

Kibbie Lake Backpack



Sheryl on granite near the pool

Day One

Last March I was sitting in Starbucks, getting to know a man I'd met through my computer dating service. The subject turned to hiking and backpacking, and I shared with him my experiences of backpacking eight years ago in the Sierra, and how much I loved it. I noticed that I was speaking about those experiences as if they were part of my past, as if I would never venture on foot into the mountains again. And I saw that that wasn't all right with me...that I wanted to experience again the wonders I'd known on those trips.

A few weeks later, my friend Mark Hill called me. Mark was the man who had introduced me to and trained me in backpacking eight years ago when we were in a romantic relationship. Though the romance had ended, our friendship hadn't, and we still

occasionally hiked together. "A group of us are going backpacking in Yosemite this summer. Do you want to go?" Immediately I said, "Yes!" And then I voiced my concerns about getting ready. Because of some elective surgery I had already scheduled for early May, I knew I wouldn't actually be able to start training with a pack until June. But Mark assured me that six weeks was plenty of time to get ready.

Twice a week for one hour and once a week for about three hours I started training with my pack. I started out with 20 pounds and added about three pounds each week until I got up to a load of 35 pounds. I amazed myself, jumping out of bed at 6:00 AM to be on the trail by 7:00 AM. and beat the heat. It turned out that my pack only weighed 25 pounds on the day we left, but it was great to go with less weight than I was used to.



Our pool

The two friends of Mark's who had originally intended to be part of this adventure ended up backing out for various reasons. About three weeks before we left, I invited my friend, Sheryl Sacerdoti, to come with us. Though she hadn't backpacked in 20 years, she was at the peak of training for a triathlon and was in great shape. In fact, she was so far ahead of me on the one training hike we did together, I said, "Okay, I think you should carry the tent on the trip!" Mark, having just come off an attack of Mount Shasta, was also in superior condition. I was obviously the weakest link in the chain, but they both said they weren't out to break any overland records

and were willing to rein in their full-bore styles to accommodate my slower pace.

Sunday, July 14, Mark and Sheryl picked me up at 6:15 AM. Our first stop was for the Egg McMuffin I'd been fantasizing about since a week earlier when we'd met to waterproof my tent and go over the details of the trip one final time. We drove a couple hours to Sonora, picked up the wilderness permit that Mark had already called ahead and arranged, and then we drove another hour through the Stanislaus Forest to the trailhead that lead to Kibbie Lake. We were ready to hit the trail at about 11:00 AM.

Our first day was a four-mile uphill hike on an established, dusty trail. We saw perhaps 15 people hiking out as we hiked in. It was a clear, hot day. About halfway up we saw a doe and fawn some 40 feet off the trail and then came to a hiker pointing into the brush just five feet off the trail. A second fawn was curled up there, motionless. The fawn's survival technique left him virtually invisible, his spots blending into the brush. We never would have noticed him if it hadn't been for the hiker pointing him out. And that hiker was the last person we saw on the trip until day four, hiking out on the same trail.

Our trail was heading to Kibbie Lake. Mark knew from previous trips that due to overuse, campfires had been banned at the lake. Before we came to the lake, we turned off the trail and started out cross-country. Soon after, about 2:30 PM, we found a suitable campsite by a pond. Hot, tired, and filthy, the water looked delicious. Mark immediately started the work of setting up camp: putting up his tent, refining the fire ring that was already there, setting up the kitchen. Meanwhile, Sheryl and I pulled off our clothes and headed for the water.

The pond was narrow and long, the far end disappearing behind a bend and some large boulders. A wall of trees came right up to the bank, so that looking down its length it looked like a green tunnel, the water about 50 feet across. I'd expected the water to be frigid. It wasn't. We waded in the shallows; the water was warmed by the sun. It wasn't until I was 30 feet down into the tunnel that the water finally was over my head. It was so clear I

We also filled another bag straight from the pond for washing our hands, dishes, etc.

