Seven stages • 340 miles • 45,000'

This is an exploration of some wonderful and sometimes daunting roads along the eastern flank of the Sierra Nevada mountain range, California’s spectacular, granite high country. The tour is different in some ways from most of our tours. Usually, we ride point to point along a route, with one day’s finishing site being the next day’s start. In theory, you could probably do that here as well, if you wanted to ride for considerable distances along Hwy 395, the main artery along the eastern side of the high mountains. But 395, while not impossible for cycling, is not the greatest touring road. More importantly, the big attractions here—the big climbs up into the mountains—are huge and often challenging, and we found, when we tackled them, that the climbs alone offered us all the cycling enjoyment and hard work that we wanted out of each day, and that any additional miles along the more-or-less flat main highway would have been mostly pointless, adding nothing to the value of the experience except more miles.

So instead, we end up here with a series of disconnected out-&-backs: up one big climb and back down, then on to the next one on the next day, and so on. You may look at the daily mileage totals and sniff; you may think they don’t add up to much. Okay then, go ahead and do all the available miles to string the package together into one continuous progression. I’m going to bet you won’t stick with it. In the end, you will prefer to do what we did: tackle each big climb, then move on and do the next one, skipping the connector miles. I know it sounds wimpy, but we found it to be more than enough challenge. You can see, from the maps, that it had been at least partly our intention to ride all of those Hwy 395 miles, or at least most of them. Witness the run from Lone Pine to Independence on the Onion Valley day, which we ended up not doing. It only took us a couple of days to figure out we didn’t need nor want those extra, empty miles. If you need any more convincing on this point, simply compare the miles—relatively few of them—with the total elevation gain—a lot—and you can begin to understand why the tour is as tough as it is, even without the flatland, connector miles.

The tour works from south to north through the towns ranged out along 395, from Lone Pine to Independence to Big Pine to Bishop, and finally on to Mammoth. The out-&-back climbs depart from each of these towns. We did it as a camping tour, but with all the towns along the way, it would be easy enough to stage it out of a nice assortment of inns or motels. (If I were
to repeat this trip, I would go with the lodgings.) We camped for the first three days at Diaz Lake, just south of Lone Pine, although, on another trip, I stayed at the Best Western in Lone Pine. The Diaz Lake stay included two rides directly out of camp and one day with a drive to Independence for the Onion Valley climb. Then we packed up and moved north to a camp outside Bishop (Millpond Park), stopping midway along that drive for the Bristlecone climb. We did two days worth of climbs out of Bishop, and finally, on our last day, we did a stage out of Mammoth before driving home. All the travel details will be taken up in the appropriate places as we work our way north, from one climbing adventure to the next.

Of all the tours we offer, this has the biggest climbs to the highest elevations. The only other tour that comes close is the Three Parks Tour, which explores the other side of this same magnificent mountain range. But the climbs are usually bigger and steeper and higher on this side of the range... and of course so are the descents. While it is true that this tour is challenging—intimidating even—it is also equally true that it is spectacular, as the photo of Mount Whitney (on the preceding page) will attest. It offers epic touring for those who are comfortable with climbing.

Lone Pine, the start of the tour as we have it laid out, is about 200 miles from Los Angeles and 400 miles from the San Francisco Bay Area. Mammoth Lakes, the tour’s finale, is about 300 miles from either metroplex. Lone Pine is not only the gateway to the High Sierra (Whitney Portal), it is also something of a gateway to Death Valley. Hwy 136 heads east and south out of Lone Pine and ends up in Death Valley about 100 miles later. On the face of it, it would seem to make sense to combine a visit to this Eastern Sierra region with a visit to the unique and forbidding charms of that famous hole in the ground, Death Valley. In the real world, however, the two regions occupy almost mutually exclusive microclimates, and when one is at its best, the other is not, at least not in terms of pleasant cycle-touring.

Perhaps the best chance to combine this region and its so-near-yet-so-far neighbor Death Valley might be in the Fall: from late September through early October. The temps in
Death Valley have moderated somewhat, but the first snows of the year have not yet choked off the mountain roads. Even this little window can close in a hurry. We have seen some of the Sierra passes closed by the first snow of the season as early as the third week of September. They don’t usually stay closed at that point. The snow melts and they open the roads again. But if that happens on the day you want to climb this or that high road, it could be at least inconvenient and maybe even a giant disaster. As the old travel writer’s cliché goes: it’s a land of extremes. Plan accordingly. Or rather: hope for the best but plan for the worst.

For a variety of reasons, the detailed information that accompanies most of our tours is missing from this one. It was a tour that was thrown together with a little less long-term planning than most, and then it was modified as the days went along. The end result was a bit more haphazard and improvised than most of our tours, and as a result, this review/preview is somewhat less complete and buttoned down than our regular tour write-ups. However, these are all good roads and routes, and we still want to share them with the general public...so here it all is. Make of it what you will.

**Horseshoe Meadows**

60 miles, 8000'

When I wrote about the big climbs on this tour in a column at BikeCal.com, the title I put on the piece was *Inyo Face*. This comes from the fact that almost all of the climbs are up the eastern face of the Sierra mountain range in Inyo County. But it works as word play too, especially in the case of this huge climb. If you look up from the town of Lone Pine at the looming front rank of mountains above the town, you can’t help but notice the Horseshoe Meadows road carved into the cliff face, far above (left). There are five great, switchbacking traverses working their way up the wall. It is one of the most impressive and intimidating looking climbs around. If there is one saving grace in this mind-messing climb, it’s that each successive leg of the switchbacks is shorter than the one preceding it, like traversing across the face of a pyramid.

