

Introduction

Matterhorn peak is the highest peak in the Sawtooth range in the northeastern part of Yosemite National Park, and it had intrigued me for a couple years now - the name of the peak (the view from the north side looks similar to the real Matterhorn in Switzerland), and the views promised from the peak. Plus I had made a trip to the Twin Lakes area last year on a camping trip with a few friends and really enjoyed the scenery - it looked like pictures from the Swiss Alps.

For the last several years, I had developed a tradition of getting to one of the high Sierra summits - this would be the 5th summer now. It started with Mt Whitney back in 2004, and then I made it to Mt Agassiz in 2005, Morgan in 2006, and Gould in 2007. I've greatly enjoyed each one and planned to keep the tradition going, and Matterhorn looked like a good goal to shoot for this year.

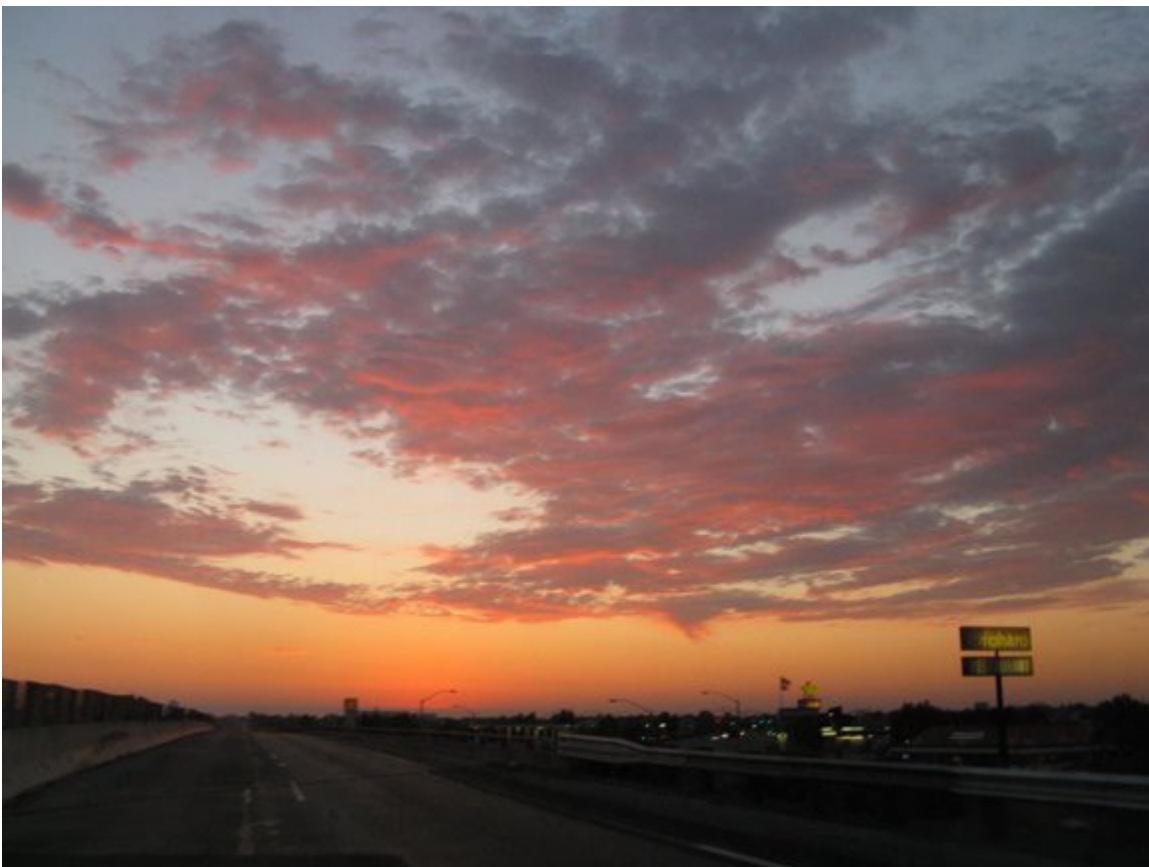
You always hear people regretting that they didn't do certain things when they had prime opportunities, or they don't realize how much they miss certain things until they are gone. I have enjoyed making the most of the great country that we live in, and especially the great places not far from home in the Bay Area. The high Sierra is a great weekend trip - you can combine it with a visit to Yosemite and even some natural hot springs as well!



Saturday

I had been traveling a bit this summer and finally gotten a free weekend in the middle of August - coinciding with the peak of the high Sierra season - when the weather is good and the chances of summer thunderstorms are starting to wind down. And the smoke from the CA wildfires earlier in the season had cleared out (finally!)

I followed my tradition of getting an early start on Saturday morning and heading east toward the high country of Yosemite. The big day was planned for tomorrow, so today was just a time to hang out and see some of the sights. Avoiding the traffic of Friday night (and having another night in my warm bed at home and not paying for an extra night), I could still get a good full day. The entire sky lit up with a brilliant red sunrise by the time I got through Tracy - I was getting energized for a great weekend!



