

# Mt Whitney and Eastern Sierras August 14-17, 2004

## Introduction

Mount Whitney at 14496 feet above sea level is the highest peak in the continental US. I had heard a couple years ago it was possible to climb it without too much difficulty (at least physically, but logistically, you needed a permit, which was quite difficult to obtain). When I realized how difficult the permit actually was, I thought it would be many years if I ever had the chance to go to the peak.

An amazing coincidence occurred a couple weeks ago, however. I was hanging out with my friend Oudan Peng and reminiscing a bit on our climb to Mt Shasta last year, when we started talking about Mt Whitney. I mentioned I wanted to climb it someday, but it was very tough since you had to reserve a permit months in advance via a lottery. It turned out the guy right across the hall – John Heimann – actually knew someone with a couple extra permits (he had applied during a lottery 6 months ago and won a set of permits). John happened to overhear our conversation and he talked with his friend and said there were still some permits available and I could have one of the permits. What a coincidence... thus started our adventure.

## Friday August 13, 2004

After a couple weeks of planning and securing a couple days vacation for the trip, we had everything set for the trip. There were 3 of us – me, John, and Chihping Fu – all from Oracle. We actually still had one extra permit, but none of us could find anyone to use it, but at the last minute, Paul Correa said he could go. He also was from Oracle up until a couple weeks ago, but due to unfortunate circumstances at work, he ended up having more free time than he wanted... So we ended up having 4 of us total. We would end up meeting 4 other people in Lone Pine. They had a different itinerary in mind – leaving one day later and just staying in Lone Pine and skipping Mt Dana. The other 4 were Yuki and his wife (with the permits for the 8 of us), and Phil and his girlfriend.

We put together the following plan – we had the permit for Whitney on Monday, which gave us both days over the weekend to acclimate to the elevation – we would need it.

- Friday – drive to Tioga Pass, camp near pass
- Saturday – Mt Dana in Yosemite (13053) feet, drive to Devil's Postpile, camp there
- Sunday – drive to South Lake near Bishop, hike to lakes around 11000 ft, camp at Whitney Portal
- Monday – Mt Whitney (22 mi, 14496 ft), camp again near Whitney Portal
- Tuesday – drive home

The weather was looking a bit sketchy through Sunday with chances of scattered thunderstorms, but we decided to give it a shot. We just needed to make sure we were away from any summits during lightning.

We get an early start from Oracle – we went in 2 cars – me and Paul in one, and John and Chihping in the other. It was nice to have Paul as company so I didn't have to do the long drive alone, plus we ended up having many interesting stories to share. I didn't know exactly when the other car was leaving Oracle, but we planned on hooking up via cell phone during the trip somehow. We pulled into

a Quizno's in Oakdale and were ready to make the call to hook up with the other car, when we realized the car right in front of us was them! What are the chances of that?

We continued the rest of the way over the Tioga Pass (it seemed a bit strange they ask you for the park entrance fee even if you're not actually visiting the park, but they wouldn't know that. Fortunately, it was a moot point with the parks pass). Tioga Lake campground – finally there... but CAMPGROUND FULL... it was getting late and we just wanted to crash somewhere. Next campground – Saddlebag Lake – FULL... then Ellery Lake – FULL... every place seemed full – we ended up just pitching a tent down the road a bit. Plus we were going to be up in about 6 hours again to do our hike to Mt Dana.

## **Saturday, August 14**

It was going to be an exciting 4 days coming, but the trip got off to a rather unfortunate start. In the parking lot nearby where we camped, a guy in his truck had accidentally backed into my car – the parking brake wasn't fully applied and he didn't realize it until it was too late. Fortunately, it only damaged the taillight and bent the metal strip below it, but you never know with how expensive car repairs can be. I tried to put it out of my mind for the remainder of the trip, and we'd figure that out later.

Coffee at the Saddlebag Lake Café by the Tioga Pass couldn't have been sweeter as we parked at the ranger station at the pass. Mt Dana is short, but steep, climbing roughly 3000 ft in 3 mi, starting from 10000 ft elevation. At least we slept around 8000 ft the night before. Plenty of water and moving slowly was the key. We started pretty early, getting on the trail around 7:30 – afternoon showers and thunderstorms were in the forecast – sometimes it can start raining around 1-2PM and we wanted to be back down before it got too bad.

