



When is a Winter Trip NOT a Winter Trip?



Ever think of that?

By: The Llama Wrangler
Michael Carlson

To me a winter trip has to be some time between December 21st and March 21st. It has to have lots of snow, and the only types of transportation acceptable are by foot, ski, or snowshoe. Well, BJ and I have “done that” kind of stuff in the wilds of the frozen tundra’s of MN, WI, and Canada. I think it was after a trip into the Boundary Waters Wilderness of MN that BJ was heard to repeatedly say, “You aren’t going to get me out winter camping again unless there is a cabin involved”. That was back sometime in the beginning of 1984. So any winter trip after that was either cabining it, solo trips with the dog, or with “the guys”.

I think it was the last straw for BJ when that first night out the temperature was down around -25°F, and by the second night -35°F. The winds were only kicking up around 15 to 25 mph, just a good breeze to keep the mosquitoes away (You all know that MN has the hardest mosquitoes in the lower 48). Well by the 3rd night BJ had had enough. But, it was her own fault. Those two previous nights she had her head berried inside her down sleeping bag, and you’al know that when you put that much moisture, from breathing, in the bag something happens to the insulation value. I think, on that night, she managed to stay in the bag until 12:00am. She finally determined it wasn’t worth all that suffering of having “frozen” feet. So she grumbled the whole time getting out of the bag. And, like a good husband, I turned over on my other side and went back to sleep. BJ ended up being the “Fire Keeper” for the whole night. Just remember the sun comes up only between the hours of 9:00am and 3:30pm where we were. For those of us that do this stuff, it is a challenge to see who can last the longest without getting up to relieve all those bodily functions. So after about 10 hours in the bag the urges won the battle over me. After the necessary position that women envy guys for (especially in the winter time) I meandered over to the fire hoping that there would be enough coals to get it started again. Low-and-be-hold there was this bright yellowish red stuff just a crackle’en, and a huge pile of wood that rivals those stacks from BJ’s snoring. And, there was BJ, muttering under her breath about my enriching qualities and characteristics, **NOT!**

When I checked the thermometer I was a bit surprised! I thought I had the best backpacking unit made. It’s range went from 120°F to -50°F. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I’d see it go beyond those ranges. Weeeell folks, this is where BJ will probably never forgive me for taking her into the frozen depths of hell. The red stuff, in the thermometer, was well below the -50°F mark. And, being the good engineer I am, I went about interpolating the temperature. The professional opinion/decision with my other colleagues was -62°F. The only good thing about this was the winds had calmed to 10 to 15 mph.

SO! Getting back to the beginning of the story: “When is a Winter Trip NOT a Winter Trip?”

With the above story in mind you’ll realize why BJ never went winter camping with me again. So here it is December 1st, 2001. “Hey BJ! How about heading down to the Canyon lands of SE Utah over Christmas vacation? I could put together a 5-day trip and we could use the llamas to haul the gear. Hey babe, what’cha think?” BJ said, “What! You know I don’t like winter camping!” But, I came back with, “It’s not really winter camping. Just think. We’ll be about 800 miles South, and you know when you go further south it gets a lot warmer, especially down in the canyon. You remember what it was like when we trekked into the Grand Canyon, back in “79”? Remember that time, 4 days into the trip, how it snowed up on the South Rim and we got only rain? Remember how much warmer it was?” Now, you would think, after 32 years of being around me she would know all my ploys. “Let’s go on the net and see if we can find the average temps for the area.” Thankfully I’ve got the NOAA site highlighted, and within a short time had the information on the screen. “See BJ, it’s not all that bad! The average daytime temps are in the mid 40’s and at night it gets into

the mid 20's. Now that's like being back home in MN and WI during the spring." Sure enough, BJ relented, and gave me the go ahead to plan out the trip.

The engineering in me has always drove BJ nuts with my organization skills. When we lived back in MN and came back from our pack trips out west I was working on the vacation for next year. (Another thing you've got to understand is that BJ and I retired for about two years ("78" thru 80") and lived out of a Chevy full sized van during that whole time when we weren't out backpacking.)

