

THE JOHN MUIR TRAIL

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John Muir Trail Pack List- Prologue

Before I begin the epic tale of our 31-day hike throughout the Easter Sierra Mountains, I feel it is important to note the provisions Geoff and I accumulated for our journey. It will give you a better idea of the preparation involved in planning our trip, and, more importantly, what was physically shoved into two standard through-hiking packs. Enjoy!

- I. Safety/First Aid
 - a. Medical Supplies
 - i. Cold compresses, sting relief cream, Band-Aids (all sizes), soap toillettes, antiseptic toillettes, first aid cream, Q-tips, Moleskin, tweezers, safety pins, eye pad, tampons, alcohol pads, super-sani clothes, emergency H₂O, hand warmers, face mask, ponchos, aspirin and non-aspirin pain reliever, cough drops, gauze, Pepto-Bismol, gloves, muscle-rub, hydrocortisone, popsicle sticks, Ibuprofen, tape, liquid bandage, superglue, iodine ointment, scissors, anti-fungal ointment, hand sanitizer, dressing pads, triangular bandage, lightstick, whistle, trauma pads.
 - b. Bear Safety
 - i. Bear bell
 - ii. Bear Canisters
 - iii. Knife
 - c. Familial Contact
 - i. SPOT- GPS locator
- II. Hygiene
 - a. Skin Protection
 - i. Sunscreen, bug spray, mosquito netting.
 - b. Keeping Clean
 - i. Biodegradable soap (Dr. Bronner's), pocket shower, wet wipes, unscented deodorant, camping towel.
 - c. Sparkly Teeth
 - i. Floss, toothbrush, toothpaste (not biodegradable... woops).
 - d. Lookin' Hot
 - i. Brush, rubberbands, razor.
 - e. Staying Healthy
 - i. UTI medication, Macrobid, birth control.
- III. Clothing
 - a. Keeping Warm
 - i. Gloves, fleece undergarments, SmartWool socks (x5), sweater, puffy jacket, sweat pants.

- b. Everyday Wear
 - i. Polyester shirts (x2), Northface convertible pants, polyester underwear (x5).
 - c. Getting Wet
 - i. Board shorts, Croqs, swimsuit.
- IV. Essentials
- a. Sleeping Bag (-5 degree), sleeping pad, compass, headlamp with extra batteries, backpack (naturally...), tent (3-person).
- V. Food Stuffs
- a. Preparation
 - i. Jetboil, fuel canisters (x8), spork, rubber bowl and cup.
 - b. Sterilization
 - i. Steri-pen with extra batteries.
 - c. Breakfasts
 - i. Oatmeal (x17, 1 quart bags, pre-sweetened), powdered milk (x17 quarts).
 - d. Lunches
 - i. Luna/Power Bars (x64, variety of flavors), protein shake (x64 tbs).
 - e. Snacks
 - i. Nuts and trail mix (x32, snack bag size), dried fruit (x4, sandwich bag size), gum (x16).
 - f. Dinners
 - i. Dehydrated meals (x31), Crystal Light packets (x64), candy bars (x32), hot chocolate packets (x32), tea bags (x32), spicy mango (x4, snack size bags).
- VI. Entertainment
- a. Books (x2), playing cards, waterproof journal, and space pen.
- VII. Disposition
- a. Patience, Strength, Diligence.
 - b. Optimism, Humor, Tolerance.
 - c. Bravery, Love, Will power.
 - d. Faith, Confidence, Appreciation.

Well, now that you have had a glimpse of what we carried, join us on a journey of uncertainty, triumph, and both physical and hypothetical ups and downs! Bon voyage!

John Muir Trail Daily Journal- Novel

Day 1:

Our adventure began at midnight on July the 13th, when the bus supposedly departing from Union Station in Los Angeles in reality left from the Greyhound Station ten minutes away. Geoff and I scrambled to catch a cab...luckily we had cash on hand... and made it to the station just in time to pick up our tickets and declare ourselves the last people in line. After standing for an hour or more as everyone else boarded, we finally stepped on an oversold bus and found the last two open seats quite far apart. Fortunately, the kind woman in front of us offered to move so that I could sit directly behind Geoff. My initial attempts to sleep were rendered futile by a woman who, despite the otherwise dark and silent bus, refused to end her blatantly loud conversation with her cell phone companion...a conversation that could not have lasted less than *two hours*. Eventually I drifted off, only to be startled by the humorous voice of the bus driver on the loudspeaker announcing the first of many stops. The seven-hour ride passed slowly, and we arrived in chilly Merced around 8am to wait for our connection with the Yosemite Area Rapid Transit System (YARTS).

The far smaller, far emptier bus arrived with a frank, but friendly driver who taught me lesson about always having small change when traveling...the hundred dollar bills weren't cutting it. The following three-hour trip was quite pleasant, as we were introduced to the scenery of the area and grew closer and closer to our starting destination. Finally, we arrived! Stepping off the bus with our excessively weighty backpacks, we stretched and squinted in the bright, morning sun and made our way to the Wilderness Permit office. There we spoke to a friendly ranger who gave us the need-to-know for our thirty-one day journey, including information about waste disposal and "wag-bags"...but more on that later. From there we took the "scenic route" to the backpacker's campground, but eventually found our way and spent a long twenty minutes setting up camp for the first time. We did not have much time to enjoy it, however; just as we lay down to sunbath next to the Merced River, grey clouds began to form above us and tiny raindrops tickled our faces as we ran to the tent.

Geoff and I napped while the rain fell then went for a short walk before sunset. Back at camp we met a man from France, and another two from Germany who were completing the JMT in fifteen days. These were the first of many backpackers who, we found out, are some of the nicest, most down-to-earth people around. It was a real pleasure being surrounded by, talking to, and learning from this particular segment of society for the duration of our trip! For dinner, we had Mountain House Chili Mac...our first of many experiences with dehydrated meals...and it was delicious. That in conjunction with our Nalgene bottle of Crystal Light lemonade and Snickers bar for dessert made for a wonderful meal. It was then finally time for bed, so we brushed our teeth 100 ft. from the tent, put our food in the bear locker, and slipped into our soft, warm sleeping bags.

Day 2:

I awoke to Geoff's voice from outside the tent telling me it was probably time to get moving...8:45 in the morning! Of course, he had been awake since 6:00, strolling

around, taking pictures of the sunrise, watching **bears** climb trees...the usual. But I was still tired. The previous night had not offered much relaxation, as I jumped at every crunching leaf believing a bear was preparing to hijack our tent and eat us alive. In any case, it took us a solid two hours to pack up, eat an oatmeal breakfast, and head out toward Little Yosemite Valley. After about an hour, we reached the junction with the Mist Trail, a more popular though not official trail on the JMT, which passes by beautiful Vernal and Nevada falls. These rewards are not obtained easily, however. The Mist Trail is crowded, seemingly endless, and very steep. You first follow a paved trail up toward the outlet of Vernal falls where, if you are me, you will tumble headfirst to the ground and take a large chunk out of your knee. Way to start the trip! Geoff and I then tackled the thousands of tall, granite steps that lead to the top of the fall, where our fellow through-hikers (evident by their large backpacks) stopped to rest every few steps with us. We met one man, Greg, who told us this was third time hiking the trail and was taking a month as well, yet after the following day we did not see him again.

Breathless, we eventually arrived and quickly learned that if we wanted to keep our food uneaten by chipmunks and blue jays, we should keep it in our bags or hands. Our lunch of nuts and power bars was succeeded by a second grueling hike to the top of Nevada Falls, where we gratefully used the restroom and bench outside. The trail eventually began to level and we passed a lovely river where a young girl was swimming with her grandfather. Suddenly the rain began to fall again, and Geoff and I moved our aching legs as quickly as possible to get to camp before the downpour...we were unsuccessful. Soaked and frustrated, we arrived at Little Yosemite Valley, threw up our tent, moved everything inside, and used our only towels to dry the equipment. The rain lasted a few hours while we read and talked, but happily it came to an end and we went exploring the campground. There we found solar toilets and that same pretty river, which we used to fill our bottles. In the process of sterilization, however, our rechargeable battery ran out and we were forced to use our back up already! Luckily, these were effective for the following twelve days. Now at this point, any superstitious person would have quit the journey, claiming that so many problems arising in so short a time must signify bad juju. The Katmandu Curry we ate for dinner did not help either, but we were not yet ready to give up. Everyone we met seemed impressed at our venture, and those who had already hiked it assured us that the best was yet to come. So, after chatting with the nice couple camped beside us, Isaac and Natalia, we went to bed.

Day 3:

Another very difficult day; I had scheduled us to walk 9.3 miles to Sunrise campground, but five miles in we were forced to stop. The Sunrise Trail was not unattractive, but walking hour after hour with an overly heavy backpack constantly uphill was more than I could handle. Every step was a literal struggle against gravity, and my hips were being ripped apart. Around four in the afternoon, I saw an area adequate enough to stay for the night where we dropped our bags...well, only temporarily. Geoff was not satisfied with the location and, a few hundred yards off, he spotted a small patch of dirt next to a gentle, gurgling stream. This discovery required that we return to the original spot, re-secure our bags, and continue our slow journey one painful step at a time. This may not seem like a difficult task, yet the feelings of the enormous weight on your shoulders, the stinging of skin being torn from your hipbones, and the pressure on

the balls and heels of your feet as if you are stepping on tender bruises...it was too much to bear twice in one day. I was very upset that Geoff could be so finicky about campsites in a situation such as ours and I sulked inside the tent until dinnertime. As long as he is appeased, however, he is very supportive and administers wonderful therapeutic massages. But that is beside the point. Despite the delicious Natural High Cheese Enchilada Ranchero, we were both quite disheartened on that evening, and I honestly felt I could not continue with the journey. At Red's Meadow, I would find my way home, and until then sooth myself with the mantra, "six days left...six days left..."

