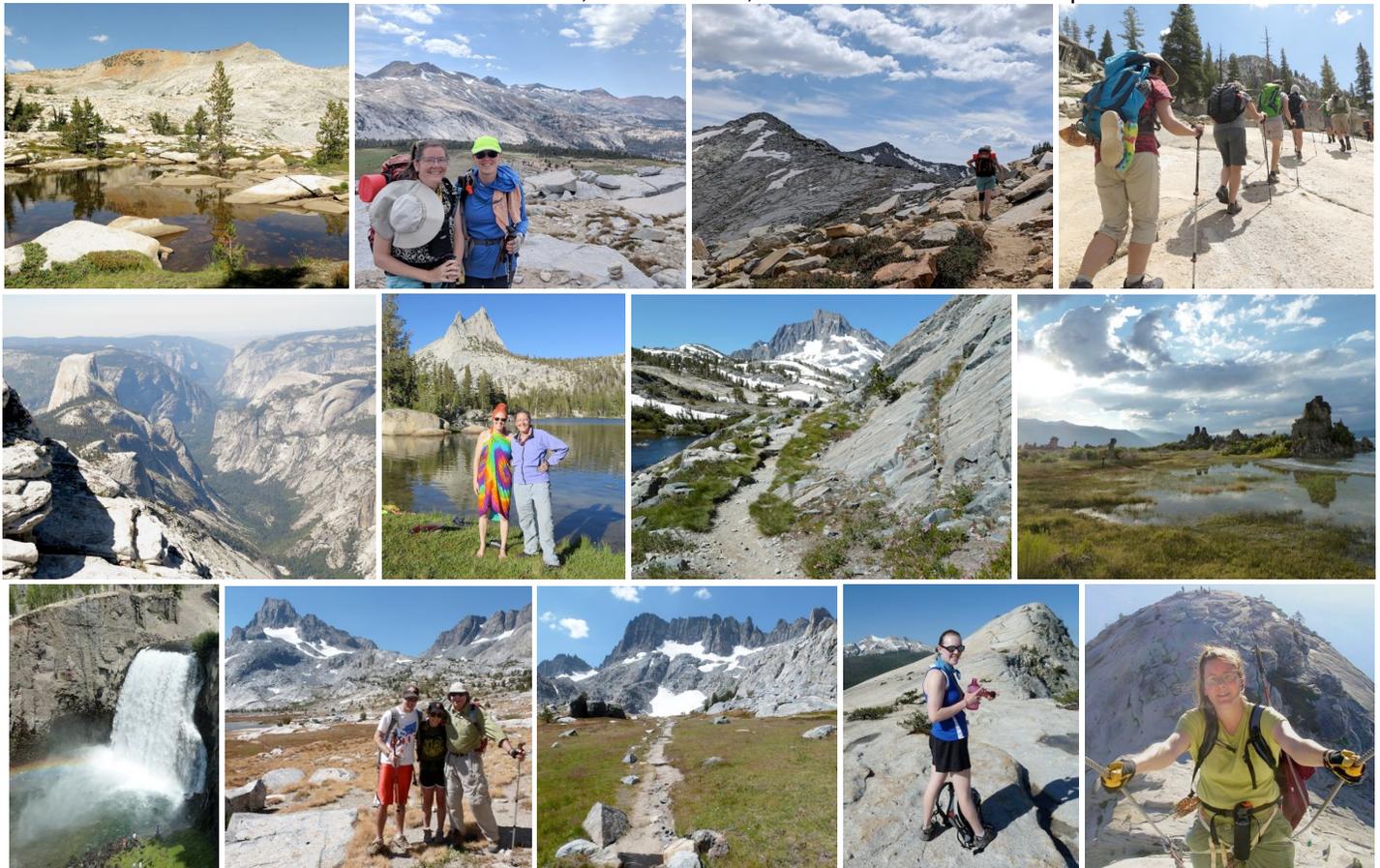


Yosemite and Ansel Adams Wilderness, 2007-2019

Yosemite Grand Traverse, Ansel Adams, Yosemite Half Dome Attempt



Left to Right: (top) Heading to Isberg Pass, Allison/I and distant Ritter/Minarets, almost to pass, granite hiking Merced; (middle) Allison/I Upper Cathedral Lake, Half Dome from Clouds Rest approaching Thousand Island, Mono tufa; (bottom) Rainbow Falls, Alvin & Family at Thousand Island, Minarets on final approach to Iceberg, Allison on Lembert Dome, me on Half Dome cables

Introduction – Revised 2019

This is a shorter collection representing 4 trips: a stock-supported traverse of Yosemite National Park from Isberg Pass to Tuolumne Meadow (including an ascent of Clouds Rest), 2 (2011, 2012) trips to Ansel Adams (including side-trips to Tuolumne and Mono Lake), and a 2007 backpack aimed at climbing Half Dome. I admit that I have a love-hate relationship with Yosemite. I first visited the park on a spring break trip in 1988 – while scoping out graduate schools in northern California. We stayed a couple nights in Curry Village, enjoyed a meal at the Ahwahnee – but, believe it or not, I wasn't much into hiking at the time. Although I liked the classic scenery, I recognized even then that the valley was overcrowded – which probably explains why I sought other Sierra experiences (Kings Canyon, Sequoia, Whitney, and Ansel Adams) over returning to Yosemite. Nearly 20 years later, though, I did lead an effort to backpack Half Dome in 2007 as homage to our dad's trials with that trail. My impression of the valley crowds/insanity were even more pronounced and poor. Perhaps it is a surprise that I agreed to tackle a traverse of Yosemite in 2019 – the trip that almost wasn't...

The Trip That Almost Wasn't – Yosemite Grand Traverse, August 2019

Allison suggested this trip in early 2019, half because it was the only thing that fit both our schedules and half because the company (Southern Yosemite Mountain Guides - SYMG) ran her Southern John Muir Trail (subcontracted through Mountain Travel Sobek). I didn't know it at the time - but SYMG also ran my Southern JMT (the infamous maiden voyage trip of 2004) – but that version was so spartan that we recommended a host of improvements (most related to more food, more space, and more comfort)... which were largely heard. Originally, Allison had been training/signed up for trekking in Peru's Cordillera Huayhuash with Marshall – but recurring injuries made him skittish about any multi-day hiking outings. Meanwhile, I had been in amazing shape all year – but I was also skittish because this trip would be my first continuous hiking trip since the stress fracture in 2016 (granted, I had done long hiking trips in Europe – but those did not involve camping and I had the option to skip any day if I was tired). I agreed to this particular trip because it seemed relatively easy/low-commitment: 7-9 miles most days, 1500-2000 feet most days, max elevation just over 10K (Isberg Pass), stock-supported, and only 1 week long. What I failed to account for, though, was that I was doing a LOT of traveling before Yosemite – and, not surprisingly, those experiences wore me down: e.g. spending 2 weeks traveling across the southern US, eating great food but not maintaining my spring fitness level; and then spending 3 weeks on a challenging trip across northern Japan, pulling my left hamstring near the end of the trip and coming home with a sinus infection. Given



2 weeks of rest, the hamstring largely behaved... but resting reduced my fitness even more. Meanwhile, the sinus infection ramped up to the point my ENT put me on sulfa right before leaving (at the time, we rationalized some nice sunny weather would do me well). Just when we thought EVERYTHING was in place (and we were literally on our way to the airport), our 79-YO mother confessed that she took a massive face-first fall along her parking strip the night before. Shepherding her through the importance of antiseptics, boosting her tetanus shot (15 years out of date) and seeing a DR as we dealt with PDX, we just plowed forward with this trip...

August 24-25, 2019 – To Fresno, and then Knoblock Meadow (6.3 miles, 1600 up and 750 down)

We landed in Fresno after our direct Alaska Airlines flight from PDX around 5 p.m. Although we'd been treated to a full valley view of Yosemite from the air, we'd also seen a few big fire smoke plumes – something which has marred a few previous Sierra trips. Hauling our luggage and walking 5 minutes (the temp 97°F) to our hotel, we had a little time to clean up before the 6 p.m. group meeting – notably in the noisy pool area. This trip had been sold out for months – so we knew it was a full group: 2 hilarious and amazing lesbian couples from New Zealand, a father-daughter from Florida, a husband-wife from New York, and a solo computer scientist from Seattle (his wife was not a hiker/camper). With the exception of the daughter and Allison (and our guides), everyone was over 50. Our guides (Joe and Daniel) were both males in their mid-20's; we'd been given their biographies before the trip and Allison and I joked that this trip must be very straightforward if they were going to put such wee babes in charge of us. Joking aside, Joe and Daniel were outstanding – hopefully, reasons for this assertion will come through in the write-up. After introductions, some gear talk, and a short trip overview, we joined the Florida father-daughter (in their useful rental car) for very good Thai food about 5 miles away. And then it was bedtime – because we had to be on the bus by 7 a.m. (breakfast at 6).



Left to Right: Minaret Pack Station – mini-bus, gear, more gear, mules

Given the drama at home with our mom, there were lots of last-minute discussions going on – although, all in all, I slept well. After a decent breakfast, I hauled my junk to the lobby – where it was clear that my stuff-sack was the largest (in contrast with everyone else, I did not purchase the recommended product). Oh well – I felt it was a fair trade after being SO space-deprived on the 2004 Southern JMT trip. Of course, I did feel bad because SYMG had not informed Joe/leader that I was coming in with a knee injury, wearing a neoprene brace, and carrying a foam roller. But he didn't seem too freaked out by this. I chose not to mention the sinus/sulfa situation, figuring that the drugs were kicking in and the knee was going to slow me down no matter what. Allison did not want me discussing the situation with our mom, even though she did carry her InReach and communicated nightly with the family. I respected this request for 5 days and then outed us to the group. Anyway – we rode a mini-bus for about 3 hours – with stops at Bass Lake (restroom) and the Minarets Pack Station (our stock/cowboy source, and restroom). At the pack station, we were introduced to our 2 packers – both were young and, amazingly, one was a really interesting woman who had traveled the world (e.g. training horses in Hokkaido). Shockingly, our stock team consisted of 12 animals (2 horses, 10 mules) – twice the size of the team who accompanied us down the Southern JMT (which tells you, again, how space-limited that trip was... although we did have food brought to us every 3-4 days on that trip).



Left to Right: near The Niche, at The Niche, mild ford near The Niche, typical woody trail

After 45 minutes unloading and sorting gear, we drove the final 20 minutes (on very rough road) to the Isberg Trailhead (7000 feet) – about 7 miles (by trail) from Ansel Adams/Thousand Island Lake. Although it felt like we were far from civilization, there were more than a dozen cars tucked into the trees. I recall more peeing (this time in the woods), applying sunscreen (EVERY day on this trip was sunny – to the point I went through 1.5 tubes of Neutrogena), trail-mixing, and going over a few details about the hike to camp. I cannot say that any of today's views were much to write home about; we were mostly in brushy woods ascending to Knoblock Meadows (8500 feet). The trail meandered a lot (left and right, up and down) and didn't make a lot of sense to me. After 2.5 miles, we stopped at this granite formation called "The Niche" for lunch. My GI tract was unhappy and so I began a regular trend on this trip: daytripping – or using the poop kit mid-day. Perhaps because of this poor start, I developed a highly negative relationship with pooping in the woods that continued throughout this trip. Although I recall hating digging holes and squatting during the intense 2004 Southern JMT, I think I had more patience for it back then. It was exhausting on this trip – in part because it seemed like the distance you had to travel to be legal felt greater. Of course, I had also just been traveling through Japan – where I developed a great appreciation for the gentle bidet butt-hole cleanse. In contrast, Sierra pooping was such a stark and painful dichotomy that I currently question my butt-hole's interest in

this kind of camping. Anyway – my first trowel effort yielded but a small hard turd; after eating a small bowl of orzo salad (very good), the apparent shit-kraken started churning (the turd-plug now released)... and I had to do a SECOND trowel/daytrip run (god – how embarrassing is that?) – resulting in a diarrhea-ful hole of fun. On this trip, we also had to save all our dirty toilet paper in a sandwich/lunch bag for the duration of the trip. Bathroom break #1/2 and I was already filling the bag with a LOT of poopy toilet paper. There is no doubt that I generated the largest waste-bag on this trip... and I believe I was the only one who had to ask for a second bag (around day 5). After lunch, we did a short/easy ford (if you can call it that) – then continued up a few steeper sections. Eventually, we reached Cora Lakes, where we took a long break on a lakeside granite slab – waiting for the horses/camping gear to arrive/pass.



Left to Right: Cora Lakes – rest stop, continuing hiking by other lakes, leaving trail through Knoblock, dinner – Joe & Daniel

A little over a mile beyond, we left the trail and crossed Knoblock meadow (which offered a few views up at the ridgeline we would cross tomorrow) to a stand of trees that represented our camp for the night. We were warned – accurately – that Knoblock was buggy. There was a small creek running along camp, which provided some cool bathing relief... but it was hard to get into fully, and there were no views to be enjoyed. I would say Allison was more disappointed and unimpressed with the Knoblock camp than me; it was mostly what I was expecting given what I know about Sierra treelines. After setting up my tent, I did some foam-rolling and static band stretching. Although Allison was more disappointed with camp, I was more disappointed with dinner: a one-pot very tomato-y shrimp gumbo with rice that did not satisfy my hunger (particularly given my teeny-tiny lunch and then-upset GI), and brought back memories of any number of hungry nights along the 2004 Southern JMT. It was also a touch too spicy, which is upsetting because of my old-lady acid reflux. After all Allison's glorious food porn stories about her 2016 Southern JMT, I had higher expectations for dinner (appetizers, bread, dessert...)...and tonight they were not met. I don't have a lot of recollections about that first night other than I went to bed right after dinner and I definitely was up around 1 a.m. peeing. The stars and milky way were amazing!



Left to Right: (top) another shallow, rocky ford, regroup after separation, Sadler Lake, paintbrush, ah – the climbing begins; (bottom) climbing to... upper Isberg Lake with Isberg Pass right of center, Allison, looking down on lunch lake – Minarets over distant ridge

August 26, 2019 – Sarah's 52nd Birthday... a Good But Tiring Climb Over Isberg Pass (9 miles, 2200 up and 760 down)

The next morning, coffee/tea was at 6 because our goal lay 7 miles away – over Isberg Pass (10,300 feet – which I kept reminding myself was South Sister-high). Indeed, South Sister is a good comparator – because that (2011) was the last time I was that high (albeit in exceptional shape). On previous Sierra trips, I've never climbed to/over 10K on day 2 – and, not surprisingly, it was a big challenge. The other challenge was that 2 of our mules ran away and returned to the pack station; thus, the packers were occupied much of the day dealing with that. But I digress: breakfast totally made up for dinner – fresh mango and avocado with chutney and mint on bruschetta-like toast (2-3 per person!). We began hiking around 8. Although much of the trail to Isberg (representing about 6 of our 7 miles) was uphill, the first 2-3 to Sadler Lake were gentle. Today, Daniel was at the front of the line with most of our party; Joe was helping the packers and so we didn't see him for a few hours. As usual, I was in the back – although half-way to Sadler 4 of us got way behind and there was some confusion over a junction that everyone up front missed (standard procedure is to wait at all junctions). Fortunately, we did choose the correct route and our group was waiting about half a mile up the trail. At Sadler, the terrain fully opened up – offering views to distant Southern Sierra peaks. Above the lake, the trail got super-steep for about half a mile. Florida dad and I

were completely winded compared to everyone else and very much took our time heading up (by this point, Joe had arrived to babysit the end of the line). Thankfully, the grade was less crazy as we attained the plateau above Sadler and headed around Isberg Lakes. Also, the impressive Minarets and Banner/Ritter Range came into view (like I said earlier, we were very close to Ansel Adams and Thousand Island Lake). At the final Isberg Lake, the decision was made to eat lunch before the pass – even though we knew that would make us all sleepy. Our progress, despite the snail people, was really good... we were less than a mile from the pass (the way not particularly intimidating), with just a mile beyond to camp. Lunch - a lovely build-your-own open-face bread slices with fresh mozzarella, proscutto, and balsamic glaze – was also exquisite (I was so excited I didn't even take a picture!).

After lunch, the going was steady and slow; although the pass looked really close, the trail made several long (but gentle) switchbacks up through the rock (one section was very red/iron-y) and took its sweet time (which was fine with me). There was no complaining given the amazing views. The actual pass represents the boundary between Ansel Adams and Yosemite National Park. The view on the other side was super-impressive, even though it looks crazy washed out in all my pictures. The guides spent some time naming all these peaks on this LONG ridgeline across the hanging valley from us – notably the headwaters of the Merced (which we'd be hiking along the next 3 days). In the middle of the hanging valley was a big lake – our camp for the night. Of course, just as we were getting ready to head down, the daytripping urge hit – and I had to borrow the kit from Joe and explore between some big rocks where it looked like people had camped. Thankfully, there was sand for digging and the pooping view was AWESOME (mostly looking down at Isberg Lakes and the Banner/Ritter Range and Minarets. It was also amazing to have this huge view and pass to ourselves!!!