If you enjoy exploring a big mountain climb, once you see this one from the bottom, you will think about it and dream about it until you have a chance to do it.

The town of Lone Pine sits at 3700' and is the launching pad for both this climb and the famous Whitney Portal climb. The Horseshoe Meadows summit is just below 10,000', plus there is a descent of around 350' near the top of the hill, bringing the total elevation gain to over 6000' in around 25 miles. I don’t think the grade ever exceeds 10% on this big boy, but it stays in the 8% range for long stretches. Those numbers compare favorably with most of the famous climbs in the Alps. (Note: much of this copy was written initially for that piece at BikeCal.com, and in that piece, I was comparing these climbs with some famous Alpine climbs. Hence the Euro-references.)

You can take Horseshoe Meadows Road right from its junction with Whitney Portal Road, three miles uphill from Lone Pine. But I recommend taking Tuttle Creek Road (below) out of town and wandering around in a region known as the Alabama Hills on the way up to the big climb. The Alabama Hills are not to be missed. They are a jumbled pile of wildly contorted
standing stones and boulders, caves and canyons, covering an area maybe 15 miles long (north to south) and five miles wide, all just west of Lone Pine. It’s an anomalous geological formation that bears little resemblance to the nearby Sierra, and it’s one of the most fantastic landscapes you’ll ever see...a wild and crazy place (above).

It also happens to be replete with history, as it has been the shooting backdrop for literally hundreds of movies and westerns, from legendary films such as *Gunga Din*, *Bad Day at Black Rock*, and *High Sierra*, to the many, many western serials of Roy Rogers, Hoppalongs Cassidy, and the Lone Ranger. Tuttle Creek winds through this fantasyland and gives you a great exposure to all its amazing rock sculptures, then delivers you to the main road up the mountain. I suggest you take the main road on the way back, all the way to Whitney Portal Road. The scenery is good going that way too, and you end up with less of an out-&-back.

(Note that the maps and route slips show a start at Diaz Lake campground because that’s where we stayed when we toured here. If you start from lodgings in Lone Pine, your distances will vary.)

Locals tell me Horseshoe Meadows Road was paved in three sections over three consecutive summers by three different contractors. And from the looks of it, following three different sets of paving specs. The paving ranges from decent to deplorable, with large sections in chip seal that more accurately might be called chunk seal, as the aggregate is extremely coarse...not a problem on the climb, but rather tiresome on the descent.

The five big switchback traverses represent the lion’s share of the climb. (One of the hairpins is shown in the photo below, with the Alabama Hills in the middle distance.) Where the road tips over the crest, you get the 350’ descent—which turns into a climb on the way back—and then another few miles of moderate climbing to the road’s end. The end of the road is a bit anticlimactic: just a parking lot and trailhead leading up into even higher country...all pretty, but nothing extraordinary. The real scenic payoff is at the top of the last switchback, where there are panoramic views back down to the Owens Valley, most of 6000’ below...a huge vista, and also a launching pad for bold hanggliders and para-sailors.

The photo of the five switchbacks is misleading in one respect: the traverses are cut at such an even gradient across the cliff face, it appears from below as if each section is a straight run of road. Not so: the road bends out and around an endless number of rock buttresses, so that the traverses are actually made up of many sinuous S-bends...hardly a straight stretch to be seen, except at the bottom, where the road cuts across the alluvial fan. (We’ll have more to say about alluvial fans later.) The many slinky bends make the descent a lot more interesting than you might expect it to be, and if the pavement were better, it would be off-the-chart fantastic. Even with the slightly abrasive surface, it’s still a wild run.
Whitney Portal
36 miles, 5000'

Even folks unacquainted with this region will have heard of Whitney Portal. It is the gateway to Mt Whitney, at 14,494', the highest peak in the lower 48. It is justly famed not only for its incredible scenery, but also as an epic cycling challenge. Beginning in 3700' Lone Pine, the road climbs to the 8371' trailhead over 12 miles, and the grades reach a leg-breaking 15%, carrying on at that pitch for way longer than you would want. Total climb is “only” 4700', but I rank this as one of the hardest of the climbs I did among this tour of mega-monsters.

It is possible to combine the Horseshoe Meadows climb and the Whitney Portal climb into one, big stage. You would end up with a day of over 70 miles and over 10,000' of gain, much of it at high altitude...a very butch ride. When we toured here in June, it was over 100° every day, and although it does cool down at the higher elevations, you have to climb through the heat to get there. On the day I did Horseshoe, it was 114° when I got back down to the junction with the Whitney road. That made it easy to decide to do the second climb the next morning, rather than in the heat of the afternoon.

I liked the Tuttle Creek meander through the Alabama Hills so much, I did it a second time on the way up the Whitney climb. It was a bit out of the way, and it turned the 12-mile climb into a 15-miler, with a slight downhill run in the middle, bringing the total climb to a nice tidy 5000'.

Once on the main climb, you have to deal with the alluvial fan. What is an alluvial fan? It is that region at the base of the steep mountainsides where, over millions of years, all the little rocks that have tumbled off the big cliffs have fanned out into broad slopes of slightly compacted scree...gravity at work, on a grand scale. Almost every one of these big Sierra climbs begins with a run across an alluvial fan. They are invariably exposed expanses of rock, with very little vegetation above head height...no shade and lots of heat. They are uniformly boring and frustrating and wearying for a cyclist: they seem to go on interminably, at whatever gradient the road engineers deemed tolerable for car travel...anywhere from 4% to over 10%. I came to detest alluvial fans heartily by the time I was done with this week of climbs. Once you’re up into the mountain forests and steep cliffs, with little streams and grand vistas, things are very entertaining. Out on the fans, you just suffer and wilt and whine, churning away at the pedals but never seeming to go anywhere.

