

HIGH SIERRA EXPEDITION

24TH July 12th August 2004

Members: Adrian Bridge
Tim Josephy
Iain Gilmour
Neil Grant

Sat 24/Sun 25 Jul:

We flew from Manchester to San Francisco via Atlanta, accompanied by Adrian's wife Felicity: Spent the night with Adrian's son Ian and his partner Cecile at their San Francisco flat.

Next day, we drove to Yosemite, about 4 ½ hours and camped at Crane Flats. This is a good site for Yosemite - although 17 miles away from the valley, it is much higher, cooler and less crowded; the temperature in the valley was reaching the 100s at this time of year.

Mon 26 Jul: Half Dome 8836ft. 18 miles/4500ft. Up at 5AM - early starts were to be the pattern for the trip in order to gain height before the low level temperatures made uphill a misery. We reached Yosemite Valley just as dawn was breaking. For those of us who had never seen it before it was an amazing sight, with vast crags rearing up from the dimness of the valley to golden sunlit crests thousands of feet above.

We left the trailhead at 6.20 and walked up the already busy path beside Vernal and Nevada falls. Above the falls the trail levels off for a few miles through groves of pines and sequoia along the Merced River valley. The traffic had eased of considerably; clearly many fail at the first hurdle of the falls. Height was gained slowly till we reached the top of the forest and a splendid view of Half Dome. It seemed hardly possible that a route for mere mortals could be found up it. A zigzag path was followed up a steep granite shoulder to a saddle below the famous cables.

From closer up they looked even more improbable - two steel cables held up by posts every 15 feet or so going straight up a steep convex slab for about 800ft.



The ascent was breathtaking in every sense of the word; at around 8500ft our lack of acclimatisation was showing.

With lungs at bursting point Iain was heard to say he was only going on

"because that ***** Kay had done it"!

All pain was forgotten on the summit where we lost ourselves in wonder at the views and in the satisfaction of success. On the way down, Iain & Tim descended by the John Muir Trail, whilst Adrian & Neil took in the spectacular summit of Liberty Cap above Nevada Falls.

Tues 27 Jul: To Tuolumne meadows.

A leisurely start then we drove to Tuolumne Grove, not far from the campsite where we wandered about in awe at the size of the giant sequoia trees, which can live for 3000 years and weigh up to 6100 tons.

Later stopped for a picnic lunch by Lake Tenaya, where some swam in wonderfully warm water despite the 10,000ft altitude. We reached Tuolumne Meadows in early afternoon & managed to secure one of the last sites. Although the National Park was busy, we never had any problem getting campsites.

Adrian, Neil & Tim spent the rest of the day climbing a route called Northwest Book (severe, about 500ft) on the nearby Lembert Dome, a miniature of Half Dome, whilst Iain walked and then came to take pictures.

Felicity & Ian carried out the vital task of booking us into the local restaurant for the evening meal.

Wed 28 Jul: Cathedral Peak 10,911ft. SE face, severe, 8 miles/2300ft

Another early start: Although the mountain is only 3 miles from the trailhead, we were trying to beat the crowds; this is a very popular peak and in fact we had the misfortune to arrive just behind a rather slow pair of climbers.

Iain left us at the foot of the rocks and went off to explore the beautiful Budd Lake. He then crossed a large area of glaciated slabs over a pass which led down to the Cathedral Lakes on the John Muir Trail, where we met him later.

We climbed about 600ft of perfect granite, picking our own line to the small summit where there was just room for two at a time. The descent passed through a notch 20ft below the summit, then steep scrambling for a few hundred feet to scree and boulders back to the start.

The walk over to meet Iain took some time because everywhere we looked there were views of jagged mountains and jewel-like lakes to distract the eye. Iain met us with welcome supplies of water and after a short break by the lake; we followed the dusty JMT back down to the trailhead.

Thurs 29 Jul: Mount Conness 12,590ft. West Ridge, about V. Diff, 9miles/4000ft

Breakfasted in the dark then drove 10 miles to Saddlebag Lake. We set off through meadows full of flowers for a few miles until the trail petered out, and then struck up over broken ground to Alpine Lake, a little gem fed by permanent snowfields under the stark ridges of Mount Conness.