The line hadn't built up at the entrance yet - just a couple cars. The parks pass fee went up to \$80 (from \$50 last year), but most of my trips are to Yosemite anyway, so I just went with the \$40 Yosemite pass. I was planning on going again with my church group a few weeks later, so in those 2 trips alone, the pass would already be paid for!

I hadn't been to the Tuolumne grove of sequoias before (I had been to the others though - the Merced and Mariposa groves). The trail was less than a mile, so it would make a nice little side-

trip for along the way. My heart was already pumping a bit at 6000 feet - at least the trail was mostly level, so it was a good warm-up.

It was obvious that a small fire had burned a while ago just outside the sequoia grove - one of the "healthy and natural" kind - that burns low to the ground, cleaning the brush and re-fertilizing the soil. The trees were so majestic - some up to 20-25 feet across at the base! It's hard to imagine them being there for thousands of years! One of the still standing dead trees even had a tunnel cut through it as a tourist attraction - I wonder how many people drove their cars through in the past!



One of the other dead trees was lying down and also had a (natural) tunnel carved inside by fire. I got to do a bit of spelunking through probably 75 feet of the log, coming out the other side! A squirrel busily working on a pinecone was sitting just past the log.

Even though the parking lot was mostly empty when I started, when I got back 45 minutes later, it was packed - I had to weave around tour buses and other vehicles to get back to the road!

I made my usual brief stop at Olmstead point - where one gets a spectacular view of the glacier-carved landscape of Yosemite, toward Clouds rest and Half Dome. I always like looking the other way too - toward Tenaya Lake, the granite domes around Tuolumne meadows and all the way up toward Mt Conness far away.

Heading east a bit more, I saw an open turnout next to Tenaya Lake where Polly Dome comes right down to the road - it's one of those places where you can be hiking up the granite dome just outside your car door! Instead of having to hike 7 miles to get to the granite dome of Half Dome, here you had to go about 2 feet! Polly Dome is one of the finer domes in the Tuolumne dome country - in fact it is part of the mecca for rock climbers from all around California. You can walk most of the way to the top (that's the route that most rock climbers walk down after their climbs), but there are hundreds of climbing routes as well. There were dozens of cars there already with people getting their climbing gear ready.

The clean granite was beautiful, dropping straight down hundreds of feet toward Tenaya Lake. You could see across the lake toward Half Dome and Clouds Rest as well, providing an interesting vantage point toward the Yosemite landmarks. The granite is about at the right angle (but sometimes going right to the limit of comfort where you feel like you might start sliding all the way to the lake!), so you can walk around and explore the sea of granite probably for a couple hours! I just had my sneakers (I hadn't really anticipated doing a hike here - I was just fooling around and exploring, but it ended up being probably 45 minutes!)



After that short diversion I continued my way over toward Saddlebag Lake - it was just before noon now. A few puffy clouds hung over the high peaks - a very picturesque view of the high Sierra. I always enjoy the diversions – many times they are as memorable, if not even more so as the original plan!



Just in a couple hours, I was amazed how many people were coming into the park - there were probably 50 cars lined up at the entrance now! Over at Saddlebag Lake, the 12:00 boat ride across the lake was sold-out, so I got one of the last spots on the 12:30. It was actually nice to relax and enjoy some lunch at the little cafe by the boat ramp.

The boat taxi saves about 2 miles of hiking each way across the lake, so for \$10, it was well worth it. Plus the scenery across the lake was like taking a boat in the Swiss Alps - so beautiful. To the left was the classic granite high Sierra - dominated by North Peak and Mt Conness - at 12,590 feet dominating the skyline. To the right were the metamorphic rocks and more rounded peaks of the Tioga crest in the Hoover Wilderness. Many people go to hang out and go fishing in the 20 lakes basin - in just a couple square miles, there are so many glacier-carved lakes. The lakes are one of my favorite aspects of the Sierra - part of what draws me back year after year.



I was headed west toward the Conness Lakes basin, where a series of granite benches and moraines hide the lakes, each one more enchanting and emerald in color than the one before it. As you head up toward the Conness glacier (one of the largest in the entire Sierra), you get closer to the source of glacial flour. The first of the lakes - Greenstone Lake - is a deep blue-green in color, surrounded by beautiful green, wildflower-studded alpine meadows. A waterfall cascaded down a bunch of granite slabs coming from the next of the lakes.

This was probably by 3rd trip to the Conness Lakes - my first 2 trips were to climb Mt Conness and then North Peak, so we didn't go up to the lakes themselves too much. I had just come back from the Canadian Rockies which are famous for their emerald colored glacial lakes. Even though the Conness lakes weren't nearly as large or as famous as say Lake Louise, they still intrigued me and it was cool knowing we had lakes like those right in our own Yosemite national park.