Whitney Portal’s alluvial fan (both photos) is as bad as any of them, and it culminates with an extremely discouraging section that is almost ruler straight for two or three miles and quite steep...9% or more. Once you get to the end of that never-ending chute, you are finally at the base of the real granite mountains, where the switchbacks begin to climb up the cliff face. That’s the good news: the alluvial fan is behind you and the scenery gets better. The bad news is the road tilts up to a gnarly 15% just as it claws onto the granite. You can see the roads cuts for the steeper traverses on the cliff in both photos. Also note that Mt Whitney is the peak almost directly over the head of the rider in the photo below.
I'm a little fuzzy on the miles here, but I would guess you're about four miles below the summit at this point. You make one long traverse to the north, another equally long and steep one back to the south—the ones you can see in the top photo on the preceding page—and then you round a corner and point straight back into the deep gorge that leads up to the trailhead. The views down into the valley are spectacular, but they are nothing compared to the view up the canyon to magnificent Mt Whitney and its consort peaks and pinnacles, perfectly framed in the vee of the gorge (above). It really is one of the most impressive vistas anywhere in this beautiful range of mountains. Breathtaking...awe-inspiring...choose your cliché.

All this knockout scenery does a good job of keeping you diverted from the grueling toil you're inflicting upon yourself in these last miles up to the road’s end. Sooner than you might expect, you ride into the developed area around the trailhead: campsites, mountain cabins, and a nice little cafe—what in Italy they would call a rifugio—where you can get a wide range of decent eats...hell, anything would taste good after that climb. There is also a pretty little lake there, and above the lake, a very nice, cascading waterfall (right) where you can splash the salt off your face before heading back down the mountain.

Pavement—for the descent—is marginally better than that on Horseshoe Meadow, except in a few spots, where it is marginally worse. Most of the time you can pretty much let it rip on the downhill, except in those places where the nearly sheer drop offs over the cliff act as a reality check on your wilder impulses. You might think those long chutes down the alluvial fan at 9% would allow you to achieve some extremely high speeds on the drop off the mountain, but you have to take into account the thermals...the hot winds that rise up the cliff face in the afternoon. They blow right into your face as you descend and do an amazingly good job of slowing...
down a piddly little thing like a bike and rider. In fact, with the wind acting as a brake, and the generally non-technical nature of the runs down the fans, these sections can get downright boring, as descents go. I was joking later that I wished I had had a book to read during these long, uneventful descents. The downhills up on the big granite are very thrilling--everything you could wish for. It’s just these runs across the bloody alluvial fans that are somewhat underwhelming.

Onion Valley
27 miles, 5300’
As soon as I saw the wiggly line on the map representing the climb to Onion Valley, I knew I had to do it. It has far more twists and turns in it than the other climbs mentioned here. Depending on how you define a hairpin turn, it has between 15 and 18 of them, along with countless other, less dramatic zigs and zags. And if you think that 26 miles is way too skimpy a total for a day on the bike, all I can say is: wait until you do it. However, you will note that the map we prepared before our tour was based on the premise that we would ride all the way from our camp (64 miles round trip from Diaz Lake or about 56 miles round trip from Lone Pine).

This climb heads up into the Sierra out of the Inyo County seat of Independence, 15 miles north of Lone Pine. Independence sits at 3925’ and the Onion Valley trailhead is at 9200’, yielding a 13-mile climb with 5275’ of gain at an average of 8%. There are no reverse profiles on this one: it’s all up on the way in and all down coming back. Those are the raw numbers. The reality is a little more complex…and a lot more fun.

Heading out of town, you begin with the obligatory alluvial fan, in this case accounting for almost six of the 13 miles to the summit. It is never steep or brutal...just tedious. A good place to practice pedaling nice, smooth circles at a good tempo. There is one section along the way across the fan where the road borders a wooded, shady creek, and it makes a nice break from the barren scree slope.

Once up into the real mountains though, things become much more interesting. (Top photo, just off the fan and up onto the real mountain; bottom photo, very close to the summit.) Those assorted hairpins don’t march up the cliff face in the orderly way that they do on Horseshoe. Here, they waltz about randomly, wrapping around one promontory, then kiting of willy nilly in a new direction to explore some other bit of local landscape, rather like an eager puppy capering about on the beach. The result is that the scenery stays fresh and interesting all the way to the top...never a dull moment.

One local website I visited suggested that this climb is the one in the region that most resembles the big climbs in the Alps. I’m not quite sure how they arrived at that notion, as the austere high desert, eastern Sierra landscape and vegetation look nothing like the Alps, except perhaps for le Casse Deserte on Col d’Izoard). Perhaps they were referring to the contours of the road itself, and in that case, I would agree, at least in broad outline: there is a certain alpine flavor to the road engineering, if not to the surrounding scenery.
As with Horseshoe, there isn't much of a payoff right at the road's end. There is a parking lot and a campground, and a trailhead to several very beautiful lakes and waterfalls not too far away. (Too far to hike to in cycling shoes, but well within reach of a moderately easy day hike, if you can contrive to get some real shoes up here with you.) But right close at hand where the pavement ends, there isn't much. There is a nice little stream where you can pull off your bike shoes and soak your hot, tired tootsies in the icy water, but that's about it.

The real payoff on the Onion Valley junket is the descent back to the valley, via all those wildly corkscrewed turns—a dancing, diving, whirling dervish of a downhill, and for a change, with excellent pavement. It makes my short list of Best Downhills Ever. You can see a fair bit of the road down the mountain in the photo above...all those kinky, slinky curves. You can just make out the town of Independence, showing up as a smear of green down on the valley floor.