The way became steeper and rougher up to the East Ridge at about 11500ft. From here we had magnificent views to the north. Below us was the small Conness Glacier, with myriad pools leading down to Saddlebag Lake, whilst in the distance we could see the sharp peaks of Cathedral and further away, looking very small, Half Dome.

Iain left us here and went down to botanise and explore the valley. The rest carried on up the

shattered East Ridge to a huge plateau only a few hundred feet below the summit. We crossed to the SW Ridge and descended some distance until a gully could be found to drop into the amphitheatre below the tremendous SW face.

This is as near vertical as makes no difference and about 1000ft high. We felt like ants crawling over the boulders across to the start of the West Ridge. This turned out to be a splendid alpine style ridge; we climbed together for all but a couple of pitches.



After the first 500ft or so, the route was entirely on the edge above the SW face, giving stunning exposure but easy climbing. What a combination.

The ridge was about 2000ft long and by the time the summit was reached we were all feeling the effects of altitude.

A resident marmot occupying the summit rocks was very interested in the prospect of scraps but refused to pose for us.

We came down the East Ridge, a grand walk in its own right and met Iain back at the car. A great day, but then all the days were like that. On the way home we stopped to eat at the Tioga Gas Mart, an unlikely place for a great restaurant,

but its reputation stretches far and wide. We all ordered too much, except for Iain who ordered far too much - he never learns, he did it several times again later.

Fri 30 Jul

Left Tuolomne Meadows and drove over the Tioga Pass towards Mammoth Lakes and the Minarets. Past the town of Mammoth Lakes we entered the Devil's Postpile National Park and found a charming campsite at Red's Meadow.

After visiting the Postpile, an extrusion of basalt columns (not a patch on the Giant's Causeway), we got a permit from the ranger station to camp out in the Minaret mountains the following night. These permits are free but limited in number. During the night we were disturbed by bears trotting through the campsite. They came very close to the tents but didn't eat us.

Sat 31 Jul/Sun 1 Aug: Clyde Minaret 12,281ft. SE Buttress 1000ft+ VS. Lots of miles / height!

A fateful day! Set off early again.

The first part of the 8 mile approach to the Minarets follows the JMT and is very dusty. We split up to avoid the dust and walked alone, joining up at rests every hour or so. We passed picturesque waterfalls on the gradual climb up to the beautiful Minaret Lake. Surrounded by the needles of the Minarets and with the shores dotted with flowers, one could be excused for just sitting and contemplating, but we were on a mission and we had no time for that.

A further steep pull reached Lake Cecile and a stunning view of the perfect spire of the Clyde Minaret. Here we made our first mistake.



It was only midday and there were 8½ hours of daylight left. We had planned to bivi and start the route early the following day, but it looked like we could crack it straight off.

Iain's disapproving silence ought to have been a clue but we had the bit between our teeth and we were off.

Crossing Lake Cecile outfall and climbing the snow and boulders to the foot of the SE face took 1½ hours, so that was another clue, but still we pressed on.

We decided to climb to a big ledge 1/3 of the way up the route and then make a final decision. We passed two climbers abseiling off; they had started at 8AM and had only got halfway. A big feature of the climb is a huge corner just above halfway up; we could see it and thought we were nearly there.

After a delicate traverse we were over a very steep part of the face and pretty much committed. Adrian was given the task of leading whilst Neil and Tim climbed together behind. The guidebook 90ft corner turned out to be four full pitches - the climb just went on and on.

The sun was well off the crag and it was getting cold. As the foolish virgins had no spare gear, the wise virgin shared his out selflessly. Still, he had more padding than the rest.

Climbing like demons, we reached the top just as the sun set and with no time to admire the colours, rushed off down the scrambling route of the SW face.

We got off the spire after a convenient abseil but then missed our way in the dark. We tried several gullies but they were all suicidally loose. After boulder hopping for several hours we had to admit we were lost.

Meanwhile, back at Minaret Lake Iain was getting very concerned. The two American climbers tried to reassure

him that we seemed to be climbing competently (where they got that notion I have no idea), and eventually Iain retired to bed with the intention of going down for help at first light. We were still walking and although we had very little in the way of clothes, it was not too cold and our main worry was Iain's state of mind.

