

Backpacking trip to Ediza Lake Aug 24-26, 2007



Introduction

This is a trip I had been dreaming of for a couple years now. The Ansel Adams wilderness near Mammoth Lakes is some of the most beautiful in the entire Sierra. The twin peaks of Mt Ritter and Banner Peak, along with the Minarets frame a distinct skyline over the meadows and lakes. I have been interested in photography, especially nature and wilderness photography for several years, and Ansel Adams is one of the most famous photographers in the world. I was excited about entering a wilderness named after this famous photographer, with hopes of getting some pictures of my own (and having some fun things to print with my new large format printer I got a couple weeks ago!)

Very often, when I'm flying back and forth to the east coast to visit my family, we end up flying right over the Ritter range when we cross the Sierra. From the air, I'm able to glimpse some of the splendor of the country there - the lakes, peaks, and meadows. I finally got inspired to arrange a backpacking trip and spend a few days there. On one of my backpacking trips last year, me and Viyasan got to talking about a trip and both got pretty excited.

A couple friends showed interest in this trip, and I extended the invitation to the outing club at Stanford as well - at one point we had 9 people! The permit was only good for 6 (which was probably an appropriate number anyway). But then at the last minute, people started dropping out (two had conference calls that came up, one hurt her knee, one had other plans come up, etc). And of course, it seemed to be the people with the most gear that dropped out first, necessitating a re-organization of who was bringing what. I had been a bit nervous about the trip - mostly of all the logistics that had to work out. Even Viyasan had to drop out since a crisis came up at work. It sort of felt like the trip was falling apart before it even begun! I had started to lose motivation myself - and we still needed to rent the bear canisters, make sure we showed up before 10 am to get our permits, and get our bus tickets to reach the trailhead (you aren't allowed to drive, since there would be way too much traffic).

Well, we thought we had it all figured out - two of us - me and my friend Ed Jarvis were going to go in my car at 3:00, and Shuli Chiu and William Clay from the outing club were going to go in his car at 5:00. I got a phone call from William just before 5:00, expecting them to say they were just getting underway. But instead, William was saying Shuli wasn't feeling well, and would have to drop out! Wow - that was about as last minute as it gets (2 hours after the trip started!)... so William would have to drive by himself. I was afraid of him dropping as well - then it would be just me and Ed. But William was pretty gung-ho about the trip, and decided to make the drive himself. We originally had 2 motel rooms reserved as well, but now with just 3 people, that no longer seemed necessary, so we could easily save \$70 and cancel one of the rooms.

We arrived in Mammoth Lakes at the Motel 6 around 10:00 after a fairly uneventful 5-hour drive (plus traffic and dinner stop) - it was nice to not get in too late, so we had time to get our packs and gear ready for the hike the next morning. I left a message with William with our room number so he could just show up and knock on the door. I went to bed around 10:30 and was asleep when the room phone rang and startled me awake. Hmmm - who was calling on the room phone? Having been abruptly woken up in the middle of the night, I didn't know what was going on - but as the fog cleared in my mind, I realized it was William. Turned out he never got my message (his cell battery was dead), and when he showed up at the office, they connected him to my room. It was good to see him and that he made it OK.

Friday

Around 7:00 after a pretty deep sleep, the alarm went off and we were up pretty quickly. I looked out the window - a beautiful clear sky - I was excited to finally get on the trail. We finished packing, visited the ranger station just down the street and picked up our permits. Apparently, our group going from 6 to 3 wasn't too unusual - the couple people in front of us were once part of a group of 5, which got reduced to 2 when people dropped out as well! The group was small, but we still looked forward to having a good time. Actually it's so much easier to coordinate things with the smaller group anyway. After enjoying a hearty pancake breakfast at the "Breakfast Club", we headed to the ski

resort where we got our bus passes - at Mammoth you can no longer drive yourself in - everyone is required to take the shuttle bus. So we parked our cars and headed to the bus station - hopefully they would be still there a couple days later.

Even though there were a bunch of logistical speed-bumps on the way, persistence paid off, and it was a beautiful day when we hit the trail. The weather was supposed to be sunny for the next couple days, with a chance of afternoon thunderstorms on the last day. But we should be out before the storms would hit on the last day.

We headed up the San Joaquin river valley up toward Shadow Lake - the valley is a broad U-shaped gully where a mighty glacier from the 13,000 foot Ritter range once flowed. Now, it was partly desert plants with sage and a few pine trees. Beautiful groves of aspens lined the creeks near the headwaters of the San Joaquin River - it'd be great to come back in a month or so when they were all golden. It was a pretty easy trail - a good warm-up for the climb coming up once we crossed the footbridge at the base of the canyon. On the other side, the trail switch backed up a set of rocky ledges, paralleling the outlet creek to Shadow Lake. We paused for a snack and watched a mule train making its way up the trail (you could see it when it was still 1/2 mile away from all the dust the mules were kicking up!).

It was a fairly arduous but very scenic ascent up the rocky trail toward the lake. The creek tumbled down a series of waterfalls and steep gorges along its course down the canyon - any one of those would make a great swimming hole. Shadow Lake is one of those Ansel Adams signature views of the wilderness - the Minarets, and parts of Ritter and Banner poke high above the trees - all reflected in the mirror-like lake. We watched a fly-fisherman doing his thing from the shore - he said the fishing was pretty decent. The area around Mammoth is probably the fishing capital of California - my family used to come up to Mammoth when we lived near China Lake and my dad would go fishing. Maybe someday we'd be back to go fishing.



