

Telescope Peak

November 6-9, 2015



This trip would be my 3rd attempt to summit the highest peak in the Panamint Range in Death Valley. My first trip was way back in 2003 with some friends where we toured the highlights of the park - the Eureka sand dunes, the Racetrack, Scotty's castle and a few others. We also made a trip to the Panamint Mountains that trip and talked about hiking Telescope Peak. In good weather, it is an easy class-1 trail to the summit, but when we visited in 2003, Telescope was heavily snow-clad, and all the trees above around 10,000 feet were glazed with fresh snow as well - we settled for the lower Wildrose Peak on that trip. The hike was fabulous, and the Mexican guitar music we had listened to on our way up still left an impression that I think of Death Valley whenever I hear Nardo John or a similar style of music.

I was ready to go back 3 years ago, but forecasted 60 mph winds and white-out snow conditions made us stay home and try again another year. It would actually take 3 years after all - I was still getting adjusted to married life and waiting for the right opportunity. I was slowly getting re-acquainted with the Sierra Club after things have been finally starting to settle at home after a busy time of travel and home improvement. Jeff from the Sierra club hosted a party at his house (which is less than 1/2 mile from ours as the crow flies - though maybe 2 miles by car since crows fly straighter than cars), and shortly afterward he announced he was planning a redo of Telescope Peak.

Telescope Peak is on at least half a dozen "peak-climbing" lists - the Desert Peaks Section, the Western States Climbers, the P5K list (peaks with 5,000 feet of prominence), and several others. The peak, having over a mile of prominence (you would have to drop a mile in elevation before you could climb any other peak that is higher) promised a wonderful view, stretching east to the lowest point in the contiguous US - Badwater at 282 feet below sea level, and west to the highest point in the contiguous US - Mt. Whitney at 14,505 feet above sea level.

He had been there many times, and he had often taken an epic option of a "trail" (if you could call it a trail), starting at Shorty's Well at 250 feet below sea level (next to Badwater), hiking cross-country up a steep ridge for many miles, climbing to near 10,000 feet before joining the official trail to the summit at over 11,000 feet. I know some people are ultra-marathon hikers or cyclists, performing masochistic feats such as running from Badwater to Mt Whitney on a summer day where the pavement would be so hot it would threaten to melt your shoe soles

along the way. Jeff's plan involved 2 routes, the "masochistic" route and the "sane" route, taken by 2 groups and using a car-shuttle. The masochistic folks would start at 3:00 in the morning from Shorty's Well, reaching the summit by around noon. Meanwhile the sane folks would start around 8 in the morning to also reach the summit by noon. Then both groups would hike back down the "sane" trail, and we would then ferry the "masochistic" folks back to their cars at Shorty's Well. I signed up for the trip on the condition that I would be able to take the "sane" trail.

A few weeks before our trip, I happened to click on the Death Valley site and found out to my dismay that actually they just had the "storm of the century" in Death Valley, closing much of the park and access to most of the backcountry. I was hoping that the 3rd time would be the charm, but it looked like the whole trip might be yet again spoiled. I knew it was a long drive, and things were still busy at home, so I was actually kind of relieved. I had read about a similar spoiled trip to the desert years ago with "900 mi and no peaks" and didn't want to repeat that. The storm had actually happened the same weekend I was away in Mesa, AZ for a district barbershop convention, and supposedly some folks who decided to drive to Mesa narrowly missed some massive mudslides on highway 58, shuttering the Tehachapi pass for nearly a week! I had only minor turbulence on my flight since I left late. Any earlier flight had to do a go-around at the PHX airport due to high winds, dust storms, and heavy rain. They reported the flight was "rocking and rolling" quite a bit - I hate turbulence, feeling so out of control, so I was thankful to arrive in one piece, only missing a short pep-rally meeting by arriving late!

That storm had brought 5-foot mudslides, burying cars on highway 58 (people just abandoned them in the mud). Scotty's Castle in Death Valley was heavily damaged and may take months or even a year to fully repair. A torrent of muddy water flowed over the roads around Badwater as the historic Amargosa River came rushing back to life. Badwater was a lake that would have been best explored by paddling instead of driving or hiking. A video showed the endangered pupfish in Hell's Hole being swamped with muddy turbulent water - I hope they survived okay!

Luckily for us, the storm happened long enough ago that many of the main roads in the park were back open again, including the main road to Wildrose and Mahogany Flat. Unfortunately the short-cut road up Wildrose Canyon from the Panamint Valley was still closed after washouts from multiple storms a couple years ago. The Emigrant Canyon road would be a 45-mile detour each way, but at least our main objective for the weekend would still be reachable. Unfortunately for the "masochistic" group, the West Side road from Shorty's Well was still closed due to multiple wash-outs. I was actually a bit relieved with that news, knowing I couldn't be pressured into the crazy 25 mile, 11,000 foot gain option, and that our group could remain together the whole weekend - we wouldn't have to split up and shuttle cars. Some people still held out hope that the road would open at the last minute, but seeing recent pictures of the condition of the road, including 5-foot deep pits in the wash-outs, didn't expect much to change anytime soon.

The group had originally started around 15 people signed up, going up to maybe 20, then dropping to 8 in the end - I'm sure some people were disappointed at the loss of the "masochistic" option, as if that trail was a sort of bucket-list item. For me, I didn't care about which trail - I just wanted to say I've been at the highest point!

We had 8 people –
Jeff our leader
Sean and his friend Asaka
Robert
Brad and Steve
Sarbi
and me.

November 6

Work had been going a bit slow the last couple weeks since my previous project had mostly wrapped up, so it was a good time to finally get away for a long weekend trip. I was able to get out by 1:30 to beat the traffic and meet up with Jeff to get underway. I decided to swing by home (only 1/2 mile away from his place) to pick up my crampons after all - I had been hemming and hawing about them all morning since I would hate to get stymied by icy snow near the summit, after making such a long trip. I had been blocked by icy conditions before on a trail that looked rather benign and didn't want to repeat such a mis-adventure here.

