

Fantasy Trail & 990: Hiking the Peak of Park City, Utah

My feet dangled in the cool spring as I reflected on my accomplishment. I did 990! The signage stated 990 but I didn't realize the significance until my return trip down Fantasy Trail and Tombstone trail enroute to the 1.25 mile Gondola ride back down to the Grand Summit. The soothing, healing effect of the cold, quickly flowing, mountain stream rushing around my feet became a refreshing reward for completing the 3.6 mile incline trek to the top of Park City, Utah.

I almost passed by without stopping but it seemed the babbling of the stream was persistent, encouraging a visit. As I moved down the mountain, I knew the babbling stream marked an end to the trail and it seemed only natural that I stop to reflect on the journey just completed. It was a calling of sorts in which that large flat red stone begged passer byers to join it for a special treat as the trail narrowed to about six feet from the stream. But the hike began approximately five hours ago. I hit the trail at 9:50 am and it looked like I would finish by 3:00 pm. I knew I was well ahead of my schedule with a goal to return to the gondola by 3:30 pm...thirty minutes ahead of the 4:00 pm closing of the gondola. The time was 2:45 pm and the hike nearly over as I estimated I had less than a quarter mile to go. It seemed like only minutes earlier when I departed the trail sign marking Tombstone Trail, this way 2.0 miles.

Tombstone Trail

The gondola ride is 6,681 feet or about 1.25 miles with a 30 to 45 degree incline and rises over 1,000 feet from the Grand Summit base. Grand Summit sits at an elevation of 6,600 feet. During the winter, the ride takes skiers to intermediate ski slopes and the Red Pine Lodge, which sits at an elevation of 8,100 feet. Advanced ski slopes like Tombstone Express lie beyond at an elevation of nearly 9,000 feet.

The guys at Canyon Mountain Sports had been helpful in detailing the trails and explaining the importance of hydration in the upper elevations. High altitude sickness happens when hydration is inadequate due to both altitude and low humidity which can range anywhere from 5 to 35 percent. The gondola attendant was also helpful describing the trails and signage along the way as well as the many service roads that cross the trail. He also coached me on the rock ridge that one passes through along Fantasy Trail.

My objective was 990 not really sure what that meant as I began this journey. The signage was simple...990 with an arrow and mileage of 3.6 miles. I learned the term 990 is derived from the ski lift located at the top of the mountain, 9,990 feet above sea level. Actually it is just shy of the 990 mark but rises well above both Red Pine Lodge and Tombstone Express. The 9990 elevation is marked at the peak of the mountain where an antenna sits.

As I approach the trail marker, I take a quick check of the map and compass with a mental note that the general direction is southward. The trail signage quickly points to the correct trail and quickly I learned that this trail parallels a mountain stream that bounces and flows off the many rocks that have found their way into the stream. The stream gradually departs from the path and for perhaps a ½ mile; the sound of the babbling stream is prominent but equally lets me know as I move away from the stream and climb higher up the mountainside. The path is well trodden and marks clearly the

path to be followed. It winds up the mountainside, snaking back and forth as it etches upward. On both sides of the trail, poplar and fir trees mark the path and provide easy grab poles to pull oneself around a sharp turn, of which there are many. Mountain flowers are in full bloom both in shade and full sun. As the incline steepens, I spot a pile of fallen trees and either naturally or man-produced, seem the perfect spot to pick up a hiking stick. After all, what would a hike be without a hiking stick and the grade makes it a prudent choice. The hiking stick would serve me well to help pull me forward while stabilizing my climb through the loose soil and rock strewn trail.

The trail winds upward and opens into a field that more resembles a ski slope gone summer. The path is marked by a dirt service road so the path widens to two tire trodden paths. This is easy to follow and slopes upward much more naturally than the previous trail, a straight incline in contrast to the winding uphill trail.

