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BASECAMP



GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY: SCORE SUNSET VISTAS LIKE THIS ON A TWO-WEEK THRU-HIKE OF THE SIERRA NEVADA'S 165-MILE TAHOE RIM TRAIL. FOR PERMIT AND RESUPPLY INFO AND TURN-BY-TURN BETA ON ITS BEST WEEKEND SECTION, TURN TO PAGE 17.

PHOTO BY JUSTIN BAILIE / AURORA PHOTOS



PERFECT CIRCLE: SIMPLE LOGISTICS, PROXIMITY TO TRAIL TOWNS, AND RIDGE-TOP VIEWS LIKE THIS, FROM 6,480-FOOT EAGLE ROCK, MAKE THE TAHOE RIM TRAIL A SWEET THRU-HIKE. TARGET AUGUST FOR RELIABLY STELLAR WEATHER.

Above It All

On a thru-hike of the 165-mile Tahoe Rim Trail, two brothers get some perspective—on America's largest alpine lake, and each other. By Charles Bethea



MY YOUNGER BROTHER ROBERT IS THE KIND OF PERSON WHO USES epic as a verb. Bare-chested and howling atop a 10,000-foot peak, cigarette in hand, flask at his lips, wearing what appears to be one of those under-sized swimsuits favored by European men, he'll say, "We just *epiced* that mountain, bro!" And I'll pant, "Yes, brother, we did."

And then we'll go down, and up again, until we can say it once more. Our plan is to do this for almost two weeks, hiking 165 miles around the largest alpine lake in North America, finally returning to where we'd started. At least geographically. Mentally, the goal is to arrive at an entirely new place. Twenty-three years old, recently let go from

his Yosemite food-service job, and one credit shy of a college degree, Rob is at a crossroads. To be more precise, our parents think Rob is at a crossroads, and I've been charged with asking him the tough questions, like: What are you going to do with your life? No easy task considering Rob's holy trinity is composed of Jim Morrison ("I believe in a long, prolonged, derangement of the senses in order to obtain the unknown"), Herman Hesse ("The truth is lived, not taught"), and climber-mystic Dean Potter ("Part of me truly believes I can fly, like somehow my mind can figure it out"). He instinctively trusts people in dark alleyways and camps

in unsavory places, believing that the universe is basically good. This is inspiring, except when we're camping together in unsavory places.

So I hatched a plan for us to hike the Tahoe Rim Trail last August. Truth is, I needed a transformative experience myself. I'd opened my eyes one day in the spring and realized that I'd been asleep for four years in a small desert town. I'd come for a job and stayed for a girl, and now both are long gone. I needed a jolt, some natural beauty, and risk that didn't involve reservation casinos. This big lake, circled by a trail high above towns full of potential, giant burritos, and the occasional beer, looked like the ticket. Logistics would

be easy, costs minimal, and the fresh air, cold water, and chance to play big brother refreshing. One thing I didn't foresee: Rob hiking in a speedo. Or that he'd bring one for me.

WHEN WALKING A CIRCLE, YOU CAN start anywhere. We choose Lower Echo Lake trailhead, about 25 miles south of Tahoe City, California. It begins an extraordinary stretch of trail through the Desolation Wilderness; it seemed smart to hit some of the best scenery right off the bat, when our city legs will need the inspiration. In the parking lot, just before setting out, I rummage through Rob's overstuffed pack, pulling out excess gear—a shamanic woolen vest,

PHOTO BY JUSTIN BAILE / AURORA PHOTOS

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prayer beads, and mutton-chop comb, to name a few—and putting stuff back in the car. As a former Appalachian Trail thru-hiker (and Rob's older, seemingly wiser, brother by four years), I have no qualms about preemptively lightening his load. But he stops me when I fish out two shiny pieces of fabric.

"You take the Silver Surfer," Rob says. "The Secret Garden"—pointing now to a pair of briefs with a



synthetic fig leaf in front—"is mine."

These spare garments, he explains, are "Speedinis," and leaving them in the car is not an option. Recently, the jungle-patterned Secret Garden has been a boon to his love life.

"It's also the best way to prevent chafing," he says. "Chafing is my chief concern." Huh. Never mind the fact that 20-mile stretches of trail are bone dry by early August—this is late August—and we have no sunblock.

