

The John Muir Trail

by *Brian Cunningham*

Christine and I have trekked in some spectacular places, most notably Baffin Island and West Greenland. It was hard for us to imagine any hike which could top these but the John Muir Trail comprehensively surpassed them. We spent 21 glorious days hiking through the most breathtakingly beautiful mountain scenery we've ever seen. Heavy packs and lots of ascent meant hard work but there was inspiration and excitement with every twist and turn of this astonishing trail. The weather was perfect for the entire trek. It never rained and we rarely saw a cloud.

Background

The John Muir Trail is a continuous path that traverses 210 miles of the California Sierras between Yosemite Valley and the summit of Mount Whitney (14,494ft) the highest mountain in the lower 48 states. En route it crosses ten passes, ranging in height from Cathedral Pass at 10,800ft to Forester Pass at 13,200ft. It is named in honour of John Muir, an adventurous Scotsman who emigrated to the USA in mid-nineteenth century. Muir loved to roam in the mountains and he frequently lugged a 90lb pack on extended treks into the California Sierras. He is credited with



Late snow and ice at Garnet Lake - John Muir Trail. Photo Christine Cunningham



Mirror Lake - John Muir Trail.

Photo Christine Cunningham

persuading Teddy Roosevelt, the President of the day, to spend a weekend camping with him in Yosemite Valley to see for himself the damage the loggers were doing. The President was deeply moved and on his return to Washington he instigated a programme of National Parks which now protects much of America's most beautiful wilderness areas from commercial development.

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Christine Cunningham climbing strongly on the John Muir Trail.

Photo Brian Cunningham

The commemorative John Muir Trail was started around the turn of the century and completed in the early Fifties when the final section across Forrester Pass was blasted out of its vertical granite wall. Although some may consider this desecration, prepared trails provide the only practical access to this wilderness area. The terrain is generally very rugged and

when we did lose the trail our rate of progress dropped to about a half-mile per hour.

Logistics

The topography of the route lends itself to an average daily distance of around 12 miles. Anything more (or less) and you will find yourself crossing the occasional high pass in the late afternoon when the day is at its hottest and the snow at its softest. Doing the entire route without re-supplying is impractical as it entails carrying sacks weighing upwards of 70lbs. We chose to have a single re-supply point at the Vermillion Valley Resort which lies at the Western end of Lake Edison, about 80 miles down the trail from Yosemite. After our re-supply, my pack weighed 54lbs and Christine's weighed 40lbs. These were the heaviest loads we carried.

We flew into San Francisco and took the train to Merced where we hired a car. From there we drove to the Vermillion Valley Resort where, for a modest fee, the owners agreed to store the food and fuel we would need for the second leg of our trek. The resort runs a water-taxi twice a day along the lake. This saves a three hour hike along the lake shore. The facilities are rather basic but there is a great restaurant-cum-store where the food is excellent and served in gigantic quantities. Christine and I were on the 'Miss Piggy Diet' which allowed us to eat anything, provided we could lift it. The meals in the Vermillion Valley Resort barely met this criterion!

After sorting our food dump we stayed at the resort for a couple of days to acclimatise and to take a look at the trail. Mid-June is considered very early in the season and to make things worse the Sierras had received a 90 inch dump of snow in late April. As a result the passes were mostly snow-bound and the rivers abnormally high for that time of the year. We carried ski-poles, ice-axes, instep crampons and a 20m length of 8mm rope but on seeing the late snow we purchased snow-shoes and were glad of them on the three early passes. However, the snowshoes were heavy and after a lengthy debate when we reached our food dump at Vermillion Valley we decided to send them home. Thereafter we crossed the remaining passes in the early hours of the morning, frequently using our instep crampons on the frozen snow.

Permits

Permits are required for the trail and these can be obtained at either end. If you choose to do the route from North to South you can obtain your permits on a 'walk-in' basis from the Ranger Station in the Yosemite Valley. If you wish to do the trail in the other direction things get a lot more complicated. Due to the number of people wanting to climb Mount Whitney, permits are rationed via a complex lottery which is best avoided. Although the most popular guide to the John Muir Trail is written from South to North,

in our opinion this is an illogical way to tackle the trail which generally gets higher, harder and more beautiful from North to South.

