

John Muir Trail - Florence Lake Through Kings Canyon

Ravenous Pie-Holes, Shooting Tampons, Rob's Harem, and the Burning Balls-Rag



Left to Right: me at Mather Pass, nearing Evolution Lake, summit of Whitney

Introduction and Logistics

For anyone who does not know what the John Muir Trail (JMT) is: it is the 212-mile trail between Yosemite Valley and the summit of Mt. Whitney (the tallest mountain in the lower 48); virtually all of the route overlaps with the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) and much of the route is contained within Yosemite, Kings Canyon, and Sequoia National Parks. This report inadvertently describes the maiden voyage JMT trip attempted by Mountain Travel Sobek (MTS). Prior to this trip, I had hiked/trekking with MTS only once (Nepal, 1998); although I liked that trip for its cultural and religious experiences, I was not enthusiastic about some of my team-mates and I felt, frankly, indifferent about the leaders and staff. Given Nepal, MTS regularly mailed me glossy brochures. After 6 years resisting minor temptations, I found myself immediately drawn to the JMT - in part because it was originally put forth as a 1-time opportunity. The MTS JMT would be horse/mule-supported, allowing us to carry just daypacks down the southern 150 mile portion through Kings Canyon and Sequoia National Parks - including a shot at Mt. Whitney. We would be skipping the northern section (i.e. the mobbed Yosemite and Ansel Adams regions). I can assure you, however: there was no love lost in foregoing said area. My awareness of and interest in the JMT over the years has been sporadic but enduring. In the mid-1990s, when I was especially full of myself post-Wonderland Trail, I researched the PCT with the intent of attempting 2-3 month-long trips down its most interesting sections (at the time, the JMT was top on the list). My friend Cara, most famous for sending me down rivers, had long urged me to visit Kings Canyon and Sequoia National Parks because she backpacked there as a teenager. As I read more and more, though, I grew increasingly intimidated with the "freeway" reputation of the JMT - not to mention the complicated problem of food-drops. At the time, I knew nothing of the pack stations in the area, most of which do spot-drops for long-distance hikers. Equally defeating, I reached several personal endurance and/or tolerance limits that caused me to question long-distance trips. Consequently, I stopped thinking about ANY multi-week trips because I lost interest in carrying shitloads of gear and sleeping in a tent for more than 7-10 days. Anything en par with the JMT remained silent for years - despite MANY people telling me to go there. And then, in March 2003, I participated in our university Science Club's spring break trip to Death Valley. Although said destination did nothing for me, the drive thereto provided me with my first big view of the Sierras. Despite the wind, cold, and partly cloudy conditions that day, I KNEW the Sierras were my destiny. Two months later, MTS advertised this trip and here I am... (or there I went).

Although this trip was sold on the premise that mules would carry all major gear (except day packs with water and weather layers), our guides (Jay and Kelsey) did execute this trip with as little impact as possible. We had 5 mules for 15 people - plus a wrangler (John) on horseback. That may sound like a lot but, in fact, we were limited to 15 lbs. of mule-carried personal gear in a 9" X 20" compression sack (excluding tents and sleeping kits). Anything more went on your back. Although 1 of the 12 guests found 15 lbs adequate, I (and most others) would have brought more warm gear (in particular: a down jacket and fleece pants) given the weather faced. Although visions of the Sierras as a "fair-weather" range did occasion to dance in my head, I was under no false impressions about temperatures associated with altitude (consider that 10/15 nights were at/above 10,000 feet) and the regular probability of severe afternoon storms. Between Roger, Jenn, and Danny (all of whom had hiked in the Sierras), I knew what I was getting into weather-wise. Final clothing items packed included: (in my daypack) full raingear top/bottom, heavy fleece jacket, hats (sun/rain), and pimp-daddy sarong (required fashion statement); (in my mule stuff sack) 2 sets of midweight capilene tops/bottoms, 2 sports bikinis (dual-purpose bathing and underwear), quick dry pants and long-sleeved button-down shirt, shorts, 4 pairs of socks, and 3 cotton items (2 undies and one T-shirt). As usual, the footwear decision harangued me - mostly because I let my friends try to alter my "gut decision" on the matter. I KNEW I could wear Chacos down the whole thing (many people do, as evidenced by several web comments/stories on the topic) but, to be safe, I carried a back-up pair of ultra-light Salomon's. Had I been less timid, I would have skipped the Salomon's and had room for my down jacket. Oh well. At least my feet were happy - and suffered ZERO blisters with the sandals. Non-clothing packing decisions were equally problematic: First, I knew I would be getting my period 3-5 days into the trip (and I did in a major way - don't say you have not been warned). This meant pads, tampons, and Handi-Wipes. MTS also suggested bringing inter-meal snacks if we got hungry a lot; being that I would definitely be in my pre-menstrual "bottomless pit" phase at the beginning of the trip, I came prepared with 9 Luna Bars and 12 Gu's. Although said items were bulky, I finished them all ravenously. Finally, 3 days before leaving, I succumbed to a major eye infection - brought on by a recently blocked tear duct (to be surgically repaired in October). Thus, I remained on Levaquin the whole time - suffering through cramping, insomnia, dizziness, and at least one bout of major diarrhea (all associated with this high-end drug). Notably - and in contrast with several others - I never got any sinus infections, hacking coughs, or waterborne/infectious diarrhea. Had I known how well I would feel and be on this trip, I would have only carried my vitamins, Levaquin, and Advil - NOT the large baggie of upper-respiratory-oriented OTC meds. Other ailing trip members, however, did partake of my extensive pharmacy. Finally, I carried 17 rolls of 36-exposure film - NOT a small object - and a new Pentax (same model as was broken in Alaska).

I booked this trip in late November 2003. In March 2004, I called in my second trip payment and happened to ask whether the trip had filled (as it had implications for the final trip cost). The MTS receptionist seemed surprised that I did not know how lucky I was to have even gotten a place: not only had this trip filled in a matter of weeks, MTS had added another JMT for September 2004 and 3 JMT trips for the summer of 2005. She went on to explain that the average participant age on my trip was a whopping 61 years old. Although some of my friends assumed that this age distribution spelled disaster, my contrary responses were: (1) thank god it's a mature crowd - I don't need a bunch of yuppies to contend with, like in Nepal. (2) Shit - they're gonna kick my ass. Indeed, my personal experience with older hikers is that they have WAY more experience, time to work out, and tolerance than me for suffering. This was pretty much the case with our group. Nevertheless, I must say upfront that this is a challenging trip reports to write up because it was an interesting group, because - as with all first-run trips - this ambitious trip had its moments, and because there are apparently a lot of people interested in or signed up for future offerings of this MTS trip (and, honestly, I fear scaring them if they don't know what they are getting into).



Left to Right: Snails/Rob's Harem summit Mt. Whitney (Tina, Joan, Rob, and Me), Larry burning his balls-rag, Jay and Kelsey

August 6, 2004 - Portland to Fresno and Pre-Trip Meeting

I flew a direct flight to Fresno, leaving chilly Portland (which had been roasting in the upper 90s for 2 weeks prior) 2:30 p.m. on a Friday afternoon. After a remarkably scenic flight - during which we actually SAW all of Yosemite Valley in perfect detail (down to Half Dome and El Capitan) - we landed in baking Fresno (103-5°F) at 4:30. Had I realized the hotel was a 5-minute walk away, I would neither have called for a shuttle pick-up nor stood in the sun 10 minutes waiting. There were actually 2 grades of hotels in the target complex and I, of course, was taken to the wrong front desk - which meant I still had to walk/carry things after being dropped off. While crossing another set of parking lots, I was instantly greeted by Joan, a 60-something single, retired public school teacher from northern California. Thank GOD there was a teacher on this trip - DEFINITELY a good sign. Joan would become a regular hiking partner during the day, given that she - like me - comprised the always-last "snail team" (which morphed into "Rob's harem"). Joan's LONG record of Sierra Club trips was, at first, intimidating. As I realized we shared a similar pace, hiking style, and interestingly mismatched wardrobe, I came to adore Joan. After chatting for 10 minutes, I moved on (Joan heading in the opposite direction for an early dinner) to the front lobby where another informal welcoming committee was waiting to greet folks: Rob and Larry. After 4 days of finding my place in the team and in the line, I realized Rob was an amazing person to talk with, the most complementary in terms of my stride and speed, and extremely disciplined in terms of keeping a slow and even pace. I would not have made it down this trail or up Whitney without Rob. Within a few days, Rob's official title became the "harem-master" as he kept the gorgeous women of the JMT - Joan, Tina, and I - in line (sort of) at the back. Although Rob enjoyed his title to some extent, he seemed to me a moderately shy guy. A 50-something single software engineer from Indiana, Rob had done over 20 MTS trips all over the world - most remote and serious Class 5 excursions (JMT was also rated a 5, hardest on the MTS difficulty scale). As with Joan, I was - at first - totally intimidated with Rob. But then I realized how supportive, positive, and down-to-earth he was about everything. Larry, Rob's assigned tent-mate (they didn't know each other before the trip), was the opposite of Rob in every way. Larry, a 60-something retired pilot from southern California, was recently widowed (frankly, it was amazing he'd come on the trip given the timing of his wife's death). Larry has got to be the fittest, fastest, and most health/diet-conscious person I have EVER met. An inch or so shorter than me, Larry was this lean, wiry, tiny-looking, swarthy man with the best over-60 legs I've seen since Sven on the Grand Canyon. Although Larry was the biggest talker of the group, we only teased him a few times about "shutting his pie-hole" (a phrase he re-introduced into our vocabulary early in the trip) because his stories about the airline industry (he retired 3 months after 911) were fascinating and his bawdy sense of humor was fantastic, although he did offend a few folks). Although Larry's fitness and pace intimidated me before, during, and after the trip, I was never personally put off by Larry because he was so friendly and outgoing in camp (when I finally caught up to him). Larry and I were the pyromaniacs - Larry because he could start a fire in rain/hail and me because I was so good at finding large quantities of dry wood in rain/hail (I attribute this skill to my experience gathering wood along the Alsek). Nevertheless, stumbling into Larry buck naked along the South Fork of the San Joaquin River and sharing WAY too many bad jokes about his "balls-rag" (which was ritually burned the second to last night in camp) will always define why Larry earns a way big smile when I think about him.

There may have been more guests showing up as I chatted with Rob and Larry but, for some reason, I can't recall specifically because my head was - as usual - spinning from the flight, the lack of food, and the Levaquin coursing through my brain. I DO recall that our leaders/guides, Jay and Kelsey, showed up. Given my personal history with another bona fide Jay, I had been warned by my girlfriends to BEWARE. While I grew to enjoy Jay more and more as the trip evolved, I was never attracted to him (thank god). Had I, say, met him on the street, I also would have been somewhat hard-pressed to fathom him leading a trip like this. I'd love to say I got to know Jay extensively on this trip but he was always far off in the lead during the day... and he was usually heavily occupied with chores around camp. As I told Roger after this trip - I really have not done professionally guided hiking trips before and so this trip was weird for me because, once you hit the trail, you were fundamentally on your

own. Consequently, I really was at a loss to connect with anyone for a long time... and, even then, I mostly bonded with other harem members (plus Larry - albeit for other reasons). Getting back to Jay, though: Jay resides in Vermont where is a professional photographer, a fly fisherman, and is married to an environmental consultant. Remarkably, I never pressed Jay for his age - although members of the team made some guesses (behind his back) that ranged from 33 to 37. In contrast with Alsek leader Brian (the gold standard), Jay seemed more reserved and took at least a week to start warming up. Sometimes, I sensed that he was insecure with all us old farts and/or that he was just as uncertain as me about who everyone was given our spread-out paces and positions (not to mention our increasingly cliquy behavior that included increasingly obvious small group discussions and gossiping). Although Jay elicited no historic responses/associations, Kelsey did. Fortunately (or unfortunately), Kelsey - like Jay - was seldom in proximity and it was easy to keep my something-between-rapt-and-lust low. Kelsey spent the first hour of each day (after we all hit the trail) helping John load packed gear onto the mules. Afterward, he remained mostly behind the snail team. Off-trail, he was - like Jay - heavily occupied around camp. Even when Kelsey did attempt to intercalate Rob's harem, we shooed him away because he intimidated us with his massive legs and held-back pace (only near the end, when his knee blew, did we welcome his finally-reasonable gimp stride and grant him honorable snail/harem status). A Yosemite resident, serious backcountry skier, and fly-fisherman, Kelsey is married to a former guide who works for the Yosemite Institute. If I spent the week post-Alsek dream-hearing Pam's British accent, I spent the week post-JMT dream-hearing Kelsey's distinctively gravelly, surfer-dude/Ty-Pennington voice and speaking patterns. Kelsey was trickier to define in terms of age. Half of us said older, half said younger; I voted younger because, by the end, I felt I'd EASILY put on 10 years in the face (elsewhere looked 10 years younger, for the record) - and, next to me, Kelsey looked, like, 19 (seriously). Although Kelsey looked younger to/than me, he was more outgoing, socially comfortable, and opinionated than Jay from the get-go - traits I tend to equate with accumulated years. But who knows or cares when all that really matters is that every journey needs a little eye-candy. Hopefully, Kelsey will forgive a few of us for granting him that honorific trip title.

After meeting the above folks (the same group who became the closest to me over the next 15 days - PLUS Tina, more later), I retired to my room. ALL I wanted to do was shower because I felt germly after sitting in airports and on airplanes most of the day. At 6, we gathered in the hotel lobby and then moved out onto the lawn for about an hour. After the small Alsek party, this group felt really BIG. Nevertheless, these folks seemed quieter in a reserved way. When Jay attempted to elicit exchanges, few people seemed into sharing their motives for this trip. I think it is accurate to say that I asked the most questions, earning an early reputation as someone who liked to know the lay of the land. My questions involved how regimented the hiking was going to be and how concerned Jay was about keeping the group together if there were black bear issues. Not very and not at all were the answers. Jay's most verbally repeated theme was that we all needed to remain flexible given that this was obviously the first run of this itinerary. For the record, Jay and Kelsey had each logged several dozen trips down the entire JMT - both guided and personal. At some point, a local MTS planning crewmember showed up. Being local, Kelsey and this individual had been the most involved in planning/purchasing food and organizing food drops. A key thing that should have been more emphasized in the weeks before this trip was that over half the group was vegetarian, vegan, lactose-intolerant, and/or clinically watching cholesterol. Carnivores would have likely packed more muscle- or tofu-based snacks had we known that dinner - in particular - was going to be single-pot, heavily grain-based camp-fare that had to meet common needs. Between this and being pre-menstrual, I was - honestly - RAVENOUS the first 5 days and nights (e.g. waking up hungry every night). Since coming home, I have done nothing but eat massive meals and engage in constant snacking for 2 weeks straight (so much for the lost weight, fabulous thighs, and awesome ass). But I digress. A lot of us - myself included - had interpreted "mule-support" as meaning that meals were going to be more elaborate (e.g. en par with a rafting trip). Although it is possible to hire THAT kind of support, I can assure you - having researched it extensively in Wyoming - that THAT level of service costs more than we were paying. Although I came to understand the dilemma and felt I made the best of things, there were some people who never accepted the meal situation and remained detectably and increasingly frustrated.

The rest of the team included: Michael, a retired physician from southern California (married, wife at home); David, a philosophy professor from southern California (married, wife at home); Maria, a financial planner from Brazil (single, the only non-guide younger than me); Tina, the Italian-American embodiment of Jenn, a businesswoman from Ohio (married, husband at home), and two couples: Peggy/Ralph (retired teacher and engineer, respectively) from Washington, and Ann/Richard (something involving vineyards) from California. Of these folks, I got to know last-in-line Tina the best (she out-guttered Larry's sense of humor and was an amazing, bright, outrageous, and warm person). I would have loved to get to know Maria more but she was always on Jay's ass at the front of the line - and quiet in camp. I enjoyed several interesting, sporadically substantial conversations with Michael, David, and Peggy but - as with Maria - they all hiked WAY faster than me. With the exception of Ann/Richard, everyone hiked regularly in their spare time, had spent a lot of recent time in a tent, and had gone on MANY serious international treks (the majority in third-world countries like Nepal or Pakistan). Ann/Richard would come to admit that this trip was way too much for them; it should be stressed they were physically fit - but the rustic conditions and camping demands were definitely not their cup of tea. Consequently, I - and others - have strongly suggested that MTS require camping experience for this trip. Over the last several months, I have been repeatedly concerned that the MTS JMT will attract more people who have no concept of what they are getting into. Although 2/12 TRULY frustrated clients isn't bad for this first JMT run, it will be really interesting to see what happens in the future. Of course - it is the guides who ultimately suffer the most. As a trip leader who recently decided to take a 3-year-hiatus from organizing non-research-based student trips after a REALLY challenging trip to Utah this spring break, I totally felt for Jay and Kelsey because the JMT is definitely NOT a trip I would pursue leading (I knew that before, during, and after doing it). Alright - before I get WAY off-course here... after the pre-trip meeting, I joined the lone or single men for dinner: Larry, Rob, David, and Michael. The experience was, admittedly, like a twisted version of the 1999 all-boyz trip to Yellowstone (Larry providing the familiar crudeness factor). And then I retired to my hotel room, performing one final gear assessment before going to bed at around 10.

August 7, 2004 - Fresno to Florence Lake and then Piute Creek

Desperate for a final shower (and not hungry given the large dinner the night before), I skipped a sit-down breakfast after waking at 6 a.m. At 7, I downed a Luna Bars and some tea. Despite Fresno's high temperatures the night before, the morning

felt reasonable and I grew less concerned about my greatest fear on this trip: hiking in severe heat (alas, this would be short-lived). Shortly after 7, we loaded gear (trip items and one post-trip duffel) onto a 20-seater van/bus (the same driver and vehicle would pick us up at our east side trailhead and transport us back after a night in Lone Pine) and boarded. Our driving itinerary: a 7000-foot climb to Florence Lake in 2.5 hours. Danny (now former lab Danny) had long warned me that this road featured spine-tingling cliffhangers but, honestly, it wasn't bad - although I distracted myself by getting to know Rob, seated beside me. My only complaint about the drive was how dry and golden-brown the land looked - particularly lower elevations (5000 feet or less). Consequently, I was concerned the range would appear likewise stark and unattractive. Fortunately, at Shaver Lake (our stinky pit toilet stop), granite and pine began to dominate and things felt Wyoming-like and promising. Within 5 miles, we were driving an ultra-narrow road (often defined by blasted granite). Given that we passed few cars, we were all shocked to find a bumper-to-bumper campground at Florence Lake. My second fear regarding the Sierras was this (although, frankly, this never really turned out to be the case). At the lake, we met John and the animal portion of the team (1 Appaloosa named Crescent and 5 extremely good-looking mostly-black mules). My first impression of busy John - your standard skinny cowboy - was that he looked an awful lot like a very friendly wrangler from my past. Fortunately, John's appearance could not compete with Kelsey's spectacular legs. Anyway - John, who seemed shocked to discover we were the same age, worked for the High Sierra Pack Station; his current girlfriend, who spent 2 evenings with us (coinciding with food drops), worked at the competing Rock Creek Pack Station. John was easy-going, secure, funny, personable, and attained heroic status for maneuvering his team over every pass (several in the rain - because he trailed behind us by 1-2 hours, the usual delay between clear mornings and afternoon showers). After dropping major gear off with John, we assembled at the boat dock near a small store and waited for about an hour.

In my opinion, Florence Lake (despite being damned by weirdly scalloped concrete) most resembled one of the larger lakes in the Enchantments. All of its shores were soaring granite - something I hadn't seen a lot of in the Winds (most lakes there are littered with granite boulders and smaller rocks but have earthen shores). Even so, the surrounding mountains were classic Wind Rivers (specifically: Big Sandy Lake). While we enjoyed our spray-soaked boat-ride across the lake (courtesy of tugboat Annie - who sounded like she had, at some point, lived and worked in New York), John would be riding 4 miles around the lake - catching up with us at camp. This was the ONLY day that I chose to wear actual shoes. Why? I didn't want to scare the guides. It was also the ONLY day that I got mild blisters. After that, it was Chacos all the way, baby. At the other end of the lake, we congregated briefly for a little talk from Jay. Given that it was around 80° F, however, I can't honestly remember a thing he said. Oh yes I can: tugboat Annie had given us some spiel about rattlesnakes and so Jay made a few comments about walking safely and remembering that ANY little thing out here could spell disaster. He did assure us that today and tomorrow were the only days we had to worry about snakes. Afterward, we'd be too high. Although it was approaching noon, Jay wanted to get in an hour on the trail before lunch - probably because a family of trail-riders was assembling their horses for a trip to the exclusive Muir Ranch (2 miles up). Comparatively, the Wind Rivers seem MUCH more livestock-y than what I saw in the Sierras (almost to the point that I felt a little guilty traveling with stock). In total, we ran into only 4 other parties with horses/mules - plus a group with llamas. The heat, while exhausting, was what I had been expecting. Although pre-trip literature suggested we'd only be gaining 500 feet over 7-8 miles, Ralph's altimeter said we actually gained 1300 feet. It sure felt that way given the constantly rolling hills and valleys. Immediately following our lakeside speech, we slogged up granite slabs for a moderately sustained period of time, next entering a long dry valley. Thankfully, there were a fair number of trees and shady spots. Also thankfully, a last-minute decision of mine had been to buy a Platypus hydration system. Given that my Camelbacks had developed strange bleach-like flavors, I briefly courted the notion of just carrying 2 Nalgene bottles. I'll say it only once: there is NO FUCKING WAY I would have survived with Nalgene bottles. Case in point: I would eventually break Jay's personal "pee record," dropping my shorts 15 times in 9 hours.



