

C2C Trail Notes

Mike Weinberg * Friday, April 26, 2013

Logistics / Anxiety

I arrived at the downtown Palm Springs Motel 6 www.motel6.com, (about a mile from the trailhead) in the early afternoon of Thursday, April 25 and managed to take a nap.

In the early evening, I went to dinner at Native Foods www.nativefoods.com, a long-established vegan restaurant that was recently corporatized and is expanding throughout the U.S.

After returning to the motel, I was unable to sleep. I felt uncommonly anxious about what I was about to attempt and all the variables to consider.

First was my ability to hike 30 miles with 10000 ft gain/loss. Second was the weather. I had already postponed the trip because the previous day's forecast had predicted rain and snow flurries. Third was the anxiety of being alone in the dark for the first 5 hours.

I slept only about 2 hours before my 11:45 pm wakeup call, but I was eager to get on the trail in the hopes that my anxiety would subside. I dressed, downed a cup of sludgie (thick fruit-veg smoothie) mixed with oatmeal and raisins, and readied my gear. At 12:45 am, I drove to the Art Museum to begin my trek about 1 am.



Only 2 hours sleep but eager to hit the trail.

Gear

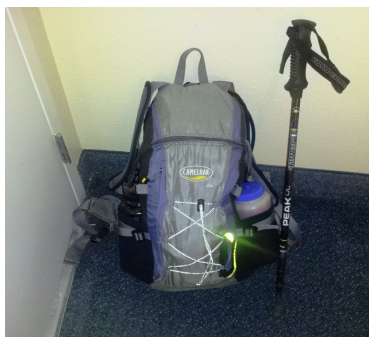
To some it's overkill, but I carry enough gear to spend the night if necessary due to injury or inability to continue. As I type this, 3 unprepared hikers were just rescued after three frigid nights on Mt. San Geronio, which is near Palm Springs.

Daypack Contents (~20 lbs)

- 3-liter water bladder with mouth tube
- 1-liter water bottle
- 1-liter sludgie bottle (very thick mixed fruit/veggie/flax smoothie)
- Lightly-salted whole wheat crackers, walnut-almond-raisin mix, sun-dried tomatoes
- Rain jacket & pants
- Thermal tops & bottoms
- Fleece head-face covering
- Extra socks & underwear
- Extensive First Aid kit (since I took a Wilderness First Responder course)
- Space blanket for emergency shelter

SPF Protective Clothing

- Long-sleeve shirt
- Pants with zip-off legs to convert to shorts
- Brimmed hat with wraparound neck cover
- Touchscreen-capable gloves
- Lightweight, lowcut trail shoes & quick-dry socks
- Homemade garters to keep debris out of shoes



Miscellaneous

- One carbon-fiber trekking pole
- Smartphone with apps (camera, maps, GPS, audiobooks, etc.), earbuds, 2 extra batteries
- Wag bag kit (plastic bag with a special powder that gels into a solid when wet, cat-litter deodorizer to mask smells, toilet paper, wetwipes) for "Leave No Trace" outings.

Multipocketed Vest

So "toys" and necessities are in easy reach.

- Stick sunscreen, lip balm
- Prescription glasses with slip-over shades
- Sweatband to wear under hat
- Navigational compass with inclinometer
- Mini-mechanical pencil, paper
- Multitool (knife, screwdriver, saw, etc.)
- Monocular for spotting trail signs/wildlife
- Mechanical altimeter for elevation readings.
- Ultralight headlamp, extra button batteries
- Multigadget (thermometer, mini-compass, light, magnifier, mirror, whistle)

False Trails

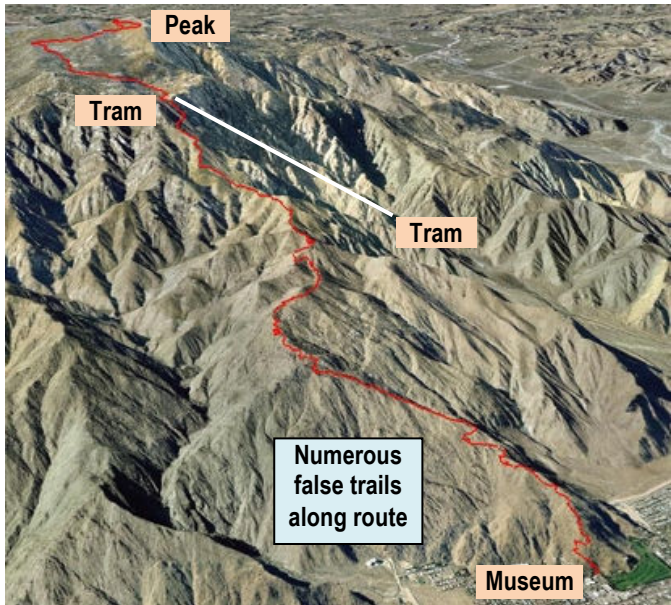
I started just about 1 am as planned, but I'd ascended only a few hundred feet before I lost the trail the first time.