I wanted to get up close to the waterfall to explore a bit, it was a gentle cascade over a series of ledges – making quite a picturesque alpine scene. I didn't go far from the trail, but unfortunately, I got caught in a bit of brush to cut over back to the trail. It was probably only 30-40 feet or so, and from a distance, the brush didn't look too bad, but when I got close, it turned into an impenetrable wall, requiring some route finding and picking my way through. I was through in just a couple minutes (though it was frustrating at times), but was soon a bit dismayed to find my sunglasses were missing. I had taken them off to go through the brush and stuck them in my pocket. One of the branches must have whisked the sunglasses out of my pocket... they would probably be impossible to find now though... bummer. At least they were only about \$11. I wonder how much I would need them tomorrow on Matterhorn.

Some clouds were starting to roll in so I might not need them now anyways. The few puffy clouds from earlier had grown a bit and were blocking the sun for now. They had said clear weather a couple days ago, but they recently revised the forecast into 20% chance of isolated

thunderstorms. hmmm - looked like that "20%" would be right over the Sierra crest - the sky was blue all around, but the clouds seemed to linger right around the high peaks.



The sun was still shining over the lakes, giving them a sparkling emerald green color. The color, contrasted with the light grey granite and bright white snow patches, gave an otherworldly appearance – the landscape seemed suddenly so remote, and the scenery conveyed a sense of wildness not found by a large percentage of the tourists in the park. I wonder how many of the busloads of tourists a few hours ago would walk for just 1 hour off the main path to see this part of the country.

Heading up the Conness lakes basin, one goes past about 4 lakes, each one a bit higher and brighter green than the one before it. The last one is right near the toe of the Conness glacier still high above. The clouds were rolling in, muting the bright white glacier a bit, but at the same time, softening the shadows to bring out the vivid colors of the lakes even more.

The Conness glacier is one of the most accessible glaciers in CA - just about 3 miles from the trailhead where the boat drops you off. The middle of the glacier was riddled with nearly parallel crevasses - it was fairly rugged in the late summer. Many people climb the glacier earlier in the year to reach the summit of Mt Conness - even then skiing back down. I've seen cars with skis on ski racks in July in Yosemite - seems kind of strange to be carrying skis on a sunny summer CA morning! Today probably wouldn't be the best day though - a gaping bergeschrund would

be in the way, and if the thunderstorm built up, you get up there on the craggy summit just in time to get a great view of the dancing lightning!

I poked around near the edge of the glacier a bit - some of the crevasses went down a ways - you had to be sure to keep your distance! The ice had a blue tinge down in the cracks, even though it was a bit dirty on top from sand and rockfalls. I didn't want to linger around the ice too much - rocks were constantly tumbling down as they were loosened by the melting ice. I looked a little ways over on the glacier (but still away from the rockfalls) and found an intriguing ice cave - which was begging for a peek. A stream flowing under the ice was carving a tunnel through the glacier, leaving interesting patterns of sculpted layered ice. A channel carved by the river meandered along the floor. Icy stalactites glittered from the ceiling and the tunnel formed by the rushing current of the freezing water snaked around the corner to the blackness beyond. I ventured a little ways in, but I had to restrain my curiosity a bit to avoid slipping and seeing more of the cave than originally intended!

A couple other tunnels and small caves had formed along the edge of the glacier - I kept my distance a bit as a few more small rocks clattered down the icy slopes of the glacier above. Further down on the glacier (and away from the rockfalls), I followed a meandering surface stream - the layering of the ancient ice was apparent where the stream had melted its way through many seasons of ice formation.

It was about 3:00 and my boat was supposed to come around 6, so still had some time to poke around. But not wanting to push it, I started making my way back, looping around to see a couple more of the lakes I had bypassed before. One of the small lakes was still ringed by ice on one side - the lake was a bright greenish-grey in color, and even some bits of the small glacier forming that lake were calving right into the lake.



The first couple rumbles of thunder happened just as I was getting back to the main Conness lakes - I was far from any of the peaks, so not too worried. I was just thinking though if it started raining heavily and I had to navigate over slick slabs of granite to get down. I was back on the trail before it really sprinkled, and it never really rained much - the clouds were just passing overhead. By now, I was ready to just be back - I had developed a bit of a headache and the weather was looking a bit more iffy with each passing moment.

The hike back was quicker than I expected (staying on the trail and avoiding the brush helped a bit!), and I was back at the boat dock around 5:30, plenty of time to relax and hang out. A couple families were fishing by the dock - one of the kids brought in 2 fish one right after another! You could even see them jumping in the lake - no wonder why it's a popular place to fish!

There was supposed to be a 5:45 boat (one earlier than the one I was scheduled to be on), but it never showed - everyone else was supposed to be on the 6:15. So it was another 30 minutes hanging out - which would have been nice except my headache was getting a bit worse (I think it got worse from the sitting, and I was ready to get to lower elevation - I'm sure with going from sea level to 11,000 feet probably had something to do with it).

