



**A quiet moment on Lake Viviane. The Enchantments offer solitude and serenity in big doses.**

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# Land of Enchantments

A sojourn in search of mountains and myth in the Enchantments

"He who knows the most, he who knows... the ground, the waters, the plants, the heavens, and how to come at these enchantments, is the rich and royal man."

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

One hears a lot of talk regarding "must see" mountain destinations. The Canadian Rockies. The French Alps. The Karakoram.

In our neck of the woods, much of such talk focuses on the Enchantments, a slice of the Alpine Lakes Wilderness that lies just south of U.S. Highway 2, near Leavenworth. Travelers come from around the world to prostrate themselves before the great granite faces, to scale the cloud-swaddled fangs of rock and to immerse themselves in a mysterious and alluring alpine mythology.

The word on the Enchantments is that you absolutely must make a pilgrimage to these high and splendid mountains before you die.

The word is true.

The sculpted granite landscape is the stuff that gives birth to legends. Norse sagas. Tolkien-esque misty mountains. Kingdoms gone and yet to come. The names themselves speak to the myths: Lakes named Rune and Valkyrie and Naiad. For reasons that are inexplicable

(too hard to spell?), the Forest Service, in its infinite wisdom, changed some of these names in the last century. But the new names, while not quite so esoteric, still make the point: Lakes Inspiration, Isolation and Perfection. Merlin's Tower. Excalibur. Dragontail Peak.

You get the idea.

And of course, in autumn there are the larch trees, bright yellow and orange beneath the knifepoint spires, lit by the late-season sun like a Maxfield Parrish painting. The landscape of dreams.

Barb, my erstwhile traveling companion, and I have a Big Idea. We plan to spend a week in this spellbinding wilderness to experience the magic, to find the heart of the myth. At September's end, we also hope to time our arrival with the turning of the larches.

The skies are leaden as I hoist my pack at the Snow Lakes trailhead and head up the path, burdened by the faux Bavarian breakfast I had in Leavenworth that steepens the grade. We climb beneath Snow Creek Wall and on up beside the creek. As we reach the shore of Nada Lake, a light snow begins to fall. We stop, string a small tarp and make tea. The silence is ethereal. We drink our tea and decide to camp here beside the snow-softened lake. To

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the west, rocky turrets appear high above the surface of the lake and then they're gone again, lost in the swirling clouds and dancing snow. A great plume of water issues forth from the Snow Lakes above, spray carried fancifully by the wind.

In the morning everything is frosted. We break camp and hike along the shore of Nada Lake, then climb up through a gargantuan rock slide to the shores of the aptly named Snow Lakes. We make our way through the snow-dappled forest and begin climbing in earnest through dwindling trees and up into the granite country of the High Enchantments. We haul our overstuffed backpacks up root-choked gullies, over rock slabs and across slickrock slopes. Three hours of this brings us to the final push up a granite incline to the crystalline shores of Lake Viviane.

We string a small tarp in a sandy alcove among the rocks at the water's edge. As the evening approaches, the clouds roll away and the sky clears. A cold wind blows from across the lake, and we don all of our warm clothes and watch the sun go down as the reflections of the towering granite cliffs drift on the lake. Mist rolls across the surface of the water as the light fades and the temperature drops. Everything freezes up beneath the glittering stars.

In the morning the skies are blue and the fresh alpine air is filled with cold sunshine. We load our packs and work our way across a tenuous log jam at the outlet of the lake, gain the other side and climb ice-slicked granite.

**Leprechaun Lake,  
surrounded by  
granite and larches.**

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Past Leprechaun and Sprite Lakes we negotiate the steps of the wild rockscape, finally dropping our packs on the austere shore of Perfection Lake. We ascend the climbers' path to Prusik Pass and then trek cross-country across boulders and snow to a high saddle. Above us Prusik Peak soars, its picturesque face rising to an awesome knifepoint above the surrounding spires. Below us the scattered lakes sparkle in their deep cradles of stone, and the exquisite larches glow, backlit by the late afternoon sun. Somewhere in the indiscernible distance a lone coyote yips and howls, its lonely song held on the wind.