The full moon cast deceptive shadows and even with my headlamp I wasn't always able to spot the white-painted dots that periodically marked the trail. There were so many false trails left by people who had taken alternate routes, that it wasn't always clear which was the main trail.

At one fork, I alternately hiked either direction for a few hundred feet but each seemed to fade out with no confirming white dot to lead me on. I was a bit paranoid about taking a trail that led me away from my goal. After consulting my smartphone GPS app, I was able to rejoin the main trail.

Staying on track isn't easy on this trail. On my October 2011 Palm-to-Pines group hike, our leader, who had hiked Skyline over 100 times, lost the trail in the dark and even in the light.

The worst part is that each time I lost the trail wasted precious minutes, which added to my anxiety about meeting my time goals. And this happened several times along the route.

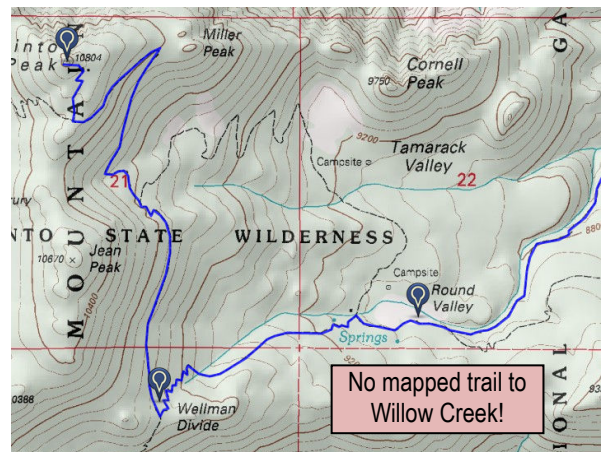


On a solo hike back in April 2011 in the early-morning daylight, I had come to a huge rock pile that marked a trail junction. I saw white dots farther along on the left fork and followed them. It seemed a bit strange that my path was going down, but I thought it would turn up again. After a few hundred yards, I met a couple coming towards me. They said they had started at the alternate Ramon Rd. trailhead, and I was heading back down to the desert floor. So I returned to the junction and took the right fork with its white dots instead. (I didn't make the same mistake this time!)

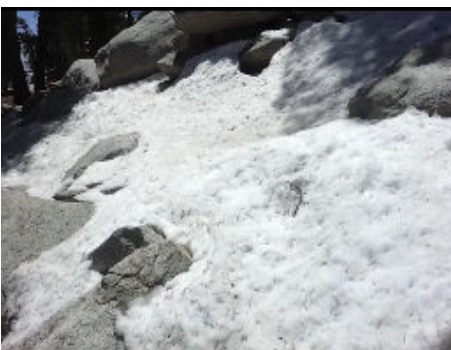
Unmapped Trails

About 2 miles past the tram on my way to the peak, I came upon a set of trail signs that I didn't remember from my 2011 backpack trip and which weren't marked on the map. There were three possible paths, two in either direction for a "Round Valley Loop" and one to Willow Creek. I wasn't sure which trail led to the peak. Being a weekday, there were no rangers and few hikers on the mountain yet, so I had no one to ask.

Frustratingly, my GPS showed me *on the desert floor* (explained later). I agonized and went a hundred yards in each direction to see if anything looked promising—it didn't. But I finally chose the rightmost fork and luckily ended up at the Round Valley water spigot that I remembered from my backpack trip. More time wasted!



Snow-Covered Trails



Closer to the peak, one couple (in t-shirts and shorts!) who had started at the tram turned back because they couldn't find the trail through the patches of hard-packed snow. I began to worry that my quest for the peak would be blocked. I didn't need to put on my microspikes for traction, but I'd sometimes sink in about mid-calf. So I would go around the patches, which is how I lost the trail the first time. Fortunately, another hiker's voice guided me back. The snow was mostly in the shaded areas, and the final 1.5 miles or so to the peak had a dry trail.