In the end we walked right past the end of the Minarets ridge then just aimed across country to try to pick up the trail we had come up the previous day. It was around 6AM when we finally made it to Iain's camp after 24 hours on the go.

He was very relieved but justifiably even more cross. Still, compassionate soul that he is, he relented and brewed us tea and porridge whilst we dozed in the morning sun. Later we wandered back down the trail to Red's Meadow and more sleep.

Mon 2/Tues 3 Aug: Bishop

Packed up in leisurely time and drove down to the town of Bishop. At only 4000ft, the heat was oppressive and the surrounding countryside was dry and burnt. It was easy to believe that we were close to the Mojave Desert. However a road led 20 miles up towards the trailheads at 9000ft and here conditions were very pleasant. We found a good campsite by a rushing stream, and then returned to Bishop to visit the Galen Rowell photo gallery (worth going just for that) and to indulge in too much food.

Next day we were banging on the ranger station door early to get a permit to stay out for 5 days in order to attempt the Evolution Traverse, a magnificent ridge crossing 8 peaks, and expected to take 2-3 days. We secured the last available permit to go in the next day. We spent the rest of the day provisioning and preparing for the trip.

Wed 4 Aug: Lamarck Col, 12,900ft

Set off from the North Lake trailhead at 9300ft. After 10 minutes Adrian turned back to recover a forgotten eating utensil. The rest of us walked on, deep in conversation, so we missed

the sign nailed to a tree and took the wrong trail. By the time we had sorted that out, Adrian had passed us at high speed trying to catch up. Neil set off at higher speed trying to catch him up.

Iain and Tim eventually met up with Adrian near Lamarck Lakes, a couple of hours up the trail, but no sign of Neil. We waited a while; then searched the broken ground around the valley and hillside. Although we couldn't see how he could have passed us, we decided to press on to the col and look for him there. We reached the col in early afternoon but there was no sign of him.

As we sat and discussed our predicament, a Ranger called Debbie appeared on her way over the col to the Ranger station on the John Muir Trail at McLure Meadows. We had convinced ourselves that Neil had not passed us, so must either be injured at the lake or have gone back down. Debbie agreed to look for Neil on the other side of the col and to radio back to Bishop.

We returned to the lake to search again. Eventually we returned to the trailhead in sombre mood and called the police for help.

Relief all round when they told us that Debbie had found Neil sitting happily on the Darwin Bench on the far side of the col, unaware of all the drama and that he would walk out next day. In fact, he walked out that evening (no mean feat, crossing the col twice in one day), spending the night at the campsite near the trailhead.

All in all; a classic example of how the smallest mistakes can snowball into utter chaos. The Evolution Traverse was now out of the question as we had neither the time nor the energy.

Thur 5 - Sun 8 Aug: Piute Pass to Lamarck Col circuit.

We still had 4 days of the permit to use, so having reunited the party we set off from North Lake to walk a loop to the John Muir Trail, following that to the Evolution Valley, then back over Lamarck Col.

Despite the disappointment of missing the Traverse, this was to prove one of the highlights of the whole trip. Iain and Tim set off first and walked up through forest, then flower meadows beside lakes and streams to the pass at 11,420ft.

On the far side they walked down into the Humphreys Basin below the giant Mt Humphreys and found a beautiful and lonely campsite on a small bench overlooking a wide river valley dotted with green meadows and azure lakes. Adrian and Neil arrived in the early evening and fully approved of the site.

Next day was a lazy start and it was past 8 o'clock before we were away. The wide valley soon narrowed and deepened, becoming more wild and dramatic. Looking back it was hard to see where the path had been. Ahead were great glaciated domes, with the river still descending quite steeply towards its junction with the JMT, which we reached at about mid day.

There were more people about now, including a large party who had arrived on horseback, but a siesta was called for and it was gone 2PM before we stirred ourselves again. Our plan to camp in the next few miles was scotched by the abundance of mosquitoes, the only time we were really bothered by them, so we extended the day to climb up into the Evolution Valley, where we expected the problem to be eased.

