



Ain't No Mountain High Enough

Backpack your way to a place
of spiritual enlightenment

By MATT J. SIMMONS

The sky seems to vibrate behind the snow-clad mountain. The light is simply unreal. Glaring off the face of the massive glacier, it takes on an ethereal glow. The cinder, scrub and tundra all melt into patterns and colours, melt into nothing more than a visual effect playing tricks on my eyes. But at the same time it's all startlingly real—ground I've just walked over, carrying 30 kilograms of everything I need on my back. My shoulders are sore from the weight, my feet tired. But my mind is firing off fireworks and verges on sensory overload. My body's just kicked off a load of adrenaline and serotonin into my bloodstream and I suddenly feel overwhelmingly happy. The absence of sound is so complete I can actually hear my ears ringing. I'm 60-odd kilometres from any car, road, house or shop. This is incredible.

About 50 percent of the world's six billion people live in urban centres, a figure that is going up. While this doesn't necessarily spell disaster for the human race (as purists might argue), it remains a slightly chilling fact. Urban living means reliance on the urban system—on electricity infrastructure, sewage systems, grocery store stocks being replenished and so on.

We're losing touch with the natural world. Instead of living in nature, in constant connection with the ever-changing environment, we now go there . . . on road trips, day-hikes, camping trips and, my personal favourite, multi-day backpacking.

There's so much that makes backpacking a spiritual experience:

being self-sufficient and self-reliant, becoming part of the natural world, adventure and—possibly most importantly—the absence of distraction. Our lives in the city are busy. We work hard and play hard, we have kids and parents and friends, we have hobbies and work to do on the house and we've always got somewhere to go, something to do. It's hard to slow down. Backpacking forces us to slow things down. The satisfaction of a simple life is pretty fulfilling. It's about stripping life back to the basics: walking, drinking water, cooking and eating food, bathing in a stream, feeling dirt under your bare feet . . . these things alone can be enough to make a person happy.

And while your spirit slowly releases its cares and tension, backpacking allows your body to get a pretty decent workout at the same time. True, it can be hard on your body—I came back from my last trip across the desolate volcanic landscape of

B.C.'s Mt. Edziza Provincial Park with raging blisters, bruised shoulders and a hotspot on my back—but my gear was lacking. With proper gear that fits you well, you should be feeling good and fit and getting the types of comments my wife gave me: "You've lost your rolls!" Packing 30 kilograms on your back across a demanding landscape means burning calories at a ridiculous rate and, let's face it, when you have to carry all your food, you eat less.

It may be a moment while resting on a rock, eating some stale trail mix and drinking water, or it may be an incredible sunset or the sight of a vividly coloured glacier-fed lake—whatever it is, whenever it happens, that moment is tantamount to astral projection, transcendental meditation and mental massage all together, with some magic mushrooms chucked in for good measure. Something clicks and everything feels new again. You've walked for 20 kilometres, the wolf you saw a few minutes ago had a curious face when you locked eyes with it and you have a strange rushing sensation. The moment happens and everything feels perfect. This is backpacking for the spirit. **M**