The trail started through some lush meadows and around some alpine lakes lined with wildflowers – carpets of blue lupines were in bloom. The trees started becoming more sparse and scraggly as we broke through the tree line. They gave way to smaller shrubs and to grass, then eventually just bare rock and talus slopes. The views steadily improved as we climbed – we could see far into northern and western Yosemite. Just beyond a ridge was a large glacial sculpted couloir filled with snowfields and deep crystal blue lakes. It was the deepest blue I had seen – even deeper than the blue at Lake Tahoe and maybe even Crater Lake. It was a very austere landscape, brown rock, brilliant white snowfields, blue sky and deep blue lakes.

The summit neared as we managed our way up the scree slope – we had to be careful with our footing, especially now that some of the rock had some ice on it from a storm the previous evening – they had some heavy rain and sleet and hail in a storm that had just cleared by the time we arrived.

Finally the summit was right in front of us – we clambered our way up the switch-backing trail to the peak. A few puffy clouds passed in front of us – some even a bit below us, momentarily obscuring the view. To our east was the full Mono Lake with its several islands (there seem to be more islands every year as the lake waters continue to recede). To our north, you could barely make out our car and parking lot, nestled among the peaks and meadows. To the west and south were countless peaks, meadows and shimmering lakes – the grandeur of the Sierra seemed to unfold before us on the summit at 13053 feet.

We got to enjoy a couple power bars and water during our brief stop at the summit – we had to start

thinking about heading back down – the clouds were building into what could later on become storm clouds. We didn't know for sure – the weather experts can never accurately predict the weather in the mountains, even with modern technology, and we wanted to play it safe.

We thought we had lost Chihping – then later we saw him running down the trail way ahead of us! He's a runner – even ran a marathon – in fact John and Paul are long distance runners too, and I realized I thought I was in the poorest shape of the 4 of us... but with some determination I was able to make it just fine on the hike.

Chihping was sleeping in the car when we got back – catching up on some needed rest. After a little stretching and changing shoes (ahh, it was nice to get those hiking boots off!), we were on our way down toward Mammoth. A brief stop at “the Lee Vining gas station and restaurant” reminded us of how bad they can rip us off and get away with it, but the sandwich and ice cream couldn't have tasted better! We also hit a grocery store nearby too, to stock up on some more power bars and fruit and stuff at a slightly more reasonable price.

We headed along 395 south for about an hour, past Mono and June lakes and reached Mammoth. Again I thought we had lost the other car – they had disappeared so we decided to wait at the visitor center. A few minutes later they came whizzing by, so we followed – if only the walkie-talkies had more than ½ mi range! We checked into the ranger station and they said there were still a few campsites open (whew – no camping on the side of the road again!) We paid our entrance fees and headed down to Devil's Postpile. It was nice to not need to pay the bus fare since we were camping – definitely more convenient! We set up camp and enjoyed some fruit.

The weather appeared to be holding – heavy clouds loomed to our east and north, but it was blue skies around us otherwise. The ranger said they had heavy rain the evening before, so we prepped our tents and decided to go for a stroll while the weather held. We headed down to the “postpile” – a row of hundreds of vertical columns of basalt – formed when an ancient lava flow from Mammoth Mountain cooled. A few deer kept us company along the trail near some meadows by the San Joaquin River.

Most people only see the main postpile visible on all the postcards of Devil's Postpile, but the area is actually littered with many postpiles – one of them is right along the river with the columns right along the banks. Some of the postpiles are tilted and bent in different directions, some have columns pointed right at you, looking like a stack of pencil erasers – one even has a small cave you can look out of. One trail on the top of the postpile takes you over the glacially polished tops of the columns – the smooth hexagonal shapes are like a large bathroom tiled floor. It was worth wandering about a bit, exploring the various postpiles.

The John Muir trail continued a couple miles south, which we followed on our way to Rainbow Falls – the other featured attraction at Devil's Postpile. The 101-foot falls flowed over a canyon lined with elegant vertical columns, with the afternoon sun casting a double rainbow across the falls. It was worth a side trip down a long staircase to the base of the falls – a bunch of kids were playing in the cool water, enjoying the natural paradise of the canyon and falls.

