

Ellis Peak – like being on top of the world



Suzy and Mark take in Lake Tahoe and all the scenery from the false summit of Ellis Peak. Photo Copyright 2013 Carolyn E. Wright

By Kathryn Reed

HOMEWOOD – If you survive the first half hour, the rest of the hike will feel like an average walk in the woods. But there was nothing average about the views.

This is what the six of us discovered earlier this month as we set out to climb the 8,740-foot Ellis Peak on the West Shore. It was the first time any of us had been there.

The total elevation gain is 1,465 feet. A significant amount of it comes right at the start. But the reward is so worth it.

It's like walking into a watercolor painting. A sea of colorful wildflowers covers the expansive meadow – mule's ear, Western blue flax, Indian paintbrush, thistle and other flora no one knew the name of fill the plateau.

To our right is Loon Lake with its island and other points in the Crystal Basin. Granite Chief and Desolation wilderness areas surround us.

We marvel at the ruggedness and rather daunting drop offs. Even from this spot it's a bit like being on top of the world.

But it only gets better.

The trail is well maintained. Much of it is soft dirt. Shade keeps us cool.

In one section trees are covered in moss on all sides so if we were lost, there would be no knowing which direction was north.

Crossing the road that is open to four-wheelers was no big deal. We never saw nor heard any motorized vehicles.

At times Lake Tahoe comes into view. Along the trail it seems so far away.

We scamper up a rock formation we think is the top of Ellis Peak. We eat lunch, take pictures and congratulate ourselves. Then we look to our left and see people on another peak. Oops. Down we go to the real Ellis Peak.

It wasn't that much farther, but pride insisted if we had gotten that far, we were going to make it to our true destination.

In one direction is Lake Tahoe. We are so high that we see behind the basin; the Pine Nut range is in the far distance.

At the base of Ellis is the lake by the same name. From this

perch it looks dark and dank like some backwoods Mississippi swamp.

A structure in the foreground looking out to Lake Tahoe is the top of one of Homewood Mountain Resort's chairlifts. If it were operating, it looks like it would take off substantial time in terms of hiking Ellis Peak.

To avoid the false summit, stay to the right as you near what looks like the peak. We missed the cairns on the way up, but they were clearly there on the way back. The true summit cannot be seen at this point.

The route is about 6.5 miles roundtrip. Just the first part might have some people thinking something less ambitious would be smarter. But the six of us – Sue, Rosemary, Carolyn, Suzy, Mark and I – never thought twice about reaching our destination.

--

Getting there:

From South Lake Tahoe take Highway 89 north. Beyond Homewood and before Sunnyside in Tahoe City will be a sign for Kaspian Campground. Turn left there. The road goes for about 7 miles. (Veer to the left and don't go straight on the dirt road like some people.) At the end of the hill the pavement turns to dirt. The trail is to your left. Park on the side of the road.

Bug juice and sunscreen are recommended.

ngg_shortcode_0_placeholder (Click on photos to enlarge.)