

White Mountain Peak June 25-27, 2004

I had been looking forward to this trip for a few weeks now. I had been a little nervous too - not being quite sure what it was going to be like, with meeting the new people and dealing with the high altitude on the climb and everything. We were all set to go, and we got off to a fairly early start on Friday - getting out of work around 1:00 to beat the traffic for the long drive to Bishop, where we planned to camp the first night.

Five of us met up at Oracle - David Altmar the fearless leader, along with Henri Tjiong, Dahlia Weiss and her friend Pascual, and me. We were picking up Andrea at the Lawrence Livermore lab on the way. I was driving Dahlia and Pascual, and David was taking Henry and Andrea.

We got on the road and immediately hit traffic on 580 - where could all these people be going? It was fairly heavy up until the windmills and then it finally loosened up. We decided to meet up at Olmstead point in Yosemite - a nice view point to hang out for a while. We figured the other car was going to be a ways behind us since they had to still pick up Andrea, but when we passed the entrance of Yosemite National Park, a black car pulled up behind us and honked - it was them! David must be a fast driver - he caught up with us on the way!

We got over to Olmstead point and got some great views of the late afternoon sun hitting Half Dome in the distance. A few lingering thunder clouds were still looming ahead of us - but mostly breaking up. I had worried a little about the weather - since it can be nice in the bay area but stormy in the mountains. The roads were still a little wet from some afternoon Sierra storms, but the rain had passed. The bit of dampness in the meadows actually really highlighted the aroma from the grasses and wildflowers and trees.

We did a brief stop at the high alpine lakes in eastern Yosemite - always worth visiting. Tioga Lake and Ellery Lake are picture-perfect lakes, and a 2-mi side trip over to Saddlebag Lake was well worth a few minutes. Just over 10000 feet, Saddlebag lake is tucked behind snowy mountains and lush green meadows - a beautiful spot. Just watch out for the many mosquitoes and don't let them get into the car!

Across the Tioga pass we descended the steep windy road through the eastern edge of the Sierra on our way to "the Lee Vining restaurant" - you can't miss the Mobil station by the junction with 395 with the big restaurant! The other car had already arrived and they were already working on their dinner - I guess we took a little longer at the lakes than planned. Nobody was really in a hurry though, and we moseied down and met them and got some juicy burgers to satisfy our appetites. The sunset over Mono Lake lit the clouds with red and crimson hues, the colors reflected in the smooth still water of the lake. The lake seems to be still getting lower every year - more islands seem to crop up each time as we keep diverting the water for our own use.

We headed down 395, watching the last beams of the sunset play in the clouds as we passed June and Mammoth mountains. We were looking for the Round Valley road on our way to Bishop where our campsite was, and we found ourselves at a casino - had we driven too far and ended up in NV already? No, we were at an Indian reservation. We stopped to ask for directions - we had also lost the other car - David is quite a fast driver. However, again a black car pulled up behind us and honked - it was them again! Thank goodness!

Turns out the Round Valley road wasn't right off 395 - it's a ways off 395. We thought we had navigated successfully - following dirt and gravel roads, dodging broken branches, but no campsite in sight. We could have just camped there - don't think many other cars would pass by... but we decided to head back to 395 - other "official" campsites were nearby. On our way, we were close to some hot springs, and we changed our mind yet again - it's never too late for a good soak.

We dropped down past Bishop to the Keough hot springs - there were 3 pools of varying temperature and we picked the one that was most comfortable. Laying in the hot water, watching satellites and shooting stars whiz by, enjoying the setting half moon... so relaxing. We'd love to camp by the spring, but to our dismay no camping was allowed...bummer. But we could sit in the spring and eat chocolate for a while before figuring out where to camp.

Around midnight, we decided to start looking for a campsite nearby. We also had changed our mind, deciding to tackle White Mountain tomorrow instead of Sunday. Logistically it made a lot of sense since we didn't want a long drive after the long hike, but I was nervous about it, since it didn't give us time to acclimatize very much.

We find a nice campsite near Bishop - located conveniently from 395. We were tired and just wanted to go to sleep! We'd have to be up early in the morning to tackle the peak, especially before afternoon storms would threaten.