I was getting quite tired – it was a long day, with a 6-mile hike to Mt Dana and 5 miles to Rainbow Falls and back. It was nice when we arrived back at camp just before sunset. The threatening weather never came, and the sunset cast coral pink hues over the feathery remains of the storm clouds.

Dinner of tasty bites from Trader Joes, spaghetti, and noodles filled our stomachs and quenched our

appetites. We even celebrated with a bit of wine – a mandatory item on the menu for car camping in California. It was around 8:30, just getting dark, and the rangers were putting on a campfire program – like from days in summer camp as a kid. There was a fair amount of history with the first settlers, miners, and Indians in the area. We were all too tired to have our own campfire anyway! We were all asleep by 9:15 or so.

## **Sunday, August 15**

The morning dawned cool and clear as we started putting together some oatmeal and John's signature espresso from his miniature machine designed for camping! We filled our water bottles – since water was freely available at the campsite. After breaking down our tents and clearing out the bear locker, we were ready to hit the road again. We had originally decided on going up to Lake Sabrina just outside Bishop, but after discovering South Lake nearby which was 700 ft higher and a shorter hike, we opted for that.

We headed back over the Minaret Vista pass on our way out, stopping for some shots including the Minarets, Banner Peak and Mt Ritter – the majestic peaks towering above. A few puffy clouds started popping up over the peaks – even a bit earlier than yesterday, so we anticipated more storms in the afternoon. We figured it was best to start heading out early.

John decided to stop briefly at a mountaineering shop – there were several on the way through Mammoth. John bought a nice trekking pole – after realizing how much easier the rest of us handled Mt Dana with ours. Paul also picked up a Thermarest – allowing a much more comfortable sleep.

We headed down 395 to Bishop and over to 168 up the eastern flanks of the Sierra. The sagebrush got thicker and lusher as we headed up. The trees started appearing – first the scraggly and hardier junipers, but they changed into thicker pines and firs as we entered the Inyo National Forest. Soon we were at South Lake – it was amazing how the landscape turned from desert into lush mountain forests in just a few miles. The other car was a ways behind us – they had stopped for gas and groceries along the way, but we spent a bit of time finding parking – the lonely desert road culminated into an overflowing parking lot at the end. We had gotten worried when we saw people walking along the road and parked cars along the side. We ended up joined the many cars along the road.

The clouds were building all around us, but the sky was still blue in front of us – but we were ready with raincoats and waterproof pants. We walked the ½ mile or so along the road to the trailhead – many of the other hikers were backpackers. The trailhead is actually the same that many backpackers use to cross the Bishop Pass into the Dusy Basin. We weren't going that far, but were just doing a day hike past some of the lakes that littered the alpine scenery.

It was almost a dreamlike scene with mirrorlike alpine lakes reflecting the majestic mountain ridges and glaciers in the John Muir Wilderness. We ascended up to just over 11000 feet as we passed South Lake, Long Lake, Spearhead Lake, and up to Saddlerock Lake. A nice waterfall flowed out of Saddlerock Lake providing some soothing natural music. Countless other smaller lakes were nestled among the mountains. The “Inconsolable Range” loomed on the left – the name was quite descriptive! At the end of Saddlerock Lake, we could see up past one more lake – Bishop Lake – full of granite islands and meanders, right against the steep granite slopes leading up and over Bishop Pass. Several backpackers had made their camp there – what a beautiful place to camp! I wanted to spend the afternoon there, but we had to head back and get to Lone Pine and up to Whitney Portal to get a decent sleep before the big day tomorrow.

On our way back, Chihping got to “show off” his strength a bit lifting a big rock, and John shared some stories of some of his other adventures. It was interesting learning that John was also a diver and had been deep diving around the world – even up to 300 feet. He’s been on the Andrea Doria – a 900 ft sunken ship 240 feet deep that still has a lot of treasure on board, and he shared a bit about things that exist in Monterey that you could only see below around 180 feet, including large elephant ear sponges and giant gorgonians – I looked forward to seeing his photos! Turns out he’s even a dive instructor at Wallins, and he was even giving the next Kelptomaniacs talk next week! What a coincidence – it seemed like this whole trip had been about coincidences. I had prayed a bit about this trip over the last few days and it looks like God’s hand was on it – the beauty all around us, our luck with the weather, and our safety so far.

