



In Search of Quiet

AN EARLY WINTER'S JOURNEY TO ARTIST POINT

Story and photo by John D'Onofrio · Wednesday, December 13, 2006



Don't let the noise and bluster of the parking lot fool you. There is quiet to be found at the end of the trail. That particular quiet unique to places that have lost themselves beneath a thick and acoustically profound blanket of snow, the almost preternatural silence of lonely and high places. The hush that makes you feel the need to whisper.

Serious quiet.

The parking lot at the upper lodge at Mt. Baker is of course anything but quiet. The air is filled with the roaring of engines, the throbbing of sub-woofers and the high-pitched noises of joy that children make when they play in snow.

The parking lot is busy. On a winter weekend after the white stuff has been flying (which is of course, *most* winter weekends) the downhill ski area is rocking. Everybody wants a piece of the action and in this neck of the woods the action is at Mt. Baker. As the reputation of "our" mountain continues to grow, the pilgrims are ever more numerous. They come in search of good times and memorable endorphin rushes and they usually find both in abundance.

We're looking for something else however. We're after the quiet, remember?

So, we clip into our cross country skis and glide up into the midst of the hustle and bustle. Our journey to the stillness begins in the heart of the maelstrom as we shuffle our way up the slopes. Skiers and boarders whistle past us every few seconds. We are salmon, swimming upstream against the current of Gore-Tex, fleece and I-pods.

At last we reach the long awaited sign; you know the one, the one that sternly warns us that beyond this point we are out of the ski area and very definitely on our own. I love the part about my heirs being billed for failed rescue attempts. Like the sign in the Wizard of Oz, it should simply say, "I'd Turn Back If I Was You".

But of course, we don't turn back. The route ahead is safe enough unless avalanche conditions are severe, which today, luckily they're not. So, on we go, leaving the hue and cry of the ski area behind us. We ascend to the wonderland of Austin Pass with its million dollar view of Shuksan rearing up into the sky above the Swift Creek Valley. I've stopped for lunch in more scenic locales, but not often.

Onward and upward! The route from here follows the summer road and before long we find ourselves atop Kulshan Ridge at the ever so aptly named Artist Point. The thing to do now is to maneuver the elegant bumps and grinds of the ridge to its highest spot; Huntoon Point, where the great white sea of peaks is revealed in all of its glory.

Here is the marquee view of the magnificent North Cascades.

Here is the cold and cleansing winter wind, fresh off of the glaciers.

Here is the quiet.

Artist Point is accessed from the upper lodge at the Mt. Baker Ski area. Ski up along the path of the summer road through the ski area or follow the steeper "short cut" that angles up to the right towards Austin Pass. Bear right at the Pass and either continue to follow the snowed over road to Kulshan Ridge or cut diagonally up the final slope. There have been avalanches at the last switchback below the ridge so exercise care. As a rule, the area to the west of Kulshan Ridge (Table Mountain and Ptarmigan Ridge) is avalanche prone and should be avoided. Exercise caution under all conditions – watch out for tree wells and white-outs.