June 26

Today was the big day. I was up around sunrise - it was hard to sleep when it got bright outside so quickly in the desert. Also anticipating the climb made me want to get moving early. It was a peaceful and glorious sunrise from some rocks near the campsite - watching the golden light hit the steep eastern cliffs of the Sierra.

We were all up pretty early, and David was already heating water on the stove when I came back from watching the sunrise - some nice warm tea to wake us up was in order! Bagels, fruit, and danishes got us started. We enjoyed a hearty meal - we would need it - and we quickly broke down camp. One last restroom stop (at the most scenic restroom in CA), and we were on our way.

We hit the little convenience store in Big Pine - we knew we'd need more water - no water is available in the White Mountains. Turns out they also had some great guides to the eastern Sierra hot springs (with the "secret" hot springs!) We started up the windy road into the White Mountains - the mountains are aptly named for the white dolomite rocks, where the famous bristlecone pines grow. A couple nice roller coaster humps in the road made sure we were all awake. We turned off into the bristlecone pine forest and continued climbing. The fields of sagebrush gave way to juniper and pinyon forests by 7000 feet, and we could see the bristlecones in the distance. The air was getting thinner as my GPS already registered over 10000 feet. We thought we were almost there when the road turned to gravel and the sign said the trailhead was still some 20 miles away!

My little Honda civic struggled as we climbed to near 12000 feet - the engine wasn't getting enough oxygen to efficiently burn the gas and it started losing power. It was almost time to ask Pascual and Dahlia to push, but we made it - was just a little slower... It wouldn't go more than about 10 mph on the steep climbs. I had struggled a bit on the Priest Grade on 120 in the foothills too - 3 people and lots of luggage were pretty heavy! No A/C for a while, until we leveled off.

We reached the trailhead at 11700 feet - we were above the bristlecones and any other trees - the ground looked like the moon - open expanses of rock and spotty grasses. And plenty of marmots! And grasshoppers too. A locked gate indicated the trailhead - we hiked up past the Barcroft research station, where we met some guys and a herd of sheep. They were apparently testing the effects of altitude on the sheep - to see how they react and adapt to the elevation.

Just over a pass at around 12600 feet, we passed an old observatory - they must get beautiful dark skies at night. However we started getting a bit uneasy when we saw some clouds building with white curtains below the clouds - hopefully it wasn't going to rain on us already! The curtains got closer and next thing we realized was it was snowing! A few white pellets of snow were coming down. Not really heavy, but just enough to notice. Actually it was quite nice. We just hoped it wouldn't get a whole lot worse later in the day.

The weather cleared and we continued toward the summit - a group of hard-core mountain bikers passed us - I wondered if they could make it all the way without walking. Marmots popped out of their holes along the way, and lingering snow patches reminded us how cold it still got on the mountain, even in the summer.

The summit was getting closer - my ears popped again as the GPS finally reached 13000 feet - the trail ahead of us started switchbacking up steeper as we made the final summit push. Deep canyons on either side of us hid large lingering snowfields, and different colored rock decorated the landscape. The group was slowing down and I started to worry about altitude sickness - in a way I wanted to get up and down quick before sickness set in, but sometimes that's what causes it to begin with. I just kept going steady - didn't want to stop too long and get cold - just wanted to keep moving. The final summit push always seems to be every man for himself - it was so close now.

Finally above 13500 feet, the grass was totally gone and the landscape was completely barren rock and snow. In the distance I could spot a small hut on the summit. Up around 14000 feet, a couple chirps break the silence - some birds were fluttering around on the snow! The hut was really close now. Two more switchbacks to go... it was tough and I was tired, but finally made it to the summit - 14246 feet. Up the ladder to the top of the hut - maybe add 10 feet, so 14256 feet.

Just a few people on top - an elderly Asian couple and a lady and a dog. I had to put in my mark in the summit register to make it official. I got a bunch of summit pictures - but it would be time to head down fairly soon. The clouds were building off the Sierras and rain was on its way. Possibly lightning too, which is not good when you're in an open field at 13000 feet and you're the highest point. I had a quick lunch on top while waiting to see if the others were going to make it too. Glad I didn't have altitude sickness - at least not yet... just a minor headache. A couple Motrin to remedy that.