As a special indulgence, Mark had carried in a liter of port. We had laughed that morning when Sheryl showed us her whole salami and enormous chunk of asiago cheese. But when camp was set, she announced it was time for hors d'oeuvres and port. This became a coveted ritual each evening. We nibbled on



Sheryl and Mark with Flora below

could see my toes down by the bottom. It felt heavenly. The sweaty layer of dust, the weight of the pack, all floated away.

Twenty minutes later, cooled down and clean, we were ready to confront the work of setting up our tent, pumping water, rinsing our clothes out. All drinking water needs to either be boiled or pumped through a water filter to avoid the risk of *ghardia*, a nasty intestinal bug. So we filled all our water bottles and a water bag that would be used for all our cooking and filling our bottles in the morning.

salami and cheese and sipped port and had a little respite before tackling dinner. In all honesty, I should say before Mark tackled dinner. He manned the propane stove, had planned all the dinners, and basically treated us like queens the whole time.

Mark cooked a fabulous dinner of fresh green and red peppers, onions, canned chicken and his secret sauce, which we rolled up in tortillas. These we enjoyed by the campfire. Twilight and the mosquitoes arrived. Johnson & Johnson's new Botanicals (insect repellent), touted for its pleasant smell and lotion-like

texture, didn't deter these critters. Overwhelmed, we retreated to our tents at 9:00 PM, mosquitoes and exhaustion keeping us from waiting up for the full darkness and star show we had been eagerly anticipating. The next morning both Sheryl and I commented that each of us had woken during the night, looked out the screen in the tent, and seen the blanket of brilliant stars on the fathomless black sky.

Day Two

Birds in the mountains wake at 5:00 AM with the dawn. I tried to ignore them, but finally my aching body and having to pee drove me out of the tent. My joke on this trip was that it was sleeping that made my body hurt, not the hiking. Even with my luxurious ¾-inch air mattress, I hurt more upon waking than at any other time of day. I would lay in my sleeping bag, listening for Mark to get up and lower the food bag (which contained my Tylenol) from the tree where it was suspended

to keep bears from getting it. By the third night I decided that the bears probably didn't want my Tylenol and I slept with it next to me, so that first thing in the morning I could pop a couple. What a concept!

July 15 was my birthday. The very first words that greeted me as I crawled out of the tent were a cheery, "Happy Birthday, Pat!" from Mark. How sweet... they'd remembered. Well aware of my chocolate addiction, Sheryl whipped out an enormous Cadbury Milk Chocolate bar that she had cleverly swathed in paper to insulate it from the previous day's heat. It was beautifully intact. "Happy Birthday!" she grinned.

At 7:30 AM, after a breakfast of instant oatmeal and Good Earth tea, we had packed up camp and hit the trail. We had one more ascending mile to go on wooded, winding trail, and then we were going cross-country. Before we'd left camp, Mark had pulled out the topographical map of the area and charted the



Terrain view



Campsite at Flora

compass reading he would use to guide us once we left the trail. Because of the tall trees, the compass was our only tool to get us to the overlook he knew from previous visits from which we would be able to look down and see the lake. But that was about four hours away.

After we left the trail, Mark commented that the terrain looked quite different; there had been a fire in the region and many burnt trees were scattered across the area. We were hiking through deep ravines with tall trees, some swampy areas, low scrub, and manzanita. It was slow going and hard on our feet. Sheryl and Mark took turns charging out front. She had mentioned that she had some American Indian in her ancestry and I dubbed her Sacajawea, since she was so frequently leading the troops.

By noon we should have been at the lookout, but we weren't. All three of us were tired and frustrated. We were each almost out of water. As Mark worked with the map, I

climbed up on a tall rock. Through the trees and down I could see a large body of water, but it didn't look like the lake on the map. The big mistake I made was telling Mark with certainty, "That's not Flora Lake; it must be Bartlett lake (just north of Flora). We've overshot our descent point and have to go back." The lake just looked too huge. Mark's big mistake was taking my word for it and not taking a look for himself. We would determine later that the lake was in fact Flora and we were just south of the overlook.