Left to Right: pass view into Yosemite to headwaters of Merced and hanging valley, Kiwis, off-trail descend, obsidian arrowhead

We descended on trail through some tricky boulder/rock sections – before leaving the trail and cutting straight down a series of grassy benches between rocks. This “scramble” effectively cut a mile from the hike and was quite easy. Thanks to the daytripping, I was in the back with Joe, Allison, and the NY couple – when I spied an obsidian arrowhead about half a mile from camp. Joe discussed some of the history of this area with respect to Native Americans, saying the obsidian was an import/trade from elsewhere. We left the arrowhead where we found it and continued to camp. Being last to arrive, Allison and I staked our tent-site claim out in the middle of this rocky meadow; it was actually nice... but a longer walk to the lake and kitchen, and we were in everyone's path to the “bathroom” area. The packers arrived within 45 minutes, allowing us to set up tents by 4... and then it was swimming (or just sitting/soaking) time. My main goal was to sit/soak and clean; Allison actually swam – even though the lake was shallow, its ill-defined bottom super-mucky. Frankly, I was worried about getting that crap up my genitourinary tract and winding up with some crazy infection.



Left to Right: camp, Joe lighting candles, me and cinnamon roll pan-cake, sunset

My birthday dinner, around 6, was exceptional and filling: fully-loaded turkey burgers, pineapple slaw, and a cinnamon roll pan-cake with birthday candles and singing. Amusingly, Allison took video of this but, being closest to the microphone, all you hear is her voice – and she's embarrassed by that. Having sung off-key happy birthday to Ellen a few weeks before while naked in an onsen, my definition of embarrassment is relative. We then enjoyed a fine sunset. Although it seemed like we were alone, there were a group of backpackers in the distant trees. Being up higher, the night felt colder but, once again, the stars and milky way were amazing!

August 27, 2019 – Down the Amazing Merced Canyon... Like Little LeConte (7.8 miles, 150 up and 2400 down)

The next morning, coffee/tea was at 7 because our goal lay 7 miles away – nearly all downhill. Breakfast consisted of these massive omelets with kale and onion – extremely filling and tasty! The upper 2 miles of the descent were all in forest. Although I tried to keep my position at the end of the line, there seemed to be some tensions up front because a few people were tired of the constant talking amongst the crowd. While I enjoyed my quiet time at the back, I didn't care if people were talking because I have always been good at tuning out day-noise. In any event, I got bumped to the middle by folks who wanted to meditate. Oh well. After a couple miles, we hit a long flat section where the trail meandered along the winding Merced. At a couple points, we had to carefully cross side-channels – at least one crossing of which was on a funky log... and where one could lose the trail if you weren't paying attention. After a couple miles of pretty flat hiking, we started hitting lots of granite and then arrived at this impressive drop-off area where we descended to a lower canyon. Granite walls domes were all around, reminding me of LeConte Canyon (the drop from Muir Pass heading south). After half a mile of descending, Joe left the trail and had us slickrock across bare granite to this roaring pour-over waterfall of the Merced. Here, we enjoyed the spray of the falls – and this nice cool pothole puddle. Lunch, which Allison hated, was GREAT: chicken salad with halved grapes... but also celery bits. Amazing – one of my all-time favorite foods.



Left to Right: (top) morning views from camp, heading out, down upper Merced, through the woods; (middle) upper 2 miles meandering upper Merced, sketchy log, more flat section, heading down LeConte-like canyon; (bottom) to lunch waterfall, amazing lunch spot, hole of women (eventually all of us got into that pothole), descending granite along Merced, waterfall

After lunch, we continued down the slickrock, eventually leaving the trail for a lower viewpoint that looked up at the big waterfall we'd lunched next to. Within 30 minutes, we arrived at camp. Like many Sierra camps, there was no official marker and I would not have known there was such a fine camp down through the trees. We left the trail and hiked a few minutes along a stand of trees, arriving at a lovely granite bench along the Merced. Two small waterfalls passed above/by the camp – before the Merced tumbled down this rambunctious whitewater mini-canyon and into the glorious swimming hole pool. Sadly, I did not do any of these things justice with my camera. Half of us (including me and the Kiwi's) camped just within the trees, the others in a more open area down-river. Joe seemed concerned it was going to rain – which it actually did (for maybe 5 minutes), causing us to rush around getting tents up and gear protected. Because Joe had played up this site as having the best swimming hole (which was correct), I was actually excited to get in the water. Unfortunately, my daytripping urge hit promptly after the short rain – and the legal poop-zone was sort of insane: you had to climb back to the trail and then another 100 feet ABOVE the trail in this rocky, brushy area – digging holes amongst the sandy/rocky benches. Squatting, you were visible from the waist up pretty much everywhere. Over the next 15 hours, I logged 3 annoying trips up there. Meanwhile, the Kiwi's and I noted, with disgust, that SOME group members were NOT following the rules – and we caught them pooping pretty much behind our tents in some bushes. Anyway, by the time I was ready to go swimming, Allison proclaimed that she was done. Fortunately, the Kiwi's were game – and then Allison decided she needed more swimming... so everyone was down in the swimming hole: this glorious deep pool below this mini-canyon of whitewater. It should be noted that a couple guys were camped a few hundred feet up-river – notably in an illegal location too close to the water. Although they seemed friendly, they willfully went out of their way to report us to a ranger the next morning, claiming they saw some of our group using a sun-shower too close to the river. I thought Joe exercised great restraint by NOT telling the ranger their tents were less than 20 feet from the river's edge. I cannot say I

was terribly thrilled with dinner tonight; as with our first meal, it was tomato and pepper/spicy-forward, although most of the content was just a big sausage-fest. Granted, I would have been THRILLED with that meal on the Southern JMT!



Left to Right: (top) best efforts at photographing camp river features – last shot = swimming hole area, Merced Lakes; (bottom) so catwalk, rabid bat, entering the waterwheel falls area

August 28, 2019 – More Merced Descent... and Some Hot Climbing to a Sad Camp (11.3 miles, 1500 up and 1300 down)

The next morning, we enjoyed a light breakfast of granola, yogurt, and fresh blueberries. The hike today continued down the amazing Merced River/canyon well past lunch. In the morning, we hiked through woods interspersed with lakes where the mighty river pooled into these enormous reflections of granite walls. At one point, we crossed this granite catwalk – right after passing this likely rabid bat that seemed to be dying near the trail. At some point, we passed a ranger station, learning that our illegally camped neighbors reported claims about our group bathing. Eventually, we entered an open, descending valley of more slickrock granite – the Merced fanning out into this wide shallow rush of white, even forming a few “waterwheel” falls (places where the water curlicue’d back on itself). Near this area was the Merced Lake High Sierra Camp, the first of a couple such camps we’d see. Interestingly, the heavy snow situation this year caused ALL the High Sierra Camps to not open at all... which explained, in part, why it was so quiet along for much of this trip. Given that I thought the High Sierra Camps were transitory places, I was surprised to see so many permanent-looking metal structures. After a short break, we continued another mile or so to our lunch spot. Lunch (Greek salad with dolmas) was delicious but upset my stomach with heartburn/belching the rest of the day. After lunch, we began the big climb to Surprise Creek. It was extremely hot and Florida dad and I were winded once again at the end of the line. The first part of the climb was up very tight switchbacks. I missed the chance to dip my hat/hair in the LAST creek before camp. Eventually, we began contouring around and up to this granite shelf where everyone was waiting in the shade: Half Dome, Clouds Rest, and Little Yosemite Valley in view.



Left to Right: (top) near climb, Half Dome sign, packers, mystery flower; (bottom) shady rest spot, big views of the big stuff!

From our shady rest spot, I wouldn't say the remaining climb to camp was as tiring – but it was annoying... mostly because the trail felt overgrown and brushy with prickly things. We were basically climbing into this burnt mini-valley – and had been sufficiently warned that

tonight's camp would be the shittiest (my paraphrase) on the whole trip, and that we'd start seeing lots of people because this spot, in particular, was one of the closest camping spots for people wanting a relatively easy dayhike up Clouds Rest (our goal tomorrow). Indeed, a couple parties were quite settled in when we arrived – having apparently taken Joe's hoped-for spots. It says a lot that I took no pictures of this campsite. The fire damage was ugly and gray. Although called Sunrise Creek, Allison and I had to work very hard to get down to the thing and then into the water. We were basically sitting in a creek that was 8 inches deep, and heavily overgrown/surrounded by a thicket of brush. Making matters worse, many charred logs were in the creek so even after you cleaned, you would invariably brush against some charcoal... and if you managed to get that off, you would still have to claw up the steep edges, getting covered in gray ashy dust. Although many people found more secluded campsites on these higher benches, Allison and I threw down our tents in this sandy valley near the kitchen. Although the camp was not my favorite, the toilet digging and privacy was probably the easiest on the trip. Dinner was also very tasty: major Mexican beans, rice, build your own burritos, etc. I do not recall sleeping well, though – a combination of lots of headlamp traffic and worrying about how I would fare on Clouds Rest tomorrow.



Left to Right: climbing burn, view towards next camp – and Cathedral Peak, famous Clouds Rest steps, scrambling!

August 29, 2019 – Clouds Rest... Redemption of Our Half Dome Failure (9.2 miles, 2700 up and 1600 down)

The next morning, we enjoyed onion-forward hash with sausages – and then headed up into the burn. From Surprise Creek, the trail made a series of gentle switchbacks up through the burn before attaining a ridgeline where we joined the main trail (and the dayhikers started appearing – the mileage about 13 from Tenaya Lake). From this junction, the summit was 3.6 miles up/down. In general, I felt more winded at the start (before this junction) – and then afterwards the adrenaline probably took over. Climbing up the open-forest ridge, I felt like I was climbing along Tam MacArthur Ridge here in Oregon. We took a rest/snack break and unfortunately I discovered a bad blister that Joe decided we should pop. As I remarked to him at the time (alas – no pictures), he exhibited excellent aseptic technique, even flame-sterilizing the first aid safety pin before lancing/draining the blister. The blister did not bother me after that and healed promptly – so I know he did a great job! We then plodded onward and upward, the trail definitely becoming more open and knife-edge-like (a la picture above) where the natural blobby steps of granite began. As views opened on both sides (left was less scary, but right was quite airy – with 4000 down all these big granite faces), we did lose one member of the team who became too anxiety-ridden and nervous. Although I was nervous, I did not feel gripped and made my way to the top, which widened out a bit. Here, though, I was a bit gripped by the big cliffy drops and chose to duck down and sit between these big boulders that made me feel safer... until everyone was ready to go down. The views from the top – particularly down at Half Dome (which is about 1000 feet shorter) – were magnificent... but equally impressive were all the surrounding views: both of where we'd been (up the impressive Merced Canyon) and where we were going (Cathedral Peak and the Tuolumne). When folks were starting to get ready to go, I asked a guide if I could shadow him down and avoid any extensive stops. And so we went down.



Left to Right: (top) looking down Clouds Rest steps, looking towards Tenaya/Tuolumne, Half Dome/valley view, view up Merced (bottom) final climb to camp (argh), flambé-ing the peaches, out of focus view of camp lake, view of Clouds/Half

After reaching the Tenaya junction (again - that most dayhikers were using), we continued towards Sunrise Lake. After a little more than a mile, we stopped in this weird jumble of boulders and forest and enjoyed a crazy-great lunch of crackers, cheese, meats, and

figs (SO tasty!). With full bellies and the climax of the day over, the hike after lunch seemed super-pokey and annoying... particularly the final 300 foot climb to the extensive lake basin where our campsite was. As with our first lake, this lake was super-mucky and I didn't enjoy my attempt to swim – even though Allison and several others managed to swim to this rocky island. At some point, I did spend about 20 minutes making my way down this jumbled slope of rocks and logs (notably wearing my down booties – which were not the best footwear!) to this poor overlook where you could actually see Half Dome and Clouds Rest. Dinner featured a quinoa-forward vegetarian chili followed some flambé-d peaches with a little nutty crumble.



Left to Right: Sunrise High Sierra Camp meadow area, Matthes Crest, distant peaks – probably McClure

August 30, 2019 – To Upper Cathedral Lake... Amazing! (7 miles, 1200 up and 950 down)

The next morning, we enjoyed avocado toast with beans and peppers before heading out for our last full day on the trail. It was a magnificent hike – pleasant and easy – that basically wound through little green meadow basins surrounded by rounded domes or fins of granite. For the first time hiking in California, I realized that this really was the distinct character of the Yosemite Sierras – by comparison with the far more mountainous Sierras we'd hiked in the Ansel Adams and Southern JMT. At some point, we crossed a very shallow pass and enjoyed a lovely lunch featuring a pesto penne salad with sundried tomatoes – and several very cool-looking granite domes or fin-like walls (the most impressive of which was Matthes Crest) were dramatically visible. After lunch, we meandered towards Upper Cathedral Lake, the Cockscomb and Cathedral Peak proper rising dramatically. Having seen Cathedral Peak from a few different angles, THIS one – from the Upper Lake – was by far the BEST.



Left to Right: (top) pass before lunch, Cockscomb, descent to upper lake... Cathedral reflection; (bottom) tentsite/view, Range of Light

Getting to the lake took no time – but the shortcut route we took to the campsite required an interesting climb over this granite bulge, followed by a brushy gully scramble (needless to say, the horses stayed on-trail around the entire other side of the lake). This campsite was truly spectacular. Having read a lot of accounts of Cathedral Lake camping, I thought it was going to be crazy... but apparently that is mostly associated with LOWER Cathedral Lake (about a mile away, and only 3 miles from the road). I selected a tent-site with a commanding view of the lake and mountains. Given water proximity and granite everywhere, the bathroom situation was challenging... there was one bench with some trees and soil that everyone used, and it required a good walk uphill (not to mention, lots of making sure you weren't intruding on others). Arriving around 2:30, Joe offered a side trip up Tressider Peak (a 3 mile/1000 foot scramble); earlier in the day, I think he had half a dozen takers. But now that we were at this beautiful camp, only Allison went up with him. Meanwhile, I found a shallow area in the lake for some cleaning and soaking – and then did a lot of moisturizing and foam-rolling. Dinner was a very simple one-pot lentil stew, with aging biscotti. Ah – memories of the 2004 Southern JMT...

August 31, 2019 – To Tuolumne... and Home! (4 miles, 250 up and 1200 down)

The next morning, we were up at 6 because we had to meet the pack station drivers by 11 and Joe wanted to maintain a good window around that time for problems. Joe received a lot of grief from the Kiwi's and I when a giant pot of quinoa appeared for breakfast – along with various toppings... the commentary mostly involving how much fiber had been run through our system the last week vs. the challenge of being able to expel said fiber (the line-up for the pooping bench continuous throughout breakfast). We hit the trail by 8 and

easily hiked out by 10:30 (the horses took a slightly different route – directly to the packer/coral area). The trail was mostly descending through forest the whole way – lots of dayhikers coming up. I cannot say there was anything with a high wow-factor in terms of scenery. Our bus was waiting/early and we headed first to the simple visitor center for some welcome real toilets and light shopping. We then headed over to the very familiar Lembert Dome parking area/trailhead (with picnic area) and the guides set up a MASSIVE lunch (the fresh food packed/on the bus): build your own sandwiches, chips and salsa, and mimosas, and mimosas. After gorging sufficiently, we made our way to the packer/coral area to get our gear... and then we made the very LONG drive back to Fresno – with a couple stops in/near Yosemite Valley (e.g. the last shot below showing). The crowds were insane. Allison and I stayed at a different hotel at the end, ordering take-out Thai for dinner. Our flights home the next day were straightforward.



Left to Right: changing faces of Cathedral Peak, trailhead sisters, fancy lunch, parting shot of Clouds Rest and Half Dome!

Trophy Wife and Sugar Momma Do the Eastern Sierras – July 2011

That the Sierras received over 200% usual snowfall did not register with Allison and I until mid-June. Given that Thousand Island Lake (as well as nearby Garnet and Ediza) were solid snow and ice on July 4, I expected our pack station to cancel this outing. But apparently cowboys operate under a different set of rules. Indeed, ours offered nothing more than a “wait-and-see” attitude well into mid-July. Even a week before our trip, all they could say was: we would be taken somewhere in the Ansel Adams Wilderness (AAW). By this point, available reports were promising in terms of suggesting we could do a 6-day loop encompassing just the AAW, including most aforementioned high lakes. And so Allison and I decided we would be satisfied and “just went with it” (sort of).

