

The Sierra High Route 2005

By
Ray Purcell

Day Four: lancets of ice crystals buried themselves into the exposed parts of my face searing the skin that was not protected by the hood of my parka and snow goggles. Leaning into 40-knot gusts our party of four inched up the southern flank of the 12,000-foot Triple Divide Pass. Ground glass snow washed over our skis as they broke through the crust like the bow of an icebreaker plowing through North Sea pack ice.

The mountain pass was a spectral line that lay ahead of us, fading and emerging again from a sorcerer's cloak of roiling mist that formed the clouds that surrounded us. The slope steepened and was avalanche prone because an overlaying layer of wind formed slab that was loosely bonded to the spring softened layer of snow underneath.

We advanced on the pass in hundred foot intervals; as exhausted by our senses stretching out into the indifferent and potentially lethal snow field as we were from the physical effort to ski in the oxygen rare air while laden under our backpacks.

We could have been skiing across the Alps or the Arctic; but we weren't. We were ski touring across a stunningly airy and physically arduous line that traverses the highest and grandest peaks and passes of the Southern Sierra Nevada and is called, simply yet most apropos, The Sierra High Route.

For years I had looked up at the snow-covered mantle of the Sierra from the Southern San Joaquin Valley after the air is washed clean by spring storms like this one. I've dreamed of crossing the range east to west following the line originally pioneered by the prolific Sierra skier David Beck.

In 1975 Beck first connected this spectacular route. To follow the route the skier has to travel over six passes, all over ten thousand feet, but most over twelve thousand feet, and covering some fifty miles of rugged alpine terrain.

I have attempted this route before and in retrospect wisely turned back recognizing my own inexperience in the face of increasingly difficult terrain and deteriorating weather that made the avalanche risk unacceptable. Now, forty-eight years old and enjoying a perfectly wonderful midlife crisis that I have no wish to end prematurely, I'd decided to hire a professional mountain guide. A no nonsense, "we go this way now", "follow me boys", kind of leader.

Selecting a mountain guide to lead you into an adventure like this is not to be taken lightly or on the cheap. You would do no less selecting a heart surgeon, right? Fortunately there are many reputable companies whose guides are certified by the American Mountain Guides Association; a bench mark of excellence and professionalism. Based on reputation I selected the Sierra Mountain Center in Bishop, a town in the northern Owens Valley, surrounded by mountains, and a hub of California mountain culture.

My guide was to be one of the company's principle partners, Robert "SP" Parker. Originally from New Zealand, he turned out to be very much the "follow me boys" kind of leader that I sought. "SP" left the Southern Hemisphere to "climb and get out of the rain." As with most climbers, he eventually gravitated to the granite walls of Yosemite and finally, by natural extension, to the mountainous Eastern Sierra. Though clearly laconic and occasionally evasive, I found that "SP" has a wry wit not

uncommon among New Zealanders. When asked what the “SP” stood for he explained with a twist at the side of his mouth and a sideways glance; “Well I suppose it could stand for a lot of things.”

“SP” is a highly regarded and accomplished alpinist, and has twenty years experience guiding. He has guided in the Alps, Patagonia, as well as the Sierra. Additionally he holds certification from the International Federation of Mountain Guides Association; which is necessary to guide in Europe where his professions history is deep, rich, and has achieved it’s highest art.

Day One: on the appointed day at seven O’clock in the morning we were to meet at the Winnedumah Hotel. Now a bed and breakfast style Inn, the Winneduhma is a movie set 1927 Spanish Colonial style hotel located in Independence, the closest town to our trailhead. Over breakfast we were meet by “SP” and introduced to our respective team members. In addition to yours truly there was Barry, a fifty-two year old Urologist who practices in Phoenix, Arizona.

Original from Ontario, Canada, Barry had been skiing since he could walk and is an accomplished white water boater, back packer, and mountain cyclist. Over the course of the trip Barry endeared himself by spontaneously breaking into song. When things got weird and scary he’d start singing rock ballads and gospel with ironically poignant situational lyrics in lugubrious bar room singer style.

