

## 2009 Challenge Review

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After close to 200 miles hiked, five summits, one mountain expedition and nearly sixty dives, let's have a look back at each of the goals for 2009. I wanted to push myself harder than I ever had before, and see if I could follow through on a commitment to achieving long term goals. Now for some people, perhaps one year isn't "long term", but for someone that never has led a particularly physical outdoor life, committing to being prepared to go mountaineering for the first time in my life, six months before I'd ever actually used a climbing harness, seemed pretty bold.

Of the challenges, the hardest, by far, was the last one accomplished, climbing Mt. San Jacinto, while the easiest, was achieving my Advanced Open Water certification. The highest point I climbed to was 13,000' on the upper saddle of The Grand, and the lowest point I dove was 120' on the Eureka Oil Platform off of Long Beach.

Those are the bookends though, and certainly for some of these tasks I accomplished in 2009, what I did went far beyond simply attaining an elevation, or descending to a specific depth. Below the fold I'll go into greater detail on each of the challenges.

Challenge 1 :: Climb Grand Teton This loomed over everything. The trip to the Tetons is covered in great depth in the excerpts from my journal here, here, here, and here, so let me take a moment to think about what I learned from this trip. As I studied the routes we might take and what the conditions would be like, I realised the depth to which I had to change mentally and physically to accomplish this. The first thought I had after my brain decided I was going to commit to doing this, was "you cannot half-ass this". I wouldn't be "that guy" on the mountain, the one that is clueless to the danger, the one that relies exclusively on his guides experience while bringing no ability of his own, the buffoon that thinks somehow it's their right to be ferried to the top if only they pay enough. Rather, I wanted to be the client that the guide enjoys sharing his experience with, I wanted to be an asset on the mountain not a burden, I wanted to be new, but prepared. My reasons for this come down to respect. Respect for my guide, respect for the dangers and respect for the mountain.

I'm going to dwell on the idea of respect for a moment. The mountain guides love the mountains. I mean there is a passion there, a glint in their eyes, that took me entirely by surprise. And as with anyone who loves something that passionately, they enjoy sharing it with those that can appreciate what they see and feel. To go to the mountain and not be prepared, would show that I didn't care about what they loved and wanted to share, and that would be disrespectful. Everything flows from that. The respect for the dangers shows that you are mindful that you are entering an extremely hazardous environment, and your preparation is key in ensuring that your guide is just that: a guide, not a rescuer. Your respect for the mountain means knowing that it is an immense privilege to be on the flanks of it, to be able to match yourself against the ice and snow clogged passages of a couloir. You can push yourself to the summit, but you can't force your way there.

Respect is why I turned around at the upper saddle. Respect for the mountain told me that despite all my preparation and training, it was an order of magnitude beyond what I could have prepared for. Respect for the dangers told me that continuing with a weak leg and mild hypothermia would be an unacceptable risk and put myself in danger as well as someone else. Respect for the guide told me not to put his life at risk just to drag me to the top of a pile of rock. What sort of person would I be if I'd continued on with my leg failing, and climbed half way up the Sergeant's Chimney only to have my hamstring give out completely.

I know I changed, as a person, from this experience. I honestly can't put my finger on how I've changed, though. It seems cliché to say "I'm more confident", but I know that's a part of it. I know that mental toughness is a part of it too; more of a willingness to be honest about a situation and confront difficult things. It's a lot to process, because there have been few times in my life where I've been as mentally exhausted as I was the weeks after that trip. My body didn't recover, it didn't need to, it was only made stronger, but my brain was fried after maintaining such focus for so many days. To some extent, I think my brain is still reconfiguring itself from that.

Darren told me that mountaineers have a short memory. I remember clearly looking up the Idaho Express Couloir to where he was climbing above me. I remember clearly hunkering down on the Black Dyke to eat a snack before beginning the ascent of the mountain proper. I remember vividly the detail of the mountains surrounding us, entranced, but recoiling at the fact that I was looking down onto their summits. All the same, I have a hard time remembering exactly how badly my leg hurt, how exhausted I felt, how cold I was, how uncomfortable I was with travelling on rock with crampons. I tell myself repeatedly "it really was that bad, you're not deluding yourself". The immediate thought subsequent to that, though, is "with more experience, you can do it".

Challenge 2 :: Hike to the summits of Mount San Jacinto and Mount San Gorgonio Separated by the valley that holds Palm Springs, San Gorgonio and San Jacinto couldn't have been more different experiences.

I climbed San Gorgonio a week after I returned from The Grand, with altitude acclimation still coursing in my blood stream and the best fitness level I've ever had. That hike was almost boring, there wasn't much to see and it wasn't really that hard considering I spent a good deal of time above 10,000'. The view from the summit wasn't very good because of poor air quality so after grabbing a snack, I bolted off of there and ran the last mile or so of the trail back to the truck.

