

## **Zion National Park's West Rim Trail ©**

### **By Amber Borowski**

Flakes. I can't stand 'em. I am, of course, referring to non-committal types; flakes of the snow variety are always welcome in my book...and most definitely on my slopes. Little did I know that my most recent trip to Zion National Park would be chock full of both.

I had already experienced most of the popular day hikes in Zion including Angels Landing, Observation Point and the Narrows, and I was itching to backpack something more remote. That something was the West Rim trail, often called the pinnacle backcountry excursion in Zion National Park. In just 14.2 miles, this moderately strenuous trail climbs along the backbone of the park and offers expansive views of a paradise where stone meets sky.

In retrospect, the trip was a gamble from the get-go because I was hooking up with a mixed-bag of friends:

Dave—Had been hanging out with him for less than a month. Seemed stable, reliable and sane (disclaimer: those were also my first impressions of Kramer.) Dave was training for a marathon and one of his favorite pastimes was night-riding Slickrock—a sure sign of water (or rocks) on the brain.

Kristy—Had dragged her along on several rigorous hikes over the years including a recent trek up Mount Olympus, after which she did not speak to me for quite some time. The West Rim was to be her first backpacking trip. Our friendship was at stake.

Mike—Volleyball buddy. Known to hit on random women in Taco Bell. No accounting for taste (regarding the restaurant *and* the women in question). Did Glacier National Park with him the summer prior; claimed a knee injury the day before a 20-mile hike. Instead spent the day hitting on women in the park.

### **Flake Number One Revealed**

Upon arriving in Zion, we checked on weather conditions and obtained our backcountry permit and campsite assignment from the Visitor's Center. We then grabbed some dinner and set up camp outside of Zion overlooking the Virgin River. That night, we watched the sun bleed into the crimson cliffs. I drifted to sleep watching lavender stars paint the sky, with no sign of either variety of flakes on the horizon for the next day.

We decided to drop Dave's SUV at the Grotto Picnic Area in the park and then shuttle up Kolob Canyon in Mike's vehicle and begin at Lava Point. When hiked north to south, the West Rim trail gains 1,265 feet in elevation and loses 4,825 feet. The plan was to backpack 6.8 miles from Lava Point to our campsite, spend the night, and then hike the remaining 7.4 miles to the floor of Zion Canyon. At least that was the plan.

Enter: morning. And Mike the flake. Shortly after breakfast, he announced he was not coming because he felt unprepared for adverse conditions. We had learned at the Visitor's Center that it would probably rain or snow on the rim that night—a precaution I had given them prior to the

trip. It was, after all, late-November, and the peak season for doing the West Rim is May – October. And so the first flake materialized.

Mike reluctantly agreed to shuttle us into the park to drop off Dave's vehicle at the Grotto Picnic Area and we then followed Kolob Terrace Road to Lava Point. Beginning at the town of Virgin, 15 miles west of the South Entrance, the road climbs north into Kolob Canyon past jutting rocks, towering cliffs, and high plateaus, gaining 4,400 feet in elevation over 16 miles. The road winds past the Guardian Angel Peaks and eventually ends up at Lava Point, a fire lookout station at 7,900 feet.

It was noon when Mike finally dropped us off at the Lava Point trailhead and we were behind schedule by several hours. I surveyed my fellow backpackers. Dave, the king of supplements, downed his Blue Ox and graciously gave me a swig as he expounded upon the benefits of energy drinks. Kristy was nervous, yet eager. I inwardly chuckled as she strapped on my old Lowe backpack, its colors an obnoxious pink and teal medley. It was very *en vogue* in the early '90s when I bought it. Really.

### **Storming Horse Pasture Plateau at Lightning Speed**

The road leading up to the trailhead was closed because of snow so we hiked an additional 1.3 miles until we reached the West Rim marker. Once on the trail, we quickly passed a junction with the Wildcat Canyon Connector Trail. We soon found ourselves atop Horse Pasture Plateau. Over half of the hike is spent atop this finger of land that points toward Angels Landing. The trail often skirted close to the rim and we watched the wilderness unfold in shades of beige, red, brown, orange and yellow.