July 22-23, 2011 – Oregon to Devils Postpile and Pack Station

Despite the unknowns of the guided portion of this trip, Allison and I had long laid all other parts of this trip – booking hotels months in advance to get good deals (and in the case of Lee Vining: to even GET a room). It is worth mentioning that I had just serviced the Subaru, dropping \$600 on her 125K tune-up, and I also had all new brakes put on the car within the last year. Our route took us down I-5 to Eugene, and then over the Cascades via Willamette Pass. Near the pass, we made a bathroom stop at a sketchy gas station/mini-mart. There, Allison walked in on a strung-out teenage boy who failed to lock the bathroom door; meanwhile, I enjoyed a half-off corn dog that had spent too much time under the heat-lamp. We soon met up with highway 97 and continued south – the skies finally growing dark. For much of the remaining 70 minutes, I passed semi after semi – the bug-kill across my window increasing every moment. Shortly before Klamath Falls, this LONG lake TEEMING with small fly- or gnat-like insects splattered my windshield to the point we could barely see... and we located a gas station so we could wash the windows and fill up. Of course, things then sort of fell apart with our well-laid plans: Allison/Marshall had visited Klamath Falls several months before – and RAVED about this Best Western (one of two in the city). Long story short, we accidentally booked the “bad” one. By now, it was 10:30 p.m. and we were cranky. That a bunch of loud, drunk men strolled by as we were unloading spooked us both because they made rude remarks lesbians (insinuated we were partners). Needless to say, we bolted ALL doors multiple times. Needless to say, we did not sleep well –because information about the Norway shootings was emerging and we were glued to CNN until midnight.



Left to Right: Minarets, cabin entrance/kitchen, Devils Postpile, Allison and her cowboy dinner with lime beer

The next morning, we were up at 7 a.m. and it was already HOT. The continental breakfast was sub-par (i.e. no waffle-maker). For the first hour, we drove through ranch-lands reminiscent of Eastern Oregon – snowy Mt. Shasta to our west. Then we drove through high-desert forest – making our way along several big, round lakes... and then descending to Susanville. There, we were diverted by a set of detour signs – a small-town parade about to begin. After 10 minutes of extra driving, we found a city park with a restroom and drinking fountain (both on the needs-list). We also decided we should enjoy the park swing-set for 10 minutes given that everyone in town was on main street. And then we were on the road again – the traffic picking up as we headed east towards Reno and then south to Carson City (our next big stop). EVERYTHING along this section seemed fifty times more developed than 2003 (my last drive-thru). Meanwhile, Carson City (which struck me/us as this backwater gambling town in 2003) was this posh little suburbia – complete with our target for lunch: Trader Joe’s. Eating yogurt and Asian salad rolls in our car, we hit the road again by 1:30 – re-entering California soon thereafter. But it would be another 2.5 hours before we arrived at Mammoth Lakes, CA. Although some of this drive was scenic (consistent with my 2003 memories), there was too much development... not to mention an awful lot of annoying speed-traps. Once in

Mammoth Lakes, we patronized the ranger station/visitor center; in general, the town reminded me of a rich ski town. Our goal for the night was a “resort” near Devils Postpile – meaning another 30 minutes of driving higher into the mountains. Access beyond the Mammoth Mountain ski area is restricted; only park shuttle buses and overnight lodge guests are given special entry/drive-in passes.

The first couple miles of the Minaret Road were a descending, clifty, one-lane experience. The best views of the ripsaw-like Minarets happened in the first few minutes... before we entered the heavily forested valley below. Near the end of the road is the resort and Devils Postpile. The resort was in the forest and the cabins were rickety A-frames; ours had no working lock, ghetto furniture, lukewarm showers, and a screen-less sliding door. As was obvious, we were NOT going to be sipping cool drinks on a balcony with a mountain view – so we dumped our shit and headed back to Devils Postpile for a 1-mile loop hike around the geologically interesting (but small) columnar basalt face. Being at 8000 feet, we both found the uphill sections challenging... but were not complaining because we NEEDED to stretch our legs after our long day on the road. I cannot say I was WOWED by Devils Postpile... but I was fascinated to learn that, as with all columnar basalt, the geological origins of this feature lie in some crazy, big hot lava lake that formed and then cooled here. Of course, being dusky – the mosquitoes started coming out in force. Ah – the shape of things to come. Returning to our cabin, Allison and I discussed our dinner options. We SHOULD have bought food in advance – given that the fully-equipped cabin kitchen was functional. But since we didn’t, we chose the pricey cowboy BBQ. Although the buffet style meal options did feature a fair bit of meat (chicken, beef, and pork options), there were sufficient roughage items (beans, corn, salad, and fruit) that Allison (who is mostly vegetarian) was satisfied. Accompanying dinner was a live band who played mostly rock and/or folk from the 1950-60’s. I, for one, found it awkward to be shoveling food in the company of 12 other patrons... the band 15 feet away. Although we’d been told our meeting time was 7 a.m. tomorrow, the revised word was that now we needn’t leave at 7 a.m. because we weren’t going to Thousand Island Lake the first night after all (something about a lingering snow-patch that horses couldn’t navigate). Said news was DEVASTATING to me because ALL previous communications with the pack station were clear: we would basecamp out of Thousand Island Lake at least 2 nights. Disgusted and losing confidence, I showered, did a fair bit of repacking, and was in bed by 9 p.m.



Left to Right: Sarah and pretty horse, early sections of High Trail, flowers, bug headnet comes out EARLY, Shadow Lake

July 24, 2011 – High Trail, Bumpy Start

The next morning, we ate yogurt in our room and headed out at a leisurely pace (i.e. 7:30 a.m.). The trailhead (Agnew Meadows) where we were meeting the packers was 15 minutes away (by car). Thankfully, we were allowed to leave our car there (alongside cars belonging to several other clients). Although Agnew was open, there were still no real mountain views. Within the hour, several parties arrived – including 4 others in our group (a family of three, plus a solo male), and a LARGE family reunion group who had chartered a private all-riding trip. NO ONE had ANY idea about the snow... and ALL were under the impression we were, like, doing the stated traverse to Tuolumne. Annoyingly, the private charter was allowed to ride all the way to Thousand Island Lake (in contrast with our party – who was NOT). In general, Allison and I felt that the pack station made MORE EFFORT to cater to the private charter in all respects (getting them to target destinations, getting them on the trail faster). The other BIG GRIPE about this operation, however, began unfolding during the hour we milled around waiting: namely, the disconnect between the pack station owner (a sweet but very old man) and his working cowboys on the ground. The specific thing that initiated gripe number two regarded the fact that our party consisted of 3 hikers (Allison, myself, and the “uncle” in the family unit) and 3 riders (a father-daughter pair, and the solo male). Although the riders clearly had to wait a LONG TIME (in retrospect – until almost noon) for the horse stuff to be worked out, the hikers had no strings... and, given the soaring temperatures, I pressed various staff (unaware of who was in charge) that we should be given the opportunity to start climbing ASAP to avoid the afternoon heat. Initially, we were told (by the cowboy facilitating packing the stock), that the hikers would hike the High Trail and then descend back to the upper part of the river valley to our camp; meanwhile, the riders would be taking the lower River Trail, along the Middle Fork San Joaquin. However, the hikers still needed to wait a little more – because our sack lunches were coming. At some point during this wait, the pack station owner arrived and chatted up our group, verbally changing ALL plans, saying everything TWICE, and pointing out details on a map (which I held out – just to make sure we were ALL on the same page). According to him, our night one camp was going to be on this scenic shelf along the High Trail near the junction where the Agnew Pass/Summit Lake branch-trail took off. Therefore (and, again, he was VERY specific about this), we were to wait at this junction until the riders and stock arrived (meaning that they, too, would be riding the High Trail). Within 10 minutes (at around 8:30), our lunches arrived and the hikers took off UP the High Trail – 100% certain of what we’d been told. The High Trail looks intimidating right out of the gate: MANY switchbacks zigzagging right up the hillside, climbing from 8000 to 9000 feet in about a mile. Thankfully, at least half was in shaded forest. Climbing, we passed 5 parties descending – including a large group of fully-covered Japanese hikers (because the mosquito situation was significant); indeed, Allison (who HATES bugs) donned her headnet within the hour. Once we topped off at 9000 feet and mostly contoured for 2-3 miles, we hit both intermittent forest sections and wet, creek-y terrain (where, presumably, the bugs were hatching). In between the forested sections, GLORIOUS views presented the entirety of the Minarets, Ritter and Banner, across the valley. Below their snowy ramparts was an impressive bulging mass of granite that seemed impenetrable... even though we knew the John Muir Trail traversed it. Around mile 4-5, Shadow Lake came into view – appearing as a bowl of blue spilling down over the steep, rolling granite as a series of fierce whitewater cascades and waterfalls. At the time, we did not know we would be hiking over there – climbing right along said stream. Eventually, the trail climbed to a shallow highpoint at 9700 feet, traversing some rock outcrops before pinching into this sometimes clifty, narrow trail that we all agreed would be scary on a horse.

Here, the views west grew larger, encompassing the terrain around Thousand Island Lake (although we could never see the lake itself – because it was hidden in more rolling granite bulges) and Donahue Pass... all clearly under vast amounts of snow.



Left to Right: rocky outcrop area, looking back at Mammoth Mountain, Ritter/Banner and a sliver of Garnet Lake, Summit Lake

In contrast with the rider situation (which we didn't learn about until much later), we were making excellent progress. By noon, we arrived at the rocky shelf area the pack station owner indicated would be our night one camp. It was, as he said, VERY scenic: Mammoth Mountain, Minarets, Donahue Pass. Ten minutes beyond, we came to the first trail sign: Agnew Pass junction... where we were ordered to wait. Now in the woods again, we sat down on some logs and ate various portions of today's sack lunches – ham/cheese sandwiches, granola bars, apples, and candy. Despite requesting a vegetarian menu, Allison was given meat, meat, meat, and MORE meat throughout this trip. Unfortunately, the mosquito situation was TERRIBLE – particularly given that we were just SITTING in one place. I felt that we should leave an obvious note and head on up to Agnew Pass/Summit Lake, about a mile away (300 feet up). Fortunately, uncle Eric was carrying a pen – and we used this to fashion a note on the front of an empty lunch sack; we wrote it upside-down so that the bag could be physically slipped over the sign-post. The note indicated we left at 12:30 and would be back by 2 p.m. The hike to Agnew Pass took 20 minutes; en route, we caught a good glimpse of Garnet Lake and its MIGHTY excurrent stream plunging to the valley floor (i.e. the actual place the riders and gear/pack train was headed). Summit Lake, set in a bowl just at the pass, was roundish and still flanked by snowfields. While Allison and Eric opted to relax along the trail, I went exploring – crossing the excurrent stream and making my way around the lake for better views of the Minarets. Interestingly, 6 miles beyond Agnew Pass was civilization in the form of the Silver and June Lakes resorts. Thus, even though we felt relatively remote, we were just a few hours from a cabin, food, and transportation out. By 1:40, we headed back to the junction/waiting spot and, for the next hour, we grew increasingly frustrated with the situation (exacerbated by the barrage of mosquitoes). Eventually, we set a time for “doing something” – although which direction to go remained a dilemma. Ultimately, we felt 3:30 was the latest we could “wait” – and, after reviewing all maps, we determined that hiking back across the High Trail was our only option (as it was short and we knew we had cars waiting). Around 3, a party of hikers arrived with word that pack trains were on their way. Soon, the private charter arrived – on their way to Thousand Island Lake. Although they said more horses were behind them, said party represented their gear/pack train... not our group. Fortunately, we stopped the lead cowboy and had a more careful chat – given what seemed to be a contagious lack of communication ALL DAY. He IMMEDIATELY knew where our party was: down in the valley by the Garnet Lake stream outlet.



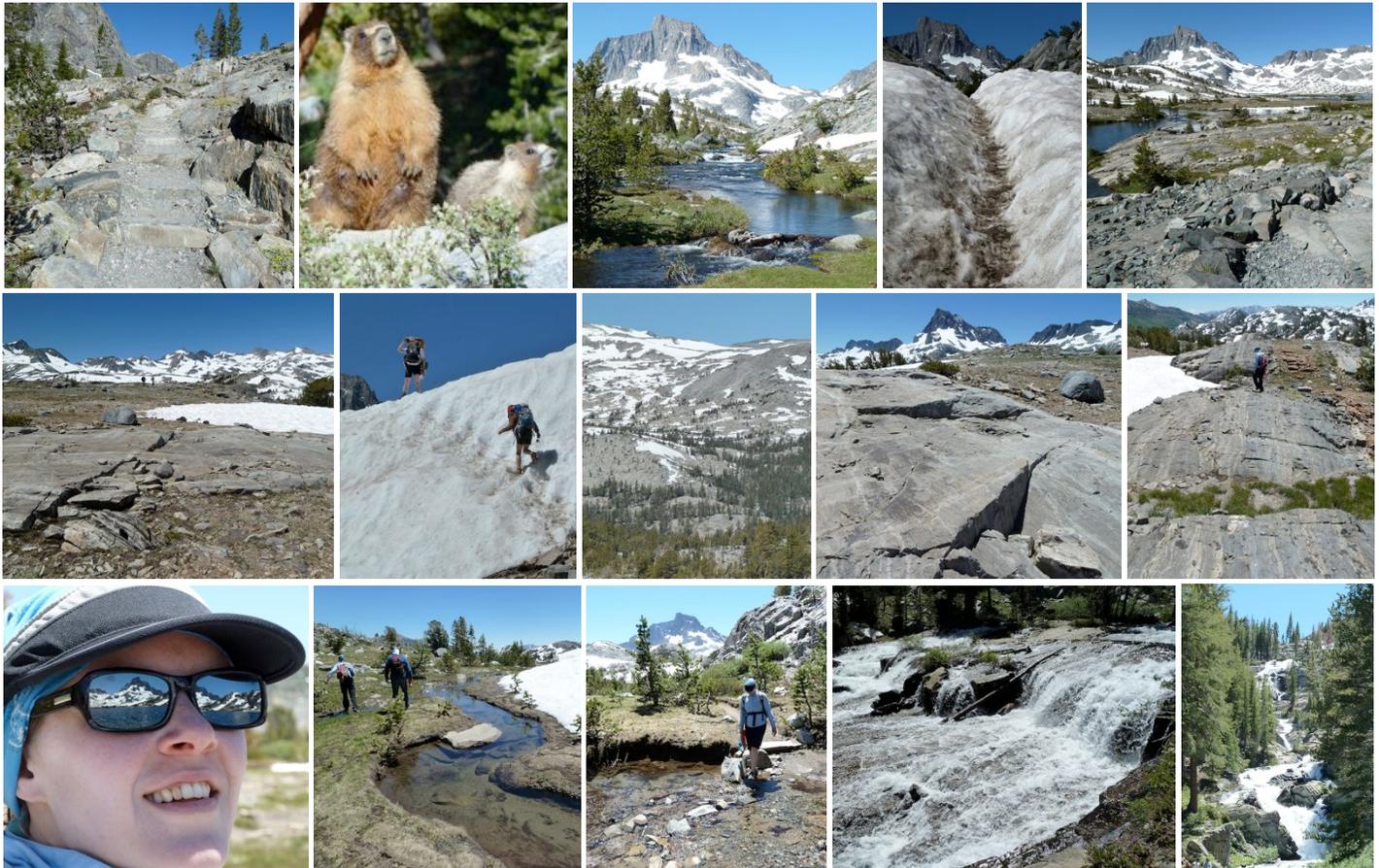
Left to Right: our tent, horses enjoying alfalfa chips, me and Allison testing bug control, EXCELLENT camp toilet, camp kitchen

And so we began the 2.5 mile slog DOWN, excited to be finally moving again but frustrated that no one seemed to have their shit straight. Half way down, a lone cowboy coming up passed us; fortunately, we had to sense to yell back and ask if he was looking for us. Ironically, the answer was yes – but he was told there were only 2 hikers... and so he did not think we were the right group. Did ANYONE know what was going on? The final mile of our hike was annoyingly steep – but we arrived in camp a little before 5, and had our tent set up by 5:30. Oddly, folks in camp did not understand that we had been given seriously WRONG information. Despite everything, this camp (ours for 2 nights) was good, especially by comparison with the next one above Shadow Lake (BEYOND buggy). Here, we could build a fire (not allowed at higher camps), there was a pretty river and a bathing creek, the toilet set-up was EXCELLENT, and there was cell phone reception. Upon arriving, we were finally introduced to our cowboys – one in charge of riding, the other in charge of cooking. Even though neither had AAW experience, both were REALLY nice 50-60 year-old men who did their best given many funky trip circumstances. Both had also retired from fascinating careers that had little to do with guiding/packing. Given stories one of the other guests told (about drunken cowboys leading other trips), we considered ourselves lucky to have had these guys. Within 90 minutes, we were enjoying dinner: pan-fried hamburgers and watermelon. In the AAW, the stock had to be tethered ALL the time. The cowboys provided them with alfalfa chips (bags delivered daily by the pack station) and “watered them” each night after dinner. These more stringent rules had to do with a combination of public perceptions and/or a Forest Service/Wilderness “agenda” to limit (if not ultimately eradicate) stock from the AAW trails. As stated in my previous JMT report, I support stock (or else I wouldn't be doing these kinds of trips) and understand their historic role in the Sierras. In any event, I was in

bed by around 9 p.m. (when it grew dark); I cannot say I slept great – which Allison will attest to given that I rotated frequently on my noisy new Thermarest NeoAir mattress.