The weather held during our whole 9 mi hike – and as luck would have it, it started pouring rain as soon as we got back into the cars! It poured and even hailed a bit on our way back to Bishop. We headed back on 395 south and decided to visit some hot springs on the way – we had an extra ½ hour or so – we agreed to meet Yuki and the others at 7:00 to get the permits. The Keough Hot Springs are just off 395 a little south of Bishop and would make a worthwhile detour. It was well worth it to soak my sore muscles a bit before the big workout tomorrow.

We arrived in Lone Pine right around 7:00 and easily found the Dow Villa Motel where the other 4 were staying. Paul even spotted Yuki in front (I had never met Yuki in person – only over the phone). We hit the Carousel restaurant across the street for dinner – the food was tasty, but it was hard to fully enjoy with the anticipation of the epic hike tomorrow. So many questions filled my mind – Would I make it? Would I have altitude problems? I didn’t want to get sick or hurt or sprain an ankle... Was it going to storm on us again? The forecast again said scattered storms in the early and late afternoon. I prayed that God would continue to watch over us.

Out of nervousness, we decided to move up our start time to 3:00 am – so we could be up and at least partly back down before the rain and lightning start hitting. Several of us went to the grocery store across the street and stocked up on some more power bars and candy for energy during the hike – we figured we’d spend several thousand calories on the trip, and we’d need the energy!

The dark clouds were still obscuring most of the Sierra range including Mt Whitney as we ascended the Whitney Portal Road. Starting from the only traffic light in town, the road wound through the Alabama Hills through the desert up to our campsite at around 8000 ft. The stars were just beginning to poke through as the remaining storm clouds fizzled. Camp was set up rather hastily as we wanted to maximize our sleep. The bear locker was packed and shut and in a few moments our eyes were shut too.

## **Monday August 16**

Today was the big day. The alarm went off around 2:00 AM but we were already awake – anticipating the big hike. The sky was clear and starry – a good sign. Some hazy clouds still lingered in the east – remnants of the heavy storms they had there the previous day. The tents were broken down, our packs were stuffed with power bars, and water bottles were filled. We figured there wouldn’t be enough room in the bear lockers at the trailhead, so we chanced leaving our food at the campsite bear box – hopefully today’s campers wouldn’t take it.

We drove the remaining mile or so to the trailhead – the bear boxes were indeed full. The others had just arrived too – Yuki, Phil, and his girlfriend. Yuki’s wife decided not to join us on the hike – she

wanted to just relax in Lone Pine and enjoy a few hours more sleep! We were on the trail just after 3:00 AM.

Our chain of 7 headlamps slowly snaked up the switchbacks up the first part of the trail. I was feeling OK – a bit sleep deprived, but the adrenaline kept me going. It looked like the first part of the trail was in trees, but the trees thinned and the trail got rockier. A couple times our group got split up a bit and some of us hiked with some other groups. Most of the others in our group started at a much faster pace – I felt it was smarter to go slower and steadier, especially because of the high elevation. It was easy to lose the rocky trail in places, but a quick scan revealed where the trail made a turn.

The first rays of sunlight started pouring in from the east as my GPS read around 11000 feet. Wow – we had already climbed a lot, almost halfway. I went to get a picture of the sunrise when my camera gave me the dreaded low battery light – hopefully it was just the cold and later in the day, the battery would warm up and last the rest of the trip. The picture came out nicely, though.

The light steadily brightened as we climbed some rough switchbacks up to what we discovered was Trail Camp at 12000 ft. The sun was hitting the rocks fully now, giving them a fiery red hue, which was reflected in a large lake nearby. We had passed several lakes now – Consultation Lake in a deep basin on our left, and Lone Pine Lake and Mirror Lake which I saw on the topo map, but it was still too dark to see at the time. Trail Camp was a great spot for a much needed rest. The nearby lake made a nice filling spot for my near empty camelback, and there were even toilets there. The solar toilets were quite rank but provided a bit of relief when nature called.