The day we did this out-&-back was as hot as any we experienced on the trip—well over 100°—and dropping off the mountain meant dropping back through thermoclines of ever-increasing heat. Mile after mile, you could feel the temperature rising, waves of hot wind blowing uphill into your face. I felt as if I were descending directly into the nozzle of the world's largest hair drier. Or maybe like the poor guy in Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom, being lowered on a grate into the fiery pit. I would guess the temperature rose over 30 degrees in less than ten miles, which on a 40-mph descent means around 15 minutes...a rather dramatic change in the weather!

Only one rider out of our group chose to do the whole ride as drawn up, all the way from Lone Pine and back. The rest of us drove and skipped those Hwy 395 miles. If you think the 28-mile ride is not enough entertainment for the day, I have a suggestion for one other thing you can do that might make it more of a full day. Just to the north of Independence, off the west side of 395, is a long driveway that leads up to the Mt. Whitney Fish Hatchery (below). You can see that amazing old building, looking authentically like an old Norman chateau, from down on the highway. I had seen it years ago, driving home from a Death Valley Double, and it intrigued me: what on earth is this old French chateau doing out along the foothills of the Eastern Sierra? So I drove up and took a look, and it’s very much worth whatever time it takes to get up there...and it looks just as good up close as it does from afar.

It's at least as incongruous in this landscape as Scotty's Castle is in Death Valley. Wonderfully odd. The ponds are full of trout...lots of fingerlings but also some big lunkers. The place appears deserted, except for the fish. You can shove a coin in a little vending machine and get a handful of pellets to feed the fish, and they work themselves upt into a satisfactory feeding frenzy when you do. It's an other-worldly, peaceful spot, almost magically dreamlike, in light of how unlikely it is that it is out here in the middle of this remote nowhere.
Bristlecone
48 miles, 6900'

All of the other out-&-backs on this list head west from Hwy 395, up into the Sierra Nevada. This is the only one that heads in the opposite direction: east and then north, into the White Mountains. The destination is the Schulman Grove Visitor Center in the Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest. When you say, “Bristlecone,” local riders know what you mean, although the actual roads used in getting to the top are a combination of first, Hwy 168, from the town of Big Pine east to Westgard Pass, and then north on little White Mountain Road to the summit.

Big Pine is the next little town north of Independence. It is 40 miles north of Lone Pine and 15 miles south of Bishop. It sits at 3985’. The summit near Schulman Grove is 21 miles away and tops out at a heady 10,100’. What with a handful of little dipsy doodle descents on the way up, the total gain adds up to 6573’. There is actually a three-mile, ever-so-slightly downhill run from Big Pine to the beginning of the climb—at the bottom of Owens Valley at 3900’—so between that bit and the various rollers and dips elsewhere on the climb, the round trip from Big Pine to Schulman and back will net you 48 miles and 6900’ of gain.

Any way you slice it, those are numbers to conjure with. A 21-mile climb with nearly 6600’ of gain is a match for anything Europe can throw at you. This big mama is the real deal. The average grade for the whole ascent is around 6%, but that figure is virtually meaningless, as the pitch waffles back and forth between the aforementioned dips, a few level spots, and a few pitches that may be as much as 17%, with many long stretches in the low to mid-teens.

This is really a tale of two roads, as Hwy 168 and White Mountain Road have distinctly different personalities. Unlike so many of the other climbs here that begin with the same old same old alluvial fan dance, Hwy 168 is interest-
You begin seeing the twisted pines as soon as you turn onto the access road going up the hill (above), but you may not give them as much attention as they deserve if you are fighting your own little war with gravity at this point, and searching high and low for wherever the mountain gods have hidden all the oxygen. This road serves up climbing in wholesale job lots. It doesn’t go up all the time, but it does enough of it to make just about any cyclist suffer. In spite of the locals’ claims of 17% grades in places, I can’t remember anything in particular that seemed all that brutal. It’s really the cumulative effect of a lot of feet of elevation gain...a lot of miles of uphill travail strung together. And the fact that the summit bursts through the 10,000’ ceiling means your lungs and heart are going to be starved for fuel. It all takes its toll.

There is a nice visitor center at the end of the paved road, and a fine loop trail through the forest, if you have any energy left after all the climbing. One other scenic feature that’s worth a mention: this climb being over on the opposite side of the valley from the great Sierra Nevada massif, there are numerous places along the road where you are afforded stupendous vistas across the valley to the rugged, snow-mantled peaks of the Range of Light. I don’t even bother trying to show a photo of this wide-angle panorama. It’s too vast to fit in one frame. But you get hints of it in the bottom photo on the preceding page and in the photo at right, taken well up into the high country near the end of the road.

Once you’ve soaked up all the Bristlecone lore you can handle, it’s time to get off the mountain...take the down escalator back to the valley. And what a great ride it is! White Mountain has a rather sketchy chip seal surface, which requires just a little more care on the descent than is ideal, by my timid descending standards anyway. It’s still a lot of fun, but the real treat is waiting down on Hwy 168: those ten miles down the canyon below Weestgard Pass...ripping through the narrows; flying off the tops of dippity-doo humps, snapping left-right-left around the topsy-turvy-swervy curves...and all of it on silk-smooth pavement, or close enough to it to not matter. This is simply a kick-ass, big-time descent....about as much fun as you can have without breaking any laws or social taboos. (This is not just my opinion either: everyone who has written about this E-ticket ride gropes for the superlatives and the hyperboles. It blows everyone’s doors off.)

