

## Damon lease on Harrison Pass

My last few difficult Sierra Nevada trips have been just Jeff and me, and we often found ourselves hammering 12 or more miles in a day, with plenty of time left over to fish. This time, there were four of us, and no offense intended, but a guy named Terry really wasn't up for the type of trip that Jeff and I tend to do. Our fourth person, Terry's brother, Jim, was more than capable, but spent a lot of time with Terry, making sure that Terry didn't get lost. Also, I'm not in great shape either right now (compared to other years), so this trip was probably a little tough on me as well. About the fourth day, I found myself sitting in a meadow, well behind everyone else, wishing I could call a helicopter, get out of there, and just go have a beer and a cheeseburger somewhere. Am I getting too old for this kind of stuff? I don't know. But, by the end of the week, Jeff and I had planned our next Sierra trip - a trans-Sierra crossing from Mineral King to the top of Whitney, and out at Lone Pine.

Certainly, we picked difficult terrain and a very high altitude trip, and as usual, we carried more weight than necessary. I started around 60 lbs. or so, but Jim and Jeff started heavier. Jeff is an amazing pack animal.

### Day 1: Onion Valley to Kearsarge Lakes

We didn't get out of San Jose until almost 6:00 am. We stopped at Tom's Place for lunch, re-packed at the trailhead, and didn't start hiking until 3:15. About halfway up, a woman coming down mentioned that she hoped we were almost to our destination. It kind of pissed me off, her assumption that we wouldn't make the pass that day. I told her we were going over and that we had plenty of time. Jeff and I ended up ahead, and the 2600 feet of climbing, the chilly air, and the lack of acclimation took their toll. Jeff and I reached the top at 6:30, and we were about to lose the sun behind the peaks to the west. The various high peaks visible from this pass are amazing.

We waited for everyone at the top, and Jeff then bolted down to secure a campsite. Terry was wiped out, Jim was struggling a bit, and I knew the way down, so I decided to stay back with them and lead them down. The first two sites (of the four bear boxes) were in use, and we finally found that we could share the third one. We got into a site just as lights became necessary, and everyone was beat. We all just wanted to go to bed, but Jeff smartly insisted on cooking and making everyone eat. Jim could barely force food down, and I ended up lugging part of his dinner for the next six days.

I had a mild headache, but figured that some sleep and more time to acclimate would clear it up.

### Day 2: Kearsarge Lakes to Center Basin/Golden Bear Lake

We got up rather late, and I was wiped out. I had barely slept at all, and I was feeling the altitude while eating breakfast. We packed up slowly and hit the trail about 10:30. This was supposed to be an easy day, with a net zero altitude change. We quickly dropped the 1600' to Vidette Meadow, and had lunch there. I caught a brown trout in Bubb's Creek, a creek that I thought held only rainbows and goldens. We basically had a few miles to go from there - a gradual climb up Bubb's Creek, and then a turn up the old Muir Trail to Center Basin.

But, somehow we ended up missing the trail and it took a while to realize it. Finally, about two miles past the junction, while parallel with Center Peak on the JMT, Jeff and I knew for sure we had missed the turn-off. So, what to do? Terry was shot, Jim was tired, and Jeff and I were

disappointed that the trail was so poorly marked, if marked at all. The next day was a hard day too - over Forester Pass, at 13,180', the highest pass on the JMT. I surveyed the shoulder to our left, and told Jeff that we were at the same altitude as the shoulder, and I suggested a cross-country route back to the basin. Jim and Terry were uncomfortable with it, but the route looked safe and obvious. The only other option was to go up the JMT for another mile or so to a mediocre campsite. Finally, against their better judgment, Terry and Jim agreed to go cross-country, and we were off. It was a fun but tiring 90 minutes, and we made it to a campsite at 6:30. No bearboxes and few trees, so we were going to sleep with our food.

Terry immediately stated that he was going to bed, but we wouldn't let him. Jeff made a great dinner, and everyone filled up on pasta. But, we had just finished two hikes rather late, we had a big pass the next day, and we were in the tents by 8:30.

I caught a half dozen rainbows and goldens the next morning before we took off. We briefly considered going the old JMT route - over Junction Pass rather than Forester, but decided to head back to the main trail and continue.