The 6:15 boat showed up and soon we were back at the dock by the little cafe. I was just interested now in getting down to Lee Vining - for some dinner and ice cream and relaxation.

My headache cleared up pretty well, but I just didn't feel hungry - I ended up taking half my dinner to go and saving it for later!

It was a beautiful sunset - the remnants of the thunderstorm clouds were thinning and the sky was turning a deep pink hue. I was soon interrupted by a bunch of fire trucks along 395 on the way north to Bridgeport - a small fire had kicked off probably about an hour ago - probably caused by one of the lightning strikes - the orange flames licked up the desert shrubs and pine trees higher up the slopes, all under a darkening twilight sky. The firefighters were waving for us to just keep moving (don't stop and take pictures - o/w traffic would rapidly get snarled up, and some smoke was blowing around the road). Fortunately the fire was natural (lightning), not too large (the vegetation was pretty sparse), and just far enough from the road for a spectacular view (w/o causing trouble)!

I felt totally better by now - amazing how dropping to lower elevation can help with altitude sickness so quickly. Climbing up to the Conway summit, all of the sudden I had a panoramic view of serene Mono Lake glistening like a mirror reflecting the deep purple and sapphire hues of the sunset. Then a couple minutes later a stunning full moon rose above the hills in the distance, reflected perfectly in the lake - it was one of those moments of being at the right place at the right time!



Bridgeport was just around the corner and I had a reservation in one of the motels in town - the place was a bit rustic and they didn't even have a front desk (when you call to make your

reservation, they give you the combination for the door and you just go in). The town is pretty small and I had no trouble finding the place - I was in by around 8:30. I scarfed down the rest of the dinner saved from before - any bits of altitude sickness inhibiting my hunger had passed, so I was pretty hungry!

I had been debating a bit about Matterhorn tomorrow - with not feeling quite 100% with the headache and a bit of stomach woes earlier, and with the iffy weather, I was thinking of just doing something easier and heading back early. But now after the clouds had thinned, a bright full moon was shining overhead, and my headache gone, I was re-considering the original plan. Plus if I had a good night sleep, that would make a big difference as well.

Sunday

The alarm was buzzing at 5:30 - I had pushed the time back from the originally planned 6:30 to give an extra hour in case the thunderstorms decided to return - Matterhorn peak didn't sound like a happy place to be during a lightning storm. I peeked outside and still saw the dazzling full moon hanging low over the mountains - not a cloud in sight. It looked to be a nice day after all.

Breakfast was some fruit, granola bars and my usual Starbucks coffee drink (the 16 oz one this time), and I was on my way around 6:00. No key to return or check-out procedure to perform, so it was easy. It had been a nice stay - a bit quiet with no TV or distractions. It was probably just as well, since last night I caught up with a bunch of phone calls and was pretty tired after a fairly long day, so probably not much TV would have been watched anyway.



I was a bit nervous about the hike up Matterhorn - I'm glad I had been in the area the previous year with some friends, but I didn't quite know what all to expect beyond where we went last year. I figured I'd just take it one step at a time and be prepared to bail out any time if the weather turned or it got too late or I got too tired. I was encouraged by one of the songs playing on the radio on the way up to the trailhead - it was "Hold me Jesus" by Rich Mullins - it seemed so appropriate. The first verse goes:

*Well, sometimes my life
Just don't make sense at all
When the mountains look so big
And my faith just seems so small*

Matterhorn peak was looking so big and I was wondering how I was going to make it. The chorus is a prayer:

*So hold me Jesus, 'cause I'm shaking like a leaf
You have been King of my glory
Won't You be my Prince of Peace*

That was my prayer as well.

The brilliant orange sunrise was lighting up the craggy peaks just as I reached the lower Twin Lake - the mountains seemed to glow in the warm sun - I could see why John Muir called the Sierra the "Range of Light". The full moon was just setting, seeming to touch the tips of the highest peaks. A few clouds were blowing beyond the peaks - it was one of those perfect moments in the mountains - giving me a renewed interest and vitality for the day.

I was at the trailhead probably around 6:30 - the goal was to reach the summit by 12:30 and be off by 1:00 (normally the thunderstorms would start building after that). The storms probably peaked yesterday around 3:00, so there should be time.

The trail heads up some desert switchbacks starting from the upper Twin Lake - I was surprised to see just 5 minutes into the hike about 3 deer just grazing along the trail. You could get within 10 feet of them and the docile creatures would just go about their business. It was very a peaceful and tranquil setting, just watching them for a bit. It actually took them several minutes to move on - they must have been protected from hunting for a long time.

