

Man comes, goes, but mountains stay

My son and I climbed La Plata Peak last week. If you ever need a reminder of the extraordinary place we live, take two mountains and call me in the morning. There is nothing like the experience of bagging a fourteener. There is no better place to do it than Colorado.

We came to Colorado from New England in 1994. My son was 6, my daughter 4. None of us knew what a fourteener was, nor did we correctly pronounce “Buena Vista” or “coyote”. But under the theory of “bloom where you’re planted”, we hoped we’d acclimate and do all the things Coloradans do. Like hike up those really, really big hills.

It’s a warm Wednesday evening. My son and I are heading west on Highway 82, driving toward the trailhead to bed down for the night. Tempted as I am to write something about the joy of camping in the mountains, journalistic integrity requires I admit to being a bed and breakfast kind of guy. We find our lodge and check in.

Two nectar feeders frame the front door. Hummingbirds swarm around them in the cool evening air, their necks ablaze with scarlet fire. We stand not three feet away and watch them for a while. I turn in, but Max finds the hot tub and watches “the most amazing sky you’ll ever see, Dad”. He’s probably right.

We get up at dawn and drive to the trailhead. We find the bridge across South Fork Creek and begin the ascent.

It’s so quiet in the mountains. Quiet, and unbearably beautiful.

At 11,000 feet, La Plata Gulch opens out before us. The trail beckons us into a valley of luminous wonder, something I’d swear was fake if it didn’t make me feel so alive.

At 13,000 feet, I know what’s coming. I’ve been climbing for hours, the air is getting thinner, the mountain steeper. It’s the dreaded Triple Whammy of Fourteener Bagging: Aptitude, Altitude, and Attitude. My own personal Cerberus, guarding the entrance to the summit.

I stop in a desperate attempt to wring a few more oxygen molecules from the parched rag of atmosphere, and look up the trail to see my son. There’s no way I’m



OPINION

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going to wimp out in front of him, so I resume a slow, steady pace. At 14,000 feet, the summit is within reach.

It takes me about 30 minutes to gain the last 300 feet. Max is waiting on top to greet me. We high five, and munch a traditional victory bar. We’re alone at the summit, so we set the timer on the digital camera and preserve the moment that way.

Max checks his GPS, I turn on my cell phone. Even at 14,300 feet I have coverage. What a world. Yes,

we pack in technology with no apology. Nor do I begrudge the SUVs and ATVs that are frequent sightings on our mountain journeys. Like the digital camera that holds the pictures I will eventually upload to facebook, they make the mountain experience possible for those who could never have it otherwise.

We rest for about 45 minutes, then begin the climb down.

At 12,000 feet, La Plata Basin stretches out below us. There’s still a lot of snow, but in the perfect summer weather the runoff sings through the gully. We can hear it even this far up.

I watch my son walk on ahead, profiled against the valley below. He seems absurdly youthful, now a young man of 20 but still too young for me to truly grasp. Any more than I can truly grasp the reality of a mountain that was here millions of years before we came and will be here long after we have gone.

There was a time, long ago, when I lived on what I thought was a big hill in New Hampshire. I would walk down to the corner store and back up again, carrying my son on my back. Now my son and I carry backpacks, and he walks ahead of me.

Eventually, I will not be able to accompany him. He will walk on trails where I cannot go. That is as it should be.

But for now, I’ll enjoy the moment. No need to hurry. The mountains won’t care. They’ve got plenty of time.

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