Heading down the 101, we soon turned off onto 152 past the San Luis reservoir on the way to Los Baños. Every trip through there during the last couple years, I have always dreaded that section, since I knew it would reveal how severe the ongoing drought had become. Living in the bay area, and working in Los Gatos, where the drought isn't quite so visible, we could live in relatively blissful ignorance. But seeing one of our major reservoirs in such a sorry state brought the drought back into clear focus. The website on water.ca.gov showed San Luis at a near historical low of around 18%, which would be down over 150 feet. Coming over Dinosaur Point on the winding highway 152, it seemed an eternity before we could see out far enough to tell how low the water level had actually fallen.



Low water in the San Luis reservoir

Stopping at the Romero visitor's center, we decided to have a look around and talk with the ranger a little. The reservoir is actually not connected with any river system - it is actually one of only a few in the world that way. Water flows into the fore-bay at the base of the dam before getting pumped up to the main reservoir. The water was probably the lowest I've ever seen. Even the tops of the intake valves near the base of the dam were visible. Seeing that we had been making good time already on our trip, we decided to hike down and have a look. Changing into sneakers and snacking on some leftover Halloween candy from last week (which Jeff had a

full bag), we made an excursion down a use trail through many bathtub-like rings, unsuccessfully dodging the numerous hitchhiker plants along the way, before entering an other-worldly scene of bare rock scoured out by being underwater for decades.

A couple fishermen were out at the farthest point of a peninsula, and right as we got there, we heard one of their lines whizzing. One guy quickly grabbed his reel in time to pull in a 14-inch trout - nice! I imagined the fish being concentrated as the water level steadily lowered, making for an easy catch.

Jeff had been talking about watching the Martian on the drive down - maybe even seeing it in Tehachapi with his cousin and family if there was time! The landscape all around looked like Mars (and since they just found liquid water, the lake could be real too), so I felt like Matt Damon roaming in an alien landscape. Nisha and I had just seen it a few days earlier. In fact on my 2004 Death Valley trip where a bunch of friends took 4WDs from Eureka valley to Saline Valley and the Racetrack, it was right after the Spirit and Opportunity rovers had landed, so Mars was on our minds the last time too!

Back on the endless I-5, we passed acre after acre of fields, many left fallow after years of drought. Entire orchards of dead almond and nut trees were left dead, waiting to be cut down. Fields of barren desert, which used to be vegetables, corn or rice paddies were left fallow, turning into dusty desert. Signs were pleading for Congress to stop another dust bowl, but then were later modified, pleading for us to stop the Congress-created Dust Bowl. Climate change could create a massive upheaval around CA if conditions became anything like those in the 1930's in Oklahoma, and we've seen the terrible conditions and war in Syria, fueled by many years of drought.

We were thankful for an invitation to stay with Jeff's cousin Ann and husband Bill and their family in Tehachapi, a good stopping point on the way to the desert. Dinner at a hole-in-the-wall Mexican place in Bakersfield was satisfying with carnitas tostadas and Mexican coke (I can never drink the American variety anymore, being full of high fructose corn syrup and who knows what else). We got to their house around 8:00. Located in a gated neighborhood, their street required a special permit and I felt even more privileged to have an invitation.

An energetic game of Scrabble followed by interesting tales of rocket science, design of experimental aircraft frames and wings, and any chance we might actually land a man on Mars or even the moon in the next 20 years gave us some interesting entertainment. It always amazes me how we managed to land on the moon during the 1960's - it made me want to watch Apollo 13 again. I had been playing the Cirque du Soleil "Kurios" soundtrack on the way down, and the sounds of the optimistic Victorian futurism still rang in my head while I imagined maybe we could be in another golden age of exploration and design as private options for space travel are becoming viable. But instead of designing machines using brass and leather and steam, we are using carbon-fiber, hydrogen fuel-cells and 3-D printing technology. One of the display cabinets in the house had an array of antiques including a bunch of scientific instruments and model cars from the 1950's with cutting-edge design for their time period. One item in the cabinet seemed out of place - a Scaled Composites mug with a design of a new space plane. Perhaps in 50 years, carbon-fiber will be as retro and cool as brass and steam are now - time will tell. So the mug may have a rightful place after all.

The sleeping arrangements ended up being perfect - since 2 of the kids of the household are now in college, there were 2 bedrooms open for me and Jeff. I was originally willing to camp or crash on the floor or get a cheap motel somewhere, but having a real bed was heavenly!

November 7

Breakfast of waffles and coffee and fruit gave us a good start to the morning. We weren't scheduled to meet the rest of the group until 3:00 at Stovepipe Wells, so we could take our time. We came up with some ideas of some side trips on our way into Death Valley - it was a long drive and we might as well take advantage of what else there was to see nearby. We could say hi to old Rocky in Ballarat if he was still there, we could see if we could get to the Trona Pinnacles, or maybe do a short hike, like Mosaic Canyon, or if we were so adventurous, maybe Wildrose Peak.

I had originally planned to ride down with Sean and/or Robert from the Bay Area, and they were planning on doing Wildrose Peak (what they thought was about 4-5 mi R/T), and meeting us directly at camp at Mahogany Flat. But some last minute changes and their plans of arriving very late on Sunday (I didn't want to repeat a 2 am arrival like on a previous trip), I didn't mind missing the hike to Wildrose Peak, and neither did Jeff - we had both been there before. But I was excited about seeing the ghost town and the pinnacles. And since we weren't in all that much of a hurry, we could see a little around the ranch while hearing more of Bill's adventures of space travel, restoring old cars, and semi-retirement life out in the country.

Bill had several old cars dating back to the 1950's - a beautiful British Triumph and a couple other classics still in progress. Drawers and shelves of miscellaneous parts filled his garage - though things looked rather scattered and abandoned, they must have been neatly organized in his mind - he had just taken the Triumph out in the last couple days and it was running beautifully. I appreciated his work - my dad got a 1952 Ford F-100 restored last year, and it's a beauty, even winning an award at a recent car show back in PA. I'm sure Bill's machining expertise for his work has plenty of usefulness in his garage as he machined custom parts for his sports cars. A DIY mechanical geek at his finest hour! I wondered if he had grown up 50 years earlier during the Victorian era what would have spurred his imagination. Cars nowadays are so sophisticated and the workings have been abstracted and computerized that they don't seem as real anymore - maybe that's why many of us are drawn to the past.