It dead ends at a rock, gravel service road that snakes from the Red Pine Lodge upward toward Tombstone Express...an intermediate ski lift that sits atop another mountain peak elevation at 8,300 feet. At the junction, a sign states "Tombstone Top" with an arrow pointing to the left. No indication of which way to follow the Tombstone Trail. The service road threw me and I took it to the right instead of the left. After about ten minutes, I concluded this is not correct and worked backwards. As I returned to the junction, off to the right was a mountain with the large, red sandstone rocks piled up the mountainside. I climbed the rocks for probably five to ten minutes looking for a trail...but finding none returned to the junction. I recalled the gondola attendant indicated that I would follow the service road until I came across the Fantasy Trail sign...but I wasn't clear which direction I would locate the trail. So, I followed the service road up toward the Tombstone Express chair lift. Along the way, I spotted a sign that pointed to Tombstone Express with an arrow pointing straight ahead while underneath was "Fantasy Trail" with an arrow pointing to the right. I stopped to inspect and concluded the trail was around the corner of this service road!

I plodded forward and at the top, the service road continued downward with signage that stated several options but I did not see the "Fantasy Trail" signage. I had been hiking for approximately ninety minutes, nearly 2.0 miles, which did not seem that long. I actually made pretty good time. I followed the service road for a while and it occurred to me I was probably heading northward rather than southward. I pulled out the compass and checked...I was heading north. I need to be heading south. I reversed my direction and returned to the trail sign just below the Tombstone Express.

As I approached the signage...sure enough there is the trail. I missed it as I approached it from the junction. The path was clearly marked but not nearly as visible from the south. I stopped, finished the 16 oz bottle of water I had in my hand, tucked it into my bag and proceeded up the Fantasy Trail. The real adventure was about to begin.

Fantasy Trail

The mileage marker stated 1.0 mile but the hidden message that the attendant coached me on was that rock climbing was in my future. I moved quickly up the trail but soon learned I needed to slow my ascent and pace as the steep incline forced me to ensure my footing was solid before moving on. Also, the altitude was approximately 9,000 feet. Thus far, I had not felt winded but from time to time my heart pounded. Brief breaks served to both hydrate and catch my breath.

For approximately a mile, the trail was similar to that of the Tombstone Trail...but just steeper. Finally, I approached a trail marker that stated "Fantasy Trail" with an arrow and 0.8 mile mark. The trail was getting rockier but still not the rock-climbing portion that had been described to me by attendants. No sooner had I passed the marker than I was confronted with the reality of what is described as Fantasy Trail. What I saw was a ridge of rocks, narrow and with both flat trails and paths with rather steep inclines. I did not see anything that shied me from the objective to conquer fantasy trail so I moved quickly forward and began the 0.8 mile ascent up the ridge to 990.

Stone piles placed by trail managers marked the path. The direction of the top stone positioned so it could point (as I recall from those Boy Scout days) the direction of the return path. Flat stones, both large and small, marked the rocky trail accompanied by boulders piled on top of one another. I moved slowly forward, cautiously but deliberately.

The path got narrower but I inched along moving with deliberate placement of each foot and checking to ensure my foot found its mark on a firm rock...that was not about to roll. I stopped at one section; it was barely three feet across. A large rock formation that jutted out of the mountain came to a point while on either side...smaller but still large boulders piled up to provide stepping stones on either side of this formation. In front was a basket intended to provide rescue in the event...the ski patrol had to do a rescue. Behind me was a rope and pulley described to me by the attendant as a rope for hikers that needed the support to move forward. I noted their existence and grabbed the yellow line but quickly felt it distract my sense of balance as I moved across the rocks while climbing upward. Also in front of me was what would become the greatest climb challenge. I must move from the narrow pile I was standing on to the right side of this large stone jutting out of the top of the ridge and somehow negotiate a path to the next formation that jutted upward even higher than where I currently stood. I could move back and to the other side and approach this next hurdle or continue on this side. Either way...there was not a whole lot of ledge to support the continued ascent. I either return or move forward. I elected to stop, hydrate and capture the moment with my Sony. I lay my trusted hiking stick down, recognizing it would be baggage and best left behind.

The view was extraordinary. And the moment was perfect to capture a few images. Either side of the ridge went straight down. Lose my footing...and well there would be a rescue mission...if I could reach my cell phone in the back of my bag to call 911. A roll down this stone-mountain would not be pretty. There was nothing to break my fall but some trees poking their way through the rock pile. Sturdy they were but sparse as well. No easy grabs. A few rolls and I would have broken limbs and perhaps a cracked skull. The irony is that at the time I thought of none of this. My strength was strong, conditioning excellent, well hydrated and confidence...well it couldn't have been better.

