

Flatiron and Superstition Mountain - Arizona

Difficulty:	Class 3
Summit Elev.:	5,024 feet
Trailhead Elev.:	2,010 feet
Elevation Gain:	3,015 feet
Round Trip:	6.5 miles
Trailhead:	Siphon Draw in the Lost Dutchman State Park

Climbers: Rick Crandall; Wayne Crandall

May 16, 2015

The Legends:

Superstition Mountain, located east of Phoenix, is famous for the Lost Dutchman's Mine where "*millions of dollars' worth of gold*" is allegedly hidden, but has never been verified. According to the legend, Jacob Waltz, a German immigrant, discovered a mother lode of gold in the Superstition Wilderness and revealed its location on his deathbed in Phoenix in 1891 to Julia Thomas, a boarding-house owner who had taken care of him for years. This mine is still undiscovered.

The history and reputation of this mountain is varied, to say the least. Many have searched for the mysterious mine. But this is sacred ground. People disappear and mysterious deaths occur. That's just one reason why it's called Superstition Mountain.

Local farmers constantly heard stories from the Pima Indians how they feared this mountain. The farmers thought the Pimas were superstitious about the mountain hence another reason for the name Superstition Mountain.

Some Apache Indians believe that the hole leading down into the lower world, or Hell, is located in the Superstition Mountains. Winds blowing from the hole are supposed to be the cause of severe dust storms in the metropolitan region. The Apaches say a Thunder God protects the mountain. Each summer (during the monsoons that travel up to Colorado by mid-afternoons) the great Thunder God roars his loudest, creating thunderstorms like no other, announcing his control over the mountain.



Then there are the UFOs. It has been claimed that the Superstitions are the home of an under-ground base for aliens determined to abduct and probe us. And, of course, there are some who say that's just what happened to them.

The Superstitions from near trailhead (on our way out when weather cleared); Saguaro cactus in front.

The “Actual” Mountain

Scientifically, the mountain was formed from volcanic activity as far back as 25 million years ago. The ash and basalt-composed mountain was eroded by the elements to give it the unique form of multiple pillars it has today, creating the prominent landmark

Old-timers will tell you everything that survives in the approach-desert wilderness “*either sticks, stings, bites or eats meat.*” This is an age-old description about survival in such a harsh environment. This is a land where life is totally dependent on the availability of water. The desert is a place where water will appear one day and vanish the next day. Temperatures on the desert floor can exceed 125 degrees F in the summer months and heat reflection off the rock creates an oven for climbers.

Part of the formation, about 250’ below the summit and not far to the South, is an unusual tilted mesa called the Flatiron. It is literally an iron-shaped geologic feature that is the destination goal of most who make the attempt. Views from the Flatiron are indeed stunning. In fact, the scenery all the way up is equally stunning. For a Coloradan – new challenges present themselves.

My readers will know I always become a student of a climb before going – so the first thing I did was to take counsel from those knowledgeable about **rattlesnakes**, definitely an Arizona hazard. I was cautioned to listen for the rattle most (but not all) snakes will warn, and circumvent. I was implored not to kill a rattlesnake, because killing the snakes who do rattle, will evolve to a time when most



Jumping Cholla along the path. Those fallen balls of spines are almost like magnets.



Agave “swords” stiff, sharp and with serrated edges

snakes left won’t rattle their warning – survival of the fittest – that would be bad for us humans!

Wayne warned me about the **Jumping Cholla** (pronounced choya) cactus that was indeed everywhere. They really don’t jump but they detach in thistle balls so readily it seems you only need to get close and you’re nailed – including right through your clothing. Once in, the spikes are very painful and they don’t remove. I touched a few with my hiking poles and they seemed to fly off their branches.

Then there’s the **Agave** – the plant, not the processed version (Tequila). The plant is also used by Indians for soap, food, medicine and weapons. These cacti have sword-like leaves that are no less sharp or less lethal than real swords – and they literally block your path. Anyone attempting to brush past them will be sorry – they don’t budge and they stick and cut. So while this may be second nature to an Arizonian, visitors need to heed the warnings.