Our first steps trace Lower Echo Lake, around granite boulders, pine trees, and cabins. We're rushing. As kids, we raced through the woods of Georgia and North Carolina this way. We hike single file, side-by-side, spread slightly apart. We sing, talk, and rap. We walk silently, then discuss silence. Through Sierra larkspur and western columbine and the rest of Haypress Meadows' wildflowers, at 8,400 feet, we stride by the cauldron of Lake Aloha with its Prius-size granite rocks, below 10,000-foot Pyramid Peak, to Mosquito Pass, blessedly bug-free in late summer. All told, we cover 12 miles through Desolation's alpine grandeur—without dredging up

the old sibling power struggle. It feels like an auspicious beginning.

That night, we lie in a tent we last shared in Montana's Bitterroots, 15 years earlier, on a family trip. Its smell conjures memories of our parents. They had their problems, strange to a child's eyes—their marriage unwound in a cabin in the woods—but they loved camping, and taught us to love it, too. It was assumed, of course, that eventually we would love it together.

DAY TWO BEGINS PROMISINGLY. The bear piñata hung five feet off the ground has not been disturbed, the sky is perfectly blue, and Rob bounces up the rocky trail, talkative and energetic. He's full of fun facts ("Humans have many sphincters, not just one") and earnest questions ("Why didn't Native Americans get Giardia?"). By noon, we reach Dick's Saddle, just below 9,974-foot Dick's Peak. Lakes shimmer to the north. Having finished what the cheery author of our guidebook, Tim Hauserman, claims is the worst of today's climbing, Rob uncorks a bottle of cheap wine—a glass bottle that weighs at least two pounds and somehow snuck past my pack check. Then down we go, past more shimmering lakes where we can see the trout but not catch them. Instead, and repeatedly, Rob calls for a semi-nude



MOUNTAIN MAN-CATION (LEFT TO RIGHT): CROSSING A MEADOW NEAR SHOWERS LAKE; ROB FINDS TRAILSIDE BOULDERING NEXT TO ROUND LAKE; CHARLES ARGUES THE FINER POINTS OF THRU-HIKING LOGISTICS.

PHOTOS BY: FROM LEFT, RYAN HEFFERNAN (3); GOOGLE; GREGG TREINISH; CHARLES BEATHEA; GOOGLE; IMAGE PROVIDERS; USDA; FARM SERVICE AGENCY; 2010 DIGITAL GLOBE; U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY; SID, NOAA; U.S. NAVY; NGA; GEBCO; LAKE TAHOE USGS DATA CLEARINGHOUSE (INSET MAP)

The Tahoe Rim Trail

Hike amid soaring peaks and alpine lakes on this three-day, 32-mile highlights route in the Desolation Wilderness.

Hike it In just two weeks, you can snag a lifetime of Sierra Crest panoramas on the 165-mile Tahoe Rim Trail. Don't have a fortnight? Take three days to knock off the author's favorite section—from Echo Lake to Barker Pass in the Desolation Wilderness. From Lower Echo Lake trailhead (1), hike along the eastern edge of four small lakes dotted with granite islands. At mile 3.1, enter the wilderness (2) where the TRT and the Pacific Crest Trail merge. Stop at the boulder-strewn shores of Lake Aloha (3) for a swim beneath Pyramid Peak and the spired crest of the Crystal Range—watch for marmots near the pile of rocks known as Cracked Crag. Nav tip: At the northern side (4) of Aloha, turn east away from Mosquito Pass toward Glen Alpine; it's a frequently missed turn. In half a mile, reach Heather Lake (5), encircled in flowers and hemlocks. In spring and early summer, an outlet creek creates a snow-tunnel waterfall (6) perfect for showering. At mile nine, camp at Susie Lake (7) with views of 9,974-foot Dick's Peak. Push 1,600 feet to Dick's Pass (8) the next morning, where, after a few hours of climbing, you'll have huge views of a dozen lakes and 130-mile visibility north to 10,462-foot Lassen Peak (on clear days). The next 2.5 miles drop 1,000 feet to Fontanillis Lake (9), where you can rest your dogs in crisp, clear water. Pass Upper and Middle Velma Lake (10), each with nearby camping. Water up here, as the trail enters an eight-mile dry section through firs to Richardson Lake (11), a tree-lined tarn with campsites on the northwest corner. The last 6.7 miles to Barker Pass (12) traverse rolling terrain through dense forest dotted with meadows. End at Barker Pass trailhead.

