Hiking Mount Whitney

The Trail

It’s important to first describe the nature of the Whitney Trail and my plan to reach the summit. The following map gives a bird’s eye view of the trail and the principal landmarks.

The trail begins at Whitney Portal (1) at an elevation of 8,300 feet. This is nearly 5,000 feet above the nearest town, Lone Pine, in the Owens Valley and reached by a spectacular mountain road carved into the nearly vertical Eastern face of the Sierra Mountain chain. The first part of the trail climbs steadily through forested terrain for 2,000 feet over a
good trail to Outpost Camp (3) at 10,300 feet elevation, 3.8 miles from the start. Above Outpost Camp, the trail turns rocky and climbs steeply for 1,700 feet to an elevation of 12,000 feet over boulders and switchbacks for another 2.2 miles to Trail Camp (4). From Trail Camp the trail climbs steeply through a series of 97 switchbacks to 13,700 feet elevation to Trail Crest. After Trail Crest, the trail proceeds on the Western (backside) of the Whitney ridge 2.8 miles gaining overall another 900 feet elevation to the summit of Mount Whitney at 14,505 feet.

My Plan

It was my plan to take three days to perform this climb. The first day I would climb with a heavy pack to Trail Camp, a hike of 6.0 miles and a climb of 3,700 feet. The second day, I would climb to the summit of Whitney with only a day pack, a distance of 5.0 miles and a further climb of 2,500 feet and return to Trail Camp for the night. On the third day, I would retrace my first day’s hike and return to Whitney Portal.

Day One, Tuesday September 25, 2012

At 6am Mount Whitney is barely visible in the glow of the pre-dawn illumination. It is dauntingly far above. My legs feel tired from carrying my pack to the car. “How will I ever make this climb?” I am thinking. “It was foolish to think I could do this”. I drive toward the gloomy massif as the sun rises above the Inyo Mountains to the East. The summit ridge is clearly illuminated as I turn the last corner of the access road to Whitney Portal.
The Whitney Ridge is rust colored in the morning light. At the far right of the above picture, nearly hidden by the Thor Peak in the foreground, is the summit of Mount Whitney. To the left of the summit is Keeler’s Needle and to its left Crook’s Needle. Lesser pinnacles proceed to left. Out of sight to the left is Mt. Muir (nearly as tall as Whitney) and Trail Crest.

I park the car in the Overnight Hikers lot and heft my pack to the start of the trail with a productive visit to the outhouse on the way. Prominent “Pack Your Poop” signs remind me of the regulations in effect. At the start of the trail I weighed my pack at 34 pounds. Those last minute additions plus 2 liters of water really added up. I had hoped to be carrying a pack of less than 30 pounds at the start. The place is deserted. The day hikers who leave in the dark have all left. My departure will go unnoticed. I am glad for the solitude. I start up the trail which proves to be wide and smooth and assumes a gradual but steady climb. I get into my rhythm which I have found most comfortable in my conditioning walks: left pole, right pole, exhale, left pole, right pole exhale…. My pace seems slow, even to myself. But I have learned that hurrying is a sure recipe for exhaustion. After a sizable ascent, the trail does a switch back and finally begins traveling in the south west direction toward the summit.
The path is initially heavily forested and parallels roughly the descent of the Lone Pine Creek which I can hear from time to time as the trail zig zags up the slope.

It takes me one hour and five minutes to cover the first 1,000 feet of elevation gain according to my GPS. It is very encouraging to realize that one fourth of my climbing is completed in a little over an hour. I feel strong. Whatever faintness of body I felt in Lone Pine has been overtaken by action and exercise.
From time to time the trees part and allow a clear view of the valley below showing tangible evidence of progress.

