

WHEN DRIVEN TO EXTREMES, ORDINARY TRAVELERS  
DISCOVER EAST SIERRA'S RUGGED BEAUTY  
WILD SIDE OF PARADISE.

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BY THE time we got to Dardanelles, we knew we were in deep trouble.

Four hours on the road and what was supposed to have been a leisurely five-day camping trip already was showing signs of turning ugly and mean. We were armed with courage, a well-stocked cooler, a full tank of gas and a map detailing the 17 Forest Service campgrounds strung along State Route 108 between Sonora and the Sierra Nevada crest. It was not enough.

>From Herring Creek to Brightman Flat, we'd cruised through every campground, looking in vain for a place to call our own. And when we surveyed the wall-to-wall Winnebagos at Dardanelles, shadows were getting long and tempers were getting short. We knew we'd find more of the same the farther we climbed. It was that crucial time when polite sentences give way to terse three-word barks and every green dot on the map becomes a beacon of false hope.

It was at that point that I said, to no one in particular: "That's it. We're through jerking around with this jive. We're going over the top."

We became ordinary people driven to extremes.

It was past twilight when we went over Sonora Pass, and almost pitch-dark when we made our camp in an aspen grove hard by the Walker River. We woke to find ourselves alone in a separate reality. We had -- almost literally -- stumbled into a region so beautiful, yet so desolate that it seemed to be a state apart from the High Sierra we thought we knew.

It has been six years since that initial trip, and the more time I spend cruising the jeep tracks and highways of Mono and Inyo counties, the more I consider the East Sierra a separate state. Between Mono Lake in the north and Mount Whitney in the south lies a harsh version of paradise -- where the high desert badlands meet the high country.

The west flank of the Sierra range climbs slowly from the Central Valley to the crest. But the east flank plunges from the 14,000-foot-plus crest to the semi-arid Owens Valley floor 10,000 feet below. It's six or seven hours from the Bay Area and a world apart.

>From Mono Lake to Mount Whitney, U.S. 395 is the road. Virtually every destination in the region is referred to by its proximity to the highway, which runs parallel to the Sierra range. Turn west off 395 on any of the dozen lateral roads strung along the range and you can drive from the dusty valley floor to lush trailheads and snow-rimmed alpine lakes at 10,000-feet-plus in a matter of minutes.

The traveler blasting down 395 would probably find nothing the least bit remarkable about Tom's Place, an outpost a hundred feet off the highway, between Mammoth Lakes and Bishop. Not much more than a gas station, a lodge and a long, low building that is the bar, restaurant, dance hall, general store, tackle shop, post office and center of civilization for the 70-or-so people living on the edge of the high desert.

Like many other way-stations along the 395 corridor, this is a community where recreation is Job One. In the summer, it's fishing. In the winter, it's skiing. It's a place where on some days you probably could set off a bomb in the middle of the main street and only Sitka, the cook's pony-sized dog/wolf, would bother to raise an eyelid. It's a place where on some nights it seems that every human from 40 miles around is jammed around the horseshoe-shaped bar, nursing a sunburn and a long-necked bottle of Bud, whooping it up to a fiddle player who knows his rock 'n' roll.

They seldom let business get in the way of a good time at Tom's Place. Management has been known to disappear on three-day trout-fishing parties at the drop of a hat. On at least one occasion, the bar was abruptly cleared at 10 p.m. so a committee of bartenders, bartenders' friends, bartenders' bosses and assorted hangers-on could caravan across the desert jeep tracks to Montgomery Pass, just over the state line, for a long night of gambling.

Tom's Place sits at the base of Rock Creek Road, one of the best bets in the vast Inyo National Forest for camping. There are 11 campgrounds to choose from on the narrow two-lane road -- from large, comfortable French Camp at 7,500 feet to the Mosquito Flat trailhead camp at 10,300 feet. The parking lot where the road terminates is a boon for backpackers who wish to start their treks at a relatively high elevation.

>From the parking lot, the trails into Little Lakes Valley offer great fishing and camping with a minimum of agony. For the more aggressive hiker, the way to go is over Mono Pass and into the Pioneer Basin or into the glacier-carved recesses that feed Mono Creek. Crossing the lunar landscape of the pass and climbing the adjacent peak, Mount Starr (elevation 12,870),

are two unforgettable experiences within in the capabilities of most hikers.

To the north of Tom's Place and Rock Creek, the 12-mile June Lake Loop road and Highway 203 beyond Mammoth Lakes also are loaded with campgrounds and backcountry trailheads. The great majority of the region's developed campgrounds are part of the Inyo National Forest system, have fees in the \$4-\$8 per-night range, and operate on a first-come-first-served basis.

Agnew Meadows, a heavily wooded 24-campsite area right on 203 between Mammoth Lakes and Devil's Postpile, is a great, frequently overlooked "second choice" camp. For backcountry travelers wanting quick access to the Pacific Crest and John Muir trails, Agnew Meadows and Reds Meadow, at the end of the road, are excellent trailhead camps.

In the winter, Mammoth and June Lake are ski heaven. Mammoth Mountain, a world-class resort for downhill skiing, has become highly touted lately for its cross-country potential. But in the summer, they could change the sign on 395 from "Mammoth Lakes" to "Boutique Sierra." It's an upscale, sports-oriented scene complete with its own upscale, sports-oriented magazine and more sports shops than you can shake a ski at. Lycra biking shorts are acceptable attire in all but the most expensive eateries. You can find 22 different Mammoth T-shirts and God-only-knows how many different models of \$50 sunglasses in these shops. But, if you need something as pedestrian as a tent pole, you're probably out of luck. For a sharp contrast to the well-tanned, well-moneyed tenor of Mammoth, look south down 395 -- to Bishop.