But we turned back, heading south along the ridge. After 30 minutes, it didn't look promising. We were all dragging. We stopped. Mark started to question our decision to head back south. We briefly entertained the idea of going back to the pool. We knew we could get back there. But I wouldn't have it. First, I knew we were closer to the lake than to the pool. Second, I hadn't come on this trip to only get to the pool! We were going to the lake! This was the first of several

breakthrough moments for me on the trip. Moments before I had felt completely used up, and now this fierce determination poured through me. I knew we were going to prevail.

Mark decided that the best course was for him to take off his pack and go find the right way and then come back and get us. He dropped his pack and headed back out, going north again. We accepted his analysis and took off our packs. But I wanted to be certain that the lake wasn't to the south. I told Sheryl to stay put in case Mark returned; I wanted to go find a big boulder to stand on to sight down the valley to the south and see if I could see the lake. I walked about 20 more minutes south and climbed up on a tall rock. There was no lake. I decided

Mark was right—the lake was still to the north. I headed back to Sheryl. She had found a shady rock to put her pad on and she was using the time to rest. I sat down under a tree and ate my lunch.

An hour went by, and no Mark. Sheryl yelled over that she was starting to get worried.

Okay, I thought, what was the plan if he didn't come back (which would mean he'd somehow broken his leg or something)? We'd take the first-aid kit and the water pump out of his backpack and go find him. That was the plan. But Mark wasn't the type to get hurt. I'd give him another hour. Thirty minutes later he showed up. He'd found the place and it was to the north.

It was 2:00 PM and we immediately set off again. We stopped at a mosquito- and-lily-pad-filled pond to pump water for our bottles and had to cross a swamp on a fallen log. The sensation and balance of backpacking is different from hiking. Not only are you carrying the additional weight, but your center of gravity changes.

Minor shifts, which are ordinarily easy to recover from, can throw you right off your feet when the inertia of the pack kicks in. Crossing the log, I lost my balance and almost slammed face first onto the log—thank heaven for those two hiking poles I was using for the first time on this trip (Mark's poles would later save the day again...stay tuned for Day 4!). I slammed



Sheryl and Pat with lake reflections. Look for the left pointing chevron right behind Sheryl—that's the water line at the other side of the lake. Everything below is reflection...except us. :-)

them down in front of me on each side of the log, and fortunately the log was close enough to the ground for the poles to stop me before I hit.

Within the hour, we were at the overlook. Five hundred feet below us was the beautiful blue gem of Flora Lake. All we had to do now was get down there. The granite wall goes down in tiers, and the key to getting down is to find the secret passageway from one tier to the next. Usually this is the fun part of the trip, but by then we were really too exhausted to enjoy it. Squeezing down crevices, maneuvering shoots filled with huge manzanita bushes, it was challenging work.

Mark and Sheryl were moving faster than I, so I got the chance to make corrections on their routes. Where possible, they'd end up doing hairpins and I'd be able to cut the diagonal. I'd realized that since I wasn't as strong as they were, I had to hike smarter. Sometimes Mark would yell out, "Pat just stay to the left, we're back-tracking your way." As we got to one of the last tiers I found my own crevice when I didn't like the manzanita-filled one Sheryl and Mark had chosen. I got stranded on a ledge and had to back-track. I was stuck, couldn't turn around, and with the pack on my back I couldn't get back up the drop I had just slid down. I felt fear rise in me. For just a second I felt the adrenaline-rush of panic. And then another part of me just shoved it down. "You are not going to panic here. That will not get you off this ledge. Just get your ass up this rock." I pulled myself up. When I think back on the trip, this is another of those moments that made it especially powerful. And yes, it was sweet. It reminded me that I am a kick-ass woman.