Day 3: Backtrack to JMT, over Forester Pass to an unnamed lake

We backtracked down the old JMT trail, an ill-maintained and hard to follow path. At the JMT intersection, we discovered that we had missed two small ducks the previous day, and that the intersection was marked but unsigned. Oh well, we'll pay better attention next time. We were at about 10,500' here, and the pass was looming way above us, at 13,180'.

I started out in front, and stopped to pump and eat something at the halfway point. After this, the climb got really brutal, and Jeff hammered up the pass well ahead of me and the others. We finally all made it, exhausted, and glad there was only a single small snowfield to deal with. We had lunch up there, and decided to camp at the second of the two lakes 1000 feet below us. The descent was amazing - the amount of labor used to construct the trail must have been staggering. Jeff and I found a campsite by 4:30, and again, everyone was exhausted. Jeff and I popped open a bottle of whiskey we had brought along, and just sat there, enjoying a sip, before we even got down to the business of dinner and setting up camp. Again, we were going to sleep with our food, camping close to 12,200' in an open basin.

At this point, the cumulative effects of three hard hikes were wearing on everyone except Jeff. The new boots that I bought last year, Raichle Eigers, had become my worst enemies, and my feet were swollen, sore, and blistered. I needed to tape my feet every day to get through the hike, and I'm going to replace those boots. I can't believe that a \$250 pair of boots can be so uncomfortable and unforgiving, especially after over 100 miles of use.

Day 4: Unnamed lake to Lake South America (LSA)

Finally, an easy day. On this day, we just needed to descend three or so miles on the JMT, turn off the main trail, do a gradual ascent, climb a 500' scree field and then drop a mile to the lake. But, I felt horrible all day. On the long gradual uphill before the final ascent, I was just shot. I couldn't breathe, I felt exhausted, and I dropped well behind the group. I sat in a meadow, pumped water and ate some candy for half an hour. I wished for a helicopter, and swore I'd never backpack again. Finally, I felt better and continued, meeting everyone at the top, about 12,000' in altitude. We quickly dropped to LSA, arriving by 2:30 or so. We set up camp, and people headed out to fish for the big goldens we had heard about.

But, I was so tired, I headed back to the tent for a nap. Terry and Jim caught fish, and Terry's two biggest were the largest goldens I've ever seen. The biggest one was close to 18", and tasted very good at dinnertime. I would never have killed such a fish, but once he was dead, we had to eat him and the others. Just at sunset, I caught three goldens quickly, including the two biggest I've ever taken. We took pictures, and we hope to positively identify them as Kern River goldens, one of the three sub-species of goldens found in the Sierra Nevada. LSA is one of the headwater sources of the Kern River.

As we ate dinner that night, I was filled with dread. I am not good at heights, and I knew Harrison Pass had the potential to be scary the next day. Also, that was likely to be our hardest day, despite a relatively short climb to the top of the pass, and a net drop of about 2000' for the day.

Day 5: LSA to Lake Reflection, over Harrison Pass

The wind was howling when we got up, well over 50 mph at times. We needed to do a trail-less ascent of about 800 total feet, the last 500 straight up a nasty scree and talus field. Terry and I were in the back the whole way, swearing at Jeff for taking such an aggressive and scary line up the pass. We often slid back down when rocks gave way, and rock avalanches seemed a real possibility. I finally got to the top, where it levelled out, and I approached the pass. I asked Jeff if I wanted to look, and he immediately said "No." Great! So, I looked anyways, and thought I was going to pass out. Jeff and Jim estimated the drop to be 45-50 degrees at the top. When you are below it, it looks vertical going back up. I told Jeff I didn't think I could do it, and I secretly hoped someone else would agree and go back with me. I figured we could meet at Vidette Meadow again in two days. Well, Jeff wasn't having any of that. We inspected the narrow switchbacks at the top. Jim went down to get Terry's hat, which the wind had blown over the edge. I felt like throwing up, and fought hard to eat a little food while contemplating the descent.

Two days earlier, I had made a comment about how nobody was ever going to carry my pack for me, period. I said I couldn't live with something like that. And, I had meant it.

Jeff suddenly turned to me and said, "Damon, I'm going to take your pack, Jim is going to lead, and you're going to hold onto your pack as we descend."

I tried to protest, but figured the best thing was to just go along. I held the pack the whole way down the first 1000' vertical, and never looked down. I pirouetted on my feet when the trail switchbacked, and just kept moving. It was amazing to be able to touch the wall just above you the whole way down, without leaning back much.

