 20 - 60 degrees. If you'd like this much protection on your feet but would like more comfort during the summer months, take a look at the non-GTX version offered by Vasque. The boot offers a ton of protection. Don't expect any bruised feet from rocks underneath foot, though on

a few occasions we did at least feel sharp rocks through the upper when scrambling through icy terrain off trail, where sharp rocks could attack from the sides. The boot doesn't rise too far above the ankle so you'll want to add a pair of gaiters for deeper snow. Traction is good in the boot; the aggressive sole bites into loose terrain well but as always, a blend between durability and traction of the sole must be met. It seems that Vasque has elected for more durability as opposed to sticky traction, and on wet rock, snow, and ice, we found

the traction manageable, but not ideal. Packed, flat snow proved to be an especially tricky surface for the boot. Cushioning was sufficient without being overly soft and led to comfortable feet over rugged terrain, though at times long days could become tiring due to the weight of the boot, even though they're quite light by most boot standards. Utilizing the upper speed lacing system we were able to get a good "Lock" around the ankle when needed, leading to confidence through difficult and slick terrain. The laces are slick and a well-tied tight double knot was needed to keep the boots tied.

Durability

Thus far the Breeze has held up extremely well. After over 300 miles the tread has a ton

of life left with surprisingly little wear. It seems as though something else will break down on the Breeze before you wear through the sole. No loose stitches or other physical defects have surfaced. One weak point we should point out however is the DWR coating that's applied to the outside of the shoe. After a single trip crunching through half a foot of snow it was completely worn down, and snow and rain soaked into the leather and mesh on the outside of the shoe. Once wetted out, breathability really suffered. If you go after the Breeze, we highly suggest purchasing a DWR restorer which will need to be reapplied after trips through abrasive terrain like deep snow or heavy brush. We've had good success with the spray-on TX.Direct product from Nikwax.

BELOW: WORN DWR COATING FROM ABRASIVE TERRAIN



Conclusion

Overall the Vasque GTX Breeze proved to be a great solution for shoulder-season cold and cool weather use in snow and through rugged terrain. We'll still be moving forward with our trail runners in warmer weather, but the protection the Breeze offers through snow, ice, and cooler weather was welcomed when conditions called for more robust footwear. If you need a footwear solution for cooler and wet weather conditions, it's hard to go wrong with the Vasque Breeze. ❖

Overall Very Good - ★★★★★

The boot currently retails for around \$160, but deals can be found at the retailer links below:

[Men's Breeze GTX Hiking Boot at Amazon](#)

[Women's Breeze GTX Hiking Boot at Amazon](#)

[Men's Breeze GTX Hiking Boot at Campsaver](#)

[Women's Breeze GTX Hiking Boot at Campsaver](#)



MANISTEE NATIONAL FOREST

Location: Manistee River Trail, Lower Michigan



After a weekend hike on the Manistee River Trail loop, we were left with an interesting impression. While not a true wilderness experience, the trail has a unique feel that only the Michigan backwoods seem to offer. Quiet and remote, hiking the trail feels a bit like travelling back in time. The map shows that several roads will be crossed, but none are paved or graveled. Most are nothing more than wide, almost forgotten paths through the forest that see little use. It feels as though you're walking through a country forest from some earlier point in time.

On the west side of the 20 mile loop, you'll travel along wooded hillsides as you follow one of America's designated scenic trails – The NCT. (North Country Trail) Cross the river to the other side and you'll walk along the Manistee River Trail, (MRT) with scenic river views at nearly every turn. No swimming required - A pedestrian suspension bridge on the northern end, and the 2 lane highway bridge on the southern end (Red Bridge) allow for an easy crossing.

Park at Seaton Creek Campground or Red Bridge, both of which offer potable water. Alternatively parking could be utilized at the Marilla Trailhead, the CP Canoe Portage, or even at the end of Slage Creek Road for a more remote experience. Designated campsites can be found along the eastern, MRT side of the loop, but dispersed camping is allowed throughout the forest provided that you're 200 feet away from a water source. The Western NCT section can be dry, but Eddington Creek can be counted on to refill your bottles. Bring your fishing gear if you're so inclined – Brown trout inhabit the waters of the Manistee River.

All of this can be found within a 6 hour drive of Chicago or a 4.5 hour drive from Detroit.