We enjoyed some bagel sandwiches with cheese and salami as we rested our legs from the climb. At least the trail to Ediza Lake should be pretty level the rest of the way. Ed filtered some water while William and I tried our rock-climbing abilities a bit on some of the slabs nearby - it was a perfect playground of rocks in all angles. You could easily walk up one side of the glacier-polished granite or climb a steep crack or staircase of ledges. We were having so much fun - and were still only about 1/2 way to our goal for the day! It was going to be a great couple more days coming up!

Continuing up the trail, we crossed the John Muir trail as we headed toward Ediza Lake - our goal for the trip. I looked forward to having 2 nights there - so we'd have a chance to make a dayhike somewhere and hang out a bit. The rangers had quite a few camping restrictions around the lakes and streams - I guess if they didn't, the place would be so over-run with campers it would harm the environment. And this was in addition to the camping quotas (we made our reservations 6 weeks in advance and a bunch of the weekends were already all full). Shadow Lake would be a great place if it was legal, but it was nice to get a little farther in anyway.

We reached Ediza Lake just after 2:00, and after seeing where a few other people set up their camps, we started looking for good spots of our own. Of course, it seemed like the best spots were already taken, but we managed to find a spot nearby the creek just by the outlet of Ediza Lake. Turned out we had our own private stretch of the creek, a couple waterfalls, a nice series of granite rocks where we could soak in the views, and a small patch of forest. We even had a "kitchen" of rocks near the creek and a "living room" of logs we could sit on and relax.



After pitching our tents and relaxing a bit, we changed into swim trunks and found a spot around Ediza Lake to hang out. The wilderness promised many great swimming spots (and I even remembered my swim goggles this time to see how clear the water really was!) And I was not to be disappointed - the visibility in the water must have been 50 feet! However the water was cold enough to shorten our swim to just a few minutes (but at least there were some good spots to lie in the sun and warm up again!) And there were a couple good jumping spots - a rock stuck up about 6-8 feet over a deep part of the lake - it was perfect!

Back at camp, we enjoyed a couple snacks and chocolates - it felt like we were sort of on vacation now (the hardest part of hiking uphill to camp with the heavy packs was behind us now). It was still fairly early, so we decided to do the short hike up to Iceberg Lake. Nestled just below the craggy Minarets, the lake is one of the most picturesque in the Sierra. And many times, you can see icebergs floating in the lake - remnants of the glacier that flows off the Minarets. Unfortunately with this year being so dry, the icebergs were already gone - but it was still a great view. The lake is surrounded by open alpine meadows with a few scattered trees around 10,000 feet. A use-trail heads up to neighboring Cecile Lake (and to the base of the route up Clyde Minaret), but we'd save that for another day. It was nice to just relax and watch the afternoon light over the mountains. The lake would be a bit chilly for a swim (but the water was probably even clearer - you could easily see the bottom).



The sun was getting low as we got back to camp just before 6:00, and we got the stove out for some hearty pasta and Indian vegetables and ramen noodles. Thanks William for cooking the pasta, and the vegetables were pretty easy (just put the pouch in boiling water for 5 minutes!). The Indian curry added some spice to dinner. It was simple, but everything tastes good when you are camping! And a little more chocolate for dessert was perfect icing on the cake.

We got cleaned up, pumped some more water, and dressed warmly for the night (it was supposed to get in the 40's overnight). Then William came to me asking to borrow my filter. I thought he had one already, but supposedly when he was changing bottles, the pump slipped off the rock and splashed in the stream. And of course, the pump was black, making it nearly impossible to find again. I gave him mine, just hoping that the mishap wouldn't happen again (the water is pretty clear, but is it worth risking giardia poisoning and 2 weeks of running to the bathroom? That would be a heck of a way to ruin a trip...)



A near-full moon was coming up, and after relaxing a bit, we found our favorite spot by the lake (near where we went for the swim earlier), and enjoyed the moonlight bathing the landscape in a bluish light. I set my camera for a few time exposures (15 seconds at 400 speed made for some great moonlight scenes). A few shooting stars darted overhead as we shared stories about past trips and thought about our hike tomorrow. Ed was already asleep, and William and I hit the sack shortly afterward probably around 10:00. It seemed so early, but when you are in the wilderness, you tend to adapt to "natural" time, following the sun, instead of Silicon Valley time (get to work by 10 AM and go to bed at 1 AM).

Saturday

I awoke just before 6 am to the smell of distant smoke. I thought fires were not allowed this time of year due to the high fire danger. It had been one of the driest years on record, and pretty late in the season. I realized there might be a forest fire burning somewhere - there had been storms over NV and the southern sierra the day before and perhaps some dry lightning had sparked a fire. It was a very dry year and fire danger was very high. I just hoped it wouldn't get too heavy or cause any threat to us. It was a spooky sunrise - I climbed up the rocks behind our campsite for an open view of the sunrise on one side and the lake on the other. The sun glowed a deep crimson red through the hazy smoke in the distance - a fairly ominous view. Ritter and Banner were splashed with an orange morning alpenglow, streaked with dark lines formed by shadows of the wispy layers of smoke.

