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ADVENTURER

Hiking Mount Whitney

By DANA KENNEDY

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It will never be described as off the beaten track, but that does not stop about 16,000 people each year from finding their personal Everest in Mount Whitney. Though it is just three hours from Los Angeles, it is the highest mountain in the contiguous United States, and these hikers set out for the summit on a tough, 22-mile round-trip trail that was constructed 100 years ago this summer.

"Very few people can get to Everest," said Doug Thompson, 58, who has owned a small store at the trailhead near Lone Pine, Calif., for 17 years. "This mountain's big, but it's attainable."

For some. Park rangers say that only 50 percent of those who try to reach the summit succeed. Most others succumb to altitude sickness or fatigue and turn back. Because there is a path to the top and technical equipment other than hiking poles is not required, some people set out to climb Whitney not just because it's there, but because they think it will be easy.

Over the years, the overly optimistic have included women who have set off in high heels, even though the trail entails scrambling over slippery creek logs, tackling substantial stretches of rocky boulders, climbing 97 switchbacks and crossing a snowfield near the summit. One man began hiking in bare feet, which became so injured that he had to slide back down part way in a sitting position.

But for those possessed of excellent physical condition, determination and good sense, making it to the top of Mount Whitney and back in one day is one of the most



Elise Waddell for The New York Times
ON THE ROCKS While the Mount Whitney trail isn't a technical climb, the conditions are challenging and the vistas are rewarding.

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At 14,497 feet, Mount Whitney looms over the southeastern Sierra Nevada. Death Valley, the lowest point in the Western Hemisphere, is 100 miles to the east. The trailhead is 13 miles from the town of Lone Pine.

Because the number of daily permits is limited by a quota, the number of people spending one night early this summer at the Whitney Portal campground (8,200 feet) — to acclimatize before beginning their hike the next day — was refreshingly small.

Most hikers were men and in groups of two, including father-son teams and brothers who said they were making the climb as a bonding experience.

Alexandra Witt, 40, an anchorwoman at MSNBC, recalls becoming fascinated with Mount Whitney as a child, when her family drove by it on trips from Los Angeles to a nearby ski area. "I'd always keep one eye on the mountain and one eye on the road," she said. Now she was preparing to climb it for the first time, with five friends.

Most hikers at the campground engaged in the same night-before rituals: eating carbohydrate-laden dinners, filling backpack bladders with water and packing layers of clothing. Many seemed not too alarmed by the brazen black bears that prowl the campground after dusk.

Usually, climbers who try to make the summit in a day get up at 3 a.m. and are on the trail, lighting it with their headlamps, by 4 or 5. Most who make it to the summit arrive there from noon to 2 p.m. and are back down the mountain by 8:30 p.m.

The first four hours, including scenic views of lush sights like Lone Pine Lake (9,850 feet); Bighorn Sheep Park, a meadow at 10,200 feet; Mirror Lake at 10,640 feet, and then Trailside Meadows (11,395 feet), are a constant but pleasant trudge uphill. The vegetation and topography are ever changing as hikers enter the isolation of backcountry wilderness.

Logs of water birch along the low-lying creeks gradually give way to foxtail pines and later, red fir growing at the higher altitudes. Colorful flowers like the orangey red Indian paintbrush thrive below 10,000 feet; another flower, alpine gold, appears at 12,000 feet. (The exquisite lavender skypilots are so named because they pop up at the highest levels, all the way to the summit.)



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Hikers notice that it becomes tougher as they leave Trailside Meadows and Consultation Lake, the halfway point. Even the scenery is harsher; the greenery from below the tree line disappears, replaced by a rocky, almost lunar landscape.

At mile 6.3 — 12,000 feet — comes the start of the 97 switchbacks, notorious in Whitney lore. They are extremely steep, take about two hours to climb and lead to Trail Crest at 13,777 feet. Here hikers are rewarded with spectacular views down into the Great Western Divide, a range of mountains that runs north and south through the center of Sequoia National Park.

For those affected by altitude, this is when it can really hit. Some start to stagger, overcome with headaches or nausea.

The final two miles to the summit along the ridgeline are the most arduous, and are not for people with vertigo. "I never in my life thought I had a fear of heights," said David Crandall, 50, a personal-injury lawyer from Irvine, Calif., who was hiking along the ridge line with his son, Ryan, 16. "I wanted to find something that would challenge both me and him. Well, we got it."

Here the path is like a mountain-goat trail and the thin air slows the average hiker's pace considerably. Navigating the snowfield near the summit takes particular dexterity. But once hikers make it through, they see the hut at the summit and a chance to relax and enjoy the 360-degree view.

T. R. Quinzeo, 25, of Long Beach, Calif., was standing at the summit with his stepfather, Gary Borg, 49. "I wanted to see if the old man could make it," Mr. Quinzeo said. "I heard this mountain kicks everyone's butt, and I wanted to beat it."

Most hikers don't stay longer than an hour at the summit. After signing a guest register at the hut, they take off for the long journey back to the trailhead.

"It was a three-decades long obsession to get to the top of the mountain, and now it's done," Ms. Witt said triumphantly at the end of her climb.

But once is not enough for some people.

Hulda Crooks, who died in 1997 at 101, was nicknamed Grandma Whitney for her two dozen climbs up Whitney, many of them to the summit, between the ages of 66 and 91. (Rangers said that people in their 60's and 70's frequently make the full climb.)

Bob Rockwell, 68, of Ridgecrest, Calif., said he first

climbed the mountain on a whim when he was 16, hiking in a T-shirt and street shoes and almost freezing at the summit, and has since gone to the summit 99 times.

"Sometimes I'll wake up, have my coffee, read the paper," he said, "and think, 'Hey, I think I'll climb Whitney today.' "

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