The Climb

The hike and climb to the summit of Superstition Mountain is reputed to be the toughest in the area. Indeed it is not easy and should not be attempted by anyone who is either not fit or who has knee, joint or back issues. More than half of the route is quite steep, ranging from Class 2 Difficult to some Class 3 rock-climbing pitches. Coming down, as usual, is tougher on the body than going up. Also route-finding is necessary in places since Web-based route descriptions are sparse.

It being May with snow still occasionally falling in the Colorado Mountains (hence too early for climbing) I decided to visit my brother Wayne in Phoenix and do an early-season climb there. Of course it's not early season in Phoenix, in fact it's usually already quite hot, but we got lucky with the weather. I arrived on a Friday when it was unusually raining cats and dogs which continued on the early part of our climb on Saturday, but then cleared making for a super climbing day. The other good news is that the cooler weather encourages rattlesnakes to stay home – wherever that is.

Here's one description of most of the route (to the Flatiron) from an Arizonian:

Best Badass Hike in Phoenix - The Flatiron

"Well, meet the Flatiron, sucka. It'll kick your hubric booty. This and Superstition Mountain is a climb that is one nasty bee-yatch. The tallest point in the Valley, there's an elevation gain of over 3000'. These figures would make a Himalaya vet chortle, but they don't tell the whole story, and we'd like to see a snow-head tackle it in, say, August in the heat. We'll see who chortles last.

The appropriately-named formation called the Flatiron — it looks, for all the world, like an iron — rests haughtily at 4,800 feet, near the pinnacle of the Superstition Mountains, the summit itself. The elevation at the jumping-off point, the Siphon Draw trailhead, is about 2,000'. Math says: two Camelbacks up, two Camelbacks down. Uh . . . ouch."

Part I: Siphon Draw Hike: a 6:20am Start

The Siphon Draw Trailhead at 2000' elevation, is easy to locate, with parking and an entry fee of \$7.



Rick at trailhead with the Superstitions behind in the clouds – rain clouds.

The hike known as Siphon Draw is aptly named for its ability to drain off water from a large area of Superstition Mountain. Just a light amount of rain siphons water over the feature you reach at the end of this 1.6 mile hike segment – a huge amphitheater-like basin of slick rock. There's an attendant at the Trailhead warning that when wet the slick rock is slick – and naturally we had to experience that on one of the rare rainy mornings in Phoenix. The hike to the basin is pleasant with a gradual 1020' elevation gain on a well-prepared path. The trail becomes steeper as it begins to climb towards the slick-rock draw.



Continue hiking right into the slick rock area. You definitely can't miss it. You will find a mini-waterfall after a rainy night, which we certainly had.

Wayne at the waterfall

As one guide says: *"Keep in mind this area is a wee-bit scary with a wet surface. Be careful! This is the turnaround point for anybody in their right mind when wet."*

The skies began to clear and we started to get the full visual impact of what the day had in store for us.



Beyond the waterfall and up the slick-rock amphitheater.

From another trip report:

"The slick-rock is at 1020' up from trailhead. The heartaches begin at the 1,021st foot. There, you're greeted by a vertical view of what's in store for the next, oh, mile and 1,800 vertical feet or so. Now, 1,800 feet in one puny mile is pretty vertical — in fact, it don't get much straighter up than that. More daunting still, the path (loosely termed) follows a natural drainage littered with giant boulders and prickly flora. Make sure you spot the blue or white dots before ascending. If the rocks are way too slippery, or you're causing numerous rock slides, chances are you missed the right route and must waste time going back to the "suggested" way!

Part II: To the Flatiron

The basin is the turnaround point for the Siphon Draw hike. The next segment is the climb to Flatiron. Continue up the slick rock. At the top, numerous trails make the right path confusing. Look up above you and you'll see the huge rock outcropping of Flatiron - the trail passes up a draw to the left of this prominent formation.



Continue up the canyon to the right of the waterfall area. If you haven't figured out what the Flatiron is, it's that huge mass looming over your head to the right.