The trail goes back and forth up through a nice forest paralleling Horse Creek - the scenery changes from desert shrubs to tall ponderosa pines - some were at least 10-12 feet across - not quite 25 feet as the sequoia yesterday, but quite majestic indeed. The creek tumbles down a set of picturesque cascades toward one of the meadows - the waterfall looked like a great place to relax on the way back.

The forest started to thin, giving way to scree fields and brush - I had worried a little about the brush, having gotten caught in it last year (but it was early season last time, so the path probably hadn't been cleared very well yet). This time though, the path was pretty good and I was soon through the tangle of brush. The worst part though was the enormous boulders you had to hop on the other side - some of the granite boulders were 6-8 feet across, requiring some scrambling on each one.

The trail seemed to abruptly end at a long scree field - I remember last year the scree being covered by snow, so you could just kick steps in the snow and get up fairly quickly. At least the rocks weren't too loose - the snow had consolidated the stones enough to make the slog a bit easier. A nice rocky meadow lay at the top of the scree field with open views of many of the high ranges of peaks all around - Matterhorn itself was obscured now, but Horse Creek peak (which looks like another Matterhorn from the right angle) and some of the peaks to the west were scraping the sky all around.

I realized this was the meadow we stopped at last year - I even found the same large boulder and trees we stopped at to have lunch (but it was a bit different not being covered in snow now). I stopped for a moment to reminisce of good memories from last year, but then got back on the trail - there were still many miles to be covered.



The sun was just coming over the high ridges to the east - I was hoping my lack of sunglasses wouldn't be a problem. At least the visor on the hat blocked most of the direct sun. It felt good to take off the fleece and convert to shorts. Looking up the canyon were a series of moraine after moraine of boulders and scree - the hike description on Summitpost said nothing harder than class 2, so nothing technical or dangerous - just tedious at the worst. I didn't mind it too much - the scenery got better with each step higher.

I was soon at Horse Creek pass - the trail actually went around the pass itself since it was chocked with large snow patches and a couple small glaciers. I was surprised to see a use trail all the way so far - I guess Matterhorn is pretty popular. It does lie at the pinnacle of the Sawtooth range and in the center of some classic high Sierra granite. Looking over the pass, I was relieved to see clear skies as far as you could see - I had visions of a wall of clouds ready to blow over (this happened about 2 years ago, when it was clear until I got to a ridgeline, and a wall of thunderstorms was lying in wait just on the other side). But not this time - good. There were those small clouds in the morning, but they just added to the nice scenery and never grew or threatened.



One of the songs from our barbershop chorus was going through my head - "Lucky Day" - one of the lines goes like:

To think it was the thirteenth just last Friday

...

I'd say that blue skies

They're going to chase the grey

And love is here to stay

This is just some lucky day.

It felt like the thirteenth just last night - with not feeling 100%, the dark clouds, and fears of the unknown aspects of the hike. But now, the blue skies had chased the grey away, and today was going to be the lucky day!

Just over the pass, it was pretty clear how to go - the use trail wined its way up past the sandy scree fields up toward the summit. A beautiful snow-choked tarn lay in the middle of the meadow just behind me - I didn't notice it earlier (the map indicated a small lake, but it didn't really look that interesting), but now from a little higher up, it looked like a worthwhile side-trip on the way back. The route to the summit looked easily passable for most of the way, but near the top, the blocky summit looked much more difficult. The hike description on Summitpost said to

traverse to the left and you'll find easier rock to the summit. And the whole hike was supposed to be rated class 2. But still it looked a lot harder than that.



I sensed, however in the whole experience that the hike was like being on a journey and all I had to do was to keep walking. One foot in front of the other. Sometimes during the journey of life, God gives us just what we need to know for one day at a time, but we can look back and realize what great things were accomplished through us. The destination wasn't just reaching the peak itself, but the journey itself was the destination. I felt like each step was a bit of worship – this is from the popular Rich Mullins song:

*I will seek You in the morning
And I will learn to walk in Your ways
And Step by step You'll lead me
And I will follow You all of my days*

*Oh God, You are my God
And I will ever praise You*

Up ahead looked like a "window" where you could peer over the edge and look back down the Horse Creek canyon. The ground dropped quite precipitously down an icy slope - didn't want to

get too close or else it could be a long one-way slide to the glacier far below. Turned out this was the top of the East couloir - one of the popular climbing routes up the mountain. Looked quite interesting and adventurous up the 45 degree icy slope (but would probably have to do it earlier in the season before the snow melted out too much).

The use trail continued closer to the summit and the views kept opening up further to the south. The meadow which was just below me now seemed so far away. But the summit still seemed far above me - the whole sense of scale seems to get distorted while being in the mountains. It was easy to lose the trail but I figured it was probably important to stay on it - especially when the going got more interesting.

Amazingly just near the summit was a bird - a Clark's nutcracker - its squawk being quite obnoxious and recognizable. A little ways further were some small clumps of bright yellow flowers - amazing how anything could grow in such a harsh environment, but life does go on - a butterfly was even pollinating the flowers during the short summer season.