To my right is the towering façade of Thor peak at 12,300 feet. The trees get thinner as I climb.
At one point I pass a family of three deer eating the dry vegetation. They are very unconcerned by my passage and grudgingly vacate the centre of the trail as I approach.
The first major landmark of my upwards journey is Lone Pine Lake which is at elevation 10,000 feet and 2.8 miles from the Portal. From here there is only 2,000 more feet to climb and 3.2 miles to reach my camping site. I take a sizable break at this point and consume some trail mix and the disgusting high energy concoction sold as GU. It seems to be a combination of axle grease and lemonade.
Above Lone Pine Lake the trail opens up more and becomes somewhat rockier and more difficult. An additional mile and easy 300 foot climb brings me to a beautiful Alpine meadow with the first official campsite at the far end. This is known as Outpost Camp and at one point, I had considered camping here to break up the climb with the heavy pack into two days. But considering how well the climb as gone to this point, it now seems like an especially pessimistic estimate of my capabilities.

However, from this point onwards, the climb became much more difficult. The trail passed over bare granite and through boulder fields. The steepness of the trail also increased with many switchbacks and considerable drop offs. Leaving Outpost Camp, one is surrounded by sheer rock faces and it is a wonder that a trail can be found to proceed.
Not too far above Outpost Camp we had a lovely view of another of those Alpine lakes that are so picturesque. This was Mirror Lake with a “small” peak, Wotan’s Throne reflected in its water.
After Mirror Lake, the trail got really difficult with lots of bolder hopping, high steps, and generally a steep grade. The unevenness of the surface definitely interferes with keeping a regular rhythm and regular breathing, both key ingredients to the efficiency of the climb. The picture below shows the “trail”.

One the other hand, the good news is that I seemed not to be bothered by the altitude. I was in no way laboring to breath and had no symptoms of altitude sickness. I am sure that our 5 days in Mammoth Lakes was largely responsible for this apparent acclimatization. Over the entire trip, the only symptom of the altitude was a definite loss of appetite (probably a good thing for life in general).
At about 1:45 pm, after walking for six and a half hours, I arrived at my intended camping spot, Trail Camp (some times called High Camp). This was at 12,000 feet and is adjoined by a lovely small lake, called a “tarn”, (dictionary: a small Alpine lake). The campsite is characterized my many boulders and outcroppings, some bigger than a house, most the size of small automobiles. I found the perfect flat spot enclosed by boulders and set up housekeeping.

The campsite was surprisingly un-populated based on reports of chronic over crowding. But this might not apply to Tuesdays late in September. There were not more than a half dozen tents in evidence.

One thing that became apparent as the afternoon wore on was the downward transit of the day hikers. I understand that most people that attempt to climb Whitney do so in a single day. They must leave Whitney Portal between 2 am and 5 am, in the dark, and make the climb to the summit, departing the summit, at the latest by early afternoon. It is a 22 mile round trip and a 6,000+ foot elevation change. The round trip time ranges from10 to 18 hours, depending on the fitness of the hiker. Frankly, in my opinion, this activity is only for the young and very fit, and misses much opportunity to linger and appreciate the scenery. I saw more than a few hikers passing by, mostly women, who seemed to be in considerable distress and they still had six miles of difficult trail to descend, some it in the dark.
During this climb, I had only a few opportunities to chat with fellow hikers. But these brief discussions were always very friendly and mutually congratulatory, either for having reached the summit or for being in the process of trying. To simplify my personal story, I stretched the truth by 11 months to say that this trip was “a 70th birthday present to myself”. This always was greeted with some astonishment and appreciation and further congratulations. I suppose, there is no dishonesty in giving birthday presents in advance.

At around 4pm, the sun disappeared over Whitney ridge and the temperature dropped rapidly. I made my dinner out of a package of hiker’s freeze dried chicken and rice (simply add boiling water). It was pretty awful, possibly due to my nearly complete loss of appetite. I finished about half which was appropriate since it consisted of two servings. To ward off the cold temperatures I cooked up some boiling water and drank it down wishing I had thought to bring a couple of tea bags. It was nearly dark by 7pm except for the illumination of a three quarter moon, and very cold. So I saw no alternative but to go to bed. Each of my nights at Trail Camp was characterized by 12 hours in the sack.
Day Two, Wednesday September 26, 2012

I awoke before 6am after a night of intense cold that took extreme measures to combat. First, I retired wearing all available clothing including, shirt, fleece, down vest, windbreaker, ski hat, gloves and double socks. When this did not ward off the cold, I broke out my emergency space blanket, a reflective Mylar film and added that over the mummy bag. Finally, after some hours my teeth stopped chattering and I fell into a fairly restful sleep interrupted, inconveniently, by calls of nature, which, to some degree, restarted the teeth chattering.