Eventually you'll top out on a mini rise where you'll see three vertical canyons leading to the top. Take the far right canyon up to the Flatiron. Here's where the mix of bouldering and rock-climbing begins and goes for a long way. It's a big 1750' up to the Flatiron.

Wayne: "This ain't hiking any more!"



Rick's loving it too. Monster boulders, rock walls – pretty soon I got so engrossed I completely forgot about rattlesnakes, scorpions and other creepy-crawleys. The weather was too cool for them and just right for us.



Finally we came upon the highly-advertised nearly vertical wall. I found the best way up it with the best hand and footholds was all the way on the right and half-way up traversing to the middle.

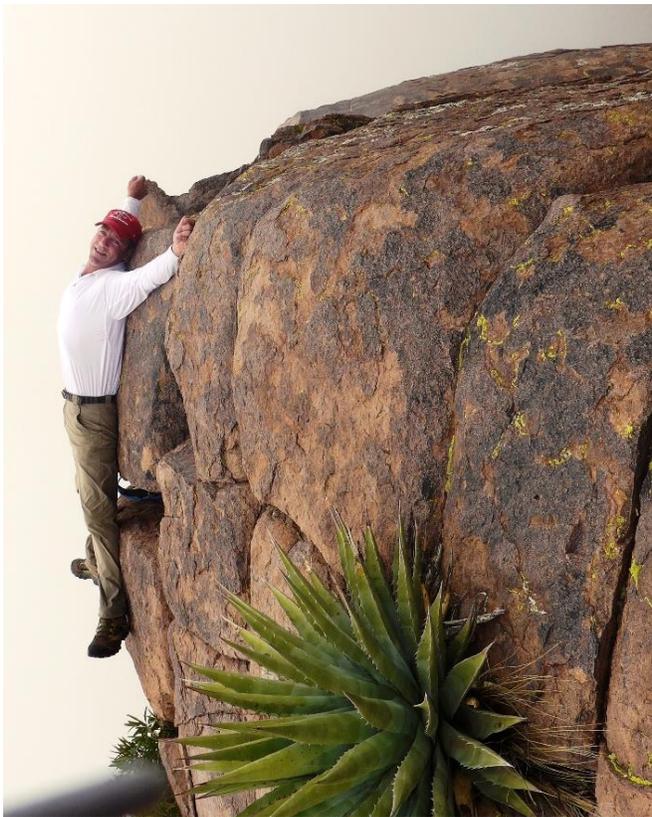
Here is the middle part:



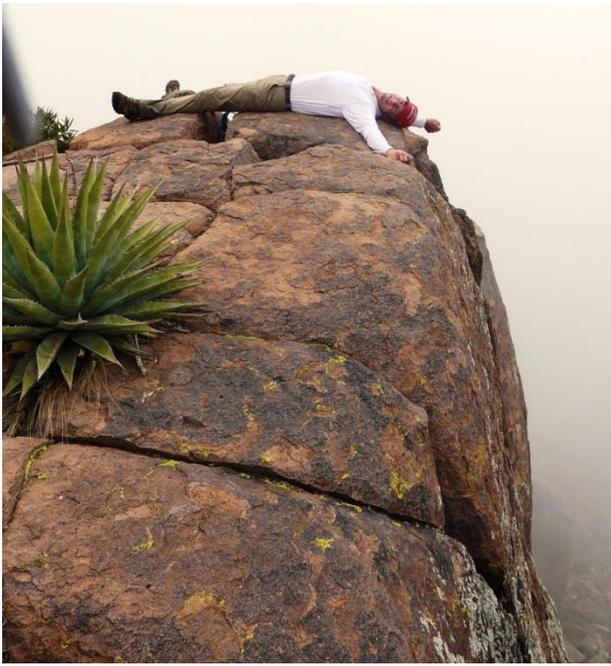
For those who will do this climb, I do need to stress that if you go for a while without seeing a white or blue dot painted on a rock, you're probably off-course and that won't end well, so you need to reverse and find the right way. We did that once and had to do some down-climbing and cactus-dodging to get on the right trail. Above the wall, the slope tapers – you should be far to the left of the Flatiron where the trail becomes well-defined and then leads sharply to the right and ...