Soon afterward, I found myself on the ridge just to the left of the main peak - and suddenly the rest of the journey seemed possible - one just had to follow a rocky "sidewalk" to the summit! No more gravely scree to slide on - I bounded my way the last couple hundred yards to the top. In one of the cracks between the rocks on the summit was the expected green metal ammo can - the summit register! I had made it - hallelujah!



It was one of the most exhilarating experiences to know you've come so far and made it - the whole trip was about 5.5 miles and 5280 feet (one mile) vertical elevation gain - shorter in distance than Half Dome, but about the same elevation gain and same time (6 hours). I started at 6:30, and now it was 12:30. Whew! I wanted to make it before 1:00 before the weather would threaten, but I was relieved to see just a few small puffy clouds overhead. I knew I didn't have to rush too much on the way down (I figured it'd be 4-5 hours down, assuming the weather didn't close in), so I could relax and soak in the view a bit.

The view stretched as far as you could see - looking down Spiller canyon to the south you could see Mt Lyell and the countless peaks of eastern Yosemite along the horizon. Whorl Mountain dominated the crest between Spiller canyon and Matterhorn canyon to the right. Both these canyons were beautiful wide U-shaped glacial canyons full of green meadows and bordered by jagged peaks. Further to the right was another classic glacial U-shaped canyon - Slide canyon with the famous Slide Mountain and an enormous rockslide giving it its name. Then behind me

was the way I had reached the peak - up Horse Creek canyon - you could see down the whole canyon, and even back to Twin Lakes far below where I had started the day watching the sunrise. Even Bridgeport reservoir and the hot springs were visible far in the distance - I was thinking about going for a soak later on if it wasn't too late.

It was a glorious mountaintop experience - I just had to be thankful that God was faithful to bring me up step by step to the top. I felt great - the acclimatization from yesterday definitely helped. Reading through the register was interesting - seeing how many people (or few) made it to the top. There were several notebooks with entries dating back several years. Rob Burd had been to the peak a while back (and had climbed Whorl Mountain the same day - not sure how he does it...). A Boy Scout group of 14-year-olds had climbed the peak as part of a 50 mile 7-day backpacking trip for one of their merit badges. What an amazing area of wilderness to go for that! I wish I stayed in the scouts longer!

The words from Psalm 8 came to mind - a couple verses go like :

*When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,*

*what is man that you are mindful of him,
the son of man that you care for him?*

God had been taking care of me during the whole time to give me this wonderful experience to be able to worship. I had to sit and meditate for a bit - I felt like God's revelation of His wonders should naturally bring us into a place of worship - it seemed sad how so many people get so buried in their own affairs that they don't think to come to such places (which are pretty much freely available to anyone who is so inclined to come). The trip had seemed poetic to me - I felt like it was a good introduction to the Psalms which we were going to be studying at PBC (and even writing our own psalms too! This trip would definitely be an inspiration for that.)

I was glad that most of the smoke from the CA wildfires from the last couple months had cleared out - this was a pretty bad year for fires with a couple years of drought going already and the forests and vegetation were quite dry. And the infestation of bark beetles wasn't helping either. The visibility in the mountains had been reduced to just a couple miles at times by the eye-stinging smoke. But today, it was gloriously clear - you could easily see 100 miles away!

As I sipped my water and got ready for my hike back down, I realized I had finished all 3 liters of my water just to get up to the top. I didn't have a filter and I had finished my iodine tablets from before - hmmm, should have brought more. At least I brought 3 full liter bottles instead of 3 half-liter bottles like I did on a trip last year! Looking back toward Spiller canyon, I had thought about visiting that snow-choked tarn - it was a beautiful spot and cool place to explore a bit, but now I had a good reason to go - I could fill my bottles in the clear and very pure water just below the snow.

Surfing down the sandy scree got me down toward the meadow in what seemed just a few minutes - it had taken probably an hour to get up! I could stand on a flat rock and almost literally "surf" down the sand (until it bogged down) – I just had to be careful not to trip! The bright green meadow was slowly getting closer - patches of bright yellow flowers were growing in the moist and lush grass and moss. Soon afterward the ground started leveling out and I was walking across an open grassy field full of scattered stones. It looked like a "stubblefield canyon" (there is actually a Stubblefield canyon a few more canyons over in the backcountry) - it was easy walking, but you had to be careful to not trip on the "stubbles" littering the meadow.



At last I reached the snow-choked lake - it was actually a bit bigger than I had thought (it was further as well!). One of the most beautiful spots in the Sierras I had ever been - it seemed like a magical place out of a fairy tale, so remote and distant from civilization. The lake was ringed on one side by a 12-foot wall of snow and the other end looked like it stretched to the horizon (like one of those "infinity pools" found at high-class resorts). This "infinity pool" seemed to stretch to the base of the jagged slopes of Whorl Mountain and the peaks beyond.