As you can see from the map, this is another day where we had planned to do more than we eventually did. We had planned to cross 395 and ride up the Glacier Lodge Road to its end (after doing Bristlecone). In the infamously hard Everest Challenge road race, they do this road before finishing up with Bristlecone. We wimped out again, not only because our legs and lungs were telling us they had had enough already, but also because it began to rain just as we finished the return trip from Bristlecone. As far as we know, Glacier Lodge is a good road and worth doing, if you’re up for it.
South Lake and Lake Sabrina
50 miles, 7000'

Now we’re up to Bishop, the biggest, sprawlingest, busiest town along the length of 395. Lots of tourist stuff. Lots of restaurants and motels and galleries and gift shops, plus all the normal American hometown fare, from supermarkets to auto parts stores to Walmarts. But looming over the town—in spite of all that civilization—the mountains are still there: the 12,000' White Mountains to the east and the 13,000' Sierra to the west. Hard to ignore from Bishop, in its basin at just over 4000'.

The South Lake/Lake Sabrina route is Y-shaped: one road well up into the mountains—another section of Hwy 168—then two roads forking off to their respective lakes. You could visit the two lakes in either order, but I chose to do South Lake first. Why? Because at the junction, the Sabrina Lake road is in the middle of a substantial climb, whereas the South Lake road is flat...which means on the way back from Sabrina Lake, one would be screaming down the grade, and who wants to break off a good descent to turn onto another road? Makes sense to me!

You can tackle this trek right out of Bishop, but I was hangin’ at a nearby campground—Millpond Park—and started there. In either case, there are three or four miles of nearly flat road getting out to where the climb gets serious. From that point, at around 4300’, you climb (most of the time) for the next 18 miles to get to the road’s end at South Lake, at 9835’. Total gain for the climb: just under 6000’. Once again, the average gradient of 6% is mostly meaningless, as the road varies considerably in pitch and in overall character from the bottom to the top.

Hwy 168 offers up one more huge helping of alluvial fan to get you going on the climb...only about three miles of it in its purest, most stultifying form, but another few miles beyond that where the climb, although actually now up into the mountains, is still a bit short on eye candy or anything very entertaining. Okay, okay...you do start seeing some great, hulking ramparts of stone and lots of scattered wildflowers and pretty Bishop Creek down below the road. I guess my complaint here is that the road itself is not doing much: no twists or wiggles or changes in grade. Just a long, long slog up the mountain (left).

But this too shall pass, and sooner or later you will encounter flat spots and steeper walls—some painfully steep walls—on your way to the junction of the two lake roads. The South Lake spur (below) starts off easy enough, with some lazily uphill miles—still along the creek—through pretty meadows thronged with quaking aspen and past clusters of mountain cabins. The whole South Lake road is about seven miles long, and the first five pass in this relatively benign way (although you are still climbing almost constantly). It’s a long way from being painful, except the air is getting a little thin. But this pleasant
road has a wicked stinger in its tail: two miles from the end, the grade jumps from maybe 5% to 10%. The road narrows from a striped highway to a dinky mountain track, with the creek now a cascade. Finally, in the last brutal mile, the pitch kicks up to 15% (above), all the way to the parking lot above the lovely lake.

After the many repeated body blows of the lower miles coming up the grade, these final two miles are a left-right combination upside the head, with the last, lethal section being the haymaker that finally buckles your knees. Unless you are an *ubermensch* when it comes to climbing, it will take you quite a few minutes to catch your breath at the summit. You can put your recovery time to good use though: admiring the lake and the impressive ring of peaks and crags that cradle the little lake (below). Now this does look authentically alpine! You could be in Switzerland. I was amazed at how—after the rather boring miles lower down the hill—things quite suddenly became quite spectacular.

There is a little snack food kiosk on the lakeshore, but they do not have running water. To refill your bottles and moisten your parched throat, you will have to stop at Parcher’s Resort, about a mile back down the mountain. It’s worth it: they will fill your bottles with ice before adding the water.

From the summit just under 10,000’, you descend to just under 8000’ at the junction. Then you have to call your climbing legs back to active duty. Another reason for doing the Sabrina Lake spur second is that it is not as long, nor as steep as the South Lake deal. It’s four miles from the junction to the lake,
climbing from 8000' to around 9200'. As you are heading back up into the same terrain you just left on the other road, it’s no surprise that this road behaves in just about the same way.

There is, first of all, a long, straight grade running up the side wall of a canyon—this time along the middle fork of Bishop Creek (above). You can just make out the road cut across the scree slope on the left in the photo. I’m not sure what the gradient is on this too-long stretch. It doesn’t look too bad in the photo, but I know I found myself cutting some shoelaces back and forth across the road. I’d guess it has to be a sustained 8% or perhaps a bit more. Not quite brutal, but a good, solid grunt near the end of the combined climbs.

But wait...there’s more! You finally reach a blessed little flat spot, where you can soft pedal and catch your breath while rolling through a charming meadow along a boggy, marshy section of the creek. However, lurking on the far side of this brief reprieve is the kid brother of that last, nasty pitch at South Lake. Once again, the road necks down to one lane, gets all twisty, and grapples its way up the final mile at something on the high side of 10%...not as bad as South Lake, but still pretty stout work.

The payoff for this final, gasping, wheezing effort is another lovely lake snuggled down in a cradle of magnificent granite spires (below). Also—much better than the snack food kiosk at South Lake—there is a quaint old chalet-style restaurant, with indoor and outdoor seating, serving basic but tasty chow for hungry hikers and bikers, with a million-dollar view off the deck. I rewarded myself for the big climb(s) with a basket of French fries...kicked back on an old sofa, put my feet up, and soaked up the sun and the scenery. Life is good!