An hour later or so, the smoke seemed to be blowing away to the east, and it turned into quite a nice clear morning. I had slept over 10 hours (it's hard to stay up much past dark when camping, especially when we can't have a campfire to swap stories around - at least the near-full moon was quite nice). But William and Ed decided they still didn't have enough sleep. I lay back in my tent, napping a bit, until it got too hot - I went down to water a tree and when I came back, the other tent had sprung to life (Ed and William slept almost 12 hours!).

The instant coffee and oatmeal and bear claws made a fairly hearty meal (and of course everything tastes better when you're camping, right? Especially when backpacking). I had my necessary gear ready in my fanny pack - camera, swimsuit, swim goggles, sunscreen, and GPS. But there was a slight problem - the top of the backpack is supposed to double as a day pack, but it was like it was made for kids, since with the existing straps, you'd have to be a kid to get it to fit around your waist! It was like there was a strap missing, since William had almost the same pack and his had an obvious extra strap. Fortunately, William also had an extra day pack and I could use his. Also William went to filter some more water to get ready for the hike, and just tucked under some rocks in the stream was his water filter - he found it! Of course it was much easier to find in the daylight, but it was amazing it didn't get washed downstream in the swift current.

Around 10:30, we were finally on our way (and the night before, we thought we'd never leave past 9:30 - how could it ever take that long to get ready?). But that was OK - today was a day just to bum around a bit. I had planned what looked like a fairly easy 7 mile loop - from Ediza Lake over a small ridge to Nydiver Lakes, then over a slightly larger ridge to Garnet lake, where we'd take the trail back around to the John Muir trail, then back to Ediza Lake.



I felt like a Japanese tourist almost immediately when we hit the trail - once at the lake just behind our campsite, the views of rugged 13,000 ft peaks and glaciers and forests stretched from horizon to horizon. It reminded me a bit of being at the Grand Tetons a few years ago. The first part of the loop would probably be mostly off trail for a couple miles, but the rest should be on much easier terrain and trails.

As we circled Ediza Lake, we stumbled on a use-trail switch backing up the mountain. It looked pretty well-worn, and soon we found out why. Just ahead of us was a pretty nice campsite with a food drop, including boxes of food, gear, and a couple cases of Budweiser beer! They knew how to camp in style! The trail was also probably well-used

since this trail is one of the standard routes for the ascent of Mt Ritter. Maybe the beer was for some climbers who could celebrate when they got back from the summit!

We continued following a stream through a small forest up the trail, and soon afterward, we saw a family with some kids! I was surprised to see any kids all the way back here... they were splashing around in a waterfall and just goofing off. I then realized it was the same family that was camped right next to our spot at Ediza Lake (and of course the kids were the first to wake up this morning - they were probably up before 6, saying "let's go daddy!"). They got me up in the morning, in time for me to get up and check out the smoky red sunrise.

The waterfall was quite a bonus for the hike - it wasn't even marked on the map, and if it was any place close to a city, it would probably be a state park where you'd have to pay \$7 admission just for the waterfall! And here we didn't even know it was here until we stumbled across it! This is one of those things I think that brings me back to the wilderness - there are always those hidden gems and surprises that you don't realize until you get there.

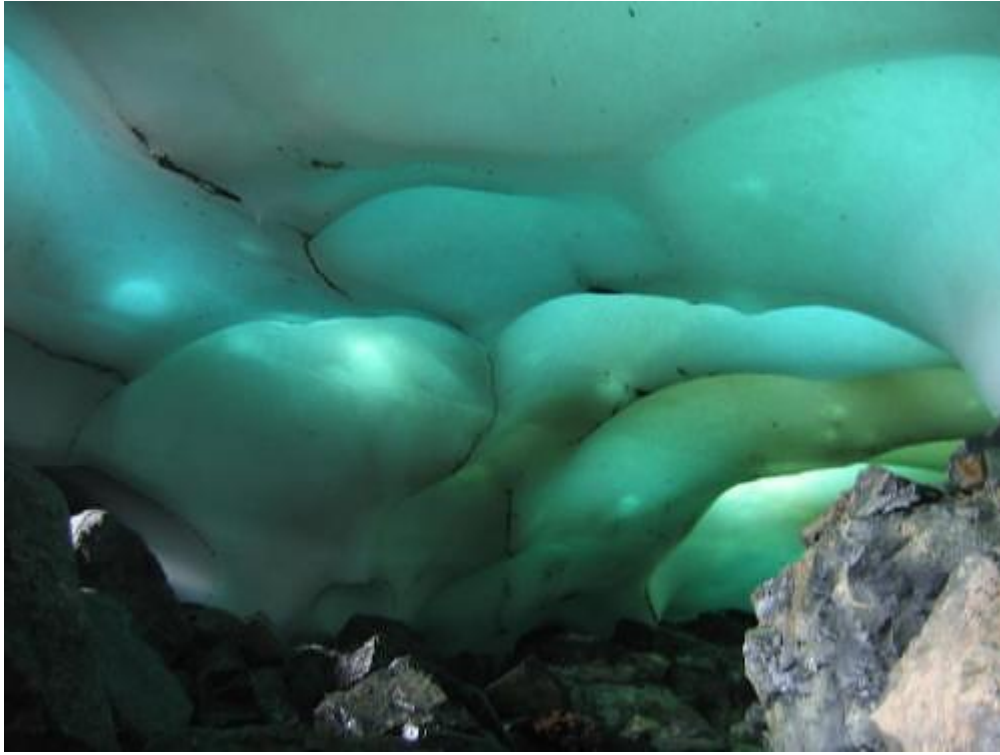
Our original route planned was a shorter way up and over the ridge to the Nydiver lakes, but when we saw how steep the contours were in real life, we realized it would be much easier just to follow the gully to the top and then cross a much smaller ridge to the lakes. Well, that proved to be a good decision, since we were treated to some surprises at the top of the gully. One of the glaciers coming off Mt Ritter flowed all the way down to the top of the gully, where it ended in a small rocky lake. I had originally planned on just continuing up the ridge to get over to the lakes, but William was pretty interested to check out the snow - how often do you get to play in the snow at the end of August? Especially in such a dry year, when the snow was mostly gone after May.



