

Yosemite / East Sierra Oct 16-17, 2004

3 seasons within 24 hours

I had been on a trip to the Eastern Sierra last year around this time and was amazed at the beauty of the fall colors in the aspens along the slopes of the mountains. I was inspired to go back and re-visit that area. The forecast had called for the leaves to be in full color this weekend. Plus I wanted to make one last visit to the high country before it was snowed over for the season.

I almost made this trip last weekend, but with the threat of nasty weather on Friday and Saturday, I decided to move it back one week – plus the colors were supposed to be even better this weekend. It was a trip with actually very little planning – when something else planned for Saturday fell through, I realized the weekend was open, and I could go. I was also inspired after talking to some coworkers who also planned on going. We talked about either going up together or at least meeting for dinner.

I had changed my mind so many times about this weekend and was a bit nervous, but excited at the same time. I finally got a room booked for Saturday night (temperatures were supposed to be in the 20's with a slight chance of snow on Sunday), so camping was out of the question – besides paying a little extra for a real bed would be worth it!

The trip ended up unfolding in a totally unexpected, but amazing way.

Saturday

I had decided to get up early Saturday instead of going up Friday night and dealing with traffic and spending an extra night. With just a small bag and some water, I was on the road around 5:30. No traffic along the way made for an easy drive. 1 hr to I-5, 3 to the Yosemite west entrance. Getting up and leaving in darkness was so hard – it was hard to anticipate what it was going to be like in the mountains, and some heavy clouds had passed the previous evening. Along the way, however, Venus shone brilliantly, piercing the darkness, keeping the hope up for a beautiful day. The sky steadily brightened after I reached 120, and finally the sunrise arrived in the Sierra foothills a brilliant red hue – filtered by the smoke from several wildfires along the western slopes of the mountains.

They had called for a chance of rain and snow showers on Sunday and I was hoping for a nice day Saturday – at least for part of the day. A few bands of high clouds passed, but it cleared after sunrise and stayed clear. It was still a bit smoky in some parts – in fact a lot of Yosemite Valley had smoke. I had changed my mind several times where to go in Yosemite, and ended up going to the Mono Pass trail in the high country. Some smoke lingered even in the high country, but it looked clearer on the south side down along the Mono Pass.

After lacing up my shoes and stowing the remaining food in the bear locker, I was off. Signs told the story about some of the history of the area, including the mining camps and cabins, the harsh conditions, and how the area is under snow most of the year. The trail started around 9600 feet – I wasn't all that acclimatized to the altitude since I was at sea level just about 2 hours ago! The trail was mostly flat, and the pass was at 10600 feet, so it didn't look like a lot of climbing would be necessary.

The trees changed from the larger pines near the trailhead and became smaller and more scraggly as the trail neared timberline a couple miles past the trailhead. Trees bent over sideways were a

testimony of the heavy winds that prevailed in the area. It was calm when I was there, but the winter season which often brings gale force winds and many feet of snow was coming soon – in fact possibly that very night it would be starting – I imagined being in the last small window of summer in the Sierra.

A warm wind from the south was pushing back the wildfire smoke, and the sky suddenly became a brilliant blue as I neared Mono Pass at 10600 feet. Along the way I had passed several mining cabins – the area had actually been home to a small gold mining operation called the Prescott Mining District. A few shafts were visible, but they were mostly filled in with collapsed rocks (maybe done deliberately so people don't get hurt inside). The rank smell of sulfur and other multi-colored minerals filled the area around the tailings.

I was happy just making it to the Mono Pass area, and I had expected the weather to start turning for the worse – however it was holding with hardly any clouds in sight, so I decided to venture out a bit and do some exploring. Near Mono Pass was a chain of pretty alpine lakes shimmering like mirrors and reflecting the deep blue sky. The lakes beckoned for at least a brief visit – what a great spot to relax and reflect on things for a while.

Adjacent to the lakes were 2 sizable peaks – Mt Lewis and Mt Gibbs – both over 12500 feet. I didn't expect to be able to make it that high, especially without acclimatizing, but I decided to explore up at least part of Mt Lewis – on the east side was a steep drop that looked like it would give a nice view.

Traversing along the side of Mt Lewis at first didn't look like it would be too bad, and it would be easier than trying to ascend the steep slopes near the lakes. The traverse ended up being a little tougher than originally thought, but a few surprises greeted me on the way – several mine shafts where prospectors apparently went searching for gold, and several beautiful ice flows streamed down some of the steep rocks. Some small caves were full of icicles and ice columns. It must have dipped far below freezing overnight and the ice was just beginning to thaw for the day. Skirting several snow patches, I arrived at a ridge where the climb became much easier.

