

Treks

In

North America

1. Wind river Range

Page 3.

2. Sierra Nevada

Page 9.

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This is a short account of two treks in North America which I did in September 2006. These two treks are part of a greater project and will be described in detail on a forthcoming website and book and this is just a quick description with some photographs. The two walks are:

1. A north to south traverse of the Wind River Range in the Rocky Mountains. The “Winds” are located in the State of Wyoming. The trek is 120 km and takes 7 days, all of it through wilderness with no facilities. Most of the trek is on established trails, notably The Fremont Trail and the Highline Trail, which it alternates between, picking the best route. This trek follows the Continental Divide Trail for much of its length.

2. The John Muir Trail is located in the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California, the highest mountains in the Lower 48 States. This trek is found in the southern half of this mountain range. It is arguably the best trek in North America passing through stunning landscapes rich in wildlife and flowers. The trek is 365km and takes about 16 days, but most people will want to insert a couple of days to appreciate the beauty.

The 16 days are all through wilderness with no facilities, However in the northern section there are facilities after small detours. Just before the halfway point is the rustic Vermillion Lodge. Supplies can be posted to here or obtained from here. This trek follows the Pacific Crest Trail for much of its length.



The Wind River Range and The Sierra Nevada Range both contain many regions with stunning and idyllic landscapes. During the summer months they are also blessed with reliable, dry, stable weather, especially the Sierra Nevada. This a view of Mount Banner and Mount Ritter rising above Garnet Lake in the northern half of the John Muir Trail (day 5).

Wind River Range



The Alpine Paintbrush, *Castilleja rhexifolia*, is a common sight in both the higher forests and meadows



The Yellow-bellied Marmot, *Marmota flaviventris*, is found in rocky bouldery areas from the high forests upwards where there is enough grass to eat. It fattens up in the summer and hibernates during the winter in an extensive burrow, usually under a large boulder.



Elephant's Head Lousewort, *Pedicularis groenlandica*, are common in damp alpine locations during mid summer.

The Wind Range Traverse is a classic trek in the Rocky Mountains. The trail follows the spine of the range for 120 km keeping largely on the west side of the spine of the range, which is also the Continental Divide. Connoisseurs consider the Wind River Range to be the most spectacular range in the American Rockies.

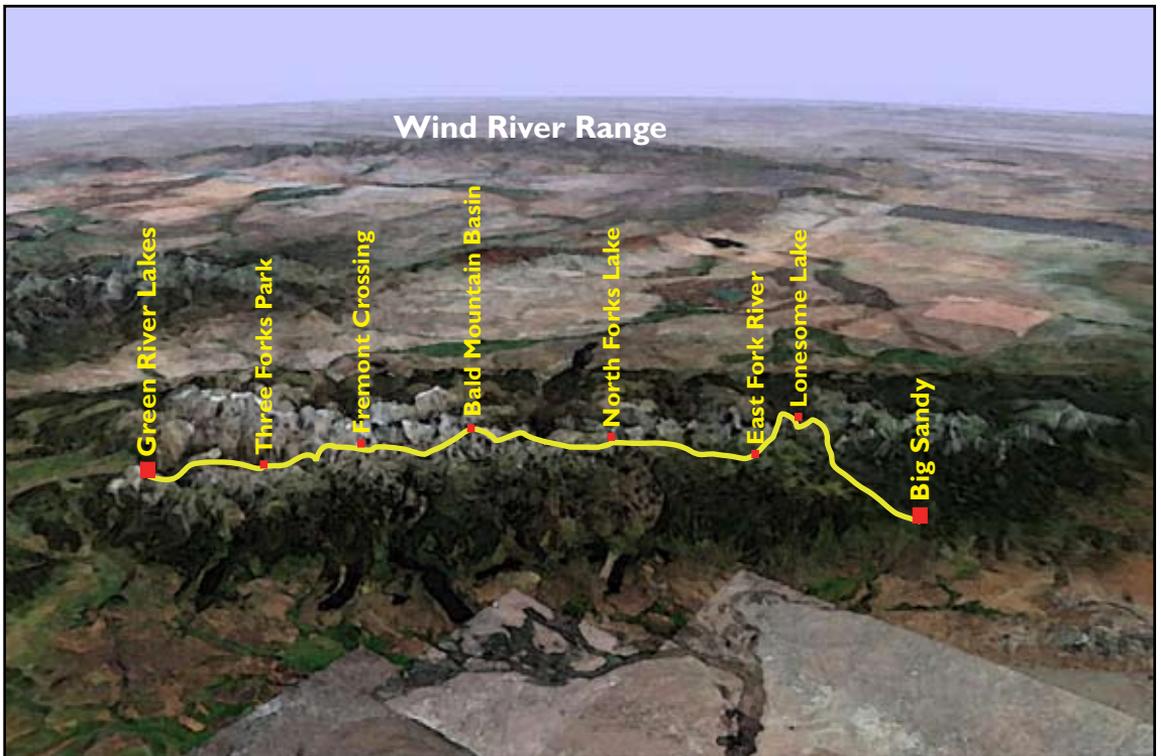
The Wind River Range lies entirely within a collection of adjoining Wilderness Areas and Forests. There are about 1500 alpine lakes in the range, many of which contain trout. There are no facilities except for occasional bridges in this wilderness area so parties must be self sufficient and carry all food and camping equipment while hiking these spectacular high mountains.