**Wayne summiting Flatiron
4750' at 9:45 am, 3 hours 25
minutes and 2,750' up from
trailhead.**



I got there a few minutes later and he was already clowning around!



... actually that's me clowning around by rotating the photo of Wayne in his favorite position.



It felt good getting to the Flatiron although when we first arrived it was totally in cloud and we saw nothing. We pulled out a sandwich, ate and drank and in a half hour the cloud passed and there was Phoenix before us!

Part III: Superstition Mountain

We weren't done – we'd come to summit Superstition Mountain but at first we could hardly see it. I dragged out my papers I'd researched that were spotty at best, and saw what I thought was the



summit of Superstition Mountain and the faint path mentioned in the notes.

We headed towards the climb to summit. We did the cactus-ducking thing, the rock-climbing thing but never saw the cairns we were supposed to see and eventually concluded this wasn't right. We headed down and ran into a young dude aiming for the Flatiron who claimed he'd done the summit before. He insisted that we had been heading in the right direction.



Meanwhile the cloud dissipated and Wayne protested that a more distant summit looked like the real one.

Wayne climbing his way to near the summit – that dog-shaped rock near the top.



But I insisted re-trying what we did.



We got further to within only 8 or 10 feet from summiting the middle spire.

That last pitch entailed going up a crack that I judged was do-able but highly exposed to a vertical drop-off and we decided sensibly not to risk it.

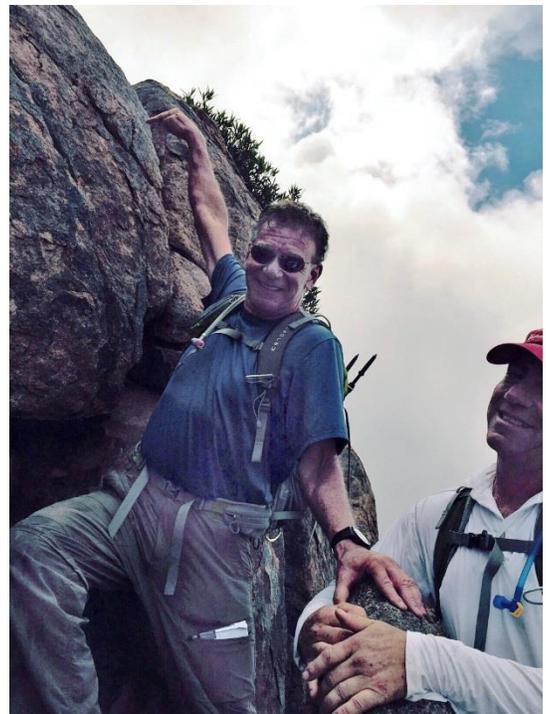
We were both disappointed we were so close to our goal, only feet away. I was already composing this story in my head about how we really did make it, sort of.

Wayne was determined to check out the summit to the further north of this cluster of spires. We got down to the path leading off the Flatiron, and he asked:

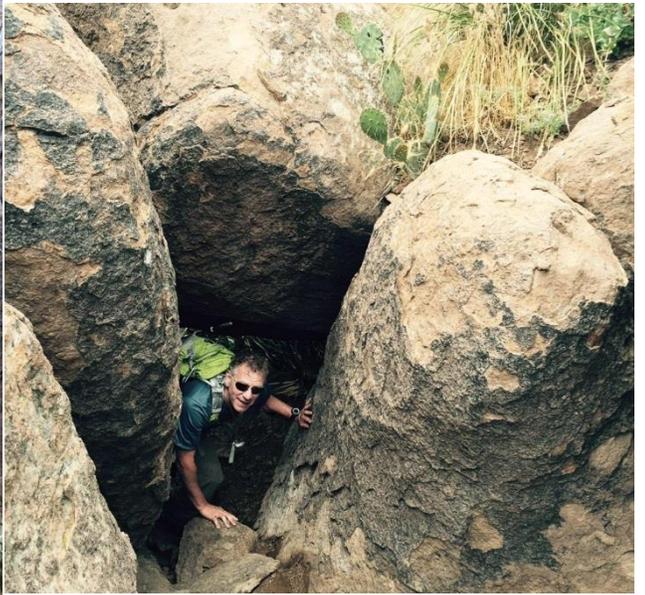
“Have you got any more in you to climb one more time?”