We wanted to stay and hang out more - we could have easily spent all day, wandering around his shop and his barn with his ponies and listening to many tales, but we wanted to get rolling to the desert as well. We said our good-byes, and were soon back on highway 58 over Tehachapi. Snow from the recent storm reached down near 6,000 feet, a slightly ominous sign. I was glad we went back for our crampons / ice axes before we left! Evidence of the mudslides was everywhere near the pass - mud was still caked high on the median barriers, and sections of various off-ramps were still brown with recently cleared mud. One exit was still closed.

The Joshua trees started right around the giant wind farm at the Tehachapi pass - the blades were turning furiously in one of the biggest wind farms in the US. We still had several hours to Death Valley, but were glad to have a little extra time for exploration along the way. The ghost town of Randsburg was nearby - some friends and I had swung through on the way back from a hot-springs camping trip at Deep Creek. I had heard of the Trona pinnacles years ago on a road trip back from Las Vegas many years ago, and the image portrayed was a God-forsaken

landscape of ancient ruins of some kind of volcanic rock formations out in the middle of the desert. I was surprised to find out we were going to be passing within 5 miles of the pinnacles, and that in good conditions there was even a road, passable with decent 2WD. Knowing of the recent extensive wash-outs in Death Valley, I didn't imagine that road to be any shape, but I figured it was still worth a shot. At least we should be able to get to a point with a distant view.

Nearby Panamint City was also once reachable by a dirt road, being one of the more impressive ghost towns / mining areas west of Death Valley. It had a short but intense history back in the early 1870's - a classic "boom and bust". Shortly after the bust, the deal was sealed, as much of the town had gotten washed away in a historic flash flood of 1876. Unfortunately, that dirt road to reach Panamint City had also been washed out - Bill said it was now something like a 9 mile hike each direction to the ruins of the ghost town - not quite a feasible side trip anymore. Apparently sometime in the mid-1980's a "terrific series of cloudbursts completely washed the canyon out to bedrock" - whew! I thought the floods last month were bad in Death Valley, but that must have been some serious rain! Moisture coming off the Pacific slamming into the 11,000 foot Panamint range (almost directly under Telescope Peak!) got concentrated as it funneled up the Surprise Canyon and surprised a lot of people! Abandoned vehicles still litter the ghost town, having made a 1-way trip (since the road was gone!).

The turn-out came up soon before the one-horse town of Trona, a gravel road extending 5 miles along the flat dry lake bed of Searles Lake. The road was in great shape - we were only slowed down by following a caravan of vehicles plodding their way through. A pair of train tracks followed the dry lake bed, holding some long-abandoned rusty train cars. The lake bed used to hold a lake similar to Mono Lake years ago during the ice ages, and the pinnacles are actually remnants of ancient tufa towers. In fact, the minerals in the lake bed are so abundant that extensive mining operations have been in place for decades. We would have to go back for some rock-hounding when we had more time.



Trona pinnacles

We parked at the northern section of pinnacles to have a short look around. My car was coated in a good 1/8 inch of dust by the time we finished the 5-6 miles of unpaved road - it looked like we had just returned from Burning Man. We got out to walk around a bit and were soon greeted by the group in that caravan of vehicles - it was a Boy Scout group! The kids were thrilled about their adventure - in this age of video games and virtual reality, I'm glad they were getting out for some "real" reality. They seemed to have spent a bit too much time at their

video games however and maybe this trip was not a moment too soon - almost all the kids were overweight, and even their scout leader could stand to drop a good 80 pounds.

The scene was surreal, appearing from another planet - just like the previous day at the San Luis reservoir. I wondered if hippies still lived out there, left over from the 1960's, long abandoned as society marched on. Hundreds of towers, some reaching probably 100 feet high littered the horizon like a row of crocodile's teeth biting the deep blue sky. The layered tufa was riddled with pockets and small caves from air bubbles as they formed thousands of years ago. They looked like a perfect jungle gym to start climbing around on, but the rock was so crumbly you probably wouldn't even be able to secure your first hand-hold!

We still had many miles to cover so we were on our way soon. The pavement felt as smooth as glass once we got off the gravel and started heading north through the one-horse town of Trona. Stopping at the Family Dollar in hopes for a sandwich or some real food for lunch, we struck out, realizing any culinary options involved loads of high fructose corn syrup and a cocktail of preservatives and artificial sweeteners. A few stores down the road, we came upon the TIS General Store, complete with wooden old-western style storefront. The lady at the counter immediately recognized we weren't from around there - "so where are y'all from?" - we said San Jose and heading to Death Valley - probably a typical response. We picked up some fresh oranges and apples and listened to a couple of her laments that many people were leaving the small town - the high school apparently only had 13 students this last year, down from around 20 last year and 30 in years past. It was on the way of becoming a ghost town.

Valley Wells was along the way. In 1849, several groups of emigrants settled there because they could obtain water from nearby Searles Lake. In such an inhospitable place near Death Valley, the most basic resources such as water were not something to be taken for granted. Driving at 60 mph in our air conditioned car on a smooth paved road, listening to music, drinking Vitamin Water and eating potato chips in our car, we could have been easily oblivious to this fact, had it not been for a lonely historical marker along the side of the road. The basic needs of survival have been abstracted so deeply in our society.

A few miles north, we crossed the pass between the Searles valley and the Panamint valley - giving us a stunning view of a broad dry lake bed and the Panamint Mountains in the background. A passing cop checked on us to make sure we were OK at the pass since we were pulled over - we were fine, just enjoying the view! Ballarat was visible in the distance, a lone road crossing the dry lake bed leading to a small town on the other side of the lake bed indicated its location.