We dropped our packs and trekked out on the edge of the glacier. Crossing a few small crevasses (you had to be careful since some of them had snow-bridges that you could easily step through), we found a deep hole in the ice. It was a moulin, formed when melt water trickles through the ice and forms a plumbing system down below. It would probably be a nasty fall into cold water if you happened to slip in - and we didn't have crampons (none of us planned on hiking on ice and snow!) Further up, at the top of the glacier, we saw a slender 500 foot waterfall cascading down Mt Ritter. As we trekked along the glacier toward the waterfall, we found a couple more holes in the ice - one was formed when air blowing through some of the rocks below the glacier melted the ice from below, forming a bell-shaped chamber that eventually went all the way through. Peeking inside revealed a few tunnels down into the blue ice below.

The biggest surprise proved to be right near the waterfall, where the tumbling water cut a deep cave into the ice. William had already gone in to check it out, and he said there was a tunnel at least 30 feet long, but didn't go all the way in. I remember exploring an ice cave in Alaska where a creek crossed a glacier, cutting a large tunnel into the ice. From the outside, it looked just like a dark opening in the white ice, but when I went inside, I

was surprised to find myself in a beautiful glowing blue chamber of scalloped clear ice. Although we weren't in Alaska here, I figured this cave still was worth checking out.



There were a series of caves penetrating the glacier, the deepest of which went back at least 50 feet (beyond that, it was too dark and wet to continue comfortably without flashlights and without getting soaked). But it was deep enough where we were surrounded by beautiful scalloped blue and green ice. When the sunlight penetrates very clear ice, the longer wavelengths are absorbed, leaving just the shorter blue wavelengths, and the deeper you go in, the deeper blue the ice appears, until it becomes pitch dark inside. I took a bunch of pictures in every angle to try to capture the moment, while dodging raindrops coming from the ceiling (both on me and my camera!) What was very interesting were the patterns of melt water rings on the ceiling. As the ice melted above the ceiling, it would form depressions which would sometimes be filled with small ponds. As one of these ponds froze and re-melted, it formed a series of rings, sort of like a bulls-eye pattern.

My back was starting to hurt a bit after about 20 minutes in the cave, as we were hunched over a bit and trying to dodge the water drips and trying to avoid stepping into puddles on the floor. Back on the surface of the glacier, we headed back down, carefully to avoid punching through the ceiling of the cave and falling in! We got back to the end of the glacier where it met the lake below, and where we thought our packs were. A couple marmots were scampering around the rocks, and I was hoping all the food would still be there and the critters hadn't done too much nibbling in the meantime. Well the packs weren't quite where we remembered, and it took probably about 10 minutes to realize they were further down on the other side of the lake (I think we might have been too

excited about playing on the snow that we didn't pay too much attention to where we dropped the packs!)



We grabbed our packs and after a brief snack started heading up the ridge up and over toward the Nydiver lakes. Again, the contours on the map were much wider (being 25 m instead of 40 ft), tricking us into thinking the terrain was much flatter than it really was. But we managed to climb over the glacially scoured slabs up and over about a 10300 ft ridge on our way down to the lakes. The polished rocks were beautiful - though sometimes the green serpentine was as slick as ice! Occasional chunks of clear quartz crystals looked pretty enough to take home (but might be a bit heavy in our packs).

Up and over the ridge, we had a great view back toward Ediza Lake and the Minarets behind us, and the serene Nydiver lakes ahead of us. I wondered how many people actually went down to those lakes, since most people who even go up to the ridge are there to climb Ritter or Banner. We ended up having the whole lakes basin to ourselves! We relaxed on one of the sandy beaches, filtering water and enjoying some oranges and trail mix. Oranges are heavy to carry, but probably one of the most satisfying things to have out on the trail!