GET THERE From South Lake Tahoe, take US 50 W 7.6 miles to FR 11N06C. Turn right and drive .1 mile to a slight right onto FR 11N06 (becomes Echo Lakes Rd.) and go .9 mile.

GUIDEBOOK AND MAP *The Tahoe Rim Trail*, by Tim Hauserman (\$13; wildernesspress.com); Tom Harrison Maps *Lake Tahoe Recreation Map* (\$10; tomharrisonmaps.com)

HYDRATION Water gets scarce starting in July. Tank up before these sections: Tahoe City to Mt. Rose Highway (38 miles; consider a cache at Brockway Summit); Kingsbury North to Spooner Lake (20 miles); Spooner Lake to Ophir Creek (18 miles).

PERMITS Required only in the Desolation Wilderness. Half kept for walk-ups (\$5/hiker/night; 530-543-2694; fs.fed.us/R5/LTBMU/). Thru-hikers must pay fees, but aren't subject to site quotas.



Elevation Profile: Echo Lake to Barker Pass



TRAIL TOOLS

View detailed maps and download GPS data for the entire Tahoe Rim Trail at backpacker.com/tahoeimtrail.

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dip-and-celebration. A serious thru-hiker wouldn't be so distracted; I may have lost my edge, but I see an opportunity to casually broach a touchy subject: What should Rob do for a living?

As a trail game, it's more about entertainment than advice.

"What about a storm chaser?"

"I'd rather be a hip-hop jeweler."

"Rodeo clown, maybe?"

"Shaman," he counters. And so on.

That we are discussing Rob's future employment opportunities as we hike, even jokingly, would make our parents happy. They hoped I'd come back with a full report on my brother, focusing on his "aversion to authority" as my dad, another authority-averse man—he once dated his commanding officer's daughter—refers to Rob's particular strain of *jolie de vivre*.

I can see dad's point. During Rob's second and final Yosemite sojourn, he set an Army Ranger on fire (accidentally), sprained his neck wrestling a UFC fighter, broke his only car key opening a beer, nearly slipped off of Half Dome, and spent most of his earnings on 60 seconds of airplane-assisted freefall. All in just a couple of months.

TAKING THE LEAD: THE AUTHOR, WHO THRU-HIKED THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL IN 2003, TREKS ALONG THE SPINE OF CARSON RIDGE, JUST SOUTH OF KINGSBURY, NEVADA.



PHOTO BY RYAN HIEFFERMAN

In summary, he tells me, "I raged."

Perhaps our parents would feel better if they could see Rob now. By 10 p.m., he's unusually quiet. Introspective even. We've walked 15 miles, pushing into darkness to reach camp, paying, as I predicted, for our swim-and-tan at the falls cascading from Fontanillis Lake. My body throbs. We stumble past a snake that turns out to be a bird, and a bear that's really a deer, and arrive at Richardson Lake's still, black, alkaline waters at midnight. "What a day," Rob says as we down two cans of Bush beans—yes, he brought cans, too. "This is the life."

LIKE MOST THRU-HIKERS, WE BOLTED out of the gate too fast, and by day three we're paying for it. My left knee has been hurting, as has Rob's perennially sore left foot. I fashion a mostly ornamental ankle wrap with duct tape and find him a knobby stick, which

cramps his style. We continue on through streams and meadows, limping in lockstep.

At 7,650-foot Barker Pass, 32 miles from Lower Echo Lake, we sit and take stock. We're at a long-trail juncture I know well: hungry to the point of self-abasement, but tiring of our rations. Time to teach my brother how to *yogi*.

Named after the cartoon bear, *yogi* is a trail skill I learned on the AT that involves looking pitiful enough to coax—not beg—food from strangers. Within minutes we've accumulated Advil, Fig Newtons, chocolate squares, and fancy trail mix from four other hikers. The loot satisfies our immediate needs but, unfortunately, seems to confirm Rob's long-standing hunch that money, hence a job, isn't necessary.

A few hours of blitz-hiking later, through donkey ear and explorer's gentian and a red fir forest, a ridge affords our first staggering views of

1,645-foot-deep Lake Tahoe. We make camp on a panoramic knob at mile 38, as the sun falls low and pink over the basin. We eat freeze-dried pad thai and discuss authority figures, which Rob summarily dismisses, except in very special cases: Tim Leary makes the cut. So does the sun. Park rangers don't. An older brother? "On rare occasions, when he is spiritually aware."