Turning off the main road and heading 3 miles east, crossing a very dusty dry lake bed we were greeted with an old sign welcoming us to Ballarat. The heavy rain and floods from a few weeks ago seemed all but forgotten here - the lake bed was bone-dry and easily crossed. Reaching the main "town square", we came upon a series of arrows, pointing us toward Surprise Canyon (and Panamint City), Pleasant Canyon, and Happy Canyon - I imagined the happiness of a bunch of dirty miners when they came across treasure in those places... The sign reassured us we would find pavement again in 12 miles if we kept going. An abandoned rail car sitting on some old tracks reminded us of the town's former glory in the mining days around the turn of the century. The Ratcliff mine gave so much wealth that the town had 7 saloons, 3 hotels and even a Wells Fargo station.

We were greeted by the town's only permanent occupant - Rocky Novak, hanging out on one of the old chairs in the porch of the main meeting center of town - the Ballarat Trading Post. Sipping a Bud Light (since they had run out of Coors or anything better), he started telling some tales about the Ballarat Bandit, a drug dealer who was jailed and went crazy and later hid from police in Death Valley before committing suicide - death at his own hands was preferred over capture. An old rusty truck parked nearby was apparently driven by Tex Watson by the infamous Manson killers in the late 1960's. We must have missed the dancing show - an old sign said the ladies were supposed to come at 9 am... I imagine it's probably been decades since any ladies graced us with their presence, if ever, but the hope still remained. We watched as a couple folks came on motorcycles across the dry lake bed - dust plumes extended for probably 1/2 mile between them. Rocky could tell what make and model the bikes were based on the sound of their engines probably a mile away. I'll have to re-watch "Easy Rider" someday - a story of a couple hippie motorcyclists traveling across the country - part of it was filmed in Ballarat. A couple other visitors had come from Apple Valley - I had been to some desert hot springs not far from Apple Valley. Even though it was some years back, I still remembered it like yesterday and immediately feel like a local sharing our experiences. I still remember when we got caught in a snowstorm in the desert and barely being able to cross the Greenhorn pass on our way back since we didn't think of bringing tire chains on a desert camping trip!



Ballarat town square

There wasn't much to see in Ballarat except for some abandoned adobe buildings that were mostly in crumbling ruins and a jail that doubled as a morgue and a motel if there were no dead people or prisoners. It was open and contained 2 rooms. The bed frame was still in place in one room, but it was a bring-your-own-mattress arrangement - the last mattress probably decomposed down to nothing 30 years ago. But meeting Rocky and seeing his grin (missing a number of teeth) and hearing his stories was far more interesting than visiting a "tourist" ghost town like Calico or Bodie. The town had a sense of "real-ness" to it that is often lacking in Silicon Valley where things are often abstracted far from reality.

We passed on the \$3 Bud Lights and just enjoyed our oranges and leftover Halloween candy on the porch before we said our good byes. It was getting late, and we still had about an hour to get to Stovepipe Wells to meet the group at 3:00. And with Jeff being the leader, we couldn't afford to be late! My car accumulated yet another layer of caked dust as we made our way back to the Panamint Valley road. The Wildrose cut-off road was still closed (and it didn't look like

they were in a hurry to re-open it), which would add another 45 miles each way to get to the campground by Wildrose. If we knew the road was open, we should have agreed to meet in Ballarat instead - far more interesting!

We got a better look at the snow on the Panamint Range from the base of the Panamint valley on a dry lake bed. It was as flat and inhospitable looking as the Racetrack (but without the "moving" stones) - the snowy pine trees stood on the hillsides 10,000 feet above us as we gazed across the valley. We were soon going to be entering a completely different world - a literal "island in the sky" with songbirds and deer and bristlecone-pine trees. The prominence of Telescope Peak was over 6,000 feet, meaning that in order to get to any peak higher than Telescope Peak, you would have to descend at least 6,000 feet before climbing again.



Telescope Peak above the Panamint Valley

Making our way to the original boundary of Death Valley, we crossed the Towne pass just under 5,000 feet. The broad sweep of Death Valley was now in front of us - the lowest and hottest and driest valley in the US (except during the crazy flood last month!). In just around 10 short miles, we were back to sea level at Stovepipe Wells, the first outpost of civilization in many miles.

I got my obligatory stamp from the ranger station in Stovepipe Wells right across from the "Elevation Sea Level" sign. The ranger knew there had been a storm a few days back with snow above 7000-8000 feet, and that the road to Mahogany Flat was icy and in questionable condition. A post on the Summitpost forum was asking specifically about the Telescope Peak conditions, and the last update was just before the last storm, so I felt we were on our own. I was happy that we were doing the summit on a Sunday, so if we were lucky, maybe some hikers on Saturday would have scoped it out and beaten a trail in the snow for us. I was also glad we had the option to camp at the slightly lower Thorndike campground if the road got too dicey. I had been caught without chains on the desert trip to the hot springs years ago as well as a UT trip over Thanksgiving a while back, so I was glad we had our options and we didn't have to press our luck this time.

After a stop in the general store / souvenir shop for some ice cream (it was about 75 degrees), we started heading up the hill. We thought about bumming around in Death Valley - maybe playing on the sand dunes just ahead, or hiking Mosaic Canyon before having an early dinner in Stovepipe before heading up to the campground (we knew it was going to be a cold night), but we preferred getting the drive over with and our camp set up when it was still daylight. We

made a guess that the campground was going to be 45 degrees. We got near the pass and the turnoff to Emigrant Canyon road (the rest of the detour to Wildrose) when we realized we had no way to communicate with Sarbi our plans, since she was staying at Stovepipe lodge by himself, forgoing the camping option. Turning around, we headed the whole 4000 feet back down the hill to Stovepipe to leave a note with the front desk of the lodge. Sean and Robert and Asaka was planning to meet us at the camp (hopefully we would all be at the same campground!). I was looking forward to our fragmented group coming together. At least back at Stovepipe, even though I still had a good 1/3 of a tank of gas left, it was worth it to splurge at near \$4 / gallon to fill up - it wasn't worth the risk!

Heading back up the hill, we soon found the turnoff on Emigrant Canyon road where we crossed the high desert landscape for many miles. We stopped to wait for a herd of wild burros to cross the road, a reminder of the mining days long ago – they might have been the descendants of working animals from 100 years ago. The snowy Panamints lay right in front of us, the snow appearing slightly more ominous than before. I was happy we had crampons, but fresh worries arose - post-holing in thigh-deep snow wouldn't be any easier with crampons - I wonder if we should have brought snowshoes instead?