The water was so clear - reminding me of Lake Tahoe. Since at this time of year, not much water was still flowing into the lakes to cloud the water, this is probably about as clear as it gets. You could easily see the bottom probably 40-50 feet down! I actually thought to bring my swim goggles on the trip (they don't really weigh much, so there was little excuse to not bring them!) And I was quite rewarded for having them. Putting them over my eyes and then dipping my face underwater was almost like out of a dream (once I got over the shock of the cold water hitting my face) - the visibility had to be about 75 feet! You could see the sandy bottom and rocks descending to a deep blue abyss far below - the water was like the blue water of Hawaii or the Bahamas (though I wished it was just a little warmer and a few more fish!)

There were a few islands out in the lake that were fun swimming to (and lounging in the sun a bit). I just wished we had all day to hang out and enjoy the place. We didn't have a lot of time pressure, but there was still quite a bit of the loop yet to go. I then realized this was one of the most remote spots I had been to in a while. In order to get home from here, we had to swim back to shore, hike back to camp, backpack most of a day back to Agnew Meadows, take a bus back to the parking lot at the ski lodge, then drive 5-6 hours back home! Of course Viyasan (who was originally going on this trip) had recently been to the Alaska wildlife refuge in the Brooks range, 7 days out in the wilderness where he would be picked up by a bush plane - so I think he had me beat!



The lake had a great jumping spot too - a granite slab probably about 8 feet above the water next to a pretty deep spot was a very tempting thought. William and I took turns jumping into the water and taking pictures of each other - my picture looked like something out an extreme sports magazine - I looked like I was flying thousands of feet over the glacier covered mountains (though I was only probably about 10 feet above the lake). The lake was a bit chilly, though not as cold as Ediza yesterday. Since the Nydiver lakes are shallower and there isn't much inflow, they can warm up better. We probably swam for a good half hour or so (in Ediza we were in for only a minute or two before we said that was enough!) Then an interesting thought entered my head - how many places are there in the world that you can be crawling through an ice cave, then within an hour's walking be jumping in a lake?

It was starting to get late, and we had only completed about 1.5 miles of our 7-8 mile loop (though we thought the rest would be easy, on trail). We debated a bit about which gully was the easiest way over the ridge behind the Nydiver lakes, leading us to Garnet

lake on the other side. Again, I was a bit tricked by the spacing of the contours on the map (25 m is about twice of 40 ft, so we had to imagine there being twice as many lines as there actually were on the map). A little ways around the lake, we saw a fairly steep and narrow rocky gully that ended considerably below the ridge-line. Climbing up over the boulders would be much easier (though maybe a bit more tedious and maybe not as interesting) than going over class 3 slabs of solid rock.

We were treated to amazing views at about 10,500 feet at the top of the ridge. On one side were the Nydiver Lakes and the Minarets, and on the other was Garnet Lake with its many rocky islands far below. Ritter and Banner loomed overhead just to our left. We had probably about an 800 foot descent to negotiate. This was the part of the hike I was most worried about - what if it was all snow and too dangerous? What if it was sketchy class 3-4 slabs for a couple hundred feet? I certainly didn't want anybody getting hurt, especially this far out in the wilderness. I was a bit relieved to see it was mostly a class 2 talus and scree field. It would be a bit tedious, but nothing was technical or really difficult (though you had to be careful about dislodging rocks.)

If it wasn't for its remoteness, this area probably would have had quite a bit of mining. The rocks were covered with many interesting minerals - crystals of clear quartz, brownish colored citrine, and green and blue malachite and azurite. It was a good way to at least temporarily take my mind off the scree slog that was ahead of us. And it was nice to be able to appreciate the little things around us - it was easy to appreciate the big mountains and sparkling lakes, but it was great to look for and appreciate the smaller things like the crystals in the rocks and the small blue and purple alpine wildflowers growing in cracks between the rocks.



The scree field filled a gully, sloping about 45 degrees straight down toward the lake far below. Snow covered about half the gully, but hugging a tall vertical wall on the right was the easiest way down. I was soon treated to a wonderful panoramic view of Garnet Lake with its many rock islands. I reached into my left pocket for my camera (like I had been every 20 feet or so since every turn resulted in another breathtaking view). I reached in to my dismay I only felt my GPS in my pocket. Hmm - maybe I had it in my other pocket? I didn't put it into my pack? After wondering for a minute or two and coming to grips that it was lost, I started backtracking up the scree field in hopes that it might turn up somewhere (and it didn't bounce down the snow and rocks to its death). Fortunately, Ed was above me when he saw it drop, and he saw it glinting in the sun buried in the scree field. That's one advantage to taking so many pictures - the camera couldn't have been far.

I found it pretty quickly (whew!), and saw it didn't look too damaged. However, when I went to turn it on, the lens only extended out about a millimeter and got stuck. Then it started making a rattling sound, sort of like when gears start stripping past each other. Hmm - didn't sound good. But I know this has happened before (when I was in Brazil at Iguacu falls, it happened at the worst time, but I figured out a trick to get it working

again). The trick was pretty simple - just give it a good thump and shake it around a bit. I think some sand probably got lodged into the mechanics (which is what causes the gears to get jammed up). Shaking it loosens the sand to unstick the lens. I gave it a couple good thumps again, and tried turning it on again. The lens stuck for a split second at one millimeter, but soon got past it and extended the rest of the way. Yay! I was quite relieved to have my camera working again!