**Note: You are viewing the PDF version of TrailGroove Magazine.
For the optimal viewing experience please view the magazine
online at: <http://www.TrailGroove.com>**

Direct link to this issue: <http://www.TrailGroove.com/issue4.html>


Resources:

Manistee River Trail - Forest Service Website:

<http://www.fs.usda.gov/recarea/hmnf/recarea/?recid=18710>

North Country National Scenic Trail/Manistee River Trail Map:

https://fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5151638.pdf

A photograph of a man and his dog dancing in a dry lakebed. The man is wearing a hat and a jacket, and the dog is a dark-colored breed. They are in the center of the frame, with a vast, flat, dry landscape around them. In the background, there are mountains and power lines under a blue sky with scattered white clouds.

Hiking Across the Country: Lessons Learned

by Tyler Coulson

In 2011, I left the corporate world and walked across the United States with my dog, Mabel.

Before I left Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, on March 11, 2011, the longest hike I had ever done was probably around 10 miles and involved a single night camping. I was an attorney, not a hiker. But eight months later, when Mabel and I stepped into the Pacific Ocean in San Diego, California, I was certain that I was a hiker. And a pretty successful one.

But, the thing is, I'm not so sure now. I'm not sure someone can be a hiker.

For me, hiking is a practice—like law. A person cannot just be a long-distance hiker, because hiking is not something that you just do. On my trip, somewhere between Maryland and Ohio, I stopped trying to be a hiker and started practicing hiking every day. Conditions are always changing. There are no set boundaries determining your route. There are no rules stating that you must use this type of stove or this type of tent, or even that you must carry a tent at all. What works in one situation might not work in another.

*LEFT: MABEL AND TYLER
TAKING A BREAK TO DANCE IN
A DRY LAKEBED ON THE UTAH/
CALIFORNIA BORDER*

And just like there is no single skill set for a long distance hiker, there is no single state of mind for a long-distance hiker. The only two rules that don't change are 1) strive for efficiency, and 2) be adaptable.

For example, I slept in motels on my trip far more than I initially planned. But I also slept in campgrounds, RV parks, behind abandoned buildings, in abandoned buildings, and underneath bridges. I learned constantly on the trip, and put what I learned into practice. Here are a few other surprising things that I learned:

--Nice camp stoves are heavy and usually aren't necessary. I mailed my MSR stove home in West Virginia and used an alcohol stove instead.

--Gallon-sized bottles of water are great, but make sure they have screw-

on caps and not snap-on. While you're at it, the gallon-sized jugs for orange juice are better for carrying water because they distribute the weight of the water more evenly.

--Water-proof stuff sacks are great, but they are expensive and are very heavy. Trash compactor bags (not trash bags) work just as well, are super light, and are relatively durable.

--A long stick is the best line of defense against angry dogs and most wild animals; they usually just want to "discuss" how much space they control versus how much space you control, and with a long stick you appear much larger and more dangerous.

--Expensive hiking boots are great! But you're probably better off actually strengthening your feet, wearing as minimal footwear as possible, and



LEFT: Mabel relaxing at a campsite on the C & O Canal. ABOVE: Mabel and Tyler walking in the Mojave. Photo by Jon Grammar, courtesy of tylercoulson.com.

putting all that hiking boot money into an endless supply of wool socks. Those are just a few of a thousand lessons I learned and put into practice during the walk to adapt to new information and new environments.

It's possible, though, that the most important adaptations don't concern equipment. The most important adaptations are mental and emotional.

--I twice spent three days rained into a tent without anything to do or anyone to talk to except my dog. I had to learn to "be ok" with doing nothing and to stop feeling anxious.

--I ran out of food a couple of times, and was always hungry; I had to get

accustomed to being hungry and to remember that I was not actually starving.

--I was in pain every day, especially at the beginning of the trip when my feet were likely fractured from the 100-pound pack. I was substantially over-packed, and my feet swelled to the size of footballs every night! I had to accept that this type of pain was temporary.

--I fell out of contact with old friends, and lost entirely a relationship that was very important to me. I had to accept change and uncertainty in all things, and to know that nothing (or almost nothing) is actually the end of the world.

--I was mocked, spit at, and condescended to; people shouted insults out of their car windows and purposefully swerved at me to scare me. But I learned to be certain and secure with who I am and what I am doing, no matter how many people spit out their windows.

--I couldn't carry a Sealy Posture-pedic bed with me every day. I learned to prefer (and still prefer) sleeping on the ground.

Adaptations like this—physical and mental—are what the practice of long-distance hiking is about. A long-distance hike is a never-ending process of adapting to uncertain conditions, learning from past mistakes, and of putting into practice difficult lessons. Of course it's painful and uncomfortable and out-of-the-ordinary, but there are smiles in there. There are moments of great passionate joy.

