earth plummets precipitously 2,000 feet downwards in all directions to the Superstition Mountain floor with sheer and jagged cliffs for the first few hundred feet. We share the rugged summit with the skeletons of agave stalks which were visible ghostly silhouettes from miles away.

Recent rainfalls have left this normally barren desert in a seasonally verdant state of splendor. Green grass carpets much of the rocky volcanic soils as the spring wildflowers prepare for their grand exposition in the coming weeks. As storm clouds blow from the west, we tire from the relenting cold wind. After sustaining one final 360-degree grand view of the Superstition Mountains and beyond, we prepare the ropes for the first rappel. Suspended, I tend the tangled mess of rope with my left hand while my right maintains proper tension for a controlled descent. I shout back up to my friends above with enough force in my voice to pierce through whipping winds, “off rappel.” We continue our dainty and mindful descent off this barely-held-together tower of cards to the desert floor below.

- - - - -

Shrouded in fantasies of lore and mystery from the vagabond days of prospecting, roughneck desert bandits and the daily threat of skirmishes; the Superstition Mountains are aptly named. A rugged and unforgiving desert range dominated by seemingly impenetrable mazes of rock, fantastic crumbling cliffs and miles of inhospitable terrain separating reliable water sources as the Phoenix valley begins its rise in elevation.

While the Superstitions are home to uncountable and often unimaginable stories and tales from the days of exploration, perhaps the greatest of all the folklore is that which surrounds the alleged literal “gold mine” hidden amidst the fortress of rock. Commonly known as the “Lost Dutchman’s Gold Mine,” the history of the tale begins before the iconic name was coined. During the 1840’s, the Peralta family of northern Mexico supposedly pioneered rich gold deposits somewhere in the Superstition Mountains. Carrying fortunes of gold back to their home in Mexico for years, their alleged last expedition in 1848 was met with an Apache skirmish, leaving all but one or two of the Peralta family dead in the desert; the survivors wandering their way back to Mexico.

In the years following, many people claimed knowledge of the mine; creating supposed maps and founding expeditions that somehow always ended up on dry trails with no gold. People who claimed to have found the mine disappeared or were met with some ill-timed adversity,
thus preventing them from finding the gold; all adding to the allure and mystery of the lost gold mine.

In the 1870s, Jacob Waltz, "the Dutchman" from Germany, was said to have located the mine through the aid of a Peralta family descendant. Waltz and his partner, Jacob Weiser, worked the mine and allegedly hid one or more caches of gold in the Superstitions. Most stories place the gold in the general vicinity of Weaver's Needle, a well-known and unmistakably noticeable landmark within this land of rock. To this day, people still follow the many versions of maps in search of the riches. Many of these maps base the supposed location around Weaver's Needle.

---

Our expedition to Weavers Needle, however, was conducted irrespective of the mysterious gold mine. The natural allure of the rock feature in and of itself is hard to fend off.

The day began on the early end of the rising sun. I stood huddled over the blue flame of a camp stove stirring a cast iron skillet sizzling with javelina chorizo beneath a rising cloud of steam. The desert floor around camp was a total carpet of emerald green grass, topped in a thick layer of morning dew teasing with the idea of frosting. Loading packs, quick and light for a there-and-back day trip, we hit the trail with the rising sun at the foot of towering cliffs.

Quickly rising up onto a ridgeline, the view expands outward to an immense green desert basin.

With a few of us having done this trip once before and having taken a wrong side trail which led to a few miles of bushwhacking that we never wished to repeat, we vowed to prevent that from happening this go around. Well, a couple miles later, we were right back on the same bushwhack. It was like this had all happened before. The same side trail lured us up its unrewarding path and separated us from the main trail by an unforgiving rocky ridgeline. Entertained by the ridiculousness of us all, once again, ending up in the same situation, we simply press forward. We are constantly teased and reassured by the towering silhouette of Weaver's Needle which grows bigger and bigger with every crested ridgeline. Bobbing, ducking, weaving and crawling through a tangled torrent of catclaw and other unforgiving desert flora; we cross up and over ridgeline after ridgeline, hoping each one to be the last. Throughout the bushwhack, we moved through different areas of lush, tall, green grass and early blooming desert poppies. Truly a beautiful state in which to see the Sonoran Desert.

With the crest of one last ridgeline, we arrive near the base of the summit. A several-hundred-foot ascent up a steep and loose slope is the final portion of the hike before beginning the more technical ascent up the rocky feature. Many of us are now covered in reddened scratches and abrasions from the myriad of un-accommodating desert plants.

Not long into the upward hike, my friend (always a watchful hunter for crystals, gems and other interesting minerals) stumbles upon a fascinating find. He exclaims and reaches down to pick up an apparent piece of purple amethyst crystal nearly as large as his palm. To our knowledge, amethyst crystals ought to be found only on the neighboring mountain, Four Peaks, nearly 20 miles to the north across the Salt River Valley. It takes a rare set of conditions for purple amethyst crystals to be formed and, based upon our amateur knowledge, amethyst is not normally found in the Superstition Mountains. Our imaginations run wild with potential answers. The most romantic idea being that it was carried for miles and miles by a long-ago traveler, inadvertently lost or perhaps intentionally placed at the base of Weaver's Needle. Anyway, seeing that amethyst is my birthstone and that day being my birthday, I take it as a good omen.

Reaching the base of the rocky -- and more technical ascent -- we don harnesses, un-coil rope and assess the first technical spot. Thankfully, the first spot is the hardest. The first climber must make a nearly un-roped move up a short and vertical crumbling section of rock. Debating who was going to go for it, the crystal finder himself volunteers. I stay on the grounded end of his rope, feeding him rope and encouragement up the few puckering moves. Performing flawlessly, the hardest of it is over and he scrambles higher up into a rocky gully to set an anchor and rope the rest of us up safely.
The rest of the ascent, aside from one more section, is mostly a technical scramble without ropes. Low risk, high consequence. We carefully pick our path upwards, having to maintain incredible vigilance about not dislodging any one piece of this crumbling pile of rocks, thereby sending it raining downwards in a dangerous descent on to our friends below.

The path ascends up a gully between the two pinnacles which form the one feature, Weaver's Needle. The final bit is exposed, scrambling up the single tallest pinnacle. While acknowledging the daunting vastness which exists just behind us, we maintain stern and calm focus on the steep scrambling in front of us. As the scramble begins to decrease in gradient, I can feel the pull of the top. Walking upright once again, we move past a rocky constructed windbreak shelter containing several ammo can summit registers. I head for a tall rock on the summit to fully absorb the feel of a true 360-degree view. In all directions, the earth drops away 2,000 feet to the surrounding wash bottoms below. The domed summit -- maybe the size of a putting green. Several Salt River Lakes are visible to the north in a deeply incised canyon. Beyond, you can see down the spine of four peaks further north and the Sierra Anchas further east of that. Due east, the Superstitions rise to high elevation, pine-covered terrain, a wilderness apple orchard hidden deeply within. Further to the south, the sheer and prominent face of Apache Leap overlooks the vast desert valley below. It is truly a view to sit and revel in. Weaver's Needle -- a continuously alluring draw for people seeking all flavors of adventure through the ages.