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Disneyland for Hikers: A Walk to Mt. Whitney

By Jill Homer

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by: **Jill Homer**

Base camp sits at 12,000 feet — stark, windy, unshaded from the blazing August sun, but an otherwise great place to stop for a snack. Voices echo across cold granite as the breeze wraps around dozens of tents, backpacks, cooking stoves, and bear-proof food canisters. An unopened package of banana chips on my lap is immediately snatched up by a marmot, unhindered by my presence and unfazed by my pursuit.

Here, the animals, the people, and the barren granite form a bustling community in the Sierra Nevada wilderness. The trail to Mount Whitney sees thousands of people each year, all in pursuit of the highest peak in the United States (excluding Alaska). The people crowd the trail, the animals exploit the people, and Inyo National Forest rakes in thousands of tourism dollars. They say if you want solitude, go to Antarctica. Mount Whitney is Disneyland for hikers.

That's not saying Whitney should be avoided. Like Disneyland, there's a good reason crowds all congregate at one California landmark. Few other places in the world offer a well-tracked trail to 14,496 feet, where anyone with a pair of sturdy boots can trek to the top of a country, and a big one at that. Technical skills are optional on this trail, though patience and a degree of elevation tolerance is vital.

The trail begins at 8,368 feet in the Whitney Portal campground, at the end of a paved road from Lone Pine. The trailhead is a maze of parking lots, which, in the summer months, are nearly always filled to capacity.

This is the part of the forest where black bears rule; they bash in the windows of parked cars and steal whatever they find. So frequent are the bear burglaries that people are aggressively ticketed for leaving tempting packages in plain view.

I feel relieved when I walk into the wilderness and away from bear country. From the trailhead it's over 11 miles and 6,000 vertical feet to the flat-topped summit, a gradual trail, but not for wimps. Whitebark

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pine forests slowly give way to exposed granite over the first 7 miles, then base camp marks a strenuous and rocky climb to Sierra Crest.

I drafted my dad and his friend Tom, two avid hikers in their late 40's, up the steep section of trail affectionately called "100 switchbacks." I lose count after 75. Most hikers complete this hike as two to three-day backpacking trip, but Dad, Tom and I are going to do it in a day.

Sierra Crest is marked at 13,600 feet, already higher than I have ever hiked. The elevation puts a clamp on my lungs, and I feel a vague sense of sleepiness creeping into my head, even though my heart is pumping. The trail rolls along the ridge behind sheer pinnacles. You could stumble and fall 2,000 feet, but the immaculate trail helps prevent that. Thousands of footsteps per year have worn a nice groove in the jagged mountain

At this point I'm laboring up the trail, but it doesn't matter. I'm a hiker that climbs to look, not conquer.

The green and gold of Sequoia stretches across the horizon. Deep blue lakes sparkle beneath a cloudless sky. From here you can almost see the depths of Death Valley – the lowest point in the United States and only 90 miles from this point.

Dad and Tom are a ways ahead by the time I ascend the final slope – a gradual ramp that eventually levels off. This is the peak – flat, spacious, almost custom-designed for large capacities. A crowd of about a dozen people are scattered over the rocks. We plop next to a geographical marker – "Latitude: 36° 35' x; Longitude: 118° 17' x," it says – and fix some lunch. We have great view of Lone Pine – 13 miles east, of Yosemite national park, of the expansive Nevada desert, of the Sierra Nevadas stretching over the horizon.

A strong wind whips past my head and muffles the incessant chatter. If I turn my head toward the sheer drop to the east I almost feel alone. Almost. They say if you want solitude, go elsewhere. If you want to see the spectacular top of America's biggest and brightest, go to Whitney.

Directions: From Los Angeles take highway 14 to U.S. highway 395 north to Lone Pine, about 200 miles. Turn west onto Whitney Portal Rd. 13 miles to the trail head. Permits are required for this hike and are somewhat difficult to obtain. Call Inyo National Forest, Mt. Whitney District, (760) 876-6200, for more information.

Jill Homer is a graphic artist and freelance travel writer currently residing in Tooele, Utah. She specializes in outdoor adventure writing. For more information please visit

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contact

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The Truth About Disneyland And Disabilities

By Chris Elliott

Today, even disabled people can enjoy the wonder of Disneyland! If you are on crutches, you should ponder renting a Disneyland Scooter to get about the estate. The lease fee is \$35 per day, with a \$20 deposit. A valid driver's license is important, and you should be eighteen years old or older.

You can also choose to lease a wheelchair, which is not electronic. The rental fee for a wheelchair is \$8 per day, with a \$20 deposit. You do not need to lease your wheelchair or Scooter from Disneyland. You can choose to rent the apparatus from an undisclosed company, and have the wheelchair or scooter delivered to your hotel room. You may discover that it is cheaper to rent from a private company, as contrary to renting from Disneyland.

Cast members and assistance personnel will be happy to help with Visitor wheelchair transfers, and if you should part with a wheelchair or scooter that you've rented from Disneyland, wholly demonstrate the ticket for the wheelchair or scooter, and Disneyland will happily supply you with another one. Even so, if you lose a wheelchair or scooter that was rented from an outside company, Disneyland will not be capable to help you replace it, and you may have to pay the rental company the full price of the chair. This is something to consider when you are attempting to decide whether to rent from Disneyland or a private company.

All of the restaurants and shops are wheelchair reachable, as are the entertainment areas. When it comes to wheelchairs, your problem will be accessing some of the rides. Various rides are not suitable for individuals who are in wheelchairs, while others are perfectly apt. For example, you will not be able to appreciate Donald's Boat, Sailing Ship, or Tarzan's Tree house.

However, there are innumerable attractions that you can appreciate, such as The Disney Gallery, Disneyland Monorail, the Disneyland Railroad, the Tiki Room, The Gold Horseshoe, It's A Small World, Mark Twain Riverboat, and Tom Sawyer Island. Some attractions will require you to be transferred from your wheelchair, such as Alice in Wonderland, Indiana Jones, and the King Arthur Carrousel.

Whether or not you can enjoy a ride in your wheelchair, or you must be transferred from your wheelchair to the ride, you can in actuality enjoy most of the rides at Disneyland. Do not allow the fact that you can't walk about the park keep you from planning a Disneyland Vacation. Now there is no more excuse not to go have fun at Disneyland!

Chris Elliott manages

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and

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