TODAY IS MY BROTHER'S 24TH birthday. It's also the beginning of our sixth trail day, around mile 57, and we only have a liter of water left. A paradox of this trail: While water is frequently visible, it's often too far away to drink, especially on the eastern shore, in Nevada. We'll have to hike four miles before getting an opportunity to refill at Watson Lake. "Drink shallowly," Rob advises.

Massive pines surround Watson Lake, and we take a long midmorning break,

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HANG TEN: SHOWERS LAKE IS ONE OF HUNDREDS IN THE DESOLATION WILDERNESS. HERE, THE AUTHOR (WHO HIKED A FIFTH OF THE TRAIL IN A SPEEDO DUBBED THE "SILVER SURFER") TAKES A MIDDAY BREAK.

the sort I rarely allowed as I rushed, like a 21-year-old, from Georgia to Maine. Glutted on water and pepperoni, we fall into a sunny daze. Time has slowed down. Sometime later, idling down the trail, we meet an ultra-marathoner doing the TRT in six days. He doesn't notice our speedinis, or at least doesn't acknowledge them. Rob wonders if he notices anything as he runs.

The speed hiker dashes away, and we decide to do the opposite: slow down even more. Birthday dinner will be in town. On the TRT, amidst some of the wildest beauty in California, once you hit a road you're rarely more than a 10-minute thumb from a beer. Near Brockway Summit at CA 267, 19.2 miles from Tahoe City, we don trousers and get a ride to King's Beach and the

Char-Pit's justly famous burgers.

Despite our short break from the trail, or maybe because of it, we find our rhythm. By mid-afternoon on day seven, we summit Relay Peak, the highpoint of the trail at 10,338 feet—halfway around our particular circle. Just before we reach the top, Rob speeds up, as if he has something to prove. Maybe he does: I've been ahead our entire lives. "We just raged up that peak, bro," he exclaims. It's hard not to agree, peering down at Castle Peak, with Donner Lake pulsing miragelike to the west.

We hit the Mt. Rose Highway at sunset, and Rob suggests hitching, again, to Incline Village, ostensibly for forgotten supplies—which I take to mean sunscreen, though he means whiskey. We won't be able to get back to the trail until morning, but he's sure we'll find nice bedding in town. Two hours later, we're sleeping in a drainage ditch. In

the darkest part of a sparse thicket, we stash our packs and unfurl our bags. I can see condos. Rob falls asleep quickly while, hot and anxious, I swat at ants. Is this the jolt I needed? Here, a difference is quite clear—to him this is freedom; to me it's one step from homeless.

JOHN MUIR, WHO I BELIEVE HITCH-hiked less than us, wrote, "A proper wilderness experience requires at least two weeks of backpacking." That amount of time seems to be the difference between visiting the wilderness and actually living in it, between crapping in the woods and marking one's territory. On day 10, Rob finally asks me for space: "Ten yards, please." Knowing the feeling, I oblige.

A few miles pass, and we arrive at an outcrop with wide views of Emerald Bay. We sit, sharing a Snickers. We have only two days left, and I'm not going to mar them by asking Rob

more career questions. How could I under this sky, with this view? On a long hike, at some point, the outside world recedes; you know it's there, waiting, but you can't muster the energy to care much. It dawns on me that my brother is a born thru-hiker: always inspired by the moment, rarely concerned about the future.

We break camp on the final day, walking by nine in the morning with 17.5 miles to go. Our packs are light, our stench heavy. We cross a meadow to reach Round Lake, where a father and son are fishing. Rob sees a hulking boulder perfect for the climbing shoes and chalk bag he's carried the previous 155 miles. He creates a route and names it "Speedini Squeeze."

We walk through more meadows, up rocky hills, past a sign marking the Pacific Crest Trail, which we decide to hike some future summer.

We eat our last pepperoni and honey sandwiches in a grove of aspens.

I wonder what I will tell my parents. There was a moment earlier in the long walk, when we crossed a road and encountered a weatherworn woman named Rita who was working as a flagger for a highway crew. She warned us about the bears "up there," then went about duct-taping her car trunk shut. Rob stopped to help, then hugged her before heading on. This is what I like most about long hikes: They reveal who we are, and what we need, without our protective walls and routines. He may be authority averse and oddly dressed, but my brother is kind.

This, I realize, is all my parents need to know: Rob is fine. And so am I. 🌊

Writer Charles Bethea brought the Silver Surfer home to Atlanta. Rob got a job teaching English in Japan, where he "rages off-trail with local monks."