July 25, 2011 – The Dream

Given that we were moving camp down-valley tomorrow, today offered our only shot at visiting Thousand Island Lake, my key goal in selecting this trip. The riders were heading up to Summit Lake and so Eric joined us again – the caveats: we were shooting for Island Pass (above Thousand Island) and there could be some snow/route-finding (9-10 miles, 1500 feet up/down). Breakfast, appearing around 8 a.m., was too light: one small scrambled egg per person and a couple strips of bacon... plus some canned fruit. We hit the trail just before 9 a.m. (long BEFORE the riders) and I will say that on days where the hikers were in charge of their own destiny, we fully enjoyed ourselves. Having said that, I'm not sure the cowboys took the time to understand our plans (which we did explain!) – and therefore they could have done little had we, like, not shown up at the end of the day.



Left to Right: (top) stairway to heaven, cute marmots, lower lake area, one snow crossing, Thousand Island Lake; (middle) off-trail jaunt, snow-cliff of DOOM, close-up of Donahue Pass, heading back off-trail, slickrocking; (bottom) last stop at Thousand Island Lake, bogs, stream crossing, pretty waterfall along main river, Garnet Lake stream outlet area

The trail was DDG from the moment we left camp – first passing along the river, which cut through granite via various sections of whitewater or outright waterfalls. We then hiked alongside snowy granite bulges and I felt like I was on the trail to Half Dome. At some point, we came across a cute mother and baby marmot pair; Allison has come to call me the “marmot whisperer” because I can usually bring them out of their dens with this long whistle I learned watching TV nature shows. Anyway, after some climbing through open woods, we arrived at the lower delta section of Thousand Island Lake – a long riverside section in low bulging granite, interspersed with occasional small lakes... Banner Peak in full glory. Hiking through this section remains one of my favorite memories of this trip; it reminded me of the kind of dreamy mountain-rock-water landscape I used to draw as a child. At 10:30 a.m., we arrived at Thousand Island Lake; in contrast with images posted on the web a week before, there was NO ice or snow on the lake. For such a popular place, I was surprised that so few tents were visible – although there was a lot of rolling terrain where camps were likely tucked out of view. We snacked and relaxed 30 minutes at the first sitting area by the water's edge. And then it was off to find Island Pass, the location of which was not obvious given that the west side of the lake seemed edged by this shallow, mostly forested uplift of land. The first half of the trail was snow-free and obvious, zigzagging up through the rocky forest. But then we arrived at the snow-cliff of doom – a shockingly steep wall of snow with no run-out below the 25-foot long staircase. Watching several backpackers (including this 10 year-old German girl wearing headphones) ascend the thing provided no comfort. But then lone hiking dude appeared, having come down some MUCH easier area just off-trail. Well – we headed over there, hiking an eighth of a mile before locating a more shallow line through the snow. Strangely, however, we were never able to find the trail again once we got into this upper plateau area. We did determine that we could off-trail our way to Island Pass – and so we headed up, winding our way through rock outcrops and small stands of trees in the otherwise open, rolling terrain. The key feature that gave Island Pass away was a doublet of lakes in this flat area - right before the broad, shallow pass dropped into the next series of lower basins. Our stopping/lunch point was an open rocky plateau ~100 vertical feet above the pass/lake area. In our opinion, we had the better view: Banner, Davis, this long ridge of weirdly-

shaped, often ruddy peaks, Donahue Pass and Peak, and Blacktop Peak. It seemed that Lyell (the tallest point in Yosemite) should have been in view – but we were not certain which of the distant peaks it was. We started heading back around 12:30 – mostly because, given what happened yesterday, we wanted to return early to camp for some downtime. Getting back through the off-trail section wasn't bad. Allison preferred to slickrock/scramble so she took more direct lines through rock areas. As we got near the long snowfield, we found a way to end-run it entirely - although there were a few boggy areas! Within 30 minutes, we were back at the trail/snow-cliff of doom. Back at the lake, Eric and Allison took off their shoes and got in the water; meanwhile, I snacked some more and took in what I knew were going to be the last views of Thousand Island Lake on this trip. Admittedly, I felt emotional leaving this place... but I didn't cry because I will probably come back again. And on that trip, I plan to pitch my tent with that view and enjoy the place through multiple rounds of different light, and with a sky full of stars. During the hike in, we noticed the interesting Garnet outlet stream area – vowing to explore that more on the way back. And so we did – leaving the trail at 3 p.m. to walk 5 minutes over to a direct view of said outlet area. At some point, we had fantasized about crossing this river and climbing to Garnet (as there is a trail)... however, there is no bridge and the river was CLEARLY raging. Additionally, we talked with about half a dozen backpackers today (all coming down from Thousand Island Lake) and NONE had took their chances with the JMT; they were all playing it safe on the lower River Trail bypass. Anyway, when we arrived at the riverside view of the Garnet outlet, this trio of male backpackers (plus dog) was across not just the main river but the second Garnet outlet stream – about to try to cross BOTH. Standing there as long as we did felt weird... like rubberneekers waiting for an accident. Upon longer inspection (or information gathered later), this party consisted of a large man in his 50's - his arm in a crude sling (he'd slipped on a snowfield earlier in the day and dislocated his shoulder). With him were 2 deaf teenage boys – a larger redhead Caucasian, and a skinny Asian-American. We watched the redhead ferry himself, the dog, and ALL packs over the first stream 6 times – holding this clothesline-thin string that his partners managed from the shore. I couldn't take it any more – and, after a brief discussion with Eric, Allison and I headed back to camp. Within the hour, Eric returned with the trio and managed to negotiate that the pack station ferry out the large man's pack. We improved his shoulder sling, using duct tape to stabilize his arm against his chest. Later, we enjoyed a fine dinner of chicken fajitas – which Allison said was her favorite meal on this part of the trip. At some point after dinner, the lead cowboy asked how Allison and I met - his look, tone, and slight hesitation, we both agreed, suggesting that he thought we were partners. Of course, Allison and I have been mistaken for partners on other group trips; indeed, it is something we think is funny (i.e. Allison's my trophy wife and I'm her sugar momma), something to mess conservative people minds with as long as possible. Not that our lead cowboy was some raging Republican, but he did seem quite relieved when I responded: "uh... we're sisters."



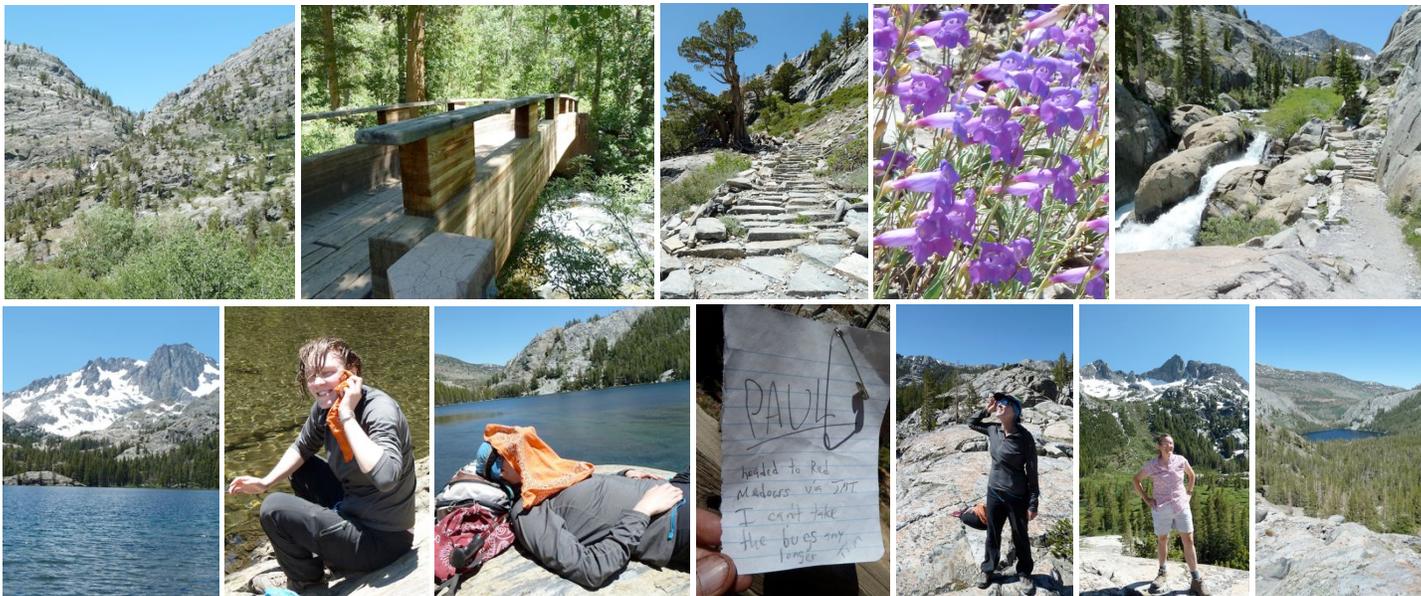
Left to Right: just below camp, garter snake, mariposa lily, nearing lunch spot by cool sequoia, is that a cold CHEESEBURGER?!?

July 26, 2011 – Unexpected Glory and Expected Bugs

The next day, we enjoyed a leisurely start. Breakfast portions - pancakes and steak pieces (seriously!) - were more generous. Initially, Eric was going to join us – but, within 10 minutes of our departure, he decided that he wanted to spend the day with his family since today was the first day the riders and hikers would be traveling the same route. And so Allison and I continued without him – the day already hot given that it was now past 10 a.m. In contrast with my expectations, the lower River Trail was seldom, like, down in the woods. Often, in fact, it traveled high above the river – soaring views up and down the valley. Having said that, we scared a Garter snake off the trail – something Allison despises encountering anywhere, anytime. Despite the bigger breakfast, Allison and I were both hungry come 11:30 – and stopped at this scenic overlook in the shade of some beautiful sequoia trees. We were then STUNNED to open our lunch sacks and discover – seriously – cold cheeseburgers with ketchup and mustard. REALLY?!? Even more shocking, it didn't taste that bad – and I could have easily eaten another. After lunch, we continued dropping a couple more miles – the folding land soon revealing the place where the Shadow Lake stream outlet cut into the bulging granite. Of course, it looked DAMN HOT – the streamside trail nearly 100% in the full solar noon sun.

At the River-Shadow junction (which featured a large bona fide bridge, under which Allison wetted most of her clothing before heading up), we ran into several colorfully-dressed 40-something female hikers who were dayhiking this from Agnew. For the next hour, we leapfrogged with them up the steepest part of the climb. The lower portion of the climb was made of LONG and more gentle switchbacks, which I found easier to manage. As the trail pinched into the hourglass drainage area, the switchbacks became shorter, steeper, and more erratic. Consequently, I rested a LOT – and grew farther behind Allison. Our lead cowboy called this route the trail of vanishing waterfalls. Although I sort of agree with this description, a lot of the stream was hidden deep in these mini-canyons of granite. Right as you neared the top, you crossed a catwalk that had been blasted out of the granite – RIGHT above/in the whitewater canyon. From this point, the trail flattened for an eighth of a mile – the greenery thickening, the river wide and placid. And then we arrived at Shadow Lake proper, a beautiful place that looked upon a different high ridge of snowy mountains called the “Volcanic Ridge.” Much to my surprise and pleasure, Mt. Ritter was also fully in view and, further behind, the Minarets. Given the amount of daytrippers about the lakeshore, it was clear that Shadow Lake was the easiest and most popular destination. It was 1 p.m. when we arrived at this large slab of mosquito-free granite jutting out into the lake – and thus decided to hang out. And so we sat, snacked, washed (Allison fully washing her hair), and fully dried off... and chatted – watching this fly fisherman and his 3 dogs making their way around the lake. Our aim was to head to camp (under a mile away, 200-300 feet up) around 2:30, the idea being that – based on all data up to this point – the riders and gear should be there by 3 p.m. So we packed up and continued climbing alongside what became

(once again) a whitewater creek. En route, we filled our Nalgene bottles and iodine-treated/neutralized more water. Indeed, we did this every day to supplement our camp-acquired/chlorinated water.



Left to Right: (top) Shadow trail junction, bona fide bridge, heading up to Shadow, penstemon, golden staircase; (bottom) Ritter from Shadow, Allison bathing and resting, infamous bug note (see below), scrambling & views – Shadow

En route to camp, we came across this humorously ominous note where the JMT came in: “Paul, headed to Red Meadow via JMT. I can’t take the bugs any longer, Tim.” Continuing up through forested granite, we arrived at the target junction (where the JMT, Ediza, and Garnet trails all came together). To the right, a clearly-used open forest campsite was occupied by a large group who was about to leave. Several yellow pack station bags had already been left (our bags of alfalfa chips, dropped off by the pack station). Given that we were being eaten ALIVE, we headed off-trail to the right – where beautiful granite domes were waiting to be scrambled. Having hiked with Allison since 2002, I remember when she was afraid to do stuff like scrambling; but nowadays Allison is an ANIMAL, totally taking off up anything granite. At the “top,” the views were magnificent: down onto Shadow Lake and the High Trail, up toward where the JMT climbed to Garnet, back onto the Minarets, Volcanic Ridge, down over this GIANT marsh by our camp (hence the mosquitoes).



Left to Right: shadows, Allison descending, the crazy begins... cheese-dog and bug-suit, campsite, cowboy mosquito repellent

After 30 minutes, more horses appeared and we headed down – only to find that it was just our camping gear. The riders were still hanging out at Shadow Lake, having been down there since 2:30 (arriving just as we left). But they showed up within 20 minutes – and then camp-set up began. Allison and I had already staked out our campsite – picking this AWESOME but peripheral spot down by the river/partially on granite. As we were setting up, our solo male rider watched us with clear envy – and then put his one-man 30 feet away. Although this was annoying, we grew to like that someone was near us... given that, for whatever reason, Allison started going on about bears, setting us both into irrational-land (RETROSPECTIVE COMMENT 2012: in fact, there were aggressive bears here in 2012!). With tents up by 5:30, Allison also began showing early signs of mosquito-borne crazy. Donning ALL raingear, booties, and headnet, she could only sit right by the river (which offered a few breezes) and read as we waited (and waited, and waited) for dinner. Being in the tent was unbearable – and would only grow worse over time. Meanwhile, this large group of teenage boys arrived – and appeared taken aback that people were at their planned camp; after milling around for 20 minutes, they “made do” in this patch of meadow across the trail. Seeing half a dozen tents crammed in to such a tiny space made me feel guilty – because we were all so spread out... but I suspect they were put off by the horses. If last night’s fajita dinner was Allison’s favorite, tonight’s kielbasa dogs and cheese-y au gratin potato slices was mine... even though you didn’t have much time to savor things given the bugs. Of course, Allison and I were the only ones who elected not to oil ourselves up with DEET. I did test one of those bug-juice fan devices (which I believe sprays out permethrin – not DEET). When we were at the less buggy camp, it seemed like it was working; however, once we got into marshy bug-camp, all bets were off! Making matters worse, we couldn’t build a fire – and so, once dinner was over everyone basically vanished to their tents... and that’s when Allison started asking if we should be concerned about bears. Even though the rational part of my brain knew there was ZERO reason to be worried about bears, I slept like shit.