Blackened hulks of trees littered the plateau, remnants of the wildfire that ravaged the area in 1996. Numerous charred snags attested to frequent lightening strikes in the high country. I looked to the sky. Murky clouds were creeping in and a storm was palpable. For the first time, I made a connection between the weather and our surroundings; a lightening storm seemed inevitable on this plateau.

I was going to discuss my concerns with Dave but he had forged ahead while I hiked with Kristy. I glanced at our virgin backpacker to see if she had drawn any similar conclusions about her surroundings. Nada. She had innocently taken to quoting her favorite Simpson's episodes, and informed me that the show could be seen 14 times a week on television. I figured it was best to keep her distracted by continuing to enlighten me with the inside scoop on Bart and Homer.

Our dramatic views really began as the trail glided up to a high overlook facing westward. The canyons began to gash deeper and deeper. We stopped and gazed at South Guardian Angel keeping watch over Left Fork Canyon. As we continued southward, North Guardian Angel, the fang-shaped crag to the right, appeared in this cut of Zion.

We followed the spine of the park until the trail led us down into Potato Hollow's grassy meadow—the 5.2-mile mark (or 6.7 miles for us). We hiked through this narrow valley, passing an overgrown pond and a spring that fed into an old stock tank. Overgrown grasses, fir and pine sheltered our route. Numerous corpses of trees, scorched silver and black, were strewn around the meadow. New aspens were beginning to repopulate the area around the spring, breathing new life into this sheltered hollow.

### **Flake Number Two Revealed**

Beyond the trail to our right was a campsite, the first of several designated sites along the West Rim. We had been assigned site No. 7 from the Visitor's Center. The ranger had promised me this rooftop view overlooked some of Zion's grandest wonders. I had envisioned we would arrive early in the day, set up camp, and then eat dinner while admiring the rose and purple canyons cast against an autumn sky. But that was prior to the flaky Mike setback. What we got instead was dusk and an introduction to a second kind of flake—snow.

From Potato Hollow the trail turned south and we climbed steadily to regain the ridgetops. We made the final pitch and reached a junction with the Telephone Canyon trail as flurries set in. We needed to find our site, and we needed to find it fast. We took the right fork of the trail and were relieved to see a campsite marker in the distance. We were finally at lucky No. 7...or not. As we drew closer, we discovered it was No. 6.; we had somehow missed our assigned campsite. We took one look at the sky and figured No. 6 was lucky enough for us. We quickly pitched our tents and dove in just as the snowstorm started pelting us.

Kristy felt ill but was still in good spirits. After dinner, I planned to share insights from my Zion guidebook with her. What I read did little to foster enthusiasm. As it turned out, my fears were confirmed: we were camped in an area that was notorious for getting struck by lightning during storms. In 1980, a lightning-caused fire blitzed the area, opening up westward views of Greatheart Mesa. A stellar view did not comfort me in the least, especially if we wouldn't survive the night to enjoy it.

Kristy must have sensed my uneasiness. "So, what're you reading?" she inquired. "Oh, nothing of major interest," I casually replied. No sense in scaring the babe in the woods. If I thought she was mad at me for dragging her up Mount Olympus, getting struck by lightning would amount to a lifetime of the silent treatment.

Dave paid us a visit and I laughed as we jammed his 6'1 frame into our two-person tent, along with our two bulking backpacks. Mr. Supplements had a contraband cure for Kristy's ailments—black market Canadian painkillers—and Kristy gratefully downed them. She then curled up in her sleeping bag so we had a wide-angle view of her backside, mumbled that she just couldn't find a sociable position, and then she was out like a light. Dave and I kicked back and listened to the sky's eruption continue unabated around us for a couple of hours before calling it a night.