Day 4:

Finally, a ray of light from between the dark, threatening clouds...a good day! Geoff and I increased our mileage by at least two miles and made up for the day before. The morning was difficult, as we arose early and trudged three miles up steep switchbacks before reaching a rocky habitation for mountain lions. Needless to say my pace quickened in this area, but we soon glided down our very first descent since the beginning of our trip. It was a welcomed change for our poor muscles and delight to scale, for it lead us to a large, deep green meadow, through which a soft stream intercepted every which way, like spider's legs. This was Sunrise Camp, a popular destination for Boy and Girl Scout outings and our choice for a lovely breakfast break. We prepared our trusty oatmeal and lay in the sun on a large flat rock. Little did we know how blessed we were to have a toilet at the site...I did not even use it (!)... but we would not see another until Mammoth.

After breakfast, we made our way across Long Meadow- true to its name, by the way- then up and over Cathedral Pass. Our first pass of the trip was surprisingly bearable, and though it is the lowest on the trail (9700'), we felt quite accomplished! On top of everything, we got a glimpse of our first lake. It was gorgeous! Down we went once more, and Cathedral Lake became bigger and bluer as we skirted its edges. The sun glimmered excitedly on its surface and the sight was incredibly refreshing to two hikers bathed in their own sweat. By the time we reached Lower Cathedral, whose campsites were 0.5 mi from the trail, I was feeling nauseous and found a nice slanted rock to nap on. Shortly after, a ranger came by and informed us that camping in the area was prohibited and we would have to move. "No way in hell," I thought to myself, "just fine me and go away." Luckily we asked him to check with his supervisor, who confirmed that through-hikers were an exception. The nice ranger averted certain death by a woman's wrath after-all! As a whole, the day was just fine, even with a very disappointing Jamaican Chicken and Rice, yet it was no match for days to come!

Day 5:

Our 12.4 mile venture to Lyell Canyon was appropriately termed in my journal, "our best day so far!," although it did not start that way. After his daily ritual of waking early and taking sunset pictures- this did not last long- Geoff poked me deliberately so that I may witness the layer of frost on his backpack, which had formed over night. We took our time packing up while trying to prevent our fingers from loosing feeling altogether, and after a few hours and another spill in a neighboring creek, we made our way back to the trail and shed our top layers of clothing. Shortly after we had a welcomed surprise, as Robyn came trotting up the trail toward us. My mom had given her our

coordinates and, as she was in the area that week, she decided to meet us and report back later. The company was refreshing and inspired us to move more quickly, but the best part was the gift of an indescribably delicious lunch that she bestowed upon us: a jalapeno turkey sandwich on a parmesan roll, fresh mozzarella, tomatoes, lettuce, and a flavorful chipotle sauce, not to mention a crisp apple, cold soda, and big, chewy cookie. It was only day four and nothing had ever tasted better!

So we stuffed ourselves silly and continued on; thankfully, the trail remained flat for a good ten miles, however at times we felt as if we were walking on the beach. For some reason...probably the sandwich... I had developed an eager spirit and quick feet to match, and was leading the duo happily. We soon reached a wide and beautiful canyon intersected by a turquoise, easy-flowing river teeming with delicious (and deceptive!) trout. We set up camp, twice, in this alleged bear-heaven, attempted to fish, and played cards before indulging in Mountain House's Chicken Teriyaki.

Day 6:

The preceding night *could* have been nice, had I not been so preoccupied with the bear issue. Yet this was just the start of a day of nightmarish proportions that it even now irks me to remember. Perhaps the day prior had bolstered my expectations for the remainder of the trip; well, suffice it to say my naiveté would be shattered by beloved Donohue Pass (11,056). Geoff and I began walking about 1.4 miles out of Lyell Canyon, when we were swarmed with mosquitoes invading every orifice of our bodies, biting and stinging and buzzing all over! Whoever said all of god's creatures were special has never worn a suit of vicious, blood-sucking insects. Ugh! Anyway, we attempted to create a makeshift mosquito hat out of bulk netting from REI, but soon realized that being able to see the path was actually a good thing. So we scratched that idea, picked up the pace, and began the never-ending trudge of what I only thought was our second pass of the trip.

The landscape was barren, the sun was beating down on us, and we were covered in fantastically itchy bumps. Step after step after step on grey, dusty rocks... after a couple of hours I was convinced we were near the top. Suddenly we turned a corner and... no freakin' way! ...there was the mountain again. We were just then approaching the base! Apparently the terrain did not allow for a straight shot, but instead took us around a peak in a painstakingly gradual ascent to the bottom of Donohue. I impatiently insisted that we stop for lunch and sulked quietly for the following twenty minutes while Geoff made a futile effort to keep my spirits up. On we went, and after another of the longest three hours of my life, we reached the top. You'd think I'd feel accomplished, but I just wanted to lie down and die. I did not even give Geoff an adequate chance to take pictures -not that there was much to see- but I feel guilty about it now. I practically ran down the mountain ruminating on the words, "three days left."

But there was no stopping it... the minute I found a place to sit, I plopped my butt down in exhaustion and wept. I didn't care who heard or stared, I cried loudly and without regulation. When Geoff finally caught on (he was usually fifty feet ahead of me), he didn't sit down beside me and rub my back. He didn't give me a hug or tell me it was going to be all right. No. He asked me why I was crying and said this was hard for everyone. I couldn't have been more furious, which just made me cry even more. I eventually got up and we slowly made our way to the nearest, somewhat adequate campsite near Rush Creek. I learned at that point, following his apology, that he was

being eaten alive by those damned mosquitoes and could not control his own frustration. Given the circumstances, I understood, but did not forget to make a list of reasons why I should stay and why quitting was the answer. They are as follows:

Stay

Don't want to disappoint Geoff.
Getting a tan.
Getting in shape.
Growing out eyebrows and fingernails.
Promise of skydiving upon completion.

Go

MOSQUITOES
Too much walking!
Chapped lips, blisters,
sun-burn, HIPS, aching
feet...
Get up early everyday.
Miss my family.
I am ugly and stink.

For dinner we had Potatoes and Cheese with Broccoli, which was awesome, but nothing could comfort me after a day like that. "Three days left..."

Day 7:

After the previous day, I believe Geoff felt it was incumbent upon him to offer that we take it easy. I did not hesitate to accept. We decided to gallivant a comfortable 4.1 miles to Thousand Island Lake. Although it wasn't as easy as it sounded, it turned out to be a great decision; Geoff took some of the most beautiful pictures of the trip at this site (see below ☺). Optimistic about our curtailed plans, and somewhat well-rested (Geoff let me sleep until 7:45am!), we began our trip with a bearably short, uphill trudge over Island Pass (10,203). From there we could finally see the stunning silhouette of Banner Peak, under which we would be sleeping that night. I learned from this trip that knocking out the hard part in the morning before your feet start aching and hips start burning makes the day much easier. It was all downhill from there!

Finding our campsite by 1:00pm, we filled our solar shower with lake water, hung it from a nearby rock, and proceeded to wash our hair and underpants. So... cold... Only very few times throughout the trip did I subject myself to the freezing water in order to get clean. It somehow became less of a priority than maintaining some degree of comfort. For the remainder of the day we rested; I read, ate a three-star Chana Masala, and got a massage as a bribe to keep going. I considered it. Thankful that we would only be walking 2.0 miles to Garnet Lake tomorrow, I ate my Snickers and fell asleep.

Day 8:

Geoff awoke early to brave the biting cold and hungry mosquitoes in order to take pictures of the sunrise. He seems to have a keen idea of when the effort will be worth it. An hour or so later, he stirred me and we began our hike to Garnet Lake. We arrived shortly after and sat down to our seventh oatmeal breakfast, at this point still warm and satisfying, when it began to sprinkle. With seven prior days of nothing but blue skies, and ever the photographer, Geoff praised the clouds and never took his hands off the camera. While he was off documenting our travels, I glanced through the John Muir Trail guidebook and noted that the rest of the trail to Red's Meadow in Mammoth (our first food drop) was a gradual, 12-mile descent. A marked error in judgment, I mentioned this to Geoff and he suggested we make the rest of the journey today and relax all day

tomorrow. Now at this point, twelve more miles sounded like absolute torture and I adamantly refused the proposal. Yet after a few more miles and a thousand more bug bites, the promise of a hot shower, toilets, and real food was more temptation than I could bear. I agreed, and we continued on down a dirty path through barren pines toward our destination.

Ok, so I did at one point agree that reaching Red's Meadow that night would have been in our best interest, but six or so miles to go and I could no longer stand it. "Great," I thought, "even downhill sucks. There is no way I can finish this trip." I suppose I have failed to mention up to this point that both Geoff's and my backpacks were far heavier than recommended for first-timers. $1/4$ your weight to start, then up it to $1/3$... that was the rule. I, at 115 lbs., was carrying over 40 lbs. Let's do some math, shall we? $115(1/4) = 28.75$... $115(1/3) = 37.95$. Yea, this is probably why, even going down, each step was a new challenge. Finally, I was through. I could take no more and begged Geoff to help me set up camp, but he was relentless. He kept saying, "we are almost there, we're almost there!" ...I was just SO tired. In anger and exhaustion, I resolved not to talk to him the rest of the way, though we did eventually make it, and threw down my pack at the first vacant spot I saw.

Unfortunately, this spot was reserved, as is required at large campsites like Red's Meadow. This I found out while Geoff was taking advantage of the hot-spring filtered showers and a nice Dutch couple inquired as to why I was setting up camp in their area. Just the thought of picking up my bag again brought tears to my eyes, and they must have noticed my anguish because they offered to share. The couple next to them also pointed out a spot between them where I could drag the tent, even though we did not pay the \$20 fee, and these acts of generosity furthered my conviction that mountain people are the kindest on the planet. Slowly, my will to murder Geoff began to fade.

He soon returned to help me finish setting up and convinced me to try to the showers. I hesitated and said all I wanted was sleep, but now cannot hope to describe how incredible that steaming water felt on my cold, aching body. Layers of dirt fell from me and my muscles ever so slowly started to relax. I could have stayed there forever. A good half-an-hour later, I returned to camp, ate soupy Sante Fe chicken, and fell asleep. I was too tired to fear bears that night.