Patches of snow started appearing just past the limekilns, where the pavement turned to gravel. The last few miles were quite slow, getting progressively slower with each mile, as the gravel became more coarse and rutted. I was worried about getting stuck or having to back down a narrow gravel road for a mile when the going got rough, even where we scraped rather hard a couple times on a high-center of the road. The wheels slid a little on an icy spot nearby. I felt we couldn't have made it more than a few hundred yards, when thankfully a small sign with a tent icon appeared on the left - Thorndike campground! Whew - we made it to a campground. Although it wasn't our final goal (Mahogany Flat) I was more than pleased to have made it! Another car with Brad and Steve had already arrived and they were getting their tent set up. They had arrived a bit before us (since they didn't have to turn around like we did) - and they even attempted many times to get up to Mahogany Flat but were stymied repeatedly by the icy stretches. No Robert or Sean or Asaka though. Hmmm - maybe they were still coming back from Wildrose Peak and were running late? Or maybe by some miracle they made it all the way to Mahogany Flat - maybe they used tire chains?

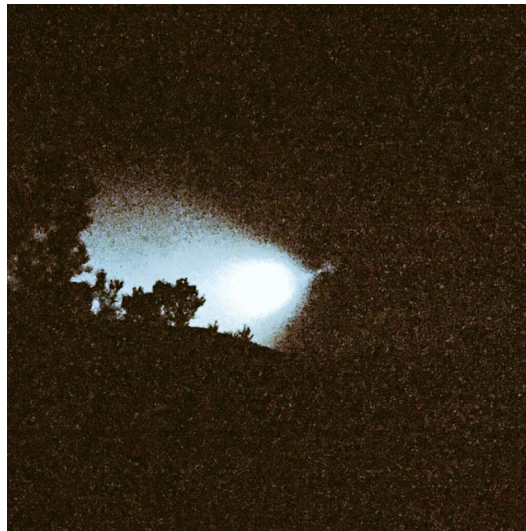
The thermometer had dropped from 75 degrees to 35 degrees by the time we got to camp (our guess of 45 was more optimistic than we realized), so it would probably get to the 20's overnight. I started to regret not bringing my down pants or my extra windbreaker jacket - it was going to be colder than I planned. And since Jeff and I rode in my car, we didn't have room to take his nice propane fireplace - oh well.

The tents were up in short order, and the stoves were going, getting water heated for dinner. A double serving of Chicken a la King made a delightful meal - of course everything tastes a couple of stars better out in the wilderness... We shared a 22 oz stout beer - a little alcohol to keep us warm! But the rest of the meal was rather spartan - although it was barely 6:00, we all looked forward to curling up in our warm sleeping bags for the night. Jeff did a short reconnaissance hike up to Mahogany to see if the others had arrived, and indeed they had - somehow they made it after all - nice!



Camp at Thorndike

Meanwhile, the other 3 folks had indeed made it to the higher camp, reaching there before we reached Thorndike. They had a wonderful hike up Wildrose - the trail had been nearly completely dry for them. And they muscled their 4x4 up the rough and icy road to Mahogany Flat (even without chains). They had a fire going, and hung out later than we did. Lucky for them, they managed to witness a very unusual sight - a "UFO" had passed overhead. Sean managed to capture some photos with his phone to prove his mind wasn't going wacky that he had gotten abducted by aliens. We googled it the next day when we got reception and found it to be an unarmed trident II (D5) missile test off the coast of southern California from an Ohio class submarine in the Pacific Test Range. I wonder if the US is planning to get more involved in the ongoing battle with ISIS in the Middle East?



Missile

November 8

I had several strange dreams overnight - probably a combination of anticipation and cold and altitude. In one dream, I imagined we had finished the summit under clear skies, and in another I envisioned waking up from camp in a blowing windstorm with clouds swirling around us, socking us in a white-out. Waking up with my right arm completely numb from sleeping awkwardly on it, I had to shake out the pins and needles. I unzipped the fly on my tent a little

ways to check, and a blazing milky way shone outside. I was up around 6:00 under a brightening sky. The morning dawned crisp and clear - the view into the Panamint valley below was clear as a bell with not a breath of wind. I managed to get some halfway-decent sleep overnight after all. It was quite cold - all of the water we had left out had frozen, and even a bottle left in my tent had flakes of ice in it. Oatmeal and instant coffee and some fruit made for a quick but nutritious breakfast. Some neighbors had joined us overnight, camping in the next spot over - they were just waking up as we were leaving. I wished them good luck on the hike.

Shouldering our packs and fitting our boots, the 4 of us hit the road. I was the only one with trekking poles and crampons - I didn't know the snow conditions higher up but I figured the poles couldn't hurt. I left my ice axe at home, and Jeff left his crampons and axe in the car - we all just hoped for the best on the trail. In a short 20 minutes we came to Mahogany Flat - I'm glad we camped where we were - it might have taken 20 minutes to drive there anyway! Looking for the others I soon came across a group of 3 campers, thinking it might be them. But they said they had done the peak yesterday and were just getting ready to pack out and head home. They said the snow was about a foot deep at the most near the top, but most of the trail was either dry or well boot-tracked. No crampons necessary - yay! A huge wave of relief came with the good news.

Jeff remembered the other 3 folks were in the first campsite and they had actually already left. I ran back to catch up and soon we gathered at the trail register at the trailhead. All of the names were on the register. Sean and Robert and Asaka had left only about 10 minutes before us, and Sarbi had left promptly at 7:00. We had told Sarbi 7:00 from camp, but she thought that was 7:00 from Mahogany Flat, so she was actually quite a ways ahead of us! Another wave of relief - the whole group was on the trail and we should all be able to meet on the summit together.

After putting our names in the register, we hit the official trail to the peak. "Telescope Peak 7 miles" pointed straight ahead, following a nice boot-track in the snow. Hiking on the east side of the ridge, we were soon warmed by the morning sun. The trail was mostly dry, passing through scraggly junipers and pinion pines. I felt I was in a dream again. Maybe I was going to wake up an hour later in a swirling white-out after all - I had to pinch myself to see if I was really awake! The "camera test" worked - I was able to take a picture and have it play back successfully - that had been my "Inception dream-test" for many years now. In fact I would be taking many photos - I wondered how many more photos my battery would last.