I awoke to a flash of lightening at 2:30 a.m., which even roused Kristy from her drug-induced slumber. We listened to the constant hiss and flutter of the wind and snow on the tent. We

timed the thunder and lightening in the distance. The strikes started minutes apart and slowly crept closer until the increments were a matter of mere seconds. We found ourselves no longer witnessing the storm from the sidelines, but a part of the perilous action.

I instructed Kristy to discard of any metal she may have had in her pack and peered outside. Herds of sinister clouds raced in the sky, imprinting the landscape with a shifting matrix of blinding snow. The only reprieves from the fusillade of snow whirling around were the colossal thunderheads that illuminated the heavens with surreal bursts of gold and blue lightening. Despite the drum roll that was pounding in my chest, I had to admit that the storm had a cold, phantasmal beauty.

After what seemed like an eternity, the lightning inched away. Kristy drifted back to a restless slumber, constantly shifting and moaning. I poked her every few minutes to quiet her down, while also whacking the heavy snow off the tent. Suffice it to say, I didn't sleep a wink the rest of the night.

### **A New Glimpse at Zion**

By 5 a.m., the storm had subsided, leaving only light flurries. A foot of fresh snow was heaped on the plateau, and we were relieved to discover we could still decipher the trail. We backtracked to the Telephone Canyon junction and opted to take the Telephone Canyon trail instead of the Rim Route as originally intended. The latter of the two would have been ideal for a clear day and offers the best views from atop the rim. But visibility was nil at that point and our primary concern was getting down the mountain. And so we chose the shorter descent, which eventually joined the Rim Route at West Rim Spring Junction.

Dave assumed the role of pathfinder. We sandwiched Kristy between the two of us. Despite a thorny initiation into backpacking, she was in great spirits and relished in the beauty of the snow. And best of all, she was still speaking to me. Who would've thought that climbing Mount Olympus would be more traumatic than almost getting blasted by lightning in the middle of nowhere? I had underestimated the dear girl and Mr. Rocks-on-the-brain.

It snowed lightly as we shot down narrow Telephone Canyon. The snow pampered our every step and the surrounding monoliths looked like they had been embedded with millions of glimmering crystal deposits. We finally reached the West Rim Spring, where a slow flow of water seeped from the ground to feed an algae-choked pool. Shrieking birds swirled like snowflakes past the fingertips of the quaking aspens and Arizona cypresses that sheltered the spring.

From here, the main trail began its descent, traversing a sheer wall of sandstone. Our views opened northward to Mystery Canyon. Morning's white beams streamed upon the pure snow that blanketed the canyon's tall pillars. We wound through a lush gulch of Douglas fir and spruce underlain by bigtooth maple and Gambel oak. Their branches drooped by the weight of the snow, bowing in reverence to the storm that had ruled its environs.

We continued our steady descent around the base of Mount Majestic, bottomed out at a bridge over a side canyon and then began a steady climb. As we neared the top of the grade, we were greeted with a view of the Mountain of Mystery, Great White Throne and the Red Arch Mountains. The route turned slick when we reached a passage of naked bedrock. We methodically eased by the cairns, fluidly shifting weight between our feet, calmly studying the route's curves and bulges.

We soon began the descent to the base of Angels Landing where it reaches a trail junction at Scout Overlook. When it came into full view, we stopped, gawked and succumbed to our tourist instincts by taking pictures. Like a hooded monk with a pure, white cloak, Angels Landing presided over the valley. The sculptured textures of its knife-edge ridge were sheer brilliance in the morning light.

And at this epiphanous moment atop the world (after realizing I was not going to die), it hit me—the West Rim trail had introduced me to a new Zion. Prior to my backcountry adventure, the park had conjured up many defining images: it was a day hike down a narrow canyon, a thrilling scramble up the precipitous cliffs of Angels Landing, and the quiet appreciation of sunset over majestic peaks.

But my Zion was now a collage of images and secrets veiled in deep canyons and high-forested plateaus. Where sheer rock buttresses seamed with snow pressed in from both sides, rising like the shoulders of a malevolent god. Where even the air had a shimmering, crystalline quality and distant peaks seemed close enough to touch.

Not bad for a flaky trip.