

Mountain School Tech Tips: Three Strategies for Successful, Stress Free Trips

One of the first winter trips I did with my local mountaineering club when I moved to Canada from Australia was a winter scramble of Cirque Peak, a gentle rocky peak nearly 3000 metres high off the Icefields Parkway in the Rocky Mountains. We approached the peak on skis, crossing a fair number of large avalanche paths along the way, skied as far up the south ridge as was possible, then ditched our skis and boot packed the remaining distance to the summit in a typical Rockies gale. It was one of my first winter ascents and I remember being somewhat nervous. Nevertheless, the trip leader, a young guy, no older than myself (I was young in those days), got everyone safely up and down the mountain in good time without any untoward incidents and I recall that everyone on the trip had big smiles at the end of the day. As a somewhat green participant, this young man made running a group trip with comparative strangers seem completely effortless, but, in hind sight, it was clear that he had three clear strategies for running a successful trip.

These three strategies can help all of us have successful stress free trips, whether they are "common adventures," official KMC trips, or just groups of friends going out for a day in the mountains. First, be clear about your objectives. Second, go only with people who have the expertise/fitness to meet your objectives. And, third, limit group size.

On our Cirque Peak trip, the objective was very clear - climb Cirque Peak. We weren't heading out for an easy day of touring with no fixed agenda, nor were we out to make as many turns as possible. The goal of the trip was climbing Cirque Peak, a reasonably arduous trip that would involve over 1200 metres of elevation gain. Next time you start organizing a group trip, whether it's a club trip or a common adventure, sit down first and ask yourself "what do I want to achieve on this trip?" If your goal is to ski the Seven Summits trail in a day, be clear with yourself and other people who are coming on the trip that you'll be pushing hard all day and they better be able to keep up. On the other hand, if your goal is to ramble along a ridge just as far as you feel like going, be clear with people who want to join your trip that you may not make the summit, you may just wander in the alpine for a few hours.

Before going on the Cirque Peak trip, I was asked very clear questions about my fitness and skiing ability. Not vague questions like "been out much this year?", but very specific questions, such as "Tell me about the last three trips you did and when you did them?" And, "What trips have you done in the past six months?" If you really want your trip to be stress free and successful you should only go with people who have the necessary fitness and skill to reach your objective. If you're off to climb Mount Dag, people who come on your trip need to have done a number of similar difficulty scrambles in the past few months. Even easy hikes, such as walking up to Kaslo Lake require a certain level of fitness, equipment and experience. If you have any doubts at all, ask for a reference, a friend or other KMC member who has done a trip with this person in the last few months who you

can ask about the prospective trip member.

Finally, there were eight people and only eight people on our Cirque Peak tour. Large groups inevitably lead to wide disparities in skills and fitness levels which makes for stressful and frequently, unsuccessful, trips. In general, the more difficult the trip, the fewer people should go. A group size of 4 to 6 might be considered the absolute maximum for a difficult trip such as climbing Mount Prestley, while an easy hike along a maintained trail would be reasonable for a group of 12. Decide how many people you feel comfortable with on your trip and make the cut-off number clear before hand. Once you've decided, stick with your absolute maximum number no matter how much coercion is involved, even if your best friend calls at the last moment.

Hopefully, these three fairly simple techniques will alleviate some of the stress involved in organizing a group trip into the mountains and prevent the seemingly inevitable group dynamic issues that seem to plague both "common adventures" and club trips alike.