Day 9:

Geoff woke me early... again... saying we should try to catch the shuttle to Mammoth in case they only run it once a day. It turned out to leave Red's every twenty minutes. So much for a relax day! In any case, I couldn't stay mad long because we found the on-site café and ingested a massive breakfast of pancakes, eggs, and hashbrowns. It was incredible, soaked in butter and syrup, and loaded with cholesterol. I couldn't believe how much I ate! I guess working off more calories than you eat for eight straight days will make you hungry as, perhaps appropriately, a bear! We then made a futile attempt to contact our parents from the pay phones outside the café, and threw what we could of our dirty clothes into the public washing machine. After relishing in the glory of the porcelain gods, we jumped on the shuttle to Mammoth Mountain and developed a newfound appreciation for any vehicle that could get us five miles in less than five hours.

We arrived at the general store and I picked up a great sweatshirt that turned out to be a lifesaver for the rest of the trip. From there we made our way to Alfredo's, the

delicious Mexican restaurant that is a must-dine whenever Geoff's family is in the area, and scarfed an enormous burrito, beans, rice, and virgin margaritas. We sat back in the chairs, soaked up the sun, and remembered for the second time that day the blissful feeling of a full stomach. Unfortunately, it went a bit downhill from there. Geoff insisted that if we spent the whole day without walking we would lose what we had already gained, and did not allow me to take the free tram from place to place. Needless to say I was a happy companion and loving girlfriend the rest of the day. We visited a sporting goods store to ask if there was any possible thing I could do about the massacre the backpack had left on my hips, but did not think far enough ahead to actually bring the backpack with us. Genius. Instead, we got the chance to hear from an avid, albeit extreme, hiker who had done the JMT, PCT, and more. He encouraged me to keep going and find out why its one of the most beloved hikes in the US. I considered it.

From there, we trucked it to a fishing store to buy some bait and a few hooks. Geoff was anticipating that, having already missed the chance to fish at lovely Lyell Canyon (mosquitoes on string weren't cutting it), he would be given another opportunity later down the line. Our suggestion for fishing: don't miss Lyell Canyon. The fish in the later lakes are tricky! Anyway, it was almost time for dinner! Acknowledging that we were pretty much still full from lunch, we decided to keep it light... sushi! As luck would have it, women got free sushi, salad, and sake on Tuesday nights, so we only had to pay for Geoff. Raw fish is so much more delicious when you don't have to catch, skin, or slice it yourself. Upon stuffing ourselves to the point of nausea, we booked it back to the shuttle; we barely caught the last one of the night- which happened to be manned by an obvious friend of 4:20, ever so slowly enjoying his pork rinds- and made it back to the campground. There we indulged once more in a hot shower, knowing we would not have another chance for the next week. Feeling stronger, cleaner, and full of spirit (food), I decided to continue the journey. Geoff facilitated the decision by transferring all the heavy items from my backpack to his, and allowing me to carry the powdered milk, dehydrated meals, and toilet paper... why he wanted me to continue so badly, I will never know. I would regret my decision and make his life miserable for every one of the 96 hours, 5,760 minutes, and 345,600 seconds to follow. Read on.

Day 10:

Well, I suppose the first day of segment two wasn't SO bad... for me anyway. Remember how Geoff had taken all the heavy items and significantly decreased the weight of my pack? Well, he was feeling it. We began the journey hiking three miles up and out of Red's Meadow through an eerie plain of tall grasses and charred tree trunks. I enjoyed the abrupt ascent because it was over quickly, but Geoff was crouched over and you know those legs were burning! Finally we reached our campsite, with nothing beyond the now usual trail mix and protein shake consumption to speak of, and set up camp next to Deer Creek. We had traveled 6.7 miles, but were finished walking by one o'clock. Seeing as we were still below 10,000 ft. and the campsite actually boasted a fire pit, Geoff decided it was time we had our first fire of the trip. He walked around the site gathering sticks and mulch, throwing them in the pit, and igniting a flame using a lighter and used toilet paper (hey, it beats carrying it around in the pack, though granted it didn't smell great as it burned). In the process, we noticed another couple arrive and set up camp across the trail from us. We were not planning on even talking to them, but actually

ended up spending the remainder of the night chatting and drinking hot chocolate together lit by the glow of a roaring flame.

A quick lesson on one of the traditions among tried and true backpackers: the trail name. “Trail names reflect a sort of split personality, in which one's trail identity is far removed from one's other life in, say, the corporate world” (Luxenberg). They are a mandatory aspect of the culture of thru hiking, which refers to completing an entire trail at one time versus hiking its different segments at different points in time. In any case, the male counterpart of the couple was called Chuckwagon, though his girlfriend was simply Alyssa, and they were an altogether interestingly, down to earth, amiable pair. We managed to unload some of our extra powdered milk onto them, as they were all too happy to take any free food that was offered, and exchanged emails before retiring to bed. The night was dark and frightening as usual, and all that hot chocolate required I leave the tent twice to relieve myself. Let me tell you how difficult it is to find a spot one hundred feet from the tent and peel off layers of clothing by the light of the moon alone, then try to pee while you're shivering from both the cold and the fear of large beasts lurking in the shadows... Everything aside from literally wetting your pants takes a back seat to getting back into your warm sleeping bag and the artificial safety of the tent. The second guessing my decision to continue had officially begun...

Day 11:

The next morning, we were sure to fill our water bottles to the brim and drink frugally, for the next water source was a scorching six miles away. The seemingly never-ending hike encircling Peak 11348 toward Purple Lake was tedious and frustrating, convincing the both of us that we were, in fact, walking in circles. After re-consulting our guide book and deciding there was really no other way we could have gone, we continued for another two solid hours, with only the rock wall to our left and gorge filled with pine trees to our right to keep us entertained. It was an impressive view, nonetheless, but also impressively unchanging. Eventually we arrived at Duck Creek and sat down to lunch: a Luna Bar to eat, protein water to drink, and a few handfuls of spicy peanuts to keep our spirits up.

While eating, Geoff spotted a dirty square of foam padding lying on the ground next to us. He looked around to be sure no one had lost it, then told me to wedge it in between my pack and my body. “C'mon,” I thought to myself, “that nasty-ass piece of junk is not the answer to my very real, very serious problem.” But I gave it a shot anyway and, against every fiber in body so unaccustomed to admitting fault, thanked Geoff for helping me. It actually felt pretty good! Without it, I doubt I could have tackled the steep, 310 ft. ascent that followed, or made it the rest of the 8.1 miles to our next campsite, Purple Lake. However, it was unquestionably not the answer to my emotional dissatisfaction with the trip, and I kept dreaming about the potential week I would spend with Geoff's mom, Michelle, in Mammoth before rejoining Geoff for the final few days.

You see, I had asked Geoff why, with a frown plastered to my face and the broken record of bitching that characterized my company, he wanted me to continue with him. His hopeless romantic response was that all he wanted was to hug and kiss me on top of Mt. Whitney, the highest point in the continental United States. Such a sap. So I suggested that I leave with Michelle when she came with our second food drop, thus evading the longest leg of the trip, and rejoin him once more when my sister, Kristen,

delivered the third. The idea had merit... it was just a matter of surviving the five days to come.

Day 12:

It did not help knowing that today we would have to tackle our fourth pass of the trip. The morning started out well, however, as Geoff and I enjoyed breakfast at gorgeous Virginia Lake. Tummies stuffed with oatmeal, we methodically repacked our necessities, at which we were now proficient, and Geoff helped me lug my heavy pack onto my back. I guess we were spotted, because a friendly stranger leading a caravan of five or six horses raised his cowboy hat in salute and shouted, "I tip my hat to you, sir... you are truly a gentleman." The unexpected encounter raised our spirits and kept us amused for the following few miles, but the difficulty of the subsequent ascent drained them once again. Preceding the final uphill trudge, however, was the descent to Tully Hole, where we met a nice couple with a friendly canine companion. I felt a bond with this particular dog because she, like me, had injured and bandaged feet, and no doubt cringed with each new step. Unfortunately for Geoff, I could have never matched her unrelenting, optimistic spirit.

The remainder of the 9.2-mile trek to the top of the pass required we skirt three more lovely lakes, named for Native American ancestors of the region. They were truly beautiful, but my fatigue could not allow me to enjoy them. Since the trip, I cannot count the number of times I have thanked Geoff for his devotion to photographic documentation of our journey, without which I would have both missed and forgotten the splendor of the backcountry. Finally, we reached the top of Silver Pass (10,900'). The view was expansive and awe-inspiring; we could not grasp how far we had actually walked in less than a two-week period, and how far we had yet to go.

Before nightfall, we set up camp, ate a four-star Pesto Salmon with Pasta dinner, and watched the sunset, serenaded only by a lone bird whose squawking was only more incessant than it was annoying. But I was glad to have the noise. Transferring from a small, insulated home with the TV always on in the background to the infinitely open, silent embrace of nature is not easy, so seeking some kind of entertainment is essential. My books of choice were Thomas Hardy's, *Return of the Native*, and Bram Stoker's, *Dracula*. They served as the proverbial "light at the end of the tunnel," inspiring me to reach camp soon enough to finish another chapter before dark. If I had to attribute my success in completing the trail to anything, it would be to the majesty of the written word.

Day 13:

Unfortunately, the appeal of reading had not quite taken effect during our seven-mile walk to Vermillion Valley Resort. The descent from Silver Pass was steep and dry; stepping hard was inevitable. This resulted in quick, unremitting drops of a large bag on damaged hips, and a cringe on the face of the helpless victim (guess who). Within those seven miles, we decreased our elevation by over a painful 3000 feet... our knees were not happy. We finally reached the sign for the ferry to VVR, and a half-mile later reached our destination.

Well, not exactly. You see Geoff was accustomed to walking at least one hundred feet in front of me, then resting on a rock while waiting for me to catch up. On this particular day, just beyond the sign for the VVR ferry, he stopped and waited... and

waited... and waited... I never showed up. The sign was rather vague and he chose to walk straight while I made a sharp left toward the beach. There I found a few individuals pattering around a small boat and enjoying lunch. I asked if they knew where to find the ferry, or my boyfriend, but they had seen neither. I then asked if they would watch my pack while I went to get my partner, and they were obliging. This adventure lasted at least twenty minutes, and, frustrated and distressed, I ran across the beach and back toward the sign. Without the pack I felt like I was flying, although knowing I was lost in the wilderness with no way of communicating with Geoff did take away from the moment just a bit.

