

Taking the Whitney Challenge

'The poor man's Everest' attracts climbers with a mission

By GEORGE ANDERS



George Anders

Drew Stemler works in a bicycle shop. Mark Korwald helps homeless people find work. Jürgen Schwärtzler is a hotshot data analyst for Google. They had little in common this summer except a desire to climb the tallest mountain in the U.S., excluding Alaska.

A day trip to the top of Mount Whitney and back is a 22-mile slog that can take 15 hours or more.

So on a recent weekend, each of them -- and 97 fellow hikers seeking the next great challenge -- traveled to the edge of the southeastern California desert. Their goal: to ascend Mount Whitney and make it back down in a single day.

Turning Whitney into a day hike sounds half-mad. The standard route is a 22-mile roundtrip slog through the Sierras on relentlessly rocky terrain. It involves gaining more than a mile in altitude before reaching Whitney's approximately 14,500-foot summit. Sensible souls do it in two or three days. In some years, two-thirds of day hikers fail. Those who succeed may spend 15 hours or more on the trail, fighting fatigue, dehydration and altitude sickness.

Yet for reasonably fit people with stamina, summiting Whitney is well within reach. There's no snow or ice on the trail in summer. There's no need for ropes, crampons or other technical equipment. Most successful climbers reach the top in an ordinary pair of hiking boots. A few even do it in sneakers.

As a result, Whitney has been attracting 10,000 or more summer climbers annually since the 1980s. If the National Forest Service didn't ration climbing permits, to keep the mountain from becoming a mob scene, the tally might be far higher.

"It's the poor man's Everest," says Doug Thompson, who runs a general store and café at the foot of the mountain. Boy Scouts climb Whitney, he observes; so do a few spry retirees in their 70s or 80s. The peak has even attracted couples looking for an unforgettable wedding site, as well as grieving survivors looking for a stirring place to scatter a loved one's ashes.

For many hikers, Whitney isn't just a mountain; it's part of a bigger personal quest. Getting to the top can be a way to celebrate lasting triumphs over cancer, obesity or drug addiction. It can be a decisive chapter break for people switching jobs. Or it can simply be a way for overlooked middle managers to stand tall for a moment on the summit, towering over everyone else by virtue of their own hard work.

Getting to the Top



Joe LeMonnier

Here's some advice from Doug Thompson, operator of the Whitney Portal Store, on what it takes to be successful in a one-day bid for the summit:

Before you go

Practice by being on your feet for many hours. Short, hard gym workouts aren't that valuable. On the trail, the steady endurance of a mail carrier or a construction worker is more useful than being able to do 45 minutes at the top level of a StairMaster.

Build up your capacity for food and water ahead of time. Your body will need at least 4,000 calories of food, just to offset the energy burned on the hike. Dieters often have trouble eating enough on the trail, leading to exhaustion. High water intake is even more crucial; Mr. Thompson advises drinking at least a gallon of water in the days before the hike.

Once you're there:

Respect the altitude. Acclimate for at least a day or two at high elevations. Practice deep breathing above 12,000 feet. Get rid of excess pack weight. Consider medication that can ward off altitude sickness.

Use walking sticks. They are especially helpful on the descent, which is where most injuries happen.

For hiking permits, contact the U.S. Forest Service. Summer permits are assigned by a lottery, starting in February each year. Applications are handled by the [Inyo National Forest office](#), which is reachable by phone at 760-873-2483. The Web site is www.fs.fed.us/r5/inyo/recreation/wild/whitneyavail.shtml.

Whitney's double allure -- mountain and mission -- began to intrigue me a year ago. I lined up a permit several months in advance for October 2007, but an early snowstorm made climbing impossible. Undeterred, I corralled a handful of Silicon Valley friends in their 40s and 50s to try this summer. They all sounded excited at first. Then they begged off in the springtime, citing aching knees, wary spouses or a preference for pampered vacations.

Cowards. I was determined to make the trip happen anyway, even if it meant placing an ad on Craigslist and recruiting climbers for my five-person permit that way. In fact the notion of such an expedition sounded brilliant. This wouldn't just test my aging hiking skills. It would be an experiment in sociology, seeing if a handful of strangers could tolerate one another on this odyssey. Hours after posting my ad, "Let's go!" responses began streaming into my email account.

People who drove BMWs and people who didn't own cars all wanted to join the team. I decided that income and status didn't matter much; a good-natured sense of adventure did. So I focused on candidates who had bicycled across Nevada, gone bouldering in Mexico or done something else zany.

Could we get along? I quizzed everyone about what would make a good camping meal the night before our summit attempt. The finicky ones got dinged. It was a mere wisp of a test, but I hoped it would prove reliable.

A few weeks later, we huddled together in a Toyota Highlander, speeding across California toward the mountain. Chatter was giddy and constant. We were going to get along just fine.