The water was so pure - the bottom was clearly visible in the sparkling water. After filling 2 more liters of water (seemed like the chance of getting sick from giardia or something must have been as close to zero as I could imagine), so I figured it had to be safe. I probably easily spent a half hour just soaking in the moment, enjoying some more lunch and taking more pictures and

videos. I realized I was probably chewing through memory about as fast as I ever had on this trip - it felt like everything was perfect!

Suddenly one of our other barbershop songs came to mind – this is from "Who will buy?":

Who will buy this wonderful morning?

Such a sky you never did see

Who will tie it up with a ribbon

And put it in a box for me

So I can see it at my leisure

Whenever things go wrong

...

Who will buy this wonderful feeling

I'm so high I swear I could fly ...

I was trying to put the whole day into a box as much as I could - I thought 2 GB would be plenty, but with so many pictures (and videos), it was running out very quickly! But if it ran out, I'd deal with that later - I didn't want to miss anything here!



And here is a panoramic view looking the other way. I wish I could have camped here - will have to next time! I felt there was a postcard view every step along the trail pretty much all the way to the trailhead – I'm glad I brought a large enough memory card for my camera!



Heading back over the Horse Creek pass from the lake, I had to cross several large snowfields that I didn't have to do before) - I was now regretting a bit losing my sunglasses the day before - I had to squint a bit crossing the blinding snow. Sometimes I would be taking pictures blindly, not really able to see that I was getting - just pointing the camera in the general direction and hitting the shutter (memory is cheap and batteries could be recharged, so no worries).

I was soon stopped by one of the small glaciers choking the pass - I had to pick my way carefully through to avoid an unintentional glissade to the rocks below! The moraine wasn't much easier though - being freshly deposited, the rocks were still very loose, and so I tried to avoid it when I could. At last, the snow leveled out and near the bottom was an interesting winding ice cave. Water was draining through the ice, forming sinuous caves through the layers of ice. The ice was too slippery to go too far in the cave, but the winding passages begged further exploration. Alas without crampons and a rope, that would have to wait for another day.



It occurred to me that this pass was also significant geologically - it was along the contact between the lighter granite rock that Yosemite is famous for, and the darker metamorphic rocks to the east. You could see where blobs of granite intruded between layers of schist forming interesting patterns. All kinds of minerals were deposited - some rocks were coated in bright green crystals. In fact just about every rock along the scree field had some sort of interesting pattern - some were green, some yellow, some brown, some white, some black and white banded like a zebra, and some with large crystals (if only the rocks were a bit smaller, it'd be fun to take some home!). The cliffs around were littered with long dikes of granite that had intruded, sometimes forming spider-web patterns.

Back on the trail, I started making my way down, mostly following the same route that I headed up what seemed like many hours ago. I was able to find a few good snow patches to glissade – sliding down the snow sure beat the walking (and these patches didn't have treacherous rocks at the bottom!)

The clouds ahead were getting thicker and I could even start seeing shafts of rain coming down over the desert. It was still mostly clear skies with just a few clouds around me and over Matterhorn. The pleasant smell of the rain over the desert was wafting up the canyon - when the moisture hits the sage bushes, the aromas fill the air. I was actually wondering if it might be storming over the Sonora pass area – I might end up driving through some of it later.



Heading back down countless scree fields and boulders seemed to take forever - at least I found one trail that I missed on the way up. There were actually several use trails parallel to each other, some easier than others. And of course, going down, it's much easier to spot the trail below you than above you when you're under it!

The scree gave way to the brushy meadows by the creek - I made sure to have found the trail before going through the brush (otherwise the wall of bushes would be nearly impenetrable!). And soon after the brush was the wilderness sign once again. They put the sign right where the trail got "interesting" if you went further in. From the wilderness sign back to the trailhead was an easy walk in the park (though a bit tiring, since I was ready for ice cream at the shop below and the trail seemed to go longer than expected!) I guess going up, I had more anticipation which kept me moving and not thinking about the distance so much.

Going back down the last few switchbacks, checking to see if the deer from this morning were still there, and finally seeing the harbor at Upper Twin Lake gave me the final bit of energy I needed to keep going. It had been beautiful pretty much all day, but as soon as I reached the bridge going into the campground, the first few raindrops started coming down. Actually, it was a nice relief from the hot sun and dusty trail most of the day. I stopped to splash in the creek for a bit - the cool water was very refreshing! I made it back to the village right after 6:00 - I figured I'd get my ice cream and relax a bit before heading back. But the store with the ice cream had just closed at 6:00 - bummer.