It was time to start heading down - the heavy clouds were coming. Again curtains were visible and would soon be upon us. No sound of thunder or sight of lightning, which was encouraging. I made it back down to about 13600 feet and saw the others in our group taking a rest. They'd probably take another 45 min or an hour to reach the summit and come back - I was a bit nervous, seeing the weather coming. Dahlia said she had enough of the climbing and was happy to head back down with me - her hip was getting sore, and she was really slowing down.

The others continued on their pursuit of the summit as Dahlia and I headed back down. We got to watch the marmots play some more as they bounced across the rocky alpine plains back to their little holes. Back at about 12500 feet, some thick curtains started to envelop us - it started snowing again. Actually it was a relief it wasn't rain - it would have been miserable to be cold and wet. Also still no lightning and no thunder, even after listening closely for a while - a good sign.

The snow started getting heavier and the wind picked up - it was like a winter blizzard! The ground was turning white, and Dahlia started looking like a snow bunny! In the sunshine state of California in the middle of summer, what weather would you expect to see? Who would have thought a blizzard? Apparently it had snowed almost every day for the last couple weeks - the monsoonal moisture from the Pacific typically gets uplifted by the mountains and drops as rain in the Sierra storms and snow on the high peaks.

About 30 minutes later, the snow had stopped and the sun even came back out. The snow melted fairly quickly and the weather got nice again! We made it back to the Barcroft station and took a nice needed break. Dahlia decided to stop and rest and wait for Pascual to come back down - probably another 30 min or so until he showed up. I decided to check out the spring down the hill a little. It's a picture perfect small lake at 12500 feet reflecting the blue sky, with the ridges of Great Basin mountains in NV in the background. One of the workers at the research station was taking a break, swatting tennis balls with a golf club - practicing his game.

Finally, heading down the last bit of path, I saw a welcome sight - the cars again - yay - we've made it! It was so good to get those shoes off again! Time to assess the blisters - my feet were a bit chafed but no major blisters. Thanks goodness. The others come shortly afterward - Pascual just collapsed and laid on his back, and Dahlia leaned on her "cane" that she had been using since near the summit - a hiking stick left behind from near the summit turned out to be quite useful for her!

We headed back along the dusty road past the ancient bristlecones, and reached the Grand View campground - apparently there was only 1 spot left, and we found it. Originally we decided to go all the way back to Bishop since Henri had some trouble with altitude, but he was better when we reached Grand View. We were just tired and wanted to sit and eat. We started cooking a hearty meal - pasta and tasty bites and watermelon and wine (you can't go camping in CA without your bottles of wine). We watched the stars over the campfire, just relaxing and enjoying ourselves for a while, before crashing in our tents to sleep.

June 27

We slept fairly well last night even though we were up pretty early again. It's hard to sleep in too much when the sun is out. Many of us also remember having some strange dreams - supposedly that's common when sleeping at high altitude. Andrea's friends found us - they had thought about joining us for White Mountain on Sunday. They got our note and found our campsite. Some of us walked over to capture the "Grand View" promised by the name of the campground - we could see most of the Sierra crest - including Mt Whitney. They had wanted to do White Mountain peak with us today, but since we did it yesterday, they ended up just joining us for breakfast, then going off and doing some rock climbing in the eastern Sierra.

We broke down camp and headed back up to the ancient bristlecone pine forest - we did the Methuselah loop, to look for the ancient Methuselah tree, believed to be over 4700 years old, the oldest living thing on Earth.

We climbed the windy mountain road back over 10000 feet and soon came to the entrance of the bristlecone pine forest. The bristlecones show an amazing hardness to harsh climates - in fact they thrive on it. Without much competing vegetation, and water available through snow through most of the year, and lack of wildfires, they are able to survive for thousands of years. Heart rot and bark beetles eventually do the trees in, but the dense wood persists for a long time.

The branches are like bottlebrushes, the bristle-like needles attached directly to the stems and not just at the ends like most other pines. The older trees have been twisted into so many strange shapes - sculpted by wind and ice for thousands of years, as the ground is also slowly eroding below the roots. The trees only lose their needles once about 40 years, and the trees are able to survive long droughts and harsh winters.

The views were quite expansive - crossing multiple barren ridges with dried salt lakes in the great basin of the NV desert. The visibility was virtually unlimited at the high altitude in the very dry desert air.