After another of the longest ten minutes of my life, I heard a faint noise from somewhere above me, and I looked up to spot Geoff desperately yelling my name from the rocky trail overhead. After a few heavy sighs of relief and some fear-based scolding, we headed in the appropriate direction to the ferry and sat (finally!). We waited three hours on the dock and I vented to a disappointed Geoff that I could not take it anymore and was determined to call my mom from the resort and have her pick me up (which she would have done happily just to get me out of bear's reach). Getting lost was the last straw, and nothing was appealing enough about the trek to motivate my endurance.

Although we were the first people at the site, by the time the ferry arrived at least eight other people had joined us. 5:00 was supposed to mark the final ferry of the night, but, begrudgingly, VVR had to send a few more to accommodate the tired hikers. Luckily, it was first come first served, so we hopped on with a happy-go-lucky driver and a mother-daughter team completing the JMT for the *sixteenth* time. What was both inspiring and humiliating about this couple was that the mother was eighty years old, and had successfully tackled the 2000-mile Pacific Crest Trail from Mexico to Canada on her sixtieth birthday. "What the hell is wrong with me?!" I thought, still convinced that this would be the final stop on my god-forsaken journey, all the while shivering like a pathetic Chihuahua from the cold spray soaking me from head to toe. But before parting, they left us with some helpful advice... "Every ounce counts. Get rid of anything that is not absolutely necessary."

Point taken. As soon as we arrived at the resort, set up camp, ate an amazing dinner (cherry pie included!!), and took another of the most exquisite showers imaginable, Geoff and I emptied each of our packs and started the raid. First to go were the luxuries of first aid: Muscle cream? Out. Sting Ointment? Gone. Aloe Vera? See ya! You get the idea. Next came the back-up essentials... goodbye extra batteries, poofy jacket, and spare powdered milk. Lastly were the things we could leave but not throw away, which we stuffed into Geoff's pack until he could unload them on his mom at our second food drop. Included in the party were Solar Shower, Extra Socks, Camera Batteries, and Sun Hat. Nice knowin' you! In the end, we eliminated approximately twelve pounds from my load, the only way Geoff was able to convince me to continue (oh, and the fact that I wasn't about to pay \$2.00 *a minute* to call my mom... we had spent \$114.00 already on food, lodging, and showers, and I could make it another few days to our halfway point and leave with Michelle Byrne). Onward ho!

Day 14:

Yes, I know, I'll keep it short. The night at VVR was wonderful! A full stomach plus dozing in a bear-free zone made for a lovely sleep. The next morning we enjoyed another rich, delicious breakfast, which unfortunately I was regretting as I squat uncomfortably behind a bush by the side of the trail seventy-five minutes later. On a less disgusting note, I had also picked up some used poles that a fellow hiker left behind and was taking full advantage of the two extra legs. Our 7.5ish-mile hike began with a shockingly steep, but relatively short (3 miles), climb up Bear Ridge, which required that we strive toward making one hundred steps before stopping to breath and drink. Little by little we could go 105 steps, 110, 120... but this took many days of excruciating exercise. The flat plateau preceding our descent from the ridge also gave birth to a new favorite mantra... if you know it sing along!

“This is the trail that never ends... it just goes on and on my friends!
Some people, started walking it not knowing what it was,
and they'll continue walking it forever just because this is the trail that never ends...”

Finally, after hours of daydreaming, admiring the beautiful wildflowers, and singing to ourselves, we decided to set up camp on the edge of the mountain. The view was incredible and there was a cold, bubbling creek nearby where we washed up and filled our Nalgens (gag, right?). That night we enjoyed a 4 ½ star Chicken a la King with Noodles, hot chocolate, and our daily candy bar. It was actually a pretty nice day.

Day 15:

The next day we continued down the south side of Bear Ridge, which was absolutely lush and lovely, and ate breakfast at gorgeous, roaring Bear Creek. There we saw Setsu again, a young Japanese man who we had met at VVR, and I attempted to practice my 日本語 with him. “むつかしいですね (so difficult!)” I said, in reference to the hike. It was all I could muster that early in the morning, but he seemed to appreciate the effort given his limited English proficiency. You see, I was anticipating the next section of that day's schedule, which would involve climbing from the creek at 9,040' to the top of pass #4, Seldon, at 10,900'. Here we go again!

Oatmeal still working its way through our systems, we began the steep climb to Rosemarie Meadow and, a few exhausting hours later, to Marie Lakes. This area was a welcomed treat, however, with dots of land interspersed throughout the pool of water like a mini archipelago. It quickly became one of my favorite spots for its uniqueness and calming aura. Unfortunately, the minute we sat down to drink lunch- a nourishing but less that appetizing protein shake that haunted me every damn day of the trip- clouds began to roll over us and we could almost smell the rain approaching. We resentfully packed our things and headed up the final mount of the pass.

Success! It was a good thing we only had a few hundred feet left to hike from Marie Lakes to the top of Seldon Pass, and also that the rain seemed to be traveling in the opposite direction. Still, the top was rather disappointing, and we quickly made our descent to beautiful Sallie Keyes Lake. To our surprise, another reunion! A nice, older couple from Berkeley we had met at VVR and a younger, male, lone traveler who had decided unilaterally to become the couple's adoptee. We chatted and swam, I

involuntarily peed on a log (ask for full details)... it was a pleasant evening. Finally, we topped it off with double the dinner- since I *believed* we had an extra... stay tuned- of yummy rice pilaf and potatoes with onion and beef/ghetto Shepard's pie. 8.5 miles closer to Geoff's destination, and one day left until I leave for good! Hooray!!

Day 16:

This was clearly not the case. Those of you reading this journal in all likelihood know either Geoff or me, and that we did complete the entire trail together... a surprising fact given the events of that particular July 28th, 2008. Our original intention was to trot a short 5.4 miles downhill to the Florence Lake store, and perhaps spend the remainder of our day at oh-so-tempting Blayne Hot Springs or Muir Trail Ranch nearby. So, knowing this was the day of our next food drop, we ate a kingly portion of oatmeal and made an early start toward the ranch, bidding our new companions goodbye. As you may have guessed, bathroom stops were more frequent than desired, and an unexpectedly rough terrain made for a rather unpleasant walk. Along the way, however, we met a fascinating individual, 76 years of age, completing the JMT for the 4th time. What was more impressive is that he was doing it in six days (!!!!!). He even held the current record for completion of the trail based on time and age. Geoff snapped a picture while I forced my gaping mouth closed, and we let him be on his way... no time to waste, obviously!

Finally we reached the junction to Florence Lake, like many days fighting against unrelenting gastrointestinal discomfort, and arrived shortly after at Muir Trail Ranch. There we rung the bell and were "greeted" by a stout, no-nonsense woman who informed us of where we were, what they offered, and how much that would cost. When we inquired as to where the Florence Lake Store was located, she laughed somewhat aggressively, pointed to west, and said, "about six miles that way... and the last ferry leaves at five." It was 1:00 pm, and knowing that our current pace was approximately one mile an hour and Michelle was waiting for us on the other side of the lake, it was all I could do not to start weeping. We had no food left, she had been there all day and had not heard from us, and there is no way we could get there in time to catch the ferry. Fml.

Luckily, I was traveling with a man whose glass was always half full, and he forced me to pick up that Sisyphus' boulder of a bag and head out. Moving as quickly as I could on tired legs and a broken spirit, I trailed behind Geoff trying not to fall on my face (its difficult to see impediments with tears in your eyes). After about an hour, we passed a field of horses, and Geoff stopped to admire them. Suddenly, one of the horses began heading in our direction and I panicked. I suppose I should mention my undeniable fear of creatures larger than myself, especially if their eyes resemble lifeless, black, Billiard balls.

CREEPY. The silver lining was that my pace quickened and soon enough we spotted the edge of the lake. I could not help but think that the woman had exaggerated the distance to discourage us from leaving the ranch, thus spending what little money we had left. Instead, we were obliged to spend \$40 on a round trip ferry ride that took no more than ten minutes each direction. No matter. Michelle greeted us heartily with halibut, zucchini and squash, rice, fresh fruit, ice cream, and brownies. Best. Meal. Ever. We stayed up late watching pictures of our trip so far, enjoying the miracle that is the toilet, and planning the rest of the stay. Once again, food had rejuvenated me; I decided that I had already made it half way and it would be foolish to give up now. Not to

mention Geoff's offer to go skydiving with me if I was successful. Mt. Whitney, here I come!

Day 17:

The previous night's enthusiasm had diminished a good deal by the next morning. We enjoyed a delicious French toast breakfast, but consequently had very late start, and the heat was already beating down on us as we applied a thick layer of sunscreen and began our trek. Time passed ever so slowly, and even more so when we finally realized that we had no friggin' idea where we were! We did not travel the same road we had coming from Muir Trail Ranch, and a significant amount of time had passed during which we encountered no signs. I had scheduled us to walk 1.8 miles to the Piute Creek Trail junction (plus an additional *whatever* to get from Florence Lake back to the JMT), but three hours had already slipped away and the junction was no where to be found.

Uncertainly, we trudged along *a* trail anyway, knowing we were at least going in the right direction. All of sudden, there it was! The relief was so great, I ran to hug and kiss the little wooden godsend. Ok, already 2:00 pm but back on track! With the somewhat fading stress, hunger began to set in and we stopped for lunch. I took a moment to take in the scenery, which was characterized mostly by dense forest, browned by the scorching sun. Why people praised and swooned over Mother Nature was quite beyond me... I was more focused on the thick layer of dust collecting inside my nostrils from day after day of walking on a dusty road behind a man in big boots.

On we went. After another few hours of following one of the other dozens of trails in the area, I began to worry again. We *had* been on the JMT, and it was plausible that trails merged at certain points, but the thought that we were exerting so much time and energy and traveling in the wrong direction!... it was too much to bear. I yelled to Geoff, checked the guidebook three or four more times, and decided that if we walked another two hours and could not find a JMT sign, we would have to turn back. I can't say that Geoff necessarily agreed with me, but it was enough to keep my heartbeat at a reasonable pace and my eyes dry. So we continued. Approximately an hour and forty-five minutes later we stumbled upon the bridge over Piute Creek itself and I was so overjoyed with the landmark and the abundance of available water, I refused to leave. We set up camp and relished in an unfortunately small portion of Mountain House's Turkey Tetrazzini. I slept soundly that night.

