

Mount Whitney, CA, 14,497 ft. – September 23, 2011, HP #12: East Buttress

The Matts and I left Utah County around 8:00 p.m., September 21, arriving in Las Vegas five hours later. The next morning we were on the road by 9:00 a.m., heading west toward Pahrump, NV and into Death Valley. Passing through Death Valley the road dipped as low as 190-feet below sea level, and the temperature was over 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

It was noon when we arrived in Lone Pine, CA. Our first stop was the Ranger Station where we picked up our backcountry permits and rented a couple of bear proof canisters. Next, we stopped at a pizza joint and had lunch. After lunch we drove the 13 miles from 3,727-foot-high Lone Pine to 8,365-foot-high Whitney Portal.

By 2:30 p.m., we had our gear and backpacks organized and had started hiking on the main Mount Whitney trail. Within a mile or so we left the main trail, where it crosses the North Fork of Lone Pine Creek, and headed up a wooded slope into a willow-choked valley, roughly following the creek. After the second creek crossing, we arrived at the base of the Ebersbacher Ledges. Traversing the ledges involved some third class scrambling where a slip could be fatal. Once over the ledges we reached Lower Boy Scout Lake at an elevation of 10,300 feet, having walked approximately two and a half miles. We crossed the creek and traversed around the lake on its left (south) side, and were soon climbing over talus, eventually crossing the creek again where it runs over granite slabs. Within a mile from the lower lake, by 6:00 p.m., we had found a camp spot at 11,300 foot Upper Boy Scout Lake. We managed to get our tents set up before the sunset. For dinner I ate a freeze-dried dinner called “Pasta Primavera” which was surprisingly tasty.

The next morning, September 23, we left camp early just after 5:00 a.m., heading toward Iceberg Lake at the base of Mount Whitney’s Eastern Buttress. Iceberg Lake is approximately a mile and a quarter east of Upper Boy Scout Lake and over 1,200 vertical feet higher. The sun was fully up when we reached it at 6:30 a.m. At the lake we stocked up on water, then scrambled up a 1,000 vertical feet of talus and third-class terrain to a notch below what is known as the First Tower where the roped climbing of the East Buttress would begin.



The first two pitches have the hardest ratings of the climb at 5.8 and went straight up to the top of the Second Tower. They required about an hour and a quarter to climb. Matthew Long led the first pitch, and Matthew Jespersion led the second pitch. Although we started out before

another group consisting of two climbers, they caught up to us at the top of the first pitch. Sharing the route with them ended up being the story of the day.

The third pitch is where things got difficult. We had the option at this point to go over a short arête rated 5.7 or to drop down a big step to a ramp rated 5.6. With speed in mind, and hoping to pull ahead of the other party, we decided on the ramp, but we did not realize it was spotted in snow and ice due to its northern aspect. Matthew Long led this pitch, and masterfully avoided most of the snow/ice, but as I followed, I soon had my climbing shoes covered in snow, and my hands frozen. This was a bit nerve rattling, especially when my now wet shoes failed to grip even as I tried, unsuccessfully, to smear them on the rocks to dry them. Arriving at the belay ledge at the base of a prominent right-facing corner was a great relief, and my shoes eventually dried out. The other party used the arête option converging at the same belay area and informed us that their line was easier climbing, but limited protection gave it the higher difficulty rating.



It was after 10:00 a.m. when we began the fourth pitch, led by Matthew Jesperson. He ran the rope almost completely out on this 5.6 step like section known as the "red corner". Matthew Long led the next pitch which took us up to a large ledge just under the "peewee" block.

The sixth pitch which runs along the right-hand side of the peewee block was led by Matthew Jesperson, and the three of us topped out on that by noon. All this time

there was one other party of two ahead of our two parties. This front-running party were often referred to as the "white guy" because one of the fellows was dressed in white. Believe it or not his partner was dressed in black. At this point, the top of the peewee block, all three groups overlapped momentarily, with the lead group soon pulling ahead again.

Keeping with leads swinging between Matthew Long and Matthew Jesperson, Matthew Long lead the seventh pitch, choosing a flake which was too good to pass up even though he worried it might be challenging for me to follow as my alpine rock-climbing experience was very limited. Fortunately, it ended up being fine for me to follow.