It was now just a short hike to one of the sub-peaks of Mt Lewis – at about 11800 feet. I didn't feel like tackling the main summit almost another 1000 feet higher, and the views would probably be worth it from the lower peak. Looking to the east was a panoramic view of the entire Mono Lake – the alkaline lake reflecting the sky like a mirror. Looking south across the barren mountains of eastern Yosemite revealed the nearly 13000-foot Kuna crest with its glaciers and the expansive Parker Pass with its glimmering lakes.

It was a marvelous experience witnessing the majesty of God's vast creation from the mountains – the feeling of being so alive always draws me back over and over again. Sitting in the sunlit silence of the mountains was a sort of therapy that cleansed my mind of stresses and cares that I have to attend to back home.

Part of this trip to the mountains was to see the autumn glory of the aspens covering the eastern slopes of the Sierra, and already in fact, I could see many of the brilliant colors down in the valley below. The groves of aspens were like rivers of gold and orange flowing down the steep slopes.

I started heading down toward the Parker Pass and I figured it would be easy to take the main trail back. Checking my watch and seeing the endless blue sky above made me realize maybe I could go

over and visit at least part of the majestic Kuna crest. Some indescribable feeling of exhilaration and amazing freedom came over me to go over and explore some of the pristine wilderness.

Some patchy grass covered the flat tundra around the Parker pass, but it soon became fields of rocks evened out by the weight of the thick mantle of snow that covers the area for many months every year. Climbing the rocky incline led to a canyon carved out by thousands of years of glaciers flowing through. Some of the remnants of the massive glaciers remained as I passed a few snowfields along the slopes of the canyon. The terrain was full of countless boulders that got bigger and more difficult as I continued up the canyon. It was starting to get late and I knew I would have to turn around pretty soon, but something was beckoning me to go in a little further.

Another 15-20 minutes of climbing over boulders just revealed a field of more countless boulders, even more difficult than the first set – it was getting a bit discouraging, but I felt like I had to go a little further. Around the corner I could see the slope was a bit less steep and it eventually rose to a flat area – that would probably make a good turn around spot.

Just over the last rise to the flat area came a grand and wonderful surprise – a beautiful pristine glacial lake – it was like out of a dream! The still lake reflected the permanent snowfields surrounding it like a perfect mirror, and the melt water of the larger glaciers higher on the mountain filled the lake with a sparkling translucent turquoise color. As I neared the lake for a closer look, I heard a faint crackling sound – there was actually a thin layer of ice on part of the lake. It was already starting to freeze over for the winter as if to remind me the couple precious months of summer were already ending. In fact, there was a faint dusting of fresh snow from the previous weekend. (I found out later that the coming winter storm would bring several feet of snow and up to 80 mph winds to most of the Sierra range).

It was getting late and it was time to start heading back – I figured it would be about 2 ½ - 3 hours back across the boulders and along the trail. The afternoon light hit the mountains with golden hues, and some small puffy clouds filled the sapphire sky. I met the first people at Parker Pass – they had come in from Gem Lake (another area I'd love to see sometime). It was almost strange to be talking with people again after being in the wilderness most of the day.

The trees smelled so sweet after I had been in the rocky alpine most of the day. I had almost forgotten about the golden meadows and lush riverbeds from the hike up. The alpine had been mostly devoid of wildlife – maybe many of the animals had retreated to lower elevations as the summer wended to a close. However a small creature hopped right in front of me – a small speckled frog was hanging out in one of the meadows.

It was about 5:00, and it hit me how tired I was – during the exhilaration of being in the mountains, I hardly felt a hint of exhaustion. I was glad to be back at the car and to get my normal shoes back on! I started to feel a couple pangs in my stomach – maybe a combination of hunger and altitude sickness (I hadn't acclimatized since I drove up in the morning). However, both of those problems would be soon alleviated during the drive down to Lee Vining for dinner.

The aspens displayed their fiery golden hues in the late afternoon light as I headed down the steep Tioga pass. The puffy clouds were increasing and lowering, and some started to cover the peak of Mt Dana. It didn't feel like winter was just around the corner, but the weather experts were predicting it.

Pizza at the Mobil at Lee Vining couldn't have tasted any better as I watched the serene sunset along

Mono Lake. After getting fuel for my body and car, I headed the last bit to a motel in Mammoth. Although it was only 7:00, it felt like after 10. After a good shower, I sat in bed watching the Yankees painfully pound the Red Sox in Game 2, but I didn't care – it was so good just to sit in bed!

I felt compelled to pull out my Bible and meditate a bit – we had started studying the Psalms in our Bible study and Psalm 8 came to mind – O Lord our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth. Also Psalm 121 – I lift my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from? I felt like I needed a bit of a “retreat of silence” – and what better way was there to do it?

Sunday

It was a good night's sleep and I was up by 7. Checking out the window, I saw the ground was already white and it was snowing rather heavily. I thought the weather wasn't supposed to come until later in the day, but apparently it was already here! After grabbing a cup of free coffee from the lobby and checking out, I was on my way. I started thinking maybe some of the passes might close soon, so it was better to leave sooner rather than later.