July 27, 2011 – Even More Unexpected Glory... but also Smoke

The next day, we learned there had been – YET AGAIN – another last-minute change in the itinerary by the pack station owner: we were moving camp tomorrow AGAIN. Previously, we had been told we were going to stay here 3 nights and then return via the River Trail to Agnew Meadows. The new plan: we were going to hike/ride 8 miles along the JMT to Johnston Meadows for our final night - and then continue 4 miles on the last day back to the resort area. Needless to say, this did not sit well with Allison and I – the most disconcerting issue being that current conditions on the route were unknown to our cowboys (according to them, no one from the company had been up there this season). As we had personally seen day one from the High Trail, there was a LOTTA snow up there. Given how pussy-footed conservative this operation had been with the dinky snow-patch by Thousand Island Lake, we could not FATHOM anyone on horseback stood a chance at pulling of this stunt off. But I digress. Today's hiking agenda began with a 4-miler (1100 feet up/down) to “above Garnet.” The morning began hazy - a fire south of Whitney in the Golden Trout Wilderness – and only got worse. The trail was also the steepest and roughest so far and, of course, I was in the throes of my period – not to mention obsessed with why moving camp was a BAD IDEA. As we hiked, everyone else was parallel-riding the same trail – along with 4 other backpacking parties. After a solid mile in the woods, the terrain started opening up – but still continued to climb: first along a little creek, then through a green valley surrounded by bulging granite (with increasing snow), and then up lots of rocky talus. The riders stopped without even climbing the final and loosest section of talus, making me wonder how this operation managed to do anything substantive. From this section (looking east), the Volcanic Ridge peaks were magnificent – reminding me of Mt. Anderson and Thousand Acre Meadow in Olympic National Park. At some point, I argued with a bunch of 50-something backpackers who INSISTED the haze was simply moisture in the air. No, I glared: this was smoke, I could SMELL it and it was brown. Crossing over what felt like a little pass, we hit a long, shallow snowfield and then a small tarn. Beyond, the trail continued but hit this steep gully of snow. Below – tucked DEEP in this pocket – was Garnet Lake. To gain a better view, we scrambled to the north of the snow-pond and earned a hazy view of Ritter and Banner. Looking at the steep snowy walls descending all around Garnet, it was easy to imagine how the old backpacker with the 2 deaf teenage boys had slipped and dislocated his shoulder. Although there were footprints heading down, no one in our group continued. Instead, we snacked, chasing this cute marmot around with a video camera – and then headed back down... the sky more hazy, the air smelling even more of smoke.



Left to Right: (top) Allison and Volcanic Ridge, climbing through open country, at pass, Ritter/Banner and Garnet, another marmot friend; (bottom) heading to Ediza – mostly in or through granite, time for “crampons,” smoky Ediza!

Given that it was only noon when we arrived at camp junction, we proceeded to/towards the second destination: Ediza Lake. In the case of the riders, I do mean TOWARDS because they didn't get there – once again owing to snow. But the hikers did! So - I had ZERO expectations for Ediza. The notion that this lake would be completely melted out AND provide one of the best views on this trip (even through haze) says A LOT. Nonetheless, I remain heartbroken that we didn't see the lake/Minarets in blue-sky glory; indeed, Ediza – perhaps more than Thousand Island Lake – remains a key reason I need to come back here. Even the hike getting to Ediza was amazing: a lazy, reasonably low grade of elevation (i.e. 300 feet up from camp), most of the trail on or in gorgeous granite, traveling along a musical creek (including a couple interesting crossings – rock or log near snow). Less than 2 miles in, we came to the horses/riders – who were stalled at a log-by-snow crossing. Sadly, only the solo male rider had decided to go beyond. Allison and I didn't pause – although we did lose the way briefly in this muddy forest area. Arriving at a big snowfield that sloped down from a moderate rock wall, we knew the lake was, like, right around the corner... and so, after popping on our mini-crampons, we followed the footprints up. Within 200 feet, the snow ended and the trail – this idyllic lakeside route in rock and meadow – continued... the views getting bigger and bigger. Within 10 minutes, I picked a scenic rock that was surrounded by pink heather for our lunch spot. There were no bugs – and so lunch turned into a LONG (70 minute) break/nap. After watching several people snow-climbing down from the pass by Iceberg Lake (above Ediza), we headed back down at a leisurely pace. Despite satisfaction at Ediza, the topic of conversation regarded Allison's lack of interest in sleeping in a tent more than 4-5 days. Gee, didn't I have this same conversation with ELLEN in 2003... right before we stopped “backpacking” together? Hmmm. Arriving in camp around 4, the notion of all this downtime with bugs wore down Allison's soul even more. Although dinner – steak, corn, and slaw – was great and served early, Allison was stir-crazy by 7. My biggest concern was that, unlike me, Allison had to be fresh and back to her high-powered job IMMEDIATELY after this trip; the thought of her coming back more stressed out than when she left was worrisome. Notions of spending another night out for no good reason – and at what looked like an even worse mosquito hell-hole were discussed using bad language. Indeed, we had just

completed this pack station's "usual" 5-day AAW tour - but now, it seemed, they were trying to force that itinerary into 6 days to match our purchased trip, but without any foresight (e.g. we would have HAPPILY spent another night, say, at Thousand Island or even the upper camp - but NOT this shit-hole 4 miles from our car). Well - hopefully what happened is not going to be a complete surprise.



Left to Right: "pass" between Shadow and Rosalie, Rosalie, above snow section, unnamed lake past Gladys, Johnston Lake

July 28, 2011 - Escape

The next morning, we got up at our usual time. Much to our surprise, breakfast was a fast oatmeal affair and everyone else was done and nearly packed; even Eric was done and gone by, like, 7:30. Being fast and bug-motivated, though, we were on the trail within 55 minutes. The planned mileage (8 miles, 1000 feet up & 2000 down) to Johnston Meadows was, according to the cowboys, the longest on the trip; I guess they'd forgotten that the hikers had exceeded that already. After descending a mile to Shadow Lake, we began the arduous zigzagging climb up the JMT to the pass between Shadow and Rosalie Lake. Thankfully, it was cool and we were in the shade the whole time. Although Rosalie had a ton of snow banked against its north side, the JMT rounded its snow-free south side; we hoped the rest of the lake areas we'd be passing were likewise. Rosalie did provide one challenge, however: no bridge over its spreading outlet creek. On the other side, we found Eric - who looked dispondent and promptly informed us there was a LOT of snow (too much for the horses) around the next lake (Gladys). Although Allison seemed deflated, I knew in that moment I was going to get us out today - because there was NO way I was going wait until after noon for the riders to arrive... and do god-knows-what for no good reason. So - even though I told Eric that we were going on to Johnston, I KNEW we were going all the way out. And so we did, discovering that - indeed - there was a TON of snow covering the busy forest around Gladys, several sections requiring route-finding attention because finding the trail was challenging. For a mile thereafter, minor snow patches were seen on or along the trail. During this time, I made my plan clear to Allison - who was overjoyed that we were going to sleep in a real bed with no bugs tonight. Each time we cleared another field of snow, we agreed there was NO way the horses were making it through. For most of this section, we were on the heels of this fit older male dayhiker; at some point, he stopped and asked if this was the trail to Ediza... and we disappointed him by pointing out that he'd missed said turn-off 2 miles back now. After he left, the trail became eerie and quiet for a LONG time - no footprints, no horseshoe prints, no stock shit (testimony to the fact that everyone was bypassing the JMT). Passing 3 more unnamed ponds, we were now on a completely downward slope.



Left to Right: (top) Minaret Creek junction, dirty shorts after 6 days with period, beer-tasting, HOT dry burn section, Rainbow Falls (bottom) Lee Vining hotel - room, veranda, Allison's dinner/origins - Mono Market; Sarah's dinner/origins - Mono Cone

Initially, we calculated that "getting out" would involve 12 miles... but then we stopped for lunch and determined that we could pull out at Devils Postpile (11 miles) and ride the shuttle back to the trailhead/our car!!!! A mile from Johnston Meadows, the trail became SUPER-dry and hot - the ground reminding me of Yellowstone geyserite. Shockingly, we arrived at Johnston Meadows at 12:30 (that's 8 miles, with route-finding, in less than 4 hours). And it WAS a mosquito hell-hole with no views... although there was an branch trail to interesting-looking high Minaret Lake. With 3 miles left, we bombed across the flat forest beyond the marshy lake area, crossed Minaret Creek on a double log bridge, and then descended this INSANELY long dry section that HAD to be more than the map-stated 0.8 miles! We began encountering day-visitors to Devils Postpile, eventually crossing the Middle Fork San Joaquin and hiking the

same little loop we hiked night one. We waited less than 10 minutes for a shuttle to arrive – and then took a big sign of relief. Back at Agnew, we metaphorically kissed the car, called the resort about our whereabouts (not surprisingly, they had no rooms), and then used my Best Western member card to get their LAST room in Mammoth Lakes. Except for the fact that the hotel's free business computers/internet did not work, and Allison plugged up the toilet, the hotel was as excellent. After washing filthy clothes in the sink (because all our gear was lord-knows-where) and showering, we patronized the local Thai restaurant. Although their vegetables and tofu were good, my beloved Salad Rolls left something to be desired (the skins were leathery and tough!), and the so-called "wide noodles" looked and tasted suspiciously like store-bought fettuccini. As we sat staring out the window, we were shocked to – for the first time – see CLOUDS in the sky. After a couple stops at the grocery and drug stores, we were back in the hotel room watching Stewart and Colbert before enjoying a LUXURIOUS night of sleep. Oh – and I almost forgot: the pack station was not able to tell us where our party was and, sufficed to say, we went to bed amusingly skeptical that we'd find our gear at the anointed time and place.

July 29, 2011 – Relaxation and Amazement, Tufa to Beat

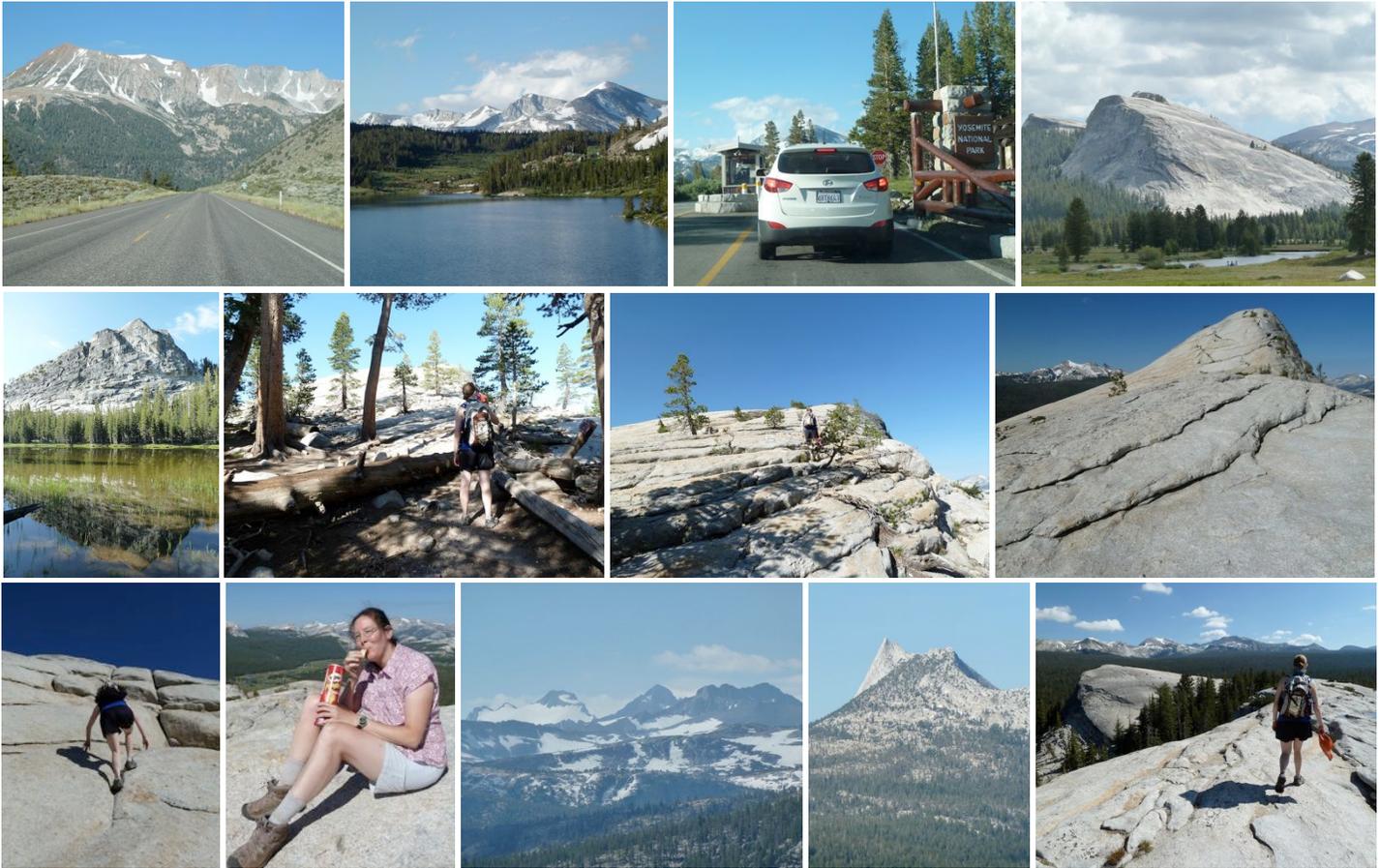
The next morning, we woke up late and made our way to the hotel restaurant – where we joined the fray of too many vacationing families. But the pancakes, fresh blueberries, and bacon were DELISH... all you can eat (!). During last night's Thai dinner, we had learned about the local Mammoth Brewing Company and decided to visit them. Although we got a little lost trying to find them, we enjoyed their great tasting room. By noon, we were back on the road to Devils – the plan to hike 2.5 miles to Rainbow Falls. Setting out at 1 p.m., it was OPPRESSIVELY hot and open the whole fire-burnt way. But at least Allison and I were prepared with water and gear; most of the dozens of other people/families on the trail had nothing. The final quarter mile to the falls was down a long and shallow set of wide stairs (meaning climbing back up on the way out). These terminated at the upper viewpoint – comprehensive but distant; we chose NOT to descend another 200 feet to the lower area (in the spray of the falls). Although Rainbow was fine, we would NOT do it again given the opportunity. The hike back was annoying and arduous, despite our last week of rigorous hiking. Arriving at the resort at 2:30, we were pleased to find things early and all other guests had left. Our cowboys joked with us about whether they smelled so bad that we had to leave – but we assured them (in words and tip) they were GREAT; given that we felt certain the snow would be stock-impassable, we weren't interested in waiting around anymore. In fact, the horses DID make it across – but it was a lot of off-trail weaving, getting lost - and they weren't sure they'd be able to do it until it was done. Oh well. Everyone seemed satisfied.



Left to Right: Mono Lake south Tufa Castle area, shortest loop – self-explanatory

By 3 p.m., we were on the road to Lee Vining, gateway to Tioga Pass and Mono Lake. After all Jenn's stories about Mono Lake, we wanted to finally visit its infamous Tufa Castles. It was worrisome to be on the road so late because, at the time, we didn't understand that the best tufa area was just a 1-mile loop; what WAS problematic: all the clouds signified a serious change in the weather – one that would bring MASSIVE thunder/lightening activity later today, tomorrow, and during our drive home. Being less than an hour from Lee Vining, we easily arrived and checked in by 3:30 p.m. I LOVED Lee Vining SOOOOO much more than Mammoth. Even though our hotel was less posh, there was something homey about the place – the cute main street, the old stores. Even though Allison had found little organic anything in the Mammoth grocery, tiny Mono Market was ALL about local, organic, and had one of the best vegetarian prepared goods area. Unlike Allison (who made a veggie-veggie-veggie sandwich for dinner), I had my eyes on Mono Cone, a drive-up hamburger joint... home of the batter-fried pickle spear (which I avoided). But I have gotten ahead of myself because dinner didn't happen until after our hike... and our hike didn't happen until we sorted out the TERRIFIC thunder and lightening show that started as we arrived in town. Like our neighbors, we dragged chairs out onto the veranda and drank beer booty as we watched the tremendous show over the lake. And then we watched the news, trying to gauge the best time to hike to the Tufa Castles. Basically, the weather service storm warning (which stretched all the way north to Reno) was to be over by 7:30. Watching things settle, I decided we should leave the hotel at 6 p.m. Allison wasn't keen on this idea given that she was not interested in being struck and killed by lightening – but she has figured out that I am not bad at reading weather. Following obvious signs to Mono Lake's south Tufa Castle area, we arrived at 6:30. Normally, there is someone in the kiosk to accept \$3 entrance fee – but, as noted above, this person had abandoned ship for safety reasons. But we still left our money. Already, a number of camera-wielding photographers had arrived, given amazing light, particularly as the sun started breaking through the clouds and over the mountains. We walked the obvious loop trail – which began on pavement, switched to boardwalk, and then became earth. There were definitely social trail/places where we (and others) wandered

through the tufa. Given that I work with hot spring bacteria (related to deep sea vent communities), I couldn't help but wonder if all these things were thermal in origin. I came in with high expectations of the Mono Lake Tufa Castles and they were 100% met; I HIGHLY recommend this little trip because the scenery is magically different from anything in the Sierras. Returning to our hotel, Allison built her healthy sandwich while I trotted across the street and brought home a REAL corn dog (as opposed to that piece of crap back at Willamette Pass), a MESS o' French Fries, and a spectacular medium chocolate soft-serve CONE.



