

'Alpine Camp at Bernice Lake, Yosemite',

By: Tatiana V.

I am taking my usual city walk in Old Pasadena to meet a friend for dinner. I pass the Playhouse, turn from El Molino to Green Street, pass Jacob Maerce, and finally turn near the historic building of Mark Piscitelli. Walks are hard to find in a city of drivers so I treasure them tremendously. This time, however, my mind is in a totally different place. This is just a few days after I've come back from the alpine camp at Bernice Lake in Yosemite.

"How was your trip? I want to hear all about it!" my friend greets me.

"It's hard to be back to the city after the trip. I wish I could stay there for a month. Imagine, I've been asked to write a short story about it," I reply after a pause.

My friend laughs, "I wonder why you are writing the story? As far as I know you were the only non-English speaker on the trip."

Well, interesting question—I guess it could be several reasons.

I joined the Sierra Club last year when my hiking friends moved out of the state and I wanted to stay connected to local hiking and to be surrounded by similarly minded people. The Sierra Club seemed perfect for that. Growing up in a relatively flat city, I always had a passion for mountains. I am a former downhill skier and remember from that time a special rejuvenation every time I returned from a long time training in the mountains.

I came across the Sierra Club mule pack trips several months ago and thought that the setting could be exactly what I was recently looking for—more time in the mountains, staying at a high elevation removed from all distractions—from driving, talking, cell phones, the usual daily trappings. The mule pack trips fill up at the beginning of the year, but I could not decide that early since I traditionally have my summer vacation in British Columbia.

This year, upon my return from BC, I realized that I needed something else - I had to have my "maintenance time" and the only place I could think of was in the mountains, where I could have time with myself and nature. So when an opening for Bernice was announced, I jumped right in and was accepted to the trip with Sandy and Peter as leaders.

As I write my short story I realize I received all I was looking for and much more and in a totally different way than my initial vision.

My Bernice Lake journey started a month before our departure when I first received prep materials for the trip. The list had two parts: necessary equipment and recommended training for high altitude. Since my last backpacking trip at Havasupai was six plus years ago, I had to get several things to be ready for Bernice. I headed to REI.

The recommendations also said that in the month before the trip I had to start acclimatizing to high elevations with weekly trips to 10,000 ft. altitude—at least. "Really?" I thought. "I am a former skier, still ski at high altitudes. It should not be a problem...though getting there could be a challenge...I usually have a lift."

Taking the part of "getting there" seriously, I went to Baldy once (I had to balance between REI, Baldy and my busy life). But looking back I realized that was the key recommendation. Even now as I write the story, I debate whether I should go to Baldy to prepare for my future trips, to be comparable to everyone in our group.

I did not know anyone in the group. I only exchanged a few e-mails with Sandy, but I was lucky to find a carpool. Finally, with bags zipped, weighed, everything under 40 pounds as required, I was ready to go.

Driving with Tim to Tuolumne base camp was a huge opportunity to learn more about what to expect. He is a frequent hiker there and our time on the road was filled with wonderful stories about Yosemite and the alpine camps.

We met the rest of the hikers at Tuolumne backpackers' campground before the morning hike of 11 miles and 2600' gain to Bernice. Melissa was the first person we saw. She rode the bus from Mammoth. I now smile when I remember the bright green hat she wore at the camp and my first impressions of her. After many adventures in the ensuing week at Bernice, I discovered Melissa's previous climbing history. I hope that one day a book will be written about her and Yosemite 1980s climbing history—I definitely will be a dedicated reader.

With Sandy and Peter, Melissa, Tim, Lori, Steve, Wanda, and Sharon, there were nine in the group. After the mules were packed the next morning, we would hike over two passes, to Bernice Lake at almost 11,000 feet. Even at the base camp, I felt pretty removed from civilization, my head occupied with two thoughts: how quickly I can pack my tent tomorrow morning and the hope that I would make the 11,000 feet without causing a significant delay to these wonderful and strong people. Of course, in between these thoughts, I also realized that I was surrounded by a different crowd, by stories around the fire of Yosemite climbing history, and, above, a starry sky—I was really where I wanted to be.