Note: Today was the start of Geoff and Andrea's Fourteen Days of Starvation saga that, most likely, was the result of constant exercise, new muscles burning diminishing fat deposits, and the same limited caloric intake as the start of the trip. Enjoy the pain!

Day 18:

Day two of the longest leg of our trip, which would be characterized by nine drawn-out days and the crossing of 4 (count 'em, 4!) mountain passes... was great! I know, you are shocked and amazed, but I did indeed have a *good* day. We had a very short day planned, and an average one scheduled for the next, so we decided to combine the two and take a day to rest tomorrow. We ended up walking 12.2 miles in total and, even so, it was GREAT! Pardon the repetition but I am just as excited as, I am sure, you are!

Anyway, our morning began with a short, gradually ascending hike alongside the South Fork of the astonishing San Joaquin River. It reminded me so strongly of the Saltos de Petrohue in southern Chile; the vibrant, turquoise waters, surrounding dark rock, and lush greenery. Well, minus majestic Volcan Osorno in the background... but 'twill suffice... We trotted pleasantly for three miles or so, both rejoicing in our new, ultralight packs, before reaching the log footbridge and open campsites where we were supposed to sleep the night prior. We were starved, and decided that would be a fine place to stop for our sixteenth, near-consecutive, oatmeal breakfast.

From there, tummies full and quads sufficiently warmed, we tackled the steep but relenting switchbacks up to Evolution Valley, often deemed "one of the Sierra's most exquisite regions" (Winnett and Morey, 1998). We were not quite as generous with the compliments, but it was pretty stupendous, and crossing through seemed more like a welcome walk than a torturous test of stamina and will power. We passed by two broad meadows with incredible views and forded a shallow, wide river, whose smooth, rocky floor was deceptively painful. It was the one time I regretted leaving my Croqs in the reject pile of Michelle's Suburban.

According to our guidebook, we were to face a final steep climb before reaching our destination at Evolution Lake. Hence, we stopped for lunch and discussed, however prematurely, that breaking up the day into three, 4-mile sections was relatively efficient and manageable. Four miles, breakfast, four miles, lunch, four miles, done... and you could knock out twelve in a day, easy! Well, we later realized that we became too hungry in the morning to finish our four miles before breakfast and that being able to complete twelve miles in a day was more a matter of terrain than strength or planning. Oh well! I also informed Geoff of my suspicions that my black sports bra was cursed... or my pink one blessed! It seemed that every time I would wear the pink, as I was that day, things went well. All I can say is that after weeks in the great outdoors with only one person and the marmots to keep you company, the brain starts losing its rational faculties.

Exhausted, we arrived and set up camp in a beautiful spot next to the outlet of the lake. Ten steps to the side and you were greeted with rushing waterfalls on your left, endless sky above you, and a vast, dark ocean of evergreens that you had already traversed, but whose immensity could not be imagined from such a low angle. The sun was beginning to hang low in the sky, so we quickly made and consumed a 3 ½ star Chicken Polynesian dinner and read in the tent until nightfall. The sky was astounding. I had never felt, until that moment, like I could touch the stars...

Day 19:

Ah... 8:30 am and still warm in my sleeping bag... and nowhere to be! Unfortunately, at that elevation (10,850'), the sun is HOT, and it really does not allow you to sleep much past sunrise. So awake I became, and decided to read a bit before getting up, as I still love to do. After, Geoff and I prepared our oatmeal/granola concoction and spent the day doing laundry and bathing in the icy lake, soaking up the sun, and simply relaxing! Just not having to wear those heavy boots all day, thus reopening the blisters that were forming all over my feet, was a gift. As for the rest of my body, I was so absolutely crusted in dirt that even rough scrubbing only removed a thin layer at a time. Whatever... everyone else we met on the trail was as dirty as we were, so

no one really noticed the putrid smell that we weren't aware was emanating from our bodies. Until Kristen arrived, that is... but I jump ahead.

Despite the time I had to read to my heart's content and work obsessively on my nails (which were finally growing out, being as I was too disgusted to bite them as I normally would), I felt as if we were wasting time. I missed my family, my cat, and my bathroom! But most of all it was the four S's that haunted me day after day... Somen, Sushi, Salad, and Sex. None of which I could have until I got home. I was starved in more ways than one, and by the end of the day, I was so ready to get moving again. Still hungry after our delicious, five-star, Pasta Primavera dinner and half a Milky Way, I lulled myself to sleep with thoughts of things to come... SOMEN, SUSHI, SALAD, SEX, SOMEN, SUSHI, SALAD, SEX, SOMEN, SUSHI, SALAD, SEX...

Day 20:

Another long day (11.6 miles), but definitely progress, and definitely wonderful! We made our way out of Evolution Lake bright and early, and stopped at Sapphire Lake for breakfast. This was certainly one of our favorite lakes in the region, as it was true to its name. Stunningly rich, blue pools were encircled by light rock formations and not a single tree... the contrast was exquisite. There we found a group of at least eleven people hiking as a family in the opposite direction of us. Damn, I thought. It's hard enough to organize and agree on everything as a pair! I couldn't imagine doing it in such a large group. From there we would skirt another lovely lake that, very unfortunately, we had to literally run past so that we were not eaten alive by the mosquitoes. I felt as if they laid claim to the area and I was an intruder without permission to enter, being attacked by their insect army! (Recall the explanation of my softening cranial matter).

But survive we did, and began the ascent over Muir Pass (11,955'), our sixth of the trip. What made this pass unique is the fact that you could see the top- marked by a cute, stone shelter- easily from its base, given that no trees or foliage blocked the view. Nevertheless, it felt like an eternity before we reached the hut, quintessentially so close but so far away! Eventually we reached the top, and the wind was so cold I could only catch my breath before moving on, leaving Geoff to document Muir Hut properly. What came next was so amazing and so unexpected that I noted in my journal how it received the first "wow" of the trip.

From the quirky, little pass, you descend into a crevasse of towering, prehistoric rock, giving the impression that you are approaching, not a new area of space, but of time. Though awe-inspiring, I sometimes feared that a gang of velociraptors was about to pop out from behind the rocks and eat me... but the silence and stillness maintained its profundity. Granted, this area was not what most would call traditionally beautiful, the way Evolution Valley was. But to see the Earth in its original form, utterly untouched by human hands- excepting the narrow, dirt path snaking through it on which we traveled- was breathtaking. To be so unimportant, but have only a single life to value and make extraordinary; it is a mind-boggling dichotomy that still gives me butterflies to think about. I felt so small and insignificant... such a representation of but an infinitesimal moment in time... it was, dare I say, a spiritual sensation- one that can only really be appreciated in the comfort of hindsight.

The novel, strange emotion passed with the hours, especially as we descended into Le Conte Canyon. This area was a virtual cave of trees, dense and lush and almost entirely shaded. It was a steep, long descent that made our knees cringe with each step,

but inevitably we arrived and set up camp amidst a dark circle of pines and evergreens. A tiny stream trickled nearby and invited a gentle deer, which came near to our tent and provided the entertainment for the night. Another scrumptious, yet unfulfilling, dinner of Lasagna with Meat Sauce and a Three Musketeers, then reading to drown out our grumbling stomachs...these were the nice moments actually, before waking in the blackness of night to empty my bladder. Hopefully morning would come quickly.

Day 21:

Why we saved all the long days for this third leg, I couldn't understand; but we were scheduled to walk another 10 miles today, 11.3 tomorrow, and 9.3 the following day... over two passes! I suppose I had little choice in creating the itinerary (sleeping on top of the mountain was not really an option) so off we went, down through LeConte Canyon at a low 8020' and then back up to the base of the Golden Staircase at 8860'. This journey comprised the majority of the day, which was relatively uneventful, but sadly marked by fatigue and frequent hunching over due to PMS cramps. Having a period in the wilderness... hmm... not something I was particularly looking forward to. Lucky for me, the physical strain of the trip was so intense that I evaded my period in its entirety, though had to invent a new rationale as to why my stomach was in so much pain (approximately one year later, I am diagnosed with IBS and given magic pills... how nice it would have been to have had them on the trail)!

Anyway, most our day was complete; and as we sat to lunch, Geoff and I glared to our left, where the infamous Golden Staircase was looming. "Craaaaap," I thought to myself, and the look in Geoff's eyes suggested that he shared the sentiment. Nearly two thousand feet of steep switchbacks in a mere three miles. Awesome. Without choice or enthusiasm, we made our way, step by every heavy step, up the mountainside until... what do you know? We were there! Breathing hard and dripping with sweat, we had made it to the top in no time. We eventually learned that steep areas seem to pass so much more quickly than flat, drawn-out meadows of the same distance; looking back, they were the sections we enjoyed the most.

The portion of the trail between the staircase and Palisade Lake, however, seemed interminable. After a torturously long few hours, we made it to camp and set up on the side of a hill overlooking the lake. Perhaps one of the reasons today in general had been so difficult was the irritated blister growing on the back of my heel, now the size of a delicious Trader Joe's Ginger Snap Cookie (though somehow not as appetizing). I cringed as I pulled the wool sock off my foot, little strings stuck and pulling at the scabbed center of the blister, and not so gently rubbed it over with disinfectant. The water had to come out, so I cleaned our handy pocketknife with alcohol and gave myself a purposeful jab... well it was effective! Liquid spilt over my heel and on to the ground, though not as much as I expected. The whole ordeal drained us and we greedily gobbled down dehydrated beef stew, whose potatoes had a texture Geoff was less than fond of. Starved and fantasizing of hot sandwiches from Schatt's Bakkery in Mammoth, it was finally time for sleep.

Another Note: Up until now, I have neglected to inform you of another fun tradition adhered to by the hiking community: rock piling. Every so often, usually as you begin to feel desperation over becoming hopelessly lost, you will encounter a small, pyramid-

shaped pile of rocks to the side of the trail. No, it isn't some freaky Blair Witch sh*t to keep you from trespassing onto hallowed grounds. Instead, it is a friendly signal left by past, unfamiliar friends meant to indicate that you are on the right track. It was strange to feel secure and watched over because of a stack of lifeless, Earth matter, yet the intangible connection to those who came before me was somehow irresistible.