I think that a lot of people dream about doing a long-distance hike. It's a noble goal. But whether it's a cross-country hike or the AT or the PCT, it's ill-advised to begin any such long-distance hike without at least acknowledging that you will likely hike out the other side as a different person. If you approach it as a practice, then that practice will change who you are as a person. It will change how you live your life and how you approach problem solving because you may start to see your life as nothing more than a very, very long-distance hike. It'll change you if you let it.

But, then, we all know that, don't we? Why else would we do something so stupid as try to walk across a continent? ❖



ABOVE: Mabel in Utah. NEXT PAGE: Highway leaving Koosharem, UT.

Tyler Coulson was born in rural Illinois. He graduated from the University of Iowa College of Law and practiced in the corporate reorganization group of a large firm in Chicago. He is the author of *By Men or By the Earth*, a memoir of his 2011 cross-country hike with his dog, Mabel. The publisher, The Walkout Syndicate, has pledged 10% of profits from sales of *By Men or By the Earth* made before December 31, 2012, to support of no-kill animal shelters. Coulson lives in Chicago and is planning his next adventure. You can read more from Coulson at www.tylercoulson.com, and the book is available at [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com).





Review: Exped Synmat UL 7 Sleeping Pad

Over the past few years, the backpacking community has seen an influx of lightweight and comfortable inflatable pads that broke new ground by also being quite warm. Previously, if you needed lightweight warmth, you'd probably be after a closed-cell foam pad, at the expense of the greater comfort that inflatable pads offered. Inflatable pads were still out there of course, but if you needed both comfort as well as warmth, you'd pay in the weight department and a heavy pack would result. Now however, companies are offering what seems to be the best of both worlds – thick & comfortable inflatable pads offering quite a bit of protection against the cold while still competing with the light weight of closed-cell foam pads, and of course packing up much smaller. The focus of this review will be the Exped Synmat UL 7, an inflatable pad utilizing synthetic insulation to achieve warmth while still being light enough to qualify for the world of lightweight backpacking. We tested both the small and medium sized mats that Exped offers in conditions ranging from balmy summer excursions to chilly wintry weather.

Pros: Very comfortable, lightweight, packs small, and warm.

Cons: Slick undersurface; Not quite as light as some of its close competition.

Rating: ★★★★★



Design & Specifications

The Synmat UL7 consists of 8 longitudinal tubes, and the mat has separate inflation and deflation valves that are recessed into the pad. (Described as FlatValve Technology by Exped) The pad is covered in a lightweight polyester with a fabric grey underside and contrasting yellow top. The two outer-most tubes are sized slightly larger (By about 1" in width compared to other tubes) with the intention to help keep you in place. All seams are welded. The Synmat UL 7 is offered in 3 sizes, shown below.

Size in Inches:

Small: 64x20
 Medium: 72 x 20
 Long Wide: 77.5 x 26

Listed Weight in Ounces (Measured Weight):

Small: 15.2 (14.3)
 Medium: 16.2 (17)
 Long Wide: 21.1
 Stuff Sack: .4 (Medium)
 Repair Kit: .6

The pad is 2.8 inches thick when inflated, and offers a nicely warm 3.1 R-value by using microfiber synthetic insulation that is laminated

to both the top and bottom surfaces of the pad. A stuff sack with a convenient sewn-in pull loop (To help you extract the pad) and repair kit are both included. Exped rates the Synmat UL 7 to 25 degrees F.

