Overnight Backcountry Snowboard Trip

Location: Carson Pass, CA

Date: February 15-17, 2013

Written: April 22, 2013

This trip report is just one snippet of my experience living in Tahoe for the first half of 2013, and I hope I can find the time to write several more trip reports detailing my exploits in the Sierra Nevada.

After taking an AIARE Level 1 Avalanche Course at Kirkwood Mountain Resort over Martin Luther King weekend, I was eager to take my newly acquired knowledge into the backcountry. Although I had already done some smaller tours in the Tahoe Basin, I was hankering for a longer trip that would require winter camping. The upcoming Presidents Day holiday seemed like a perfect time to undertake an adventure of this magnitude, seeing as my season pass was blacked out for the weekend. I set about finding a few people willing to go into the wintry wilderness for a few days and an objective zone for the trip. As the time of the trip grew near, the location for the trip became clear, but the group was completely in question. Some people waivered in interest, some got sick, and others were contingent on finding rides up from San Francisco. The only constants in the days leading up to the trip were my determination to do this overnight backcountry snowboarding trip and the location; I had chosen an objective camping zone about four miles due South of Carson Pass, in between Round Top and Deadwood Peak along Summit City Creek in the Mokelumne Wilderness.

Luckily things came together in the end and I had a partner in crime for the weekend. We had met in our AIARE Level 1 Avalanche Course, and it just so happened that he was a Northeastern civil engineering graduate of the Class of 2011. He had been on a few NUHOC trips, though never really got too involved in the club. Friday night came along and I found myself waiting in the parking lot of Raley's in South Lake Tahoe for Abe to arrive from San Francisco with a guy he had contacted on a rideshare site. As soon as he arrived, we stuffed his gear into the back of my Outback and drove the remaining 25 miles to Carson Pass like men possessed. We were fortunate to have a clear night to begin our adventure, as traffic had significantly delayed Abe’s arrival to the Tahoe Basin, and we did not begin skinning until 10 PM PST. As we emerged from the trees above Carson Pass, we were graced by a semi-moonlight view of Elephant’s Back and Round Top, between which we planned to pass to reach our objective. Kirkwood glowed off to the East, and snow cats were visible making preparations for the next day’s visitors. Originally the plan had been to reach our camp near Summit City Creek on Friday night, but it quickly became apparent as the moon set that we would be unable to make safe progress without its light. We decided to make camp in the singular copse of trees in this alpine zone near the saddle which we planned to cross in the morning.

We could not have chosen a more perfect spot to make camp. We opened our tent door to be greeted by one of the most magnificent sunrises I have ever been witness to. Unfortunately I had not slept too well since the tent was on a slight tilt. We quickly broke camp to make for our objective. We crossed over the saddle within fifteen minutes, as we had made camp not a quarter mile from it, only to get our first true taste of adventure. There is a saying that adventure doesn’t start until something goes wrong, and this was the start of our adventure. The terrain we were greeted by on the opposite side of the saddle looked nothing like the terrain I had been expecting based on my study of the topographical
maps before the trip. We pulled out our map and compass only to find out that we were actually on the lower and more easterly of the two saddles along the ridge between Round Top and Elephant’s Back. We figured out that we were looking at Forestdale Divide, the connecting route between Carson Pass to the North and Ebbetts Pass further to the South in the summer. The terrain in the area looked very inviting, and we decided to make for this zone instead of trying to work the craggy ridge of Round Top to get back onto our planned route.

This ended up being the best decision on the trip. After descending a tricky rock lined chute from into the basin, we put our skins on once more to ascend up to Forestdale Divide proper. This descent made it abundantly apparent that I had over packed for this trip; my pack weighed close to 60 pounds between avalanche gear, climbing gear, camping gear, food, water, stove, extra clothing, and god knows what else. We came over a roll to find ourselves standing on a slightly raised piece of land at the bottom of a magnificent, semi cornice-rimmed bowl just to the West of Forestdale Divide, with several chutes and other terrain features interspersed along its slopes. With this view revealed to us we decided to ditch our original plans and make camp in this bowl. We were fortunate that this slightly raised area at the bottom of the bowl was populated with trees, as it allowed us to shelter our camp from the wind. We dug out an area for our tent and cooking area about two feet deep to further protect ourselves from the wind.