I shook myself out of the bag to witness one of the most startling and beautiful scenes I have ever seen, a sunrise over the Inyo mountains to the East.
Not too long thereafter, when the sun rose above the ridge, it illuminated Whitney Ridge above me in a shimmering golden color.

I ate a breakfast of leftover chicken and rice reheated with salami slices, a concoction that only a hiker might think of. It was hardly better than the night before. I dressed as if for a polar expedition since the temperature was still below freezing and I had been warned of the misery of strong cold winds on the summit. I also medicated my self with a pair of Ibuprofen and a coca candy from Peru, said to do wonders for combating the effects of altitude.

At 7:45am I departed the campsite and immediately entered the feared ninety seven switchbacks that extend from Trail Camp to Trail Crest at 13,700 feet. Soon after starting, the sun hit the lower portions of the switchbacks and I was boiling in my polar garb. I shed all outer clothing except for my long sleeved shirt, which went into the day pack (and was carried needlessly to the summit). I was sorry to be wearing long pants as hiking in shorts is so much less confining. Finally, to add to the inappropriate clothing, my ski hat provided little protection from the hot sun and high-altitude UV rays, in spite of being pulled down over my ears. Having climbed up several hundred feet, there was no thought of returning for more appropriate clothing.

What was surprising was that the switchbacks provided an excellent walking surface. Yes there were the occasional high step and the inconvenient boulder, but for the most
part, I could establish my rhythm of breathing and pace. The switch backs were a marvel of manual engineering and I made good time. The picture below shows the upper portion of the switch backs with the Trail Camp area visible far below adjacent to the tarn in the upper left of the picture. Consolation Lake is in the upper center of the picture.
Along the way, I traversed the feared “cable section” where ice and snow make the trail impassible in the early season. Thick ice was still present in the shadows but the trail itself was clear.

A little further up I passed National Forest Service crews working as part of a continuing program of trail maintenance.
The switchbacks had some scary drop offs.
In a little under two hours I had reached Trail Crest, a climb of 1,600 feet and 2.2 miles. I was feeling good both physically and mentally because of the accomplishment so far. I was beginning to think I would make it and was looking forward to the surprise call to Gayle and others from the summit. I then cautioned myself to not count my chickens before they hatch.
At Trail Crest, the trail transitioned from the east side of the Whitney Ridge to the west side. I had my first glimpse of the rugged grandeur of Sequoia National Park.
The 2.8 miles to the summit on the west ridge has a further elevation gain of 800 feet mostly in the last mile. But the trail is truly amazing, very difficult walking and quite dramatic. The picture below shows the rugged nature of the trail and the precipitous drop offs just waiting for someone to trip.
The Whitney west ridge is characterized by numerous granite pillars. Getting around them was the trick.
As I approached the summit the trail began to traverse boulder fields and yielded better walking
The picture below shows the back side of Keeler’s Needle with the Whitney summit behind.
This picture shows the final climb up to the summit through an imposing boulder field.