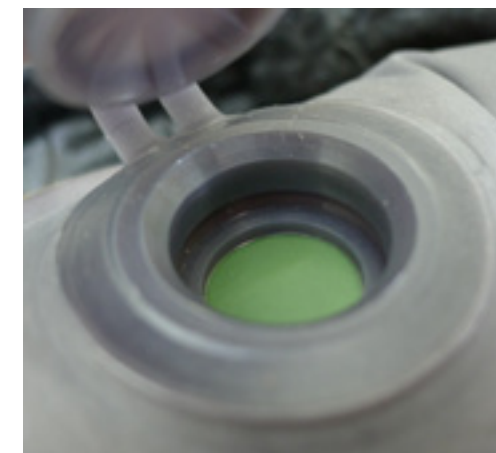
Impressions & Performance

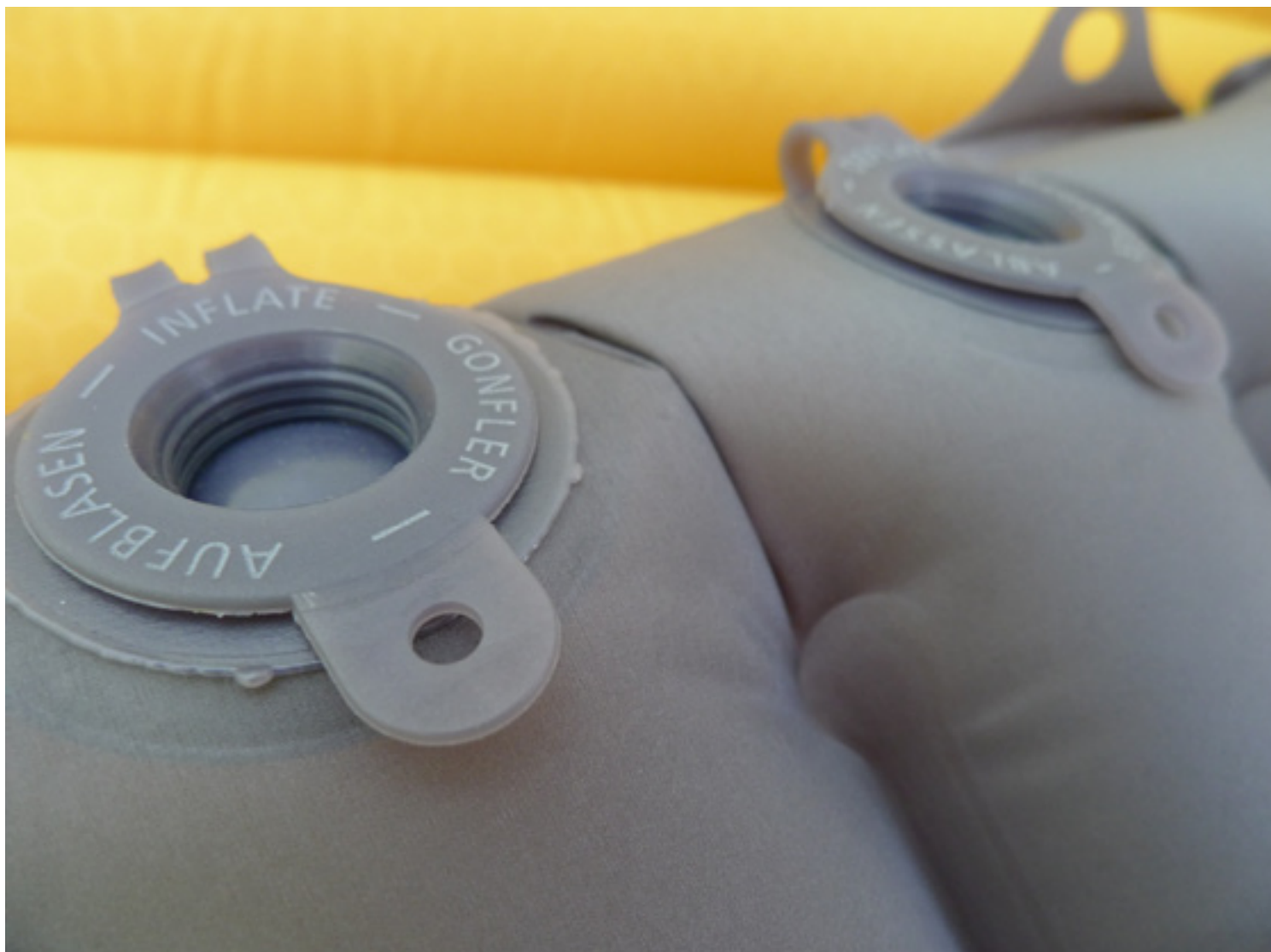
The construction of the Synmat is excellent. The fabric is velvety soft, yet doesn't seem like it would require ultralight-style care, despite the impressive weight of the pad. The Exped also packs down fairly small into the included stuff sack to about 10 inches long with a 13 inch circumference for the medium size. Usually however we just left the stuff sack behind and packed the rolled pad into our dry bag that we take along for clothing, perhaps with a rubber band to help keep things in order. The bottom surface is slick, so if you haven't applied a silicone seam-sealer treatment to your silnylon shelter floor, you'll probably find yourself and the pad sliding in the direction of any downhill slope. For side-sleepers out there, the 2.8" thickness doesn't bottom out and offers enough of a fine tune to offer both softness and support. With the soft material that's used, the pad

is also very quiet while you're shifting around.