Left to Right: Florence Lake, an hour from Florence Lake, unloading gear at camp 1

After an hour, we stopped for lunch at a wide spot in the trail. As we began passing around the food, the trail-riders ambled by, expressing surprise that we had managed to maintain our lead this whole time. For many reasons, I failed to record meals on this trip - and thus my presentation of food may be spotty. I do remember that we had GORP, bagels, cream cheese, fresh vegetables (tomatoes, cucumbers, and peppers), and cookies that first afternoon. I was surprised that Jay and Kelsey carried all lunch items each day (I figured that we would either split lunch items up or make/carry our own). Based on picking it up, I guessed Kelsey's pack was 35-37 lbs. Jay's was more like 45 lbs., owing to camera gear. My daypack ranged from 8-12 lbs., all contingent on water volume (which explains my excessive drinking/peeing). I was surprised to see that only 4 others had daypacks that were as physically large as mine (the MTS-recommended 1200-1500 cubic inches). At least 5 people had tiny Camelback systems and 2 others wore fanny-packs. Although I envied them when it was warm, I was MORE than happy to have 2-3 layers on hand to don once that rain/hail started coming down. People seemed happy with lunch, although 2 folks made the first of several (almost daily) references to the lack of wine (other items - mostly steak - were added to the list as time wore on). Not surprisingly, the big food critics on this trip were also the ones carrying the smallest packs. After lunch, we continued hiking up a long river valley - some sections on a dirt road that lead to the Muir Ranch. Jay gathered us all together

3 times: to pump water at a small side creek, to make sure we took the "correct" trail around the ranch, and just before camp. Apparently, Muir Ranch doesn't like hikers wandering in view of their rich customers and convinced the forest service to build an alternative trail that climbs high up the slope opposite the valley floor where the ranch is situated. Officially, we hit the JMT 5 miles in (we would not enter Kings Canyon National Park until the next morning). It was probably just after 4 when Jay gathered us all up for the last time, half a mile down from Piute Creek (impressive Piute Canyon visible to the northeast). Just as he left to scout a favorite campsite, John and the stock showed up (as always with him/them - GREAT timing). Surprisingly, there are no official campsites along the JMT in Kings or Sequoia National Parks - which makes it feel a lot like the Wind Rivers. Although most places we camped had obvious clearings, they were not - like - marked on a map or as developed as beginners may like. Jay's chosen site along the South Fork of the San Joaquin River was occupied by a single female who said she didn't mind if we shared the site too. I suspect she regretted her decision after she experienced our group.

We hiked a short ways down to the riverside camp spot, a rocky clearing surrounded by thin forest. Although John took a long time loading the stock, he was amazingly efficient at unloading in camp. For someone who claims NOT to enjoy camping (yes, it is true), 2004 is a record year (10% of my nights spent in a tent). Although there were a couple rough nights in the Sierras, I honestly never grew frustrated with camping on this trip. Of course, I would NOT have predicted this given my first impression of the MTS-provided tent. On most guided trips, parties are given a tent that is big enough to sleep at least 1 extra. When MTS said singles would be issued 1-man tents and doubles would be issued 2-man tents, they were NOT kidding. I have personally never slept in a bivy sack (it is one of those things that crazy men love and use, and I just look at them and go: no fucking way). My MTS-issued Sierra Designs tent was a very small step above a bivy sack (yet another reason MTS needs to screen for camping experience). I would say that there was only an 8-inch perimeter of floor-space around the MTS-issued sleep kit. Owing to my stature, I could not fully sit up without my head touching the roof. If the fly was used (all but the first couple of nights), a small amount of vestibule space was created (barely enough for shoes). My immediate comment - made to neighbor David as we erected our homologous abodes: well, I understand why they made us line our packs and stuff sacks with plastic compacter bags - because they knew we'd be storing them fully outside every night. Although this was the case, Jay usually planned camps near/under trees for some protection from weather. That first night, I honestly never thought I'd survive the whole trip in that tiny tent. It was not that I grew to love it or anything - but it was bearable and occasionally comfortable. And, most importantly, it protected me and held up once the siege of rain/hail began. Had I the opportunity to do this trip over again, though, I would have brought my Bibler (which Jay informed me, on day 12, would have been permitted given its small size and weight). Sadly, I NEVER took a picture of my tiny abode! After setting up my tent, I made my way to the river for a bath. I carried 3 items on this trip that I have either never carried or have not carried in years: watch, pocket mirror (for the eye), and quick-dry towel. Given our late arrival, dinner (pasta with vegetables) was not ready until dusk. A surprising aspect of meals was that we were not asked to wash any dishes. Nearly everyone agreed, by the end of this trip, that the guides did not deserve ANY more chores in camp; Larry, by day 12, was cajoling folks to do their own dishes (which most of us did). Although it was not really cold, I was concerned that I was already wearing most of my warm gear (i.e. what was going to happen if it got REALLY cold?). Consequently, most of us retired promptly. John, it must be elaborated, camped with us that first night (he was not allowed to graze the stock at many other camps and thus retreated to lower elevations). When we shared camp with John and company, the animals ran around free a lot. In some cases (like the first few nights), there were stock fences/gates or box canyons within a few miles of camp. In other cases, there were not - and you can imagine what happened. When the animals were loose, John put a pleasant (but audible) bell around Crescent's neck and, given her status, she was followed by the mules. For most of that first evening - until John tied the stock up and bedded down in his classic "cowboy bedroll" - the variable clanging of Crescent's bell sounded in the trees. Needless to say, I was never afraid of wild animals on this trip. But I also never approached sleeping as good as I did in Alaska - probably because it was colder and I brought WAY more soft clothing for awesome pillow construction.



Left to Right: various day 2 shots, San Joaquin River and Entering Kings Canyon

August 8, 2004 - Piute Creek to Goddard Canyon/San Joaquin Junction

Given our acclimatization-inducing itinerary for the day (5 miles, 500-700 feet up), we were allowed a lazy start (as in: leaving by 10 a.m.). As with most days, breakfast featured hot drinks and both hot/cold cereal options. For entertainment, Tina regaled us with her mid-night adventures dealing with acute GI distress: she dashed off into the woods without her headlamp and promptly got lost, wearing only a loose shirt and socks. After a moderate period of time (that included stumbling into the camp of our neighboring lone female), Tina did make it back to her tent. Given that we didn't have to stick around waiting for John, camp pack-up proceeded quickly. Our small amount of gear, in combination with the simple tent, made the whole camping experience all the more efficient; most issues I had with my tiny abode began vanishing as I realized how easy it was to deal with on a daily basis. At some point, I warned Jay that I would be donning Chacos - likely for good. He had no issues with me wearing sandals. In contrast, Kelsey didn't catch on to my open-toed hiking status until just before Forester Pass but

never seemed comfortable with this decision. Within 15 minutes of camp, the scenery once we entered the Kings Canyon NP became dramatically grander - specifically, when we crossed fantastically clear, blue-green Piute Creek via a large bridge. Although I suspected Sierra rivers were beautiful, I didn't understand how gorgeous they were (and would continue to be) until seeing them for real. In theory, yesterday's hike had been in a river valley - but we really didn't see the river (in that case, the San Joaquin) until camp. From this point, we hiked up a narrowing canyon (that eventually becomes "trail-less" Goddard) along the San Joaquin. Virtually all the terrain was granite, including much of the sometimes-blasted trail. MANY photo-stops were entertained given the combination of water on granite, soaring walls, and impressive peaks all around. Although we agreed to have lunch in camp, we congregated for GORP along a really beautiful section of river - which inspired a discussion of great world rivers. Here, Jay tried to scare me out of doing Chile's Futaleufu River, which he learned I was contemplating (RETROSPECTIVE COMMENT - in 2006, Allison and I discovered that he was right, but for all the wrong reasons). We continued on up the trail, the way growing less rocky. Although we passed a few people backpacking, I was stunned with how quiet the trail was so far (and would continue to be). Even though we reached camp by around 1 (in line with having done 5 miles at increasing altitude), I thought it FELT much longer. But this was probably because of the searing heat (probably 80°F, if not higher). The emerging snails (Joan, Tina, and I) whined to ourselves about how there was NO WAY we were going to be able to climb to Evolution Lake (our next camp) in this kind of heat; we hoped Jay would be call super-early start-times on days that were likely to be hot. Too bad we didn't know how little encouragement Jay would need to facilitate said request.

Camp was in a large, moderately open stand of lodgepole pines, a few hundred feet from the river. From camp, we could see our most immediate task for tomorrow: a 1200-foot climb up to Evolution Meadow. Beyond (but not visible), we would meander up 500 gradual feet and then climb another 1000-ish foot bench to the lake. Honestly - it neither looked nor was bad. What made it challenging was that it was our first climb to/above 10,000. Before this trip, I had done plenty of calculations using daily mileage and elevation data and nothing exceeded, say, grades on the Wonderland. After visually sizing up the first part of tomorrow's climb, I decided it was time to soak in the river - stumbling immediately onto naked Larry. Eventually, I found some well-placed rocks near a good section of current. Here, everything up to the thighs went in for 30 minutes. After soaking, lunch was ready and John arrived. Upon setting up my tent, I enjoyed a luxurious nap. I then felt the need to go pet the horses and see whether John was a quiet-type/anti-social cowboy or a friendly one (given that he was, again, camping with us). In general, I was disappointed at how clients on the trip did not interact with the stock. At first, I thought maybe they knew something I didn't about liability issues. But John made it clear that anyone who wanted to visit the animals was welcome; he just wanted to escort us the first time. He also advised against trying to pet a couple of the mules as they were skittish and ornery. Although a few clients casually patted Crescent here and there, it seemed that only Kelsey and I genuinely liked socializing with the horses and mules. When I ambled down to "John's area," the stock were tied up, John nowhere in sight. John eventually emerged from down by the river where he'd been enjoying a bath. Now I am sure that Roger is thinking: bet you wished you had stumbled down there? Honestly, no. Nevertheless, John was friendly and eager to introduce me to the stock (although pretty much only Crescent was friendly). I noticed John was wearing a knee brace, having been recently bucked while breaking in a personal horse. John had ridden the entire JMT several times but he had never climbed Whitney. Although he preferred packing long-distance, multi-day trips, he said most of his business involved 1-2 day food drops, often for long-distance backpackers. At first, John offered to let me untie Crescent and walk her around (until he untied the mules) - but then he saw I was wearing sandals. Smelling a little horsy, I enjoyed a quick river rinse - despite more bugs. Although the bugs were never substantial on this trip, they were out on a regular basis on warm evenings. Jay had informed us that a fire would be built tonight because there were s'mores on the menu and we had trash to get rid of. Thus, on the way back up to camp, I gathered an armload of wood. In contrast with future nights, no one was into the fire that first night because it was too damn hot. Dinner, served within the hour, featured curried lentils, cheese, and rice. Ironically, I do remember that - but only because everyone in our party who had ever been to Nepal, India, or Pakistan (i.e. 75% of the group) was inspired by the dish to share their stories from said regions. At some point, too, Jay mentioned receiving his masters in environmental studies from Missoula where he was involved in writing about and photographing Yellowstone. Consequently, he asked me a few knowing questions about my experiences with research permits and bioprospecting; this would be my only lengthy work-related discussion in front of everyone. Honestly, it was nice NOT to think about or discuss work for 17 days. Even Peggy - on around day 11 - remarked: for an academic scientist, you are quiet and modest, Sarah - we went on a trip with a woman scientist from the Midwest who didn't let a day go by without mentioning her Ph.D. from Princeton and how she knew how to split cells. Indeed. It often surprises people - especially people who have only read my writing - how quiet I am.

Over dinner, Jay gave us a fear-of-god speech about the hike tomorrow because it marked the beginning of MANY serious and challenging days (INDEED, that is an understatement). Although we would only hike 7-8 miles tomorrow, we would gain about 2400 feet - half above 10,000. As mentioned, this elevation would be attained in 3 stages: abrupt, gradual, and abrupt again. To our relief, Jay called a 5:30 a.m. wake-up (on the trail by 7). He advised us to begin hydrating tonight, to drink 1-2 liters the next morning BEFORE hitting the trail, and then keep drinking ALL DAY while hiking (shooting for 4-6 L on the trail). At some point, he made the error of saying he typically peed 8-10 times on a comparable day, with a personal best of 12. We should emulate this, our constant goal being clear urine ALL DAY. Tina and Joan disputed Jay's advice, insisting that peeing this much was, in their experience, a sign that they were over-hydrated. Jay politely shrugged, explaining that he was fine with personal decisions by people who felt they knew their bodies that well. Looking back, it was hard to tell how much water people drank on this trip. Given that we were only told to bring 2X1 L Nalgens (or a 100 oz. bladder system), Jay's double and triple volume recommendations were daunting (possible because we filled bottles at least once a day using portable filters). I knew a few people who only drank only 2-3 L a day and were excellent hikers. I knew others who seemed to constantly be filling their 80 oz. Camelback systems. On most days, I felt like I sucked water down like there was no tomorrow - even though, when I did the math, I was only downing 3-5 L total. Anyway - after dinner, we gobbled down chocolate, marshmallows, and graham crackers (most separately). At some point during the lively social hour, Larry introduced what would become the trip catch phrase: SHUT YOUR PIE-HOLE. I would elaborate more on this story but, honestly, I can't remember how it came up. It just stuck hard. The night was warm and clear - despite a late-afternoon cloud that had the guides wondering whether it was going to grow and dump. Apparently, the Sierras had just enjoyed almost a whole month

straight without rain. Kelsey definitely said we were due BIG-TIME. After hearing the same thing in Alaska and then getting virtually all sun, I hoped my weather luck in California was as good as it was up north (HA HA). Most of us retired by 8-8:30.



Left to Right: Evolution Valley meadows, final plateau before Evolution Lake, viewpoint by ex-current spout of Evolution Lake

August 9, 2004 - Goddard Canyon/San Joaquin Junction to Evolution Lake

After a 5:30 a.m. wake-up, I remember tofu-scrambler burritos, 1 of the few breakfast items that truly energized me. I downed half a quart of tea and started peeing multiple times - even before setting out. Although it was cold, the temperatures felt motivating. Jay hoped to be on the trail by 7 but we ran 20-30 minutes late (something that continued every day, driving a couple people crazy). We hiked less than an eighth of a mile before the switchbacks began - at which time Jay gave a useful spiel about hiking switchbacks; the only thing he left out was the "rest step" (something Rob re-pounded into my head), which saved my ass MANY times. Although Michael had been predicting that the party order would shuffle once we hit a real incline, Tina, Joan, and I remained and simply WERE the end of the line. Although I blame 20% of my pace on clothes-changing, sunscreen-applying, picture-taking, and gawking, 80% was simply that I am NOT a fast hiker (never will be). Even though I have no issues admitting this fact and being this way, I was troubled on this trip by the PAINFULLY slow pace that I could NEVER improve (at times 1-1.5 mile per hour). As I said to Jay and Kelsey much later: you know, I sat there with pre-trip literature doing the math and I kept coming up with these pace values that were 1-2 miles an hour. At the time, I arrogantly thought - NO PROBLEM. I NEVER DREAMED I would actually be reduced to 1-1.5 miles per hour on much of this trip. But I was. And my pace never improved in a predictable, linear manner. Certainly, there were days when I was more energetic - but they came as a function of sleep, food, and menstrual issues. It was TRULY astounding how slowly I went. On the other hand, though, mountaineers recommend not gaining more than 1000 feet per hour at elevation (i.e. 10,000 feet or more). Given that, we were doing the right thing - not that I, personally, had a choice in the matter. Although the pace was slow, I never really acknowledged it during the climb to Evolution. That first abrupt gain was awesome, the switchbacks well-graded. The views up and down the canyon, and the immediate views of Evolution Creek spilling down solid channels of granite were phenomenal. I think the only thing that bugged me a little was pulling up the rear - knowing the majority of the group was ahead (albeit only by 10-20 minutes). It bugged me that they did not seem to be appreciating the scenery. Not knowing what Jay thought of our progress, I was also slightly concerned that he was going to start running a tighter ship. The first congregating point where Jay et al. waited for us was at the bridge-less crossing of Evolution Creek. Having been warned about this ford, most people carried sandals in their pack. I was, now and forever, in sandals and socks. Jay had predicted this crossing would be just above the knees - but it was mid-calf with no appreciable current. I don't know if I look like an imbalanced fool but Jay constantly seemed to offer me a hand when it came to river crossings. I took a couple offers later in the trip - mostly on slick logs in the rain. Frankly, though, it was ludicrous - given how many rock-hopping crosses I had to deal with when Jay was nowhere in sight and I had only myself to trust. While reading about the JMT, I was taken aback by a lot of scary language used with regards to fords and rock-hopping. Although the number of crossings we dealt with was comparable to suggested numbers, I found none of them scary or particularly difficult - even in sandals or rain. As we regrouped on the other side of the creek, Kelsey arrived. Both he and Jay were delighted by our time so far. Slight skepticism aside, I do believe the guides were genuinely impressed with our pace (including that of the snail team). Once we hit Evolution Meadow, the trail was rolling but gradually climbing. The views reminded me of the long way into the Enchantments. I was pleasantly surprised that half the trail was shaded by forest and crossed by creeks - each surrounded by a lush array of flowers, the most notable being shooting stars and something onion-like. Nonetheless, I will likely piss some people off with the following remark: Evolution Valley is touted as 1 of the most spectacular meadows along the JMT. While it was very scenic, it doesn't compare to the floral carpets in Washington (e.g. Paradise, Sahale Arm, High Divide). Its distinctive grandeur was derived not from the flora but, rather, the vast granite. For "dry" southern California, the greenery we did see was, frankly, amazing. I can't say I missed sprawling greenery, though - because I wasn't expecting much; if I missed anything, it was snowfields and glaciers. But I knew the Sierras were going to be even less snow-clad than the Winds.

After about an hour, we re-grouped for a snack on top of a magnificent granite slab in the sun. Just before, Tina and I met our first and only hard-core, stock-hater, a 50-something woman backpacker heading north. In contrast with other clients, I had been expecting negative feedback from way more JMT hikers who were offended by stock. Anyway - our critic stopped to chat with Tina and I, asking how it was that we were WAY out here with such small daypacks. We then explained that we had stock support; the horror on this woman's face was memorable. She disgustingly proclaimed stock as "the black plague of the trail." Given our mules' color, our team would lovingly refer to them as such from now on. Our critic then asked how far we were going and was SHOCKED to hear all the way - as she had NO IDEA animals COULD ride the whole trail. Aside from the plague remark, though, Tina and I thought she was pretty polite. Thus, we were surprised to hear that she tore Kelsey (behind us) another asshole (my words, not his), accusing him of outright animal cruelty for "hauling animals over those terrible passes." After Kelsey's report, I smiled: Why didn't you tell her to SHUT HER PIE-HOLE? Kelsey vowed to remember this line for future attacks. Alas, though, our only other critic was this large man with a big gut hanging over his pack belt; he called us the wussy team... which was more funny than offensive to us. With regards to stock, I was never really sure what

Kelsey - in particular - thought about this luxury. Call it pre-menstrual intuition, but I sensed this was Kelsey's first time dealing not only with such a large group but also with major stock support. Consequently, he sometimes seemed conflicted about our impact. Nevertheless, Kelsey's (paraphrased) response to "plague-lady" was elevated: "How did she think historic figures like Ansel Adams and early Sierra Club members got into the Sierras; how did she think the trails were built - not to mention maintained; was she aware that an awful lot of thru-hikers used stock-provided food-drops; was she aware of the long history of stock use in the area - not to mention by humans throughout history and the world." Certainly there was a period when I frowned on stock - but obviously here I am on a trip like this and with a similar attitude.