And now—once the pommes frites are stowed away—the downhill is there, ready for the plucking. After all the hard work on the climbs, it would only be fair to be rewarded with a world-class descent, but such is not the case. It’s a good downhill, but not a great one. All those long, featureless miles of moderate climbing lower down the mountain translate into long, featureless descending. Some of the steeper pitches do allow you to pour on the coal in the speed department...50 mph is easy if you want it. On the bright side, with a descent this non-technical, you can spare an eye for whatever nice scenery is flying by.

Altogether, from Millpond Park, I racked up around 50 miles and 7000' of gain, with about seven of those miles being the flat stuff at the bottom of the hill.
Sherwin Grade and Mosquito Flat
66 miles, 7000'

The main claim to fame for this climb is that, when you reach the tippy top trailhead at Mosquito Flat, you have made it to the end of the highest paved road in California (at 10,250'). The locals call this a 22-mile climb with over 6000' of elevation gain, but that is kind of an arbitrary fiddle...a bit of geographic spin doctoring. The final climb, from the junction with Hwy 395 at Tom’s Place to road’s end is only 11 miles, with 3200' of climbing...some of it over 10%. But the conventional local wisdom is that to get to that final ascent, you have to climb up from Round Valley, way back over by Bishop, down in the 4000+ region. What you’re then doing is really two or even three distinct climbs, depending on how you define a climb. It certainly is the best way to tackle this package, if only because the first climb in the bunch—Sherwin Grade—is the best part of the whole ensemble.

We started again from our camp at Millpond Park, logging an extra 11 miles each way on the valley floor before hitting the first real climb. Instead of a 44-mile round trip and 6000’+ of climbing, we ended up with 66 miles and 7100’. Some of those valley miles are very nice and some are only so-so. I have included a picture of Round Valley (left) to give an indication of how nice it can be. And hooray!...no alluvial fan!

No doubt the locals have a precise spot in mind for the official beginning of the climb when they say it’s 22 miles long. But I had a hard time telling where the Round Valley rollers left off and the real climbing began...so gradual is that first run up to the rocky hillside. Once you get to Paradise Lodge—a charming old restaurant beside Lower Rock Creek—you know you are climbing in earnest. This is Sherwin Grade, and it meanders back and forth across an open, rocky hillside for about five miles before summiting at 6427’. This is as entertaining as the South Lake approach was boring. Here, the road loops back and forth in a slinky sort of way, like a big lazy snake slithering up the hill. The photo below was taken about halfway up the grade during the aforementioned Everest Challenge.

Once over the top, there is a jazzy little descent back into the gorge of Rock Creek. It drops 300’ in around a mile, amidst impressive rock cliffs, and then returns to uphill for four more miles through a pleasant forest of firs and broadleafs. None of this is very steep...easy going. This road, by the way,
is identified as Old Rock Creek Road up to the summit, and Lower Rock Creek Road on the north side of the hill. We have been travelling in a northwesterly direction for most of the ride up to this point. Now, after one connector mile on Hwy 395, we arrive at Tom’s Place (a small community of no particular distinction), and the route heads uphill on Rock Creek Road, almost doubling back in a southwesterly direction now, headed for that Ultima Thule of paved roads... Mosquito Flat.

In spite of having cranked right round the compass from NW to SW, Rock Creek is still our constant companion alongside the road...sometimes right there, making a big, splashy show with cascades and rapids, and sometimes wandering off a ways to leave us high and dry. Overall, this is a nice road. The creek is pretty; the woods are too, and the grade varies occasionally to get you out of the saddle or settled back down for easy tempo work. They say the steepest pitches hit 11%, and that sounds about right. Never killer, but a lot of it: constant uphill effort for over 20 of those 22 miles.

Nine miles up from Tom’s Place, you hit Rock Creek Lake (above), where there is an old mountain lodge that serves wonderful fruit pies. But you have to do a 1-mile round trip off on a side road to get to the lodge and the pie. Worth it? Maybe...but I skipped the pie and stayed with the climb, up, up, and up, above the lake. Over those last two miles, the scenery improves a bit...not that it has been all that shabby previously. It’s the usual high-country payoff to which we have by now become accustomed: the higher you go, the better it looks. In the last mile, the road shrinks to one lane again, a la South Lake and Sabrina, and it does get a bit steeper too, although not as brutal as those other two finales. It’s only right that this highest of all roads should finish with a little panache.

Road’s end is another trailhead/parking lot, with Rock Creek doing one last star turn through a marshy meadow. There are no developed conveniences at this turnaround, nor any especially diverting scenic attractions (although it is all very pleasant in the generic, high-Sierra manner). So after a brief snack, a little sun worshipping, and a little streamside meditation, it’s time for payback: a big withdrawal from the gravity bank.

Nothing too technical about this upper Rock Creek descent (below). Most of the time, just hang on and let it run. That goes for the miles back down Lower Rock Creek Road as well...altogether, about 16 miles of enjoyable descending...some of it moderately exciting, but most of it simple cruise-control miles. After working back up that 300’ bump on the backside of Sherwin Grade (amidst those very dramatic rock cliffs), all that ho-hum descending comes to an end. The drop down the south side of Sherwin is a total blast: five miles at about 6-8%, all on perfect pavement, all beautifully engineered for maximum cycling fun. One elegantly curving corner after another, all...
nicely cambered...this is as good as it gets. Look back at the photo on page 14 of the riders climbing Sherwin Grade: now imagine descending that same section, with the good pavement and the slinky, S-bends. If all 22 miles had been this primo, I don’t know if I could have handled the overload of bliss. Five miles is probably about my limit when the downhill is this sweet.