We ran into a little bit of trouble on the eighth pitch when we decided not to wait for the climbers in front of us to finish the pitch. Matthew Jesperson attempted a variation only to run into a difficult ceiling causing him to be lowered back to the belay station. By now, around 1:00 p.m., the other climbers were gone, and we were able to climb the standard pitch they had used. Matthew Long also led this one, which looked relatively easy but turned out to be challenging as tired and as cold as we were.

At the top of the eighth pitch, I put in one more piece of protection, climbed up a large boulder and unroped followed by the two Matts. At this point I decided to remove my "cruel shoes" and put on my boots understanding the remaining 300 feet to be mostly class three or moderate class four. As I did so, my partners kept moving and I soon lost sight of them.

Eventual, as I scrambled up, without the protection of a rope, what turned out to be fourth class and moderate fifth class terrain I noticed Matthew Long, and decided to angle towards him. In doing so, about 30 feet below the summit, I encountered a sheer 10-foot wall which I dared not climb unroped. I scrambled around a bit looking for an easier alternative only to come up short. I had just decided to sit down and eat my lunch before trying to work my way down and south to the third-class terrain, when I heard Matthew Long calling out to me. I asked him to get a rope and drop it down to me and he did. On rope I was able to climb past the roadblock, in my boots, and then finish the scramble to the 14,497-foot peak. From the time we roped up almost seven hours had passed making it three o'clock in the afternoon when we reached the roof-top of California. There was no site of the other two parties who had been on the east buttress with us, and amazingly we had the highpoint to ourselves.

We relaxed inside the summit hut, erected in 1909, and after forty-five minutes we located the Mountaineers route, and started down it. We found it coated in ice which we were not prepared for being without crampons and axes. With careful route finding, sticking to the fourth-class boulders on the left side, we were able to negotiate our way around most of the slick spots. Eventually we crossed over on a sugary snow section and continued down the right side. Just above the saddle where the route turns right and heads down to the west, we were forced to down climb a fifth-class section about 20-feet high, that had limited hand holds and spots of ice. It was quite unsettling, especially after all we had been through up to that point. Fortunately, we all made it down without incident and continued down the "never ending" west aspect couloir of the Mountaineers Route reaching Iceberg Lake by 6:00 p.m. Within an hour we were back at our camp at Upper Boy Scout Lake. Fourteen hours of hiking, climbing, and scrambling was now behind us!

September 24, we woke up to hail, that would come and go intermingled with sunshine or rain. Enjoying and needing the rest, we forfeited our plan to scramble up Mt. Russell. By 11:30 a.m. in steady hail we headed down. As we headed down the hail soon stopped, and the sun came out. At the lower lake I removed my jacket and paused to look back noticing the peak of Mt. Whitney above the lakes eastern wall, it looked a long ways away!

At the Ebersbacher Ledges we got off track by following a lone hiker in an orange hat. We soon discovered our error and notified the hiker as well. Once we got down the ledges and across the creek, we stopped for a drink and I noticed the hiker had ignored us and was way off course, in potential danger, and without his backpack. I whistled at him, caught his attention, and we were able to yell directions to him, allowing him to get off the ledges. I left my pack and hiked up to him, meeting him just a few yards past the creek crossing. He seemed uneasy but claimed to be fine. I asked about his pack and he said it fell off the cliff when he tried to lower it

down a section. Hearing he was alright and confirming a second time that he did not need help, we continued down arriving at our car in less than three hours. I weighed my pack at the trailhead, and it was only two pounds lighter than when we started out, and I had no water left. A liter of water weighs 2.2 pounds, so essentially my pack was unchanged in weight from the hike in.

From Whitney Portal we returned to Lone Pine and the pizzeria. Following our late lunch, we returned the bear canisters and drove back through Death Valley to Las Vegas. Sunday morning, we were up at 5:15 a.m., allowing us to return to Utah County in the early afternoon. What an awesome, unforgettable adventure, and how lucky for me that two good friends were willing to allow an inexperienced rock climber, namely me, join them!

