

As a part of fulfilling my desire to completely hike all of the CDT (Continental Divide Trail) in my local area, one of the few sections that I had yet to accomplish was the desert section down by the Big Hatchet Mountains. I had left this one to last, as the desert, by nature, is better suited to be accomplished early in the year to hopefully keep the daytime temps within reason. After all, there is a reason why the rattlesnakes love it there... heat! So after watching the weather for a good window of opportunity, Jan 17-21 appeared as a good fit, so off we go. We drove down Sunday afternoon to attempt to access the Southern Terminus (ST) of the CDT. Our experience with that exercise sadly mirrored the experience of others, and that is that the ST was every bit as difficult to find as what we had already read. Therefore, as the time was speeding away, it was more and more important that my ride get turned around and headed back to Glenwood (a 3-hour drive) for work on Monday, so on to Plan B. And that was, that I would begin where the CDT crosses Hwy 81, hike down that section of the trail 12.5 miles, then hike back to the starting point, therefore completing the number of miles that I would have trucked if I could have found the ST. This at least would complete the spirit of the venture if not the actuality of an entire hike of that section.

OK... so far not bad at all... remembering that's what the individual said that fell off the top of the 12-story building as he passed the second floor on his way down. My ride let me off, I shouldered my pack and headed about a mile out into the desert. I set up the portable home, cooked dinner, then allowed the gathering darkness (and the temperature) to chase me into the tent.

First bad sign... the sleeping pad won't hold air... *what?* After some investigation I found a very sharp thorn had pushed up through the ground cloth, into the bottom of the tent, and right into my now very flat, sleeping pad. I have to admit that sleeping for 3-4 nights or more directly on the ground, did not fill me with happy thoughts. But after a lot of searching, I still had no idea where the hole was, as it was so tiny as to be practically invisible, at least not without a tubful of water to catch the air escaping. So I resigned myself to multiple days of sleeping on the ground. ☹

Next morning, breakfast and off we go, which for a mile and a half or so, was easy moving. That is until we crossed a county road and the wonderful little CDT trail marking placards went away (?). Now what? Turned out that the section of the CDT I was entering, if not the entirety of the rest of the trail south, was marked by 4x4 boards stuck into very tall piles of rocks. I suppose that is one of those 'no-brainers', but it took some hiking on, more or less guessing on the direction to realize that these rock piles had become the trail markers. So we trudge on but not on any sort of trail as for this section, until I turned around, was only a smattering of pieces of trail usually right near the trail markers. What the hiking *did* entail, was going up, over and around rocks, sticker bushes and other impediments, and through drainage after drainage ad nauseam. Therefore the hike became a serpentine around all the obstacles with naturally some very slow progress. It is illuminating that on the third day, hiking only on roads, I ended up going almost twice as far in the same amount of time.

Sunset arrived more or less on time, as it has a habit of doing, and it became clear that day one was a wash, and so I began looking for what I hoped was in this area, a rock-free place to put the tent, remembering that there is NO sleeping pad! Never found one. Managed to clear away most of the large rocks as well as I could, and down went the tent. However, sleeping was not without some difficulty, as there always seemed to be another rock where you were attempting to place the durable parts of your body. I returned home with both hips and the bottom of each side of the rib cage bruised from the bed of nails I was sleeping on.

Morning made its reappearance, I breakfasted and on I went. The hiking was quite warm on this day, and around noon I finally reached my turn-around point, as well as one of the few water caches on this section of trail. I re-filled my water bottles, which were near bone dry, rested some, and then headed back for the starting point, this time on the road, not on the trail.

Got on down the road, and was making quite good progress with my sails full, but I was also becoming painfully aware that the sky was giving persistent 'uh oh!' signals. More and more clouds to the northwest, and with rain beginning to make an appearance. Well, it was still a long ways away, but I keep it clearly on my radar, and what my radar eventually said was, "Watch out!" When it began to rain on the mountains just ahead of me, it was obvious that I needed to cut my losses... and quick!

Tent site opportunities were identical to the previous day, except that now I had time stress added to the mix. I quickly kicked the big rocks out of the way, threw down the ground cloth and tent, got it all secured to the ground, and leapt into the tent (with my shoes on... I *NEVER* get into the tent with my shoes on, but this time it was a prudent exception) just as the rain got serious, and I *DO* mean really serious. I have had a whole lot of nights in a tent, and have experienced a considerable amount of weather in said tents, but I never have had an encounter with a weather event such as this. For at least 40-50 minutes I was lying on the floor of the tent, holding down the tent by the top as the wind and rain blasted with a fury, that, as I noted, I have not experienced previously. A few times, I was not sure that I and the tent were not going to go sailing across the desert. Fortunately the stakes held it down, and the water at least remained outside of the tent. However, even when the main blast of the storm moved on to greener pastures, the rain continued to some degree well into nightfall, and since I won't try to cook in the tent, tonight we were fasting. Wonderful.

One time some years back, I made a statement that, I had awoken to light rain, but that was just inside the tent. This morning, with Yogi Berra's noting of 'Déjà vu all over again' in my mind, I was once again awoken to light rain inside the tent. This was due in part to condensation because the tent was closed up because of last night's storm, and also with the added moisture from the storm, the tent had become a miniature rain forest. So what to do; with the knowledge that drying out the tent as wet as it was, was a pipe dream, and any further camping would be on mud, I opted to wimp out, hiked out to Hwy81 and hitched a ride into Hachita, NM (I know that hitchhiking is not exactly held in high esteem nowadays, but hikers doing the long trails do it all the time to resupply, etc. The fact that you are wearing a backpack tends to attract the kinds of folks that you don't mind riding with).

Since Hachita is close to the CDT, they are used to hikers passing through, and as a result I was directed to the one gentleman that dealt with hikers, and he let me overnight in the Community Center, which was certainly a degree better than passing the night on rocks/ground. ☺

Thursday, I called for a ride, and here we are back at the computer, instead of slogging along the trails. I will now have to go back to the desert and finish off the section that I didn't get done, but walking, camping or anything else in the desert is not happy when it is muddy. So we'll look forward to another, drier, day. A saying we had in aviation was that any landing you can walk away from is a good one. I'm thinking that that applies to hiking as well.

A recounting such as that above would give some pause to ask the question, "Why in the world do you do this if it ends up being somewhat akin to an endurance test." A logical question to be sure, but not a complete consideration of the big picture. Which is, that the scenery was spectacular, the exercise worthwhile, and the experience overall, a blessing of the first order. Would I do it again? Unquestionably... just not on that section of trail. ☺