On the trail

The trail was clear and mostly dry as we flanked around the side of Rogers peak and reached the saddle with Bennett peak. The views expanded in every direction - the full Death Valley and Amargosa basin on the left and the Panamint valley and the right. The row of high Sierra speared the horizon to the west, crowned by Mt Whitney. This was one of the few places where you could see the highest point and the lowest point of the continental US from the same point!



Mt. Whitney

Crossing the saddle ahead, the wind started to pick up and I started again to regret my lack of windbreaker. But luckily we were only the wind for a few moments, and the sun was steadily climbing and keeping us warm. The desert brush was glazed with a couple inches of snow - nothing like the 2-3 feet I imagined. The peak looked so close now, almost level with our eyes, though we knew it to be over 1500 feet higher. A check on my phone GPS showed us at about 9,400 feet and the summit was over 11,000. We had caught up with Sean and Asaka - they had a great time yesterday. Sean was getting to be an avid peak-bagger, talking about several peaks he did the previous weekend, and the peaks he had planned.

We passed a distinctive scraggly pine tree that marked the waypoint where the “masochistic” trail met the normal “sane” trail. It looked to be about the most direct way down – I wonder how many people ever actually attempted that route – there’s not even an official trail, but since there aren’t many places in the US where you can climb straight for 11,000 feet, it made for an interesting item on someone’s bucket list.

The trail was straightforward nearly all the way to the summit, only crossing a deep drift every once in a while making us watch our step. Seeing an Indian lady hiking back, we guessed it might be Sarbi, and indeed it was - she was making great time. Bummer we wouldn’t be on the summit together though. And soon afterward, we saw Robert returning as well - he was scampering back down the trail.

My phone buzzed as we neared the summit ridge of Telescope Peak as my signal returned and a bunch of my apps came back to life with rejuvenated connectivity. I was happy to know I could call home when we reached the top. The final airy stretch to the summit was a bit breezy but not too bad - being above tree-line, it was desolate and windswept, but gave views over at least half the Mojave desert! Peaks as far away as the Palisades to the NW, White Mountain Peak to the N, and even Mt. Charleston outside of Las Vegas were visible. Sean helped me identify at

least a dozen peaks from Mt. Whitney to Russell to Langley, Tyndall, Williamson, and various peaks in the Palisades. In fact, every 14'er in CA except Shasta was visible.



On the summit

Nisha was ecstatic to hear from me on the summit - the 2 bars of signal were a bit weak, but enough for a short conversation. I would be able to make a post on Facebook and complete my "summit ritual". I came up with this when training for my Nepal trek last year on Pico Blanco, Mt Goode, Morrison and a couple others.

- 1) Sign register
- 2) Take photo with register
- 3) Shoot 360-degree panorama movie from the summit ending with my face
- 4) Stitch panoramas with phone
- 5) Call Nisha
- 6) Post photo on FB

Six of the 8 of us were on the summit together - Brad and Steve, me and Jeff and Sean and Asaka. And seeing the names of the 2 others in the register, I knew we had 100% success - nice! The weather was beautiful and sunny - not a cloud in the sky. I felt this would be my final hurrah for the season to get out to the wilderness - the Thanksgiving holidays would be upon us sooner than we would realize, and then we would be going straight to Christmas - whew!

Brad and Steve started heading down before the rest of us, but the rest of us enjoyed probably a good 1/2 hour at the summit before starting back down. We had made great time getting to the summit, so the 4 of us decided to take a couple short detours on the way down. We had passed right next to Bennett Peak and Rogers Peak on the way up, and seeing it was a straightforward ridge heading down, we figured they were not to be missed. And they were listed in the "Desert Summits" and "Desert Peaks Guide", so they were "official" summits worth tagging, so that sealed the deal that we would go for them. I had to use a mnemonic to remember the peaks - R for Rogers, which had the Radio antennas, B for Bennett, which was in Between, and T for Telescope, which was the Tallest.

We made quick time down the trail off the summit - it seemed a noticeable amount of snow had melted in just the last couple hours. It was a bit slick in places requiring care (and catching myself with my trekking poles at times), but the going was smooth. Soon we were back at the

saddle between Telescope and Bennett and from there it looked just a short slope to the flat summit of Bennett. Looks deceived me, however as I felt I huffed and puffed my way up the several hundred feet of the open slopes of Bennett - the going was tougher than on Telescope itself! Maybe conserving my energy for Telescope, we moved slower, but on Bennett, thinking it was an “easy hop, skip and a jump”, I was deceiving myself. I had to stop a couple times and have an extra Snicker’s bar (still from the leftover candy) to keep going.

It was probably only 15 minutes, but the views were well worth it - providing a panoramic view of the expanse of the Panamint ridge capped by snowy Telescope Peak on one end and Rogers on the other. An old register was hidden in an ammo can by some rocks stacked on the flat summit. This register went back quite a bit further than the main Telescope one - I’m sure many people forgo the intermediate summit on their way to the main one, but I felt the entries on the intermediate summit’s register reflected more the true nature of peak-baggers, since the signatures there proved their intentions.



Bennett Peak summit

Continuing along the ridge, we found ourselves weaving among a few scattered desert shrubs along the snowy northern slope to the saddle between Bennett and Rogers. The final push to Rogers was a piece of cake compared to the push up Bennett - we were up in probably 5 minutes, gazing past the arrays of solar panels, propane tanks and Air Force installation buildings from the summit. The entire ridge was now visible, to Bennett and across to Telescope.



Telescope and Bennett from Rogers

Some high clouds were starting to stream by, an indicator of a distant change in the weather. The ice crystals in the clouds were arranged properly to create a menagerie of different refractive phenomena, including brilliant rainbow sun-dogs, a 22 degree halo and parts of a parhelic circle. I knew I would have to keep my eyes out for some of the rarer phenomena as well, knowing conditions might be right.