Day 22:

Dreading our seventh pass of the trip, the first few miles that day were long and arduous. The terrain was rocky, barren, and gray, the wind of the morning was frosty, and my body's fuel supply had run out a long time ago. About half way through the ascent to Mather Pass (12,100'), we stopped for breakfast and took in our surroundings. It was as if we were having a picnic on the surface of the moon! Don't take me to sound too enthusiastic, however, as it was not the most beautiful view I had yet seen; but it was certainly impressive in its desiccation and enormity.

Luckily, breakfast had rejuvenated me, and with a little diligence and heavy breathing we reached the top and allowed the cold air to dry our sweat-soaked bodies. Down we went, a lengthy but relatively painless trudge to our lunchtime destination at a cute, rushing river. What was notable about this stretch of trail was the absolute straightness of the few miles following the descent from Mather Pass. Not a dip, not a hill, not a curve to be seen... soon enough it was like walking on a treadmill, especially because mountains don't make the best indicators of progress.

Our final ascent of the day was quick and rewarding. Roasted almonds and Luna Bars in our bellies, we heaved up the last three hundred feet or so, finally reaching a wide, bright meadow with scattered rocks and tiny creeklets strewn through it. We decided between a number of eligible and lovely lakes for the site of our next camp-out and decided on Lake Marjorie, with its low, soft edges and glimmering water. For dinner we ate the remainder of our 4-person beef stew (yum yum!), but unfortunately, due to an arithmetic error on my part, we did not enjoy a candy bar for dessert. All in all, it was quite a nice day and put me in an optimistic mood for the three days until our next visitors arrived and drove us to Mammoth for food food food!!

Day 23:

As I sit here on a comfy couch, warm in my mother's home with not a care in the world, it is a joy to remember having quite a similar feeling on, arguably, the best day of the trip. As I alluded to in the previous entry, the ascent to Pinchot Pass was beautiful in its aura of peacefulness and simplicity, and I thoroughly took pleasure in our stay at Lake Marjorie. Well, the steep climb to Pinchot Pass (12,130') and subsequent descent did not disappoint either. Views from the top were stunning! The first fluffy clouds since Seldon Pass adorned the sky like little rabbit tails; instead of the gray rock comprising Mather Pass, we were gazing upon mountains of green, yellow, and red; and shimmering ponds of deep blue dotted the valley miles ahead of us. Needless to say, Geoff was in heaven, as any true nature-lover/photographer would be. For my part, I couldn't complain (gasp!). It was exquisite.

On our downward trek, we encountered a friendly park ranger who posed for a few shots and updated us on the status of the weather. Rain was expected within the next few days, but even the news could not spoil our good mood. At least today, the skies

were sunny and bright! We continued our journey, which was relatively flat and undemanding, but it took a bit longer than we had anticipated. We found ourselves having to stop for lunch soon after the descent, and luckily, we were revitalized! You never realize the power of a few nuts and a power bar until you are starved and burning calories at an exponential rate. Even the disgusting vanilla protein drink became a miracle elixir at the end of a long hike.

Perhaps the momentous event of the day was our first acquaintance with the most adorably comical creature of the High Sierras... the yellow-bellied marmot. This chubby, fuzzy member of the rodent family provided endless entertainment on the top of Mount Whitney, but we were given our first glimpses of him on our path to beautiful Woods Creek. Upon reaching the campsite, we filled and purified our water bottles (batteries still going strong), and cooked ourselves a disappointingly bland Mexican Chicken and Rice. With enough time for a bathroom break and reading before bed, we closed out the day warm in our sleeping bags surrounded by another five groups of campers. For whatever reason, this kept me from fearing the wrath of bears, and my sound sleep created the perfect ending to a perfect day.

Day 24:

Fresh from resting the night prior, we began our ascending walk in an optimistic mood. But, unfortunately, the morning was long and hills unyielding, and we soon became tired and irritable. Very rarely did Geoff allow me to enjoy breakfast in peace, either because I would eat too slowly and he would feel we were wasting time, or because I had developed a healthy appetite and was actually eating *my* half of the porridge. No longer could he expect me to eat a quarter, feel ill, and give him the opportunity to devour the remainder... and his unfulfilled stomach was undoubtedly causing him pain. Hungry Geoff and Rushed Andrea make quite a bad pair indeed!

Yet as all things do, the time passed, and we were soon making our way past numerous, lovely lakes and other, more cheerful hikers. Their spirit and that of our surroundings was contagious, as we regained some energy at precisely the same time we began our ascent to Glen Pass. After about an hour, we could see the top of the mountain, and we happily trotted onward. The timing was wonderful as well, because grey, ominous clouds were gathering and a cold wind was beginning to blow. We would make it to camp just in time!

About twenty minutes later, we reached what we believed to be our destination when, as we rounded the corner, the mountain doubled in size! We were nowhere *near* the top and we could hear thunder in the distance... the scary thoughts began flooding in. With no option but to continue, we strapped our metal walking poles to our packs (to get them off the ground) and picked up the pace. The trail was endless! Every new turn brought another hill, and I was sure we would never reach the top. Not half an hour later, the thunder and lightening were directly above us, and my hair actually stood on my head from the static electricity. We could not even find a rock to hide under until the storm passed because the trail was so exposed. Tired as hell, the idea that we might be struck by lightening at any moment gave us the adrenaline to keep running (practically) up the steep switchbacks.

Almost suddenly, the top was ahead of us and we heaved a sigh of relief. Unfortunately, it did not help that Glen Pass (11,978') was exceedingly narrow and long,

requiring that we step one foot in front of another until reaching the other side. I stopped only briefly to take in the scenery- dark and grey as far as the eye could see- and to yell at Geoff that it wasn't the time to be taking pictures, before heading down the backside of the god-forsaken mountain. Just as we felt we were escaping the worst of it, the rain began to fall and make our descent not only cold but slippery too. Awesome, I thought. This could not get any worse... and just like in the movies, the gods heard my cry and sent hail to comfort me!

I did my best to keep from sobbing as I carefully, but quickly, scuttled downward, all the while being pelted by dime-sized pellets of ice and shivering from the freezing air. After what seemed like an eternity, we found a cute campsite and tried to set up without drenching everything in our packs. This was especially difficult given how numb our hands had become! Setting up the tent was like torture, but finally we did it. We huddled inside for no more than fifteen minutes when a ray of sunshine penetrated our humble dwelling and sounds of birds chirping signaled the end of the storm. Sometimes it seems like the universe does things on purpose just to screw with you.

Anyway, the rest of the evening was nice. A group of hikers some yards away offered us mashed potatoes and ribeye (amazing!), which we complemented with a totally impractical Chicken and Dumplings meal. This treat only teased us and stimulated our salivation glands, as we drifted to sleep dreaming of the feasts in which we would indulge only one day later. Almost there!!

Day 25:

Nearly two years later, and I still have not forgotten the feeling of waking up STARVING! It is a testament to how closely we are linked to our animal brethren that the only thing you can think of in the right situation is what will literally keep you alive. Luckily, today was the day my sister and her now ex-boyfriend would pick us up at Onion Valley Trailhead, surely bringing gifts of delicious home-made nourishment with them. Nothing could stop us now! Springing up at 6:30 am, Geoff and I quickly dressed, packed, and began the 8.5 mile journey that unfortunately proved more difficult than expected. See, to reach Onion Valley, we had to detour from the JMT and brave Kearsarge Pass (11,823'), which was preceded by a waterless stretch of about five miles and generally uninteresting scenery.

What was unique about today, was that *Geoff* was feeling the pain and I assumed the role of counselor. I know, shocking right? But surely after playing superman for over three weeks, it is understandable that the exhaustion and dehydration finally caught up with him. We even ended up spending a good 20 minutes trying to fill our bottles at the first pathetic creek we found, instead of waiting for a stream with a larger ratio of water to dirt and a width wider than a pencil. No matter. We slowly but surely ascended the pass- over 1000'- then descended over 2000', with a net elevation change of almost 3500'! The descent was never-ending, though, fortunately, so was my spirit! I was getting to see my sister, fill my tummy, and have a hot shower... how could I be anything but blissful?

100 or so switchbacks from the base, we spotted Kristen's car in the distance. I practically ran the rest of the way and gave my saviors a huge hug! Well, Kristen's reaction was not exactly what I was expecting; she sharply pulled away from me while a hilarious look of disgust transformed her face. "Oh my god!! You smell sooo bad!" she

yelled, while Geoff and I nearly cried from laughing. I suppose the eleven days we went without a shower- bodies now coated in accumulated sweat and dirt-, used toilet paper in our packs, and two pairs of very dirty underwear had taken their toll, though Geoff and I would have never noticed it on each other.

After opening all the windows in the car and enjoying more of Kristen's mock vomiting, we indulged in the rice balls, chicken sandwiches, pan amasado, juice, fruit, peanut butter and jelly, and spicy mango that was sent our way (god, I love my family!). In a little over an hour we reached Mammoth- absolutely baffled that the same journey had taken us over a week on foot-, took a 45-minute scalding shower, and stuffed ourselves at Roberto's Mexican Restaurant. Life was good.

That night, we lay ourselves down on the warm, fluffy, bear-free sheets of an actual bed; although it felt next-to heavenly, Geoff and I had to shake off a slight, nagging urge to sleep on the floor.

Day 26:

Ok, I'll keep it short. Our lovely day off was filled with more eating (waffles and omelets, gourmet sandwiches, fresh fruit, soup, rice, sushi, and macarons... and none of it dehydrated!), more showers, real toilets (!), playing cards with the fam, and walking a solid ZERO miles up and down a dusty trail! It was awesome. We savored every moment and, at the same time, looked forward to the final leg of our ambitious, once-in-a-lifetime journey to the top of the world (well, the US).

P.S. Even as we said goodbye the following day, Kristen noted that the many lengthy showers and three bottles of soap we used could not purge the nauseating smell from our bodies. C'est la vie!

