

ROUTE FOR MT. CONSTANCE, UPPER PORTION

By Cebe Wallace

Hands down, my favorite local climb is Mount Constance in the eastern Olympics. Known to her devotees as The Goddess, she is courted only with great effort and care, but rewards her suitors amply. Seen from Seattle, Constance is the massive peak to the right of The Brothers, the one that ramps up to the right, then falls off abruptly on the north end.

The best campsite is beautiful Lake Constance.

NOTE: Permits are needed and places are limited. Get reservations from Olympic National Park

A washout on the Dosewallips road adds five miles to the approach, followed by the infamous Lake Constance trail, gaining 3400' in just two miles. Camp at the lake in the company of goats. The climb is a classic rugged mountaineering route, long and quite exposed in places, not technical or needing much hardware, but demanding skill and careful movement. Most of the elevation is gained up steep scree or snow slopes, after which the route traverses several notches and gullies, including one officially known as the Terrible Traverse. Final scree slopes lead to the summit block of solid dark basalt pillow lava. The exposed final pitch leads to a very airy summit with 360° views of the interior Olympics, the Strait of Juan de Fuca, Seattle, the Sound and the Cascades. Constance is a big mountain and she feels like one.

(Ref. Olympic Mountains Climbing Guide, 4th ed., pp 109-115)

Check the Olympic Mountains Climbing Guide for approach and lower part of the climb. I recommend the S Chute, Route 1. The book's description is good. However, here is more detailed info on the upper portion, where route finding is difficult, starting with arrival at the terrible traverse.

If the TT is in good shape, it's the most direct. What's terrible is not the traverse but the runout, a funnel leading to a 500' cliff. With novices I have used a fixed line there; experienced parties will just cross with care. Late in the season the TT snowfield retreats enough that you can just walk beneath it on rock and heather benches.

If you think the TT is out of shape or too dangerous for your party, the classic alternate is the finger traverse but it should be protected, hence is slow. Here's a better alternative, the Steve Leslie variation on p. 115 of the 4th edition. It avoids both the TT and the Finger Traverse.

- Find the beginning (the S end) of the Finger Traverse
- Then turn L (W) and go up and over the ridge crest in an easy place (easy scrambling) to the W side.
- Turn R (N) and slightly descend easy terrain to a chimney/crack with a chockstone
- Descend the crack (15 - 20') - we rigged a fixed line with cordelette and slings, and had climbers clip into to it, then left it in place for the return.
- Follow ledges around the corner to the R (E) a short way. Here you will see the far (N) end of the finger traverse.

There the two routes join. To proceed to the summit:

- Descend L a few yards to a notch at the top of a large steep snow or scree slope
- We rigged a fixed rope here to descend the steepest part of the snow and left it in place for the return.
- Below the snow, descend E to large talus (the Terrible Traverse is to your R here)
- Go up and E on a broad ledge (like a high angle sidewalk) at the base of a vertical wall (beautiful lichen on the rock here, and Flett's Violets in season)
- At top of ledge turn L (N or NE) and ascend dirt/snow/scree to a headwall.
- Scramble to crest of headwall, then follow it R (E) to its end near the SE corner of the summit block
- Take easy ledges around the E, then N sides of the headwall's base
- Scramble up to NW corner of summit block
- Climb about 40' of solid 4th class rock, then scramble to the summit. We put in a fixed line here; experienced climbers will scramble it up and down.

It's a great mountain. Have fun.