However, on returning from the peak, I again lost the trail and was somehow headed *down* the mountain. So I started back up and heard voices. A young couple was coming from the opposite direction and we spoke briefly. After we parted, I regretted not asking where they had started from and began to

worry that I might be on the trail to Idyllwild, which went down the *opposite* side of the mountain. Again my GPS put me on the desert floor. Not sure what to do and feeling exquisitely anxious I continued on, hoping I'd run into someone. To my great relief, I came to a rock I had rested on at which I had accidentally dropped a piece of sun-dried tomato—a welcome sight!

Trail Tips

- If you know you'll be returning on the same trail, look back occasionally to see what it looks like in reverse. Make note of memorable or unusual trees/rocks/landmarks, etc. You might even want to take photos. (On my next outing, I may mark little dots on rocks along the return trail with chalk or maybe arrange some twigs or make marks in the dirt.)
- When in doubt at a fork, favor the trail going in your general direction and elevation. For example, if you're heading up, take the fork that goes up. Be aware that "up" trails may dip, but if they keep going down, you're probably going down.
- If you decide to walk around snow patches that cover the trail, don't just head off along the path of least resistance. Follow the perimeter of the snow patch until you see the trail emerging. Since trails are generally worn a bit lower than the surrounding terrain, the snow tends to collect in them. Water melting from the snow patch may actually be the trail.
- Look for cairns (typically 3 rocks stacked in a pyramid) marking the trail. But be aware that they are sometimes hard to interpret (do I go right, left, straight?). Sometimes cairn builders think they're on the correct trail and later realize they're not but fail to return to dismantle the misleading cairn. Sometimes hikers find alternate routes and set up competing cairns.

Map App

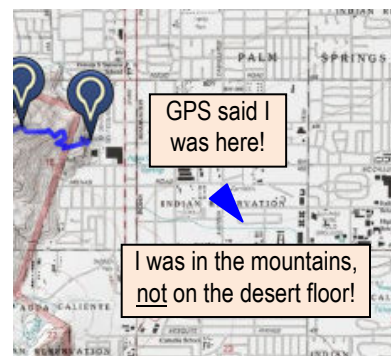
I used a trail mapping program from www.trimbleoutdoors.com to create a customized map (see last page) of my route. In satellite view, I can zoom in so closely that I'm able to trace over the actual trail point-by-point. The app calculates the mileage and elevation gain/loss. On the steeper slopes with dense trees near the tram, I had to guesstimate the trail and wasn't able to plot all the switchbacks. So the app-calculated mileage was a bit less than actual mileage.



The really cool thing is that Trimble Outdoors includes an app that syncs with my Samsung Android smartphone, so I have my custom map on my phone. And using the GPS function (which works in areas that lack cell or WiFi data signals), I'm able to see where I'm at on the trail. But the GPS has limitations as you'll read shortly. (A big plus on extended trips is that Samsung smartphone batteries can be swapped, and I carry 2 extra batteries.)

GPS Woes

When I lost the trail in the dark at lower elevations, GPS gave me fairly accurate locations and allowed me to reconnect with the trail. But as I got closer to the mountain range and the trees thickened, the GPS kept showing me on the desert floor, which was especially frustrating when I was trying to find the trail. Later I learned that GPS technology requires line-of-site access to FOUR satellites to give an accurate reading. Unfortunately, mountains, trees, and buildings can all interfere with GPS signals.



Rescue Boxes

This article describes the contents of the two Rescue Boxes I encountered.

Emergency boxes installed to aid lost hikers on Mt. San Jacinto, The Press Enterprise, Sep 19, 2010

<http://www.pe.com/local-news/riverside-county/hemet/hemet-headlines-index/20100920-emergency-boxes-installed-to-aid-lost-hikers-on-mt.-san-jacinto.ece?ssimg=309011>

"Beneath the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway lies one of the toughest trails in Southern California. Now, Skyline Trail hikers who find themselves in trouble will see a little help along the way. The Palm Springs Mounted Police Search and Rescue Team installed hiking rescue boxes last week at two elevations, 2,500 and 5,000 feet, along the trail. The stainless-steel boxes contain water, Gatorade, a flashlight, whistle, emergency blanket, umbrella and cell phone. Instructions direct hikers how to respond to heat exhaustion or hypothermia. The boxes come with reflective markers and a solar-powered beacon that make hikers visible at night, reserve officer Doug Stevens said. The idea to install emergency boxes was triggered by the deaths of four hikers last year, Stevens said. Since then, the volunteer search team has been called to rescue six hikers but none have been fatalities...."



