

Quake Lake - Riding the Scar of Montana's Madison Slide

Contributed by Drew Pogge
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The mountain fractured and the slide began. Minutes later, amid terrible chaos, 28 people were dead and a landscape forever transformed.

No avalanche, the 1959 Madison Landslide was triggered by a 7.5 Richter earthquake on an August night in southwest Montana. The families and sportsmen camping below along the placid banks of the Madison River had no warning and no chance of escape; 80 million tons of mountain sheared off and crashed downward at 100 miles-per-hour. The stone tsunami pushed 400 feet up the north side of the valley and dammed the river above the slide, forming Earthquake Lake. Skeletons of a forest still protrude from the surface—190-foot deep Quake Lake is a reminder of the tragedy and a tomb for those buried beneath the jumbled tons.

Almost 50 years later, I shuffle my skis and look down at the snow covered gash and the slumping earthen debris pile still clogging the valley far below. A Chinook wind at my back pushes me forward with warm alacrity as I prepare to drop into The Slide.

Standing at the broken summit, it's difficult to imagine the entire mountainside releasing and crashing downward. The scar seems fresh 48 years later; few trees grow on the mostly raw dolomite surface. Topping the sharp ridge, sagebrush grows right up to the brink on the gently sloping south side. Where the sage ends is a ragged vertical drop to the north, an earthen crown where the mountain fell.

The snowpack is thin and variable, but a quick pit analysis determines that it's stable. The surface is a strange mix of windblown cream, light powder and dense breakable chalk; skiing is more education than recreation. But I'm not here for the snow. Struggling to link turns, I grimace at my clumsy efforts as the mountain shakes me down.

I slow at the brink of a steep rollover, and without warning the mountain fractures once again. Between my feet shoots an arcing crack and with a low rumble, the avalanche releases. I take a desperate, lunging step uphill and watch as a slab three feet thick accelerates with rapacious ferocity. The giant blocks of snow liquefy as they roar downhill and come to rest, filling a previously unknown moraine with 20 feet of rubble. I am left standing on a new 350-foot avalanche crown. The slide scoured the ground, exposing wickedly sharp, unweathered scree. We carefully make our way to the safety of the timber at the edge of the slide and ski to the base unscathed.

Looking up at my near miss, the duality is striking—a slide upon a slide. Revealed by the peeling layers of snow is the same mountain that roared down on helpless campers a half-century ago. I came to ski an interesting feature; a geographic freakshow steeped in history and tragedy. But I quickly realize this is no place to ski—I was a foot, a half-second, a mile-per-hour from joining the buried 28.

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