The best time of year to visit the area is June, July August and September. However during the earlier summer months rivers are high and melting snows make damp conditions ripe for plagues of mosquitos. September sees the weather becoming more unstable. The optimum month to go is August. Meadows full of wild flowers are standard, Moose and deer are common and Bighorn Sheep may be seen while small mammals abound

The town with best links to the start and finish is Pinedale, but public transport does not exist. Taxis are expensive and hitching is difficult but perhaps the best choice. It is about 60km to the start and finish from Pinedale.



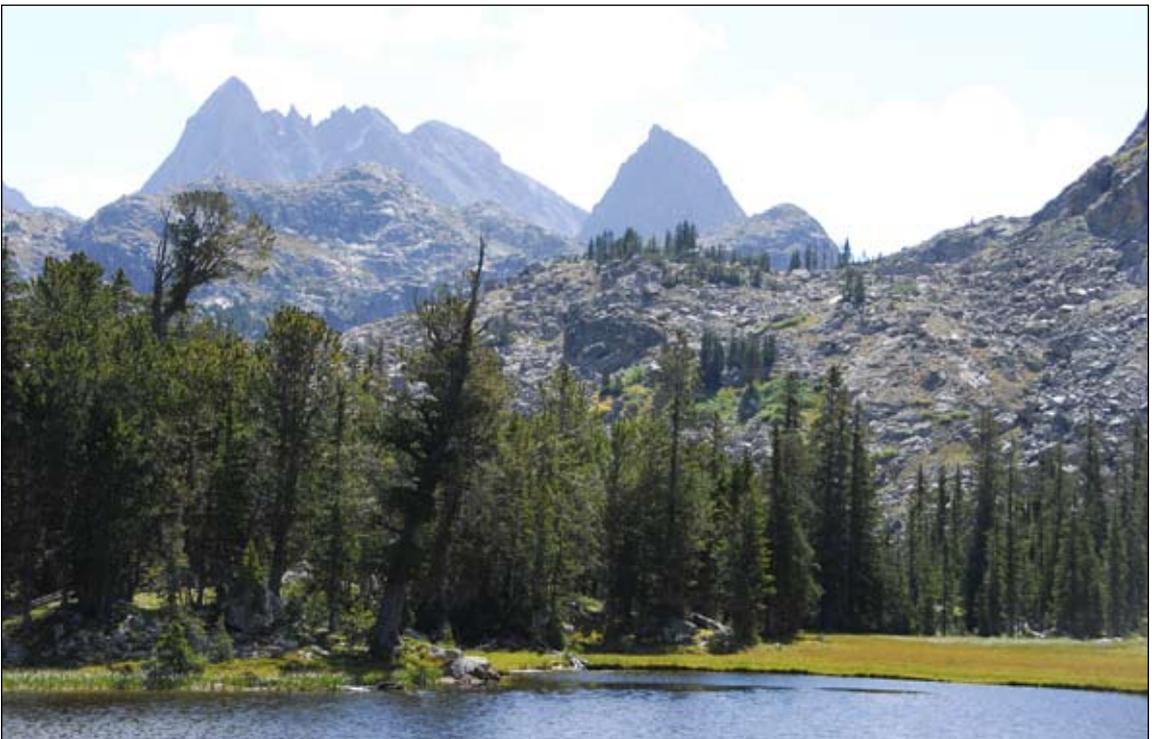
On Day 1 the trail leaves the trailhead and crosses a bridge over the Green River, the source of the Colorado River. This photo is taken just after the bridge. The trail then goes down the east side (left side) of two lakes and into a U shaped glacial valley on the left side of Squaretop Mountain. This mountain is in the middle of the photograph in the distance.