Although it was a fair climb, the zigzag path was well graded and easier than we expected. At the top we forded the river to Evolution Meadow, where Iain's local knowledge led us to another fine campsite. This turned out to be equipped with a fire pit made by some previous occupant so for the first and only time we camped, American style with a proper campfire. We didn't sing any songs though.

Having cracked about 18 miles the previous day, we were in no hurry as we strolled up the valley past McLure Station (Debbie was out) and along to a steep climb up to the Evolution Valley itself. This is at the same time one of the most beautiful and dramatic places any of us had ever

seen. All I can say is go and see for yourself. Along one side stretched the Evolution Traverse, seemingly miles above. It was a sobering sight and we wondered if we would have been capable of doing it at all.

We spent a few hours sightseeing; then climbed up a side valley to the Darwin Bench, where Neil found the best campsite of the trip; flat, sheltered and surrounded by stupendous scenery.

On the last day, we walked slowly up the Darwin Canyon past a chain of charming lakes under the vast walls and glaciers of Mts. Mendel and Darwin. There is so much to do one just has to go back. (Any takers?)

The pull up to Lamarck Col was steep and bouldery but small cairns pointed out the best way. At the col, a rocky ridge led up to Mt. Lamarck, 13,417ft. This proved too much temptation for three; Iain, having more sense, negotiated the snowfield below the col, and waited for us by a small lake. The ridge provided fine scrambling to the summit plateau whence a magnificent vista revealed itself, with the town of Bishop visible miles away and over 9000ft below.

The descent to the trailhead and the car seemed interminable, but the prospect of a motel room, a shower and a beer (not necessarily in that order) kept us all going.

Mon 9 Aug: Tom's Place to Dade Lake. 6 miles/2000ft

Drove to Tom's Place; a small hamlet about 30 miles NW of Bishop. In the afternoon we set off from Mosquito Flats trailhead to walk up the aptly named Little Lakes Valley.

This is very popular with walkers and fishermen but once we reached Gem Lake, about 3½ miles away we were on our own. The trail ended there and we covered 2 miles of large boulders up to Dade Lake, spectacularly positioned below Bear Creek Spire, our objective for the next day.

We found some cosy little bivi sites among the boulders and were soon driven into them by the chill wind (we were at around 11,500ft).



Tues 10 Aug: Bear Creek Spire, 13,720ft. North Arete 1000ft+ Severe

Iain professed himself past master at pottering around in campsites and absorbed himself investigating the flora and fauna of Dade Lake.

The rest of us toiled up boulders and snow to the foot of the fine North Arete. This time we had all day for the climb and we enjoyed it thoroughly.



Superb rough granite, the first half was on a relatively steep buttress, then the rest on a grand alpine style ridge with many gendarmes and

limitless views all around. The summit block provided a tricky move or two and was just big enough for one person to stand rather precariously.

Once we had taken our turns on top, we found abseil slings, which allowed us to reach easy ground quite quickly.

The descent was dusty, bouldery and long, but we didn't mind, each of us quietly reliving the enjoyment of the climb.



Back at Dade Lake we packed up and the four of us hiked out to the trailhead. I don't know about the others but I felt a strange combination of satisfaction at our achievements and sadness that it was all over. I really think the High Sierra is not a place you can visit just once; there is so much to see and do whatever the level of your ambitions, that you have to go back.

Logistics.

It was really a very cheap trip. Including the flight and the car hire, petrol, camp and national park fees, food, beer and a couple of nights in a motel, the cost was less than £1500 per head. We pre booked the first campsite at Crane Flats which was a good thing as Yosemite area is very busy; all the others were on spec and we had no trouble.

We had entertained some doubts about the time of year because of high temperatures but in fact although the valleys reached over 100deg most days, we were rarely below 7500ft and the climate was very pleasant. Water was plentiful and the snowfields, which can necessitate the use of axes and crampons earlier in the season, were no problem. In addition, nights were not cold, so we carried only light clothing and bivi gear. Thunderstorms are rare in July and August, so for the high mountains we probably had the best of all worlds.



EICHORN AND CATHEDRAL



IAIN AT CLYDE MINARET



EICHORN PINNACLE ON CATHEDRAL



BEAR
CREEK
SPIRE

LEFT



CATHEDRAL
PEAK

RIGHT



HALF
DOME

MARMOT