I arrived at the summit at noon. My first objective was to make my surprise call to Gayle. She would not be expecting to hear from me for another day at least. It was making this call that was a major motivation to my progress upwards. It would be the moment of success and acknowledgement of the deed. I was quite overcome with emotion as I dialed the number of Gayle’s cell phone. “Hello. It’s me. I calling from the summit”, but I was also thinking “I worked so hard to be here”. The tears streaming down my face made it difficult to speak coherently and AT&T providentially and predictably cut me off before I had to say much more. I could tell, however, that Gayle was pleased to learn of my success.
The summit of Mount Whitney has a stone hut built in 1909 for the National Geographic Society. It apparently is a highly dangerous place to be in a thunder storm. Just outside the hut is the summit register where I added my name and the comment:

“70th Birthday Present to Myself. Spent Night at Trail Camp”

I stayed on the summit for one hour, resting and eating my lunch, a tortilla salami and cheese sandwich. The sun was warm. There were lots of people milling about. But I pretty much kept to myself.

At 1pm I departed the summit. The return trip to Trail Camp went without problems. It was my first dose of sustained down hill but using the trekking poles I was able to cushion the jarring impact of downhill walking on my knees. Another coca candy for the return trip probably didn’t hurt. I arrived back at Trail camp at around 5pm. It had taken me four hours and fifteen minutes to get to the summit and about four hours to get back down, confirming what many people have said, going down is not much faster than going up.

I had an interesting talk with a couple of hikers who set up in the adjoining campsite. They had just summited Whitney but this was on the final leg of hiking the entire 215 mile length of the John Muir Trail. They had been out hiking for the previous 21 days.
This accomplishment was huge and made my 3 day hike seem pretty puny in comparison. And both hikers were in their early sixties

I prepared my dinner, this time freeze dried beef stew, a much better meal than the previous nights chicken and rice. Two cups of boiling water slightly warmed my insides in the plummeting temperatures. Again at slightly after 7pm I crawled into my tent for the long dark night. I had a surprisingly long and restful night’s sleep. I was looking forward to the triumphant and easy hike down to Whitney Portal in the morning.

**Day Three, Thursday September 27, 2012**

I awoke at my usual 6:00am when the sky was still black but the eastern horizon was alight with the coming dawn. I brewed my morning coffee and prepared a breakfast out of the last of my salami and cheese. Then as the day broke, I disassembled my camp site and meticulously repacked my back pack. This process took some time as I wanted to “leave no trace”. At about 7:30am I departed, dressed warmly, but prepared to strip down into looser clothing as soon as it warmed up. I had thoughts that today would be a piece of cake, 6.0 miles, all downhill. It had taken me six and a half hours to ascend from Whitney Portal. My thought was it would take half that time to get down. So I was expecting to be at Whitney Portal about 11am.

It turned out that today was the hardest day of hiking of the Whitney trip. I might attribute it to cumulative fatigue, consistent downhill with a heavy backpack, failure to take an Ibuprofen, or an unbalanced backpack. But this day was just hard. My legs felt wobbly. I had to be extra careful with each step so as to not slip or make a false step that might lead to an injury. How unfortunate to have to be assisted down the mountain should I sprain an ankle or break a leg. Even, with this care, I had several near falls as my footing gave way on the slippery sandy trail surface and except for the trekking poles I would have been on my knees or flat on my back.

I had also underestimated my needs for water, thinking I would have a quick descent. Around Outpost Camp, I sucked my Camelback dry. So I had to stop at the crossing creek to refill it with 2 liters (4 pounds) of water and to purify it with iodine tablets. The iodine treatment turns the water a bright yellow, but does not seem to affect the taste in any way. The water is disconcerting to look at, but quite OK to drink. Water treatment is recommended with all water sources in the Whitney Zone.

The final three miles from Lone Pine Lake was particularly long and tedious. I was really feeling tired and my muscles seemed to have no strength. And my back pack was weighing down on my shoulders which were cramping. In any case, I proceeded slowly and carefully and at about 1pm, five and one half hours after leaving Trail Camp, I shuffled into Whitney Portal. I again weighed my backpack. At 31 pounds it had lost three pounds during the trip.
I found the car had bear paw prints in the dust on the rear bumper. But there was no food in the car (as dictated by the rules) and the inquiring bear did not have reason to molest the undefended Honda. The drive back to Mammoth Lakes and a hot shower and clean cloths seemed to take forever. But inside I had a feeling of contentment that was really soothing.