Our fourth team member was Allan, also fifty-two. Allan is a British chemical engineer currently assigned to his company’s facilities in Pennsylvania. Allan has traveled extensively and has skied and climbed in South Africa and the Alps. He has an ebullient personality and the type of British humor made famous by the Monty Python Troupe. He told me well into our adventure that the Haute Route, a trans-mountain range ski route between Chamonix, France and Zermat, Switzerland may have had more demanding downhill skiing in comparison to the High Route, but at least you could toss back a bottle of wine in the comfort of one the Alp’s ubiquitous and quite opulent "huts" at the end of the day.

After Huevos Rancheros Winneduhma style “SP” took us outside and lined us up for a gear check, to distribute avalanche beacons and the collapsible shovels that I prayed would only be employed to dig out snow shelters- as opposed to any one of us.

I’ve always considered myself frugal when it came to carrying lightweight and only necessary gear in my pack. But, “SP” examined each item and with a knitted eyebrow then unceremoniously discarded item after item saying “Nope, that’s not on the list.” or “What are ya gonna use that for?”

After "SP" completed the gear route we headed out. All of us were crowded into our guides faded red and brush scratched economy truck ultimately bumping along a dirt road through the desert of the Owens Valley west of Independence. Mount Williamson loomed snowcapped in the foreground as the scent of sage filled the cab. We rolled past blooming mountain lilac, deep purple lupine, and reddish-pink dessert pear to the Symmes Creek Trailhead.

Silently we pulled out our loaded backpacks and strapped our skis onto them for the hike that would eventually take us from the five thousand foot desert trailhead to snowline. The beginning of the hike was punctuated by the obligatory groans of the first trail day as we were newly burdened with fully laden packs and skis.

After several crossings of the spring-swollen Symmes Creek we came to a sobering sight, which

reminded me of the awesome power of avalanching snow. We found the creek canyon above us had been stripped down to bare soil, with all the vegetation resting in a tangle and cemented in snow at the creek bottom.

The snowfield in a steep chute further up the canyon had clearly slid, the torrent snow scouring the lower canyon savagely bare. We climbed over the tangle of avalanche debris and continued the arduous climb to our first camp above snow line on a fairly level bench at ten thousand and forty feet above sea level called Anvil Camp.

Making camp became a predictable routine of setting up our two four-season tents. These were sturdy, extremely light structures made of high-tech fabric so thin that I was afraid of putting my finger through them. Yet these tents are so sturdy that they easily withstood nightlong snowstorms.

“SP” was also the trips chef and had pre-prepared all meals and snacks. Dinner became a welcome routine. Each night regardless of weather, after setting up camp we welcomed hot drinks followed by hearty soup, and a main course abundant with meat, pasta or rice and beans. Foods both savory and with the crucial calories to not only replace the energy burned during the preceding day but also for keeping you warm and snug in your sleeping bag through below freezing nights.

Day Two: we crawled out of our cocoons squinting into the blue jay-blue sky of an alpine sunrise. We busied ourselves to warm then eat a hot breakfast, with coffee for Barry and I, and tea, of course, for Allan and “SP”. After stowing the tents and repacking our gear we strode off for our first full day on skis intent on crossing our first high point the twelve thousand and eight foot Shepherd Pass. We were silent in the warming morning mostly from the thinning oxygen at altitude. Approaching the pass “SP” picked an economical and efficient line up the steep snowfield.

Having meals taken care of by the guide was one of the luxuries of this trip. But one of the most important benefits was the expertise with which “SP” navigated steep, and exposed terrain. Not to mention his ability to identify and correct my wanting technique on skis so that I struggled less making turns as we climbed these impossibly steep slopes.

I was winded, hot from exertion in the relentless high altitude Sun, and famished as we topped out over Shepherd Pass. But I was immediately distracted by the first views of the High Sierra. As we ate onion and poppy seed bagels with cheese, tomato, and avocado, we drank heavily from our water bottles and the expansive vista of the High Sierra.