After another hour, we stopped for lunch and water filtering along a shaded creek. By this point, I was already up to 9 trips to the woods (and gloating to Jay). I think it's safe to say that Jay now realized that he'd created a pee monster. BUT he never lectured me again about drinking. In terms of water purification, the guides carried 3 ceramic filters - and 1 couple brought their own. The clog/cleaning rate required for the ceramic filters was astounding given the clear-looking water (1-2X per day). Of course, 12 people were using them to filter 3-5 L each. Equally astounding was how LONG it took: I would spend 10-15 minutes filling my 100 oz bladder (as did everyone else). Although I sometimes felt and detected some frustration with this set-up, I don't know any other way to have dealt with water - especially when we were separated from the stock. Lunch was spectacular and I gorged to the point that I felt sick-to-my-stomach while hiking to Evolution Lake in the soaring heat. I can still see the spread: 3 kinds of crackers, 2 kinds of cheeses (rich hard cheddar and perfect temperature Brie), apples, oranges, and this spicy pepper-encrusted salami. Rob earned the abdominal-fortitude award by downing the WAY-pepper-encrusted salami ends. As we grew finally full (despite much food still remaining), John arrived and we enjoyed his company. John seemed notably pleased to finally see some meat; his penchant for politely downing vegetarian fare (many items of which were unfamiliar to him) was always fun to watch. Given that Evolution Lake was the first place John could not camp with us, he wanted to press ahead so he could have adequate time to return to the lower meadows after dropping gear off higher up. He and Jay discussed target campsites so John could just dump gear with or without us present. And then he was off. Jay timed and positioned lunch at the base of the final climb to Evolution Lake. Yes, we were warned, it was going to be scorching, open, and steep. Although it was all those things, I remained impressed with how many trees shaded the path, even above 10,000 feet (and, trust me, I was timing a LOT of water/pee breaks based on tree shadows). Despite my strong start, Joan passed me a third of the way up. At some point, the terrain changed from dry, thin, forested hillside to flat open meadows, the rolling granite landscape dotted with pothole mudflats, tarns, grass, and flowers. Here, the trail seemed less intense as it meandered toward an obvious plane in the distance where I knew the lake would be (and it was). Consequently, I began to smell the barn, losing Tina and Kelsey (who arrived in camp 15 minutes after me - around 2:30).

Having likely settled for our second choice camp, we occupied the second trailside area, an extensive meadow along the northern end of the lake - a long beach with commanding views. I want to say, first off, that Evolution Lake was 1 of the most scenic campsites along this section of the JMT (and certainly among the top 3 - with Palisades and Guitar). Nevertheless, I held specific pre-conceptions about it, mostly based on Galen Rowell photographs. Consequently, I did not find Evolution Lake quite as massive and pretty as the pictures. There was something in the way that Rowell captured reflections that made the range look larger and more complex in his pictures. After setting up my tent, I headed down to the lakeshore nearest camp - only to find the immediate water shallow and warm (I wanted ice-cold for the knees and feet). It took a moderate stroll before I found a spot that was deeper and colder. Aside from some non-DDG backpackers who decided to get half-naked and jump in much next to me, it was a good soak. After an hour, I headed back to camp for an awesome nap in my perfectly warm tent (10,000 feet, for the record, was not as blazing as 8000 feet). When we first arrived, Jay alluded to leading a stroll over to the ex-current region of the lake where a big view down the whole valley could be had. Upon waking up around 4:30, I went looking for folks who were interested in said hike. I also donned my pimp-daddy sarong, having vowed that it was coming out once we hit 10,000 feet (we were at 10,852). Given that Jay and Kelsey had been seen leaving with their fly rods, Larry, Michael, and I headed off on our own. The obvious social trail was easy, except for 1 interesting stream crossing. Here, Evolution Creek poured down steep granite, plummeting down a headwall of solid rock. Obviously, the view down the entire valley was stunning and we found a nice place to sit and stare for a long while. Similarly, views up the valley were remarkable: Mts. Darwin, Mendel, Spencer... Indeed, the entire region bears place names referring to Darwin and evolution. Sufficed to say, jokes were raised as to whether the Bush administration was going to rename everything.



Left to Right: Evolution Lake - day, sunset, post-sunset

Upon returning to camp, we enjoyed dinner within the hour: corn chowder, mashed potatoes, and tasty Indian nan. As dinner proceeded, the serious alpenglow began. I blew, easily, 30-40 shots - both from camp and while running up a low rise of granite 5-10 minutes from camp. Given the immense openness of the sky, I also hoped to sit up until it was dark - being that we were near the height of the meteor showers. My tent was nicely positioned next to a big sitting rock with a commanding view of the lake - and so I sat there waiting. Amazingly, everyone else but the guides had retired. About 100 feet behind me, Jay and Kelsey were working to clean the dishes and secure the food. Giving up on stars appearing anytime soon, I strolled

back to help... but they were done, setting the last of the bowls on a drying tarp. Kelsey had actually heard of WOU, having researched MAT-offering programs on the west coast. I said I wasn't surprised, given that I'd instructed some of my rafting guides. I then likely offended Kelsey because we got into a discussion of higher education that led to my always-rabid comments about Bush's throwing more money at community colleges (which, in my experience, lack rigor) to solve the job crisis. Although I never detected any rampant republicanism in Kelsey, I believe it is accurate to say that he had drifted in and out of higher education (including community colleges). Given my comments, he likely thought I was an over-educated snob for at least that night. Oh well. As the trip evolved and peoples' true colors came out, it was clear we both agreed there were MANY things you can't learn in an academic setting. I don't think Kelsey thought I respected that while we were sitting there under the vast array of stars. Being that I was yawning, it was 10, and the Milky Way was now visible, I surrendered to the tent. Disappointingly, we'd only seen 5 shooting stars. Given the cheese-oriented lunch, I went to bed stopped up, worried I would be out enduring a major trowel movement in the middle of the night. As for the bathroom situation, there were no special facilities. Peeing was easy and shitting required digging a hole and squatting (although a folding seat/stand was available). Something that troubled a few of us was that we were supposed to burn our toilet paper prior to burying it. Given that several of us started small grassfires doing this, we would have preferred putting debris in a baggie and either carrying it out or burning it in a campfire. Burning issues aside, a couple folks (you can guess) were totally put off by the bathroom situation, expecting a formal privy tent/unit. Making matters worse: pretty much from Evolution Lake south, it was hard to find a campsite without micro-trash, obvious toilet paper, and old shit-holes (always-eloquent Larry referred to them as gushers) visible under or among the rocks. Even though it did not approach Patagonia, it was terrifically offensive - begging the question: why are there no pit toilets? Despite all the goodies making their way down my GI tract, my only overnight product was abdominal cramping and farting. A portion of said problems, though, was menstrual (a little-discussed fact about women's periods is gas and bloating). Fortunately, most people were suffering from altitude- or diet-related farting and I think it's safe to say we all just blended together. I did feel bad that Jay was camped right behind me; hopefully, he was not a light sleeper.



Top Left to Right: Evolution Lake at pre-dawn and dawn (sort of), halfway to Muir Pass
 Bottom Left to Right: Muir Pass - looking north (at basin we just hiked through), hut, and heading south into LeConte

August 10, 2004 - Evolution Lake to Little Pete Meadow/LeConte via Muir Pass (11,955 feet)

As usual, we were up around 6. After all the overnight sublimating (solid to gas, without a liquid phase), I made 2 productive dashes into the meadows, trowel and toilet-seat in hand. Everyone was shocked and/or pleasantly surprised how warm it was - overnight and in the morning. By 8, we were on the trail - prepared for a HUGE day (10 miles, 1200 up to Muir Pass and 3300 feet down). Yikes. All of my energy seemed spent and I moved slug-like all morning. It is accurate to say that I plodded to Muir Pass, struggling because I was sleepy, SERIOUSLY suffering from menstrual cramps, and bleeding like an open wound. The first section of trail wound around long and large Evolution Lake, climbing over talus fields that sloped into the still water. Following Evolution, we climbed successively from lake basin to lake basin: Sapphire, something small/un-named, Wanda, and McDermand. The scenery went from alpine meadows to barren, austere rock everywhere. We regrouped twice before the final haul to Muir Pass: once at the long rock-hop below Sapphire Lake and once for a snack along Wanda Lake. At the latter, Jay pointed into the distance, indicating where Muir Pass was. I misunderstood his directions (I don't think the Advil had kicked in - either that or I had already taken too much) and thought it was the lower of 2 obvious gaps. Consequently, I was MAJORLY disappointed when I arrived to the first gap and saw my teammates STILL CLIMBING. Of course, now I REALLY had to pee, there was NOTHING but low granite - with Kelsey, Tina, and Joan all caught up. Desperate, I found a large slab off the trail. Behind this rock, Joan and I squatted side-by-side, Tina and Kelsey waiting 20 feet down the trail. Given my situation, I left an obvious red streak down the granite (I REALLY hoped Joan didn't see this). I also noticed that I had COMPLETELY bled all over the crotch of my pants. Although the stain was not easy to see from behind, I haven't felt so self-conscious about my period since I was a damn teenager. I had elected to wear a so-called "ultra-thin heavy-flow" pad (total BS). I was not about to insert one of my OB tampons with Joan right there and blood everywhere. Consequently, I pressed on, hoping things would hold until better terrain was found. Peeing didn't make me go much faster but I did get ahead of Joan, Tina, and Kelsey (likely ashamed of my bloody pants crotch). Only Jay, at this point, knew about

the period situation (I told him the night before because I needed to verify how he wanted me to dispose of the roadkill). Jay was more than understanding about the situation; after making sure I had everything I needed, he asked that I store roadkill in temporary Ziploc baggies in my pack until food drop days (i.e. when new food arrived on incoming secondary stock parties, major/remaining trash was taken out). Despite everything, I made it up to Muir Pass 30 minutes earlier than I expected (we were all WELL ahead of Jay's expectations). Muir Pass is occupied by Muir Hut, a stone structure that - much to my chagrin - smelled of urine. Its large fireplace had been systematically filled with rocks to discourage active use (not that there was any wood to burn and not that you would want to remain inside long, given the smell). Given the calm, sunny, warm skies, we lingered and snacked at the pass for 30 minutes before heading down the other side. Jay had long warned us that Muir Pass represented the easy portion of the day; we still had 7 excruciatingly downhill miles to go as we descended into LeConte Canyon. Within 10 minutes of starting down, of course, I had to pee again. As there were few large boulders beyond the trail, I went pretty much in view of anyone coming/facing uphill - the snails blocking passage down.

The first half-mile down LeConte was not too steep - although the terrain the trail contoured was much steeper than that on the north side of the pass. But then the trail got crazy-steep and super-rocky - unlike most everything else on the JMT. Like I said at lunch, THAT trail would be called an un-maintained climbers' path and closed to stock in the Winds. Piecing my way down, I was constantly reminded of Shannon Pass between Upper Jean and Peak Lakes in the Northern Wind Rivers: the extremely convoluted trail, the way it passed through tight mini-canyons where you couldn't see much ahead of you, and the fact that you felt like you were in this skyscraper-like maze of rock. This was also the only place where an honest-to-goodness section of holey snow blocked the trail - the patch lingering along a tight and steep ravine of highly mobile, head-sized talus. Instead of going across, most people (including our party) crossed a series of teetering rocks that cut a shallow arch below the iffy section of dirty white. At around 1:30, we arrived at a large, round lake that marked the point between rocky upper LeConte and more alpine meadows - albeit surrounded by or interspersed with soaring walls and shelves of solid granite. Here, we enjoyed pre-fab vegetarian Indian (the same stuff at Tweedsmuir camp on the Alsek) with rice and tortillas. I also recall jam-filled shortbread cookies and orange-filled chocolates. Of course, I HAD to squirt Palak Paneer all over my pants (major coverage, both thighs) - which amused Jay to no end. Little did he know (or maybe he did): now I had green thighs to go with my red crotch. The most disgusting thing, however: I would wear these pants UNWASHED until the end (at which time there was little red or green left). As we were beginning seconds, John and the stock miraculously appeared. His first words were: Gosh, I don't remember that trail being so hard. And then he sat down while Jay explained how to eat the bags of Indian food (and what they were). At some point, we heard a splash: Kelsey swan-diving from a large boulder along a distant peninsula. Given that our ultimate camp for the night lacked easy water access (which I did not know at the time), I regret not soaking my knees here. At some point during lunch, I decided to finally deal with the blood situation and take care of a necessary trowel movement. Well - it was not pretty, and made less so by somebody else's streaming toilet paper in my chosen spot. I not only changed pads but also added a big, heavy-flow tampon (which I REALLY hate wearing). All I can say: thank god for Handi-wipes. Now - just a warning for anyone who has been offended by these stories: they will get worse before they get better.



Left to Right: various views while descending into magnificent LeConte Canyon

After lunch, Jay estimated we had 4-5 miles left to go. This middle section of LeConte Canyon featured the most beautiful, lush, green, and extensive meadows we saw along the whole trail. The views were also HUGE and spectacular. In contrast with the serpentine and narrow upper sections, the middle/lower sections were straight down this MASSIVE U-shaped canyon, following a gorgeous river (Middle Fork of the Kings) that often flowed down solid granite. As we descended, the party order did shuffle a fair bit. I personally felt I was going too fast as I took over the likes of Michael, Peggy, and Ralph (which likely explained my subsequent knee problems). But I enjoyed everything except the last mile - when it finally began to level out, passing through dry, taller grass meadows. Given high numbers of campers - in combination with the relatively late hour - I am fairly certain we did not get the campsite Jay hoped for. At some point, I ran into John and his girlfriend scoping out a camp (she came in with the food drop team, currently down at the ranger station near our camp). Joan, who had been coincidentally packed in by John on a Sierra Club trip 2 years before, later noted that he was now with a different woman. Shortly thereafter, I met up with our group - lying in the grass along the river. Within 10 minutes, Jay sprinted toward us, trying to convince us to hike another 10 minutes. Most of us could barely stand, our joints having completely stiffened and our attitude souring as the warm sunlight vanished behind the towering granite. Our camp, 2 minutes from the ranger station (and the incoming Dusy Basin/Bishop Pass trail - by which the food drop team had come), was my least favorite on the whole trip. The river access sucked (down a rough, steep, and rocky incline with no trail), flat sites were hard to come by, and the views/ambiance were poor given the immediate shadows. Given weird pains along my right iliotibial band (ITB), my first order of business was to painfully stumble down to the river. Once I found a place to immerse my legs in the otherwise shallow river, I thought things were feeling better. After 30 minutes, though, I could not warm my now-numb legs in the shade. Thus, I climbed back up the nasty shit hill on chilly joints, my knee actively throbbing with pain. Needless to say, I panicked - truly

concerned that I would be riding out over Bishop Pass tomorrow. After setting up my tent, I felt exhausted and fell into a remarkably deep sleep that lasted an hour - despite audible conversation and socializing 75 feet away. Partly disoriented, it took me a moment to realize dinner was being served. After hearing something about garlic bread, I felt the immediate need to get up. I think it is safe to say, however, that I was not in the mood to be social. Last through the dinner line, I wolfed down cheese tortellini in marinara covered with major Parmesan, and 2 chunks of buttery garlic bread. I also made the slight error (in retrospect) of sharing my ITB condition with Michael, David, and Joan. All responded with immediate concern, including riding out. Although such thoughts had crossed my mind, it was frankly devastating to hear other people suggest them.

Following a celebratory group toast of port (and others making their way to bed), I decided to talk with Jay and Kelsey. I don't know how much of whatever emotion I was feeling was my period vs. the thought of giving up on something I had been preparing for a whole year (the only other trip I'd ever trained THAT hard for was the Wonderland). I just know I was on the edge of bursting into tears through the whole conversation. Anyway - neither Jay nor Kelsey was, like, freaked out - they just wanted to get as much information as possible (as both had dealt with knee problems of their own). I explained that I was seriously concerned that a 10-year-old ITB problem was back. In that case, I had been carrying a 50-lb pack down a climbers' path that dropped 3500 feet in 2.5 miles. My doctor's advice: ibuprofen; ITB-specific stretches, and icing - all before, during, and after hiking. While I felt I was keeping up on my ibuprofen on this trip, I admitted that I was not stretching as much as I should and icing, obviously, depended on camp. Jay asked whether I thought it was a complete pull or just a strain. I said I honestly did not know because it had been too many years since this happened before. I then went on about my concerns about continuing and, although I never full-on cried, Jay and Kelsey knew I was holding it back. I knew from experience that I could hobble down a few dozen miles if things fully blew - but I'd never had to hobble out over these big passes. I said I didn't want to give up but I didn't know what would happen if I continued. We still had 3 GIGANTIC passes before the next food drop (4 days away) and no easy escape routes. Kelsey knew I was on the verge of losing it and sat down behind me, took my obviously tense neck/shoulders, and calmly explained that I was going to be fine - the knee was just strained because it had been a hard day; I needed to take several deep breaths; the party wasn't going to fall apart if anything did happen later; I just needed to get a good night's sleep, do everything I usually did to keep stretched out, and think positively. Jay agreed - but was definitely not the type to get touchy-feely with emotional women he didn't know (which, alas, was part of the reason Kelsey was WAY more charming). Having faced equally trying moments on other challenging trips and often been dealt the take-it-like-a-man attitude by too many hiking partners (male, female, lovers, friends, and family), I appreciated Kelsey's calm and supportive attitude. In what became a horrible irony, Kelsey hiked out on a seriously-pulled knee at the end of this trip. To this day, I worry he caught it from me - as though it was an infectious agent that transferred between us in LeConte Canyon. I will always feel responsible somehow - not to mention guilty for recovering. Roger will, no doubt, email me the following: Sarah, you recovered because of all the hormones sent coursing through your veins (and he may be right). Promising to be good, I left to brush my teeth. Just as I was about to get into my tent for good, Jay approached me with a speech about how I was going to be fine and I needed to ignore other client concerns and focus on strengthening my knee. I said I really did appreciate both his and Kelsey's supportive advice the most; I also pointed out that - as HE well knew - it had been a hard day with many serious distractions (he nodded knowingly, likely thankful I didn't use the M or P word)... to the point I was probably walking stiffer than usual. Before we said our good-night's, I asked him - with a laugh - whether I was allowed to wear a menthol icy hot patch given bear issues. Yes, given the circumstances, I was allowed. Once in the tent, I had WAY too many things to deal with: changing WAY-bloody tampons and pads, applying patches to my knee, and taking Nyquil (this plus the port would knock me out good). Once I settled, though, everything I'd been holding back overflowed and I just wept these memorably big, hot tears for, like, 15 minutes before finally accepting that I had to push through all of this. Even at the time, I knew the big cry had nothing to do with sadness; it was about letting go of ALL this stress and reaching some higher level of trust with the guides. Until those moments with Jay and Kelsey, I had had no tangible reason to ask myself whether I trusted or needed them. Meanwhile, Jay and Kelsey enjoyed a major box-burning fest outside - while I calmly fell asleep to these dancing reds and yellows and oranges. Of course, in the middle of the night, I awoke to major cramps, the need to pee, and the feeling of blood between my skin and the rented sleeping bag. Thus, I proceeded outside in my way-bloody underwear to pee. Making matters worse, Jay had set up his tent 10 feet to my right. This made me all self-conscious about the noisy clean-up. I could go on - but I won't because it honestly rivaled the comparable night on the Colorado in terms of mess. Even so, I quickly fell back asleep and remained as such until morning.



Left to Right: Golden Staircase (from below), views while climbing the Golden Staircase

August 11, 2004 - LeConte to Lower Palisades Lake via the Golden Staircase

The next morning, we were up at 6 a.m. I awoke well-rested and my knee seemed more stiff than strained or pulled. Given my LARGE baggie of roadkill, I tried to surreptitiously make my way into the kitchen where the trash bag was kept (as this was my last chance for disposal before the next food drop). Given last night, there was NO WAY I was getting by stove-manning

Kelsey whose eyes seemed fixed on my every move (no doubt trying to figure out how the knee was). I finally just smiled and said I hoped he wasn't going to watch me this much all day... because if he was, he was liable to catch seeing things like roadkill. It took him a second but then everything clicked. I explained further: you have NO IDEA how bad yesterday was... the knee was only half the problem - at least I know the other one is going to go away. After breakfast, Jay commented that he had been watching me and was happy I appeared to be neither limping nor favoring the other leg/knee. Although I don't mind a little attention, I felt self-conscious when Jay said these things to me - particularly because I like to believe that I am more aware when someone is watching me. We began hiking around 8. It was clear, sunny, and already warm. Jay had warned us that we had 3 miles of downhill (800 feet) before we turned east and started climbing. Said descent was like the last annoying mile of yesterday's hike. Making matters worse, most was in the trees - wasting precious shade on the coolest part of the day. Given Jay's advice and my own experience, I decided to do something that did not make sense to others: stop using my poles. Why? First, I wanted to FEEL what was going on (poles masked a lot). Second, I wanted to work on building back leg strength. And, third, it was time to focus on even, balanced walking (poles make me walk more sloppy). In general, I have learned over the years that my knees stiffen more when I walk rigidly (like yesterday, given cramps). I suspected I needed to consciously loosen up my stride, transferring more impact to my quad's (which have always been my greatest strength). Although I stopped using my poles for general hiking, I did not put them away. I knew I needed them for stream crossings and pacing myself on uphill sections. I also used them to ease the strain of getting up after stretching (something I did once per hour). The best ITB stretch - I have found - is the one where you sit down with one leg crossed over the other (flat on the ground) and then you lean in/over the bent knee - which stretches the ITB on the flat leg.