In front of us was a fearsome wall of rock – another seemingly “inconsolable range” – I wondered how we were going to ascend it. Then I saw the first of the infamous set of 97 switchbacks – we had just over a mile to climb 1500 feet. The climb was about as steep as Yosemite Falls, but finished at 13600 feet elevation at Trail Crest. Countless glacial lakes started appearing as we climbed the rocky switchbacks past some steep snowfields. Some chains had been installed for railings where the drop off was almost vertical – it was a great feat how the trail had even been built!

We had to watch our footing on some icy spots on the trail, and some slow spots forced us to take breaks and eat on the way. It was important to continue eating and drinking plenty of water, especially for the strenuous hike at high altitude. We even got to enjoy some wildflowers under a rock – their soft blue petals and feathery green leaves a stark contrast to the hard and unforgiving barren grey granite slopes all around us.

The switchbacks finally came to an end at the Trail Crest at 13600 feet – we could finally see over the pass. An utterly sublime and serene scene unfolded before us – the 3000-foot cliffs of the Hitchcock range with the huge lakes in front reflecting the towering peaks. Countless other lakes and peaks were visible under a deep crystal blue sky. Guitar Lake was named for obvious reasons once we saw it.

We had just 2 mi to go and about 800 ft more climbing – shouldn't be too bad. My worries about lightning were confirmed with some stern warning signs not to proceed if any dark clouds were nearby – fortunately the weather was holding so far. I could see quite a few people following the trail as we flanked the backsides of Keeler Needle and over to Whitney. It was hard to tell where the trail was beyond a few feet in front of us – it blended in so well with the rough landscape. Occasionally, deep windows opened to our right where we looked straight down the rocky basin – sometimes brilliant turquoise blue glacial melt water lakes were visible amidst the snowfields.

We could easily recognize the Whitney summit – a rock cabin had been built at the top, and occasionally we could spot people on the trail far ahead of us. The last mile seemed to last an eternity as the trail weaved us through the boulder fields and through a deep snowfield. Many potholes still had frozen puddles from the rainstorms the previous evening – it had dipped well below freezing overnight, and the ice was still quite hard. The temperature had dropped dramatically during our climb, even with the sun rising.

We finally saw our goal – the cabin at the summit! A bunch of people were already there – Chihping actually passed us going the other way – he had already been on the summit for a while and wanted to get down! John was just behind me, and later Paul and Yuki and Phil and his girlfriend showed up on the summit. It was amazing how the trail had been built so well the whole way, but the cabin was incredible! I performed the requisite signing of the summit register and photos of the summit pin at 14496 feet above sea level. It was about quarter of 10 – just over 6 ½ hours after we started.

A couple guys planned on celebrating with a beer until it fizzed out of control due to the lower pressure on the summit. I just celebrated by basking in the splendor of the peaks around that appeared to be a million miles away. The sky remained pretty crystal blue in the west and some thin hazy clouds remained in the east. A nice set of lenticular saucers formed in the south, possibly off Mt Langley – I was hoping it wouldn't be too windy on the Whitney summit, but it wasn't too bad. A rather photogenic marmot was hanging out and playing hide and seek in the boulder field around us.

After about ½ hour of hanging out and enjoying the scenery and taking pictures (and praying the battery was going to hold), we started the long journey back down. The view looked quite a bit different in the brighter light as the sun broke through the veils of clouds to the east. Mt Hitchcock cast eerie shadows reflected in the lakes. A bunch more hikers were still coming up, including some who camped in the basin and hiked Whitney from the other side. (I think I'd like to do that next time, instead of doing the day trip, but it would take a lot more planning). A large stack of backpacks sat at the Trail Crest, where the backpackers had left them to do the summit before hiking out to Whitney Portal.

It seemed like an endless journey back down the 97 switchbacks as the Trail Camp slowly neared. My camelback was nearing empty and we reached the lake just in time for a fill. It looked so much different in the broad daylight now, since it was still twilight a few hours ago. The trail kept winding down the rocky switchbacks along a creek and nice waterfall. The creek went down to a lake which was now visible among the first trees – later I found out this was the Lone Pine Lake we missed early in the predawn darkness.