I moved along the right side, stepping three feet down to position my left foot while using my left hand to support the step down. My left hand was still on the rock I departed while I used my right to find a grab point on the rock in front of me. This left my right foot and leg to rise up and find a notch I could pull myself up onto this next ledge. The right foot found its mark; I hoisted myself up and quickly moved my left hand from the rock I had been clutching to a three-inch popular growing out from the top of this rock. I completed the pull upward and found new footing on this ledge. However, before me I saw more of the same another thin ridge to negotiate with an even steeper incline.

I moved along sure-footed, moving cautiously with each foot finding its mark. As I made way along this ridge I found the climb steep but the trail began to widen and the rock ledge replaced with a rocky path but with more greenery and dirt. No sooner had I moved along this path but it opened up at a junction with a service road in front of me and above me the top ski lift at nearly 9,990 feet and further above it...the mountain summit with an antenna at the top. This was 990 and it left no doubt that while I had conquered Fantasy Trail...I must reach the top. I pulled out a water bottle and gulped the balance of my second 16 oz bottle. That left me with one 24-ounce bottle for the return trip. The time was 12:15. I felt I could get to the peak, depart by 1:00 pm and still catch the last gondola ride.

990

I followed the steep, service road and it was steep. I moved slowly, pacing myself as not to exhaust. My wind was excellent and I was experiencing no muscle cramps. The high-altitude sickness the Canyon staff described...well I felt no awareness of either it or dehydration. As I approached the first winding curve I saw a patch of white, which I knew immediately, was snow. As I got closer sure enough it was snow that had melted ever so slowly at this high altitude but had formed white ice crystals. I moved forward up the mountain recognizing I still had much real estate to cover if I were to reach the peak.

I trekked along for about fifteen minutes before spotting the ski patrol station and the chair lift station once again as I rounded the final wide curve. As both came into view I spotted another patch of snow. Above me was the summit, which looked like all stone. Another five minutes and I passed by the melted but still frozen snow, I guessed it sat on the West side but was being reached by sun. I decided that before completing the ascent up 990...I must put my water and chocolate covered peanut butter power bar on ice. The column under the ski lift station looked like a perfect spot to rest my bag...it was also shade but at this altitude I felt no heat. It was a comfortable temperature. I removed both water and power bar from my bag that I positioned under the ski lift station (and under the shade). I trekked back down the rock pile toward the crystallized snow found a rock with a nice edge for scraping and dug a hole. It was ice cold. I dropped the bottle and power bar into the hole covering both with ice crystal.

Above me was the summit and another stone formation that would require walking sideways up rock slate. It was probably five to ten minutes but not a place I wanted to lose my footing. No obvious trail here but plenty of loose stone, quite dry dirt and brush. Nothing to grab!

I estimated I could take 45 minutes to play around up here, get to the summit, take photos and enjoy ice-cold water and power bar. I worked my way up the ridge. On one side it was slate rock and gradually further away from the summit, covered with dirt, loose rock and low lying shrubs. On the other side of this ridge was the National Park system but it sloped downward into a grass-covered cove that looked like the perfect natural ski slope. A sign stated this side of the summit was not serviced by the ski patrol. At this time of the year, it looked like it should have cows grazing the dense green grass.

As I climbed to the summit, I could feel the wind pick up. It actually felt cool but rather brusque. I estimated it was blowing anywhere from 5 mph to 12 mph. The view was spectacular. Where I stood, two ridges formed the summit. The one I had just climbed but than a second that stretched eastward. On either side of the ridge, it sloped at a steep incline and was covered with much greenery. Off to the south, were more

mountain ridges speckled with pockets of snow. As I walked along the ridge, into view came the valley below, Park City and numerous housing developments. I could see the interstate system and where a major interstate cloverleaf tied Park City into Salt Lake City on one end and Heber City on the other. I checked my time and it was after 1:00 pm. Enough playing up here it was time for a break and than the return trip.