Inflation / Deflation

The inflation and deflation valves work very well. The great thing about inflating the mat is that the inflation valve has an automatic flap that seals the air inside between each breath, so there's no reason to rush or fear that all of that work could be lost along the way. The inflation valve is also generally sized – We were able to inflate the medium sized pad in only 13 quick breaths, so the valve size really helps to keep the light-headed inflation factor to a minimum. With the synthetic insulation that Exped has used, moisture from your breath degrading the quality of the insulation isn't as big of a concern compared with a mat using down as the insulation source. We've always inflated the pads by mouth, and haven't had any issues with moisture build-up. However, if you're





concerned about this, you can look into various solutions like the Exped Pillow Pump which allows for inflation via ambient air. Exped also states in the instructions that if moisture build-up does become a problem, a hair dryer on a low temperature / cool setting can be used with both valves opened to dry the interior of the mat by blowing air through the inflation valve, which will circulate throughout the mat and then out the opened deflation valve. In the end we chose to save the extra weight and just

use our lungs; with the large valve inflation is fast. With the opposite dedicated deflation valve, packing up in the morning is a quick and easy process. Opening the deflation valve and folding the mattress into thirds lengthwise, then rolling towards the valve to force out any remaining air and you're ready to go. The only real drawback to the flat-valve system is that mid-night adjustments to your inflation level can be a bit tricky, but it's entirely doable and didn't seem to result in much frustration.

Comfort

Once you've found your desired inflation level however, the pad is extremely comfortable. In fact, it's the most comfortable backpacking pad I've slept on. The 2.8" thickness easily surpassed the comfort that foam pads offer, and adds just enough of a bonus to set the pad apart from other inflatable pads that come in around the 2.5" mark. The fabric used on the pad is soft, and while not exactly high thread-count Egyptian cotton, it's

definitely very comfortable compared to many other high-tech fabrics that can trend towards a foreign and clammy feel. The lengthwise tubes of the Synmat are in our opinion, its best feature. As a side-sleeper who tosses and turns throughout the night, I always seem to find myself falling off previous sleeping pads I've used several times throughout a night's sleep. With the Synmat however, the tubes cradle your body in place and do a great job of holding you on the pad – Thus far no more waking up cold and on uncomfortable hard ground with your sleeping pad out from under you.

Temperature Rating

Exped rates the pad for temperatures down to 25 degrees, which we can confirm is accurate. However, it's about right at the 25-30 degree range where chills

can start to creep in with the Synmat UL 7, and you never know when the forecast might have been a bit on the optimistic side in regard to the forecasted low temperature. With all this in mind we consider the pad



ideal for temperatures down to freezing, and if it happens to get just a bit colder you should still be set. If temps in the mid 20's are what's expected, we would supplement with a superlight, ultrathin ~1/8" closed-cell foam pad just to boost the rating, comfort, and create a small safety net if temps happen to drop lower than expected.

Durability

Durability is always a concern when gear moves to a lighter and lighter level, but retains functionality at the same time. Exped has found what seems to be an excellent balance. At around a pound the small and medium sized pads are still light, but we never felt that the pads needed too delicate of a hand. In fact, when testing the pad outside of a shelter at one point, a previously unseen tree branch was crushed beneath the pad. It was the branch that broke, and the pad remained undamaged and in service. The pad isn't bulletproof of course, so we'd suggest keeping the pad in the tent and away from any such obstacles just to be safe, but so far no issues on our end.

Conclusion

With ease of use, comfort, and stability the Exped should be a great choice for the majority of 3+ season backpackers interested in an inflatable pad, and its warmth can be increased for extended season use by adding foam padding when needed. If you have a slick shelter or tent floor you may slide around a bit, but this can easily be solved by adding some silicone seam-sealer strips / dots to the floor. All of this comes in at a respectable weight along with sufficient durability. The price point at MSRP is a bit on the steep side, but deals can be found to soften some of the blow. Either way we feel that the Synmat UL7 is well worth the price and is now our go-to pad for all but the coldest conditions. ❖

Overall Excellent:



You can find the Synmat UL 7 for about \$155 - \$175, but deals can be found at the retailer links below:

[Exped SynMat UL 7 at Campsaver](#)

[Exped SynMat UL 7 at Amazon](#)

Backcountry Photography

by David M. Cobb

Since long-distance hiking helped form so much of my photography, I thought it might be helpful to supply a few photo tips from the trail I picked up along the way. These tips won't need tripods or fantastic cameras; they'll be ideas to help improve your composition and light, and the overall impact of your photos from along the trail. I hope you enjoy some of the tidbits that come your way through this TrailGroove feature.

