

WEEKLY

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The Joys of Sastrugi

MOONLIGHT ON THE TATOOSH

Story and photo by John D'Onofrio · Wednesday, March 16, 2011



Many years ago I developed an appreciation for *sastrugi*.

I first encountered the term in the journals of doomed Antarctic explorer Robert Falcon Scott. As you may recall, his 1913 attempt on the South Pole ended in catastrophe. He reached the Pole only to discover that his competitor, the wily Norwegian Roald Asmundsen, had been there first.

Asmundsen had used dog sleds, taking his cue from the natives of the northern Polar Regions. Scott deployed ponies. Bad idea.

Arriving at the pole and finding a Norwegian flag there must have been the ultimate buzz-kill in the long and storied history of exploration. All members of Scott's polar party perished on the return journey. His journal, steeped in melancholia, remains a classic tale of misguided optimism and hubris, a cautionary tale for the ages.

But I digress. *Sastrugi*, or alternately, *Zastrugi* (from the Russian) are the ornate patterns formed in the snow by fierce winds. Under the right conditions they compose themselves in remarkable swirls and spirals, finely honed shark fins or gracefully rippled terraces.

Even in his desperate state, Scott waxed poetically (for him) about the phenomenon: "The *sastrugi* are getting more confused..."

A confusion of *sastrugi*? I was hooked.

Once I began to notice them, I became a connoisseur. Here in the northern mountains, *sastrugi* can be found on particularly exposed wind-blown slopes. The high exposed reaches of Mt. Rainier seemed likely to be *sastrugi* heaven. I aimed to find out.

We climbed up from Paradise and its throngs of blissed-out snow worshipers. Joe and I, wearing our plastic MSR snowshoes with aggressive crampons, headed straight up the tilted snow while Donn, in his 50-year-old moose hide and birch wood snowshoes (each the size of Argentina) was relegated to a more circuitous route. I couldn't be sure, but I thought I heard some potentially blasphemous muttering coming from his general direction; so much for antiques.

The sky was a brazen blue and the sun bright and warm. We ascended the last pitch to the top of a ridge—Alta Vista—and gained views in all directions. Rainier, resplendent and dominating, crowded the sky. But the Tatoosh Range, spreading across the southern horizon always surprises me, dark fangs lined up like a fierce yet somber army.

We carved out a flat spot for the tent and set out to explore the immediate vicinity. Sure enough, the *sastrugi* were everywhere, carved in sinuous and fanciful shapes by the breath of the north wind, like miniature canyons of pale blue.

At day's end, mist rose from the valleys in purple curtains. The full moon rose and the great glaciers above us on Rainier were burnished in cold, crystalline light. The Tatoosh were like a dream dipped in moon-syrup, a strange milky-white. All around us the snow was covered in moon sparkles.

I sat out in the moonlight as long as I could, ignoring the cold, prolonging the pure moment. My heart was filled with the winter music of the mountains, even if my feet were, I admit, a little cold. Eventually, the siren's call of soft down could not be resisted. I bid adieu to the prayer-quiet night and crawled into my sleeping bag, welcoming the warmth of dreams.