Left to Right: (top) Tioga Road, park entrance, Lembert; (middle) reflecting pond with lower Lembert, out of the woods, Mmmm – granite, final knob; (bottom) Allison scrambling knob, summit snacks, detail of Lyell/MacClure and Cathedral, descending

July 30-31, 2011 – Perfection in Tuolumne, Brake-Dancing Home

After deciding the weather was not stable enough for North Dome (a 9-mile hike with about 1000 feet down, then up), we put all our energy towards humble Lembert Dome (3.6 miles and 900 feet up/down). Knowing the weather situation, I called a “7:30 a.m. on the road” mandate; it was one of those times Allison didn't enjoy it but thanked me later. Given that our hotel lacked breakfast services, we had purchased yogurt and fruit the night before. In addition, I also brought gourmet rice crispy treats a Pringles for the trail. I cannot say exactly what the mileage was between Lee Vining and the Lembert parking area; it took us 40 minutes, involved 3000 feet up and a park entrance line/stop. Ever since I was little, I have wanted to drive the Tioga Road and see Tuolumne Meadows. While I will say that the BIG ASCENT to 10,000 feet/Tioga Pass (claimed to be the highest paved road in CA) was scenic (especially with snow), the road drops to the Tuolumne vicinity and there were WAY more trees than I was expecting. Although there are high peaks around, they are more distant and rolling. But Lembert was an oasis of excitement, satisfaction, and great views. And – THANK GOD – we arrived EARLY; we were the only ones on the way in... and the only ones on the top. That said, the trailhead looked crowded... but that was because a big group was bouldering on Lembert's lower flanks. That we hiked in and scrambled Lembert by ourselves was shocking; equally so was how quickly the weather deteriorated over the time we were out. But I digress. Even though I LOVED Lembert, that trail getting in was a MAJOR bitch during the first mile... and the signage felt lacking. After using the stinky restroom (no lock), we hit the trail. Above the parking lot, Lembert LOOMED frighteningly – its straight-up face making me question whether I could handle whatever was in store for us at the end. We crossed an open granite section and then took our first junction – heading right. IMMEDIATELY, the trail shot relentlessly UP and became rudely rocky. Despite all our acclimating the week before, being thrown THAT grade at this hour made me question my fitness level. Allison, 16 years my junior had NO problems. Dragging, I clawed my way up the goofy path – wondering where the views were and damning all these trees. After a mile, we came to a pretty pond that reflected “lower Lembert.” We then came to another junction and promptly saw Lembert's dragon-like back of pretty granite through the trees: SO exciting. Ascending the spectacular flakes like stairs, I only wish we could have been on granite for longer than the 20 minutes (total) we were on ascent. Almost instantly, the views opened entirely: Tuolumne Meadows, Cathedral, Unicorn, Vogelsang Peaks, the Mt. Lyell/MacClure complex, etc. For 10 minutes, we debated whether people climb what we deemed the “final knob.” Guidebook statements were not clear and only featured pictures of people below last 100 feet of blobby granite. Well – Allison decided she should do it so I sat down mocking her with the video camera. Given that she was fine, I hauled my ass (and my rice crispy treats and Pringles) up there as well. It was not bad, although I can't say the views were better. Most importantly, it was not scary – not like Half Dome, which we aborted in 2007. While enjoying the summit, Allison (who usually doesn't know much about the hikes I plan) made a

profound statement: Lembert (9450 feet) was higher than Half Dome (8842 feet) – we finally “beat” our old nemesis. She then wondered whether it was higher than Clouds Rest but, alas, that is over 9900 feet. After sharing treats, we 5-pointed our way down the granite and headed back, still not encountering any other parties until the pond.



Left to Right: simple visitor center, Olmstead Point – overview, Clouds Rest detail, Half Dome detail, me and Allison at Olmstead

Arriving back at the car at 10:45, we decided to head down to the Tuolumne Visitor Center. In contrast with expectations, the place was a TINY, CCC-built cabin housing some old-school natural history displays and a gift shop. Of course, I was drawn to the GIANT flower book they had placed on this big pedestal... and I instantly bought copies for Bryan and myself. We chatted briefly with the ranger, who seemed surprised we'd already been up/down Lembert – but pleased because of approaching thunderheads. Across from the parking area, I was dismayed to see dozens of parties WANDERING free-form through the meadows. Why weren't the rangers doing anything? Why weren't there trails to stop this madness?!? We then drove towards Yosemite Valley, the way climbing and making its way first by and then through lots of lovely granite. Given that the trailhead for Clouds Rest originates at Lake Tenaya, I had looked forward to seeing this spectacular-looking lake in person. For some reason, though, it wasn't as awesome as whatever photographer who illustrated my guidebook made it look: too many people, road turn-outs, picnic areas. This likely explains why we continued to Olmstead Point – the first place from which Half Dome is visible. In contrast with Lake Tenaya, I had no expectations for Olmstead Point – other than it being a big mess of people. Thankfully, there was a nice weed-out trail to a quiet granite overlook – and, there, one could enjoy the scenery. Looking out at Clouds Rest, Allison and I agreed that that would be one hard deathmarch. We could also see where the cables went up Half Dome – although it was most convincing when viewed as a zoom-lens close-up image. By noon, we started doing the math and prioritizing the fact that we wanted to get to our Susanville hotel early to relax – and this was going to take 5-6 hours. With clouds gathering, we started back – against the stream of traffic still coming in (the line was SOOOOOO long at Tioga Pass that they closed our lane to spread incoming cars into it... meaning we waited 10 minutes for them to open the exit). As we descended the pass, I knew my car was not doing well; the car was shaking whenever I touched the brakes. Although I did downshift to assist with the problem, the shaking seemed to get worse with every turn – even though the brakes unquestionably responded. When we finally arrived in Lee Vining – where it was now storming and raining, I felt she needed to cool down and so we stopped at a couple places, including Mono Cone (again). There were no obvious smells coming from the car and so we proceeded. Driving around Mono Lake to the north seemed fine – but then you climb over what I call Mono Pass. Given that the traffic was light, we flew at our own pace down most of the other side – with me downshifting or minimally braking. Near the bottom, we came upon a VW van that was a little pokey and so I sunk my foot onto the brake: NOTHING... it went ALL the way... NOTHING. Much to my own surprise, I was very calm – explaining the situation to Allison while downshifting and pumping the brake again – this time, I got a response. Obviously, I tested the brakes a lot after that – and a couple times, the same thing happened. Needless to say, we stopped at the first gas station (in Bridgeport) that seemed like it should be large enough to have a service station. But the guy said no – and directed us to another town 30 miles away. Leaving the station, I nervously tested the brakes in the parking area and they failed another 2 times... but they also stuck 2 times. At the time, we had no cell service. Allison and I did a couple basic checks, pulling out the manual and examining the brake fluid level (fine)... no weird smells, the engine was not overheated. And so we continued again – the next big town (Gardnerville) a LONG way away. Near said town, we finally got cell service so we called Marshall. He felt the car situation was bad and that we should stop at the first Les Schwab; at the same moment he web-located said place on his computer, we saw the sign along the highway. And so we spent the next 2 hours there (right up to 5 p.m. closing) – but they fixed what were heat-warped discs, and checked/replaced the brake fluid (just to be safe)... to the tune of about \$140. Allison will tell you that I enjoyed 3 bags of salty, yellow popcorn, spilled at least one bottle of water, and read several trashy magazines while talking to some entertaining locals.

Given our previous enjoyment of the Carson City Trader Joe's (and the fact that Susanville's eating options were unknown and/or suspicious), we did a repeat performance. At the time, there was a MASSIVE downpour and we were the only ones with umbrellas. Leaving Carson City, we witnessed several fires – including one close enough to the road to see flames along a ridgeline; a plane dumping red fire retardant also made one pass as we drove by. Past Reno, plumes of smoke from more distant fires rose to the east/northeast. We arrived in Susanville around 7:30, the sun behind the mountains. Allison showered while I cleaned out the dirty car as much as possible, organizing gear for a smooth transition tomorrow. And then I went to the functional business computer/internet and plowed through 300 emails... most junk. The next morning, we got a fairly early start – which, apparently, everyone else wanted to do too; hence, the busy breakfast area that received poor marks (again - no waffle-maker!). But most of these folks ultimately were driving west toward Lassen/Redding... not north – and so, other than some annoying big-rigs, traffic on the way back was not bad. After personally driving some 1300 miles, I handed the car over to Allison for the final 3 hours... I was exhausted, honestly. We made it back to Salem around 3 p.m., pretty much what we expected to achieve given the start time.

Concluding Remarks

Given all the challenging conditions presented by the late-season snow in the Sierras (and most places), I would say we had a great trip. Because I had wanted to do the AAW the most, I was not disheartened by missing out on Donahue Pass or Lyell Canyon – although, eventually, I would like to traverse this whole area. After all the hype about snow, there wasn't THAT much. After all the hype about bugs – yeah, there were a lot... although they drove Allison far crazier than me. As for the pack station, I have obviously

chosen not to document their name; anyone who wants more information about that can email me directly. Although I would probably not use this company for any guided trips that involved mixed riders/hikers, I would use them for doing pack/gear drops should I want to do a hybrid backpack/basecamp. I would also not try to plan this trip as far out as I did. As for the non-guided stuff: Devils Postpile is worth a short add-on. Mono Lake is awesome and I'd love to explore more stuff in the vicinity (e.g. a number of hot springs in the foothills). And even though Tuolumne was a little woody, Lembert Dome was a perfect and fierce way to end our trip.

Lightening Strikes Twice on the AAW Loop – August 2012

Given 2011's many epic trips (AAW, Wind Rivers, Tetons, and South Sister), I committed in January to repeat my 2004 Southern JMT; the planned trip was to coincide with my 45th birthday in late August. Knowing I needed more high altitude training and that the Sierra snowpack had been light, I decided to return to the AAW in early August, using the same pack station. Although that might seem shocking, even Allison agreed that the likelihood of experiencing the same problems were significantly lower. Flying into Mammoth Lakes, I rented a car (that largely sat at the trailhead) and booked a super cheap Travelodge one night before and one night after this trip. Thanks to one of the worst and latest allergy seasons hit Oregon, I developed a blocked tear duct and massive sinus infection in late July. Even so, my physician and ENT encouraged me to continue – if only to get out of the Willamette Valley.

August 4-5, 2012 – To Mammoth Lakes and Thousand Island Lake

I awoke around 6:30 a.m. to catch the airport shuttle for the 10:30 flight to LAX (horrible – total zoo!). Landing at 1 (with a 2-hour layover), I hungrily circled the gate area four times before committing to this overpriced hamburger joint, hoping for their veggie option (nope – out). So I just went with a traditional hamburger and fries – excellent. The hour-long flight from LAX to Mammoth Lakes was in a ~40-seater prop plane. We were warned that it was windy and we should expect turbulence. I had been looking forward to this flight because I thought we might, like, get good views of Whitney. Unfortunately this was NOT the case - most of the flight was on the western side; when we finally cut over the mountains (south of the AAW), there were some decent mountain views but my windows were filthy and the plane was bumping around a lot. The most memorable part of the flight, though, was when the Sierras DROPPED out from under us as we crossed over the Owens Valley; the winds were extreme and the plane lurch-dropped several times. Having flown over the mountains at 20-25K elevation, we had to make a many-circled descent to land at Mammoth Lakes; every time we turned – getting hit by the wind just right - it felt like the plane was going to fully flip upside down. But we eventually landed, the air clean and blue. But I could feel that my head and ears were stuffed and buzzing more than usual, which was worrisome given that I had only 2 more days of antibiotics. Fortunately, I picked up my rental car and navigated the 20-minute drive into Mammoth Lakes proper. Although the hotel was only \$80 a night and the owner was nice, the room was hotter than hell and felt cheap-y dorm-like (in terms of both quality, comfort, and cleanliness). After reorganizing my gear into duffle-bags, I hit the supermarket for a light dinner and then picked up a mini-bear spray canister from one of the local sports stores; without Allison, I was concerned I could be hiking alone long periods of time on this outing. Popping a Nyquil with the hopes of calming down my head and ears, I slept moderately well.

Waking around 6:30 again, I felt REALLY hazy – and decided to take a Sudafed, downing it with fake hotel juice, a bowl of cereal, and some toast. I hit the road around 7:30 (the trailhead meeting time 8 a.m.), driving up past the ski resort, through the entry gate, and down the Minaret Road to the pack station at Agnew Meadows. Compared with last year's big snow, the Minarets looked naked and bone-dry. At the pack station, I learned that this year's party was bigger - a near even split of hikers and riders. The former included me, Alvin and his 2 kids (Joe and Zoe), and a solo male hiker (Paul); everyone (hiker or rider) except me was from California. Hitting the trail took still about 90 minutes... although, given 10 clients and 2 cowboys (a male wrangler and a female cook), the gear situation was large and the wait more justified. At some point, however, one of the cowboys indicated we were NOT camping at Thousand Island Lake the first two nights (WTF?). Given that I did not know anyone well yet, I kept my feelings to myself for a little while. Around 9:30, the hikers took off first, Alvin's kids setting a fast pace and Paul pulling up the rear. Being that Alvin and I hiked the same pace (well – that day we did), we started talking, comparing notes, and then venting. Alvin was an extremely seasoned and lifelong Sierra hiker. After serious backpacking pre-having-kids, he started taking his brood on serious basecamp trips up and down the range using pack-supported drop-offs. I REALLY respected Alvin, his knowledge of this mountain range, and his experience and advice. Alvin's voice and speaking mannerisms are best-described as: "when Jon Stewart does his cranky old Jewish man" (which I love!). With that in mind, Alvin was more hopping mad than me about the "no Thousand Island" basecamp situation – and my stories about last year's debacle only fired him up more. Being a very high-tech guy, Alvin pulled out his smart-phone and called the resort. I'm not sure if he got the owner or the second in command, but the bottom line was: there was no reason we couldn't camp there (i.e. it wasn't some kind of permit issue). Much as I loved Alvin, I sure wouldn't want to get on his bad side... he was one TOUGH honeybadger!



Left to Right: packing up, along the High Trail, Banner Peak on trail to Thousand Island Lake... at the lake!

And speaking of badgers... our meeting spot (i.e. the cowboy-preferred camp) was by Badger Lake, a dark little hole surrounded by thin forest and granite bulges. Alvin's family and I arrived there at around 2 – and they vanished to explore whether the lake provided any redeeming qualities (it did not). Within 20 minutes, the riders and the gear train (2 cowboys with a 5-team mule train who would return to the pack station that night) arrived and we began our campaign to go on to Thousand Island (40 minutes away). Ultimately, our client group was 60% strongly in favor of continuing – with the remainder indifferent. If our wrangler, an affable and pleasant man, was

opposed, he did not express or show it. Our cook, however, was super-passive aggressive – simultaneously insisting it did not matter to her, but then totally degrading the idea for all sorts of reasons (bears, crowds, the fact that the gear packers would be out even later)... and then throwing her hands in the air, insisting she would accept a majority decision (which had already been determined in our favor). Indeed, it became obvious who was behind the Badger Lake idea. Owing to a combination of the funky group vibe and the lack of snow/greenery, the hike to Thousand Island was not nearly as impressive as last year. Of course, the fun was not over yet. We had been told that the camp area would be to the LEFT at the first lake-trail junction. When I arrived (Alvin's kids having left me in the dust awhile back), I saw NO horseshoe prints or anything that way (given that the trail was sandy, you would have seen something if THAT many horses had been through). I was surprised I could not see ANY campers to the right (SURELY I SHOULD be able to see a dozen or more horses somewhere... especially after all the hemming and hawing about crowds). After 15 minutes, Alvin's son arrived – having thoughtfully come down to direct us late-arrivers. The camp was, in fact, on the right – 15 minutes away (half along the lakeshore trail, half UP this granite ramp – alongside this little draw where, alas, the creek was dry... just like everything else).