To the south rose the 14,000-foot plus peaks of Mt. Williamson and Tyndall. The rolling broad Tyndall Plateau spread out to the west and beyond it was the singular granite pillar that tops 13,641-foot Milestone Mountain. We would end our second day on the eastside of this landmark in the headwaters of the Kern River, aiming to cross Colby Pass the following day. But grey wispy clouds were building on the western horizon and I noticed that the barometric pressure on my altimeter watch was falling, a certain portent of a storm.

We skied through the remainder of the day across the undulating terrain beneath Diamond Mesa, finally traversing north of Tyndall Creek before a wooded descent into the Kern River Canyon and the night’s camp. While Barry, Allen and I finished setting up camp, “SP” used a satellite phone to call the companies Bishop office for a weather update.

I eaves dropped with understandable interest on “SP’s” side of the conversation. In response to

whatever information he was being given he simply replied with a terse “Uh huh.” “Uh huh.” “Uh huh.” “Uh huh.” “Uh huh.” Then abruptly disconnected the transmission. Over dinner I asked what the weather report held. To which he responded that a Pacific low-pressure system was building and that up to fourteen inches of snow accumulation was forecast over the next two days.

The other “clients” and myself understandably asked about contingencies, you know, camping out the storm, retreating, freezing to death, cannibalism, and so forth. To which “SP” responded “Dave Beck certainly would not retreat so neither will we –well, not yet anyway”.

Day Three: dawn came early through a gathering gloom and we rose early since “SP” was anticipating a long and difficult day. We hastily broke camp with the first dusting of snow and began laboring up our second pass. Hours passed climbing until the snow cover became too sparse and steep to ski. Still the wind howled and slammed us with the rhythm of Jimmy Hendrix playing Voodoo Child. We strapped our skis onto our packs to continue, “booting” toward the pass. “SP” called a break so that he could scout ahead and test the terrain

Reaching the high point of the pass we were chastened by our guide to quickly stow our climbing skins, put on our skis and descend as soon as possible to gain the shelter and safety of lower ground. It was three o’clock when we reached the sheltered leeward side of Colby Pass. Lunch had to be delayed because of our perilous circumstances and not having drunk adequate water or eaten snacks I became light headed. The snow and sky became one so that even when I stopped I felt like I was still moving. Vertiginously I skied and fell, skied and fell. Finally in the relative calm we ate and I slowly felt my head clear with strength returning.

We descended further but with the lowering cloud ceiling obscuring the next pass advance today was futile and we made camp. As we built sheltering walls out of blocks of snow around our tents it became clear to me that what “SP” had said in jest the previous day about camping through a storm vs. retreat really meant that once you are committed on this kind of an adventure the clock begins to count down on the food that you have with you and the fuel available to melt water from snow- the clock was loudly ticking.

Day Four: another early start and hard push over another technically difficult pass. This time I was prepared to eat and drink on the run. We descended into the next valley while the storm waxed and waned. Again “SP” called home on the satellite phone for a weather report and the status of our connections once and if we arrived on time at the west end of the route.

To reclaim precious lost time and avoid having to ration food and water it would be best if we could still get over Triple Divide Pass. But the weather wasn’t relenting. “SP” watched the weather and gauged the snow against the increasing avalanche risk like a surfer studying the timing of the sets of giant waves at Mavericks or the “Pipeline”. At last timing was judged and we were urged to cautiously approach the next pass.

As we gained on the steepest slope with the greatest avalanche risk, “SP” dropped his pack. We checked our avalanche transceivers and reviewed how to establish a pattern of search to locate a buried body. We took our shovels out of our packs assembling the scoop into the detachable handle and stood ready as “SP” climbed the last part of the slope before the pass. We watched shielding our eyes against the daggers of wind driven ice as our guide tested the slope to the pass.

Passing beyond the accumulating cornice at the highpoint “SP” disappeared over the horizon and

then shortly reappeared retracing his route to us. Shouldering his pack he said "Well boys that was so much fun I think I'll do it again." Then we were cautioned to spread out in one hundred foot intervals while ascending the slope. The rationale was clear, should the slope slide it was better to lose one than all.