Day 27:

Here we go again! After a quick clean of the condo (for my dad, who would be visiting in the next few days) and another scrumptious breakfast, we headed back toward Onion Valley Trailhead. Let me tell you, it is hard enough to traverse a pass once; but having to do it all over again in the opposite direction was painfully disheartening! Luckily, we made the long ascent first thing in the morning while we were still fresh. Luckier still, we had only five days left until the close of our journey- a thought which kept us motivated to continue down the ceaseless descent into lower Vidette Meadow some ten miles later.

While on the peak of Kearsarge, however, we met an interesting character who had clearly indulged in one too many magic mushrooms in his day. He informed us- in all seriousness- that he was on his way to find Bigfoot, whom he had spotted in the nearby woods a few years earlier. He described in great detail the location of the creature, its appearance, its *baby*, and how exactly he planned to capture the beasts on tape in hopes of reclaiming his lost fame and fortune. We promised to keep our eyes open while we crossed through its habitation, but never did see Bigfoot or baby Bigfoot... bad luck I guess!

Furry creatures or no, we eventually reached our next transitory home; by this time it was late in the day and our knees were sore from the long hours of heavy stepping. Perhaps the most tiring part was anticipating the LONG day we had in store for

tomorrow: another 11.3 miles! There is no rest for the weary I suppose (oh wait... what did we do yesterday?). We set up and cooked a delicious, 4 ½ star Noodles and Chicken dinner as quickly as our tired bodies could go; it was surprisingly satisfying given our feast from yesterday. Although this site actually had a bear box and we were accompanied by fellow campers nearby, I slept just slightly less soundly than I had the night before.

Day 28:

What a day! This particular August the 9th, Geoff and I would conquer the tenth pass of the trip, and the final one before the ominous Mt. Whitney. Practically the whole of our excursion was a gradual, uphill trudge towards the base of Forester Pass. It was beige. It was treeless. It was dry. It was hot, yet forcefully windy. I liked it. Geoff did not. Perhaps I was just in the right mood, or it was the work of my magic pink sports bra. But more likely, it was because after nearly a month of walking at least six hours a day with an enormous backpack up and down a rugged mountain, I was ripped!!

My new muscles gleamed in the sun, I could walk 150 steps up steep switchbacks without stopping, and there was not an ounce of fat on my body. It was at this point that Geoff and I decided we should start a weight loss program utilizing our new JMT hiking skills. It was foolproof! No person completing this trail in even the modest month that it took us would be dissatisfied with his/her amazing progress. Unfortunately, we soon realized that- on our salaries- we could never afford the liability insurance or the lawyer needed to draft a bulletproof waiver. Well, now that I am a certified social worker I can finally begin to save up to fulfill my forgotten dream... in 53 years.

Ok, back to reality. After a grueling final ascent to the top of Forester (13,120')- the highest point we had reached thus far- we sat for a moment and enjoyed the tremendous view. There we also met fellow through-hikers traveling in the opposite direction, essentially just beginning their quest. We inwardly smiled and (somewhat smugly) offered commentary on our favorite campsites, paths to avoid, and methods for staying sane. I won't lie; it felt good to be a veteran at something I wouldn't have even dreamt of attempting even six months prior. I relished in it.

Nevertheless, the day was long, and we doubled up on dinner that night. The Louisiana Red Beans and Rice was sub-par, though the Vegetable Lasagna somewhat made up for it. Sadly, after hot chocolate and a Snickers bar we were still starving, and fell asleep as visions of hamburgers danced in our heads...

Day 29:

Ahh... I had never thought before this day that walking 5.2 miles in the middle of nowhere would be heaven! We woke up at an unimaginable 9 am, sun scorching us in our 25° sleeping bags... or negative 5°, in my case. We did not even leave camp until 11:00! When we eventually got moving, the declines and subsequent inclines (and subsequent declines) of our journey were soft and manageable.

Emerging from a dense forest, we passed through the most hauntingly beautiful terrain on the trail, the Bighorn Plateau. It was uniquely flat and expansive, with soft plains surrounding a singular, circular pond. We could not tell for certain whether the water was real or just a welcomed illusion; hence, I dubbed my new favorite spot, "Lake Mirage." The 20 minutes or so it took us to cross the plateau was characterized by

engrossing heat, near-silence, juvenile wonder, and nebulous visions, described in my journal as a “playground for happy ghost children.” All I can really say is... awesome.

Still fresh, albeit a bit dazed, we arrived at our campsite no later than 2 pm! We eagerly changed into our bathing suits, slapped on some more sunscreen, and lay down on a bright meadow next to camp to read, relax, and indulge in our most cherished treat of the hike: spicy mango (dried fruit was of the heavier items in our load, but well worth the effort... yum!). Hawaiian Chicken from Backpacker’s Pantry was on the menu for dinner, and further solidified the fact that this brand was painfully inferior to the consistently surprising Mountain House meals.

It was also on this day that I stopped adding up the miles we had already walked (220.5), and started counting down how many more we had left until reaching the peak of Mt. Whitney: 11.7!! We were so close we could taste it; and after such a great day, we were anxious to get moving once again! Until tomorrow!

Day 30:

There are always pros and cons to making a plan, expecting it to fall into place, then seeing it shattered to pieces. Although this sounds virtually all-bad- and if you are an obsessive planner like me, it usually is- I cannot deny the awe I felt as I watched meteors rip through the night sky from the highest point on the continental U.S., wrapped in Geoff’s arms and a somewhat effective sleeping bag that left only the center circle of my face exposed. My nose was numb and I could barely breath, but I would not have traded that brief moment for anything.

But I jump ahead... apologies. We began our day with the bearable 6.9 uphill miles to Guitar Lake noted in the itinerary. The trek was difficult, and as we reached Timberline Lake I was feeling severely dehydrated and nauseous, and nearly fainted. I communicated this to Geoff, but I suppose after almost a month of hearing me complain, the effect wore off. He allowed me a short break to refresh before we began the last leg to our destination, then we hurried on our way. We reached Guitar Lake at a reasonable hour, but by this time I was resentful and tired, wanting nothing more than to set up camp and take a nap.

I did get a chance to rest for about an hour while Geoff amused himself by jumping off a high rock into icy Guitar Lake, but my joy did not last. As we ate dinner, some fellow hikers informed us that a meteor shower was supposed to take place that very night and would be stunning from the peak. I fought back exasperated tears knowing that it was an opportunity Geoff could not resist and prepared to hoist my hefty bag back on my scarred hips and shoulders, all the while presenting my futile argument as to why we should wait.

An hour later, with the sun slowly setting in the distance, we began the steep ascent to the top of Whitney. Our thighs burned, we were sweating incessantly despite the rapidly cooling air, and the mountain seemed infinite. Still, we had rarely seen each other in a state of physical exertion by the soft, orange light of dusk, and the way we heaved and glistened was strangely romantic. The only thing keeping us from making out on the edge of the mountain during sunset was knowing that soon it would be dark, and a wrong step could easily send us tumbling down the shear cliffs to our death (amazingly, I’m not exaggerating... it was pretty intimidating).

By the time we reached the junction to Mt. Whitney's summit- some two hours and 2000' later- the sky was black and we were relying solely on faith and the batteries in our headlamps. What was nice about this last trudge was that, given the popularity of the area, there was a spot available where most hikers leave their packs in favor of day-packs. In our case, we shoved our sleeping bags and pads, some food, clothes, and all of Geoff's camera gear in *his* pack, put the rest of *his* stuff in *mine*, and left *mine* behind (meaning I carried only my water to the top ☺... yes, despite his passion and obstinacy, he is a good man.)

The walk was frightening! We definitely took our time and located each step with caution and intention before making the move, using the rock wall to our right for support. The random dip and boulder kept our muscles tense and reactions sharp, but we did not escape an occasional panicky slip. To add insult to injury, it was absolutely bitter out; and because we were not walking as quickly as before, the sweat began to freeze on our bodies and we got COLD. Braving the biting wind only made it more difficult to navigate the often-confusing trails and avoid scatterings of pebbles; yet no less than an additional two hours later, we made it!

Seeing the little hut where campers used to shelter themselves from lightening storms and orange-sized hail was like seeing the gates of heaven. We had walked 231.4 miles in an almost-consecutive 30 days; we had suffered, and starved, and fought, and feared, and consoled, and cried; we had proved wrong everyone who told us we were nuts for trying; we had physically, mentally, and relationally transformed; we had succeeded... and somehow we were too tired and cold to appreciate it (well at least I was; I cannot speak fully for Geoff). It is incredible how secondary aesthetics and profundity become when you have been walking for almost twelve hours and can't feel your limbs.

Ok, I better start wrapping this up. We quickly found a small niche under a jutting rock- good for blocking the wind- where we arranged our sleeping bags and attempted to eat without reaching outside the bag. Even the brush of the air was painful. After enjoying some nuts and fruit, and a magnificent view of the stars, we fell asleep with a plan to awake again at 2 am, the time when the meteors were expected.

And here we come to the start of this one-day saga. We awoke surely after the shower began, because we seemed to catch only the tail end. It did not matter either way, as we were so exhausted we could only keep our eyes parted for some twenty minutes before falling back into a shivering, disturbed sleep. At least I did not worry about bears that night.

Day 31:

Four and a half hours later. Geoff stirs me from my "slumber" to watch the sunrise. He prepared some oatmeal and hot chocolate as I begrudgingly obliged, and we sat observing as our entire journey was illuminated before our eyes. It seemed as if we could practically see Yosemite Valley, Pinchot Pass, Guitar Lake, and everything in between, without the obstruction of dense forest or other mountains. I am embellishing a bit, of course. But it is true that the world never seemed so compact yet limitless simultaneously as it did that morning.

(And we were also blessed to share the sentiment with our new friend, Gordo the marmot. His furry face and playful antics kept us as distracted as possible from the painful bitter air of dawn. We like to think that he enjoyed our company, but in all

likelihood, he was simply waiting for us to turn our backs so he could raid our energy bars. Needless to say, his diligence and charisma earned him a few almonds and dried cranberries, and we remember him quite fondly even to this day.)