TIP #1: LANDSCAPES AND THE HORIZON

Too often I see landscape snapshots with the horizon line dead center in the photograph. Mostly I find this technique compositionally boring. Many times the sky is all blue or all gray, so half the image is already wasted space. Here's a good rule-of-thumb: If the sky is more interesting, favor the sky in the composition; but if the land is more interesting, then favor the land. That's not to say you can't ever have 50-50 images of sky and land—rules are meant to be broken and sometimes the sky and land have equal visual weight. But in most instances if you pick what's most interesting and commit to it, you'll find your images from the trail are much more rewarding. Below I've given a couple of examples of my work.

All images Copyright 2012 © David M.Cobb Photography.

RIGHT: IMNAHA SUNSET





TOP: THE SKY ABOVE; BOTTOM: MT HOOD AND LOST LAKE
RIGHT: CHIEF MOUNTAIN MORNING



Check out our next issue for another great tip from David!

David Cobb is an avid backpacker and photographer. You can see more of David's images at www.dmcobbphoto.com

Backcountry Cuisine: Campfire Hashbrowns



This hashbrown variation is sometimes called "Potatoes O'Brien", but it can be modified to suit your tastes. They aren't just for breakfast - you can add protein, different veggies, and spices to make a great dinner after a long day of hiking. All you need is a campfire, and you can even skip that if you don't mind scrubbing your pot and burning some fuel. These are great with eggs or sausage, or as a side dish to steak if you're feeling fancy.

Serves 1-2 depending on your appetite. Enjoy!

Ingredients:

- 1 Potato, Cut Into Small Chunks
- 1/4 Cup Chopped Onion
- 1/4 Cup Chopped Bell Pepper
- Salt/Pepper, Other Seasonings As Desired
- 1 oz Packet Olive Oil
- Ketchup Packets (optional)



(Don't forget to bring along a piece of tin foil for cooking)

Directions:

- * Place the Potato, Onion, Pepper in the center of the tin foil.
- * Season with Salt/Pepper/Seasonings and drizzle with Olive Oil.
- * Wrap the foil up tightly and place into hot coals of the fire.
- * Cook for about 20 minutes, or until the potatoes are soft.

Note: You are viewing the PDF version of TrailGroove Magazine. For the optimal viewing experience please view the magazine online at: <http://www.TrailGroove.com>

Direct link to this issue: <http://www.TrailGroove.com/issue4.html>

The Drive Home: In the Know



Over the last 24 hours Jen and I had driven 1200 miles. Most of that of course, was over an interstate highway system with wide lanes and smooth pavement at 75 mph. For the last 100 miles that surface had narrowed and become rougher, and our speed slowed a bit as we moved farther away from

any type of legitimate metropolitan area. Finally a bit of fresh air with some decent views. Between the small car, our dog Layla, and 2 full packs ready for a week long trip, there wasn't much spare space in the car, and we were driving straight through – No overnight stops. We tried to sleep but only

managed about an hour each as the other drove. (And perhaps a few seconds each while actually driving ourselves) There was literally no space to doze off in any sort of conventional fashion. Now, we turned the Subaru off the 2-lane highway and onto a gravel road that would lead us to our

destination – The Trail Lake Trailhead on the northeastern flank of the Wind River Range. The gravel road soon turned to dirt that on occasion required a bit of precision to avoid numerous potholes or potential undercarriage-grinding rocks that protruded above the road's surface. The day was hot and the sun intense as we pulled into the parking lot. Clouds of dust from our tracks settled onto the hot surface of the well-travelled car. Weary but excited, I amused myself with the thought that we'd just driven halfway across the country in less than a day to walk a hundred miles.