We slowly started making our way down the scree field toward the lake far below. It took a bit longer than any of us thought - it was hard to get the idea of scale when the place was so big! Stretched in front of us in an amazing panoramic view was 2-mile long Garnet lake with its many rocky islands in front of us, then Banner peak with Ritter behind it to our left. The sun was shimmering off the jewel-like lake below - quite an idyllic setting. The scree was worst near the top but fortunately it continued to get easier as we got lower.

A use trail appeared to circumnavigate the lake - it looked like the worst was behind us, and we could just follow the trail back. So we hung out a bit near the shore, had our bagel and cheese and sausage sandwiches and soaked up some rays a little. It looked like there would be so many great swimming spots around the rocky islands of the lake - we even saw some campers that had even kayaked out to one of the islands! But we still had about 4.5 miles to go and it was already after 3:00.



The map indicated the JMT connected from Garnet Lake to the Ediza lake trail in a pretty straight path - only a mile or so, and only crossed a few contours. It looked like it would be pretty straightforward. However, we were tricked yet again by the map - the trail was actually a pretty windy path switch backing many times up about a 40 degree incline (I guess we had to get up and over the same ridge that we went over before, but here it was lower and there was a trail). The "easy 1-mile stroll" ended up probably being closer to 2 miles, climbing over 400 feet. But we were treated to amazing views with every switchback.

Finally reaching the crest, we were able to look back over to the other side to the south. I was a bit surprised to see a pretty stormy sky - it looked like a system was rolling in from the south, and the weather might turn on us fairly soon. At least we were pretty close to camp and should be back soon. It had actually in fact stormed fairly severely to the south (my roommate was planning on climbing Mt Russell near Mt Whitney this weekend, but his plans were foiled because of the weather. In fact, they backpacked all the way to where they were going to camp and immediately turned around before even setting up their tents! Being on a 14,000 foot peak in a thunderstorm wouldn't be a happy place to be!) I found out later this system was supposedly some of the fringes of Hurricane Dean that had swept across Mexico and started to swing northward - southern California was hit pretty hard with flash floods.

The "trail" around the lake ended up being a bit of an adventure, however, when it went from a nice easy grassy meadow and ended at a cliff of rocks going straight up. Hmmm - now what? I was hoping the worst was behind us, but when we got up and over the rocks, we reached about a 30 foot cliff going straight down, which dropped down into a narrow gully, then a 30 foot cliff on the other side. From a distance, it looked pretty flat and easy, so this was an unwelcome surprise. It was beautiful country, but at this point, we were pretty tired and ready to just get back. It took a bit of work to traverse to where the gully wasn't quite as deep, cross, and get back up.

According to my GPS, we were making slow but steady progress back to the "official" JMT trail - no more relying on "good use trails". But shortly afterward was another gully, then another one! You could see the bridge at the far end of the lake where the JMT crossed, but we hoped to pick up the trail before that. As we got closer, we saw a couple of cairns around a campsite by the lake - a perfect spot! Maybe next year... I went down to the water to have a look and to rinse my dusty legs a bit, when I noticed an interesting pattern of horizontal white stripes on all the rocks - there were a bunch of parallel bathtub rings a few inches apart on the rocks from when the lake rose and fell. It looked like a mini "grand canyon" of horizontal layers on the rocks.

We finally reached where the trail should be on my GPS, but still no trail. Hmmm - it looked like we actually went past it - my little navigation arrow was on the other side of the trail. Hmmm - how did we miss a path where mule trains pass every day? Even though the GPS says it's accurate to within about 20 feet, that is relying on the trails indicated on the map being accurate as well! Well, after another 50 feet or so, we were on the trail. And as we followed the trail, the little arrow paralleled the trail indicated on the map, but to the left about 300 feet!



It was a fairly uneventful last couple miles back to camp - we were pretty tired and ready to chow down some dinner. I started to notice some things we had missed earlier, such as how many of the trees were really twisted. Most of the trees were twisted (some very dramatically, like a candy cane), but I noticed it seemed they all twisted in the same direction. Hmm - maybe it's like how most people are right handed. But there are a few lefties out there. It wasn't for another mile or so that I finally noticed a tree twisted the other way! It was around 6:30 when we got back - we thought we'd be back before 5:00, but with a little extra goofing off and trying to find a non-existent trail in places, we were a little later. We picked up our bear canisters down in the woods and starting prepping some Mountain House freeze-dried teriyaki chicken and some ramen noodles. Everything definitely tastes better when you're camping! A tasty dessert of milanos helped revive our tired bodies as well.

It was a bummer again not being able to have a campfire, but there were obvious reasons. We stayed up probably until around 9:00 watching the near-full moon come up (though it felt like 11:00), talking about everything from other hikes we've been on to William's trek back and forth across the grand canyon, to wiggling your nose to appear instantaneously anywhere you wanted to quantum fluctuations in the fabric of space-time. Anything to keep us entertained...

Sunday

I slept off and on during the night - I fell asleep quickly, but woke up a few hours later to find my thermarest deflated again. It developed a very slow leak a couple months ago and no matter how much I tried to fix it, the pad would still be deflated by about 3 am. It

was a long day yesterday, but a very fun one, and I found myself mentally still replaying the memories of the hike through my mind as I tried to sleep. And of course, sleeping at altitude (we were over 9000 feet) is never so easy.