The 7 Day route starts at the Green River Lakes Trailhead and follows the spine of the Wind River Range southwards for some 120 km to Big Sandy Trailhead. For most of the route the trail keeps on the west side of the main ridge of the range, which is also the Continental Divide. It crosses to the east side for the last night at Lonesome Lake in the Cirque of the Towers.



On Day 1 at the south end of each of the two Green River Lakes are marshy areas, lagoons and ox-bow lakes which are rich in aquatic plants. These plants are sought after by moose which are often seen in the area. The males may be over 2 metres high and weigh 600kg. The antlers may be 1½ meters across. One should be wary of moose and never approach a female with calf. They are excellent swimmers



On Day 2 there are 3 passes to cross. The first is the beautiful Vista Pass shown here. The other two, Cube Rock Pass and Shannon Pass lie in the mountains in the background of the photo, There are possible campsites around Vista Pass but the other two passes are much higher and somewhat exposed.



On Day 3 the trail leave Fremont Crossing and heads south across a plateau dotted with lakes. From here there are great views back north to the mountains of the Titcombe Basin seen to the right of the photo.



Day 5 is relatively flat as the trail heads south across a high plateau on the west side of the spine of the range. Towards the end of the day the route heads back into the mountains up the Washakie Creek Valley. This valley is in the middle of the photo. On day 6 the trail crosses a pass over the mountains ahead.



On Day 6 the trail heads up a valley to Shadow Lake and the mountains of the Continental Divide and those which make up the Cirque of the Towers. However we are looking at the outer side of the Cirque. The pass into the cirque, Texas Pass, is off the photo to the left. The pass we see on the left, New York Pass is steep and often snow-bound on the far side making it a difficult crossing without equipment.



The Cirque of Towers is one of the highlights of the trek. It is a deep cirque containing the Lonesome Lake. Almost completely surrounding the lake on all sides are lofty towers of granite which rise sheer from the cirque floor for some 700 metres. The Cirque of Towers is a climbers Mecca.