Having been out to SE Utah just 2 years previous I gave our selves a couple of options: 1) hike in the Arch canyon area where I had been before during that spring break vacation, or 2) try out the Grand Gulch Wilderness area during a time when it's not so busy. So I found the necessary Topo-maps and went after picking up info of the area. This was at a time when I tried getting into the BLM or FSS websites to no avail. They were all being locked out. I took awhile, but started piecing the info together. And, it never fails, there seems to be conflicting information. So I shot-off e-mails to llama people in the area thinking I've got enough time yet. After a few days, no replies. So I finally break down and pick up the number for the BLM offices in Monticello. Maybe it's just me but I get impatient when I can't get through with a simple phone call. Busy, busy, busy. Then, finally, I get through, but the person that can help me is out in the field. Sometimes fate plays the cards wrong. I later called back and got the guy. It turns out he had just taken the job there after being in the Jackson Hole area for many years, and also knew the area where we have our ranch.

He was able to set me straight on a lot of things. Yes, you can pack with your llamas, but only in certain areas, and you'll need a special permit. Yes, you can bring your barking hypos with, but they are considering to ban them from the area. There is a fee of \$5 per person while camping in the canyon. He'd send me the literature in the mail and all I had to do was return the stock permit. Great!!! Finally I got what I needed. Now just somehow organize the mess on the Living Room floor of all the camping gear and get the guys ready for the trek.



Since we have (31) of those beasts of burden it's always a hard decision on which ones to take on "your own" trip. We opted for Mt Osborne and Magnus, our 4 year olds. They've been out on the hills training like the rest of the others but hadn't been out on longer overnight treks. With the gear still on the living room floor I took these guys out each day starting 7 days before the trip. Starting with packs weighing 40 lbs we went through our obstacle course and hikes into the BLM area. Each day I added 5 lbs to their packs. By the 6th day they had 70 lbs and we went out on the "Proving hike". I took them up and down, up and down all over the hills in the BLM area north of our place, and then back through the obstacle course. They were real troopers! My figuring says you ask them to train hard and when it comes time to do the real thing it's a piece of cake!



So, Thursday, Dec 20th rolls around. BJ comes home from work and I ask her to get all the "stuff" she's going to take on the trip out so I can pack. My stuff already has been packed away for a week. So during the commercials for CSI and the CIA programs it actually started to look like a tight composite unit. The weigh scale comes out and it's pegged at 57 lbs each for a 5-day winter/not so winter like trip. Remember, the average historical temps are in the 40's. And, the kitchen sink stays home.

Friday, Dec 21st, I pack the van, check the oil, tires, etc. I take the guys out for a short hike with no weight. They thought it was wonderful!!! Our friend comes over late that evening to ranch sit and brings his 2 llamas and horse. Our gargantuan beasts love to have a friend over. While his 2 llamas are not quite accepted as heartily. We even made it to bed early.



Saturday, Dec 22nd we basically jump into the van, literally. I work with the llamas on loading them into the middle section while the dogs get the bed and we get the captains chairs. And we're off by 8:30am.

I figure we can get from the Cody area of WY through Thermopolis, Riverton, Lander, Rock Springs, down to the South side of the High Uintahs by dark and camp out. Weeeell, I was in a driving mood and kept going. With gas stops in Price and Monticello we made it to the Kane Station entrance to the Grand Gulch by 1:00am the next morning, that's about 16 hrs on the 750-mile road. The only complaint we had on the trip down was the llamas. They'd

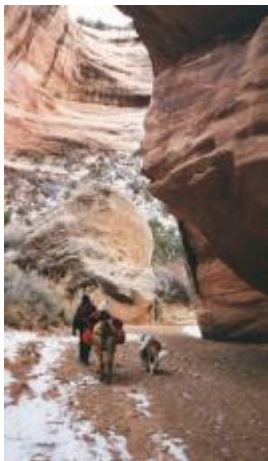
stand up until 10 minutes out from a refueling site, and then they'd kush. That's a long time, but by dark, Magnus finally figured it out, and then, Osborne followed. Once that happened it was enjoyable.

