Snowboard Mountaineering Trip

Location: Mount Shasta, CA

Date: May 11, 2013

Written: May 13, 2013

Mount Shasta, or as the native Karuk tribe called it Úytaakhoo, The White Mountain, is the most majestic and powerful mountain I have had the privilege of setting my eyes on in my life. The mountain’s summit at 14,179 feet stands over 10,000 feet above the surrounding area, which averages about 3500 feet in elevation, and is the tallest mountain for hundreds of miles. It is the second tallest mountain in the Cascade Volcanic Arc; only Mount Rainier is higher. But Mount Shasta has earned a deserved reputation over most, if not all, of the other mountains in North America as a premier backcountry ski and snowboard destination.

Every face of Mount Shasta can be skied, but the most popular by far is the Southwest drainage known as Avalanche Gulch. As its name suggests, Avalanche Gulch is highly prone to avalanches during the winter, but is also the easiest route by which to reach Shasta’s summit because crevasse-ridden glaciers cover the northerly and easterly flanks of Shasta. During the popular climbing months of April and May, the hazards of making the ascent via Avalanche Gulch are at a minimum. Since the slopes of the mountain are usually still covered in snow, the rock fall that occurs naturally and from human triggering has not yet become a notable safety hazard. Additionally, the snowpack is well consolidated from frequent melt-freeze cycles; although as the sun’s rays become more powerful in the spring the likelihood of loose wet avalanches from daytime warming becomes much more worrisome. Thus the safest plan of action is to ascend and descend the mountain as early as possible in the day before the potential for rock fall and avalanches increases.

This brings us to 3:20 AM PDT on May 11, 2013. My phone incessantly began to go off like a siren, and quickly awakened me from my sleep. I had slept in the back of my Subaru at the Bunny Flat Trailhead, the access point to Avalanche Gulch which sits at an elevation of 6950 feet, after driving 300 miles from Tahoe the previous evening. I quickly did a final packing of my backpack, chugged as much water as possible, and changed into my snow attire before beginning my ascent. To my relief I only needed to walk a few yards uphill from my car before I was able to start skinning, and from there I started trucking up the trail which leads to the base of Avalanche Gulch.

On this first section of my ascent I found myself in complete solitude, with nothing but the established skin track and the light of my headlamp to let me know that I was going in the right direction. This quickly changed when I came closer to the base of Avalanche Gulch and passed by Horse Camp, a popular camping spot near the base of Avalanche Gulch just below 8000 feet. As the entirety of Avalanche Gulch came in to view, I could spot dozens of little lights at various elevations of the drainage, but there was only one solitary light up on Casaval Ridge, a more difficult route of ascent which borders Avalanche Gulch on its Northwest side. I began overtaking other climbers as I made my way up the main drainage which flows out of the base of Avalanche Gulch; I passed over a dozen people before I diverged from the main climbing route.

From my previous experience on Shasta two weeks earlier, I knew that when the gully split that it would be more conducive for me to take the climber’s right gully, as it would allow me to continue skinning
past Lake Helen at 10,400 feet on a broad ramp instead of needing to switch over to crampons. I split off from the line of headlamps heading up the climber’s left gully and continued my upward grind towards the summit. On my way up I passed two perfectly shaped kickers that someone had built into the walls of the gully, but only noticed them after a few seconds of scrutiny (it was still dark). I passed Lake Helen around 6:15 AM PDT and was shocked to only see two tents pitched at the popular intermediate camp, as it sits just below the halfway point of the ascent, in terms of vertical feet.

I quickly realized that as the slope began its upward kick above Lake Helen that skinning would no longer be an option for my ascent. As the sky brightened from the sun rising behind Sergeant’s Ridge I quickly transitioned to my mountaineering axe and crampons, making sure to secure my splitboard securely to my pack because a poor strapping job had caused me much grief on my last ascent of Shasta. I was granted the good fortune of having an impeccable boot ladder to follow up the rest of Avalanche Gulch, something I had not had the good fortune to find two weeks ago when I was climbing the mountain on a food poisoning hangover of sorts. About two hours later I reached the bottom of the Red Banks just as the sun was coming up over the ridge; my timing could not have been more perfect. The sun was hot, and as soon as I was beginning to feel the intense heat from the May sun I ascended into the chimney carved into the Red Banks.

The crux put up little opposition as I ascended up through the Red Banks. This chimney was the steepest and narrowest part of the route, choking at 5 feet wide and maxing out at about a 40 degree slope, not too difficult in the scheme of things. Unfortunately though, the multitude of tracks from people ascending and descending through this narrow corridor had created challenging snow conditions for trying to gain a foothold and driving my axe into the snow. Nonetheless I emerged from the chimney onto the broad ramp above the Red Banks and continued my brutal pace.