The Wind River Range: North-South Traverse

Day	Start	Finish	Km	Up	Down	Time	General
1	Green River Lakes Trailhead	Three Forks Park	23	310	240	9	From the trailhead at the outlet of the northern lake follow the trail south, passing to the east of the two spectacular, turquoise lakes. Moose are common here. Then follow the open U-shaped valley south passing to the east of the imposing Squaretop Mountain. Enter a deep V-shaped canyon then cross a bridge over the Green River, beyond which is Three Forks Meadow and good campsites.
2	Three Forks Park	Fremont Crossing	17	1080	510	10 ½	From the camp, head up to Trail Creek Park and then over the beautiful Vista Pass. Then head south out of the trees across boulders over the easy Cube Rock Pass and harder Shannon Pass to reach a high plateau with sparse vegetation. Go southeast across this plateau to cross a col and head down past Upper and Lower Jean Lakes, before descending to the bridge at Fremont Crossing.
3	Fremont Crossing	Bald Mountain Basin	14	630	580	7	Cross the bridge and follow the path across a convoluted plateau to Seneca lakes. Thereafter Lester pass and descend through idyllic forest to the Cook Lakes. Continue for another 2 km over knolls to reach Pole creek. Cross this stream and follow the path up through the forest to reach a complex of shallow lakes in Bald Mountain Basin and some campsites before an unnamed pass.
4	Bald Mountain Basin	North Forks Lake	16	540	690	9	Leave the Basin and climb up the unnamed pass. Descend from this pass and take the high fork at a junction which leads over two rocky knolls to an open valley. From here there is an easy climb through forest and grassland to Hat Pass. Descend Hat Pass into forest and clearing dotted with lakes until North Fork Lake is reached. There are good campsites on the north side of the lake.
5	North Forks Lake	East Fork River	25	720	710	10 ½	Leave North Fork Lake and follow the flattish forest path to the Pipestone Lakes. From here head south east along a line of forest lakes to Bobs Lake. Continue south east after Bobs lake but now across grassland climbing slowly to Sheep Creek. After this stream climb a bit more then once Cirque of Towers appears descend to the meadow with the East Fork River flowing though and camp.
6	East Fork River	Lonesome Lake	14	640	510	7	Leave the meadow and head east up the beautiful Washakie Creek valley towards jagged peaks. Pass north of Shadow lake and climb to Billy's, Barren and Texas Lakes. From Texas Lake ascend a rough trail up to Texas Pass for a stunning view. Descend into the Cirque keeping just east of the growing stream to Lonesome Lake. Follow the north shore to the outlet and spectacular camps below this.
7	Lonesome Lake	Big Sandy Trailhead	16	280	580	6	Follow the south shore to the beck from Hidden Lake and find the climbers trail. Follow this trail up to the pass at the base of Warbonnet Peak. Descend to Arrowhead lake. Clamber over boulders on the west shore to meet the other trail. Descend to North Lake and then the Big Sandy Lake. From here there is a long pleasant forest descent beside the Big Sandy River to the trailhead.
			125km	4200	2820	59hrs	

Sierra Nevada



Golden-Mantled Ground Squirrel *Spermophilus lateralis* are very common in pine forests. They resemble chipmunks.



The Mule Deer *Odocoileus hemionus* are abundant throughout the length of the trek. As they are generally not shy they are regularly seen. They are found in or just above the forest. They have large ears and black tipped tails.



Belding Ground Squirrel *Spermophilus beldingi*, or Picket Pins, are common in the north half of the trek, especially near Tuolumne.

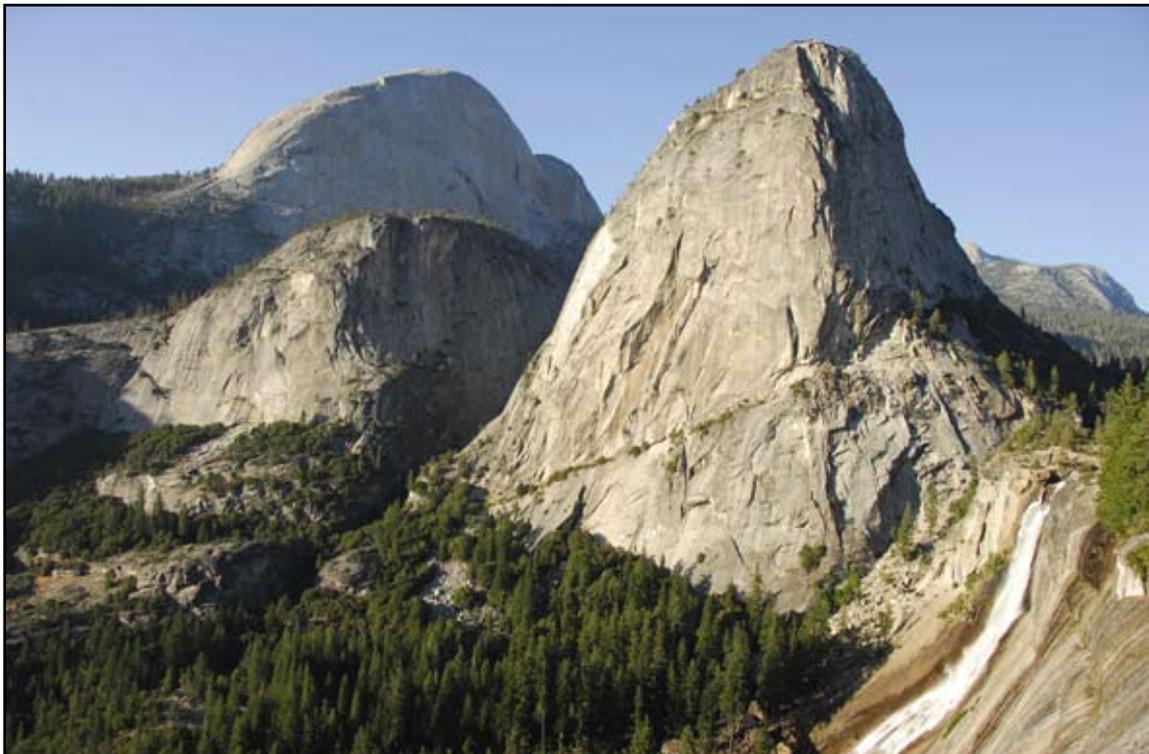
The Sierra Nevada in California is the highest mountain range in North America outside the Alaska/Yukon Ranges. It probably has the best summer weather of any range in the world. The scenery is stunning and wildlife is abundant. It is hardly surprising that this is the setting for arguably the best walk in North America, namely the 360km John Muir Trail (JMT).