So it's 1:00am in the morning when the Kane Ranger Station appears. The moon is 3 days from being full and its coooold. We dig out the "winter gear", feed the llamas and dogs, and get the bed ready to sleep in. We pile on a comforter, a heavy wool blanket, and unzip the 6 lb rectangular sleeping bag. We change into dry cloths, socks, open the windows (to keep the moisture from collecting on the walls and glass), and climb under the covers. I don't know about you, but every time, like this, with another person, I never warm up. Whoever claims "...having 2 people under the covers together is warm" must be from the tropics. I've come to realize we have to be in separate sleeping bags to be comfortable. Our toes never did seem to get warm.

Later that morning the sun comes up out of the SE at about 7:45am. Enough is enough! I do the usual thing for the body and check on the llamas. I had left the thermometer out and took the time to open it up. Then said, "Hey BJ! What do you think of the weather?" I think it's fair to say you might imagine what was uttered, but it always ends with "Carlson!" It was 6°F.



As you can see by the picture there was snow on the ground. When at home the weather data stated that Monticello had about 6" on the ground, Blanding had 1" and Bluff 0". So I figured that 30 miles West of Blanding there should be little to none. Weeeeell another interpolative data gathering gone bad. There was about 10" at the Kane Station. The decision to wear the desert boots was changed real quick! Dug out the Sorels.



We managed to have everything packed up and ready to go by 10:30am. I have never figured it out way it takes so long to get going at the beginning of the trip? The Kane Canyon trail takes you down about 600ft over 4 miles to the junction with Grand Gulch. The trail had been packed down by other people and with all the dead-man markers it was easy to follow. About 3 miles into the trip we meet up with 2 couples heading out. They had been in the canyon for 2 days. They didn't find the open springs in the bottom and didn't bring enough gas to melt snow so decided to head back and do the tourist type stuff with Natural Bridges National Monument. They had all sorts of questions of the llamas, and being the shrude businessperson, handed them a brochure of our ranch. Yes, I carry that stuff wherever I go. You never know whom you might meet up with off the beaten path. The last mile into the canyon drops off real fast. But, by the time you reach the junction of Kane and Grand Gulch canyons human history stands out right in front of you. We stopped and ate lunch at the junction and gazed at

the ruins just above us.

It took us about 2½ hrs to get there, and with another hour for lunch (2:00pm) I'm thinking we don't have much time before sunset. (But my thinking is flawed here. I'm still under the northern MN experiences of 3:30pm when the sun doesn't shine.) With 4 miles down and another 4 to go we had to make some tracks. The trail takes you past numerous



We dallied long enough to glimpse the age-old history. By 3:15pm I'm thinking we'll never make the area I wanted to camp in. We had another 2 miles to go and I'm thinking it ain't worth walking in the dark to get there. So we found a site high enough up that would catch the sun's rays the next morning to warm us up. All along the way there was no open water. So after unloading the llamas, pitching the tent, and getting stuff stored away I set out to start the stove. I've never had a problem with this newer MSR stove. Lights every time, and can burn like a Saturn 5 rocket. But, this time it chose to act up. It started leaking at the bottle opening. I fooled around with it for ½ an hour and finally resolved to let it leak and see if the loss of gas would reduce as the bottle was used up. We were planning to be out 5 days. Soooo I thought a 1½-liter bottle should get us through. By the time we finished with supper the bottle was down to ½. With the leakage problem and the melting of snow for water

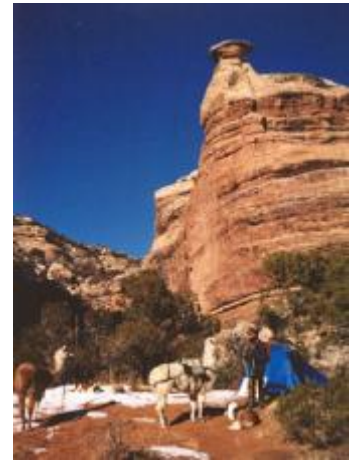
this trip would not last 5 days. Just that night we had the stove burning 3½ hrs. The better made plans of mice and men (notice there is no “wo” in front of that).