We descend to Perfection Lake in the fading light, set up the tent on the rocky shore and watch the stars dance in the cold sky.

Morning dawns clear and cold; water bottles are iced up. We load our day packs and climb the rocks to the heartbreakingly beautiful Inspiration Lake, its rocky shoreline rimmed with new snow. We follow the trail along the shore and then ascend a rocky slot up boulders and icy snow into the upper basin. A new panorama of lakes and mountains spreads itself below us as we work our way up onto the high plateau dotted with half-frozen tarns, gingerly testing snow bridges across the multitude of sinuous streams that connect them.

We reach the mostly frozen Isolation Lake in midmorning, its floating ice a serene blue. One can debate the old name/new name argument, but this morning Isolation seems right to us. Clouds are gathering around the upthrust fangs of Dragontail Peak as we ascend yet another step of the plateau to Aasgard Pass, the highest point of the upper trail.

We spend the afternoon wandering beneath the towering ice-encrusted peaks amongst the sculpted granite. Water is everywhere, flowing through smooth chutes of polished stone in elegant tapestries. Graceful snowfields merge with the wind-ruffled surfaces of icy tarns, reflecting low billowing clouds streaming amongst looming black peaks. We walk through otherworldly mosaics of stone and descend to mist-softened gardens of heather as the cold chastening wind blows across the empty highlands.

As the clouds continue to descend, we follow their lead and make our way down giant stone slabs back to Inspiration Lake. We glissade down a snowbank back to camp. As the wind rises, we make dinner and slide into the tent as rain begins to fall.

We rise and make coffee as the rain drifts through the spindly trees. After breakfast we load our packs and set off down the trail back towards Lake Viviane through misty rock-and-larch landscapes. It's as if we are in a Japanese watercolor, the surroundings indistinct and muted. At Leprechaun Lake we find a perfect bad-weather campsite on a small peninsula of stone and lash our tarp to a boulder to





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construct an inviting little storm-proof grotto. The mist blows around the gnarled forms of half-seen trees and visibility drops to almost nil. We venture out from our snug little shelter and explore the lakeshore in a profound silence, enraptured by the stillness. It's like walking in a dream.

The rain stops in late afternoon, the sun breaks through and the lake sparkles and shimmers, its surface mirroring serrated ridges and gleaming wet stone. We eat dinner beneath a modest smattering of stars and drift off to sleep listening to the subtle music of the wind.

The morning is glorious—sweet warm sunshine bathes the smooth stones that form our breakfast nook. A solitary raven flies across the lake, the pulse of its beating wings echoing in the rocky amphitheatre.

We climb up the rocks to a point overlooking both Leprechaun Lake and the more Gothically severe Viviane and bask in the morning sun, surveying the undulating granite waves of the lower basin, softened by the feathery golden larches. Moving easily over the rocks I find that a subtle shift has occurred—I am flowing with the terrain instead of struggling over it. Truly going with the flow. There is a deep and

profound joy in the moment, contentment and a fully realized sense of place. A perfect moment. Enchantment.

I shoulder my pack and it feels light and good on my back. We commence the descent down the steep rocks, reentering the forest with its soft textures of fallen needles and good, brown dirt, down to Nada Lake where we drop our packs for one last camp.

We eat dinner, tell stories and laugh hard, like people do when they're exactly where they want to be. Barb ducks into the tent and I sit beneath a tree, writing by headlamp. Now and again I turn it off so that I can look at the stars. The moon rises through the clouds, casting an otherworldly light on the dark forest and the night breezes animate the shadows all around me.

We have walked amongst the mythic spires and breathed deeply the wild and purifying wind. We've rejoiced in the impressionistic colors of sunlit larches and observed the season's first snows as summer fades to autumn.

Enchantment indeed.

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**Hiker Barb Hanson negotiates the ascent of "Trauma Rib."**