As suggested, though, 3 miles is not a short walk - and so it seemed like a long time before we re-grouped at the junction of the Middle Fork of Kings River and Palisade Creek. After enjoying some snacks, we continued up/east. From this point, we climbed gently for 3 miles, the latter portion through a 2-year-old burn. The first non-burn section was pleasant but deceptively easy. Every flat section concerned me because I KNEW it meant that today's crux - the infamous Golden Staircase - was going to be THAT much steeper. The burn section was disturbing in light of the toilet paper burning rule. But the views were impressive - particularly down the emerging canyon toward the Three Sirens. Looking up-canyon, though, I had NO IDEA where the staircase was (there were a couple possible saddles). We regrouped for a major water stop in some shady woods. Although it was noon, someone (I think Larry) proposed that we postpone lunch until camp. It sounded good at the time but, honestly, everyone was hungry-crazy by the time we hauled up the final 3 miles (even though, seriously, we made it up by 2). Before continuing into the open talus fields, I knew it was time to change tampons (a major production). Despite the fact that the bleeding was calming down, I picked a too-large tampon and wound up - let's just say - VERY uncomfortable all the way up the Golden Staircase. With ZERO places to trade in for smaller, I pressed on in an annoyed, anti-social mood. And then the fun REALLY began: the Golden Staircase, the last completed section of the JMT. Although most Golden Staircase websites I found said this name referred to the trail being blasted out of yellow-white granite cliffs, a few claimed the name actually referred to the amount of money all that construction cost. The worst section was 2 miles and 1500 feet (not bad - it just looked awful and felt unending). As usual, I began hiking in front of Joan and Tina (and Kelsey). At some point during the first half-mile up, I shockingly overtook Rob. This first section zigzagged up a steep talus slope interspersed with stands of low bushes and streamlets that seemed to overflow from roaring Palisade Creek (which cut down the middle of the wide, high-angle gully). After 20 minutes, the trail topped out on solid rock and then veered away from the creek. Above, a dizzying number of closely-spaced switchbacks proceeded straight up a 60-70° angle chute of rocks. Near the top of this FIRST chute (yes, there were MORE), the fast members of our party appeared closely strung together. I audibly muttered FUCK under my breath several times. Honestly, though, I LOVED all the chutes of switchbacks. They were short, gentle, and made me feel strong and capable. It was the shit afterwards that went ON and ON and ON, made no sense, and wore me out. After a few more chutes, the way topped out again - but this time it seemed like there was nothing but a solid granite headwall before us. To this day, I have no idea how the trail went... it just started meandering via totally random things into the jumble of rock. Eventually, things became less steep and the Palisades (14,000+ foot mountains) came into view in the distance. Although you THINK you are near the end, there is still another mile of meandering, slightly up-hill shit to tackle. So - DON'T get your hopes up until you see the goddamned lake. THAT was the too-large, fat, dry, itchy tampon talking - for the record.



Left to Right: 10 minutes before Palisade Lake, the black plague at Palisade Lake, alpenglow looking south from camp

OK - so Palisade Lake was GORGEOUS (among the top 3 camps on this trip). Worth every damn moment of suffering. At least 2 parties were camped along the ex-current end of the lake; several teams would follow, making for the most crowded evening so far. We camped along the left bank - amongst granite slabs and low bushes. Given the knee, my first order of business was to get into the lake - which offered a deeper shelf along the shore (i.e. I was able to stand up to my mid-thighs in QUITE cold water for 40 minutes). Tina and Joan vanished down the trail and behind some bushes for bath; only the screaming gave them away. Given that everyone was famished, lunch was set up quickly once all arrived: an interesting combination of peanut butter, Nutella, bananas, walnuts, and tortillas. Although the sugar and protein rush was filling, I craved salt for the next several hours. John's arrival coincided, as usual, with lunch - convenient because we were all now energized

and ready to set up tents. As with Muir Pass, John's response to the Golden Staircase: Gosh, I don't remember that trail being so hard. As with Evolution, Palisade offered neither protection from the sun or rain, nor much soil for tent stakes. Shortly after erecting my tent (using lines and rocks), substantial clouds moved abruptly down from the north and sprinkled us with refreshing rain. In what is now an ironic act, many people started thanking the sky and asking for more, more, more. Meanwhile, I was - like: NOOOOOOO. People were, of course, taking back ALL those requests when the rain, hail, and cold visited us with a vengeance over the next several days. But, at the time, the rain seemed a pleasant novelty. I don't remember what I did for the several hours - given that I did no work, reading, writing, or anything useful for 15 days straight (except collect firewood). At some point, an ill-prepared, soaked mother/daughter team arrived, squatting in our space. Mom, dehydrated and possibly suffering mild altitude sickness, seemed incoherent and challenging (or maybe she was just naturally stubborn and confused). They had plowed in via Bishop Pass and taken no days to allow for acclimatization. Clearly beyond abilities, their goal was to hike to and summit Whitney over the next 9 days (we still had 12 days to go for this feat). Carrying poorly-packed rucksacks, they oxymoronically (or just plain moronically) unloaded a flimsy plastic tube tent and down sleeping bags (lord knows what other crap they were hauling around). Jay and Kelsey made them hydrate, encouraged them to re-evaluate their itinerary, and helped them erect their silly tent (next to impossible given the lack of trees). While mom continued to be extremely difficult (her responses defensively know-it-all in tone and nature), her teenage daughter seemed inexperienced and useless. Not surprisingly, we never saw these women again during the trip. The next thing I remember was dinner, which Kelsey qualified as being sushi-inspired. Given that I don't do fish or wasabi, I had rice, more than my share of avocados, and miso soup. Tofu would have been nice. The light during/after dinner was amazing - although it seemed that only Jay and I were taking such pictures. I was later told that Jay complimented my eye for interesting light.

At some point after dinner, Jay explained what was in store for us tomorrow: over Mather Pass (12,100), a LONG descent, and a short climb (just in case we forgot what that was like) to Marjorie Lake. It would be our longest day yet - 12 miles (argh). As Jay continued, I was overcome with MAJOR GI distress. Of all places on THIS trail. MAN did Palisade suck in terms of bathroom amenities: no privacy, no diggable soil, nothing close to camp that was also more than 100 feet from water. DASHING from the dining area, I spent 5-7 excruciating minutes searching for someplace reasonable and legal. I found neither by the time I knew I was going to 'splode. And 'splode I did - behind a giant rock in view of several distant tents. I would say that I was 70 feet from a small stream and the best I could do was to dislodge some hand-sized rocks from the tough meadow grass (which refused the trowel) and deposit in the space left behind. I actually had to move 3 rocks before I found 1 that didn't reveal someone else's old shit and toilet paper. Squatting for 15-20 minutes, I had LOTS of time to stare at the Palisades. Burning my toilet paper, I felt MUCH better (and such problems never returned). An hour after I returned to camp, though, Jay felt the need to discuss the dire toilet situation, emphasizing that we do our absolute best to be more careful about finding legal bathroom sites. He pointed to a distant (far and high) shelf where he said there was privacy AND sandy dirt for proper digging/burial. Although several of us had taken the trowel into the vicinity where I had been (and, believe me, you learned to watch where people went for many reasons - NOT stumbling into them being the most important), I felt guilty - as though Jay was ONLY talking to me (because, god forbid, he'd rooted me out). Nonetheless, it was hard to feel totally guilty about needing to do what I did - not only because I was sick but also because this place was SO shamefully abused by people who, I can assure you, were NOT suffering from explosive diarrhea. I decided it was time to slink off to bed. By now, the skies had cleared and shooting stars began, even against the still-light sky. Every time Tina, camping tent-less 20 feet up the hill from me, saw a shooting star, she audibly made some substantial sound of awe. I don't recall if I finally put in my earplugs or if Tina finally calmed down - but I fell into a deep and long slumber.



Left to Right: Mather Pass (the notch), switchbacks to Mather Pass, almost there (Palisade Lake below, Palisades above)

August 12, 2004 - Lower Palisades Lake to the South Fork of the Kings River via Mather Pass (12,100 feet)

Alert readers will recognize that we failed to make it to Marjorie Lake. The rain, worshipped at Palisades, finally got us good. Even so, the day started clear, albeit with clouds forming in the distant north. Suspecting we may get slammed, Jay began by going over safety things regarding the pass: given bimodal hiking patterns, he planned for everyone to wait at the pass if conditions were reasonable. However, if he got there with front folks and it was bad (lightening or precipitation), he would send them over without him, designating they wait at an obvious creek crossing near tree-line. Meanwhile, he would backtrack to a safe point before/below the pass and gather slow folks until he deemed it safe to cross. With these warnings and breakfast in our now-happy stomachs, we set out. Planning for the worst, I made the morning-only mistake of wearing long pants. As with comparable mornings, I started out in 3 layers of tops, each easy to remove. Committing to long pants, though, always meant a big stop. And stop I did - after 20 minutes of steady climbing and then some flat meandering through thin stands of trees. Indeed, the trail climbed abruptly above the lake from camp but then leveled out, contouring at around 200 feet above the water for some time. No trails descended to Upper Palisade Lake, which came into view at the point where I decided to exchange pants for shorts and lube up on sunscreen. From here, the way climbed above the upper lake through

rocky meadows. It was here - thankfully BEFORE the land become NOTHING but rocks - that I endured another menstruation moment (title-inspiring, in fact) that actually provided a source of levity as I plodded up Mather Pass. Given yesterday's issues with too-LARGE tampons, I decided to go with the smallest option today (WAY more comfortable). The problem: I sat down all alone for my first big knee stretch. The stretching part went fine but then I tried to get up. Something about the strain and the position caused that little tampon to shoot out (caught by my thankfully synthetic underwear). Shooting tampons is something women I know joke about but nobody thinks ever really happens. Well - there I was in the middle of the Sierras and I shot my tampon. Of course, the next thing to cross my mind (NOT nearly as funny): Kelsey catching up. Consequently, there was no time to fuss with Handi-Wipes... I was, like: put it back in, wipe the hands on the underwear, and try not to notice whatever winds up under the nails. Given that I was on antibiotics and had anti-fungal/yeast drugs, I was not too concerned about the possibility of a hygiene-related infection - particularly when weighed against getting caught in a VERY awkward position. I am sure that story will divide people into 100% offended vs. 100% amused. I have since shared it only with Jenn, George, and Allison - who predictably howled with laughter. Within 10 minutes of continuing, I caught up to Joan in the middle of this dead-end cirque of formidable rock. Joan, who had previously done the JMT in pieces, was at a loss to recall which of the many ragged notches was Mather. Finally, we saw TINY specks of color making their way up this daunting wall of rock to our left - heading for this WAY-HIGH notch. Joan couldn't BELIEVE we were heading up there. I was beginning to resign myself to the notion that if some feature looked improbable and impossible, it was likely where we were heading. As with the Golden Staircase, I cursed under my breath and then enjoyed the long switchbacks; indeed, I was truly impressed with how you could look up at all these crazy passes and, literally, see just rocks... NO evidence of a trail. But then you would just keep going and there was the trail - wide and well constructed. Somehow, I managed to get ahead of Joan and Tina, arriving at the pass around 10:30 (30 minutes before I thought I'd arrive there). Because the weather was stable, Jay had gathered everyone to wait. Although the pass was awash in temporary sun, clouds were gathering in all other directions. The views were striking - much more impressive than those from Muir. To the north, the Palisades massively towered over their namesake lakes. To the south, the trail dropped via LONG switchbacks down an impressive headwall before crossing this golden plain of rocks and grass (Upper Basin). Beyond, an endless sea of jagged mountains were on the verge of complete deluge by billowing stacks of clouds. We enjoyed a brief snack but knew it was time to boogie because we began to hear thunder.



Left to Right: view south from Mather, looking back at Mather - from close and then from far (Palisades visible through notch)

For many reasons, I did not rush down to the Upper Basin. The amazing, dynamic light justified MANY stares and photo stops. By the time I was hitting the Upper Basin (thunder and lightening audible and visible among all surrounding high peaks), most of the fast crowd was already dropping out of view 1.5-2 miles ahead. Rob, Tina, Joan, Kelsey, and I were the only people in my view when the deluge arrived. After 5 minutes of serious rain, I stopped to dig out and put on my rain jacket - at which point pelting hail fell in a deafening mass of white. By this point, I was in distant sight of tree line and decided to put up with the stinging sensation of ice on bare legs (after previous events, such decisions were very relative). The trail dropped gently through golden grass, rocks, and occasional streams lined with lush plants and flowers. Owing to the rain and my head-down stance, I didn't see the party until I was 1 creek away. Only Jay dashing out from under a small stand of trees to lend his hand (which was accepted) on the slick log crossing gave away the fact that 10 or so people were huddled nearby. I would have been more inclined to call where we stopped sub-alpine meadow - not tree-line. The sparing trees were small and offered little in the way of protection. As had everyone else, I rapidly donned ALL my gear, layering long pants and rain pants, adding my fleece jacket to my upper layers (it should be no surprise that it was no longer warm). More than on any other trip (the Alsek and Patagonia being strong runners-up), I learned on this trip that I (and my gear) could withstand an awful lot of discomfort and weather. This was the first of several times when I found simple peace in full-on rain - not concerned or stressed about my personal well-being. Having made all these glowingly stress-free remarks, though, we were all wondering how John was faring. We knew he was IN that storm AND on the pass. Some people seemed concerned about the possibility that he was not going to make it - what that would mean. I guess, having experienced a few tough cowboys, I knew he'd make it. About 30 minutes after everyone in our party had arrived, John appeared HEROICALLY through the misty torrent, wearing his long oilskin coat and cowboy hat - rain dripping prolifically off the many shiny jacket flaps and from virtually the entire brim. Needless to say, he received a standing ovation and catcalls. Given still-pouring rain, John tied up the stock and joined us for another 10 minutes. And then it was over (for awhile). Jay and Kelsey prepared lunch on a massive bulge of nearby granite as we all partially disrobed, shaking the beading drops off the raingear. As sun emerged fully from the whitening sky, it was shocking how warm it suddenly grew. More clothes were hung over weeping bushes as we sprawled out and ate ravenously. But, alas, the sun would be short-lived. This was no surprise given that magnificently dark and billowing clouds swirled chaotically in every direction beyond our sunspot. As we packed up, Jay announced that he was not certain we would go to Marjorie because he did not want to risk setting up tents in a downpour; Marjorie was also high and open and Jay did not want to subject us to a potentially large storm in that kind of environment. Thus, we would be hiking 2 miles down to the South Fork of the Kings River (low point of the day) and, there, he would make the final call.

Half way to the river, we were hit with big rain again. Even so, all the local peaks were visible - the clouds at least 12,000 high in the sky. Looking back, Mather Pass seemed blended into the color of the sky - behind, bruise-colored clouds appeared to devour the dark Palisades. In the distance, thunder continued to roll. In no time (it seemed), we arrived at the river; it was around 3 p.m. Jay vanished for a spell, explaining that he needed to take a look around and think about his decision. As the trip progressed, we noticed and discussed more and more when Jay and Kelsey vanished for daily meetings. After 10 minutes, Jay returned to announce that we would be camping here - for the aforementioned reasons. At the time, I wanted to push on. But later, flip-flopping liberal Sarah agreed with Jay - partly because we enjoyed a great fire that lifted spirits and dried gear, and partly because tomorrow's hike - even with the extra 1.5 mile - was short. While thinking, Jay had found a good place to camp just down the trail - albeit involving a complex river crossing. Unlike some people, I did not take any spills (nor did I need a hand) - despite my sandals, which others began to finally notice (wondering how or why I would hike in them on rough trails and in the rain). Fortunately, the rain had mostly stopped by the time we were ready to unload the stock and set up camp. Even so, the camp was fully soaked (as was all raingear). After setting up my tent, I spent a fair bit of time really sorting gear into 2 piles: things I absolutely needed in the tent and things I didn't. The latter went inside plastic bags within either the daypack or the compression sack, both of which stayed outside but mostly protected under big trees. Such sorting made the tent interior bigger and more organized - and so I continued this routine daily, regardless of the weather. I was, honestly, shocked how easy dealing with the rain and gear was despite the small tent.



Left to Right: John and Crescent arrive from Mather, emergency camp (Larry and my growing fire), John's cowboy bedroll

Larry and I decided that it was going to be a fire night - even if we were, technically, 100 feet too high (for the record: there was a HUGE, well-used fire-ring in the center of camp). When Larry and I announced our plans, though, I don't think anyone believed we could do it (not even the guides). But, like I said, Larry was good at starting fires and I was good at finding all sizes of timber. Within 15 minutes, we had a small blaze. Within 30 minutes, everyone was shocked to see this roaring inferno that was so hot we could put wet logs next to it and, within 5-10 minutes, they were dry enough to burn. I most remember Jay and Kelsey's dumbfounded expressions while preparing dinner (about 30 feet away). Every time they looked up, they swore it was getting bigger - the temperature downright balmy within a 30-foot radius of the flames. Shortly thereafter, we enjoyed burritos with rice, beans, and seasoned tofu. With some begging from me (because he'd mentioned it as a "maybe" earlier), Kelsey made a fabulously fat dessert: pan-fried apples in butter with pecans, walnuts, and strudel-like dough blobs. I, of course, ate the most - drinking a cupful of the concentrated calories. And I enjoyed my best night of sleep on the whole trip (in this blissfully fire-warmed and fat-induced state). Of course, I also do tend to sleep better in cooler temperatures (which it was beyond the fire) and I did find the sound of the on-and-off rain relaxing. A few random memories of our evening at South Fork: John mysteriously vanished much of the evening, having been summoned (or enticed) by 2 very young girls, camped near his bedroll, who somehow convinced him they were peak-bagging. That they giggled so much caused some of us to question their assertions. Tina feigned EXTREME jealousy over John's indiscretions with YOUNGER women when he FINALLY showed up for dinner; she and Joan (who had, in fact, bagged most local peaks) visited the girls after dinner, discovering that they never got close to any summits in their aimless wanderings. What can I say? We were all jealous when it came to John. The number of parties camped close to us (4-6) spoke to the foul weather - the fact that a LOT of people were changing their itinerary and playing it safe. At some point, Jay described tomorrow's itinerary. Even though it was a short day (now 6.5 miles, 2600 feet up, 1000 feet down), Jay wanted us up at 5:00 a.m. He explained that this weather system was not a typical afternoon thunderhead build-up; it was a real storm with potential staying power AND unusually low temperatures. While the cold made thunder/lightening less likely, it raised the specter of snow/ice. Even so, we went to bed with mostly clear skies - which explained the frigid conditions once the sun vanished.

August 13, 2004 - South Fork of the Kings River to Crater Mountain Plateau via Pinchot Pass (12,130 feet)

I did not acknowledge how short today's hike was until it was over. Honestly, I was dead on my feet most of the morning. I can't remember which of my ex's decided to appear in my dreams; each paid me at least 1 visit along the granite trail of high-altitude dreams. Anyway - getting up in the freezing darkness at 5:00 sucked. I packed by headlamp, wearing 3 layers top to bottom. The brief climb to Marjorie Lake was the only section where my pace seemed alright. There, a ranger chased down the snail team, asking where our leaders were because she wanted to discuss our plans for the night. We explained that Jay was 15-20 minutes ahead, Kelsey an hour behind. We were slightly concerned that she chose to wait for Kelsey because she thought he was a she (said while dashing off - before we could correct the pronoun). Marjorie Lake was at the low end of a long, meandering valley - several lakes and tarns dotting the higher landscape above. The peaks on either side of the valley were different than everything we'd seen so far: darker, more crumbly, volcanic - resembling ugly quarries in comparison to all the gorgeous granite (honestly, it was my least favorite section on this whole trip). Had the weather been clear and sunny, I don't think my impression would have changed. As we climbed toward Pinchot and Crater Mountain, the rocks became iron-red. I also found the trail up to the pass irregular and indirect. Even so, I made it up there by 10:30 - an hour before I was

expecting. Unlike me, Jay was ecstatic over the reasonable weather and our timing. You've GOT to be KIDDING, Jay - I SUCKED ALL MORNING (I did tell him that, by the way).