I worked my way back down the rock slate. My toes were aching from pushing into the front of the shoe where trails snaked downward. Earlier I realized my shoelaces were not tight enough but by than I could feel blisters begin to form by the constant slippage of my foot in the shoe. I decided to get a couple of band-aids from my improvised first aid kit. It occurred to me that while I was at it...the shaved ice would work to cool and soothe my feet. I went over to my knap sack and got a couple of band-aids before hiking back down and over to the patch of snow where my water was chilling out.

Once I got there...well I had to take pictures of this. I scraped away the top layer of ice and snapped a couple of shots. My mind was working what do I do first? Do I get water? Do I take my shoes and socks off? Do I chow down on that chilled power bar? I decided to do water first. It was cold, refreshing and perfect! I must have gulped at least a half of the bottle. Next was to remove shoes and socks, grab some snow ice and rub it gently from top to bottom. While they bathed, and the ice melted on the skin, this was the perfect time to enjoy that power bar. Between bites and chews, I worked the band-aids around the small toe in an attempt to protect them from further blistering. I finished the power bar quickly as the flies began to find their way to the chocolate stained wrapper.

For the most part, the flies had left me early on Tombstone trail when I soaked myself with deet-drenched toilettes. The flies were particularly a nuisance when I began the hike. As long as I kept moving...they couldn't hit a moving target. But when I stopped, they were all around.

I dried my feet and gently pulled the stained socks onto each foot, carefully to protect the band-aid wrapped small toe. The thought occurred to me that I should have brought a second pair but at this point...this pair will have to do. I tightened my shoes by pulling the laces tighter than they had ever been before noting the depressed portion of the lace was its traditional spot lying just under the lace eye. Now the depressed lace moved up higher in the lacing. I gathered all the wrappers, power bar, band-aid wrappers and the sticky band-aid end protective papers. I left the water in the ice until I gathered my stuff from above and began the final descent.

The Descent

At approximately 1:33 pm, I departed 990. With the backpack secured, I left the station base only to look back over my shoulder one last time to check I had left nothing behind but equally to capture one last mental snapshot of the 990 lift station. A short trek took me by the snow patch where I grabbed the chilled water. Another gulp and I probably had a quarter of that 24 oz bottle left. I would be ready for this once I got to the Tombstone Trail junction.

I hiked quickly to Fantasy Trail following the service road, stopping to capture a few more photos. When I arrived at Fantasy Trail, I packed away the water and camera before descending through the rocky ridge portion of Fantasy Trail. I did not need anything swinging from around my neck nor that occupied either hand. I moved quickly over the rocky summit, taking enough time to ensure my footing was solid while also

checking the path before me. My descent took me over the second stone ridge and onto the first. I completed this descent and came across my old friend, hiking stick...right where I jettisoned it some two hours earlier. As I completed the trek over both rocky ridges, I found the trail where it begins to widen and looked for the stone piles that would mark the path. These markers were extremely helpful. I could spot them in front and move quickly toward them, searching for the next marker. This continued for perhaps five to ten minutes before I reach the worn dirt path portion of Fantasy Trail and the 0.8 mile marker. I stopped took a photo, packed the camera away, slung the back pack on my back, secured the waist belt and moving quickly once again down Fantasy Trail toward Tombstone Trail.

It took me approximately 45 minutes to reach the Tombstone Trail junction. I stopped; finished the water took another photo, packed both items away and secured the back pack. I was on schedule to reach the gondola by 3:30 pm. I had another hour of hiking.

The Tombstone Trail was familiar as it snaked back and forth down the mountain. Soon I could hear the babbling stream in the distance, signaling a return to the lower part of the mountain. My feet were holding up well but while the small toes rubbing the inside had been neutralized by the tightened lacing, the sock was slipping down along the sides, and permitting the shoe edge to rub just below the ankle bone. I figured I could reduce the rubbing depending on the way I planted my foot. Yep...should have a second pair.