For me, the Sherwin Grade part of this package was the highlight—both climbing it and descending it—and the highest-paved-road deal was cool, but not as epic as I had expected. Glad to have done it so I can check it off my list, but I probably won’t be back too soon. However, I would eagerly go back and do Sherwin Grade over and over.

We’re starting the ride at the corner of Main Street (Hwy 203) and Old Mammoth Road. There is a large supermarket parking lot on the corner for stashing your cars. We begin with a 4-mile uphill on Old Mammoth Road. It doesn’t look too good as it leaves the clutter and congestion of town, but it will get better soon enough. The town falls away and the road tilts up and narrows down to one lane and begins twisting and turning up through the rocky, forested hills above the residential sprawl (left). We gain about 1000’ over that run, most of it concentrated in the last 2.5 miles.

At around four miles, we hit Lake Mary Road and turn left, heading for the namesake lake (below). The climbing continues for another half-mile or so and then levels out as we turn left off Lake Mary Road onto Around Lake Mary Road, which, as the name so clearly implies, makes a clockwise circuit around the pretty lake. This is all very pretty and very quiet...a mix of high-Sierra wilderness and mountain cabins and docks for little boats. Once we’ve circumnavigated the lake, we get back on Lake Mary Road and retrace our route past the Old Mammoth junction, continuing along Lake Mary Road.

We’ll stick with this road all the way back down the hill to about 40 miles north of Bishop. Skiing seems to be the main reason the town is here, but they work hard to keep their tourist revenue stream going in the other seasons as well, so there are golf courses and a vast network of mountain bike trails, including deals where you ride the ski lifts up the slopes and ride your bikes back down. There is an almost endless inventory of hotels and inns, restaurants and bistros and pizza parlors here. You could stay another night here after the ride, or before the ride, for that matter.

Mammoth Lakes is a ski resort village about 40 miles north of Bishop. Skiing seems to be the main reason the town is here, but they work hard to keep their tourist revenue stream going in the other seasons as well, so there are golf courses and a vast network of mountain bike trails, including deals where you ride the ski lifts up the slopes and ride your bikes back down. There is an almost endless inventory of hotels and inns, restaurants and bistros and pizza parlors here. You could stay another night here after the ride, or before the ride, for that matter.

Mammoth Lakes Meandering 40 miles, 5000'

This final stage is not even close to the final stage we had planned to do. For some reason I can no longer recall, we tossed out the stage we had drawn up ahead of time and improvised this one instead. One of the people in our group had done approximately this loop before and recommended it, and we agreed to the change.

My notes from that tour say we did 44 miles and 5300' of climbing. The Ride With GPS data I just worked up rates it at 39 miles and 4800'. I’m going to round both of them off and call it an even 40 miles and 5000'. And while any of those figures looks like a fairly modest day on paper, I can assure you we had as much of a ride as we wanted, especially as this was on our travel day, with the drive back to the Bay Area after the ride.

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the town of Mammoth Lakes, except for one detour: at about 7.7 miles, we take a left on Twin Lakes Road and do a little scenic bypass on this road that snuggles up against the shore of Twin Lakes. This little divertimento only amounts to a mile, and then we’re back on Lake Mary Road (above), which, for a few miles, has this nice bike trail alongside the road. After traversing the hillside, past some ski resorts and loads of mountain cabins, the road plunges back to town on a fast, smooth flier of a downhill.

Just before mile 11, we bottom out in town and turn left on Hwy 203, also at this point known as Minarets Road. We’re heading, first of all, for Mammoth Mountain, the premier ski resort in the area...a huge development. We climb, most of the time, for the miles between 11 and 16, usually on a moderate, steady grade that seldom exceeds 6%. Much of this section is quite pretty, deep in the fir and pine forest. The resort itself sprawls over thousands of acres and is typical of ski resorts: probably quite attractive when covered in a blanket of white, mid-winter snow, but looking awfully raw and bleak in the summer...just a bit less ugly than a strip mine.

But we’re just passing through the resort. The goal on this out-&-back is further along: up and over this first pass (9175’ Minaret Summit) and down, down, down to Red’s Meadow and everything that goes with that. This is a long dead-end that drops quite dramatically into the majestic gorge of the headwaters of the San Joaquin River, near the eastern edge of Yosemite National Park. Red’s Meadow is the trailhead leading into the backside of the park, and is a busy hive of activity for both day trippers and long-haul backpackers. I’m going to suggest some short hikes that even bikers can do (with the right sort of shoes), but the paved road is reward enough for coming this way, even if you never venture onward to any of the nearby scenic attractions.

The road beyond the summit and down into the gorge is under some sort of ranger control. We did this ride on a weekend, and at least on the weekends, car traffic was either prohibited or strictly limited. Only shuttle buses and bikes allowed. As I recall, we had to go to a ticket booth in the main Mammoth Mountain resort lodge and secure passes to even enter the area on bikes. We passed through a ranger check-point near the summit, showed our passes and then bombed on down into the canyon. But we also managed to have a sag wagon down at the end of the road with hiking shoes for all of us, so unless our sag driver took the shuttle bus, with a bag of shoes in tow, there must have been a way to get a private car into the canyon. As we were improvising this as we went along, I wasn’t keeping notes on all the details, and it’s all a long time ago now, and who knows what regulations are in place now. If you choose to do this stage, you’ll need to do some internet digging to get it all sorted out.

In any event, we eventually carried on down into the canyon. I only have the one photo below to illustrate this wonderful road. It’s a nice enough shot, but it hardly begins to do justice to this magnificent road and the surrounding wilderness. It’s actually the Ansel Adams Wilderness and not precisely Yosemite NP, but it all looks as grand and pristine and spectacular as the famous park, with the jagged Minarets and Ritter Range looming in snaggletooth glory on the far side of the gorge.