We had talked about trying to have dinner back in Tehachapi if time allowed - at first I wasn't too optimistic we would get back in time, but seeing it was only a little after 2:00, I felt we had a shot after all. Seeing the service road coming straight off the Rogers summit, we knew it was the same one we saw from Mahogany Flat - and it might even be a shorter option than the trail we went up. At least it would be a change of scenery.

The road was snow-covered in about 3-4 inches of fluffy powdery snow, cushioning our steps as we tromped our way down. The snow gave decent traction, actually, and even though we were pretty tired after hiking around 14 miles, we were bombing our way down pretty effectively! In short order, we arrived back at a gate - I recognized it to be the one we saw at Mahogany Flat from the other side when we took the trail. I was ready to tromp the last mile or so to camp when I realized we needed to check out at the register at the trailhead - we didn't want to get any rangers worried that we were still out there (though there were some entries in the last couple days where they didn't sign out and nobody seemed particularly concerned, so I wonder how seriously the register was taken).

Back on the road to Thorndike, I realized the going was the most treacherous of the day - the tire tracks had packed the snow down to ice in many places, and walking down the icy road at the end of the day on tired legs was trickier than expected. That would have been a bummer, but we were careful. A lone hiker passed us going up the road, saying he wanted to do Telescope Peak and then get to Mt Whitney the next day - it was already after 3:00, and it would be pitch-dark around 5:00, so unless he was super fit and was a Scott Jurek-style trail runner, I'm not sure how far he would have made it. I warned him about the changing weather forecast and that high winds and snow were in the forecast. He did have a headlamp and camping gear, but I doubted he was going to get very far. I did read a couple days later that a 25-year-old UCLA grad student named Mike Meyers died in the Mt Whitney area shortly afterward - having maybe gotten caught in an avalanche in the Meysan Lakes basin while hiking alone in a snowstorm. We never did get the guy's name - I would have liked to have been able to follow up.

It was getting chilly at camp when we arrived - the long shadows were extending. Boots were taken off and tents were quickly broken down, as we were eager to get back. The hike ended up being around 17 miles and over 4,000 feet of elevation gain at the end of the day, which the extra bits we did. But I was not disappointed.

Jeff and I looked forward to a celebration dinner with his cousin and family. My car was still where it was - no break-ins or flat tires - whew! Sean and Asaka and Robert left just before us as we made our final pit-stops before hitting the road ourselves. Robert had gotten dropped off at the charcoal kilns - he didn't want to chance his Audi on the dirt road past the kilns. I had a peek at the kilns, again remembering my trip from 2003, but this time it was nice to actually have a few minutes to look around. According to the NPS site, the row of 10 Charcoal Kilns at Wildrose were completed in 1877 by the Modock Consolidated Mining Company, to provide a source of fuel suitable for use in two smelters adjacent to their group of lead-silver mines in the Argus

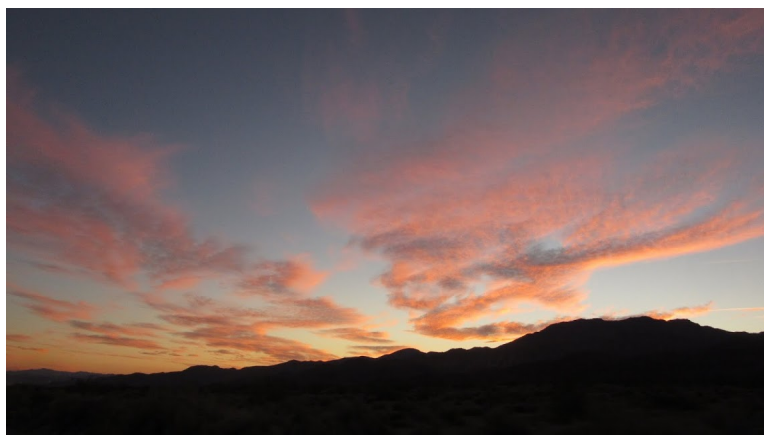
Range west of Panamint Valley, about 25 miles distant from the kilns. I was impressed at their remarkable condition despite their age.

Just before getting back in the car to head down the hill, I caught a glimpse of a rainbow out the corner of my eye - it was in fact a circumhorizontal arc. I had forgotten to keep an eye on the clouds after seeing the atmospheric optics before. Craning my neck upwards revealed a brilliant circumzenithal arc as well - I felt a blessing on our trip by having the opportunity to witness these rare phenomena.



Charcoal kilns

The late afternoon sun graced the valley as the shadows deepened, casting the snow-covered hills and rolling desert slopes in an artistic palette of shades. Again, we had to make the 45-mile detour to bypass the washed-out Wildrose Road, delaying dinner by probably an hour. But the views on the way were well worth it. We said farewell to the snowy summits above as we crossed the flat Panamint Valley dry lake bed. Lake Hill stood on the edge of the shadow-line from the distant hills, like the "Grandstand" of the Racetrack. A field of dunes to the north caught the late afternoon light like a miniature Sahara desert. Deep hues of orange, red and crimson lit the sky to the south and west as we proceeded south past the desolate plains around Trona and the Searles valley.



Sunset over Trona

Once my cell signal returned, I was able to get caught up with Nisha after what felt an eternity of

being apart - I got to tell my tales of our adventures in the desert and on the mountain and send a couple pictures back - the wonders of modern cell technology! But in return, I heard some tales of the "boogie-man" - who always seems to come when I'm not home. While Nisha was thawing some pasta sauce in a glass jar, the jar cracked and broke on the floor. And later while cutting an eggplant, Nisha found something wriggling inside - a worm! Alive! And the worm, upon its newly discovered freedom, soon proceeded to turn around and point straight up, almost touching Nisha's nose in the process! At least, it wasn't something worse than finding a worm in an apple after taking a bite out of it - a half a worm!

After my call we were able to text with Jeff's cousin to make some dinner plans. A text chimed back that there was a Mediterranean place nearby - I was looking forward to some good food! The GPS was set and we had our ETA for dinner. I left a text with Robert with the time and place but didn't get a response - oh well. We arrived at our destination with rumbling stomachs and our eyes fell when we got to the restaurant and found parking to be a little too easy. Then looking at the door, the dreaded "C" word was hanging - CLOSED. Bummer... we texted Jeff's cousin and left a message - nothing. hmmm - our "celebration" was turning out to be a bust.