Left to Right: Various views of Marjorie Lakes/Basin during the climb to Pinchot Pass

The climb to Pinchot marked the day Rob, women in tow, earned his rest-of-the-trip title, harem-master. Despite MANY years of hiking, I still struggle with setting my own pace - especially at elevation. After, by far, my most irregular week of hiking, I finally accepted that I needed help. Tina and Joan, determined to pull up the rear, were just a little too slow. Rob and I had been close the whole trip and I'd observed him long enough to know he would be the best person to even out my psychotic pace. I'd also spent enough time talking with him to know that we conversed easily - and were secure enough to enjoy the scenery without the need to ramble. Even though Rob's trekking resume rivaled all serious travelers I know, he was 1 of the most humble, supportive, and honest people I've met over the years. When viewed against the spectrum of men I have known in different ways over the years, Rob definitely rated in an extreme zone of innocent and vulnerable. Admittedly, Rob and bonded at levels that had a couple folks wondering if there was more going on than 2 people sharing views of the world. And I freely admit there were times when I had to ask myself what kinds of feelings were getting wrapped up in all the words and time spent on the trail. But I could not get over 3 things: First, the 20-year age difference. Second, I felt so worldly as compared to Rob when it came to even my limited relationship history. Third, I do not prioritize or define myself in terms of committed relationships. Having experienced lust, temptation, unfulfilling years of craving security in the form of marriage, and profound love in many forms, I simply do not believe there is 1 true love for each person. And I think that essential tenet provides the most fundamental and serious difference between Rob and I. It is strange, nevertheless, what trips of this magnitude do to the soul. As echoed in many of my stories: wilderness and physical challenge may provide the primary impetus for doing this stuff... but in the end it is often other people - how they affect you - that create the deepest impressions and effects. Rob, who was dear to me, certainly made me think a lot about who I am/have been, and what I value.



Left to Right: Pinchot Pass view south, bathing tarn near campsite, camp view (Clarence King on second, distant ridge)

OK - where were we? Pinchot Pass, surveying the jagged line of reddish gray and brown rubble-strewn peaks above a vast plain of gold and green and orange. Rob, Joan, and I descended together, engaged in the first of many conversations about team dynamics, traveling with mixed groups, and comparing travel companies with an emphasis on client expectations. Although I don't recall what initiated this conversation, responses to yesterday's weather and the itinerary change influenced the topic. As experienced outdoors-people, the 3 of us had all been expecting to face and overcome such challenges. But we were beginning to acknowledge that some members of our party had no idea that cold and rain were likely possibilities in the Sierras (among other things). At some point the night before, Jay said he usually brought a few cheap plastic ponchos to every pre-trip meeting because there were always a few clients who disregarded packing lists, assuming "this was California - it never rains." In response to this story, a couple teammates explained that, indeed, they would have never packed raingear if Jay hadn't provided them a packing list. It was a flabbergasting remark, certainly on my mind a lot as the team and trip progressed. Still yacking on this topic, we arrived at camp around (SHOCKING!) 12:30 p.m. Here, the topography was strange and difficult to describe: everything was sloping downward - eventually into the large valley occupied by Woods Creek. Beyond, an immense array of ominously rugged peaks (most notably, Clarence King) was being consumed by ridiculously large cumulus clouds rising to 20,000+ feet. Although the JMT dropped to the valley/creek, the trail proceeded considerably down-river (west) before climbing again - thus cutting a WIDE arc around the imposing peaks immediately south of camp. The broad ridgeline along which we camped was steep on the east, dropping to Twin Lakes. Immediately across from us, crumbling gray and brown Mt. Cedric Wright (a Sierra photographer) sounded at least 3 major rock-falls over the next 15-18 hours. To the west of camp, the terrain was rolling meadow with several shallow lakes pocketed variously. Despite the fact that most of the day had been overcast and cool, a spot of blue provided Joan, Tina, and I enough incentive to brave a

bath in the lake nearest to the trail/camp. Down a mild slope of thin forest, our bathing spot was out of camp view. Thus, clothes were lost and at least 1 person (TINA) effectively re-enacted the deli scene from "When Harry Met Sally" as she immersed herself in the cold water - screaming at the top of her lungs. That Larry was soon bathing at the far end of the lake (missing our R-rated show) and Kelsey teased us when we finally returned to camp was no surprise (we even got a smile from Jay). Lunch - bread and crackers with smoked fishes, cheese, and vegetarian pate - was served after the giggling women returned (it's hard to say clean). John arrived 10 minutes later. Within an hour, stupendously massive clouds ripped over Crater Mountain and a long, intense downpour drowned the camp. Like most people, I leapt into my tent for a forced nap. Although the idea of bad weather may sound horrible, I have to confess that I enjoyed this particular storm because my tent was luxuriously warm and the sound of the fierce rain was musically lulling. Compulsory naps like this seemed a reasonable trade for all the good weather we DID enjoy. While there were some moments of weather-generated annoyance on this trip, we fundamentally lucked out because we never hiked long in the rain, we never had to erect tents in downpours, and we saw all the mountains - either because the clouds were above them or because, within an hour or so, it was clear again.

Dinner, curried cous cous with LOTS of nuts and fruits, seemed late for a few of us (although I will only speak for my state of sugar-low bitchiness). Sadly, morale was reduced further by the fact that the sky decided to dump as we were scooping up dinner. Yes - this would be an example of weather-generated annoyance. Huddling beneath heavy, already-wet branches with a rapidly cooling bowl of unfulfilling cous cous (that made its way through my system in record time) was a serious low point for me. I daresay: I preferred shooting my tampon below Mather Pass because at least I was able to derive great amusement from THAT. After several exciting bathroom runs DOWN the steep side of camp, I spent some time socializing with the guides and a few hardy teammates willing to brave the cold, wet kitchen area. It had, by sunset, stopped raining and the sky appeared to be clearing yet again. As we admired the rising/parting ceiling of red-undersided clouds from the open vantage just below the kitchen, we were suddenly distracted by major noise down at Twin Lakes (where John and the stock had to camp). At first, we thought John was just being funny. But then we heard Crescent's bell and serious yelling. Before we knew it, Crescent and company were loping up the trail (which zigzagged down/up the hogback 100 feet from our viewpoint). In what was a surreal moment, we all scattered - trying to stop the animals from their determined hike back up the trail. John had long warned us that stock felt a strong homing instinct - home being defined as "back" in this case. Despite my moments of bonding with Crescent, she bolted around me when I approached her. Kelsey got the closest, briefly grabbing her harness (she snapped her head out of his hold - and he knew better than to try again). Poor Jay, who seemed not to know what to do with horses in general, was not happy or stress-free; in fact, I heard him swearing under his breath (which I took as a positive sign that he was normal and may loosen up fully by the end of this trip). By now, John had run up the trail and joined us city/town-folk in the chase. John, Jay, and Kelsey proceeded up the trail after the stock - now about a quarter-mile beyond camp. Although it was tempting to follow, I knew I was tired and useless - so I went to bed. I figured the stock would stop in the meadows (and they did) and all would be fine shortly (and it was). Despite a few early-evening bathroom runs, I slept well - so well that I apparently missed whatever torrential rain occupied most of the pre-dawn weather.



Left to Right: heading out (note lovely skies), 4 hours later (seriously); waiting out the immense rain/hail at Arrowhead camp

August 14, 2004 - Crater Mountain Plateau to Arrowhead Lake (Rae Lakes Basin)

At 5:45 a.m., Kelsey announced that wake-up/departure would be delayed because everything was soaked. I don't know whether I slept much but the extra 2 hours felt good - the later morning clear and promising, the tents sun-dried by our 8:30 pack-up. I suspect that breakfast (pan-fried buttery bagels) had not been originally planned as such (i.e. it was probably cold bagels). Although it looked and felt sunny and warm when we hit the trail at 10, there were VERY LARGE clouds to the north, growing bigger every moment. In brief, we dropped 2 miles to Woods Creek, continued riverside 2 miles, met up at the Golden Gate suspension bridge (so lame I didn't take a picture!) for lunch, and then climbed 4 miles to Arrowhead Lake. I hiked and talked with Rob most of the day. Given the morning topic (database software), I found the descent to Woods painless and scenic. At some point, Joan caught up and the conversation changed to health care and the global AIDS crises. We also caught up to Larry who was in search of dental cement because one of his crowns had popped off. Sufficed to say, MANY jokes were had regarding why Larry's crown came off (i.e. his LONG, meandering stories) and what he should do (i.e. shut his pie-hole). Indeed, using dental cement might do just that for a LONG time. For the record, Larry never found any cement and his attempt to use superglue failed. Although Rob's harem set out together after lunch, Tina and Joan fell behind during the first quarter mile because it was now heating up. Adding to bonking states, the trail was highly circuitous, boggy, and interrupted by creeks with challenging slick-log stacks for bridges. After 2 miles, during which time the skies turned scary dark, Rob needed a long tree break and insisted I keep going. Given plummeting temperatures, I did not argue. Within 15 minutes, abused (to the point of no camping allowed) Dollar Lake came into view. Behind it - partially eclipsed by trees - was famous Fin Dome (another specific expectation of mine). Alas, I was disappointed by its camouflaged appearance against this dark gray sky. Even against tomorrow's perfectly blue sky, though, I can't say I was terrifically moved. Wind River homologue Pingora Peak is WAY cooler, bigger, and more stunning. The brief distance between Dollar and Arrowhead Lakes traversed

beautiful meadows that were beginning to turn golden. Both lakes were located within protective stands of trees. Jay had selected the first flat area along Arrowhead, the trail running down the middle of camp.

After setting down my pack, I enjoyed 5 minutes before the sky dumped freezing rain and hail for the next 2 hours. During this time, I donned ALL clothing layers in my daypack. Even so, it was the ONLY time on this whole trip I occasioned to shiver because all we could do was stand and wait. The amazingly rapid cold front that enveloped the long valley was more impressive than weather I've experienced in Wyoming or Patagonia. To the north, huge strikes of lightening and thunder accompanied the procession of dark clouds as they stormed north, colliding with the warm air. Of all difficult weather on this trip, the Arrowhead storm was THE worst. Within 10 minutes, the ground was white with half-inch diameter hail. The appearance and sound of this deluge on the lake (15 feet away) was astounding. As the ice fell, combined, and melted, 2 interesting things happened: the lake began to steam, and several 6-8" rivulets poured down from higher ground. The latter was informative in terms of telling us where NOT to eventually put our tents. Half an hour later, John's arrival did not coincide with any rush to erect tents. Larry/Rob and I had selected a clearing by the lake for our tents, with Joan staking her claim on a shelf nearby. Most others camped across the trail above the lake, nearer to the kitchen where John unloaded the gear. This was the first day substantial tarps were pulled out to cover all the gear. Jay and Kelsey worked quickly to prepare vegetable broth, pitas, and hummus. Even so, Joan was visibly freezing and chomping at the bit to set up her tent so she could retreat to her sleeping bag. Thus, when the sky looked a little lighter (15 minutes after lunch), Joan erected her tent despite a light drizzle. Most of the party followed, me included. That we could set things up in stages (i.e. sleeping kits could remain under tarps until tents were up) made things easy. When I finally unfurled my sleeping kit, there were a few damp spots on the Thermarest (probably left over from last night) but they dried quickly. Needless to say, I hunkered down for some time. I can't say I slept given that Larry, despite losing his crown, was his usual talkative self next door. Outside, the ground was waterlogged, the trees dripping, and the air frigid. By 6:30, it wasn't warmer but the sky was lighter. By 7:30, full-on sun erupted between a rising layer of clouds and the ripsaw ridge to the west. Consequently, I moved to the lakeshore, laying my sopping raingear in a moving spot of gold. Once the sun vanished, though, bitter cold was all that remained; I returned to the tent to conserve energy. An hour later, Rob summoned me to dinner, insisting meals were being done in batches and I needed to come get my share now. Given that things were not done when I reluctantly emerged, I suspect Rob felt guilty - which explained why he insisted his harem consume the first helpings (why Rob truly was the harem master). A fan of falafel anything, I LOVED the greasy veggie patties - served in pitas with whiskey-mustard and avocados (HEAVENLY). To the north, the clearing skies flamed red. Not wanting to waste an ounce of calories, I said my goodnight's and dove for the tent. Given warmth, fat, and protein, I slept amazingly well.



Left to Right: heading out, Fin Dome (Pingora is better!); Rae Lakes Basin proper (Glenn Pass is notch closest to middle)

August 15, 2004 - Arrowhead Lake to Center Basin via Glenn Pass (11,978 feet)

Of all days on this trip, this was among my least favorite - but not because it was boring or unattractive. I completely underestimated Glenn Pass, I was psychologically unprepared for another day of stress, and I felt wasted. If you had asked me in advance about Glenn Pass, I would have said: oh, I think that it's relatively easy. For the record, Glenn Pass is SERIOUSLY hard. The route on BOTH sides is steeper and more intense than any prior pass. I know, aesthetically, it was HUGE and awesome - but it was not satisfying: I could not see the route well from the start, it was this hard mess of meandering shit that could NEVER make up its mind (whether left/right, up/down, or steep/shallow). Not helping matters, we awoke to wet everything, ultimately packing damp and muddy-bottomed tents because - stressfully - we had NO time to spare. Nevertheless, we did enjoy clear, blue skies as we set out. Only I audibly noted clouds gathering in the north (which Jay acknowledged as problematic - another reason to get moving). Although it was not warm, the temperature was pleasant for hiking once you got moving. Rob's harem stayed together during the first part of the climb. Even though I found the Sierras bigger-feeling than the Winds in terms of the overall area they encompassed, I remained unimpressed with Rae Lakes Basin/Fin Dome because it/they seemed less impressive than comparable locations in the Winds. That today's pictures did not turn out well (my camera case was soaked and I often forgot to wipe the wet/fogged lens) only accentuates how I felt about the basin as I passed through its brevity. Although many Rae Lakes are located high above/off the trail, we passed only 4 named lakes and a few higher tarns. There was something claustrophobic and ominous about the final big lake - owing to its location beneath darkly towering mountains that enclosed the dead-end valley. Here, we began climbing and I lost all my steam (I think we all did, actually). Looking up (and I mean UP) at the jumbled mess of serrated, crumbled granite EVERYWHERE, I had NO IDEA where the pass was. The first section was up the precipitous southern shore of the big final lake and meandered through a series of winding gullies - some meadow, some rock. It was clear there was a large shelf we were aiming for - but what lay beyond/behind was eclipsed by the massiveness of the land and its steep grade. I huffed and puffed up this mess, stopping WAY too many times (as did Joan and Tina). I felt bad for Rob because I sensed we were all holding him back with our irregular resting and whining. With Kelsey sticking around camp to help John each morning, I worried that Rob was feeling duty-bound to make sure that the back of the line was properly watched over. I frequently joked with him about how he deserved some salary for all his efforts - but he insisted he didn't mind.

Once we hit the shelf, the trail became confusingly rolling rubble. I had been hoping to discern the pass at this point - but, as with Mather, I had no fucking clue where we were heading. I did pick up a tiny bit of energy (either that or Tina and Joan bonked completely), and Rob insisted I continue on my own at a more regular pace. I don't know how long it took to climb the last 1000 feet but it seemed like an eternity. I also wrestled a GREAT deal with whether I was going to be able to finish this trip, whether I wanted to suffer and struggle like this for another week. Mid-way up/across the gradually ascending shelf, I scanned the jagged line of scary gaps above me and made 1 of those stupid deals with myself that I retrospectively regret: I could see 2 spots that MAYBE were the pass. The first was lower, gentler, covered with rubble and looked like it COULD lead over something; the other was this impossibly high wedge of rock that looked technical. I was, like, NO WAY - if THAT is the pass, I am taking a mule out tomorrow (as we would be meeting a food-drop team WAY down the other side). Within 15 minutes, I could see an ant-like train of multi-colored dots slowly making their way up to pass option #2. I cussed and cussed (and cussed some more). The trail was relentlessly weird - suddenly steep then gentle, winding in and out of talus draws, frustratingly indirect, and often viewless in terms of providing any perspective on progress. I'm sure it didn't take THAT long (indeed, my arrival time was consistent with all my other pass times) but it felt really negative to be frustrated for so long, to be moving less than a mile per hour. Mind you, the clouds are totally gathering this whole time - so there was NO question about what is waiting on the other side: a huge-ass rainstorm and muddy wet tents. That folks seemed so far ahead exacerbated my feelings of inadequacy. Hiking behind these people, I decided, was like being with a bunch of 20-something guys - all this purposeless testosterone. As I've said, though, Jay was never concerned about anyone's pace (sometimes, I wondered if he wished he could turn DOWN the front pace). Even so, I felt bad for Jay when he attempted to greet me at the pass - because I was NOT in a good mood. By now, everyone in front had been ordered to continue down because of the threatening weather. Although I smiled, I openly confessed to cussing all the way up - AND considering exit options once we met our food-drop team. Jay replied that quitting was not an option (and he was TOTALLY serious). The thing that made me renege was Kelsey's completely wiped state upon arrival (shortly after me). Listening to his equally frustrated words, I was, like: thank god someone else feels that this is seriously hard. Snacking, drinking, laughing, and re-living the annoyance of Glenn Pass, we waited for everyone else. By now, John was HAULING ASS (literally) up the gigantic boulder-field, rapidly approaching Tina and Joan (who made it up first, but not by much). The weather continued to deteriorate and this was the closest we were to getting thoroughly dumped on while on a major pass. As suggested earlier, the south side of the pass was stupendously massive: huge, steep, and endlessly down. THIS view was what I was envisioning for Forester (the most legendary JMT/PCT pass - and the highest); if Glenn was THIS bad, Forester was going to kick my ass AND scare the shit out of me.



Left to Right: Glenn Pass - view south, stock silhouette, stock descending

Unlike Joan, Tina, and Rob (who barely stopped at the pass), I lingered. Even Kelsey left before me, determined to race down, pass the front group, and meet the food drop team. Although part of me was nervous to proceed down, there was something mesmerizing about watching John and the stock making their way up through the rocks. I started down just before Jay and, within minutes, caught the surreal silhouette of John's arrival at the pass. Assuming they would need to pass me, I started looking for a wide spot along the narrow, cliff-hanging trail. Locating a mini-gully, I was just stepping off the trail when Jay came running down. He said I needed to stay WAY ahead of the stock on this section because of falling rocks (or falling stock and John). I then shocked Jay by actually running with him down the rocky trail, laughing: you didn't know I could run, did you? After putting 3-4 big switchbacks between the us and the pass/stock, Jay insisted we stop and take some pictures because we both knew that shots of John coming down this thing would be amazing. And they were. I hiked quickly with Jay (as opposed to running) for another 10 minutes - at which point I caught up with Rob at the base of the uppermost cirque (the steepest part of the whole descent). Jay departed because he needed to take over leading again. Within 10 minutes of descending more open, boulder-strewn meadows, John caught up with us and passed. The way, though, was not easy and our paces were barely as fast as John's. Some sections in this "middle cirque" rivaled the southern side of Muir Pass in terms of being narrow, challenging chutes of big rock - and John spent a surprising amount of time walking (not riding) Crescent and the team. I felt seeing this was important; it seemed a shame that others never experienced John's daily world - if only for a moment. Above, the massive granite walls seemed slightly pink and I regret not capturing any of this on film. Meanwhile, the clouds spat lightly for the next hour and we were at a loss to choose proper clothing - particularly since the lower we went, the warmer it grew. Although we could see mountains across the valley from us, we could not see the valley floor. After hiking through a hanging meadow with HUGE white boulders, we contoured these LONG ramp-like switchbacks that descended in an eastward curve to the valley floor. Across the valley, Mt. Vidette TOWERED - THIS was what I had been hoping Fin Dome would be like. And then the trail arrived at a high gap in dry forest - Jay and company waiting. This complicated junction linked 3 choices: high route to Kearsarge Pass (gateway to the east, by which the food drop team had come), Charlotte Lake, or down to Vidette Meadow and our goal, Center Basin. After a brief rest and snack, we continued through increasingly lush forest. Larry joined the harem at this point because he was suffering some foot/ankle issues. Eventually, the trail took a decidedly southerly turn and began dropping down a steep gully where even the harem caught up with the fast people.

At the bottom (another trail junction), we amassed in the trees. Jay and Kelsey had run ahead so they could find the food drop team and we were to stay put until everything was in order. Within 5 minutes, the skies POURED. Even though there was no hail and it was not cold, the quantity of rain was stupendously large. Fortunately, I had adequate time and cover to gear up. I found this soak to be amusing because, by now, I was confident the weather would vanish quickly and I would be able to dry things out. I did not, however, detect the same confidence or amusement in several others; to the contrary, it seemed a few folks REALLY had had enough. As we sat beneath the drooping branches, our heads down, 20-30 boy scouts marched silently by. We waited in the rain 30-45 minutes before Jay showed up and summoned us down the trail 5 minutes, to a clearing along Bubbs Creek. Here, the food drop team (2 packers, John's girlfriend, 3 horses, and 5 mules) had assembled next to our crew. Under a still-spitting sky, we could only locate new places to huddle - waiting another hour while food was sorted and re-packed. Today was also a departure from the original itinerary (I don't know if it will be "Plan A" in all future trips). In the original itinerary, we were going to camp AND meet the food drop at Charlotte Lake (1.3 miles off the JMT). The next day, we were going to enjoy a super-short hike (5-6 miles with little elevation change) to Center Basin. This itinerary, however, provided only 1 shot at Mt. Whitney. Given the weather we were fighting daily, Jay was concerned that we build in a second shot at Whitney. Thus, we cut out a whole day by combining Glenn (today) with Center, eliminating Charlotte. My only frustration with the change of plans was that there was a lot of downtime spent in the rain and without lunch. Our previous food drop coincided with a camp and thus we could set up tents and relax while Jay/Kelsey dealt with the food. Thus, arranging for the food drop team to meet everyone at Center Basin should become standard practice if this itinerary becomes the norm. Nonetheless, that the sun quickly emerged did wonders for the mood. That an extensive assortment of cheese, crackers, salami, and cookies was procured also calmed the ravenous and soaked pie-holes.