I finally got up a little after 6:00 to a light pitter patter of rain drops on the tent. It had been clear just a few hours ago with the bright moon shining, but apparently the weather turned fairly quickly. I got out to have a look and there was a brilliant red sunrise lighting the underside of a couple bands of a mid-level cloud deck. One of the bands was over us, causing some light showers, but it was clear to the west with another thicker band further away. A few lenticulars were blowing over Mt Ritter, their saucer like shapes undulating with the terrain. I climbed up the rocks behind our campsite again (being careful since the glacier-polished granite was slippery like ice) and was treated to a view of a crimson sky to the east, and an orange alpenglow on the peaks to the west. It was beautiful, but I was glad we weren't doing our big hike today - instead we were just going to head back to the trailhead - about 7 easy miles on the trail. And a little cool weather would be welcome (as long as it wasn't raining too hard!)



I knew we should probably break camp early (red sky in the morning, sailor take warning) - even though we weren't sailing on the ocean, I still wanted to heed the warning. We decided to forgo the oatmeal and coffee and just have a quick but cold breakfast. I was just rolling my sleeping bag when the first clap of thunder hit. I looked back and the top of Ritter was already buried in thick clouds. It was a stormy day south of us yesterday, and it looked like it would be upon us today. I knew Ed would be a little disappointed without his morning coffee to wake him up, but better to be a little sleepy

than getting soaked. The kids next to us didn't seem to care - they were excited "daddy does this mean we get to hike in the rain?"

We got moving fairly quickly, our bear canisters packed and our tents rolled pretty efficiently. Once on the trail, the miles passed more easily than I expected. My soreness had mostly passed from the first day, and being on a good trail hiking downhill made for much quicker progress. It had been a great couple days in the wilderness - long enough for my mind to purge itself of most of the worries of work and cares of living in the Silicon Valley. The weather had started to clear up nicely - once the last band of moisture passed through, there was blue sky all around us except for a few puffy clouds over the high peaks behind us.

We got to the picturesque Shadow Lake around 10:00 - a few other people were enjoying the scenery across the lake and swimming in the clear water. It would have been wonderful to camp anywhere near the lake - nestled in clumps of trees right by the shore. But camping was not allowed - probably since it would be overflowing with people otherwise. A couple of people were just leaving a spot near the lake - just in time for us to settle in for a break. Since we had skipped the hot breakfast earlier, and now the weather looked pretty good, we decided to get the stove out and enjoy the oatmeal and coffee after all. Ed enjoyed his couple cups and so did I - I was feeling a bit hungry and groggy earlier as well. I also tried a short dip in the lake - but the water was definitely colder than yesterday. But then again, it was still early so it didn't have time to warm up much yet - however the other people didn't seem to mind...

Along the trail, we met up with some of the people who had camped near us - they had just come back from summiting Clyde Minaret, the highest of the Minarets over Iceberg Lake. It was a successful day, but just a lot longer (and more difficult) than expected. They were happy just to be getting back home! It was cool talking with the people yesterday who made it up Mt Ritter. Even though we didn't summit any of the peaks, we had a great day (but we did summit the 10,500 ft ridge over the gully). Apparently most of the people who camp around Ediza are there to climb the peaks, and very few go back down into the Nydiver lakes basin - it was cool having the whole area to ourselves yesterday!



We descended the steep gully back toward the San Joaquin River and contoured the east slope as we headed southward back to Agnew meadows. It was a steady uphill for a couple miles (we didn't really notice going downhill at the beginning of the hike, but we sure noticed the uphill on the way back!). We hiked most of the way with an Asian couple who also were from the Bay area (from Sunnyvale - the husband and Ed both worked at Cisco just a couple buildings apart! Small world...). We kept passing each other - they passed us first, then we passed them, and back and forth until we hooked up for a while.

We finally got back to the trailhead a little after 1:30, where we caught the shuttle bus back to the ski lodge. It had been a great hike, and it was nice to finally be able to clean up and enjoy a real meal (camp food was good, but compared to "real" food at a restaurant...) At the bathroom, we changed into clean clothes and got ourselves cleaned up (sort of like a sponge bath with excessive amounts of paper towels, but that would have to do). Also I hadn't shaved in 3 days. Once we were clean enough to enter society again, we went into town where we enjoyed some 1/2 lb burgers and local beers. A great way to celebrate a wonderful trip.

Ed had decided to accompany William for the ride back, since William drove himself the way up. Also Ed needed a ride back to his place in Millbrae (his car had overheated a week ago when coming back from Tijuana and his engine blew a gasket, and the car was still not running). William lived near Redwood City, so it made sense for him to drop Ed off. So then I would drive myself back to balance with William's drive alone to Mammoth in the first place.

I enjoyed driving back - taking a leisurely pace, sort of like some of my other trips alone. I didn't have an agenda - just needed to be back eventually that evening so I'd be ready for my 10 am meeting the next morning and our 1:00 all-hands with Bill Gates (definitely didn't want to miss that one! Bill spoke to all the folks here at Tellme and afterward we got to meet Bill up close in person!) It was a nice ride - watching the thunderstorm clouds towering over the high peaks as Vivaldi was playing - listening to the art in the music while seeing the art in the mountains as well.