But within 2 minutes of us pulling up at the closed restaurant, a van pulled up next to us - it was them! Jeff's cousin said she knew of another good place nearby that should be open - the Apple Shed. Checking on yelp, it was open and had decent reviews - nice! Most of Tehachapi goes to be early, especially on a Sunday night. It was just a few blocks down the main street. I shot a follow-up text to Robert in case he was still on his way.

Dinner was fairly simple but tasty - blackened salmon and salads and bread. Just after we ordered, a familiar face showed up - it was Robert! He made it after all. We caught the end of the 49ers game (though I was too embarrassed to care about the score) as it was playing overhead - a welcome back to civilization and back to the bay area the next day.



Celebration dinner

It was just a short drive back to the house - we looked forward to just relaxing! I was just pulling my bag out of the car when a bright flash caught my eye overhead, somewhere near Pleiades a bright shooting star soared overhead, perhaps one of the Taurids, which was predicted to be a good one this year. I had brought some wine and dark chocolate as a gift, nicely appreciated over an intense game of Scrabble while watching a silly rip-off show of America's Funniest Home Videos with dogs running backward around merry-go-rounds and redneck guys on wakeboards

being pulled by a rope attached to a backhoe swinging around next to a lake. The videos only got more entertaining with each glass of wine.

November 9

It was a wonderful night sleep in the warm bed - my muscles were mostly recovered after the 17-mile hike the previous day. We enjoyed the hot coffee and cereal and fruit for breakfast over another series of stories of experimental aircraft, landing gear mis-haps out in the desert, and speculation if we were ever going to get to make it to outer space someday in our lifetimes (100 km above the earth). It makes me wonder. I feel it's strange how we got to the moon using technology that was less sophisticated than the processors of our cell phones that we now use to browse Facebook and play Flappy Bird and Candy Crush, and yet we haven't been able to go back for over 50 years. I wonder if the Chinese or the Russians or Indians are going to get there first? I'm glad for movies like Interstellar and the Martian for keeping our interest in space exploration alive (and of course we all can't wait for the next Star Wars!) The trip to the desert wasn't exactly outer space, but the scenes could have been from Mars or Tatooine - I'm a space explorer at heart.

The fog had rolled in with a vengeance overnight with intermittent rain - I had forgotten there was a change of weather. It was eerie, with visibility less than 100 feet as we rolled out the driveway. Bill left for work, his son left for school and we left for San Jose at the same time. Actually I was leaving for work too - though the "commute" was planning to be over 4 hours... Stopping somewhere near Los Baños for a rest break, I was able to make my daily stand-up call for work, giving the illusion I was at my desk and on top of things. We pulled into a gas station, where interestingly the gas was a full dollar cheaper than the name-brand Chevron gas station right across the street.

This call turned out a little different, however - I had just found out I was going to be put on a new project to integrate with our Adobe system, and the next couple hours would be a bunch of WebEx meetings to get up to speed. Bummer - my computer was at the office still several hours away, and I had to admit I wasn't at my desk. I guess I'd have to make up for it by working late if I could.

Back on highway 58, we dropped below the clouds and it soon cleared up completely as the frontal system passed. A second, much colder wave was predicted the next day, bringing snow to Tehachapi - I might have needed my chains had it been a day later to get out. Again on highway 5 we were reminded of the troubles of the farmers in the central valley. Hundreds of acres of orchards were left dead and abandoned, dozens of fields were left sandy and fallow, and enormous herds of cows were left roaming a dirty field completely devoid of anything green, waiting for the slaughterhouse. A dust bowl seemed imminent if we didn't get the rain we needed really soon.

That rain would come soon enough, however. I sent a few Skype's to my wife and she said the (rain) - emoticon included - was coming down in sheets over there! It was dry and dusty where we were, though in the distance a series of enormous thunderheads was starting to peek over the hills as we turned onto highway 152. Some sprinkles started to fall, which turned into showers, then into a full-out pounding rain as we started to climb the hill to Pacheco Pass. The rain was coming down in earnest when we started seeing brake lights ahead - hmmm, traffic? A

quick check on the Google maps showed a short section of dashed-red. Hmm - construction? Probably an accident - California drivers never seem to know how to drive in the rain. A check on the Caltrans twitter showed a post from 37 minutes ago asking when the road was going to re-open, with a couple bumps after that asking for updates. The words "going to re-open" - hmm, that didn't sound good. The traffic reports on the 8's on 740 am didn't seem to be promising either. Traffic was inching forward, probably not due to a lane being opened, but probably due to the traffic line compressing, and that several cars were starting to 4-wheel it across the grassy median to turn around. It would probably be at least a 1-hr detour to get back on I-5 and take 580 back, and we hoped the road would re-open in less than an hour given the rate at which the traffic line was building, so we stayed put. Running outside to the trunk to grab a bag of potato chips and leftover Halloween candy, we braced for a long wait.



Ominous skies and heavy rain ahead

It turned out to be a fatal accident, unfortunately - a driver going too fast and lost control on the downhill part of the winding highway 152 west of Pacheco pass. Just after an update on 740 said the accident had been moved to the shoulder and a lane reopened, we saw traffic making progress again. I looked away when we passed the body-bag on the shoulder - I had to be reminded that each day is a gift and we never knew which day would be our last.

Finally on highway 101, it was clear sailing back home, as a brilliant double-rainbow arched just ahead of us as we passed through the last of the rain showers. Brilliant blue skies opened over us during the last few miles back to Jeff's place, where we quickly unloaded and celebrated our successful trip. It had been over 1000 miles in total, but with 3 peaks - not bad.

And to top it off, I got to work just before 2:00 after the long traffic delay, just in time to find out the Adobe integration meeting had gotten re-scheduled to 2:00 since someone else couldn't make it either, so I didn't miss anything - whew!

Thanks for a wonderful trip, and I'd love to go back. Nisha and I are already talking about visiting again in the spring, and maybe even taking her mom if she is able to visit from India - I can't wait!