As noted already, the road itself would be worth the price of admission, even without the scenery. The descent is a bit over five miles. The steepest pitches might approach 10%, but most is in the 3%-6% range...in other words: perfect for fast
but not too hairball descending, and then, on the way back, not too brutal as a climb. The pavement is good or even very good, and the road is not overly engineered. It’s old-fashioned in all the right ways that make biking fun.

The road rambles along down in the bottom of the canyon for two or three miles, passing pretty little lakes, before fetching up a Red’s Meadow at around mile 25. There are a number of options here for off-the-bike activities. The simplest thing to do would be to have lunch in the nice cafe (below). If you have figured out how to get some walking shoes down here with you, you might consider a couple of short hikes. The easiest and probably most rewarding one would be to walk to Devil’s Postpile (above). The whole region around the Red’s Meadow trailhead is within the boundaries of the national monument for this geologic wonder. I forget how long the hike is to the base of cliff, but it’s neither very far nor very difficult. To really appreciate this marvel, you should take the trouble to hike up to the top of the postpile and walk out onto it. Glacial scouring has smoothed off the tops of the basalt columns so that it all looks almost like a level floor of hexagonal tiles. Definitely worth the small amount of work involved in getting here.

A somewhat more ambitious hike—three miles round trip—goes to Rainbow Falls (photo on page two, in the introduction). It’s a lovely waterfall on the San Joaquin River. I’ve done this hike a couple of times. The falls are nice, but the miles to and from are only so-so. The area was burnt out in a forest fire not that long ago and looks a little raw and austere.

After whatever adventures you want to tackle down at the trailhead, we have to get back out of this deep hole. That’s not really as daunting as it might seem. The gradient is relatively moderate and the scenery along the way is superb, so your senses and mind are beguiled by the beauty of it all, making it easy to forget the work you might be putting into the project.

The low point in the bottom of the gorge is around 7600’ and the summit is around 9100’, so the total climb is about 1500’ over five miles. That’s between 5% and 6%, and for a change, that’s a fairly accurate reflection of what one can expect to find.

Then, once over the summit, we have that five-mile descent back past the ski resort and down to the town of Mammoth Lakes. It’s a fast, clean run...never technical or weird. Just let ‘er rip. At the bottom, we turn left on Forest Trail, a rural-residential side road that runs parallel to Hwy 203. It gets us almost all the way back to our cars without any urban congestion or clutter. Just in the last fraction of a mile, we have to hop out onto 203 for a block or so before our parked cars show up.

And that’ll do it for this very short but very challenging tour. We felt like we got our tickets punched pretty much every day, in spite of the modest miles. But if you find you want more (miles), the roads are all there, just waiting to be ridden. Short or long, it’s a delightful cycling adventure.
Stage 1: Horseshoe Meadows climb

Stage 1: Owens lakebed from the Horseshoe Meadows climb
Stages 1 or 2: Alabama Hills

Stages 1 or 2: Lubkin Canyon Road, off Horseshoe Meadows Road
Stage 3: Mt Whitney Fish Hatchery, after Onion Valley

Stage 4: The Narrows on Hwy 168 and bristlecone pines in the high country
Stage 5: Climbing to South Lake
Stages 5 & 6: Millpond Park, near Bishop

Stage 6: Climbing to 10,250' Mosquito Flat
Stage 7: Lake Mary

Stage 7: Twin Lakes
Eastern Sierra Tour

Day 1—Horseshoe Meadow
60 miles, 8000' up and down

Day 2—Whitney Portal
36 miles, 4900' up and down

Sequoia National Park

Eastern Sierra Tour

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60 miles, 8000' up and down

Day 2—Whitney Portal
36 miles, 4900' up and down

Sequoia National Park
Eastern Sierra Tour

Day 3—Onion Valley
64 miles, 6000' up and down

Onion Valley out-&-back...
13.3 miles each way
Eastern Sierra Tour

Day 4—Bristlecone Pine and Glacier Lodge
48 miles, 6900' up and down and 21 miles, 4000' up and down
Eastern Sierra Tour

Day 5—South Lake and Lake Sabrina
50 miles, 7000' up and down
Eastern Sierra Tour

Day 6—Sherwin Grade and Mosquito Flat
66 miles, 7000' up and down

Crowley Lake 6781'

Red Mtn 11472'

Rock Creek Lake 9682'

Mosquito Flat 10,250'

Round Valley Peak 11943'

Casa Diablo Mtn 7912'

Tom's Place 7072'

Paradise Estates 4960'

Rock Creek Trailhead

Millpond Park 4300'

Pine Creek Trailhead

Inyo National Forest

Eastern Sierra Tour

Day 6—Sherwin Grade and Mosquito Flat
66 miles, 7000' up and down

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Rock Creek Trailhead

Millpond Park 4300'

Pine Creek Trailhead

Inyo National Forest
Eastern Sierra Tour

Day 7—Mammoth Lakes Meandering
40 miles, 5000' up and down

Minaret Summit
9175'

Mammoth Mountain
Resort

Devil’s Postpile
National Monument

Red’s Meadow

Twin Lakes

Mary Lake

Horseshoe Lake

Starkweather Lake

ANSEL

ADAMS

WILDERNESS

Start Finish

Mammoth Lakes
7860'

Inyo

National Forest

Forest

MINARET ROAD

MINARETS ROAD

LAKE MARY ROAD

TWIN LAKES ROAD

LAKE MARY ROAD

AROUND LAKE MARY ROAD

OLD MAMMOTH RD