Instead, I found something even better - it was nice to be inside now that it was raining a bit and at the village they had a charming little country restaurant. I had planned to eat on the road (McDonalds or something of that sort), but a hearty Italian pasta dinner hit the spot – and of course was way better than McDonalds! The country boys were boisterously huddled around the TV, wondering if Michael Phelps was going to break the Olympic swimming gold medal count record (he already had 3 gold medals and 3 world records this year). He indeed finished another race and beat the other guy by 0.01 seconds in the butterfly race (was like a miracle!). The other guys that weren't around the TV were swapping their fish stories – “I got one THIS BIG today at the lake!” It was fine entertainment for me as the lasagna, chicken parmigiana and bread made a nice end of the day. And even better, dessert was included - they gave me a nice bowl of rainbow sherbet (close enough to ice cream and more healthy anyway). And just as I was finishing the bowl of sherbet, I looked out the window to see a rainbow over the lake!

Well, all good things had to come to an end, and it was time to start heading back - it was about 7:30 now, and I figured I'd be back in Bridgeport around 8 and home by midnight. I couldn't wait to be back in my warm bed at home!

A wave of emotion came over me as I started heading back to the valley - it had been one of those "epic" days in the mountains - as one of my favorite Third Day songs was playing - "These Thousand Hills". It starts off:

*These thousand hills roll ever on
In footprints of a Mighty God
They bring me to my knees in praise
Amazing love, amazing grace*

I had to stop and soak it in for a bit - as tears were coming down. It would be a day to remember - and I felt God had given me an amazing experience of worship this day.

The waning thunderstorm clouds from the afternoon were lit in a brilliant orange as I headed down the last of the ancient glacial moraines going back into Bridgeport. Large herds of cattle were going about their business, peacefully grazing with the backdrop of the sunset and mountains.

Back in Bridgeport, I decided to skip the hot springs - I'd have to go back another time... I saw the turnoffs to Travertine, Buckeye, and the steaming water flowing from the abandoned Fales hot springs resort in the waning twilight. My camera was almost completely full - my 2 GB had been barely enough! It would actually take me several tries later to get the pictures downloaded because of the volume of data! But that kind of trouble seemed tolerable - as long as the pictures were all there! I felt the most valuable aspects of the whole trip were the experiences and perspectives that would last probably for a lifetime! I've come to realize that my mind seems to store episodic memories very efficiently - so now every time I hear about things related to this trip or look at a map, this whole flood of memories can fill my mind.

Heading north on 395, I cut over to highway 108 on the journey back home, and I could see in the distance a large plume - it was too dark to be clouds (and besides the clouds were behind me now) - it looked like smoke from a fire. I had seen a fire last night also - could this be 2 in a row? The smoke plume looked a bit menacing, but I figured after so many fires this year, the firefighters must have been used to it by now. I'd have to check the Cal Fire website the next morning.

The road winded around and the smoke plume was out of sight (and out of mind) for a while. I assumed I was past it and occasionally glanced in the rear-view mirror to make sure I was indeed past it. But around the next corner, there it was - still right in front of me and looming even bigger than ever! hmmm - must have been quite a fire ... suddenly I realized I'd get a better look than I really cared for. Then there were some blinking lights far in the distance - conveniently right next to the road - the smoke definitely piqued my curiosity and I could ask what was going on. Well I got the answer and didn't really like it - one of the thunderstorms did indeed pass over the Sonora pass area (I had guessed that a few hours ago and that guess was amazingly accurate...) - touching off a wildfire. The firefighters needed the road for access to the flames, and so the highway was closed... bummer.



The officer said the next pass north was open, so I headed back on 395 and over toward the Monitor pass on 89. From there you could go over 4 (Ebbetts and Pacific Grade summit) or 88 (Carson pass) - the officer recommended the latter, but the map indicated the former would have been a bit shorter. I think the slowness and windiness of 4 probably made up for the longer distance on 88. I hadn't been on 4 in a while so I decided to try my luck. It felt like a bit of a journey winding through the dark and seemingly uncertain path through the forest. I had actually been playing a CD of a testimony about a Russian Christian who had been persecuted and imprisoned repeatedly by the Soviets for many years – sparing none of the horrific details. Yet God had been faithful in his life and brought him through an amazing journey. It gave me a fresh bit of perspective of my journey in the mountains, and now my journey home. One of the lakes near the Pacific Grade summit was reflecting the full moon as a mirror – I pulled over and enjoyed the quiet and serene view for probably 20 minutes. I realized how many things we can so easily take for granted, especially after hearing that guy's testimony of so many years in numerous prisons - I wanted to enjoy every moment I was given.

It was probably around 11:00 when I got into Angels Camp - a couple chicken nuggets from the McDonalds helped keep me over a bit longer. A mostly uneventful last couple hours back and I was finally home by about 1:30 am - the detour had ended up being about an hour and a half. Seemingly forever, but comparing to a 1.5 hour flight delay (which seems pretty normal these days) –it was all a matter of perspective...

The trip was definitely one of those experiences that would stick for a while - it would take months for it all to digest - I can't wait to go back next year!