I continued my descent at a good pace. For the most part, I used the hiking stick for balance reserving it only for uphill ascents where I wanted to steady the climb and secure a foothold along the mountain trail. The familiarity of the trail permitted a quick pace and I wasted no time resting to capture breath. My endurance encouraged this pace as I moved closer to the sound of the babbling stream. The thought crossed my mind it would be wonderful if I had the time to stop and dip my feet in the cooling mountain waters but I needed to get back to the gondola by 4:00. At one point the trail crossed the stream but centuries of finding its way to the bottom, this stream had found a much more efficient trail than the one I was following. It was probably another fifteen minutes or so before the trail would parallel the stream near the trail start point.

The trail continued winding down the mountain but the sound of running water became much more apparent. I was now hiking parallel to the stream but the distance separating us was probably twenty-five feet. I continued my descent at a brisk pace not slowing for anything but to round each winding turn to ensure my feet would not slide out from underneath me.

The last turn took me to within ten feet of the stream and I felt indulged to stop and partake in its cooling waters. Checking time...it was 2:45 pm. I was well ahead of the 3:30 pm target and I knew I was nearing the start of the trail. I guessed I was less than a quarter mile from the end. Yes...I must stop and bathe my feet in the healing mountain waters. I had worked them hard and probably had not paid enough attention to them in the beginning. The cold running water would help to reduce the natural swelling that occurs when worked at the pace they had been subjected to for the last several hours. My legs were covered with trail dust and it would be nice to leave it behind as well.

As I hiked I kept searching for the perfect spot that would invite me to sit and play, a spot I couldn't resist. The trail moved closer to the stream at a point where it was only six feet away. My attention became obsessed with the stream. My eyes search for the perfect

stop while looking occasionally at my path to avoid stumbling across some tree root or rock. I finally spotted this large, seat-sized, red stone boulder with a flat surface sitting along side the stream. It looked like it was placed there intentionally by others who enjoyed this spot to rest, relax and refresh. It sat in the water perched high with sufficient width that you could sit, remove shoes and place them behind you in a dry spot.

Time was plentiful as I reminded myself I may never pass this way again. I stopped, sat, removing one shoe and sock at a time. I dipped my foot in the water, forcing the water to find its way around it. I scooped cold water washing calf, ankle and foot. I rinsed it by plopping it back into the water...it felt wonderful but I couldn't keep it there long due to the chilling water temperature. I plunged it again into the cooling water, holding it under longer than the previous dip, knowing that with each soaking, it would better adapt to the cold water temperature while also reducing swelling. Each foot got three dips.

It didn't take long to work the other foot into the water, bathing calf, ankle and foot as practiced with the right foot. The cold water had a healing effect on those blistered toes and rubbed ankles. Pain subsided as they soaked in the chilling mountain stream and all that remained was the memory of a rather, challenging accomplishment. With that respite, I collected my belongings and packed them away for the last time, heading down the trail and passing by the trail entrance. Looking back at the trail sign, I caught the chair lift at 990 and the peak I had just left. All that remained was the gondola ride back to the Grand Summit.

During the twelve-minute gondola ride down to the Grand Summit, I thought about the journey completed and how I felt at that moment. Great...no fatigue, no muscle ache not even mental fatigue just a mental state of relaxation! My physical conditioning prepared me for this challenge and I acclimated well from the coastal elevation I'm accustomed to. It reinforced the lifelong penchant for fitness I kept up over the years. The time it took to maintain stamina, endurance and strength seemed a small investment in return for the confidence it provides at a moment to pursue these recreational challenges that come along our life's journey. I've known that fitness is a means, a method to enjoy our environment and its rigors whether it's the mountains of Utah, the Atlantic Ocean waters probing its natural habitat or an asphalt trail that winds along a river in a downtown renewal project, taking in the manmade artifacts. My day-to-day routine plods along at sea level or an MSL of 28 feet! Quite a contrast to the 9,990 I just experienced.

Such journeys offer a small window of appreciation into the adventures of explorers such as Lewis & Clark, or Native Americans, pursued centuries ago as life long pursuits though indeed no comparison. If I can take this sense of appreciation for adventure, keep it in the context of the daily tribulations of those who came before us, while reinforcing the ethic of caring for our environment, back to the monotony of small city, coastal living that pervades my day-to-day existence than a bonus it is.