“Sure” I said, it was still only about 10:45am.

“Follow me.” Said Wayne.



Rick pointing to the crack he was thinking of going up – the summit was just feet above where I’m pointing.



Rick climbing and bouldering up towards what turned out to be the real summit.

Wayne found another trail, less obvious than the first one and past the point where you head down to the top of that wall we came up to the upper Flatiron trail. We headed up, lo-and-behold we saw cairns! My emotions were elevated – now maybe I wouldn't have to make excuses for not summiting after all! The wear and tear of the climb to Flatiron, and two attempts on a false summit quickly dissipated and we did a fun rock climb to what was becoming increasingly obvious was the real summit, Superstition Mountain summited CHECK!!



Wayne and Rick at the summit of Superstition Mountain, 11:30am,

Elevation 5,024' or 3015' above trailhead. Of course the real vertical gain was more due to the two prior false-summit attempts.

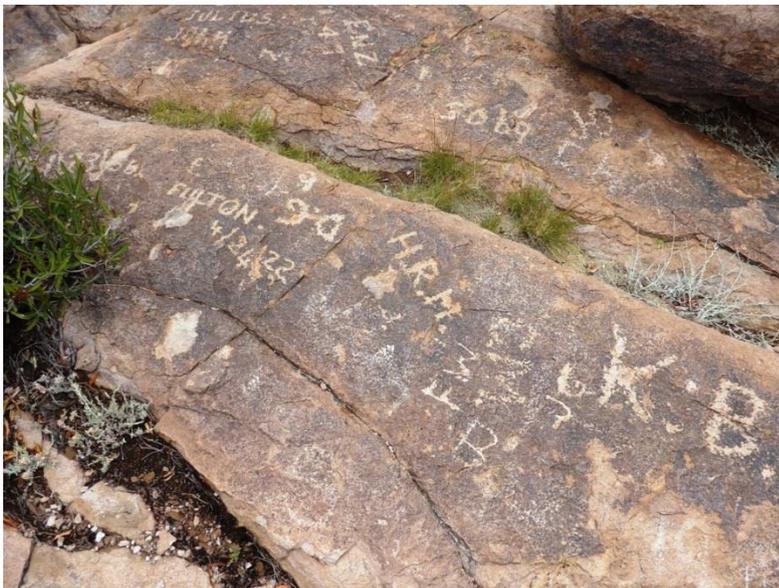
Wayne was prancing around on summit like a Peacock – “*What’s the two words? Gimme the two words!*” says he. “*You’re RIGHT*” says I and I think he experienced something sexual.

Indeed we were a good team all day – the route finding as well as how to ascend some tricky Class 3 pitches alternated between his judgement and mine and we did great together as a team – that made the day even more special.



Rick at the summit of Superstition Mountain pointing to the Flatiron which is approximately 250' below and to the south.

The weather cleared once again, and the views were fantastic.



Graffiti at the summit, from 1922, almost 95 years old.

By about 11:30am we headed down. As is the case with most climbs, we thought someone had stretched out the route between our ascent and descent, because down-climbing all those rocky pitches seemed to go on forever.

Wayne eventually was convinced his legs were made of rubber instead of skin and bones. Fortunately by the time we got down to the slick-rock basin it was dry and we could negotiate it without concern of slipping. From there it was an easy walk down another 1000' and 1.6 miles to the car.



Back at trailhead with the sun now fully out we felt some of the heat we never had to worry about on the climb – what a stroke of luck. The Flatiron is clearly visible in the distance. The Superstition Mountain summit is to the left and behind the imposing front range.

After a brief pause paying homage to a fantastic day on a mysterious and beautiful mountain, we headed to Wayne's house and his hot tub – which he'd already turned on remotely from his iPhone so that it would be hot and bubbly by the time we got there. Indeed it was.

There are many more climbing stories in the Colorado Fourteeners at www.RickCrandall.net