Finally, we cleared the main chute, and I volunteered to take my pack down the open scree and talus to the edge of the huge glacial moraine that marked the end of the first part of the descent. It turned out to be a mistake, as there was little safe footing, and I slid haphazardly most of the way down.

We re-grouped at the upper edge of the moraine, with the worst behind us. But, we still had a few nasty descents ahead, and no real trail. The moraine and the ravine following it were pretty scary, and we eventually reached the lakes at the bottom. From there, we descended in the stream for a few hundred feet, and then things got better. Finally, we began to find traces of the old trail that is not maintained, and after a fight with a willow thicket and one more boulder field, we made Lake Reflection.

Amazingly, on a Tuesday, in mid-September, at a lake that has no maintained trail access, and is five miles off the nearest main trail, we weren't alone. Another group had come in from Cedar Grove, hoping to have the lake to themselves for a few days.

As Jeff and I set up our stuff (the other guys were well behind us), the wind picked up steadily, and the clouds we had been eyeing for two days really thickened up. We had sustained 30+ mph winds with gusts over 50 mph. After sunset, we got some minor snow, and we got sleet through the night. We also had a minor cooking scare, when I had to repair my MSR Whisperlite in the field, but the repairs worked (I carry the repair kit) and we were back to two stoves. Again, we slept with our food as the wind howled around us all night.

After a few more days to think about it, I know that I will never go back to that pass, and something truly Class 3, like the nearby Lucy's Foot pass, would result in me dying of fear. Jeff, on the other hand, wants to investigate more passes like that.

#### Day 6: Lake Reflection to Vidette Meadow

This turned out to be our easiest day of the trip, despite steady rain. We packed up before the rain started, and we actually descended into the storm. We hit the main trail junction on Bubb's Creek after a five mile descent, mostly through avalanche and rockslide areas, especially below East Lake. We found a log to cross the creek, and rested briefly before beginning our next climb. At this point, we were down to 8400', the lowest point on the trip. We were going to climb 1000' to Vidette Meadow, and then call it a day.

It was raining pretty steadily by now, and the frequent presence of bear shit on the trail was unsettling. We made the climb in about 80 minutes or so, found a site, grabbed some firewood, and we were resting in our tents by early afternoon. We actually had the luxury of arriving at a site early enough to cook some soup for lunch, flyfish for a while (smart, skittish fish there), and even play cards in the tent. We built our only campfire that night, roasted a few fish in the fire, and enjoyed the last of the bottle of whiskey we had with us.

We knew the next day was going to be somewhat difficult, so Terry decided to get an early start, at least, by our standards for this trip. We were up until nearly 11:00 that night, and sometime in the middle of the night, the storm cleared out

#### Day 7: Vidette Meadow to Onion Valley

Terry was on the trail at 8:15, and the rest of us made it at 9:45. We figured Terry would get to the car well before us, but he made the pass just minutes ahead of the rest of us. He made it just before noon, Jim and Jeff arrived at noon, and I followed about 15 minutes later. We stopped for close to an hour atop the pass, talking to a ranger and ogling the gorgeous companion of one of the ranger's friends. But, we were tired, hungry, and thinking about a beer. We left the top 12:45, and Jeff and I estimated that we would cover the 5.5 miles by 2:30, or in about an hour-forty-five. But, everyone was in an amazing hurry, and we made the 2600' descent in only 84 minutes with two water stops along the way.

We stopped in Independence for a cheeseburger and beer, and then headed to Yosemite for a night and day. Terry had never been there before, and that gave us the excuse to come out Friday rather than Saturday, and spend the day in the park. The highlight of Saturday was a really good

breakfast in the Ahwahnee, despite the fact that it was really expensive.

Final thoughts:

- \*All together, we did about 55 miles, and the gross vertical was about 12,200'. I am sure that we did much more than that, but this is the total from just using basic high and low points on the trail.
- \*We never had to hang food. We had lockers at lower altitudes, and we just slept with it up higher.
- \*My new tent was overkill and is heavy. But, when it got windy or rained, it felt good to have that kind of protection.
- \*The temperatures were cooler than I had anticipated, and for the first time ever in the Sierra Nevada, I had too little clothing with me.
- \*My new Cat's Meow bag is a very snug fit, but very lightweight as well. If I were a bit skinnier, I'd like it more.
- \*The repair kit for a Whisperlite is worth carrying. Luckily we had a back-up stove if we'd needed to rely on it.
- \*We had two Pur Explorer filters with us. I will never use a First Need filter again, and two of these guys was quite a luxury.
- \*Jeff carried cans for every single dinner. He is crazy.
- \*The views at the really high altitudes (including Whitney from the unnamed ridge by LSA) were incredible, but the altitude really had an impact on me.
- \*Raichle Eiger boots pretty much suck, and I'm going to replace mine. When your feet hurt, a trip can get nasty very quickly.
- \*I am either too fat, too old, or both for a trip like this. I'm starting to appreciate hotels and beds more and more.
- \*And lastly, when you don't have access to a computer and e-mail, the world goes on, but you don't miss it. It takes a trip like this to remind me that life is way too complicated, and that the things that are really important are really the simplest things.