Although I was not looking forward to 3 more miles, I did not find this section difficult - even after all the challenging terrain this morning. Yes, there were a few slogging ascents but mostly it was flat meadow and thin forest. Kelsey caught up with the harem 10 minutes before camp and pointed out Forester Pass (like, RIGHT there). Even though Forester seemed big, far, and high, it did not bug me as much as Mather and Glenn - AND I liked that I could see the whole damn route already. But Forester was definitely out-there: a sustained quarry-like pile of rocks. What I could not see (the other side) continued to trouble me because THAT was said to be stunningly cliff-like. Nevertheless, I had a feeling I would make it - if only because of a new motivation: spending money makes you less inclined to give up. A shameful confession (gonna have to read [Into Thin Air](#) after that comment). Center Basin camp was extremely pleasant. Pretty much along the trail and gorgeous Bubbs Creek, the site offered many spots interspersed among large white boulders (which provided excellent places for drying clothes). With the weather looking up, I FINALLY could do some laundry. For the last 5 days, my clean underwear reserve had fallen to ZERO (clean = worn no more than 3 days). This task was accomplished by filling a collapsible bucket with water plus a few drops of biodegradable soap. Clothing was rubbed together by hand and soaked - repeating several soap-free rinses until, hopefully, things ran clear (in my case, not bloody). Dirty water was broadcast 100 feet from the river. I began washing around 3:30, hung everything in the sun at 4, and hung things in the vestibule overnight. To my surprise, everything was dry by morning. Dinner was definitely my favorite on the whole trip: thick rice noodles in a Thai-inspired coconut milk broth with sweet peppers. For us carnivores, an oh-so-welcome pan of apple-curry sausage was also fried up. For the record, I could have eaten the ENTIRE pan of meat and still craved more. Alas, only second helpings of the fatty coconut milk and noodles remained when I was ready for more. Wiped, I pretty much went straight to bed and slept well.



Left to Right: ascent of Forester Pass - Tina low, Junction Peak, the final push to the obvious gap!

August 16, 2004 - Center Basin to Tyndall Creek via Forester Pass (13,180 feet)

Forester tied with Muir for my favorite pass. For the first time since Evolution, I was confident with my pace, the trail was spectacular, the grade reasonable and consistent. I liked that I could see nearly the whole route and visualize the feel of the land. Leaving around 8 a.m., Rob's harem pulled up the rear - but by our smallest margin up any pass. A couple fast people, in fact, reported slowing because of breathing problems. Given that it was cold, I left wearing 3-4 layers but stripped down to 2 by the pass. Even so, most people preferred climbing in cold, and we knew there was little chance of thunder/lightening. From camp, the trail was pretty much above tree-line the whole way. We walked 10 minutes of thin forest, ascending this hogback. Entering nothing but rock, we zigzagged switchbacks to an intermediate plateau. Here, we wound south around tarns and patches of grass, moss, and flowers - the pass visible as the second obvious notch west of Junction Peak. Soon, we began climbing another rubble mound, everyone slowing as we huffed up the rocky switchbacks. After the first hump of this mound, we arrived at a large lake (12,500 feet). From here, we zigzagged up the far end of a high rocky hogback, contoured, zigzagged, and contoured some more. Here, Kelsey passed Rob and I, Tina/Joan falling far behind; at the time, we thought we were close. The final crux of Forester, though, is this open slope of mobile talus leading right up to the notch. Somehow, we all managed to gather at the tiny pass. The first 10 feet lay along an angling rock wall that blocked views to the south. The trail then traversed a cliffy edge that offered an impressive drop over the other side. Perhaps placed as a barricade, a park sign defined this edge as the border between Kings and Sequoia (see cover shot). Looking down, I can't say I found the south side THAT scary. Even though the views were big, the scenery south wasn't THAT spectacular. Mather DEFINITELY earns

my "best pass view" award. A trio of stylish Italian hikers chatted with us until we began heading down. After passing the sign, the trail crossed through the narrowest portion of the notch-like pass, proceeding out onto this platform-like tower of rock before zigzagging down a narrow chute. Although wide enough to not scare the complete shit out of me, the trail was clifty (100 feet straight down, followed by a thousand feet of 60° talus). After losing about 100 vertical feet in the chute, we began a long series of contouring switchbacks, most of which were on catwalks that had been blasted into a face of 70-80° granite. THESE scared the crap out of me - not only because of the big drop-off but also because we were walking on solid rock that felt more forbidding than talus-strewn dirt. Overall, Forester scared me the most on this whole trip - with sections of Whitney close. In reality, Whitney was probably AS scary as Forester but I encountered Forester first so the fear factor was higher.

Before starting down, we agreed to regroup at this obvious, unnamed lake. Here, I stretched the knees (they were stronger - no signs of faltering), adjusted clothing, and enjoyed the sun. Given that it was not even 1, we unanimously voted to wait until camp for lunch - 4 miles away, down a series of long benches. The terrain seemed more arid and desert-like, the ground dominated by coarse pumice. It was hard to believe that we were approaching the tallest mountain in the lower 48 because the land, in contrast, seemed to be more rounded and worn. In some ways, this trip paralleled rafting the Colorado: both began modestly, were over the top through the mid-section, entered a gentler area before hitting the big one (Whitney or Lava) and ended peacefully. Passing 2 junctions (Lake South America, Shepherd Pass), we convened at Tyndall Creek. Here, a young female ranger stopped Jay and was officiously explaining that John/stock were not allowed to camp with us (as we thought). In general, I found all the Sierra rangers annoying. All were poised to greet us, having "heard about" this trip via pre-trip press and radio-communication as our team progressed south. My impression was that Jay, Kelsey, and John were MORE than conscious about minimum impact issues and MORE experienced than these young things in pressed uniforms. Sierra rangers should be more carefully screening people like the crazy mother/daughter, managing the extreme waste and trash, and ticketing people illegally climbing Whitney... to name a few more important tasks. Although the skies had been promising, the sun vanished behind massive gray clouds when we arrived in camp. By now, we were all grudgingly trained to accept weather crap. Larry and I, however, were not about to abort plans to bathe (in separate locations). Tyndall Creek passed 20 vertical feet below camp, accessed via a 100-foot slope of rock and dirt. The creek offered boulders for sitting and a robust wall of willow-like shrubbery along the edges. Thus, I vanished into the bush and did some bikini-clad scrubbing. Unfortunately, it seems impossible to bathe without something embarrassing happening (real, near, or otherwise). This time, Kelsey fetched water 10 feet upstream - just as I was scrubbing the boobies. Although I doubt he saw anything (because there is nothing to see), I could tell by his recoiling apology that I'd embarrassed him. Relative to the moderately shameless Colorado team, I thought we were pretty sad. Certainly, there were subgroups that were wild and free... and, although I don't pretend to be wild and free, I do flow better into those categories. Anyway, by the time I was ambling back to camp, lunch was ready and I filled up on WAY too much on bread, cheese, and tomatoes. The skies were still cloudy but there was no wind and it never rained. John arrived as the eating frenzy subsided. During camp set up, Tina inherited my previous night's tent - which included a roadkill gift baggie in a side pocket. Needless to say, I was MORTIFIED. A KEY piece of advice everyone gave Jay post-trip was to assign tents (as opposed to our free-for-all system). My gift baggie notwithstanding, there had been MANY rumblings from "clean" folks who did not appreciate getting filthy tents from others. Complaints included failing to: shake out tents, empty trash, wipe dirt from tent bottoms, neatly stuffing tent pieces, and collect stakes. Again, I would have brought my own tent to avoid all these problems. Even so, I KNOW MTS will be assigning tents for this trip in the future.



Left to Right: More Forester Pass - view north, view south, blasted catwalk trail on south face

By around 4, the sun was out and everyone seemed to be enjoying the down time. I had just directed Joan and Tina to my bathing spot and was sitting down to do some housecleaning. As I began, I was approached by a team member who was making the rounds, trying to gather support to end the trip early if we made it up Whitney on our first try (literally saying: "certainly, you must have things you want to get back to at home?"). It should be fairly obvious that this was someone who had not spent serious time in the backcountry, who almost didn't bring raingear, and was MORE than stressed out by this trip. Somewhat surprised with her naïve belief that we would make it Whitney up on the first try, I reminded her that we had just dealt with MORE than our share of foul weather, and could face similar or worse problems on Whitney. Unable to fathom that things were NOT going to abide by "our" schedule, she was also shocked when I said I had no pressing things to attend to and, in fact, would be terrifically inconvenienced if we came out early. I added that many others - including the guides - would be put off by similar problems with hotel and transportation logistics - not to mention the fact that we WERE on a paid vacation and some of us WANTED to finish it. Lastly, I said that I was concerned that ending the trip early could get the guides in trouble (or deprive them of pay) - not to mention cast a negative vibe over our group and the pending trip. Although I was polite at the time, I was furious that this individual was essentially proposing mutiny on selfish grounds. Unable to stew about this by myself, I marched down to the river and had a committee meeting with Joan and Tina (neither of whom had been or would be approached yet). I thought I was going to have to restrain them from marching up to camp and engaging in a full-on fight (indeed, they uttered more expletives than me up any JMT pass). I then did some information gathering and learned that others were NOT supporting the mutiny proposal. At least one team member was troubled that the harem was angry, insisting

this issue was NOT going anywhere because the mutineer KNEW she had no chance. Although the harem agreed to not push this issue (so long as no one else did), this situation tainted and divided many party members for the remainder of the trip. Again, MTS needs to seriously evaluate their JMT screening process because they fundamentally created this negative situation. What problematically sets the JMT apart from many MTS trips is that it sounds deceptively easier and more luxurious than it is. Many MTS trips - especially international ones - involve huts, lodges, or/low-wage third-world staff. Typical MTS clients may not grasp the complexities of REAL American wilderness camping unless they ARE serious outdoor people. Having experienced mountains in other parts of the world, I have found FEW that compare to what we have in the US when it comes to undeveloped space. Not all travelers, I have come to sadly learn, appreciate the rusticity of facility-less mountains for 15 days straight. Another concept that pervaded my thoughts on this trip: WAY too many Americans have a warped idea about the value of things like service - and WAY too many American are embarrassingly cheap (despite, in many cases, being well-off). I had the impression that a handful of folks on this trip erroneously and ludicrously assumed that comparably-priced trips in first and third world countries would involve comparable service. For better or worse, it costs less to pay porters in Nepal than it would to provide comparable support in America. OK - I am done for the moment. Given that dinner seemed delayed, I wondered if Jay and Kelsey had been informed of the situation and were occupied with discussions on this matter. Dinner, served as the last direct sunlight vanished behind the closest ridge, was pasta in a white sauce with LOTS of cheese. Lining up alongside everyone else, Mr. Mutineer sarcastically and audibly commented: it wouldn't be dinner if it was ACTUALLY light and warm out, now would it? Given palpably tense glares from several folks who found this remark offensive (albeit consistent with nightly remarks), I began to wonder how anyone could be this dense. In many ways, this comment marked a twisted turning point for me because I truly let go of all schedule expectations - in large part because I was finding pleasure in watching people more freakish than me unable to cope with a necessarily flexible itinerary. Of course, the events of tomorrow would provide the ultimate perfect karmic payback for all of us. In between dinner and then, though, all we wanted to do was escape the frigid air by crawling in the tent for a long night's sleep.



Left to Right: Great Western Divide, Whitney from Bighorn Plateau lake/tarn, me and first view of Whitney

August 17, 2004 - Tyndall Creek to Wallace Creek

At 6:30 a.m., we awoke to extremely cold conditions, the sun 3 hours from hitting us directly. And I know this because we waited - often shivering - this whole time in camp. Why? Don't laugh too hard because, like I said, this was the ultimate karmic payback: the stock ran away in the middle of the night. I'm sure anti-stock people will have a field day with this story. Hell, I can't blame the poor things after Forester (shit, I wanted to run away after Glenn). It was a beautiful, funny, an entirely just moment. All morning, I wanted to laugh and laugh and laugh out loud. This is not to say that several members of the team (including the guides) were not shitting bricks. My experience and intuition knew the stock would be found before noon and we would simply lose our emergency summit day (making the mutiny proposal wildly moot). I was neither angry nor anxious about this certainty because, honestly, getting on top of Whitney was NOT the reason I wanted to do this trip. I was only concerned for our poor guides and cowboy; I felt their pain and suffering; I was worried about post-trip repercussions; I would not want to be in their shoes (and NOT just because they were not wearing sandals). John passed through camp around 7 after we had packed our tents. Jay announced the situation as breakfast was getting underway, trying to be upbeat. John had been following tracks for awhile but then he lost them in some rocky field below camp. He seemed especially annoyed that the ranger had made him camp lower down, in an area that was more wide open: easier for them to make a lot of ground. The only good news: the tracks suggested they were, as usual, trying to head back UP the trail. Given that the Forester cirque provided a good dead-end, it seemed likely they would be up there grazing. And they were - near Lake South America. It's hard for me to speculate on the mood in camp. I spent those waiting hours talking with Michael and David, both of whom shared my opinion about the stock and why they did this trip (i.e. Whitney was not the primary draw). By 10, John arrived with the stock. After talking with John, Jay called everyone together to announce the new itinerary (well - the best one he could foresee): today's planned 12-mile hike to Guitar Lake was no longer possible. Thus, we would hike 7 miles to Wallace Creek, enjoying a side-trip along scenic Bighorn Plateau. Tomorrow, we would hike to Guitar, arriving there really early so as to ensure a good night sleep for our 2 a.m. wake-up and summit attempt. Peggy and I were EXTREMELY pleased by these plans. She and I, at some point yesterday, had had a long talk about our concerns with doing 3 back-to-back days from hell (11 miles over Forester, 11 miles to Guitar, a few hours sleep, and then 11 miles up/down Whitney). When the stock ran away, we were both, like - THANK GOD.

Within an hour, we were hiking. For most of the day, Rob's harem hiked together. The trail dropped a little, then ascended the broad hogback of the Bighorn Plateau proper. Until we reached the apex, views were limited by a combination of trees and traversing in and out of shaded draws. At some point, we all stopped to take off warm layers and sunscreen up. When I set out on this trip, I had been carrying one of Ellen's Japanese good luck charms on my pack (a little sumo-man). Given that it jingled, I was surprised when - around day 5 - I noticed it had fallen off. As I packed my shed clothing along the way to Bighorn, I lamented to the harem that it was sad that sumo-man was gone. Silently mesmerized, Tina promptly produced sumo-man from the top of her pack, having found him along the trail on DAY 3. At the time, she had thought: oh dear,

someone has lost their lucky charm. After gradually climbing through more rocky forest, we broke out into the open: Bighorn proper. Pretty much due west, this MASSIVE vista exploded before us: the Great Western Divide. Had you asked if I knew about this legendary view before the trip, I would have said no. But when I saw it, I knew I'd seen it in Sierra guidebooks and geology textbooks. After hiking the last 11 days in "the Sierras," seeing this HUGE track of trail-less mountains - that encompassed 3-5 days of hiking - I was finally impressed by the scale of this range. Even though I remain partial to the Wind Rivers for their lush beauty, they are a small range by comparison. Another thing I remain struck by while recalling the Great Western Divide: how enclosed and canyon-like a lot of the JMT is. Although many passes provided big views, there was often - for me - this pervading sense of walls and eclipsing peaks. My mother, who has/had no concept of the Sierras, asked after the trip - well, what did the mountains look like? In describing the trail to her, I was surprised how often I used phrases like "canyon" and "valley" and "big walls towering over us." Indeed, one feels very small and overshadowed a lot on this trip. And even when one is not beneath high walls and peaks, one feels smaller still when confronted by the extreme expanse of a place like the Great Western Divide. After 10 minutes of climbing, we arrived at the trail highpoint along the plateau. Here, Jay led the group across a grass field to a lake that looked more like a mud-flat tarn (given that it appears on 2 maps, though, I guess it is a lake). Even though it was sunny, a brisk wind prevented classic reflection pictures. It was also at this point that Mt. Whitney was FINALLY visible. Prior to Jay's identification of it, I had been fairly certain I was looking at it (something about that tilted summit seemed familiar). Sometimes while looking at it, it seemed no higher than Forester relative to Center Basin. But then I'd look a little harder and it would scare the shit out of me. Honestly, I had no sense of whether that summit was in my destiny or not (indeed, usually I have "feelings" for these things). Even though I'd like to say I didn't care about the summit, it was hard not to care because you'd think after making it this far that climbing Whitney would be deservedly possible. After sitting, eating, and psyching myself out, I decided not to sit out Jay's side-trip to the rounded Bighorn "summit" west of the lake. Mostly, I did not want to disturb Joan's requested solitude at the lake. Although Joan did not communicate the following in exact terms, she knew today would likely be her last view of this place (1 of her favorites on earth); consequently, she asked Jay if she could remain at the lake by herself for the next several hours - at which point she would hike to camp by herself. Hiking with older individuals like Joan was inspiring from the standpoint that I did find myself re-thinking perceptions about my own capacity over time; at the same time, though, coming to terms with Joan's present tense was a reality check for me about how important it is to live every day as though it could be the last. Perhaps that's why I make such an effort to document these stories - because I do edit them every few years and the words conjure up everything.

The rest of us fanned out across the rocky land as we climbed the knoll. At the top, we snapped a few pictures and then took a different route down, meeting up with the JMT a quarter mile from where we'd left it. After sending everyone along so I could pee, it would be 20-30 minutes before I caught up again - although I intentionally hiked slowly, inspired by Joan. All around, orange tree trunks flamed in columnar bursts against a Yellowstone-like ground of arid white. As I rounded the end of a hogback and began descending into a valley, I caught up to Michael, Larry, and Rob debating whether they had missed a trail branch-point. Given that Jay was very anal about waiting at junctions, I didn't know what the men were confused about. After a brief discussion, we dropped to the valley floor via a couple long switchbacks, crossing wide Wallace Creek on a line of small and partly wet rocks. Camp AND a sunny afternoon - what more could we ask for? How about an awesome lunch? The new lunch item that impressed me: canned stuffed grape-leaves (dolmas). In what seemed a surreal moment, lunch was dominated by a friendly-sounding attempt by Richard to engage several of us in a discussion about how we all came to be so outdoorsy. "Several of us" were mostly Jay, Kelsey, and I. Although Richard, in choosing this trip, suggested he had been hoping to re-live fond, boyhood memories of camping in the woods, he admitted it was too much of a "reality vacation" for him and his wife. He also seemed genuinely surprised that we had all grown up hiking extensively, that we took time to backpack long and brutal routes every summer. Although I'd like to think Richard respected our love for "real" wilderness, I still think he looked down on us for putting up with such simple and basic needs. As lunch drew to a close, John and company arrived and we were able to set up camp by 3:30. Given superb weather, the harem dispersed to wash our hair (the first time, in my case), take baths, and do laundry in/by the creek. The pimp-daddy sarong was converted to a muumuu while I brushed dry my hair. With the stock roaming freely in the grass around all of us lounging sunbathers, it was hard to believe we were in the middle of the Sierras. Alas, I don't remember what we had for dinner (although something keeps telling me it was chowder). Overnight temperatures were, again, VERY cold and, consequently, I retired early - having exhausted my layers.