I came up over the roll onto the plateau above Red Banks at 9:30 AM PDT, a mere five and a half hours after leaving my car. At this point I had reached an approximate altitude of 13,250 feet, over 6000 feet above my car at the trailhead which I could see off in the distance. On this plateau I decided to take a break to gather my strength for the final 900-ish feet of ascent. The scene on the upper reaches of the mountain was drastically different from when I had been in the same spot two weeks prior. A wet week prior to my ascent had left the upper mountain with a few feet of new snow, which recovered slopes which had been bare on the day of my last visit. This pleased me greatly as it opened up the possibility of a descent from the summit. Only time would tell if a descent from the summit was possible, as I still had to crest the top of Misery Hill before getting my first glimpse of the summit proper.

After a leisurely hour and a half break chatting with other climbers and skiers, some on their way up and some on their way down, I decided that it was time to make my push for the summit. Misery Hill lived up to its name, the 600 vertical foot slog, though small by comparison to what I had already climbed, did not give up a foot of elevation without a fight. I crested onto the summit plateau with my splitboard still on my back hoping for a summit to base descent, but what I saw didn’t look good. There was a large flat plain in between me and the summit pinnacle, and it became quickly apparent that I would be unable to skirt along the North side of Misery Hill due not only to a rocky ridge, but the presence of the Whitney Glacier, where I could see 40 foot deep and 10 foot wide crevasses across its width. I decided to leave my splitboard on the plateau and make for the summit with a lighter pack.

As I started back on my way toward the summit across the plateau before the final pitch I felt reinvigorated as if a boulder had been take off my shoulders. I scampered up the final slope through a rocky section as fast as my legs would allow; I could hear voices conversing at the top of the pinnacle.
At last, the summit was mine. At 12:15 PM PDT, eight hours and fifteen minutes after leaving my car seven miles away and 7229 feet below me, I walked up the last rocky steps and let out a triumphant yell, the release of two weeks of pent up frustration for not having reached this point on my first attempt two weeks prior. Standing on this summit truly felt like being on top of the world; the massive flanks of the mountain fell away into the distant valleys over 10,000 feet below and nothing but Lassen Peak 100 miles to the South even looked remotely comparable to the height of Shasta.

After signing the summit log, snapping a few photos on the pinnacle, and drinking some much needed water it was time to begin the descent. Unfortunately when I reached the summit it had become painfully apparent that I could have easily ridden right off the top of the mountain, but alas my board sat a few hundred feet below me at the top of Misery Hill. Thus I descended the same route which I had taken to the top in the first place, and within minutes I was back at the place where I had left my board. I was finally able to remove my crampons and stow my mountaineering axe on my pack for good. The anticipation was killing me; it was time to ride.

At the top of Misery Hill, with the entirety of Avalanche Gulch laid out below me and the trailhead just a speck in the trees below, I strapped in and began my 7000 vertical foot snowboard descent. The snow on Misery Hill was soft, but the winds and the temperature prevented it from turning to slop under the power of the afternoon May sun. I shot across the flat at the bottom of Misery Hill toward the rider’s right saddle which marked the entrance to Avalanche Gulch above the Red Banks. I came over the roll onto the 45 degree bowl and began carving turns in perfect corn snow. It was amazing how much quicker the descent was than the ascent. Before I knew it I was quickly approaching Lake Helen, though my speed was not meant to last.

The snow turned into deep slop, and I quickly became aware that I had forgotten to put a new coat of spring wax on my board. Sticky wouldn’t even begin to describe how my board was handling in these conditions. Thus the rear leg burn ensued as I tried to prevent myself from cartwheeling in this heavy, wet snow. At the lowest elevations of the descent, sun cups began to make their inevitable appearance, and I retreated back onto the established skin track from Bunny Flat, the smoothest strip of snow under tree line. After what seemed like forever slowly meandering down the creek bed I had ascended in the dark, I reached the saddle over which lay the Bunny Flat Trailhead. Too exhausted and lazy to deal with crossing over the saddle strapped in, I unstrapped from my board and walked the last 100 yards down the trail to my car.

The relief of taking off all of my gear was indescribable. It looked like my gear had exploded all over the immediate area surrounding my Subaru, but I couldn’t care less because I was lying down in the trunk drinking the reserve water I had left in the car. After a few hours of relaxing and recovering in the parking lot, I was reinvigorated to the point that I felt good enough to drive the 300 miles back to Tahoe so I could sleep in my own bed after a much needed shower. I packed up my gear, and began my drive home. As I made my way around Shasta and eventually off to its Southeast, I kept taking glances back towards that powerful solitary peak until it was no longer visible to my sight when I ascended onto Route 44. As the mountain went out of view, I said to myself, “Thank you Shasta”.

This mountain represents my most significant achievement thus far as a snowboard mountaineer. It represents the most vertical I have ever covered in a single day of touring, 7229 feet up and 7229 feet down. It represents the most distance covered in a day of touring, 14 miles round trip. However, the most significant achievement of the day to me was the summiting of my first 14,000 foot peak. I hope that I will add many more to that list, but Shasta definitely has earned a special distinction that no other mountain will be able to have in my mind.
If ever you have the chance to climb this mountain, seize the opportunity, it is truly one of the most powerful and majestic mountains on the planet.

-Lou Cassano, NUHOC Tahoe 2013