Feeding the Beast

After completing the C2C and relaxing in the motel jacuzzi, I surprisingly didn't feel like napping, but was sort of buzzing with tired energy. Through a phone app called www.happycow.net, I found a fantastic organic veg-friendly restaurant right across the street call Palm Greens www.palmgreenscafe.com.

I walked over and after browsing their menu, I felt like I'd hit the vegan jackpot. I wolfed down a deliciously-adorned flax-hemp burger plate, a heavenly date-banana-almond milk smoothie, and a huge portion of apple cobbler with vanilla-coconut ice cream for dessert. I regret not snapping photos.

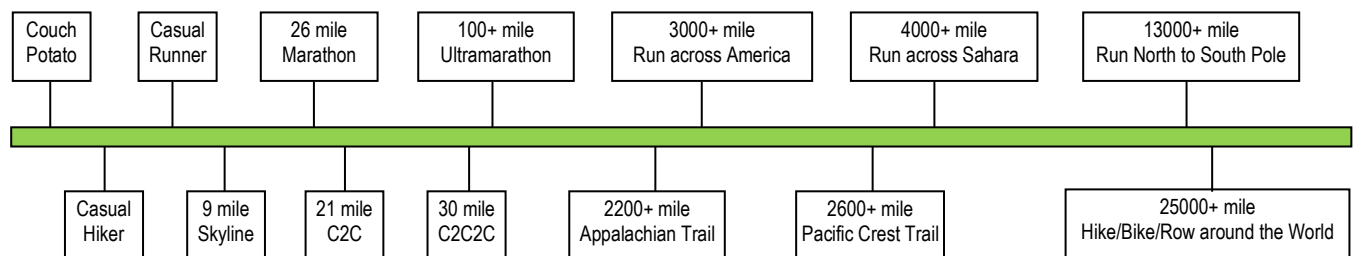
After a restful night's sleep, and only slightly sore legs, I scampered back to Palm Greens at 7:30 am the next morning and had TWO beautiful vegan breakfasts—french toast with butter and maple syrup followed by tofu scramble with greens & toast. This time I took photos!



It's All a Continuum

Most of my immediate friends and family think I'm nuts for even wanting to take on endurance challenges, but most are impressed nevertheless. In turn, I'm in awe of super hikers who can do a C2C in 7.5 hours (literally half the 15 hours it took me) and the full C2C2C in just over 12 hours. But any person's performance is relative.

The following continuum is just a sampling of the tremendous feats humans have performed, but it doesn't account for time or speed or age, like the 100-year old vegetarian marathon runner! And a 3-hour marathon time certainly requires much better conditioning than a 15-hour C2C. This continuum also omits triathletes, mountain climbers, and other extreme athletes.



Wherever one is at on the continuum, there will always be someone who is younger or older or better or faster or slower. Unless you're willing to devote your life to breaking or setting records, the only reasonable recourse for the average person is to set goals, compete with yourself, and achieve personal bests that make you proud.

Final Thoughts

I knew that my original C2C2C goal was in jeopardy when it took me 12 hours instead of 10 to reach the peak. Besides time lost finding trails, I was moving noticeably slower as time went on. Although I was able to jog, as planned, on most of the downhill sections, it was a very slow jog. When I reached the tram station about 4 pm, my legs and body were spent, although I felt surprisingly strong in some ways.

Sometimes I fantasize that I could have stumbled my way back down the remaining 9 miles to the museum, but that would have been foolhardy at best. In my depleted condition, not only would 5+ more hours of hiking put me at risk of cramping up or taking a misstep and a spill on the steep downhills, it would have meant descending the last few hours in the dark.

Now that I've reconciled myself to the facts that I didn't achieve a C2C2C, that others older and younger have gone farther and faster, that I have limits to how hard and long I want to train, I'm content that I made a plan, followed through, and reached a personal milestone.

C2C / Mt. San Jacinto Links

- C2C Hiking Guide: <http://www.mtsanjacinto.info/skyline/mainmenu.html>
- Mount San Jacinto State Park: http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=636
- Weather: <http://www.weather.com/weather/5-day/Mount+San+Jacinto+State+Park+CA+CASPNANJAN:13:US>
- Tram: <http://www.pstramway.com/index.html>