The trail starts at the iconic Yosemite Valley and ends at Mt. Whitney. During its entire length it passes through protected wilderness areas. There are no facilities although in the northern half the trail runs adjacent to 3 campsites with stores and restocking opportunities. The rest of the

trail passes through pristine wilderness with just some footbridges, so parties must carry up to 10 days of food and all camping gear.

It is possible to do this trek from late June to late September but the optimum time to do the trek is late August and early September when the snows on the passes have melted, the insects have disappeared and temperatures diminished from the summer highs.

Public transport from San Francisco to Yosemite is good but the return from Whitney Portal is slow and complicated and takes over a day.



On Day 1 there is long climb up out of Yosemite Valley into the Sierra Nevada. You pass a number of spectacular waterfalls en route such as the Nevada Falls seen here. Just beyond the falls is the granite dome of Liberty Cap. The highest granite dome in the distance is Half Dome.



Half Dome is an imposing and emblematic peak at the start of the trek. Although not strictly part of the JMT it is only a 4 hour sidetrip to make the surprisingly easy ascent which goes up the face towards us. This sidetrip can either be done on Day 1 or 2. The view from the top is second to none with the whole of the unbelievably spectacular Yosemite Valley beneath you and the Sierra Nevada peaks around you.



The John Muir Trail starts at the Happy Isles Trailhead in Yosemite Valley. It then heads through the wilderness for 3 days to Tuolumne Meadows campsite. It is then 2 days to Reds Meadow campsite. At both these campsites there is a shop with some provisions, outdoor equipment and a cafe. From here it is a further 2 days to rustic, friendly Vermillion Resort where there is also a store selling provisions.



It is possible to mail provisions to Vermillion Resort where it is stored for a fee. From here it is about 10 days without any facilities to Whitney Portal. Almost every day involves going over a 3500-4000 meter pass and passing through pristine forests dotted with idyllic lakes between these passes



On Day 4 the trail goes up the gentle Lyell Canyon valley. This 20km long valley has a lazy trout filled river meandering down its valley floor. On each side of the river are quiet meadows full of squirrels and deer. Beyond the meadows are the forest clad foothills. The valley ends in a mountainous basin where the Donahue Pass leads over to the next watershed



On Day 11 the trail goes up the upper Evolution Valley past the pictured Lake Wanda and over the alpine Muir Pass in the distance. Lake Wanda has no trout and is a breeding ground for the quite rare and threatened Mountain Yellow-legged Frog *Rana muscosa*, which has huge tadpoles.



The Sierra Gentian *Gentianopsis holopetala* is found on grassy alpine meadows in the Sierra Nevada Range.



Rock Fringe *Epilobium obcordatum* is a very hardy plant which is found in inhospitable rocky places at altitudes of up to 3500 metres. It generally flowers later in the summer.