We'd spent the last 2 weeks with maps spread out over the dining room table, measuring mileage with string and a ruler and planning a route that would be a combination of on and off-trail travel in a counter clockwise fashion over the northern half of the Winds. With a week to complete the route it was certainly doable, but considering the fact that we'd be leaving the trail behind several times in favor of cross country travel through regions that we'd only seen on a map before, there was a certain mystery in the air. We picked up our packs, double checked that the car was locked, and after taking the obligatory "Let's do this" photo with the trailhead register in the background we hit the trail. At just 7500 feet, the trailhead is on the lower side compared with some of the trailheads the Winds have to offer. On one hand this is great – If you've just travelled from a much



lower elevation as we had at the time, (Now, we live there) you can look at it as a way to ease into the altitude change. On the other hand, the Wind River Range for the most part is quite a bit higher than 7500 feet, so you'll have a lot of climbing to do. In the end it's a pick your poison (Though well worth it) type of arrangement, and I think the main point is to use whatever situation applies to your intellectual advantage. Philosophy aside, we had a lot of climbing to do.

Altitude isn't so much of a factor when you're taking pictures at the trailhead with big smiles. Once you start climbing switchbacks however, you're quickly humbled. Thankfully, now that we live at an elevation over a mile high, so the first few days of a trip aren't an exercise in self punishment waiting for acclimatization to set in. This day though, we didn't have that luxury. Driving from 500 to 7500 feet in less than 24 hours tested the limits of our lungs as we made our way upwards past each switchback. We climbed 1500 feet and then took a break on the first flat rock we found in a sliver of shade from a scraggly pine, the only tree that we'd seen to shade the trail so far along the sagebrush and desert-like ascent. Far above we'd eventually make our way to pines, clear mountain streams, and cool mountain air, but not for another thousand feet or so. We sat there and sipped on our water bottles, looking at the map just as a good excuse for a break. We'd barely begun to catch our

breath when a couple quickly made their way down the trail towards us. We tried to act as if we were not completely out of breath as we greeted the pair. "How far to the top of this thing" I asked. The man replied: "You don't want to know! I see you've got a map, I hope you've got a good compass as well. The trail gets really hard to find up top". I nodded my head and replied with something along the lines that we'd try to do our best. They explained that they were just finishing up a week-long trip. "Avoid the Clear Lake route at all costs" he said. "The deadfall took us hours to navigate". I thanked him for the advice as this was indeed a route we'd been



considering. They'd been on the trail for a week, most likely without seeing hardly anyone else along the way. We were just starting and anxious to get moving. They said they were out of food and had been hiking extra hard to reach the trailhead that day – Our packs of course were heavy and we offered them some snacks, which they declined and we parted ways. A few days later, I wished we would have stayed around to chat just a bit longer to ask about the route that was to come.

We pushed on, trying to take our time, but soon we began to hear thunder in the distance that only moved closer

over time. We were headed for an exposed pass, but once over we would potentially be able to seek shelter at a lower elevation on the other side. The thunder kept creeping closer. We had two choices, stay put where we were safe now, or press on as fast as we could to get over the pass before the storm and then seek shelter on the other side. Even with failing lungs, the thunder seemed far enough out that we chose option two.

Out of breath we pushed over Whiskey Mountain almost at the summit, with curious mountain goats and golden eagles looking down upon us from the slightly higher ridgeline that marked the true summit just above. As we descended the storm enveloped the terrain we'd just passed over. The next couple days went uneventfully and we settled into our trip and established a nice routine. We began to get used to the altitude and we encountered no more additional storm activity. One day we stopped for lunch and caught (then released) brook trout on every cast at a mountain lake that was supposed to be fishless.



We then finished our lunch lounging on the rocks that surrounded the lake in the afternoon sun. One question mark that had surrounded the trip, but we had mostly ignored until now was the off-trail route we'd chosen to take during the middle of the trip. This would involve leaving the trail we were currently travelling on and then taking a cross country route to the continental divide itself. There, we would find an unnamed pass and would climb down a gentle a ridge to meet up with another trail in the valley below, on the other side of the divide. When we'd run into the couple at the start of our trip I knew

from the lakes and areas that were mentioned that they'd probably crossed the divide near where we had planned, but for some reason I hadn't asked about the route they took. After all, the route I had in mind looked easy when looking at a topographic map – What's a bunch of closely spaced lines anyway? As we'd soon find out, in the Winds that means one thing – Steep.

2 days later we left the trail and hiked past several high alpine lakes teeming with cutthroat trout. The ascent up to the divide itself was steep but manageable terrain, and once on top

we took celebratory pictures to mark our accomplishment. Now all we had to do was descend, the easy part right? We walked across a flat and passed several tarns. One of the larger tarns had a small outlet stream that we knew led to the valley below where the next trail system lay in wait. We chose to use the outlet stream as a guide to follow on the way down. Since the stream would follow the steepest terrain we tried to descend a few hundred feet beside the stream, just keeping it within earshot. The terrain soon closed in on either side of the stream however, and unless we were going to walk along nearly sheer cliffs the stream itself became the only route down. Soon our feet were soaked as we splashed along within the stream, making our way downwards along slippery rocks and the thin corridor of the lush vegetation the stream supported. We still had a thousand feet left to descend.