The coming of the sun brought, not only more creatures, but more hikers as well. Some were completing the JMT as we were; most, however, originated from the east side and were traveling from Whitney Portal and back again for the day- an **insane** venture if you ask me! After chatting with a few of our comrades, and even exchanging numbers with a musician from Berkeley, we packed and began our descent to Whitney Portal.

The initial two miles or so were entertaining, as we squeezed next to the exhausted faces of individuals trudging in the opposite direction, asking us in breathless spurts, “how far is it from the top?!” But as soon as we passed Trail Crest (13,620’) and lumbered for over an hour down endless switchbacks, the trail became tedious at best and intolerable at worst. They never ended!! Left, walk, turn, right, walk, turn, left, walk, turn, right, walk, turn, over and over and over for 2.2 miles and 1600’ of elevation decline. Knees pulsating and bowels cramping (from the considerable breakfast and absence of a toilet on the summit), we reached the vast, rocky plain that would take us to our destination!

It was at this point that I decided I could take it no longer. I had to go. The only problem being that there was no, umm, “going” allowed on this part of the trail (due to its immense popularity). Instead, every hiker was given one “wag bag,” into which we were supposed to drop the kids at the pool... even multiple times if necessary. So over the rocks I went, found a somewhat private area (there were no trees or bushes around), and did the do. I needed to keep my eye out and pretend I was peeing if hikers passed by, as some could definitely see me if they were to glance in the right direction. Luckily, I was in so much pain, I was able to finish up despite the shame. The next step was to tie the bag and put it neatly in my pack- with all my food and clothing- and continue walking for another six miles. I attempted to stay behind Geoff as often as possible ☺.

Ok, enough of this shit. A few more grueling hours passed and, out of nowhere, we had arrived! It was actually over... We still had to locate a campsite, set up our tent, and sleep under the stars, but we had a real toilet (unanimously voted the best invention of all time)! We ate a hot, juicy patty melt that we did not need to hydrate in our Jet Boil! We could take off those god-forsaken boots for good! 242.8 miles, 31 days, 5 showers, 2 meltdowns, and thousands of mosquito bites later, we... were... VICTORIOUS!!!

Day 32:

There is not much to tell... life was back to normal! We woke up by the light of the sun (around 8 am), consumed an inordinate amount of pancakes and eggs, blissfully sat on a public toilet with no seat cover for at least half an hour, and read Thomas Hardy on the most comfortable rock I could find.

Hmm... not so normal after all. But that was the beauty of our trip! A flat rock became as comfortable as a couch; “dirty” took on an entirely new definition; the sun was our clock; and it became completely appropriate to scarf as much food as was available in order to survive, instead of limiting intake for the sake of your figure. I felt like a nomad or Native American, in tune with the earth, with physical exercise, with braving the elements... it was pretty cool!

Unfortunately, it did not last long. By 3 pm, we were sitting in an air-conditioned vehicle, moving at 70 miles per hour, on our way to a world of microwaves, disinfectant, and electricity. Now, I won't try to convince you that in a mere month I became a better person and now prefer to live in a world devoid of modern technology; I only wish to impress upon you that the simpler life is possible and, occasionally, something to be desired. With that, I would like to segue into my final synopsis of the trip, taken directly from the waterproof journal that accompanied me throughout the venture...

John Muir Trail Final Thoughts- Epilogue

It seems the proper end to such a story would involve a thorough "summing-up" of how I felt following the adventure. I would like to do so in three sections: what was most difficult, what I missed most, and what I most enjoyed (I did not intend to have a 2:1 negative to positive ratio; I'm just following my journal notes!) Let us begin.

What I Hated Most:

- 1) It perhaps does not come as a surprise that the WALKING was the most trying part of the trip. It was truly incessant and there was no escape! If you wanted to quit, you had to *walk* the horrendous route you took to get there, in the complete opposite direction (a thought worse than death). No matter what- rain or shine, happy or sad, tired, cramping, headache, blisters, diarrhea, twisted ankle, you name it- you had to walk because food and water were limited, generous loved ones were waiting for you on the other side, and there was no way to contact them to say you needed a day to rest. And by walk, I don't mean a stroll in the park. I am talking rugged terrain, steep switchbacks, narrow trails, and 30+ pounds on your back. Ok, I'm venting again. Although it became somewhat of a comfortable routine by the end of the month, suffice it to say I learned that a mile is a *very* long way.
- 2) Second- although arguably worse than the first- come the MOSQUITOES. Somebody please help me out with this. What exactly is the purpose of the mosquito? Does it have any kind of symbiotic, necessary relationship with another creature that makes them worthwhile on this planet?! From what I can gather, absolutely not. Those swarming bloodsuckers are relentless, malicious, and evil. I know it sounds harsh, but if you have ever been unable to sleep peacefully because your entire body is covered with excruciatingly itchy bumps (even your ass, which you forgot to Deet before going to the bathroom in the middle of the night), you would agree. Whoever said we should love all of god's creatures never went hiking. What I learned: regardless of the what the warning labels say, *always* use 100% Deet repellent. Similar, milder, safer products DO NOT work. For your own sake, heed my advice!

What I Missed Most:

- 1) FOOD... *Fresh* bread, cheese, vegetables, fruit, fish, cereal, somen; I could go on and on. The dehydrated meals were surprisingly satisfying, especially after a long day of nothing but backpacking, protein shakes, and trail mix, yet they could never compare to the savory deliciousness of a homemade meal. Especially after

- the second week, when what we had packed for the beginning of the trip could no longer satisfy our ravaging hunger, real food became the holy grail.
- 2) Coming in another close second are TOILETS. As I have described before, you never really know how lucky you are to have a toilet until you are squatting for twenty minutes behind a bush that is barely adequate for cover, with mosquitoes biting you every twenty seconds and the heel of your boots chafing half-scabbed, half-open blisters, then trying to relax enough to have a good bowel movement. It is hard. I suppose I should express my gratefulness for the trash collection system as well, as having to put that dirty toilet paper back in my backpack after such an ordeal only added insult to injury.
 - 3) The next category- being clean- includes both HOT SHOWERS and CLEAN CLOTHING. Although we were unable to smell how dirty we were, we could definitely see and feel it. Every attempt to scrub the layers of dirt from our skin was futile, and it was easy to see how filthy our shirts, shorts, and underwear had become. Unfortunately, it is difficult to feel awake and alive without also feeling clean, so this certainly inhibited our ability to be fresh for our daily jaunt through the great outdoors.
 - 4) Along the same lines, I missed the luxury of having POTABLE WATER at my fingertips. Not having to risk my socks by walking into a stream, dip my hands into the icy water, wait a full 60 seconds for it to sterilize (or more if you inadvertently pull the steri-pen out of the bottle), and wonder whether my solar-powered batteries are going to hold out is a blessing.
 - 5) SLEEPING IN. I'm not going to lie. It was lovely to wake up to the warming sun at 6 am, but many days I just wanted to stay cozy in my down bag and sleep! The constant exercise with no promise of relief the next day was enough to put me in a sour mood. Even on our rest days, Geoff found one reason or another to get me up, and it got old... fast. [Though I must admit I wasn't working at the time, and therefore not used getting up until after 10 am most days of the week... Regardless! It was tough ☺]
 - 6) Lastly- but not really lastly- I missed my FAMILY and V. What can I say? They start to grow on you.

What I Loved Most:

- 1) From an aesthetic, somewhat mystical sense, the most wonderful part of the hike was having the opportunity to see part of the earth in its true form, essentially untouched by human hands (save the narrow stretch of trail running through it). Wind, water, earthquakes, erosion, avalanches, fire, snow; these alone were the natural sculptors of the incredible environment that both challenged and protected us. Absolutely devoid of all the things that most people would consider the product of human creativity and brilliance, entering certain sections of the trail was like stepping backwards in time. It felt equally likely we would meet a fellow hiker with cushioned boots and a Solar Shower, as a Triceratops would come stomping out from just over the bend. It was truly inspiring, and impressed upon me the relativity of time and space. Nothing could have been more remarkable than seeing the fruits of nature's brilliance- Evolution- and this mind-boggling, fantastic phenomenon in action.

- 2) From a more self-centered perspective, I love being able to say that I did it. I walked nearly 250 miles in a virtually-consecutive 31 days and did not quit, even though I had never camped or backpacked before and, many times, wished for death. The expression on other hikers' faces when you tell them how long you have "been out" is priceless, as are the kudos others give when you relay your tale in retrospect. I have never been considered a particularly strong, outdoorsy, or courageous individual, so having some legitimate evidence under my belt is great.
- 3) This hike was also the perfect opportunity to get to know my partner in crime in the most intimate of ways. I feel I have neglected him in my journals thus far- focusing on my personal suffering instead- but Geoff was a key element in my success. Although I was a bit disappointed that he didn't propose on the top of Mt. Whitney- as someone had suggested ::ahem::- I was absolutely satisfied with how we operated as a team. Geoff was the idea man; I hammered out the details. Geoff harbored the optimism, while I provided the reality check (or useless pessimism, depending on who you ask). He offered to carry all the heavy items and give me massages at the end of the day. He occasionally snapped, acted like an ass, and minimized my suffering, but he always kept his positive spirit and tried to inspire me with it. Most significantly, he was the comfort, the encouragement, the tough love, the calm, the joy, and the extra push I needed to keep trucking. I owe most of this achievement to him.
- 4) Ok, back to me ☺. As I have mentioned before, I was in the best shape of my life following our trip. I was tanned, toned, and blonder than ever. In addition, it gave me the chance to grow out my eyebrows and nails, as I was too tired to pluck and too disgusted to bite. I went from the most hideous to the most beautiful version of myself in a matter of days, and all it took was constant exercise, the beginnings of skin cancer, and a little starvation. Cinch.
- 5) I would like to conclude my ceaseless rambling by advocating for lengthy through-hikes, such as the John Muir Trail, for all people. Besides the many reasons listed above- and a number of others I failed to mention or did not realize- adventures transform you, even if it is ever so slightly or temporarily. They push limits you didn't even know you had. They test your strength, your patience, and your will-power. They make you realize how irrelevant and essential each moment really is. Perhaps most of all, they help you appreciate every little thing you take for granted, be it your family, your appliances, or your self.

Happy Hiking!