The Sierra Shooting Star *Dodecatheon jeffreyi* is a beautiful flower found in damp places on alpine meadows



Day 5 goes past a number of spectacular lakes, some alpine and others in the forest. This small idyllic lake in the forest is fringed with reeds. It is one of the small Trinity Lakes beside the trail on the long descent to Reds Meadow.



Towards the southern end of the trek the upper forest is dominated by the Foxtail Pine *Pinus balfouriana*. While not as massive or spectacular as some of the leviathans along the trail like the Jeffrey and Ponderosa Pines, Red and White Firs and Douglas-firs and Douglas-firs, they should be the most revered. Gnarled. Twisted specimens, growing in conditions where no other tree could possibly grow, may be up to 3000 years old.



On the last day, Day 16, the trek culminates with the ascent of Mt. Whitney, 4418m, from the last camp at Guitar Lake, 3500m. This photo of the rounded summit in the distance is taken from Trail Crest where one leave rucksacks for the 3 hour round trip to the summit on a good path. From here it is nearly a 2000 metre, knee testing descent down the east (right) side to Whitney Portal and the treks end.

Sierra Nevada Mountains: The John Muir Trail

Day	Start	Finish	Km	Up	Down	Time	General
1	Happy Isles Trailhead in Yosemite Valley	Little Yosemite Valley Camp	7	650	50	4	Leave Yosemite Trailhead at Happy Isles and make the sustained 3 hour climb up to the stunning cascade of Nevada Falls. Continue up the flat forested valley for an hour to the campsite. If you had a morning start, instead of the usual afternoon start, it would be best to make the essential 5 hour sidetrip up Half Dome from this campsite. If done on Day 1 it will make Day 2 much shorter.
2	Little Yosemite Valley Camp	Sunrise Camp	22	1660	710	11	Leave the camp and climb an hour up to the Half Dome junction. Assuming it was not climbed on Day 1, leave your rucksack and make the spectacular 4 hour return hike up this landmark mountain. Return to your pack and gradually ascend the forested path, passing a 3 way fork until you start to climb a pass. Ascend the pass and descend to a beautiful meadow and the campsite.
3	Sunrise Camp	Tuolumne Meadows	15	380	610	6	Head north across the meadow for an hour before climbing over the shallow Cathedral Pass. Descend to more meadows and the beautiful Cathedral Lake at the treeline. From this lake descend in the forest for 2 hours to a visitor centre. Do not go on the road but head east in the forest for ½ hour to a short trail to Tuolumne Meadows campsite. There is a provisions and equipment store near the camp.
4	Tuolumne Meadows	Rush Creek	27	820	520	10	Leave the camp and return to the forest trail south of the road. Follow the trail for ½ hour until you are in the stunning Lyell Canyon. Follow the flat canyon for 4 hours and then climb up to the Donahue pass at the end. Descend Donahue Pass to a basin of alpine meadows and then drop into forest with flower-filled glades. Descend for 2 hours until you get to Rush Creek and good camps.
5	Rush Creek	Reds Meadow	33	930	1480	11	Leave Rush Creek and saunter to Island Pass with exceptional views. Descend gradually to the truly stunning 1000 Island and Garnet lakes. Climb a small pass and make a long descent to beautiful Shadow Lake. Climb yet another pass to more idyllic lakes, then make the long descent to Johnston Meadow. Drop into the Joaquin Valley and head to Reds meadow campsite and nearby store.
6	Reds Meadow	Virginia Lake	26	1150	400	9	Leave Reds Meadow and ascend fire damaged forest for 1½ hours to reach Crater Meadows. Thereafter meander through the pumice strewn forest for an hour climbing slightly. Then contour the hillside above the Cascade Valley with excellent views. The trail contours into the side valleys containing Duck Lake and then Purple Lake before climbing a small pass to reach Virginia Lake.
7	Virginia Lake	Vermillion Resort	24	590	1350	9	Leave Virginia Lake, climb a small col and descend into the pastoral meadow at Tully's hole. Follow the river downstream crossing it at a bridge then begin the long climb through forest and then alpine lakes to Silver Pass. Descend the south side of the pass, sometimes steeply to Mono valley. If going to restock at Vermillion Resort walk the 2km sidetrip to the jetty for the 6km ferry at about 1630hrs.
8	Vermillion Resort	Rosemarie Meadow	20	1050	350	8	Take the 0900 ferry back to the trail and walk the 2 km back to the JMT with a restocked pack. Then make the sustained ascent up to the forested Bear Ridge. Descend the lush south side to Bear Creek. Follow the gentle path through the mature lodgepole forest beside the idyllic stream for 2 hours to Bear Creek Meadow. From here it is an hour up through the forest to Rosemarie Meadow