Mark had waited at the bottom of their crevice to talk me down while Sheryl, smelling the water, had shot ahead. By the time we got

down to lake level, Mark and I were whipped (Remember, he hadn't gotten that hour and a half break that we got while he was finding the right route). Fifteen minutes later we met up with Sheryl, dripping from a quick plunge in the lake. But we still had another third of a mile to go through boulders and brush to get to the shady part of the lake where we wanted to set up camp. "Just follow the lake around this way and catch up with us," he said to her. Mark and I kept moving forward like automatons. Magically refreshed from her swim, she caught up with us within 10 minutes.

It was just after 4:00 PM when we got to the place Mark had camped the previous times he'd been to Flora. Although the campsite was in a small grove of trees, an expanse of granite stretched from it to the lake—our poolside. Once more, when we hit the campsite, I dropped my pack, pulled off my clothes, and hit the lake. I just had to get the thick layer of sweat and dirt off me. A little chillier than the pond, the water wasn't achingly cold as I'd expected. While Sheryl set up our tent, and Mark maneuvered the large rocks for the fire ring, I floated on this spectacular, wild blue lake, watching the swallows flitting around. We hadn't seen another living soul the entire day. We had arrived at paradise.

In an attempt to revive Mark, who was laying down on his sleeping pad resting... the only time I saw him rest on the trip... Sheryl had declared it time for hors d'oeuvres. Out came the port, salami, and asiago cheese. Mmmm. Dinner that night was chili with corn. People speak pejoratively about backpacking food, but I have to say that by the time we get to dinner, it's all good.

The mosquitoes came out again, but Mark had found his "Jungle Juice" (a greasy stinky repellant that is disgusting but really works)

and we slathered it on so that we could enjoy our campfire and then the stars. It was a quarter moon and reflected brightly off the granite. We picked out the few constellations we knew from the mass of visible stars and saw the Milky Way. Next time I'll have to find a book of constellations to take along!

We crashed by 10:00 PM.

Day Three

Today was our lazy day. We had already decided that we would stay at this site for our

some yoga postures that felt absolutely wonderful. We “strolled” (uttering the “h” word was forbidden) along the lake to see some parts not visible from our campsite. We swam. We marveled at the light dancing on our private lake. Not another living soul for miles.

And then it was time to take the tourdebutt shot. ☺

This winter, I read about a website called www.tourdebutt.com (I recommend that you go there right now and check it out... the rest



Close-up of Flora Lake

third night, too, and if we felt like hiking there were plenty of lakes in the area to go visit.

But at breakfast, when Mark mentioned hiking, I didn't want to hear it. I was hanging out at the pool, reading, whatever, but I was not putting on those boots today! Mark decided to go alone for a few hours, and Sheryl and I lazed around. She guided me in

of this will make more sense). Basically it's this guy who loves the outdoors and as a joke started taking shots of great scenery with him in the photo with a bare butt. And then he posted them. And then people sent in their own pictures, or “Guest Butts” or “Guest Arse” as they are called. When I saw that, I got totally inspired. I wanted to be a guest butt on the tourdebutt website. Now this is interesting,

because I am not a nudist... I don't even walk around my own house naked when I'm alone. But I figured it was now or never... it's not like my butt is ever going to look any better than it does now, as imperfect as it is.

So one of my goals for this trip was for Sheryl to take a picture of me butt naked by the lake. I bought a cheapie panorama disposable camera (Kodak Advantix), which is what I used for all the photos in this story. To my surprise, my two friends, who had been skinny dipping for years, were not interested in having their butts immortalized on a website. So Sheryl took the picture. [Now the disappointing, to me at least, news is that the picture did not turn out very well. I sent it on to the webmaster, but I don't know if he'll use it.]

Day Four

July 17, the last day of the trip. I must admit I was a little apprehensive. Although we

had taken two days to hike in to Flora Lake, we were hiking back to the car in one day. Once the granite cliff was conquered, which would be done in the first 90 minutes when we were the most rested, the trip was relatively downhill. And it's easier to press on when the carrot is a hot shower, a fresh salad, and a crisp, cool glass of wine. We broke camp and set out at 7:30 A.M.