San Jacinto, I climbed in December, at the last minute, 24 hours before the first true winter storm of the season would come barreling through. Even still, the mountain was covered in fresh powder and ice, for which I did not have the right equipment. I also didn't have any sort of fitness level approaching what I'd had after the Tetons.

I followed a pair of guys that had mountaineering boots on and microspikes, and while I did, perhaps, note that by letting them go first, they would be kicking steps for me, I also wound up off trail by using that strategy. That resulted in, again, a leg strain. I pushed myself very hard through the knee deep powder, wanting to achieve the base of the switchbacks that lead to the summit. When I got there, I looked at my map and determined how much farther the summit was, then I looked at the trail through the powder bowl I'd just hiked through and saw that the wind whipping through there would obscure the boot pack in a few hours.

I began the same debate between pushing for the summit and turning around that I'd had on The Grand. This time though, I relied on my ability and experience to be able to push hard for the summit and make it back down. My reasoning was that I had gotten a better start than I had planned, and my hard stop time was 1PM. If I fully committed to a summit push, I could achieve the top by noon, tag the USGS marker, take a photo, and be back down in the bowl in 90 minutes maximum. I also decided that noon would be my new hard stop time to compensate for the effect of the snow drifts covering the boot pack, and that along with a total commitment to the summit, any obstacle would force a turn around. Essentially, give it 100% until conditions are less than 100%. The strategy worked out perfectly, although I did have to hike back from the summit with a definitively strained thigh that was not happy at all with being dragged through powder.

Both hikes, though, were not something I could have accomplished at the beginning of the year. I would not have had the fitness for San Gorgonio or the experience for San Jacinto. I don't see much of a reason to go back to San Gorgonio, but San Jacinto looks like a good proving ground for snow training this winter.

Challenge 3 :: Hike Yosemite Falls and Nevada Falls in 24 Hours This was another challenge I had to cram in at the end of the year as my need to spend more time with my family in northern California began to dominate the calendar. I drove up on Friday, after work, hiked Yosemite Falls on Saturday, then hiked Nevada Falls on Sunday, and drove home.

If I'd been able to plan all the scheduling for the challenges far ahead of time, I most likely would have placed Yosemite squarely into late spring, rather than late autumn, but I'm glad I didn't. The park took on an entirely different tone than I've become accustomed to with my trips there in May. While I couldn't recall a single tree in the park that wasn't either a pine or a dogwood, the variety of trees displaying fall colors was beautiful. I specifically remember the large maple in the meadow below Yosemite Falls, that looked so vibrantly green in previous trips there, had taken on a blaze of orange there in the heart of autumn. The hiking was hard, again impeded by flagging fitness levels. The knees took a pretty

heavy dose of abuse with several thousand feet of descent in only a 24 hour period, and all that on either pavement or broken granite blocks. It was worth it though, since I proved to myself that I could do it.

Challenge 4 :: Hike to the summit of Lookout PeakThe year before, I made it within 5 feet of the summit and totally bonked; I didn't have one iota of energy left to scramble up the last little bit to the top. This time, I corrected the nutritional screw up that had messed up my previous attempt, and topped out Lookout Peak in King's Canyon National Park.

That trail is a leg breaker though, with a constant, nasty gradient every step of the way. Somehow, I also can't seem to find a time when the trail isn't hotter than hades. That trail is uphill, from the first step you take onto it at street level, all the way up to the boulder pile that comprises it's summit, and combined with the heat and a certain amount of direct sun exposure in large sections, I wind up trudging breathlessly from the shade of one pine to the next, telling myself "just one more, just one more".

It's a good training hike though: altitude, distance, gradient, and rewarding views. Just make sure you bring something more than just a single cliff bar and a teeny bag of beef jerky.

Challenge 5 :: Hike to The NeedlesLike Yosemite and Mt. San Jacinto, I had to jam at the end of the year to get this one in. In fact, I had to leave my grandparent's house at 5AM on a Sunday to drive to the trail head about five hours south, do the hike, and then drive another five hours home. In my haste, I only took a cursory glance at the map, and read "700' Elevation Gain" (or something like that). As it turned out, that was the final total of elevation change, that involved a saw tooth trail topography I hadn't paid attention too. Lesson learned. Fortunately, I had the pickup truck this time to get to the trail head, instead of the dinky little suspension of my friend Robyn's Mini Cooper.

As a result, the hike was a bit more strenuous than I had intended, probably a "hurts a little more" on the Wong Baker pain scale. My luck ran out a bit on this hike, in that they had closed the Department of Forestry Needles Lookout station at the summit the previous day for the season, so I wasn't able to go all the way up for the grand view. Oh well, there's always next year. It reopens in June.