Left to Right: gear team departing, enjoying the smoky view, crazy kitchen, evening light and tent area

Given Thousand Island's reputation, I was SHOCKED how well-hidden our camp was – positioned in a clump of trees at the top of the rocky ramp; frankly, non-stock party tents (all down by the lake) were FAR more blazing. So – kudos to the cowboys for making our group nearly invisible. Having said that, there were no hidden tent sites left for folks like me – and so 3 of us erected tents RIGHT on the big rocky ramp – AWESOME views all-around. Having said that, the amount of traveling required to make our way around camp – e.g. for water or bathing or getting to the kitchen – was significant, including a surprising amount of elevation (now that we were at 10K and the Sudafed was running out, I was feeling it). While setting up my tent, I noticed smoke gathering around Banner... a wild fire on the west side blowing our way; given last year's Ediza situation, I feared a repeat performance. Eventually, I hauled my ass UP to the chair circle near the kitchen and socialized, getting to know our riders. Alvin's kids excluded, I was one of the younger members – most others 50-65. At some point, Paul FINALLY arrived, suffering altitude sickness much of the night (and some the next day). Unfortunately, it was also becoming clear that our cook was drunkety-drunk-drunk... fulfilling one of the serious pack station criticisms Allison and I were told about last year. Under normal circumstances, a drunk (to the point of falling down) cowboy cook with a surly sense of humor would make for interesting short-story fodder; however, she scared most of us and her hygiene/sanitation practices were terrible: the kitchen was an unorganized mess (that only got worse every day), she handed out food with her bare hands (no obvious washing), and ALL tonight's chicken breasts showed extensive raw interiors (half because she was drunk, and half because – by the time she bothered to start cooking – it was dark and she didn't use a headlamp). Oh – what I would have done for one of last year's cold hamburgers! Howsoever tempting it is to go ON and ON about this, I don't want to waste any more precious space – sufficed to say: the dinner/drinking situation was another example of passive-aggression. Indeed, she was not this way every night, her food (if cooked) did taste good – and she could, at times, be likable, funny, and charismatic. Unfortunately, I went to bed and suffered through my own scary night – sinuses full, ears stuffed and buzzing, no temperature control, and mildly delirious.



Left to Right: view from my tent (Constantina and tent), close-up of Banner, kitchen view, heading up-lake

August 6-7, 2012 – Aborted Dayhiking, Traverse to Shadow

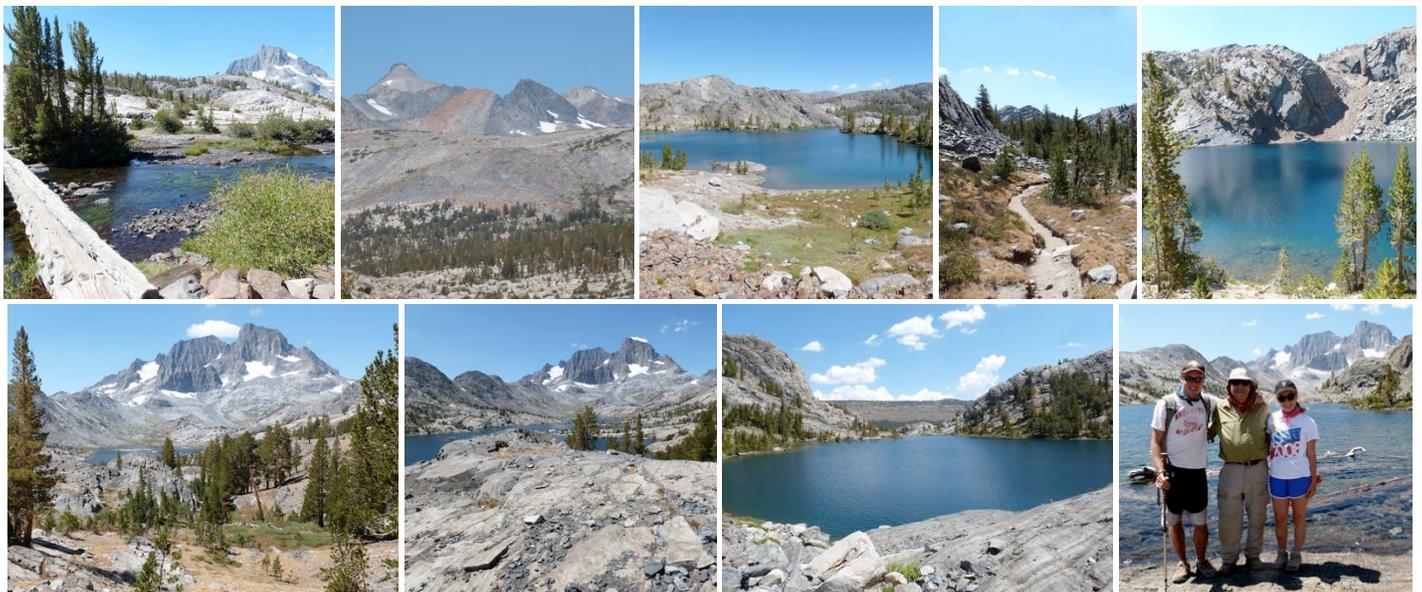
Given that this trip was supposed to be about training for the BIG Southern JMT (to begin 2 weeks after my return), my original plan for this day was to hike to/from Donahue Pass – a 13-mile round trip to 11K. My state come morning, though, was little-improved – and so I aborted that idea, downed a couple Dayquil, and sat down in the shade waiting for breakfast (which was good, but late). Years ago, Alvin had backpacked into the high lakes area BEHIND Ritter/Banner – accessible from here via North Glacier Pass (the notch between Banner and Davis) – 2 miles from our camp (via an unofficial climbers' route). Today, he hoped to take his kids over said pass and, minimally, make it to Lake Catherine. Given that 4 miles didn't seem impossible, I accepted their invitation – although I said I would stop if things got too ugly (which they did, at several levels). Setting out at 10:30 (the day sunny and hot), we headed up the lakeshore trail – passing a dozen camps. At the end of the lake, we left the path and started ascending this shallow grassy/rocky ramp that curved up and around behind Banner, eventually pinching into North Glacier Pass. We were mostly trying to follow a creek, from which we eventually retrieved/filtered water (being that we did not trust the kitchen water). Following our water break, the way was a shallow but sustained climb on a mostly obvious climbers' path (that seemed to appear out of nothing). Climbing, I lost nearly ALL my energy...

I don't know if it was the heat, elevation, illness, dehydration, or all of the above. Alvin and his family waited here and there but eventually they knew I wasn't going to make it up to the top. There were no trees and even the meadow was vanishing. In the end, I made it to 10,700 feet – where there was nothing but a big boulder field. Ahead, I could see Alvin and his family SLOWLY navigating the boulders; although I briefly attempted to follow (as in – made it out maybe 100 feet), the rocks were scary, and there was a questionable snowfield above that - so I sat down and just waited for them, enjoying my lunch and doing my best to hydrate more.



Left to Right: (top) no-trail begins, looking down on lake, “trail” reappears, higher; (bottom) highest greenery/meadow, where I stopped, Alvin/family on snowfield, looking back at the pass

At the time, we thought the pass was RIGHT there. In the end, I waited an hour before Alvin/family came into view again. During this wait (I SWEAR I was not delirious), I observed a meteor streaking across the sky above the pass – it looked like a daytime shooting star, leaving a big tail of white light. At the time, Alvin/family was thick in the rocks – and could not corroborate my story. Eventually, I descended to this beautiful creek crossing where Alvin had stashed a beer – figuring this was the designated break spot. Arriving within 20 minutes, Alvin/family looked beat. Alvin reported that the skyline gap was NOT the pass. Beyond was another bowl of rocks – leading to an even higher talus pass (no easy or obvious routes leading to it). They called it quits and ate lunch in a rock crevice. Heading down, we stuck together until upper Thousand Island Lake. Hiking back along the trail, I started feeling dizzy – had to sit down and talk myself down a little. Back at camp, I laid down for some time (knowing dinner would be late again) – worried about tomorrow (a mandatory thru-hike to Shadow Lake, albeit only 6 miles, with ~800 feet up/down). I don't remember dinner well because I was so out of it. In an effort to knock myself out for a thorough rest, I downed 2 Nyquil and went to bed as early as possible. Indeed, I must have been out cold – because a bear did, in fact, raid the kitchen (surprise, surprise!)... and I didn't notice anything.



Left to Right: (top) JMT bridge over Thousand Island outlet, detail of Island Pass and funky mountains, Emerald, trail through granite bulges, Ruby; (bottom) approaching and at Garnet Lake – last shots: lobe/outlet area we hiked around, Alvin and family at outlet.

The next morning, I awoke in a Nyquil haze but I was well-rested. My left sinus was stuffed, my left ear buzzing. After another late but tasty breakfast and a decent pack-up time, the hikers hit the trail at 10:30 again. Given yesterday, the fact that I did not want to burden

Alvin/family, and Paul's issues, I willfully hiked with him all day – knowing I, too, would benefit from taking it easy. Although I think he was onto me and didn't completely appreciate the company, we made it across in one piece and I don't think I drove him too crazy... although I did chatter more than usual. Lord knows, he probably thought I was hitting on him! The first 2.5 miles of today's route were entirely new to me, although most of the hike was not crazy scenic. Crossing the Thousand Island outlet, we headed into the granite bulges, winding – mostly through golden meadows – in between rocky outcrops and small stands of trees. We passed 2 smaller lakes: Emerald was in a more open bowl surrounded by friendly greenery, and Ruby was deeper and located in a more austere granite bowl – surrounded by bulging cliff faces of rock. There was little elevation to speak of until Ruby, at which point the trail gained 200 feet to a little pass – all in thin forest. Given that I had to rest, hydrate more, and change gear, I lost Paul – at which point Alvin arrived and we hiked together until Garnet. Indeed, I thought Garnet would be, like, RIGHT over the pass – but the trail meandered 20 more minutes before these GLORIOUS views of Garnet – the unique Banner-Ritter profile above - came into view. Indeed, the trail circled around the lowest lobe of this highly scenic lake – coming in via this rocky area, dropping to a cluttered outlet crossing, and then traversing low meadows along the shore. Here, Alvin caught up to his kids and I caught up to Paul; we all found shady spots above the trail to eat lunch, watching what was a parade of hikers and riders: a tall male solo backpacker whose pack was, like, 4 feet tall – down its entire length (and even hanging below) were 10-12 tablet-sized solar panels recharging; this HUGE (like 15-20 people) Japanese backpacker group – EVERY person sporting HUGE backpacks and covered head-to-toe to avoid the sun; and finally, our horse parade. Alas, the cook and her horse took a fall down in the outlet area, the horse's shoes sliding on a section of smooth granite. As the team passed us - the cook's legs bloodied and bruised – she realized she'd lost her sunglasses... so she handed us the reins of her horse and limped back (5 minutes) to search for them, the rest of the group continuing behind the wrangler. While the riders enjoyed lunch a little farther up the lake, the hikers plodded onward and upward; indeed, this half-mile or so represented THE big climb of the day – zigzagging 500 feet or so up a steep and rocky hillside to the “pass” where Allison and I had made it (but were then stopped by snow) last year. Here, we were taken over by the riders – and did not see them until camp.



Left to Right: climbing from Garnet, where Allison and I stopped last year, Sierra white gentian, descent with Volcanic Ridge, my tent

Having written about the hike down in last year's report, I'll make this section brief: it was just as long and annoying as before (more, in my opinion) and NOT HALF as scenic, given the lack of snow and greenery. From the junction (the mosquito hell-hole from last year), we headed UP. Indeed, this year's camp was positioned just under halfway to Ediza – located in this clearing under scenic granite bulges. Getting there meant a mile of decent climbing through granite. Even though today's mileage and elevation were negligible, I was really beat by our 4:30 arrival time. If you are doing the math: that means I spent 6 hours hiking 6 miles with 800 up/down. After setting my tent up next to Paul (pretty much in the center of the clearing), I headed over to the shady chair circle by the kitchen. Despite the early arrival, the kitchen still looked like something exploded... and tonight a few people started helping the cook – just to get things moving. Unfortunately, I don't remember much more about that evening.



Left to Right: Jim the animal at Ediza, detail of Minarets (looking like Cirque of the Towers/Wind Rivers), Jim the animal on the trail to Iceberg, looking back at Banner/Ritter, almost there...

August 8-10, 2012 – The Most Beautiful Hike (Ediza and Iceberg!). Hiking Out, Returning Home

The next morning, I felt the same as yesterday: not as scary as the first morning, but clogged sinuses and buzzing ears. Breakfast seemed super-late, which – given my low energy state and today's limited itinerary – was fine. Indeed, I knew today was going to be another short day: up to Ediza and then hopefully up to Iceberg (4 miles with 600 feet up/down). Since you cannot ride above Ediza, a number of riders joined the hikers – and happily shocked/impressed me with their abilities! Indeed, I had committed the night before to joining Jim and Catherine today. Come morning, Catherine bailed because she didn't have good hiking shoes. Meanwhile, Jim nearly lost his daypack to an ursine visitor in the middle of the night; the bear dragged it away, left it up a nearby draw, having chewed apart one of the outer mesh pockets. Jim - in his early 60's - looked like a cowboy-miner (he hiked in blue jeans and a long-sleeved dark green shirt), and so I sort of figured he was going to be a good slow pace for me. But Jim was an ANIMAL – probably because, as I learned talking with him all morning, he'd spent most of his younger days hiking and backpacking all over the Sierras. Of course, with all that talking and Jim's fierce pace, I had to ask to rest quite a few times – albeit mostly after Ediza (which is a tame hike). Indeed, we made it up to Ediza in 30 minutes – the skies glorious and the meadows green and summer-like (not golden and fall-like). Our only

momentary distraction was a cute water ouzel/dipper dancing among the rocks in musical Shadow Creek. When Allison and I were here last year, we thought Iceberg was, like, RIGHT over the crest – when, in fact, the lake is much farther and back in the higher upper valley. The trail is also significantly steeper and rockier, providing a sustained climb nearly the whole time. Based on the time-stamps on my pictures, we made it there in just under an hour. The final 15 minutes were the MOST BEAUTIFUL of this entire trip, reminding me of Sahale Pass. Jim had been looking forward to seeing actual icebergs in the lake – as had been the case on his last trip here (some 20 years ago now). But there were none today. Above the lake, this Minarets rose impressively; later, I learned that there are 12 different spires up there – each named for a different climber (see picture below). Just as we began to discuss where to eat, we noticed Tina sitting in this stand of trees 5 minutes up the lake. Tina, another rider who could also hike well, had snuck up here first thing out of bed – skipping breakfast and eating granola bars. Shortly after joining her, Alvin/family arrived – meaning Tina’s hope of a private lake experience was gone. But we had a good time for the next hour – our source of entertainment being this group of simply dressed women (2 sisters and one friend) scrambling the VERY ROUGH climbers’ path (ALL rocks, 500 feet in a third of a mile) to the next higher lake (Cecile); the sisters had been up there 30 years ago with their dad. Prior to watching them do the route (with binoculars), all of us were, like: NO WAY! But those old birds made it up in 45 minutes flat, causing some of us to wonder why we didn’t continue too. Although everyone else left within the hour, Tina and I stayed up at the lake chatting another 2 full hours.



Left to Right: just before and at Iceberg Lake, Minaret sign (at viewpoint by entrance gate), Tina heading down (Ediza below)

At around 2:30, we finally headed down, arriving back in camp within the hour. Given that neither of us had bathed in 4 days, we decided to head over to this highly touted swimming hole 5 minutes from camp. That said, the water was very cold – and it took each of us a good 15 minutes (including a big scrub down) to get in completely. Only I did a full head/hair submersion. We were told that there was good fishing in this area, but I didn’t see any fish in the pool... not that they would have tolerated all the laughing and screaming. Given that I didn’t want to go to bed with wet hair, I returned to the tent and combed my hair in the sun. Out last night’s dinner was the big steak finale – but also included the tasty pita pizzas shown below. At some point during the pizza social hour, we were again visited – this time in full daylight – by our bear friend. It was the boldest bear I have ever encountered. Initially, the bear appeared on this rock ledge about 200 feet away from the kitchen. When we all moved toward him (to 100 feet) to take pictures and gawk, he showed ZERO fear. Eventually, we decided we should discourage him – and so the cowboys briefly chased him away. Within 30 minutes, though, he was back – ambling right up the trail and approaching the kitchen from the opposite direction. At this point, the cowboys were more aggressive, chasing him for nearly a half a mile (no doubt to some other camp that was more interesting than ours). Although dinner was tasty, we were all on edge the rest of the evening and throughout the night. Indeed, we stayed up in talking and making lots of noise until around 11 – which, given day one drama, was a positive end to the trip (from a social/group dynamic perspective).



Left to Right: the day-spa, ouzel/dipper, Jim & Catherine, excellent appetizers, camp visitor!