Some of the trees had large chunks "bitten" out of their trunks - caused by the combination of heart rot and beetle attack. Pascual, being one of the most photogenic of the group, appeared to be biting these chunks in some of our pictures! He also decided to do some stick balancing when he got bored - he could keep a stick balanced on his chin way better than I could! He did a good imitation of one of the scraggly trees - bending and contorting his tall lanky frame in an amusing way.

We entered the Methuselah group of trees - the oldest known trees in the world. We saw the ancient Methuselah tree, and nearby were some dead trees whose wood is almost 9000 years old! Scientists were able to come up with 9000 years of climate history by counting the rings of the wood, and matching up patterns of rings in older dead trees. Areas of narrower rings indicated droughts and thicker rings indicated wetter climate.

Alas, it was time to start heading back - it had been a very enjoyable couple days in the mountains. We started heading back down the mountain - back down to the Owens valley 6000 feet below us. One last pass over the roller coaster humps in the road - just to make sure Dahlia and Pascual were still awake!

Back down the road through Big Pine and over to Bishop where we visited the famous bakery. It was just about lunchtime and we were hungry - however it seems people from all around the state were at the bakery - it was jam packed! We grabbed some sandwiches and some of their famous pepper jelly to go and decided to visit some hot springs on the way back. A good place for lunch.

We turned into Hot Creek just off 395 - it was one of the featured hot springs in the book, and I had heard of it earlier. It's actually quite an amazing geologic wonder - like a miniature Yellowstone in California. Brilliant turquoise pools dotted the sides of a river - the water boiling hot, too hot for any bacteria or anything to live. Small waterfalls cascaded from one spring to another. The river on the other hand was quite cold - the clear water coming from snowmelt off the Sierra. The icy river water mixed with the hot spring water and made a nice hot bath temperature. Just perfect!

Some of the springs came up directly under the river - you could see the water bubbling like an effervescent fountain. It was a little cold when you first got in the river, but the spring wasn't too far

of a swim. You could be picky about your water temperature - if you like it a little warmer, move a little toward the spring - if you want it cooler, move back a little. The group of bathers in the river formed a circle around the spring - right where the water was just right.

It was starting to get late - we spent a good couple hours at the springs. We knew it was time to get out when our fingers were like raisins. It was time to start heading back to the bay area - it had been a great trip, but we had a long drive still yet to go.

Back north on 395 as we passed Mammoth on the left. We decided to do a short scenic detour on the June Lake loop - a little loop that goes back in to the edge of the mountains and passes 3 pretty lakes. Something about mountain lakes always draws me back - it is so peaceful to be by a lake with the snowy mountain peaks behind and lush green meadows around. On the loop we passed June Lake, Silver Lake, and Grant Lake. I'd love to camp or get a cabin by one of the lakes. My family used to visit this area on summer vacations when we lived in China Lake - maybe somehow the love for the area lingered with me.

We didn't try to stay together as much on the way back - we could meet up with the other car when we reached the bay area. They had to drop off Andrea (probably adding about 15 min), and the June lake detour for us would probably also add about 15 min. We'd probably get back about the same time anyway.

Back on 395, up to 120 and through the Tioga pass. A nice little break at Tanaya Lake for a snack, but the mosquitoes kept the visit short. The afternoon clouds were starting to build over the Sierra in Yosemite and we knew there'd be some weather ahead. We had reached about White Wolf when the sprinkles started. It rapidly became heavier and heavier - we could see curtains of rain coming down ahead of us. Mammatus clouds billowed above us - indicators of severe weather. Some green in the clouds indicated hail, and that soon started - the icy pellets hitting the windshield and bouncing off the roof and hood. It was a beautiful summer day just a few minutes ago!

The storm passed quickly and the sun was back out again as we descended the foothills past Don Pedro reservoir. Most of the houseboats were back in but a few people were still water skiing and jetskiing. Kind of reminded me of the fun we had on Lake Shasta a few years ago.

Back on 580, burgers at In & Out (we had the craving for grease burgers after the trip), and past the windmills over the Altamont pass, back over the San Mateo bridge and back to Oracle. We were just finishing sorting our gear when the other car pulled in - what timing! We finished sorting the gear and expenses for the trip. Total expense for the trip - \$23 a person (plus food). And a carwash for a VERY dirty car. A \$23 well spent! Looking forward to our next adventure in the mountains.