Along the trail, you have a fantastic view to the north and east across the Great Western Divide south of Kaweah Gap. According to my map, the pinnacles I saw far in the distance, were the summit chain that contain Mt. Whitney, which was dramatic to see from the western side of the Sierras. These mountains truly are one of the crown jewels of this state. Hopefully, if time and National Park Service Wilderness Permit Lottery results allow, I'll be able to give Mt. Whitney a go this year.

Challenge 6 :: Scuba dive at least once a monthBefore I say anything else about this, I have to thank, whole heartedly, my regular dive buddy, Rich. I can remember at least twice when I called him and said "I have to get my monthly dive in this weekend, it'll be my only chance!" and he was always there for me like at trooper.

I remember very specifically the October dive on the evening of the 29th. We got to Vet's Park and had a look at the conditions and they were marginal at best; right on the edge of what we would consider diveable. The swells were running at least four feet with rapid sets that we wound up having to swim under to get out past the breakers. We went out and agreed that we would head back when we got down to 2000psi, which would make for a dive time in the range of maaaayyybe 10 minutes of fun diving, and about 20 minutes of fighting out and fighting in. We wouldn't have done it if I hadn't "needed" to. If conditions had been any worse, we would have called it.

Any diver, can end any dive, at any time, for any reason, no questions asked.

It may sound like semantics, but the point of this challenge wasn't to actually dive once a month, but to make the time to dive once a month. I had stopped diving after 16 dives and hadn't picked it up again for about six years, and I didn't want to repeat that. What I wanted to do, was make a habit out of it, and I think it worked. Even though the challenge is over, I find myself trying to find time to go diving, even though I don't necessarily "have" to any more.

No Image for June

No Image for October

Challenge 7 :: Earn an Advanced Diver certification My journey to being an Advanced Open Water diver started off with a stolen catalytic converter, progressed to a boat dive cancelled by horrendous seas, but finally ended with an Advanced Open Water certification, that rapidly became a Nitrox certification, Wreck Diver certification, Rescue Diver certification and now a nearly completed Divemaster candidacy. My reasons for beginning the AOW program were marginal at best, but I suppose I must have seen something in it that I wanted to pursue because as all the non-diving reasons for diving fell away, I was left with a continued desire to dive. Period.

Soon, I hope to begin the Open Water Instructor program; smells like a 2010 challenge, don't it!

Challenge 8 :: Go on at least one overnight hike Ok. Kind of a cheat on this one. I did an overnight hike, from the Lupine Meadows trailhead to Corbett High Camp on Grand Teton, where a tent was already waiting, as well as a nice guide hut to eat meals in. I did carry up all my food, a ton of climbing gear, and a four day supply of wag bags, so... you know what? It's not a cheat. Mark it 10, Dude.

Challenge 9 :: Hike to the summit of Mt. San Gorgonio and dive to below 100' within 24 hours. The challenge so nice, I did it twice! Not only did I go diving 24 hours after summiting San Gorgonio, I went diving 24 hours after summiting San Jacinto too! After San Gorgonio, I went with Dive Buddy Rich and his daughter to the old Marineland site for a quick shore dive. Since his daughter didn't have many dives and the conditions weren't the best, we restricted ourselves to strict Open Water limits of 60' or less. So, no, I didn't dive below 100', but I'm not going to quibble.

After San Jacinto, which was a far, far tougher hike than San Gorgonio, I met Rich at the Catalina Express terminal in Long Beach at 6AM the next morning, for a ride out to Catalina. There we were planning to dive at the Casino Point Dive Park. So not only did I do a harder hike, I dove farther away and deeper afterwards. So whatever points I don't get for not going below 60' after San Gorgonio, I more than make up for with this.

All kidding aside, this was another "I wonder if I can do it, physically and logistically" challenges. The idea is not to limit myself to one particular activity at a time. I figure with careful planning and execution, these sorts of things could be reasonably accomplished by anyone. Certainly, not to this extent; climbing to 11,000+ feet followed by a boat ride to an island is at the far end of the spectrum, but I've proven it can be done, so hopefully, I can convince others to try something a little less crazy. At no point was I in any danger from trying to combine the two activities, and if you step

back and think about the variety of environments you move through from the summit of San Jacinto to the sunken swim platform at Casino Point, the experience can be awe inspiring.

Just make sure you climb BEFORE you dive!

Challenge 10 :: Trim down 15-20 pounds before climbing The Grand I spent a week hiking and climbing in Grand Teton National Park before starting up the Grand, to help acclimatize to the altitude. Between the training in the gym, the training hikes and that, I guarantee you that I lost that weight, even if I didn't take a scale with me to the Lupine Meadows trailhead before we set off to High Camp.

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Twelve months to accomplish ten challenges, and in that twelve months, that is ten challenges accomplished. One year down, a lifetime to go. Let's see what 2010 will bring...