Having a one-burner lantern sure can make the difference when you can't have open fires in these areas. We've used candle lanterns over the years, and since the llamas needed the exercise, that's weight off my back. Besides, you couldn't have used a sled in the canyon like we usually do when trekking the back woods in winter.

That night was a lot better than the previous night. We managed to stay up until 8:30pm. Yes, it did get cold again, 6°F, but the feet were warm. That makes or breaks a trip.

The next morning the game was played again. Who can stay in bed the longest. Guess I'm fortunate to have good muscular control and BJ lost. The sun was out but not over the rim of the canyon at 8:00am. It took another hour before it opened up on our campsite.(see the picture)

With the petrol problem we decided to cut the trip short to only 3 days. So the new agenda was to day-trip further into the canyon. The dogs had it easy. They only had one pack between the two of them to carry, and Meiko had the honors 1st. Today they would have a day off from carrying weight. Although, the llamas needed to carry just our day-trip things. Soooo, Magnus lost in the wood chip toss and carried the gear.



the site and the fauna.

By 2:00pm it's time to head back. Have you ever experienced that after going some place it takes less time to get back? What took us 2 hrs to go 4 miles only took us 1½ hrs to get back to camp, and we still investigated ruins on the way back. Fortunately we came across water that had liquefied from the sun. Do you know the



What a wondrous place! The sun's out, there is very little wind, and no one has been through since the last snow fall. After awhile, by looking at the walls of the canyon, you could tell where the ancient ruins would be. Just within a 4-mile distance we came across six sites.

The rules say DON'T damage the sites. Take only pictures, and that's what we did. These ancient people adhered to some good engineering principles - construct on south facing walls where the sun can heat the rock and adobe walls during the winter while the summer sun is blocked out by over hanging rock outcroppings. Yep, they were right. It was warm while we investigated. Petroglyphs and pottery pieces were abundant. We spent a lot of time at the split-level site. The BLM even has an ammo can with literature about



adage “You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink”? I generally don't have problems with the llamas, but this time something was blocking their brain waves. You'd think that after 2 days, with little water, they'd stop and take-in a cool drink. Nope, not on their agenda. They wait until we get back to camp where we'd have to use the stove to melt snow. I wonder if they conspired together to cut the trip short and did something to the stove?

This night, things were a *looooot* better. The stove did run better and didn't seem to leak. The moon was full. It was warmer, and just a breath of air movement circulated through the campsite. We managed to stay up to a whopping 9:00pm. Prepping for bed was even tolerable. Didn't have to draw the cord tight for the sleeping bag hood.



I awoke sometime around 2:00 to roll over on my side that faces the outside. I drew my two stocking caps back to peer out at the night sky. Then it occurred!! There he was, St. Nick, flying across the sky!! But, being the curmudgeon adult, I realized it was just a shooting star.

Tuesday, December 25th. This time BJ won the contest. I forgot to empty the bladder before going to bed. The extra time and pressure was too excruciating. As I get out of the tent I check the wool sock hung on the tent. Nothing in it. Santa had passed us by last night. Maybe that was him I saw!

We start our tried and true routine. Whoever gets up first starts the stove and gets water on for breakfast and then works at disassembling the tent. The other packs the stuff inside the tent. Again, here is something that should normally take 1 hr to strike camp and be on our way. But it must be old age and weather that lengthens everything we do now. Oh, to be young again!

We manage to be packed up and ready to head out

by 10:00am. The loads are a lot lighter for everyone. This time Koncho gets to take the dog pack.