Left to Right: Timberline Lake/Whitney, Whitney base camp, post-storm alpenglow on Whitney

August 18, 2004 - Wallace Creek to Guitar Lake

Despite only 7 miles to Guitar Lake, Jay had us up at 6 a.m. From yesterday's Bighorn vantage, we had seen the winding route we would be taking that eventually rose to Whitney. Geometrically speaking, we rounded about 60° of said massif. From camp, Rob's harem ascended in the shade - working our way through stark boulders and trees. And then we dropped a little, gained a little, dropped a little, and gained A LOT before dropping into a green valley where a buck dashed down a grassy ravine. All of us were involved in a conversation about our families, having fully bonded - albeit separate relative to the rest of the group. After a final climb, we met Jay and company waiting at a junction near Crabtree Meadow Station. Heading

left, we hiked another mile to a second junction near the Crabtree Ranger Station. This was the ONLY spot where Jay did not reconvene the group - given the obvious sign "Mt. Whitney (arrow left)." By this point, Kelsey had caught up with Rob's harem and we hiked together until Timberline Lake. Owing to lots of pee-stops, the harem dispersed as we plodded along Timberline and climbed the final gap to the Guitar Plateau. In the sky, wisps of white streaked the blue and I smelled rain. After 2 weeks of feeling thwarted every time I tried to judge my progress toward a major landmark, I was SHOCKED when I plodded over this lip of rock - expecting ANOTHER higher plateau in the distance - and, WOW, there was Guitar Lake. It was barely 11 a.m. Alright. Roger will have to FORGIVE me, as my preconception of Guitar Lake was based on his report. On said trip, Roger fell ill and had to forego Whitney. His then-wife completed the ascent, including taking pictures of Guitar from near the summit. Something about her pictures and Roger's report lead me to believe that Guitar was some barren, ugly place. Thus, when I saw the actual lake, I was SHOCKED at how beautiful it was. Surrounded by all this soaring granite - Mts. Young, Hale, and Hitchcock, the mind-blowing Whitney face with its LONG, toothy summit ridge - Guitar Lake was AWESOME. Even more surprising, there were patches of green among the spectacularly-hued granite. I blew an entire roll of film between the gap above Guitar and camp. On closer inspection, however, I have to withdraw MANY of my initially positive impressions of Guitar as the filthy, unhygienic camps RIVALLED Patagonia's shit-fields. I have NEVER been so ashamed to be a hiker anywhere in the US. Jay claimed what seemed to be grand central station, a group site along the lake with a cabin-sized boulder wind-block (near what would be the kitchen). Immediately behind, the stench of feces/urine and visible garbage (discarded men's underwear and a GIGANTIC women's sanitary pad) - were horrifying and sad. As we dispersed to stake claims on campsites (COMPLETELY in the open at over 11,000 feet), we were at a loss to find places that did not bear the smell of human waste, and evidence of shit-hole digging with toilet paper. Why the park service and patrons have NOT DEMANDED the installation of pit-toilets was BEYOND comprehension. Believe it or not - things actually got WORSE if you left the "camping" area - i.e. this grassy meadow across the trail and above us (unofficially known as "shit-hill"). As with Patagonia, you could not turn over a rock or dig a hole without finding someone else's squashed pile of shit or shitty toilet paper; SERIOUSLY, it was THAT bad. SHAME, SHAME, SHAME ON YOU SEQUOIA NATIONAL PARK!!!!

By afternoon, there were 8-10 parties, each ranging from 8-30 people (the largest being some boy scouts) camped around the lake. All but 1-2 parties would summit the next day with us. My understanding of the Whitney permit system is that 100 overnights are allowed to go for the summit each day. Some come from Guitar (in the national park) and others camp on the east side of Whitney (national forest, I believe). An additional 100 dayhiking permits are also given daily, all from Lone Pine (the dayhike entails about 18 miles and 7,000 feet up/down). Although Jay felt that there was monitoring of overnight access, he thought a lot of permit-less daytrippers slipped through the cracks. In what would be the final ranger annoyance, another officious female ranger showed up to question Jay about our permits - specifically mentioning publicity surrounding this trip. If I was the park service, I would be WAY more concerned about developing long-term solutions to the human waste problem than over-monitoring a wilderness-conscious tourgroup 1-2 times a year. I was, like: can you not SEE and SMELL the urine and shit? After enjoying a sunny lunch before John arrived, the clouds coalesced and darkened - a cold wind whipping up from nowhere. As John, Jay, and Kelsey unloaded things, the rest of us scrambled to layer up, gather emerging gear, and erect tents - knowing what was about to happen: HUGE RAIN. Howsoever tempting it was to watch the weather ripping over Whitney, I KNEW I had to rest. Even so, I questioned whether ANY of us were going up now. But who knows? It was only 1 - ALL this could (and would) be blown out by dusk. Donning earplugs, I enjoyed one of the most luxurious, cozy naps of the whole trip. I have no doubt that THAT nap contributed to my ultimate success - physically and psychologically. I was up again at 5:30 p.m. While the skies above Whitney were blue, clouds were now suspended over Crabtree and the Great Western Divide. I am pretty sure we dined on lentils and rice again, adding to extreme levels of climb-farting. Although I stayed up past my self-defined 7 p.m. bedtime, it was worth it to watch the alpenglow, to feel reassured that MAYBE the clear skies would hold, and to acknowledge that I felt well-rested. Of course, if you asked Kelsey, he would recall how ridiculously unsure I was about going up - mostly because Roger's ex-wife (who also did NOT like heights) had problems with the summit ridge's knife-edge "windows" section (even Roger was concerned I would freak out). Although Jay acknowledged what Roger was talking about, he said the windows were NO WORSE than anything we'd done so far. Kelsey and Larry seemed less supportive, throwing up their hands: if you feel that way, just stay in camp all day. Kelsey also attempted to talk me out of wearing Chacos - to which I said: well, if it is REALLY no different than anything else, I should be fine. Confused, I went to bed at 8.



Left to Right: Ascending Whitney - first part of cliffs/windows, sunrise through a window, summit tower from along ridge

August 19, 2004 - 2 A.M. Guitar Lake to the Whitney Summit and then Crabtree Meadow

To all our shock, it was clear and not that cold when Kelsey made the 2 a.m. wake-up rounds. An hour before, some of us (including myself) had heard a nearby group of Europeans heading out. Having packed and pumped all my water the night before, I just needed to layer up (and layer down soon thereafter). In the distance, I could see the Europeans - their bobbing string of headlamps ascending the switchbacks; already they had gained 600-800 feet. Excluding Jay and Kelsey, I was the second one in the kitchen area - behind Larry, our most serious coffee addict. Larry was genuinely surprised to see me up, convinced I would bail before even getting out of my tent. I just laughed: you don't know me very well - if I bail, it will be up

there on the ridge. Mind you, there is NO MOON and it is - aside from the billions of stars - really dark. All I could make out on anyone was the blinding lights on their headlamps. Breakfast for me (and most) was berry-flavored Pop Tarts (which Kelsey affectionately called "pastries"). And now I will forever associate Pop Tarts with the summit of Whitney. The breakfast of ravenous pie-holes. As planned, we were on the trail at 3 a.m. This trip's original itinerary had us rising at 4 a.m. (and hitting the trail by 5 a.m.). Some folks were taken aback by Jay's decision to move things up - but I fully agreed and had no issues with the early hour. His reasons: to avoid OBVIOUS crowds, to catch the sunrise, and to be off the mountain if weather came in (as it had been between 12-4). Unfortunately, I did encounter 2 problems with night hiking: my new Petzl headlamp was a complete failure (consequently, I was pretty much right with Rob), and everything was surprisingly wet with dew. Indeed, my socks were WETTER during the first part of Whitney than ANYWHERE along the JMT. Although the temperatures were fantastic, everyone did have to repeatedly stop to shed clothes. Nevertheless, the scenery while ascending Whitney under just a canopy of stars was AWESOME, spiritually fulfilling, and just plain magical. The route from Guitar first meanders up through a rocky meadow, climbing to a middle plateau in which Hitchcock Lakes are set. Without my own light, this part was the most difficult: lots of steep curvy switchbacks that meandered through rocks, puddles, and streambeds. Once we reached the Hitchcock plateau, we began walking these LONG switchbacks, scaling the HUGE talus slope that comprises Whitney's southern mass. High above, the 2-mile summit ridge loomed. Mt. Hitchcock, a nearly sheer wall to the south, appeared continuous with the summit ridge, forming a U-shaped headwall/cirque. Looking UP, you could tell where the rock ended and the sky began only by virtue of where there were no stars. Being fully occupied with excitement, the night sky, and watching my feet, I - and others - found that climbing seemed WAY easier and faster than coming down. Going up, you plodded, seldom aware of your progress. When the time came to look down that HUGE slope, we were all, like: SHIT MAN, WE CAME UP THAT?!? Rob's harem stuck together during the ascent to the summit ridge. At 500-800 feet below the summit ridge, we heard Kelsey from below. At first, we just thought he was trying to identify us and we called back but kept moving. Eventually, we realized he wanted us to wait. When he arrived, he was limping (full ITB pull) and asked that we take the lunch items and let Jay know that he was going back. The 4 of us did our best to make sure he was alright going down alone - and then divided lunch. Within 30 minutes, we were at the summit ridge - Trail Crest, where the eastern Lone Pine trail meets the western Guitar trail. The sky was dark blue and the Hitchcock/Whitney headwall/cirque was STUPENDOUS, alighted by this powdery dark gray light that would never be captured on my film.

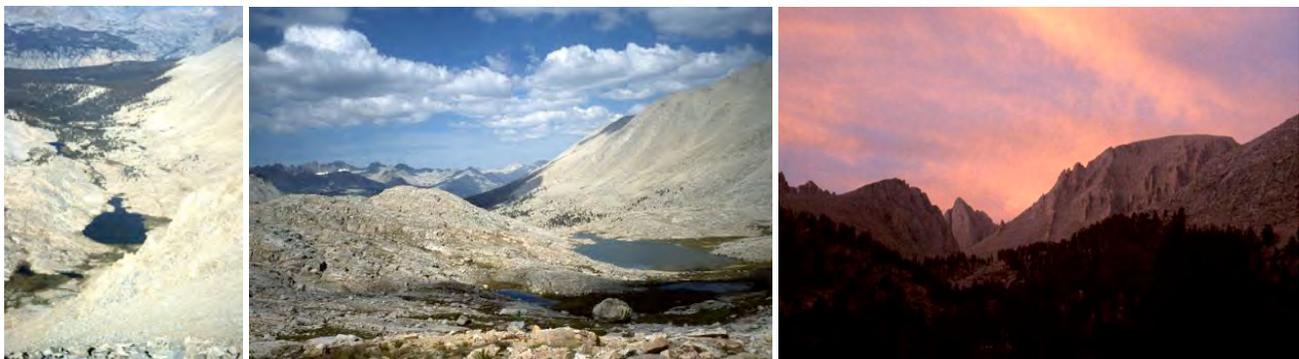


Left to Right: Hitchcock from near summit; views north, summit trail and windows from summit

Upon our arrival at Trail Crest, Jay - at first - did not understand that Kelsey had turned around (because Rob attempted to joke about how we stole Kelsey's food and pushed him over the trail). The OBVIOUS traffic here was substantial. MANY backpacks had been ditched at the junction's small clearing, their owners doing the summit either on their way out from or into the backcountry. Feeling pressure to beat the crowds, we downed water, Advil, candy - and proceeded. To the north, the ridgeline trail was obvious. We had 1 mile along the ridge (all flat/contouring) and then another mile curving away from the ridge and up the gentle backside of the Whitney summit tower. I had NO fears about the last mile; it was the first one that would make or break me. Rob's harem stayed together a quarter of a mile (at which point Tina left us to do the impossible: find a private spot for a trowel break). Although there were some freaky sections, it was not that bad - mostly because there were few spots where you had any plummeting views to the east (even when you did, you had to TRY to climb up to and see them). Notions that there were spots where you were ACTIVELY on a knife-edge (thousands of feet down both sides) were not, by my vertigo-driven standards, true. The first hairy spot was on this especially scenic section of cliffy trail through these wild formations that looked like giant candlesticks made of cracked granite. The trail was serpentine, traversing blasted-out sections of solid rock with substantial single-sided drop-offs (the worst being 100 feet straight down, then 70° talus for several thousand feet). Had the trail been narrower, the cliff been more sheer, and the taunting summit not been in view, I'm not sure I would have made it. After half a mile, all along only 1 side of the ridge (facing Guitar, west), we came to the windows: toothy, pie-shaped bites in the ridge that offered a few knife-like passages with 2-sided views. Indeed, most of the summit ridge proper was 50-100 feet above and to the right of us, forming an effective wall-like barrier. I don't remember how many windows we passed - maybe 5-6. Again, none of these serrated gaps were RIGHT down to the trail; you had to climb up short piles of rocks to look down in nearly all cases. Even in the 1 window that was a little dicey, the trail was super-wide and the left side was not, like, some cliff (although the right side was very sheer). After the windows, we began gently climbing the final mile. Our last sight before cutting inward (away from the ridge) was the summit tower - about 500-700 feet above us. From this vantage, the summit dropped off in a sheer manner, the crumbling ridgeline between us and the top too unstable for a decent trail. Consequently, the trail veered left (west of the summit), contouring gradually up through slabby talus before making a final turn right and up the exceedingly gentle summit backside. A short field of hard, sun-cupped snow was avoidable - just before the final turn. Although 75% of the summit trail was reasonable (i.e. on gravel or earth), 25% involved clambering over medium to large rocks and boulders, most of which were steep and uneven, and many of which were mobile. I had no issues with the Chacos, though. In fact, we were passed by a bunch of women from some all-female company; 1 of their leaders, a beautiful Tibetan-American, was sporting Chacos. We briefly discussed how "free" our feet felt before she kicked my ass. After the windows, it seemed like no time passed before we were on the summit. I felt no different - in terms of

stamina - than I had on, say, Forester. It was shocking to be at 14,495 and feel THAT good - seriously. As someone who has spent many years struggling with that line between climbing and hiking, Whitney - for me - was a truly awesome achievement. I know that "real" climbers will laugh at that statement because Whitney is just a walk-up. But, for me, it was BIG, challenging, fulfilling, and - at least on paper - pretty damn impressive in terms of elevation. Having gone into this trip NOT prioritizing Whitney, I found that the thrill of actually doing it vastly exceeded my expectations. Having spent 2 weeks getting to this point - that the view from the summit was THAT much more special; I could look out and truly understand where I had been - both in the short term of Guitar Lake and in the long term of all those passes (not that we could see much north of Forester). I came into the JMT thinking: California? There's no wilderness there... And yet here I was on Whitney and there was wilderness in every visible direction. Amazing.

Given all the up and down weather endured on this trip, we TRULY lucked out on summit day: no substantial clouds, no wind, and the temperature was surprisingly warm. We also hit the summit between many parties; the Europeans had headed down and it was pretty much us, the women's team, and 4-6 others. Jay seemed completely ecstatic that he'd gotten all of us up Whitney - almost as though he had surprised himself. Although Jay had been on the summit dozens of times before, it was nice to see him thrilled with such an old-hat event. Even though Jay had been genuinely jubilant on most prior passes, there was a different, heightened spark to him on Whitney. Thus, I wondered how high he prioritized Whitney in terms of his (or MTS) perceptions about the "success" of this trip. An initial concern of mine had been that people who could be attracted to THIS style of trip would be a bunch of trail-running, peak-bagging nuts who valued the summit of Whitney over the significance of the long-distance hike. Although I feel I sincerely lucked out given our overall team and summit experience, I still think MTS will struggle with trail-running, peak-bagging nuts and the basic question of the relative importance of the summit vs. simply completing the trail. Even Richard/Ann were DELIGHTED with the summit and, for a moment, I think we all hoped that their negative impressions of this journey would diminish. Gee - is there some sarcastic foreboding in that sentence? After donning the pimp-daddy sarong (which also brought a memorable grin to Jay's face), taking obligatory pictures, and signing our names in the register (which was maintained by the Smithsonian Institutes, something I did not know), we began trickling down. I hiked back with Rob, who - after saying nothing about my whining the night before - said he was pleased I made it up and surprised I had no serious issues with the trail. Even though I felt more moments of vertigo staring DOWN at all that space in the full light of day, it is fair to say that I had no serious issues with the trail. As noted previously, the trail felt longer and harder going down. Both our knees felt shaky and/or trashed during the last 2 miles - pounded and jostled by the constant downhill. After holding my bladder since 3 a.m., I FINALLY asked Rob to stand guard up-trail so I could take a HUGE piss in this little gully alongside the trail. Although this spot was in view of anyone coming UP, there were few of those folks by this hour and so I enjoyed slight privacy (privacy being VERY relative on the Whitney summit route). Seeing the final mile (i.e. the annoying, circuitous, and slick section), I was shocked I hadn't taken a major spill and knocked some teeth out in the dark. We arrived in camp around noon and I regret not talking with Kelsey - but he seemed distant and in pain. Our team stats for the day: 11 miles, 3100 feet, 9 hours. Had you told me that pre- trip, I would have been slightly disappointed. Having experienced MY pace at elevation the prior weeks - I was TOTALLY impressed and AMAZED. Wow. That's all I can say.



Left to Right: 2 views of Guitar Lake while descending, alpenglow on Mt. Whitney from Crabtree camp

Of course, the afternoon storm clouds were right on time, pouring over the summit ridge. THIS was the reason Jay insisted on moving camp for the night - down to Crabtree. John, currently camped at Crabtree, was scheduled to bring the stock to Guitar between 1-2 p.m. The period between returning from the summit and leaving Guitar seemed unorganized, in part because we were all summit-crazy - our brains not used to this much oxygen or light. Given that we were also starving and that we were effectively down to 1 guide, several of us began free-for-all grazing from the harem's stash. When Jay realized we were foraging, he added his bagels and crackers - complementing our tuna, peanut butter, jerky, and chocolate. After lunch, we narrowly avoided the imminent downpour as we rushed to pack. After gear was piled under tarps, there seemed to be a long and ill-defined period of standing around. In retrospect, I think Jay felt obliged to help John given Kelsey's situation (i.e. did not encourage us to proceed down without him). When the downpour began, however, I decided it was time to leave - so I did (VERY slowly), several folks following. Jay got the message and FINALLY let us go, insisting we wait at the first major junction where there were trees to stand under. Although the total mileage to Crabtree was only 3 (and all downhill), most was in pouring rain. After such an exhilaratingly beautiful day, it was impossible to fathom that here we were slogging and slopping down the trail in foul weather AGAIN. How quickly the memories fade (at least in the thick of the trip). At the junction, we waited for Jay... but Kelsey showed up - hobbling faster than I could imagine in a comparable state. Even though we all knew Kelsey was going to walk out, I don't think any of us fathomed that he was going to nearly keep pace with the harem (which he managed to do for the final 27 miles - YIKES). Kelsey then lead us to camp - past occupied popular sites, down a mini-canyon with a pleasant creek, and across a soggy, trail-less meadow. Given the weather, Larry and I immediately began planning a BIG fire - not even asking whether it was legal (because it was SO GOING to happen). Larry and I were stoking the blaze AS

John and Jay arrived. With rain drizzling, Jay and John erected a tarp over the kitchen/dining area - wondering WHY we hadn't done this before. And thus we enjoyed a surprisingly civilized evening. We were now EXPERTS at setting up our camps in organized quanta, never getting anything too wet. With all this experience, it was sad that we only had 1 more night to savor our skills. At some point between the establishment of the kitchen and dinner, Jay and Kelsey vanished for the LONGEST "guide meeting" of the trip. Although we figured Kelsey's knee was the main topic, several of us guessed that the next trip was an equally occupying issue. Indeed, it was announced that Kelsey would not be involved in the next trip; Jay seemed beside himself and overwhelmed. After dinner, I treated myself to a LONG trowel run using "Michael's" toilet seat (the only person shameless enough to always use it). Given everything endured over the last 20 hours, I knew there would be LOTS of things to evacuate. Yawning, I returned to camp where a striking sunset featured Mt. Whitney against clearing, red-streaked skies. Then, like most others, I crawled into bed at 7:45 and fell asleep immediately. Despite feeling well-rested prior to Whitney, I know my body needed the 10 hours of sleep it was granted that night.