A few showers sprinkled on me as I headed up 395 and over to 120 to get back over the Tioga pass. It was an eerie stormy grey sky over Mt Conness and the sierra crest - making one quickly realize you can't take the weather for granted. You are kind of always at the mercy of the weather in the mountains and it serves as a reminder of who is really in control. As I neared Tuolumne meadows, however, the weather cleared rapidly - the clouds were mostly centered around the crest. A deer was grazing peacefully by one of the streams.

Extension

I had heard a bunch of good things about Mt Watkins recently in Yosemite, and I knew the hike was a short one from Olmstead point - probably at most an hour each way and level. The weather was pretty clear and most of my soreness was gone (though it would catch up to me in the next couple days!), so I decided to give it a shot. I could at least go to where there was a good view and turn around. Olmstead point is always a great view which I enjoyed while my GPS was calibrating and finding the satellites. I grabbed my remaining water and camera and set out.

A bit to my surprise, the trail started switch backing down a fairly steep stretch, making me doubt if this would be an "easy stroll" after all. After wandering through a set of switchbacks (and trying to stay on the trail across the granite slabs along the way), I found myself about 10 feet from the road! Hmmm - I could have just done a nice shortcut - I'd have to remember that for the way back. Soon afterward though, the trail straightened out and was a level path through meadows and forests. After about 15 minutes, my mind kind of went on auto-pilot, and soon afterward, I spotted a large dark shape ahead just next to the trail. I turned and found myself face to face with a black bear about 20 feet down the trail! It was just grazing peacefully in the lush grass of the meadow. I must have scared it when I reached for my camera, however, since as soon as the lens extended, the bear had darted into the woods. I guess that's a good thing, since the bear was still shy and afraid of humans (like they should be in the wild, not like those bears in Yosemite Valley that have learned to graze on people's campsites instead)

After a minute or two and after I realized the bear wasn't going to come back to the meadow, I continued on slowly, partly hoping the bear would come back and I'd get a good view (and picture), and partly hoping the bear wouldn't come back (and pose a threat). It never did show up, and in the next couple minutes, I found myself coming out the other side of the forest where some views started to open up on a steep hillside. I

started to be able to see down the Tenaya canyon - where a group of us from YAF trekked last summer.

The trail rose to a saddle, and a large granite dome was visible to the left. That had to be Mt Watkins. It had been a fairly easy hike (except for the first steep part). Leaving the trail to the left and contouring on the same level, I started making my way to the dome. The trees started thinning and the view opened to a vast open granite slab with the signature peaks of Yosemite all around. Clouds Rest loomed directly ahead (with some clouds resting near the summit), while Tenaya canyon leading up the Pywiack cascades to Mt Conness and the cloud-capped sierra crest lay on the left. I could start making out the top of Half Dome as the granite slabs leveled and started heading back down. I was only a couple hundred feet from the top of the dome.



It was a serene setting, just about as grand as being on the top of Half Dome (for less than 10 % of the effort, no cables and 18" high steps to go up and down!). The dome crested at about 8200 feet, and sheer drops on both sides fell 4000 feet to the base of Tenaya canyon and the creek far below. I was able to see most of the route we went last year from Tenaya Lake down the canyon to Yosemite Valley. The open slabs near the top, the area around the "lone boulder", the "slabs of doom", and some of the waterfalls and pools were visible. You could even see down the "inner gorge" where you start the rappels down the steepest cliffs. The view brought back many good memories of the hike last year. The traverse of Tenaya canyon is about 10 miles, and it took us 12 hours to complete, and as soon as we got into the valley, we chowed down on dinner. (and then we picked up the cars the next morning).

The dome was full of strange rock formations including mushroom shaped granite boulders, scattered potholes, overhanging rocks, and large glacial erratics (it was interesting to know the whole Yosemite area was under thousands of feet of ice at one point, and one of the glaciers deposited a 6-foot boulder on top of the dome 4000 feet above the valley!) A couple hardy trees managed to grow on the weathered granite dome - like the famous Jeffrey pine on top of Sentinel dome before a storm took it out a couple years ago.

I reached the end of the dome and enjoyed the view for a bit. It was a great hike, but it dawned on me later I didn't think I was even on Mt Watkins! I realized Mt Watkins was a slightly higher and bigger dome probably 3/4 of a mile further down. The hike would be on easy slabs the whole way, but the hour was getting late and I was ready to get home. And I think the views from this other (unnamed) dome were even better as the walls were sheerer and it was located closer to Tenaya canyon, providing the best view.

It was about 5:30 and time to start heading back. It was a pretty uneventful hike back and I was getting tired. The bear didn't make a re-appearance in the meadow (even though I went slowly and looked pretty closely). Back at the car around 6:30, it was a pretty nice sunset on the way back with the sun lighting up some red bands of high clouds as I neared Crane Flat. Back down 120, past the Priest grade (I took the easier way back - no need to risk the brakes), past the Don Pedro reservoir, the giant pile of logs (and the sprinklers were still going even at night), over to 580 and back to the bay area. I was back home by around 10:30. It was a great trip with many happy memories and megabytes of pictures!

Pictures can be found online at <http://outdoors.webshots.com/album/560470773vgwALf>.