Once we had established our camp, we ditched all of our unneeded gear, ate a late breakfast/early lunch, and went to explore our new neighborhood. We decided to swing out lookers left of the large rocky buttress marking the eastern border of the bowl and ascend on a mellower, more protected route to minimize our risk on the terrain. As was to be expected based on the weather patterns in the area and previous observations I had made in past weeks on smaller backcountry tours, we encountered about 4-5 inches of surface facets forming on the Northern aspects which made up the terrain in the bowl, verifying our decision to take the mellower route for the time being. We dug a snow pit on a Northern aspect when the slope kicked up to around 40 degrees about two thirds of the way to the top of our climb. Here we made a more detailed analysis of the snow conditions and discovered that the surface facets were sitting on top of an extremely stable snowpack, with no signs of weakness detectable. We made note that the facets currently sitting on the surface could form a weak layer if new snow fell on top of them.

Based on our observations of the snowpack, we decided that it would be safe for us to descend the routes in the bowl, though we decided that we should try to avoid the areas where a cornice had formed for our safety. We booted up the last pitch of the climb, and topped out on the buttress overlooking the bowl. From this new vantage point our decision to make camp in the bowl was immediately verified; the terrain we had originally planned on traversing and riding was suffering from a thin snowpack, especially the south side of Round Top which was half-bare.

After a well-deserved victory beer, we scrambled over from the buttress to our first run, a chute on the eastern side of the bowl in the shadow of the buttress. We decided to descend the run in two sections, the first being the chute, and the second being the open lower half of the bowl after regrouping on a rise about halfway down riders left of the chute that we assessed should be safe in the unlikely case of an avalanche. I decided to go first down the chute to the rise; the faceted snow on the top of the snowpack rode like powder, and I was rewarded with soft turns down to the rise. Abe followed, and reached the rise with stoke level pinned to the max. We descended the last half of the bowl in the opposite order, and rode back into our camp with nothing but grins, hoots, and hollers from the great snow.
We decided to call it a day although we probably could have squeezed in another run; we didn’t want to be racing the sun. As the sun set we got the whisperlite running and cooked up our dinner, cans of Chef Boyardee that were on sale at Safeway. I’ve never been much of a fan of Chef Boyardee, but something between camping at around 9000’ and hiking it in on our backs made it taste divine. After scarfing down 6 cans of the stuff, we cleaned up and retreated into the tent for the evening.

That evening we decided that we would take two laps in the bowl before breaking camp and making the trek back out to Carson Pass, with a projected wake up time of 4 AM PST. However, when we were both awakened by howling winds at 3 AM PST, we decided it was probably for the best that we waited for daybreak and only take one run before egressing. This once again was a very smart decision, as we would have likely frozen between the lack of daylight, the 10 degree temperature, and undoubtedly fiercer ridgeline winds. We were rewarded at 7 AM with calm winds and blue skies.

We made quick work of the ascent, and decided that we would do more than just the single run down the bowl. We decided to descend the east facing slope which our skin track and boot ladder followed to the summit about halfway down to the beginning of our well established boot ladder. This quick run in the sunshine was enough to get the blood moving to our extremities again, and we set to our true objectives. We decided to take different lines this time; I had picked out a small chute at the prow of the ridge that formed the main bowl while Abe chose a line more or less down the center of the bowl. Abe descended first, making wide turns across the open slope to the bottom. I followed, schussing my way through the small trees on my line into the open expanse of the lower bowl.

After more self-congratulating, we broke our camp for the last time, and descended down the drainage towards the eastern side of Elephant’s Back, which would lead us back to Carson Pass. We once again donned our skins and began the ascent up to the high meadow. This proved to be a very sweaty affair, as the air temperature was a full ten degrees warmer than the previous day, and the sun was incessantly beating down upon us. We crossed the high meadow with ease; the stunning east face of Elephant’s Back towered over us on our left. After some difficulty trying to avoid two additional transitions from touring mode to ride mode and vice versa, we decided just to suck it up and descended down to Red Lake Road. Upon meeting the road, we promptly motored out the last half mile to the Carson Pass parking lot.

No sooner had we reached the parking lot that my 60 pound pack was thrown into the trunk of my car and my drenched ski socks were exchanged for a pair of flip flops. As we drove down to Kirkwood to meet Abe’s ride home we couldn’t contain our stoke from the success of the trip, and soon after I began to plan my next big backcountry tour in the Sierra Nevada.

-Lou Cassano, NUHOC Tahoe 2013