The views along 395 were beautiful – It was snowing in the upper elevations, raining further down, but further east in the desert, the sun was still shining. Interesting how the mountains make such an effective barrier against the weather. I had to stop several times along 395 for pictures – views that contained both autumn and winter in the same scene. How often do you see the brilliant leaves changing while it is snowing above? Several times, a great rainbow shone against the mountains. One of my favorite spots was the June Lake loop – the road cut deep into the mountains and golden forests of aspens lined the many lakes. Another small side road featured bright pink and red aspens nearby a meadow where some deer were peacefully grazing. I had the Vivaldi Seasons playing – something about great classical music resonates with nature in an almost supernatural way.

I had originally thought of going up to Rock Creek lakes that morning – the road goes up to near 10500 feet (the highest drivable trailhead in the Sierra), but it was already snowing above around 8000 feet. Even if I could drive all the way up, there wouldn't be a whole lot to see anyway – I'd have to save that for another trip.

Heading back north along 395, I saw the Tioga Pass was already closed! It was snowing pretty heavily at the upper elevations, and the road stays at high elevations for a considerable distance (but the other passes generally just go up and over and you're done with it). I was hoping the Sonora pass would still be open. I had actually brought my chains just in case but didn't think of actually having to use them!

The Sonora pass was up by Bridgeport, and I remember visiting some nice hot springs there in the past. I had my handy book of hot springs with me – every trip to the Eastern Sierra deserves a visit to at least one of the wonderful hot springs! Big Hot sounded pretty appealing so I decided to give it a shot. The directions were pretty good, and the road wasn't in too bad of shape. Plus I wanted to be able to soak my sore legs from yesterday!

The large alkali slope containing the hot springs was actually easily visible from 395 - a dirt road went most of the way to the springs, but part of the road was on private land and passed a cabin, so I decided to play it safe and stay away from the cabin. Several other cars were parked off the road, so I

figured there'd be company in the springs. However, I ended up not seeing any of the others in the springs – they must have headed elsewhere or they were friends of the owners of the cabin.

The alkali slope led to some small bubbling turquoise pools – very pretty, but too small and cold to go in. The book mentioned quite a few pools so I decided to explore a bit. Going uphill, the pools generally got larger and some were a bit warmer – some of them were steaming and looking very inviting! Perhaps 20 or so pools in total dotted the area, and I was up for a soak. The big pool wasn't real hot, but warm enough to be quite comfortable. Laying in the steaming pool in the sunshine, watching the rain and snow fall on the golden aspens on the majestic east slopes of the Sierra, while a brilliant rainbow hovered in the sky – I had found paradise!

After a good soak, I figured it was time to probably get moving – the longer I hung out, the greater chance the roads would be closed! But just about 100 feet along the path was a small bubbling natural Jacuzzi – the hot water was perfect! It was worth the risk to spend a little more time and soak a little longer!

It was about 11:00 now, and probably about 5 hours back home – barring any delays, weather or traffic related. Back along 395, it was just a few miles until 108 branched off toward the Sonora pass. I checked the sign – “SONORA PASS – OPEN”. Whew! That was good to know.

The road wound up higher in the mountain and the rain started coming – a bit heavier in the higher elevations. A small sign read “Elevation 7000 feet”. I knew the pass was over 9000, and I was hoping the precipitation would remain as rain for a bit longer. Pretty soon, however, it started changing to snow and the ground was white. It was actually quite pretty and it looked like a winter wonderland. Hopefully the snow wouldn't get too much heavier. Then “Elevation 8000 feet”. Hmm – I had at least another 1000 feet to go!

I heard later this early storm was one of the worst to hit the mountains in quite a long time, and several groups of hikers would get stranded in the snow over the next couple nights. I was happy to be on my way back to the bay area – at least safe so far. Plus when I saw cars heading the other way without chains made me think they made it over the pass just fine (they couldn't have all turned around because the pass was closed above!)

The snow got heavier, but the road was still just wet – thank goodness. Finally came the big wooden sign “Sonora Pass, Elevation 9628 feet” – higher than I thought. The pine trees were laced with a feathery mantle of fresh snow and around 3 inches were already on the ground. Several cars had stopped and the kids were romping around in the snow. How often can you play in the snow before even carving the pumpkin for Halloween?

The worst was over now – the snow thinned as the road descended, and it was raining along most of the western slopes of the mountains – quite heavy in places where the weather was forced upward by the topography. The clouds broke up and the sun came out over the central valley for the several pumpkin festivals going on. Some fresh apples and cantaloupe at one of the fruit stand added a nice touch for dessert. Finally, back on 580 through the vast windmill farm, and 92 across the bridge took me back to home sweet home.