Next morning, a quick wake up, tent down, everything repacked, my bag weight and size as expected, bear canister closed and packed. We made it in time to the mule pack station. With seven of us together at the station parking lot, Sandy and Peter gave the last instructions before the hike to the camp. It was the usual stuff: enough water for a day, enough food, breathe deeply, know your limits, it is important to be at the camp before the mules. Looking at these strong experienced people, I was focused on the one point only, just make the 11,000 feet, you can do it! You can do it! Wanda made coffee in the parking lot.

The way there was long and not the easiest (for me at least). It was also beautiful and eye opening, there was time to get to know each other, to story tell, time with silence and observations, time to pass the small and big lakes, to lose and gain elevation.

No, we did not make it there before the mules. Only Sandy did. We came 3 hours later with 9 hours total of hiking. I was sure Peter would make it in half the time and maybe some of the others too, but for me on the last switch back to Bernice it was one step after another just to make it. That was the time when I realized that I should have done so much more training before the trip instead of all that other prep. But in the end, I did come on this trip to reconsider what was important and what was not, so, in some sense, it was "mission accomplished."

We set up camp—a camp of nine. We were the only people at the lake for the whole week, carefully protecting the lake's beauty, discovering it and testing ourselves (at least I did) for many challenges in hikes and climbs around the area. The next day was an easy one in order to recover from the initial hike and to prepare for the next day. Even with an easy day, I realized that it was not and will not be an easy relaxing time on this mule pack trip. The mule pack, at least this one, seemed like a glowing advertisement for the vivid reality of the scrambling and climbing in the most beautiful setting, with amazing people and rich history. I couldn't have dreamed of it.

The next day there were two groups of hikes and climbs: Mt Florence and Florence Lake. Sandy mentioned that if anyone wanted to try the peak they were welcome to talk to her or Peter, though none seemed qualified. We all went for a long hike to the lake to enjoy the beauty of the green trees and the many surrounding lakes. We swam and did “class 2 scrambling” over granite rock formation on the way. I remembered right away that I was afraid of open spaces in the mountains—the fear is not present when I’m on my skis, but happens in the open mountains. Thanks Wanda (again and again) for the hand this day.

The next day was full of rest and recovery. I had a chance to discover the areas around the lake, its waterfalls and their surrounding splashes of flowers which caught me by surprise in the gray granite of Yosemite. It was a picture-taking day though on all other hikes I take them rarely, preferring instead to observe with no camera in hand. It was a day when I discovered the fatty animal—the marmot—who would let me come close and watch him “observing the nature and me” moments. It was a day with no plans and slow time.

Tim and Melissa climbed an unnamed peak. That could be a story by itself which I hope will be written by them.

The following day was my first peak climb and I could not have done it without Sandy and Peter. Before we started the climb, I was aware of my fear of high elevation and open spaces. Though I did not overcome them, climbing was too appealing to resist. This long climb I did step by step. This was Vogelsang Peak at 11,493’ elevation with a 1,700’ ascent. It now has a special meaning to me. That day was the last of camping at Bernice.

We climbed out the next day, having packed in the morning and making it to the meadow before the mules this time.

Did we become different or was it just the climb down effect?

We met Cowboy in the middle of a switch back. He was on a horse and had two mules. Sandy said that we needed 5 mules for our gear at Bernice, and Cowboy said, with a strong voice, that he had five. We all counted two mules, but decided that Cowboy definitely knew better.

We took a different route this time and went cross-country through Yosemite’s flower field for a good portion of the trip. And when Sandy said that didn’t we think that it was much better than on a dusty easy little trail, I completely agreed, despite my knees and tiredness. I knew that in this beauty, I can meet the challenges one step at a time.

On the way back with Tim's heroic driving, the whole trip seemed like a dream, unexpected. I overcame challenges, climbed my first peak, and found the dream to go and climb with an experienced team of people and spend time with myself. When you climb, they say, in each step you have to be totally present.

With dinner over, my story is partially written in my head though I do not know if I am the right person to write it, but why not try anyway.

I would like to go back soon. I know that I need this “high maintenance time” back in my life regularly. And Yosemite, I hear, is beautiful in the fall.