To be fair to Meiko we take things out of our daypacks so Koncho has a comparable load to what Meiko had a few days before. The llama packs weighed about 42 lbs each. Did we lose that much gas? Seems, some how, we lost 30 lbs from when we started. Osborne and Magnus were most appreciative.

Heading out was a delight. Again the sun's out and not much wind. I strip down to my silk underwear top and open the zipper of the nylon sweat pants at the bottom. I've got to dissipate the heat, while BJ is bundled up. Here again, it took us only 3 hrs to get to the top whereas going into the canyon took us between 3½ - 4 hrs. We always seem to go up faster up than

going down. I remember hiking up the Bright Angel trail in the Grand Canyon with 25 lb

packs in just over 2½ hrs. Ahhhh yes, back in our younger days!

Since we came out a few days early we debated the myriad of choices the area had to offer. We would play around with the extra time. We camped about 5 miles S of Kane Station by just pulling off the road where there wasn't too much snow. There was the thought of heading to Bluff, Utah, and visit with the folks at Recapture Lodge & Tours, but

we decided to see parts of the area we had not been through. We had been through this area back in 1979 during an early retirement period of our lives. We decide to proceed northwest on our slow roundabout way home.

First stop, Natural Bridges National Monument. For the few people that were there we sure were the spotlighted entertainment of the place. We found out that foreign folks just aren't used to seeing the sight of a menagerie like ours come out of a van. Most of our time was spent answering questions, while the USA folks would just drive by staring. Since Park reg's prohibit dogs on the walking paths we wondered "llamas?" So the four-some drew all the attention at the parking lots while we took in the sites. On returning to the van the folks were amazed at the loading procedure we went through. First the dogs, on command, would jump up onto the bed. Then Mt Osborne steps right in there, turns around and stands. Then Magnus pops right in there, turns around and kushes with Osborne dropping next to him taking up the remaining space. They were all super impressed on how well trained these guys were. So I'd puff out my chest and proclaim that, "... all my llamas are trained in this manner." Inside the van I'm thinkin' "pheeeeeew!" they finally got it after all this time of traveling!!



After a half day of playing tourist at Bridges we sloooooowly drove NW along State Rd 95. The White Canyon, which is on the NE side of the road, was impressive! Now we have found another spot to visit for future northern hemisphere winter solstices.

Then came the overlook of Glen Canyon!! One thing about this area is not having trees. Sure gives you some faaaaaaantastic views. And, they have an airport near by. Now I'm thinkin', "How can I convince Miz Maggie to fly down here for a week of trekking?" MM is my "want to do everything" llama, and I will be training her to fly with me in my Cessna 172. You'll have to read our Christmas letter on our web page to understand a bit about her.



With not much daylight remaining we head up to Hanksville, all the time looking for a good spot to turn off the road and find a place to stay for the night. Up in this area it's like being on a high plateau. We check out a few places, but none feel "just right". But good things come to those not in a rush. We come on this site that has great grass for the llamas just a few miles out of town. The moon's full now, and casts an eerie light on the surrounding desert. Living out of the van brings back the old routines of our past retirement. Cooking supper and then retiring to the captains chairs to read by the light of the 2-burner Coleman lantern. We manage to stay up until 10:00pm before slithering into the sleeping bags. The nights are much warmer. One does not need to draw the cord tight on the hood of the sleeping bag. And, having a mattress to sleep onthis is winter camping!

Thursday, December 27th brings on another nice sunny day. We pack things up and head into Hanksville for petrol and fresh produce. I drop BJ off at the market while I gas the van at a unique station. The pumps are no different than any other, but the station building was not a building. They had excavated the inside of a huge boulder! This is the stuff post cards are made off. I talk with the proprietor about our previous night south of town. He indicated the area we were had a lot of fossilized remains. This explains our excitedness while rock hunting before supper.