An hour and a half later we were scrambling and boulder hopping and had almost breached the top. We were right on schedule when disaster struck. The three of us were climbing in close quarters, moving up one of the last crevices. Mark was in the lead, and was leaping to a steep boulder a few feet way. He screamed an anguished roar of pain and grabbed his calf. Sheryl and I watched in horror as he crumpled to the rock, holding his leg and grimacing. A few minutes later he hobbled to a flat area and quickly took some ibuprofen. None of us have any medical



The final look back over my shoulder as Flora disappears below the ridge

experience; all we knew was that something in there had torn.

We had several options. Sheryl or I could stay with Mark while the other went to get help. Both Sheryl and I could leave to get help, on the theory that together we had a better chance of finding our way out. Or Mark would hobble out with the support of his two hiking poles. He only entertained the first two plans for a few minutes and then said, "I'm not staying here. Let's go." We agreed, but only on the condition that he give us some of his weight. He would only give up his tent, which Sheryl refused to share with me. At that point

But on any uphill stretches, the pain and concentration were etched on his face. On a very short break, Sheryl and I each used our own brand of New Age healing on him... hers was laying on hands using Tantric Yoga energy and mine were little magnetic rollers from Japan, massaged on his leg. Who knows whether either or both made a difference? Yet he did go the distance, so I'm convinced they did.

Sheryl and I alternately led the way, trying to find the easiest lines of passage, frequently directed by Mark from behind. "Go to the left of that big pile of boulders up there." "Work up to the ridge line and let's follow that." We



Lovely wildflowers growing near the swamps we were crossing

I told her she was no longer Sacajawea; I dubbed her Xena Two-Tent.

Mark was okay whenever the trail was downhill and he didn't have to use his calf. His calf was flexed rock-hard and swollen.

worked our way back through the forest with none of the miscalculations that had plagued us on Day 2.

We came across a large pile of black scat, answering the old question, "Does a bear sh**

in the woods?” We decided nothing else could have made such a big pile. And then a mile or so later, Sheryl pointed out the clear track of a bear’s paw in the dirt, each of the claw’s indentations easily discernible. But unlike Yosemite Valley bears, backwoods bears are shy critters, and unfortunately there was no actual bear sighting for us this trip.

We reached night one’s campsite by about 11:30 A.M. Now we were at the trail to Kibbie Lake. Sheryl and I were pooped, and ready for a break and lunch. But Mark was reluctant to stop. He was afraid that if he did, he would not get going again. He told us to take the time we needed and catch up with him on the trail. We paused for about 20 minutes, and then went after him as quickly as we could.

We caught sight of him about 30 minutes later, and Xena Two-Tent sped ahead to be with him. Around that time, we ran into a group of teenaged girls with backpacks, the first people we’d seen since we left the trail three days earlier. I have to say that even injured, Mark kept up such a pace that most of the time I just kept him and Sheryl in sight; I couldn’t catch them. Even injured, he was going as fast as I could.

We reached the car at 2:00 PM. The hike (which Mark estimates was nine miles) took us six and a half hours. But we were still another hour by car to civilization and ice for Mark’s leg. We found the perfect stop in Sonora—a mini-mart that had popcorn and ice for Mark, next door to an ice cream place that had non-fat frozen yogurt for Sheryl and full-fat ice cream for me. Then I took the wheel and we were home by 6:15.

By 6:30, Sheryl and Mark were gone and I was in the shower. We are SO spoiled by the constant availability of hot, running water.

And a good bed. And refrigeration. And water that you don’t have to pump to drink.

I loved being out in the wild country. And I loved coming home. ☺

P.S.: Mr. Heal Himself has refused to consult a medical professional so we might never know what actually happened to Mark’s leg. Almost two weeks later he is seeing continuous improvement, but has cancelled his backpacking trip scheduled for mid-August.