We checked into a campground at the base of Mount Whitney, made dinner, and opened up a bit about our quests. Mark was 59 and had just survived a health scare. He wanted to show that he was as fit as ever. Drew, 36, had been a daredevil mountain-bike jumper years ago, before breaking a lot of bones. Now he wanted to do audacious things outdoors in a safe, controlled way. I was switching jobs at age 50. Jürgen, the 31-year-old Google statistician, had arrived by a separate route and hadn't yet joined up. A fifth member of our group, 43-year-old David Thom, said he dabbled in real estate and didn't offer much more.

The next morning, we rose at 4, gulped down some coffee and headed for the trailhead, at an elevation of 8,365 feet. A full moon -- aided by our headlamps -- provided predawn light. The first few miles seemed easy enough. After months of in-the-gym training, some of us were tempted to trot uphill, but Drew reined us in. "Just saunter," he said. There would be plenty of time later to get tired.

The first test came at 12,000 feet. The air was thinner now. A huge, rocky hillside sloped up before us. Mark set out first, zigzagging through 97 switchbacks. "I'm slowing you down," he kept saying to the rest of us. "Someone else can lead." But no one else wanted to. Mark's pace was all we could handle.



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As the switchbacks ended, we crossed from the east side to the west side of the mountain. That meant pausing at a crest with drop-dead views of valleys on both sides, at least 2,000 feet below us. We had another 2.3 miles and more than 1,000 feet of elevation to go. Fog was setting in. Jürgen was wincing with an altitude-related headache. Others were feeling woozy, too.

For the next two hours, our technique suffered. We teetered past small boulders, jammed our hiking poles into cracks and lost their tips. We inched forward a few hundred feet and then stopped to gulp in air, unable to hold a steady pace. The tiny thermometers attached to the handles of Drew's hiking poles registered 38 degrees Fahrenheit, far colder than the 65 to 70 we'd grown accustomed to. With the wind snapping at us, it felt well below freezing.

But we made it. The hut atop Whitney finally came into view. It was a miserable structure, with boarded-up windows, no interior light and no furniture. But it was a sturdy wind shelter and we were grateful for that. We stumbled in, signed the summiters' register and collapsed on the floor for 15 minutes. Then we headed back down. We had less than six hours before dusk.

The first few hours of descent were almost as grim. We were so fatigued that we violated the first rule of marathon hiking, which is to keep eating and rehydrating, whether you want to or not. My cache of snacks -- cashews, dried cranberries and cookies that had seemed so tasty a few hours ago -- now looked vile. Even opening a water bottle for a few sips seemed like too much effort.

Drew and I became the scolds, urging everyone to keep eating and drinking. We all swapped snacks, hoping fresh tastes would help. Then, as we descended, we started to feel alive again. David and I were laggards a few miles from the finish, when we suddenly decided to see if we could catch the others.



Jupiter images

At 14,494 feet (4,418 meters) above sea level, California's Mount Whitney is the highest peak in the lower 48 states. Whitney is part of the Sierra Nevada, a fault-block mountain range formed when shifting tectonic plates led to the cracking and faulting of the Earth's surface.

Mark Korwald, Drew Stemler and David Thom rest on a crest on the way up

As we zipped along the trail, David confided about his real-estate troubles. He had made big money for a few years, buying shabby urban homes and fixing them up. One Oakland house that he bought for \$45,000 looked so good after he renovated it that banks let him borrow \$432,000 against it. Everything looked good until the housing bubble burst. Now he was stuck with too much debt, forcing him into repeated defaults.

"I need to get out of real estate," he said. "I need to do something else." He started talking about an earlier career as an inner-city English teacher. Winning kids' respect was tough, he said. "You've only got three or four days to do it. Otherwise they take over your class." But he had prevailed -- and he believed he had even helped some of them head toward a better life. "I might go back to teaching," he said.

I was leaving The Wall Street Journal for a new phase of my writing career: riskier but potentially more rewarding. Finishing up the hike, I kept thinking of our stubborn push to the summit. I would need that tenacity many times in the months ahead. Recalling the experience of pushing onward in the fog -- fighting fatigue nearly three miles above sea level -- would help me persevere.

As we neared the end of the trail, we got ravenously hungry again. David and Jürgen wanted pizza. I craved soup: hot, wet, salty soup. It was 8:20 p.m. now, dusk. We had been on the trail for more than 15 hours.

We jumped in the car and headed for the nearest restaurant -- 14 miles away, farther downhill, in the small town of Lone Pine, Calif. Half an hour later, we walked into the Pizza Factory restaurant and ordered the food of our dreams. The servers made fun of the patchy sunblock still stuck on our faces. We didn't care. I ordered chicken gumbo and gulped it down with a plastic spoon. It was delicious.

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