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Epilogue (Damon's answer to an e-mail I sent to him):

Tony: I was just going through my old papers and came across your account of the Harrison Pass trip. It makes me feel less discouraged when I find that even people much younger than I feel the ravages of AGE. I have...

Damon: It is becoming more and more obvious to me that I will someday need to adjust how I backpack, and that I will not always get away with carrying the weight that I do now. I guess the booze, two fishing rods, chocolate, and other things will have to go.

Tony: ...decided that, even though the trip has been a planned favorite of mine for years, I am probably beyond doing it in a comfortable manner. If I did, I would probably do the loop the way Don Savant did it. He did it in the opposite direction: he stayed at Lake Reflection and came over Milly's Foot pass. He had to lower the packs by rope but evidently the pass was shorter ...

Damon: My friend Jeff wants to go back into that area and go through Lucy's and Milly's along with Harrison again. I told him that I'm busy that week, whenever it is. We stayed at Lake Reflection the day we came over Harrison Pass, but didn't get to see much of the lake. We were exhausted, it was cold and windy (it snowed a little), and we just stayed right by the tents.

Tony: I can't remember if you bought a new sleeping bag or not but I did and it is the best one I have ever had. It is the new North Face Snowshoe 3D. It is a 5/15 degree bag and only weighs 4

OUNCES more than my old Cat's Meow! (3lb8oz vs 3lb4oz). Of course the new CM3Ds are lighter also. You would need a large size which is 3lb12oz. The bag stuffs down as small or smaller than my CM. It has a shoulder draft tube which is cinchable independently of the hood and has more room than the CM. It is great! If you are still in need of a bag definitely look at it.

Damon: I bought a Cats Meow this year, in the regular size, and I don't like it at all. I'm too big for it, and it was very uncomfortable on this last trip. I'm going to give it to Cheryl or Phillip and get myself something else. So, I'll look into the Snowshoe. I've seen them at REI up here.

I also need to get some new boots. I had a pair of Raichle Eigers for two years, a boot Raichle made for REI. They were sold to me as a great choice for multi-day backpacking and mountaineering. I expected the sole to be inflexible as they were boots that would take crampons. But, the boots never broke in. I did a lot of miles in them over two years, and I got blisters every time I used them. On this last trip, I had to tape my feet up most of the trip so I could keep on going. And, when the trip was over, I discovered that pressure on my big toes had cut off circulation, and both of them were numb. They still have not healed completely, two months after our trip.

So, I took them back to REI, and the people up here told me I should never have been sold those boots for anything other than mountain climbing. They gave me 90% of the last purchase price of the boots, about \$160, vs. the \$250 I had paid.

So now, I need to find new boots and break them in again. I'm thinking of just going back to the Vasques, which were very comfortable and easy to break in. The problem I had with them was their durability. I need to find some boot that gives me a good combination of durability and comfort.

Take care.

Damon

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Here is an excerpt of an email I got recently from Damon Lease (note the last sentence):

We are coming to CA in September. I invited Jim Myers along a couple of weeks ago, promising him nothing too difficult. It looks like it's going to be a six person, seven day trip, with a goal of getting to some good fishing. The leading contender for our route right now is Twin Lakes to Tuolomne Meadows, going up past Benson Lake on the way, and then up the Grand Canyon of the Tuolomne to Glen Aulin and out. I've already done over half of that trip on two other trips, but I've never made it to Benson Lake, which has a reputation for big fish.

Another possibility is a west to east Sierra traversal, ending up on the top of Whitney. Jeff keeps suggesting a variation of our trip two years ago, \*\*\*the one described above\*\*\*\*that would allow him to explore Lucy's and Milly's Foot passes. I've told him that I would stop at Lake South America, and refuse to go on.