Not surprisingly, I didn’t sleep well and woke up tired. After a decent pack-up effort, I hit the trail at 10:15 – and, despite setting out with Paul, I eventually ditched everyone and remained out front. Although this was fine during the first part of the hike (which I’d done before), I got a little freaky out during the final 3 miles – half because it was not familiar (and there were not a lot of people) and half because I started feeling run-down and dizzy with the heat. Although Allison and I had hiked UP from the River Trail to Shadow, I had never hiked down the thing. Given how steep and exposed it was going up, I was concerned going down the granite staircase alone – but in the end, it wasn’t TOO bad. The only weird thing was that this family stopped me 15 minutes from the bridge at the bottom, asking if I’d seen their oldest son. Although their story seemed a little sketchy, I gleaned that they had hiked down the rudimentary trail from Garnet Lake (WAY up the valley) to the River Trail and, not wanting to make the scary (see 2011 report), had made up their own route down the trail-less side of the river. Their older son had gotten way ahead, having been told to wait by this bridge – but was nowhere to be found. The good news is that they did eventually find him but I cannot say how or where he was. The remaining 2 miles of the River Trail back to Agnew were new to me. While half was in pleasant and woody shade, the other half was QUITE in the open, including this 300 foot climb up to the Agnew shelf (for lack of a better word). Huffing up that thing, I had to sit down at least 3 times to rest (that’s when the family passed me again – with the son). At the “top,” I misread my map (evidence that I was NOT together!) and started down the wrong trail... fortunately, its immediate descent made me concerned and I had the good sense to sit down and check my logic. Yup – this was heading back down to Devils Postpile. Fortunately, I only had to climb 10 minutes back up... and then I was

ALMOST home-free. Owing to big storms earlier in the year, the final mile to the trailhead featured several impressive heaps of dead, downed trees, all chainsaw-carved within the last 2 months. I arrived at the parking lot around 1 p.m. (7 miles, 1500 down and 300 up). Within 30 minutes, Alvin/family arrived – and they insisted we drive back to the resort for milk shakes. I wasn't going to turn that down – although the line for milk shakes was insane... and when I heard they were out of chocolate, well – that was the last straw. I took my business to the grocery and settled for a cold beer and some potato chips. I don't remember when we arrived back at Agnew – but it did take a longer time than usual for the riders/gear to show up (something about a horse losing a shoe). Oh well... much as I enjoyed nearly all members of our team, it was time to go home – and so I think I was one of the first to hit the road for good that day. Arriving back at the Travelodge around 3:30, I washed up and hit the same Thai restaurant Allison and I patronized last year. Once again, they were not astounding. And then I went to bed early, trying to rest up as much as possible given a long day of flights tomorrow. The next morning, I did make one final drive up to the entry gate to say goodbye to the Minarets/Banner/Ritter. I arrived there just after this big high school track team had made their morning run; their support van staff was handing out breakfast boxes with French toast and eggs. All flights back were non-monumental; even the previously harrowing flight over the Sierras was OK – save the fact that my sinuses and upper teeth were now sensitive to hurting outright, and my ears were popping, aching slightly, and buzzing.



Left to Right: descent from Shadow, back on River Trail, annoying final climb, Agnew Meadows

Concluding Remarks

The fact that I gave this pack station a second chance is remarkable – but they will not get a third. Talking with Alvin about his experience organizing pack-support into the Sierras, it is MORE than obvious that there are plenty of pack stations serving the Eastern Sierras. And there are no monopolies on access if you, say, charter a gear drop-off. Indeed, that is probably the only circumstances by which I'd use a pack station in the future (i.e. to haul gear that I organize to a designated location). Although some parts of AAW (e.g. Thousand Island) were not as impressive-looking given the lack of snow/greenery, Ediza and Iceberg were REALLY special and beautiful. I was pleased, though, that Thousand Island did not feel crazy crowded – and I am glad I finally got to fulfill my dream of camping there... howsoever shitty I felt, and howsoever shitty that first night was in terms of the camp vibe. That day/night aside, I enjoyed my traveling companions – Alvin and family, Jim/Catherine, and Tina in particular.



Left to Right: Allison & Karen near parking lot, Nevada Falls, Allison trucking up trail, first view of Half Dome, fancy composing toilet

Mini-Report, August 2007 - Superfreaks Visit Half Dome... Can't Touch This

Even though this trip was short (1.5 days driving, 2.5 hiking/camping), I would be remiss if I didn't write this baby up. After all: lots and lots and lots of people have written about their freakily successful ascents of Half Dome's infamous cable route... but how many people have honestly written up that they did their freaky best but could only manage a third of the way up the cable section? We, the superfreaks, will gladly stand as role models for all those who called it quits before standing on the summit (and, believe me, there are lots of you out there - I talked to quite a few during this trip). It should be no surprise that Superfreak, my personal theme music during much of this hike, was eventually sampled for Can't Touch This.

August 12-16, 2007 – Note: There is now a much more stringent permit/quota system in place up Half Dome...

MANY people (we estimated 300/day - MIDWEEK) do this trip in 1 day (about 15 miles, 5000 up/down), I knew - based on countless pictures of cable bottleneaking - I wanted to do a more sane itinerary: backpacking to Little Yosemite Valley, camping, rising pre-dawn to watch the sunrise (if we were lucky, on the summit), ascending/descending the cables before the dayhikers, and then returning home. This itinerary, however, requires acquiring backcountry permits - which can be requested 12 weeks in advance (no sooner). Difficult stories about getting permits for this trip seemed exaggerated; we got our first choice dates and all follow-up interactions with the backcountry office were prompt and useful. There were 2 motivating factors for doing this particular trip: (1) my dad had unsuccessfully tried it twice as a dayhike during the years before he passed away; and (2) I had always fantasized about Half Dome as a child (mostly based on National Geographic books my dad gave me, featuring pictures of the route). Thus, we hoped - as we had done last year around Rainier - to take 1 of his handkerchiefs to the summit and either hide it in a rock crack or cast it into the wind. Given lots of information (e.g. on-line research, guide comments about Italy's via ferrata - which seemed to resemble Half Dome's cable

route), we also decided that we should make and wear simple diaper harnesses and clip into the cables. 2007 saw 3 deaths on the cable route, including a fatal slip by a 37-YO Japanese tourist in late June. Having looked head-on into the cables and climbed what we did of them, we agreed that it is a miracle more people don't fall to their deaths on this route... preparation, water, equipment, fitness, and weather issues notwithstanding. Karen (friend, colleague, then-department head), Allison and I set out at 6 a.m. from Oregon for our 12-hour drive to Groveland, CA (870 miles). As luck would have it, we booked the same hotel my folks used during their Yosemite visits. After a weird dinner at a nearby greasy spoon, I slept well (despite sharing a bed with Allison). Our only mistake the day before: NOT calling Yosemite to confirm our permits, recommended 24 hours before between 9-4. Thus, we rose early the next day so as to arrive at the permit office before 10. The drive between Groveland and Yosemite is more substantial than I expected; something about the hotel-advertised "12 miles from entrance" caused me to forget there were still another 22 to reach Yosemite Valley proper. Compared to my impressions from 20 years ago, parking areas seemed more limited and inconvenient (e.g. we had to walk half a mile to the visitor center/wilderness permit office, the same to the trailhead). Disappointingly, the valley was inundated with smoke and haze, so much so that you couldn't see any rock features. At the wilderness office, the (according to Allison) terrifically cute ranger gave us a big spiel as he prepared our permit, mostly emphasizing bear-related things. Given that it was only 10 a.m., we decided - having skipped breakfast - to patronize the Ahwahnee buffet. Although my eggs Benedict were awesome, the fried potatoes were not great and Allison felt her salmon smelled suspicious.

We then drove to the trailhead parking lot and spent 45 minutes preparing things. Key among our duties was to empty the car of all smelly things, placing said items in group bear cabinets near the access road. After organizing our bin, I held up our stuff - asking the prophetic question: is there anything you will be upset about if you never see it again? The answer was no and so we commenced up the INSANELY crowded trail from Happy Isles, mostly near/along the Merced... a mere trickle (even Yosemite's main falls were completely dry). Had I done THIS hike BEFORE the southern JMT, I would have NEVER returned to California. What a fucking mess!!!! We had people passing us every 2-5 seconds... big, noisy, unprepared, rambunctious parties. That is was 85°F only exacerbated my frustration. Within 15 minutes, Karen was dizzy to the point she had to sit down (she says elevation, I say heat). As a result of this repeating issue, our 4.1 mile hike (2000 feet up, to 6000) to lasted 5 hours. We elected to take the JMT (slightly longer) when we hit the junction below Vernal Falls. The crowds reduced by about 70% after we left the junction area (which featured a toilet and full-on sink). Even so, the JMT climbed (often steeply) nearly the whole time and I would, in no way, describe any of this route as moderate; it was all strenuous. The trail did lighten after it gained what I'd call the Nevada shelf. Even small, Nevada Falls were spectacular. Above the falls, the trail was flatter but still had some surprise hills; it was also extremely open, hot, and dusty. At first, the Little Yosemite Valley camping area did look decent. Yes, you could see your neighbors... but at 5:30 p.m., people were quiet (in retrospect - probably taking naps). We erected our tents near the composting toilet, an impressive 2-story structure that hardly smelled; Allison claimed that each stall was so roomy she could sleep in there if the bear situation got too freaky. Fortunately, that scenario was never put to the test (as we never saw any bears). Given plans to rise at 3 a.m., we prepared and consumed dinner (Backcountry Pantry Asian vegetarian meals that gave Allison the WORST gas in history). And then we attempted to sleep. Well - all sorts of people conspired against our efforts: happy guitar-wielding christians singing, loud Europeans who stumbled into camp late and put down next to us, the endless line of bathroom-bound campers and their haphazard lights and loud voices... just to name a few. Even filthy Whitney base camp respected quiet hours. Shame on Little Yosemite Valley! I do NOT recommend camping here; if you must camp, use the GORGEOUS sites on the final ridge of Half Dome (unfortunately - no bathrooms and no bear protection).



Left to Right: all shots represent climbing Half Dome's mini-dome shoulder pre-dawn

After 2 hours of sleep (a liberal estimate), I rose at 3 a.m. Earlier, we heard whooping and hollering: a party of 20-something kids left Happy Isles at midnight. For some reason, I love hiking good trails by headlamp - and tonight was no exception, although I was delirious (even after Pop Tarts, a good luck charm from my Whitney ascent that - alas - did not work in Yosemite). For 2.5 miles, we ascended through forest in starry darkness. As we gained the ridgeline, pre-dawn light faintly appeared. Unfortunately for my confidence, so did gigantic views down into Yosemite Valley. After 15 minutes hiking along the ridge (Half Dome's profile obvious, partly eclipsed by its mini-dome shoulder), we came to the base of said structure. Here, warnings about going higher, weather, and not camping on the summit were posted. Prior to this point, there were active signs of impact: a couple with an illegal fire, toilet paper around every corner... But we pressed on - up the steep, tall stairs cut into the solid granite. I'm actually not sure how Karen, at just over 5 feet, fared so well because the steps seemed half as tall as her legs were long. Within 5 minutes, I started melting down and handed off my dad's handkerchief to Allison, convinced I'd be quitting shortly. The exposure now on both sides of the ridgeline was too much. As I climbed, however, I started seeing slivers of Half Dome's summit re-emerging - providing renewed motivation. Within 10 minutes, Allison had her meltdown and stopped for good. Karen and I continued, cut stairs vanishing into open slickrock. Even though the route became sketchier, you could feel the mini-dome summit widening, the exposure temporarily subsiding. Indeed, the mini-dome summit was gorgeous and left me actually feeling fairly safe and inspired. Some members of the aforementioned parties were lying among the rocks, others descending the obvious cables. Ironically, my response to the cables was "oh shit - they're so short, we can't give up now" while Karen's was just "oh shit." We dropped to this freaky narrow saddle between the mini-dome and the beginning of the cables. The saddle was exposed, made my heart race, did not imbue comfort... and yet we readily harnessed up and clipped in. Unlike Karen, my response to clipping in was moderate security. Both of us agreed, though, that all things related to the cables were,

like, totally ghetto: the poles wobbled A LOT, the cables were hardly taught, half the wood planks were loose and/or broken, and there were sections where the thick wires had been woven together and duct-taped (seriously). Not only did I lose respect for Yosemite's management of this area, I wondered how it was that more people didn't die trying this crazy thing. We ascended 6-8 pole sections (each 12 feet long) and that's when things got freaky steep (50° plus). While looking down didn't bother me too much, looking to either side was superfreaky. And so we decided to practice descending - in my case, face out/down (HUGE mistake). Repeating the move backwards felt much more stable. And so we pushed on again... another 3-4 pole sections. At a couple points, both our feet (Karen wearing boots and me wearing Chacos) completely failed to stick to the rock, resulting in slippage and full reliance on our hands. Indeed, the well-worn footpath - in contrast with naked granite - was smooth and greasy. Karen then had the final meltdown and we turned around. I can't say I'd reached my limit but I also can't say I would have made it much farther. Given my expectations and the earlier events of the day, I was pleased to have made it as far as I did. We descended to the saddle and watched this symbolic team (a 50-something father and his 3 sons) bomb up and out of view in less than 15 minutes; a good sign, we agreed - and returned to Allison. Starving, we regrouped for a snack just below the mini-dome. Eventually, we located a place to leave dad's handkerchief; it had a decent view of Half Dome and likely reflected how high he made it during his summit attempts. Descending, we began passing party after party after party - 90% dayhikers... we actively counted over 100 people and then gave up because they just KEPT COMING. Given the insanity we saw, it is our STRONG opinion that Yosemite needs to develop a dayhiking permit system/quota for this trail, akin to that on Whitney. What scared me the most: 75% had nothing but a Nalgene bottle (dangling in their hand) or small Camelback... no clothing, no emergency gear, no extra food/water.



Left to Right: (top) more mini-dome, cables, father-son team on cables; (bottom) Karen clipping in, Allison near handkerchief tree, the joy of no terror, Watkins Pinnacles and Tenaya drainage

We arrived back at camp at 11:30. Exhausted, we all napped 1-2 hours. Allison and I then headed down to this fabulous swimming hole we'd spied during the hike in. There, we soaked the netherworlds and enjoyed doing nothing for 2 hours. Unfortunately, an aggressive squirrel chewed Karen's bladder system (which we'd carried for filtering/gathering water). Not even my counter-terrorist rock-hurling was enough to halt this action. By 5, we made our way back to camp and were enjoying a FABULOUS couscous with Indian vegetable sides (lentils and eggplant). Although we had permits for 1 more night and entertained hiking up nearby Clouds Rest, we knew we'd be leaving tomorrow because we all had commitments looming back at home or work. Settling into the folksy stylings of the happy christians, we prepared for bed; fortunately, our loud European neighbors had moved on and we all enjoyed a beautiful night of uninterrupted sleep. We arose at 6 a.m., rested and ready to go home. Even by the time we hit the trail, we were passing party after party of incoming dayhikers... CRAZY. As we rounded a key bend, though, visible plumes of smoke curled around this mystery dome adjacent to Nevada Falls. Hmmm. And yet all these parties are still coming up? How could there be a fire less than a mile away and no rangers were on the trail disseminating information - or, better yet - clearing/closing this trail down (as was my experience in Yellowstone)? Meanwhile, a helicopter buzzed back and forth between Emerald Pool (where it filled its reservoir) and below Nevada (where the fire was). The chaotic water drops seemed an imprecise exercise and we all wondered why there was no active ground presence (despite flames as close a 200 feet from the trail). Insanity. Above Nevada, the trail had been a mess of uneven granite stairs; below, it was like climbing the mini-dome all over again, but this time down a cliff-hugging ledge, with handrails, and 3 times longer. I thought my knees were going to blow at several points. As we descended, though, a wonderful thing finally happened: no more people coming up... ah - they DID close the trail. Around Vernal Falls, we finally passed an incoming ranger and firefighters. Sufficed to say, we deeply enjoyed the complete quiet of the cleared trail. Being the most cynical, I decided the blaze was set by some crazy midnight dayhiker bound for Half Dome who wanted to reduce the flood of incoming crowds. At the quiet trailhead, a ranger was actively turning away many disappointed people. Thank god. We walked to the car and retrieved our bin of smelly items from the bear cabinet. From atop the bin, I passed this hand-written note to Allison, joking that this was from her boyfriend (the cute ranger). But then we discovered this was a note from some other ranger, alerting us to the fact that a bear had gotten into the cabinet, eaten all the food, and many things may have been misplaced. Hopefully, the bear enjoyed my spare Pop Tarts and Allison's boxed Chardonnay. Nevertheless, we all found it disheartening (and perhaps consistent with other feelings about Yosemite) that, given all this so-called management, a bear broke into the parking lot cabinet. On the way out, we shot several iconic images before downing HUGE food in

Groveland. Karen and Allison managed the rest of the drive back, although - as predicted - we did not arrive home until 3:30 a.m. Been trying to catch up on sleep ever since! Can't touch this!



Left to Right: (top) shots of the fire - distant plume, helicopter water drop, close flames, water pick-up at Emerald Pool, crazy stairs along Mist Trail; (bottom) water shots along Mist Trail - Nevada, Silver Apron, Emerald, Vernal, Half Dome, bone dry Yosemite Falls