The first trees smelled so sweet – it had been so barren and desolate for so long on our way to the peak and back. To the left Mirror Lake and a lush green meadow were visible. The trail actually went right next to the lake, though I had completely missed it earlier. A ways farther down, a roaring waterfall tumbled past Outpost Camp. It had felt like an eternity getting back down this far – but it was still only around 2:30. We had been up over 12 hours and still had a few miles to go!

We plodded our way down the last few miles of switchbacks – my GPS battery was dead and going down almost seemed longer than going up... at least my camera battery held just fine. We were just anxious to get back to the car and take a nap! It was around 4:15 by the time we finally reached the car. Just a little over 6 hours to get down. The sky was full of puffy clouds, but no signs of serious weather – we were lucky to not have any rain the whole way. Everyone made it fine and the trekking pole really helped John. The T-shirts and postcards at the Whitney Portal store were a bit expensive,

though they were quite nice – I couldn't resist bringing back a couple tokens from the trip.

We headed back down to Lone Pine and as we went, the thought of just crashing at the Dow Villa Motel started looking more appealing... we originally planned on camping again at or near the Whitney Portal campground. But we finished in enough time to go back to town and eat a real dinner – John had been craving beer and pizza. Rooms at the motel were only around \$40 a night (\$20/person), and we decided the bed and hot shower were well worth it. After probably depleting most of the hot water supply at the motel, we rested for a short nap and planned to indulge ourselves a bit. There happened to be a good pizza place across the street, where we split some extra large pizzas (some of us having 8 slices!). It was just before 7, and even though it was still quite bright outside, our eyelids were getting too heavy. I thought I could read at least one chapter before dozing, but the book fell after less than a page.

## **Tuesday, August 17**

I had slept clear through until past 7:30 this morning and actually felt quite refreshed. I actually managed to finish the chapter before John and Chihping woke Paul and me at 8:00. Chihping had already been up for an hour and a half (where does he get so much energy?). We walked down to a nice family restaurant down the street - Lone Pine is quite compact – the whole town is less than a few blocks. The pancakes were quite satisfying – it was our first real breakfast of the trip.

After checking out, we visited a small sporting goods shop and started talking about plans for the day. I felt pretty good and was eager to see some more stuff on the way back – however the other 3 were still pretty tired and ready to just head straight back. The weather forecast was mostly sunny so I looked forward to great views back up 395 on the way back. We ended up parting ways at the end and I planned to make it a leisurely trip back – no rush to get home.

I had heard a lot about the Alabama Hills – they form a scenic backdrop for many old western movies. In fact, I felt like being in a Roy Rogers movie - the whole town of Lone Pine, the Alabama hills and the Sierra made the perfect backdrop. The smooth and rounded hills stand in such contrast to the jagged Sierra crest high above. What is pretty interesting about the hills is that they contain several natural arches – like those you see in postcards of Arches National Park. One of the arches is pretty easy to get to, and it forms a perfect frame for Mt Whitney. I had lugged my SLR camera the whole way, and was rewarded with some great photography with the arch and scenery of the hills and mountains.

A scenic loop went through some more of the hills – similar to those in Joshua Tree National Park. A few turnouts led to rockpiles where you could climb around on the rocks and enjoy the view – chalk was visible on some of the outcroppings where climbers practiced their bouldering skills. It would have been easy to spend all day there playing around on the rocks, but it was a 7-hour drive back to the bay area and I didn't want to get back too awfully late.

I had thought about visiting Bodie near Mono Lake on the way back – it'd be a little bit of a detour, but since I wasn't in the area that often, it would be worth it. Besides the road is only open a few months of the year, and the weather was holding so the visit seemed appealing. It was probably about 3 hours up to Bodie from Lone Pine. I noticed on the way Convict Lake was just off 395 and it was supposed to be nice, so it made a good rest stop after a couple hours driving. A bunch of people were fishing and hanging out by the lake enjoying the view of the colorful metamorphic rocks of the peaks beyond.



After a brief stop in Lee Vining for gas and getting severely ripped off (it was \$2.79 in some places!), I reached the road going east through the high desert up to Bodie. Most of the road is paved, but the last part is unpaved and quite dusty – I knew my car would need a wash anyway when I got back, so I didn't really care.