Hiker traffic

As it climbs out of Yosemite Valley, the trail is very busy as the first few miles coincide with the busy trail up Half Dome. After this and until we got to Mt. Whitney we rarely saw more than a couple of hikers a day. At the height of the season about 100 people a day climb Mount Whitney from the East. We camped at 12,000ft on the West side of the mountain and reached the summit at 10am long before the bulk of the day-trippers arrived. The 6,000ft descent from the summit to the portal at Lone Pine was tough.

Equipment

It occasionally froze at night, especially at higher altitudes but we were fine with 3-season down bags and Karrimats. If we were doing the hike again, we'd probably bring our Thermarests which are heavier but a lot more comfortable.

We used a Terra Nova Solar two-person tent which was definitely over-spec'd for the typical Sierras weather. Campsites were generally very sheltered and a lighter, better ventilated tent would make sense.

We've never been big fans of walking poles but on this trail they quickly became indispensable, particularly for the tougher river crossings. We learned to use them to good effect both uphill and downhill on the Trail. Our Lowe Alpine rucksacks were superbly comfortable and well-proven but rather heavy. The US company 'Go-Lite' specialises in rucksacks as light as 2lbs and with hindsight we would probably have chosen them for the weight saving.

Our International Whisperlite stove performed perfectly however one long distance trekker showed us his DIY alcohol stove which weighed less than our Whisperlite spares kit. This incredible stove was lashed up from the bottom third of a Pepsi can and a small Tuna Fish tin with some holes cut in it. It can only be a question of time before a commercial version is available. Although mosquitoes can be a problem, particularly later in the season, they were rarely more than a minor irritant. That said it would be foolish not to bring bug-hats and a plentiful supply of repellent. We put a lot of time and thought into planning our food. It worked well and if anyone is interested please contact us for details.

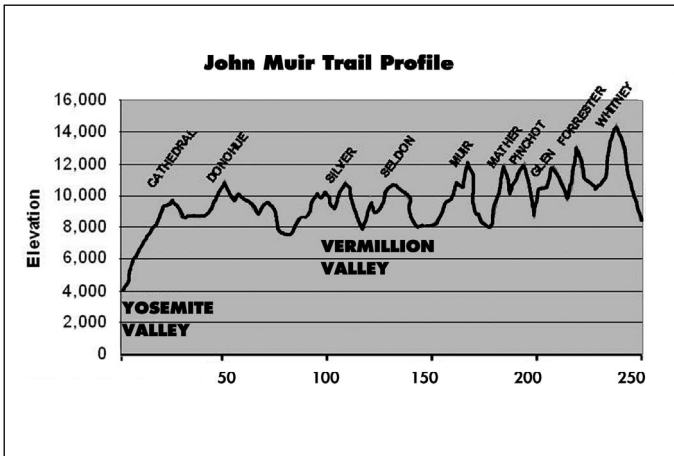
There are persistent rumours that the water is contaminated with the Giardia bacteria so it is advisable to pump water through a purifying filter as a precaution. Tom Harrison Maps produce a special set of thirteen 8 x 11 sheets which cover the entire Trail. The set is available from Stanfords in London for £18.95. The Rangers strongly advise hikers to store their food in bear-proof containers, especially in and around Yosemite. We rented two

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containers from the Ranger Station for a modest charge and despite their weight we were glad to have them as we saw two bears at close quarters during our first two days on the trail. When we got to our re-supply point at Lake Edison we sent the containers back to Yosemite and thereafter we slept with the food in our tents and never saw another bear.

Footnote

It may be of interest to certain Rucksack Club members that The John Muir Trail was completed in 4 days 15hrs in 1999 by an Ultra distance runner from Santa Fe.



Height profile of the John Muir Trail.