August 20, 2004 - Crabtree Meadow to Rock Creek Lake

Although we rose intent on hitting the trail at 7:30, other forces seemed determined to NOT let us accomplish this feat. But I will get to these events shortly. Being that my tent had been erected in a thick bed of pine needles and leaves, I stepped in soggy foliage upon emerging from my bed. The kitchen and fire-ring area were also damp - although Larry had a fire going when I arrived for hot beverages. Given that Jay did not think we could have a fire at our final camp, Larry decided that today would be the day he ritualistically burned his filthy balls-rag (hence, the picture of Larry at the beginning of this whole story). And then near-mutiny #2 occurred. People were, given that the trip was ending soon, jovially reminiscing about challenging parts of the trip. I believe it was the topic of bathrooms that provided the first incendiary comment. It should be no mystery who turned what had been a light-hearted exchange about typical experiences on long-distance trips into a massive critique about how pre-trip literature had been 100% misleading. Several of us, of course, were chomping at the bit to have a down and dirty argument given near-mutiny #1. And of course, Jay and Kelsey were caught in the middle of what was getting a little unfriendly. Jay attempted to be EXTREMELY professional, insisting he wanted to hear our honest responses: good and bad. But mostly what he got was an argument between the radical extremes. Initial points were ridiculous: certain people had been expecting a private toilet structure and shower system to be set up every day. Larry, being the most diplomatic pie-hole, tried to move the argument away from stupid things that only inexperienced hikers would not understand to REAL changes he would make: namely, adding another guide to deal with cooking. Unfortunately, this allowed the bathroom-obsessed folks to spew forth more criticisms regarding the low-end camping meals, insisting that the trip needed another set of stock with a second wrangler, all dedicated to elite meals. The rest of us disagreed with ALL these ideas EXCEPT that another GENERAL guide should be added because there were CLEARLY too many chores to be done. Although Jay responded calmly to discussions about bathrooms and food, he voiced strong opposition to the notion of adding another guide, insisting that that would up the price of the trip and diminish the number of participants (given group size restrictions imposed by the national parks). However, nearly everyone agreed that they would have no problem paying another \$400 (RETROSPECTIVE COMMENT - nowadays, this trip costs \$1500 more and still only features 2 guides and 1 wrangler). I cannot say that anything was resolved during the big kitchen blow-out. I know that I personally was made more annoyed - to the point I found myself making snippy remarks like "well, unless people have actually CARRIED a REAL backpack..." Exacerbating the tension, this situation took place AS Jay and Kelsey were trying to pack up. Consequently, Jay and Kelsey - to a few folks - looked even more behind and overworked because here we were - late again. Part of me kept asking: am I, like, on Survivor or something? Where's the fucking camera crew and when do we get to do some voting OFF? Against the backdrop of my professional team experiences over the years, the JMT team was (for many years) the only group I have worked with that has undergone a full-on mutiny attempt (RETROSPECTIVE COMMENT - alas, the Futaleufu in 2006 was actually worse).

Amusingly, we did not hit the trail until after 9 a.m. The fractured party did not leave together; several of us felt the need to remain in camp with Kelsey and John - both to help get things organized and to make sure Kelsey was not hiking alone given his injured state (physically and possibly emotionally). Although it was obvious Kelsey and Jay were not thrilled about what had transpired, it was also obvious that nothing anyone could say now was going to smooth over emotions. In the end, Tina became Kelsey's leader all the way out, which the slightly-ahead harem felt was poetically just. Our mileage today was about 10 - which may sound long but there were no passes and the going was easy. Although we did climb a little (500 feet), the net drop was 2000 feet. I need to return, again, to some Roger-inspired expectations: when I first sent Roger the MTS JMT itinerary, he was glad we were exiting via the longer Cottonwood Pass/Golden Trout Wilderness, avoiding the Whitney Portal freeway. Although Jay tried to sell Cottonwood on its peaceful merits (i.e. an epilogue to the insanity at Guitar), I think the fact that stock are not allowed down Whitney Portal was the real reason we were spending 2.5 extra days to hike out the long way. Given Roger's fond descriptions of Cottonwood, I was expecting this trail to be more alpine and scenic. But it was not, in my opinion: the landscape was just high desert forest. We saw no mountains to speak of - until the final view from Rock Creek Lake (and even that was partially eclipsed by trees and ridges in the foreground). If there was an alternative exit, I would skip this long route. Unfortunately, my map interpretation suggests there are no closer or shorter trails for stock (or people, for that matter). Anyway - the first part of the day was through dry forest, gradually ascending this low, forested ridge. We then dropped steeply to lush Rock Creek River. We briefly re-grouped at the crossing, agreeing to hike 1 mile upriver before lunching at a nondescript spot along the trail. Given the warm sun, we probably ate for an hour - during which time John arrived and enjoyed a snack before passing us. From here, the trail made an almost undetectable climb upriver to its source, semi-alpine Rock Creek Lake. Although there had been recent black bear activity at the marshy lake, we would experience no bears or signs of them. In general, I found it amusing that some people thought we'd see, like, LOTS of bears on this trip. Even though northerly JMT regions (e.g. Little Yosemite) are famous for lots of negative bear-human interactions, I have never viewed the Sierras as "real" wilderness in the sense of harboring many big or dangerous mammals. Indeed, taken as a whole (Sierra-philes cover your eyes) this trip provided no meaningful wildlife experiences (not that that's what I came for). Bryan will appreciate that I did find the flora interesting. I'd like to say I enjoyed Sierra geology but its grandly HUGE homogeneity paled in comparison to the crazy diversity in Alaska and Yellowstone. Although Rock Creek Lake was boring relative to other high alpine things we'd seen, I did like the campsite a lot. It featured many large white boulders and an excellent fire ring. Despite

good weather all day, the skies did some threatening as we set up our tents (several of us cursing the clouds and begging for a reprieve on our last night). Consequently, Larry and I took to gathering wood and building yet another impressive fire (because we could, in fact, have one). The fire was so large and hot, we agreed, that it likely built up enough local high pressure to evacuate all clouds for 48 hours. Even though the morning funk was not evident, I think we were all just being good because we knew we'd be out tomorrow and never see each other again. Dinner featured falafel, chocolate, and whiskey. During dinner preparation (prior to any whiskey), Tina and I threatened to photograph Jay and Kelsey hand-rolling garbanzo balls but we were glared at for all our usual dirty-mouthed cackling and commentary.

August 21-2, 2004 - Rock Creek Lake to Lone Pine and HOME

After yesterday's breakfast brawl, we were all polite, focused, orderly, and punctual. With 11 miles, Cottonwood Pass (11,200 feet), and 2500 feet of elevation change to deal with, it remains slightly surprising that we were completely down to the trailhead by 1:30. The brisk morning and chilly winds certainly facilitated this timing. From camp, the trail climbed up a narrow, shaded chute to an intermediate meadow with some muddy puddles and a small creek. Staying level for a long time, the trail began gradually ramping up this gentle, forested hill. At the apex of this ridge, I erroneously figured we had arrived at the pass. Distant views were expansive but, in my opinion, uninteresting. At times, I felt like I was hiking along a meadow in Yellowstone (minus thermal features). Much as I find Yellowstone scientifically interesting, I think most of it is boring in terms of in-your-face scenery. The trail continued to contour along this ridge - just under its south-facing side. After 20 minutes, we entered a VERY Yellowstone-esque region of light-colored rocks, pumice-like groundcover, and sparing trees. The route curved in and out of several draws. For awhile, I thought we were going to start zigzagging UP this big open talus slope to what, given most of our other passes, HAD to be one of THOSE ugly notch things. But the route just kept contouring along the uneven ridgeline, eventually climbing (ever so gradually) to another apex where we crossed north. THIS was the pass?!?! Yup. And so little effort. We knew it was the pass because Chicken Spring Lake (our planned lunch spot) was visible below. Now hungry, I felt myself picking up speed. But the LONG switchbacks down to the lake lasted forever. And when we arrived at the lake, our party was nowhere to be found. Stomach growling, I insisted we push on another 10 minutes because Jay and company HAD to be close. Indeed, we found them at the scenic lip of our final descent. As usual, though, folks were smellin' the barn - uninterested in a formal lunch stop. Anticipating this, I had reserved a couple personal Luna bars - which I promptly downed, alongside group GORP. I would love to say something more grand about those final miles but they were not very scenic or memorable to me. I would love to say something more enlightened about my thoughts during those final miles but they were not very lofty or intelligent. I think we were all just focused on getting down and out. I can't say I was overwhelmed with sadness or ecstasy. Had the terrain been more interesting and motivating, I could have sustained another week of hiking and camping. But everything - whether in terms of the terrain or the party mood - simply said it was over and this was the right time. After a LONG descent, we sustained a LONG flat hike and arrived at the amazingly full parking lot (lots of cars but not a lot of people). Comparatively speaking, Jay was utterly joyous - as much or more than on Whitney. I hope Jay will forgive me for this comment - but, after much thought, I have come to the conclusion that Jay is a lot like Ellen: stressed and a little high-strung during the trip (to the point you never think he/she is having a good time) and then super-crazy-elated when it's over (to the point he/she talks about it like it was the greatest thing EVER). Confusing individuals to travel with.



Left to Right: Rock Creek Lake (NOT Whitney behind), Yellowstone-esque landscape, FINAL pass and Chicken Spring Lake

After 20 minutes, Kelsey and Tina arrived and lunch was procured. Although hobbling and pain-stricken, Kelsey was - given my knee moments - totally inspiring for making it out. I'd like to think I could do the same but I doubt it. Originally, our shuttle (same folks who drove us to Florence Lake oh-so-long ago) was to come around 4. Jay, however, had been able to phone ahead and let them know we were early. They arrived around 2:15 bearing fresh fruit, chips/salsa, and beer. After 45 minutes of face-stuffing and beer-swilling, it occurred to us that John was probably at the stock trailhead (separate from the hikers' parking area). After briefly driving around to find him, there were 2 pieces of bad news: First, he and Crescent had taken a HUGE fall just after the start of the final descent. Although John was alright, Crescent had some gashes on her knees. Sadly, Tina, Joan, Kelsey, and I were the only ones to actually get out of the van and say goodbye to her and the Black Plague. Second, John's boss (driving the stock vehicle) had a work order for the next day - the implications of which were that John would not be joining us for dinner. Alright - technically, there was a third piece of news: John's fly zipper broke (nothing to do with the fall); his memorable good-bye involved standing at the front of the bus/van displaying and explaining said open fly. Broken zipper or not, all of us had really wanted to express more proper and lengthy goodbyes but he was gone in a seeming flash. The drive down to Lone Pine was a near-aerial experience. After 10 minutes curving through bumpy forest, we broke out onto the precipitous and tall eastern face of the Sierras proper via these immensely long switch-backing ramps. Although the road was paved, it was mostly 1 lane with occasional turnouts. The view down, out, and across Owens Valley was from 5000 feet up - the equivalent of flying in a small plane. If you had dropped me into that seat with just that view, I would have guessed we were, in fact, flying. For an hour, we zigzagged back and forth down the mountainside in what was the longest big open view I have ever sustained in any mountain range from a car. Although we had gained 7000 feet during our drive from Fresno to Florence, it was never straight up anything with such an all-encompassing view. Memories of my spring break

trip to Death Valley returned as I studied the hazy highway crossing the salt flats - heading for the lower and more colorful hills in the distance. Many of said flats were red-purple, owing to halophilic Archaeobacteria that photosynthesize using weird pigments that are most similar to color-absorbing rhodopsin in the eye. Looking east, I can't say I felt any desire to return to Death Valley... but, in driving this route, I had a better appreciation for the landscape and the proximity of these two seeming contrasts: Mt. Whitney (tallest in the lower 48) and Death Valley (lowest in the lower 48).

As we neared the bottom, the ramps of switchbacks moved generally northward - the famous Alabama hills (which, to me, look more like Utah formations than Sierra granite) becoming recognizable elements. In fact, the road we were on actually merged with the main road up to Whitney Portal before entering Lone Pine. Although our hotel was 1-2 miles south of said town, Jay promised us the chance to hit the town for an hour or so before dinner. The Best Western was a welcome sight and the rooms were nice and quiet. Relative to the Asek, I can't say I was THAT dirty. The clothes SMELLED dirtier than I LOOKED. I took a rinsing shower, filled the bath, soaked, and then took a second shower as said tub drained. I was ashamed to empty my filthy belongings all over the extra hotel bed - but I needed to dry a few things out and do a trash check. I called Bryan, my emergency contact, to let him know I was out, made it up Whitney, and never got sick. Bryan, who grew up in Southern California (but never hiked in the Sierra's per se), was surprised we'd had so much rain/cold. At 6, I united with the joining crowd in the courtyard. Many people looked shockingly different all cleaned up. Where Joan looked prettier with her big hair, I thought Tina (the most gorgeous woman on the team) looked older wearing make-up. Although most of the men looked the same, Jay and Kelsey - now clean-shaven - did not look old enough to legally drink (man do I regret not taking their picture). Alas, though, the earliest dinner reservation we could get at the Whitney Café was 8 p.m. After a short drive into town, we dispersed. My only shopping goal was to find a set of twelve 8X10 inch maps that showed the whole JMT. But, of course, none of the 4-5 stores who normally carried this set had any in stock (I would have to order on-line through a UK vender). At some point, Tina whisked me away - down to this very cowboy bar where she accurately suspected we would find the guides. The 30 minutes Tina and I had them to ourselves were more fun than a barrel of monkeys (mostly because Tina and I started drinking Lemondrops and getting bawdy). Two months later, though, the only actual thing I remember from this conversation was Tina INSISTING heated car seats caused yeast infections; being a microbiologist, I vehemently disputed. Jay and Kelsey laughed and laughed at us going on about this topic. Unfortunately, half the team found us all and we had to settle down. Soon it was time for dinner and we strolled (or staggered slightly) down the street, the sun having disappeared behind the range 15 minutes before. The Whitney Café is like Copper Creek Inn (Longmire/Rainier) meets Hard Rock Café (with an ice cream counter). The rustic building and fixtures had a decidedly 50s feel - with many historic photographs signed by movie stars who came to the town to film westerns. There was no holding back on a full steak dinner - despite the fact that Tina INSISTED on paying for everyone at our table (which only sat Joan, Larry, Tina, and I) plus Rob (who wound up across the room). Although the salad, steak, potatoes, and onion rings were good, I would recommend passing on deep fried corn. I then shocked the group by ordering and consuming a double waffle cone of chocolate ice cream, this accomplished as most others were giving up. Kelsey, who had already downed a GIANT malt shake, had the nerve to come up and tease me (chocolate, no doubt, all over my ravenous pie-hole). It was then that we both caught steak-every-night Richard turning in his half-eaten cow (same cut I just devoured). Knowing eyes were rolled. It was around 10:30 when we arrived back at the hotel. Notably, David insisted he walk back by himself; I had the distinct impression David - like a few of us - was not ready to let go of the trail. Ready for bed, I climbed under the covers, watched some dumb TV, and fell into a deep sleep by 11:30. I can't say that returning to civilization felt as dramatic as it did after the Asek. But then again - the Asek entailed 10 of us without another soul for 12 days straight in Alaska/Yukon; I can't say I ever felt that remote in the Sierras. The next day proceeded quickly. I stepped out of my hotel room at the height of sunrise alpenglow on Whitney. After simple continental breakfasts, we piled on board the bus/van. One of my great regrets about the return drive was that we did not get to go north over Tioga Pass (a place I have yet to see). Instead, we proceeded south through the scrublands of the northern Mojave before turning west over Tehachapi Pass. Negative memories of the stressful drive to/from the Grand Canyon passed through my mind (at the time, Jenn and Steve were engaged but you wouldn't have known it from all the garbage that happened on that trip). What was said to be a 5-6 hour drive to Fresno only took 4 hours, leaving WAY too much downtime before my 5:30 flight home. Even so, goodbyes were fast and I felt remarkably little emotion watching all this dispersal - in sharp contrast with my state post-Asek. And - before I knew it - I was back in Portland.



Left to Right: Whitney sunrise final morning, JMT sign in LeConte Canyon, Kelsey, Kelsey, Kelsey (my sentiments exactly)

Conclusions

After filling my ravenous pie-hole for 3 weeks, I was able to shake off many things that had been troubling me (some about the trip) in its aftermath. Nevertheless, I would be lying if I said that writing about/reliving the JMT did not affect me in terms of some negative problems encountered en route - and, unfortunately, I did lose steam over time. Most prominently, I feel I did not do Whitney justice. If the final days seem slow, lacking luster, and a little dull, though, they were slow, lacking luster, and a little dull. Whitney, though, was uplifting in a way that I could never describe adequately - enthusiastic mood or not. Two months later - what can I say about the JMT? First: VERY HARD - and that was carrying only 10-15 lbs after working out

daily for a year. Anyone who thinks they can do this should be in DAMN good shape. Regardless, reduce your mileage/pace expectations - be HAPPY with 1-1.5 miles per hour above 10,000 feet. Second: Expect cold and wet weather. Don't be like some folks who seriously thought it never rained in "sunny California." Third: Although I was pleasantly surprised with the general lack of crowds (Whitney excluded), I was ultimately disappointed by the lack of wildlife. After all these years bitching about bears, you'd think I'd be happy. But, seriously, there was a sterility to this land that left me empty (definitely exacerbated by having done the Alsek). Fourth: Although I did not expect to summit Whitney, it was definitely a major highpoint and I can understand why it is such a thrilling peak to bag. If you get a chance to do Whitney, DO WHITNEY (and whine all the way). Last: Definitely wear your Chacos and shoot a tampon in my honor below Mather Pass (but PICK IT UP and PACK IT OUT!).

And what about the MTS version of this trip? As I wrote in my evaluation of this trip, this is definitely NOT a trip I would have the balls to lead (or want to). I totally respect and appreciate Jay for accomplishing it with our group. I feel lucky and privileged to have completed it. But I will be surprised if MTS continues to run this ambitious trip for long - perhaps shortening it to 7-10 days and emphasizing Whitney. I think many things will lead to such a decision: not being able to find people who want to take 17 days off, who are fit/driven enough to hike 150 miles/30,000 feet up/down straight, and/or who are willing to spend that kind of money for mule-support and camp-style meals. Being a ravenous pie-hole, I believe MTS will have a tough time meeting meal expectations of its typical clients with the existing menu. Speaking as a leader of mixed-student groups, I think would-be JMT leaders are nuts to not screen patrons more - requiring, minimally, camping experience. As someone with backpacking experience, though, I found the trip worth EVERY penny. But it is hard to say whether the trip fulfilled all my expectations. Scenery-wise, yes. Whitney, Evolution, LeConte, and Palisades were breathtaking. Challenging, oh YEAH. Despite some bitching, it was what I expected (and, shoot, I had LOTS of time to relax and nap so it could not have been THAT bad). The team - NET ZERO. Even so, Rob, Joan, and Tina will always remain some of the most important reasons I enjoyed this trip and made it. Leadership - after the Alsek, I feel for all future guides because Brian/Sam/Brock are a tough act to follow. Although Jay and Kelsey pushed me through some difficult moments, I never felt that awe and closeness that I do with most oarsmen. Stock and wrangler - awesome. Food and shelter - first impressions not good, but comfortable by the end. Yes, even I came into this trip with images of a few steaks and a slightly spacious 2-man tent dancing in (and above) my head. Even though every grain-based meal vanished from my bowels in a matter of hours (leaving my stomach growling many nights), I returned more healthy and hard-body than I've been in years. Nonetheless, I can empathize with Ellen's feelings about our infamous 2002 Wind River traverse. You'll just have to read that to get it.

Epilogue - November 2004

As is the case with other trips, impressions of my friends to photos and unfiltered narrations often cast interesting perspectives on my own feelings. In many ways, Jenn's childhood experiences hiking the Sierras seriously influenced my decision to get over preconceptions about California and do this trip. When I first announced I was signing up, Jenn was envious. Her final words to me before I left: you have to PROMISE me you'll do this at 50 when I can go. I thought about Jenn a lot on the trail - mostly when the thunder and lightening came crashing (because she'd lectured me A LOT about weather). In my moments of doubt, I also asked myself whether I would want to do this again at 50 - and I kept thinking: hell no (even though all these 60+ folks were kicking my ass). A month after the trip, Jenn came down for the weekend and her response to my slideshow was a complete turnaround. She freely said there was NO WAY she would sustain that many days and seriously hard miles at once. At the time, I discounted Jenn's self-doubt because even she admitted she has been lazier since the birth of her daughter. The trail simply could not have been THAT bad. A month after that, though, Diane visited. I associate Diane with the first hikes I chose to do as an adult, but few since then given her gymnastics-abused knees. Diane's response to the JMT: I've always known you are serious about the outdoors, but now I realize HOW serious you are; I've never understood how big your trips have grown until seeing that one. Knowing climbers and long-distance hikers, I have to laugh a little at the grandiosity of Diane's statement. But, honestly, preparing for the JMT and Whitney has changed my lifestyle. Spending a year training is a FAR cry from the weekend warrior shit I did to my body between 20-30. Between the Alsek and the JMT, I have actually found myself eating super healthy (almost vegetarian)... and anyone who thinks they have an image of what a vegetarian is would be HARD-PRESSED to pick them out of the JMT party. For someone who has avoided hiking with unknown groups, I have come to enjoy meeting awesome people who love wilderness - not to mention learning new organizational skills. After being in charge of many trips, I cannot convey how FANTASTIC it is to just enjoy a trip for what I fundamentally am out there for: trail under my feet, landscape before my eyes, ZERO electronic distractions. For someone who has avoided/planned around Washington weather, I have been pleasantly surprised with my experiences on set-date trips: funky weather happens (but not as much as I feared), doesn't always add a negative dimension, and is survivable with excellent gear. So who knows? Maybe at 50, I will return to the JMT. By then, Kelsey will be 30? Years ago, I predicted that my tolerance for sleeping outside and putting up with rain would slowly diminish as I age. I can't say that I agree with that assertion after the Alsek and JMT. Given my agedly wise JMT company, I would be ashamed to be less open-minded about what I'll be up for at 50, 60, and 70.