Next stop on our whirlwind tour, Capital Reef National Park. We spend 2 hrs doing a drive about through the steep sided canyons. Here again, the llamas and dogs where not welcomed to tour with us by foot. We move onward and make the turn NE with the intention of checking out other areas or doing something in the Flaming Gorge National Recreation area. But, a weather report of snow on Friday and Saturday with high winds started doing mind games with us: "Carlsons go home!" or "Stop now and see how things go!". We decided to continue on and see what might look interesting enough to stop and smell the dormant sagebrush. Heading up to Flaming Gorge we heard the weather for Rock Springs was to get worse. And true enough to form, when we motored into Rock Springs the wind was howling at 32 mph. Not conducive to having the llamas out in the open or sleeping in the van. So what do we do here in this situation? It's 7:30pm, winds are howling, and it's another 6 - 7 hrs to get home. Camp or drive home? Camp or drive home?

BJ has the captain's chair reclined all the way back, and the woodpile is growing. Magnus has his head over Osborne's back and seems to be "Lights out" for him while Osborne has his head on BJ's captain's chair blowing sweet nothings in her ear. I don't now how he does it? I can never get away with it! The dogs.they haven't roused in hours.

Time to switch the body and mind to "the Long Haul" mode. Since this much wind is howling I won't have to worry about deer acting out the answer to the question..."Why'd the deer cross the road?" So the "Rubber Duck" (remember the trucking song?) plodded on at 65 mph.

With only a stop at Boysen State Park to change drivers and let everyone stretch, we were off again. BJ takes over the PIC duties (that's Pilot In Command for you non-pilot types), and after a bit makes a comment about this great place to stay overnight, "This place has a great Guest House, the proprietors love llamas, and I believe we could stay there for free because of my close association with them." I turn my head

to her; pull my stocking hat above my left eye, check to see the seriousness of her expression, and answer, “Yah, Right.” (She is referring to our Shangri-la back in Burlington)

I woke in time to see a yellow sign on the right side of the road, “**Llama Xing**”. BJ pulls into the driveway under the ranch sign “**Wayfaring Traveler Ranch**” at 2:00am. We unload the guys, remove their halters (they were thankful for that after having them on for a week straight), and put them in the big corral where there should have been a mess of others to greet them, but, they must have had settled on pasture camping for the night. I’m about ready to start tearing everything out of the car when BJ says, “Hey hon. Come over this way with me.” She leads me to our Guest House. Instead of waking Jim, our ranch sitter, BJ thought it better judgment to keep the trip alive a bit longer by staying someplace warmer.



After a week without cleansing the outer body I was ready for a shower. I turn the shower on, in the Guest House, and let it run a bit for the hot stuff to move through the pipes. After a minute or two I’m thinkin’ something’s wrong here, no hot stuff is coming through ... Now what’s wrong? The brain was still in the “Long Haul” mode and not ready to deal with repairs, when it dawned on me, we leave the hot water off until guests arrive. I’m in a zone out. The resolve, take some aspirin, get under the covers and let the dream catcher do its work.

The trip ends with us waking to the “Woo, Woo, Woooooo” of our male ostrich, Heathcliff. It was soooooo great to wake-up and not go through the camping routine. You didn’t hear that from me!

So, “When is a Winter Trip NOT a Winter Trip?” I’d like to think anytime you’ve got weather that is sunny and warm during the day, your teeth aren’t chattering all the time, you don’t have to worry whether or not your body can make the sacrifice of staying in the sleeping bag a bit longer, and it’s not below 0°F the entire time, you’re comin’ awful close. When you’re from the northern stretches of the USA that means South is the direction to head. And, if you do, I’d recommend that SE section of Utah.

► BJ and Mike Carlson are the owners of the Wayfaring Traveler Ranch outside Burlington, WY. They are transplanted Midwesterners who decided that the Wyoming way of life suited them. Their love of animals and past outdoors experiences in the mountains readily lends itself to their endeavor of providing wayfarers with restful accommodations, trekking with llamas, and organic produce. Visit their menagerie @ <http://www.tctwest.net/~wtr>