The ghost town appeared before me up on the hillside – the mines and stamp mills and all the buildings were all there – left, forgotten to time for the last 120 or so years. The years around 1880-81 were quite profitable with millions of dollars of gold being mined, but afterward when the profitability of the mining declined, and with many severe winters, people started leaving until the entire village was abandoned.

It was kind of an eerie sight seeing the buildings – the church complete with its stained glass windows, pews, pulpit, and pipe organ, the schoolhouse with its antique style desks with dusty textbooks and lesson plans still on the blackboards, the globes and maps (with some modern countries missing), US flags (with a few stars missing), US maps where several states were still Indian territories (such as New Mexico, Arizona, the Dakotas, Idaho, Wyoming, etc), the houses still with dusty dishes on the dinner tables, old Singer sewing machines and antique furniture in the bedrooms. Even the tile floors were still there, though many of the layers had worn away, revealing layers beneath. Much of the wallpaper was still on the walls – it was clear how they did wallpaper back then – they would tack cloth on the wooden walls, apply the paste, then the wallpaper. Then when they wanted a different look, they would just put another layer on top.

The houses and buildings where the windows were still intact still preserved much of the interior, though the buildings missing windows had mostly collapsed due to the increased exposure to the weather – which sometimes included 20 foot snow drifts, gale force winds and temperatures 40 degree below zero.

The mining operation was quite extensive – the tailings of many mines still remained on the hillside, and most of the rusty mining machinery was still intact. The city even had its own Chinatown for the several hundred Chinese laborers. The jailhouse, which housed some of the West's worst bandits, still stood. There was so much to see – it was straight out of a history textbook – a picture is worth 1000 words, but actually being there is probably worth 1000 pictures!

Back on the road, back to 395 past Mono Lake and up 120 from Lee Vining, I decided to go visit Saddlebag Lake for at least a brief tour. Last time I was there, we just stopped for a couple pictures, but according to the map, there's a bunch of lakes and glaciated peaks around, so I thought it would be worth another visit. It was about 4:00 with plenty of daylight left, so I got out the GPS and camera and decided to look around a bit. I was also used to being at elevation, so starting out at 10000 feet wasn't a problem.

The trail wandered around Saddlebag Lake where some fishermen were trying their luck. Soon, it branched and went up to a basin where everywhere you looked there were more alpine lakes and meadows than you could imagine. The map only had some of the larger ones. Greenstone Lake, Cascade Lake, Z Lake, and Steelhead were some of the featured lakes. Beautiful slabs of glacially polished granite surrounded Steelhead Lake, and a bunch of backpackers had recently set up their camp nearby. A few lingering snow patches filled some of the north facing gullies and small streams still flowed in some of the alpine meadows. The wind was calm and many of the lakes were like mirrors reflecting the majestic peaks above. It was just a couple hours to visit the lakes, but it was time well spent, especially since it was right on the way.

Back at the parking lot, the sun was just starting to dip below the peaks on the west, and a young guy pulled up with all his mountaineering gear. Working as a guide on Mt Shasta for a summer job, he had just finished his season as the snow conditions on Shasta have deteriorated by the end of the summer. He planned on sleeping right there in the parking lot and getting up at 5 AM the next morning to tackle North Peak and Mt Conness in a marathon 16 hour day. Consisting of climbing steep 50 degree snow slopes with crampons and ice axes and soloing some technical class 5 rock climbing, his route would take him up the steep glaciated face of North Peak, traversing the ridge down to Conness, then cross country across the granite slopes back to the car at Saddlebag Lake. I wished him good luck as I pulled away, wanting to get back to the bay area at least before midnight – so much for getting to bed early, but at least last night’s sleep was restful, and I’d be able to catch up on sleep during the week.

Back on 120 along the Tioga Road through Crane Flat, down the steep Priest Grade road to Oakdale, with a gas fill-up and McDonalds fill-up (and a car almost backing straight into me... I didn’t want to have a second boo-boo with my car!). The rest of the trip was rather uneventful, back on 205 over to 580, past the windmills on the Altamont Pass, over the San Mateo Bridge (with the extra dollar toll now...), and back home. I was back in bed around 12:30. I later found out the others made it safe too – they stopped at Tanaya Lake in Yosemite and enjoyed a long dinner and got home around 9:00.

A tiring but very memorable trip – it was good to be back home.

**THE END**