9	Rosemarie Meadow	Evolution Meadow	28	790	990	11	Leave the meadow and climb out of the forest to Marie Lake. Then continue up and over Selden Pass and down flower filled meadows to the very beautiful Sallie Keys Lakes. Continue the descent down into the Florence Valley then head upstream, cross the bridge and enter Goddard Canyon. Follow the canyon up for 2 hours, cross the river and climb into Evolution Valley and campsites.
10	Evolution Meadow	Evolution Lake	9	540	50	5	From Evolution Meadow campsite saunter up the very serene valley passing through lodgepole forest and idyllic meadows for 3 easy hours. Spectacular peaks surround this <i>Shangri-La</i> . At the end of the valley climb up zig-zags to reach a higher basin. Evolution lake is at the edge of this basin overlooking the serene valley below. There are good campsites here.
11	Evolution Lake	Pallisade Creek	26	520	1360	12	Leave Evolution Lake and follow the valley up past Sapphire and Wanda Lakes into the alpine basin and boulders of Muir Pass. Cross the pass and descend to Helen lake. Continue the deceptively long, and sometimes steep, descent past other lakes into Le Conte Canyon. Pass the Pete Meadows and Grouse Meadow and continue down the deep canyon to Palisade creek. Camp in the pines here.
12	Pallisade Creek	Lake Marjorie	29	1520	670	12	Ascend the forested Palisade Creek for 2 hours to reach the valley headwall and "the golden staircase" leading to a higher alpine valley with the Palisade Lakes. Pass the lakes and continue up to the scenic Mather Pass. Descend the south side into the Upper Basin and enjoy the easy, scenic descent through the forest into the valley. Climb the south side of the valley to Marjorie Lake and camp here.
13	Lake Marjorie	Arrowhead Lake	23	960	1160	10	Leave Marjorie Lake and make the short ascent to Pinchot Pass. Descend the south side of the pass into the forested Woods Creek Valley. Descend the valley passing waterfalls to a fork. Cross the creek on a suspension bridge and ascend the South Fork Woods Creek in mixed forest for 2 hours to serene Dollar Lake. Continue up for a ½ hour and camp beside the equally beautiful Arrowhead Lake.
14	Arrowhead Lake	Bubbs Creek Basin	21	1160	870	10	Leave this lake and continue up past the lovely Rae Lakes to start the steep ascent up to Glen Pass for 2 hours. Descend the south side into a deep corrie. Leave the corrie and contour round passing above the turquoise Charlotte lake. Descend in forest down to the Bubbs Creek Valley and ascend this canyon-like valley through mixed forest to just beyond the treeline where there are campsites.
15	Bubbs Creek Basin	Guitar Lake	31	1270	1170	12	From the campsite in the Bubbs Creek Basin climb the relatively easy trail to Forester Pass. There is steep descent on the south side to an open shallow valley. Follow the gentle valley down to the treeline at Tyndall Creek. Cross the creek and then for 4 hours cross Foxtail Pine forests and sandy plateaus to reach Crabtree. At Crabtree go up the valley past Timberline Lake to a campsite at Guitar Lake.
16	Guitar Lake	Whitney Portal	24	1070	1940	9	Leave Guitar lake ascend the valley and then start the long climb up to the col at Trail Crest. Leave your pack here and make the easy 3 hour round trip to Mt. Whitney summit. Once back at the pack, shoulder it and start the long, relentless, often steep, but very varied descent, down to Whitney Portal. This is then end of the trek. It should be easy to hitch the 15 km to the town of Lone Pine.
			365	15060	13680	149	