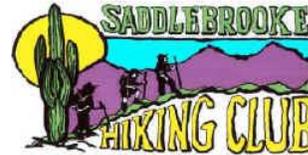


SaddleBrooke Hiking Club
Selecting the Right Hike
February 14, 2021



IS THAT THE RIGHT HIKE FOR ME?
HINT: IT IS NOT JUST ABOUT THE RATING AND DISTANCE

Most of us eagerly anticipate the new offering of hikes each 2-month period. We look over the list and make a determination about which hikes would be the best fit for our level of conditioning, experience and interest.

Over many years of hike leading I have on occasion asked my hikers how they go about choosing their hikes. Generally, they tell me they look at the hike rating (A,B,C,D), the distance and the location as the major factors that play into their decision making. Recently, I have had hikers signing up for hikes that are really not appropriate for them based on using just these criteria. It is important to know that each hike description also contains other very important data that should enter into our hike selection. Let's talk about those.

The enjoyment and safety of a hike is based on the energy we expend which is dependent upon: trailhead elevation, net elevation, accumulated gain, trail terrain, weather, (especially heat), pace of the hike and yes, distance. Trailhead elevation needs little explanation. Most of the hikes in our immediate area start at a base level of around 3,000 ft. Just be aware that a hike at higher altitudes with reduced oxygen levels, like on Mt Lemon, will be more difficult than a similar hike on the desert floor.

In Arizona, because hardly anything is flat, we rate our hikes based on distance and elevation. Let's look especially at how **net elevation** and **accumulated gain** should enter into our evaluation process? I think we can all agree that we expend less energy walking a longer distance on a flat surface than a shorter distance on a hill. Net elevation gives you a measure of how high it is from the lowest point on the hike to the highest point. A more important factor, however, is the accumulated gain which is the sum of all the uphill portions of the hike. It's important to get into the habit of evaluating your hike based on the accumulated gain relative to the net elevation because it will give you a clear picture of the profile of a hike. For instance, if the net elevation is 800 ft and the accumulated gain is 800 ft, you know that you will be on a steady uphill climb from the lowest point to the highest point on a hike with no dips in between – a really tough hike. Blackett's Ridge is a great example. The net elevation is 1668 ft and the accumulated gain only 65 ft more. Wow, I will be climbing pretty much straight up the whole way! That is going to be a sustained high energy output and I need to factor that into my thinking about whether this is an appropriate hike for me.

On the other hand, If the net elevation is 800 ft and the accumulated gain is 1,400 ft, I know that I will be ascending and descending a lot to reach the highest point. Even though I will be climbing an additional 600 ft to make up for the downhill portions, I will have periods of downhill to rest in between the climbs. This will be more of an undulating hike which overall may be less strenuous. Fortunately, most of our hikes are in this category.

Therefore, if you are using only rating and distance to evaluate your hikes you are not gaining a complete picture of the energy you will be expending. The Anza Trail in Rio Rico is C rated at 5 miles with minimal accumulated gain whereas the popular Alamo Canyon hike in Catalina State Park is D rated at 3.5 miles, but has 429 ft of accumulated gain. You should know by now that

you can plan on expending much more energy on the Alamo Canyon hike even though it has a lower rating

Also, look carefully at any hikes that have a *** designation. That means the hike has some special condition that warrants your attention. It usually pertains to a trail condition such as large loose rocks, large step ups or down, more exposure or there may be an off trail component. The reason for the asterisks is explained in the hike description.

In summary, hike rating and distance are important, but accumulated gain, net elevation and terrain should be major factors in choosing the best hike for you. Don't overlook them!

As always, if you have any concern about the suitability of a hike don't hesitate to contact the guide for more information.

Walt Shields

Active Guide
Former Chief Hiking Guide