I was the third to begin the ascent and felt as though I was spinning the chamber of the revolver and pointing the muzzle to my head. The avalanche beacon emitted a constant radio signal from where it was strapped across my chest, the strap reassuringly tightened with each deep breath. Step by step I skied delicately upward, like I was walking barefoot on rice paper; wondering if the slope would fail early, late, or hopefully not at all. I must have prayed an entire novena by the time I topped out on the crest.

We were all well rehearsed in the routine. As we reached the pass we removed the climbing skins from our skis and quickly got ready to descend. What made me buck this time, especially after the physical and emotional exhaustion of surmounting the pass, was the prospect of down climbing the 200-foot gully on the windward side of the pass before being able to clip into my skis for the final descent to Glacier Lake.

The airy exposure about unhelmed me. "SP", matter-of-fact and reassuring, coached me to descend down the forty-five degree snow gully facing forward as he had done so naturally. "Be aggressive, don't lean back," he urged me, but my natural tendencies were counterproductively strong and my pack and skis seemed to pull me off balance- I continued to slip. Then "SP" had me turn to face into the slope and kick step down, a slower but less disorienting technique.

After the ordeal on Triple Divide Pass the ski down to Glacier Lake, at the head of appropriately named Cloud Canyon, was a blessed relief. We arrived exhausted and pleased to find sheltering walls of snow already built by previous travelers which spared us most of the work. We dozily set up our tents in the enclosure and collapsed into our sleeping bags to warm, dry and gather energy for dinner.

"SP" cooked inside of his and Allan's tent as the snow continued to blow. We shuttled food between their tent and ours. Snow was melted for water with the precious remaining fuel. But the soup was reviving, and according to Allan "civilized." We ate the main course with snow falling on our tent that made the sound of grains of rice being poured over the head of a drum. Despite the steady noise or perhaps because of it sleep came quickly, deep, and just.

Day Five: I awoke before my tent mate Barry but was on the unfortunate side of tent when "SP" threw a "hey, wake up over there" snowball against our tent that loosened the frozen condensation on the tent wall and dropped a shower of ice onto my face. The resulting exchange is unfit for polite retelling.

Even through the closed tent I could tell the storm had cleared and was excited by the prospect of a cloudless sky. The barometric pressure was up a little and it was seventeen degrees in our tent. I peeked out the tent flap to see an amber penumbral dawn pushing back the midnight blue sky across the top of the world.

"SP" fixed a cobbler for breakfast, which redeemed his unspeakable act with the snowball. We broke camp before the sun had so much as raised a blister on the eastern wall of the surrounding cirque with the hope of reclaiming valuable time- but at the cost of a very long day.

Fortunately the day was characteristically fair for spring and the terrain favorable. With the most technically difficult passes behind us we made excellent time. We rhythmically skied over the remaining three passes and ultimately gained the Table Lands, a rolling high valley which ended in a delightful roller coaster ski to our last camp near Pear Lake.

It was surreal given what we'd been through on this crossing. Especially at the end as we skied out of the woods and there was the black asphalt parking lot of the Wolverton ski area in Sequoia National Park. Suddenly it was over, Still, and warm.

The van driver let us out at the Visalia Air Terminal. While we waited to hear the status of our flight back to Independence, I lay on my back in the shelter of a Ramada and looked at the sky.

Abundant grandmotherly storm clouds were again setting upon the valley this afternoon. With bolstered rears and throw pillow bosoms they came wearing lumpy variegated gray frock coats. They began to forage about the sky with the random purpose of a day after sale, and with a voracity born of bargain table desire.

Each seemed to wield a capacious handbag undoubtedly equipped with a mirrored compact, lipstick of an absurd color, half a pastrami sandwich –mustard, no mayo- on seedless rye, and the urn with Uncle Ernie's earthly remains. They were congregating thousands of feet above the Sierra and the shuffling of their feet was stirring up just God-awful weather on the peaks and passes.

Nope, probably no flights back over the Sierra today. Then I drifted off to sleep.