Descending became more demanding, and the stream began to rush even faster over our calves as the terrain steepened further. Far below, we could see the meadow we'd hoped to camp in, and several lakes of the range could be spotted from our high perch. The view was amazing, but it came at a price – You couldn't keep your eyes on it for long for fear of a serious fall. We began to wonder if this was even possible – We'd simply made this route up from looking at a map and it started to feel like we might be in over our heads. "We'll just take it 10 feet at a time" I

told Jen. "We can always turn around". Layla just looked at me with a "Really? You thought this was a good idea?" type of look as we pressed on. I noticed the sun had started to dip towards the western horizon. There was no place to camp here. We'd either need to push on or turn around. Our decision was soon made for us however, as we reached a spot where the stream, with cliffs on either side, took an eight foot vertical plunge. A beautiful waterfall it was, but we sat there trying to decide what to do. The rocks over the edge were very slick, I thought we could get down, but I wasn't sure if we could get back up. The sun was setting and we'd already been through quite a bit to get to this point. Our feet were wet and aching, our minds and bodies were exhausted. Still far below, the green meadow could still be seen, but teleportation was not an option. We took off our packs and threw them over the falls on to a small spot of green grass below. I then climbed down, and reaching up with water splashing over my head Jen handed Layla to my outreached arms, and we managed to get our 50lb dog over the edge and to safety. I then helped Jen down and we continued splashing through the stream. Soon we came to another point where the stream descended sharply, but far greater than 8 feet, too far to down climb in any type of safe manner. We'd made it past the cliffs on either side at this point however, and now on either side boulder fields flanked the stream. We chose a side and left the stream behind.







We were now in a massive boulder field set against a mountain side. At the extreme angle it wasn't easy, but at least the rocks were now dry. We stepped as if we were on glass ready to break – Each boulder looked like it could break loose at any moment and we made sure to avoid any situation where one of us was below the other as we moved forward. Each step was made with extreme caution, and evening set in as it took us nearly 2 hours to move about 100 yards down the mountain. Eventually a tree could be seen below along our line of travel, then another. Dirt, pine needles, and fallen timber soon replaced the boulders underfoot. It was still quite steep and we used tree trunks like a railing to keep our feet from slipping out from under us as we moved downwards. After some

time of this, the sun dipped below the horizon for the night and we broke out of the forest and finally stood on our target, the trail that ran beside the tumbling waters of the Roaring Fork. Our feet hurt – A lot. Quickly we found a sheltered spot among the pines and setup camp in the last few moments of remaining light, cooked dinner, and immediately fell to sleep in a state of sheer exhaustion.

The next few days were much easier as we followed trail systems where we hardly even needed a map. We ended up exiting the Winds from a different trailhead than where we'd started, and after a motel stay and some interesting transportation logistical issues we made it back to our starting point and headed

back home. I couldn't help but wonder about that couple we'd run into the first day of our trip. Did they know the secret way down? Should we have gone right instead of left? They had to have used the same pass we did, and maybe the terrain was gentle and sloping just a few hundred yards to the East. Or maybe they knew of an entirely different route that we'd missed on the map altogether. These were all thoughts that occupied my mind on the way home and have since – Questions that I could have found out the first day on the trail with just a couple quick questions. At home research yielded little information on traversing the area, and after looking at more maps and even satellite imagery the chance of a better route was mostly inconclusive. Eventually I was able to find a mention

regarding the pass after exhaustive searching - The route was described as "Easy". Our experience was anything but that by anyone's definition, but when you're after off-trail adventure following your own or unmarked routes, the slightest turn, or a hundred feet left or right can make all the difference. When it's not written down or drawn on a map I guess you just have to know. The satellite imagery did show what could be a grassy ramp a stone's throw to the East, and the terrain looks to be just slightly less steep in that direction on the topo map – But it's hard to tell from the air or at home. With foot travel the only way to tell for certain... As if we needed an excuse. Already planning our next attempt at the pass, who knows what type of adventure will be waiting for us this time. ❖





THANKS FOR STOPPING BY!

Check out our next issue
(available the 1st week in November) at:

www.TrailGroove.com

Copyright © 2012 TrailGroove Magazine LLC

