St Mary Peak is the pinnacle of the Flinders Ranges in South Australia. This is the story of how I beat the odds with hard work and determination to be able to climb to the summit of St Mary Peak from Wilpena Pound on one beautiful autumn morning.

Located just over 450 kilometres north of South Australia's picturesque capital city, Adelaide, The Lady of the Outback – St Mary Peak (Ngarri Mudlanha) rises an impressive 1170 meters (3839 ft) above sea level and is the pinnacle of the Flinders Ranges. Situated on the north-eastern rim of Wilpena Pound, the route to the top is accessible via a well-defined and sign-posted track, beginning at the Wilpena Pound Visitor Centre.

Mind Games

With comments from past summiteers of the peak – "*You will never make it, it is way too steep!*" – my mind was often overwhelmed with thoughts of – "*Hey, they must be right, I will never make this*" or "*They should know, they've already been to the top*". However, I knew deep down that if I put in that extra mile I *would* be capable of reaching the summit of St Mary Peak, just like back in 2008, when I was told that I had only 20% chance of regaining function in my legs, I would beat the odds.

Even more determined to reach the highest point within the Flinders Ranges, I planned a 3-month training program to not only strengthen my lower back, legs and increase my overall cardio fitness but to also eradicate all those internal negative thoughts that were cluttering up my mind.

Autumn was now well and truly at my doorstep, and with only 10 more days left until the big day I needed to step up the challenges. It was only when I had accomplished an 11 kilometre round trip to the summit of Mount Cavern (770m), combined with an 18km hike along the rocky track of Hidden Gorge within the Mount Remarkable National Park, Mambray Creek, that I was reassured that I was definitely ready to meet the Lady of the Outback – known simply as St Mary Peak.

Onwards and Upwards

My phone alarm went off at the ungodly hour of 2:00 am and although I had only managed about four hours of restless sleep I felt surprisingly awake. Overflowing with anticipation for the day ahead, I stepped out of my swag and onto a campsite bathed in the soft glow of a full moon. I could not have asked for a better start to the day.

After a hearty breakfast, countless vitamins, and triple-checking our backpacks one last time, we headed off towards the start of the track and our journey onwards and upwards. After initially thinking that the autumn morning would be relatively cool, we found it surprisingly warm, tropical in fact, and were already shedding the layers to cool down within the first kilometre.

Upon reaching the 2.5km point of the walk, the silhouetted outline of the peak was visible in the far-off distance; her sheer size still an overwhelming presence in the semi-darkness. What an absolute privilege it was to experience this magnificent environment in a completely different light – moonlight.

With *Saddle Rock* now only 2.5km ahead (the psychological halfway point towards the summit), the upcoming terrain suddenly changed from an effortless single track to a track littered with odd-sized rocks, boulders and vertical rock ledges – perfect for your common mountain goat. It was at this stage of the walk that I was truly thankful for my trusty walking poles, which have been a valued companion on many a long hike. The walking poles not only assisted in reducing the physical loads and stress endured on the body, but they also helped with balance and gave me that extra spring in my step.
Just prior to reaching the comforts of Saddle Rock we had one more obstacle to overcome, a sheer rock face where two hands for support are often not enough.

Thin Blue Line

Phew! We finally made it to the ridge of Saddle Rock, the midway point that separated us from the valley below. If it had not been obscured by darkness, I reckon the view from up here would have been spectacular.
The second leg of the journey started off remarkably easily, too easily in fact. Similar to the track near the valley floor, this track too disappeared and merged into a maze of large boulders and steep rocky ledges only metres after Saddle Rock. The only guidance now was from a labyrinth of strategically positioned blue reflectors on the rock faces up towards the summit – the thin blue line.
After spending another gruelling hour and nearly scrambling up the eastern face of this tangled web of rock ledges, unsteady table-tops and narrow rock formations, I unexpectedly found myself on an open plateau 1170 metres above sea-level and on the summit of *St Mary Peak*.

360° Perfection

The *Lady of the Outback* had been kind to us that beautiful autumn morning and, as I scanned across the moonlit valleys and far-reaching vistas of the Flinders Ranges, I was overcome with a mixture of relief, excitement and a feeling of total freedom that I was able to enjoy an adventure of such calibre in our very own backyard.
With a rising sun in the east and a full moon in the west, the 360° panoramic views of Wilpena Pound, Lake Torrens and the jagged backbone of the northern Flinders Ranges would forever be etched into my mind.

Heading Home

Two hours had come and gone and it was now time to pack up and head back down to the Pound. Although I could have stayed until nightfall on what felt like the top of the world, I knew that if we didn’t leave now we would be caught walking back in the heat of the midday sun.
As we headed back down to Saddle Rock we had two options: either retrace our steps back

down the shorter, steep descent from where we came; or, take the longer, less travelled southern route through the centre of the Pound back to the campsite. We decided on the second option through the Pound as my walking companion had not been down this path before. In hindsight, I think we should have decided on the first option and taken the path more travelled.
After a challenging hour-long trek along the lengthy and extremely rocky pathway to the lower rim of the valley, a rewarding lunch break, and then a further three hours of plodding across the wide-open Pound, we finally found our way back to where it had all begun.

Final Thought

After a well-deserved afternoon siesta, a hot dinner and a review of the day's photos, I thought to myself that without the inspiration, determination and hard work of 2008, this modest little adventure would not have been possible.

Debrief

- Thank you to *The Lady of The Outback* – without you this would not have been possible.
- When you feel a blister coming on, bandage it up straight away – I learnt the hard way.
- Carry a spare pair of socks on extended hikes – great foot recovery.
- Get decent walking poles – don't leave home without them.
- 4 litres of water was just enough – never underestimate your water consumption.
- Take a healthy lunch and plenty of low GI snacks – avoid those hunger flats.
- Ensure you have a jacket (windbreaker), cap and beanie – it was cold at the top.
- Pack the essentials:
  - Fully Charged Camera
  - Good Binoculars
  - Quality Head Torch + Spare Batteries
  - First Aid Kit + Whistle
  - GPS – Waypoints at the Ready
  - UHF – just in case
  - Spare Batteries
  - Adventure and Fun!