There is nothing even remotely upscale or quaint about Bishop. The city of 4,000, situated on what's left of the Owens River, is a supply depot. The fast-food joints, motels and gas stations which line the main drag exist to give succor to the steady stream of Los Angelenos who trek up into the Owens Valley each year.

More than anywhere else in the East Sierra, it is in Bishop where one is constantly reminded that Los Angeles owns this area lock, stock and water-barrel -- like a distant colonial outpost. Every other recreational vehicle has a license plate frame proclaiming it to be from Covina or Culver City. Every other news-rack has the Los Angeles Times. The Owens Valley Water Wars that raged from 1904 to 1930 are far from forgotten. And the politics of water continue to have a tremendous effect on everyday life.

Poke around the dry, arid bed of Owens Lake to the south. Or spend some time walking along what's left of Rush Creek to the north. You can almost get a palpable sense of what Jake Gittes, Jack Nicholson's gumshoe character in the film "Chinatown," felt as he snooped around the original water wars. Water is still the subject of loud and bitter bar-room debates, and bumper stickers that say flatly "Blow up the damn pumps" are not uncommon.

In many ways, the water battle never really ended -- it has just become focused on Mono Lake. After decades in and out of court, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power was told in late April by the state Supreme Court that it must cut back the amount of water diverted from the ecologically fragile lake. Right now, the lake's South Tufa Grove and Panum Crater volcanic feature are the only two things worth a detour into that bleak area.

In the shadow of Mount Whitney, the highest peak in the contiguous United States, there is a place that nobody is particularly proud of. Manzanar is nine miles north of Lone Pine on 395. There are no fences left at the concentration camp where 10,000 Japanese-Americans were interred during World War II. No signs to point the way. No buildings -- save the two stone guard huts at the entrance. Nothing more than a low-slung brass plaque to explain what happened here.

There's nothing left but concrete foundations choked with weeds, some flagstone walkways enveloped by the desert sand and a lot of memories. Step inside the two guard huts and read the memories. Every inch of walls is covered with the inscriptions of pilgrims -- who have remembered everything down to their shack numbers.

Walk further west through a grove of trees and follow the cattle fence north until you see a white spire in the distance. This is the cemetery at Manzanar. The thousands of folded paper cranes draped on the monuments and barbed-wire are said to signify healing.

The volcanic tableland that stretches from Mammoth in the west to the White Mountains in the east is possibly one of the least hospitable stretches of sand-blasted, sun-scorched earth in the state. It's loosely referred to as Long Valley, or Benton Crossing, for the loosely constructed road that connects Tom's Place and Mammoth to the tiny town of Benton to the north. The area is webbed with a maze of jeep tracks and dubious roads. And with only a handful of miners, loners and Basque shepherds venturing out here, there doesn't seem to be a great need for signs or maps. But there's plenty to see -- from the Indian petroglyphs of Chidago Canyon in the south to the wild mustangs of the Pizona area in the north.

The Benton Crossing Road may yield a shaky ride, but it's what's underneath the road that could really shake you up: The road winds across the Long Valley Caldera, one of the "hottest" geologic areas in the world. A huge mass of molten rock estimated to be six miles deep is thought to be responsible for the swarms of earthquakes that constantly jolt the region. To see evidence of just how hot the geologic activity is, check out the beach scene at Hot Creek, 1.5 miles off 395 on the road to the fish hatchery adjacent to the Mammoth Airport. On any weekend, the 100-yard stretch of

creek is jammed with people lounging in the shallow, piping-hot, frequently foul-smelling water. It's the most popular and well-known of the countless hot creeks and springs that dot the area.

The fish hatchery road continues out onto the volcanic plain, passing abandoned shepherd's camps and cattle pens. Six miles in, the road runs into the bona fide Benton Crossing, a fast, paved road that doubles back southwest to Crowley Lake. After passing the Tom's Place/Crowley cutoff, the road loops back east and the flatlands give way to rolling hills, red bluffs and rocky crags covered with scraggly pinon pine and sagebrush.

Where the road turns north, the pavement abruptly ends. Turn on the road marked "Moran Spring" and you'll find yourself descending into a maze of canyons. Many of the bluffs have been used as impromptu firing ranges. There's no mistaking that this is deep country, where guns are a part of life and regulation is pretty much limited to the "No Loaded Guns In The Store" signs and ubiquitous Forest Service warnings: "No shooting over campsites, bodies of water, roads . . ." In many of the canyons, the observant hiker may come across mounds of shell casings -- everything from .22 long rifle to .30 caliber military ordnance.

Six miles beyond the Moran Spring turnoff, the main road becomes little more than a car-width slot blasted through a wall of immense rocks. After inching your car through the looming tangle of otherworldly volcanic formations, make your way slowly down the chalk-red canyon named -- you guessed it -- Red Rocks Canyon. The first sight of Highway 6, the main route for the return trip to Bishop, may come as something of a relief. After 37 miles on a bad road to nowhere, it's easy to get the feeling that there's absolutely nobody out there. Making your way back south to Bishop, you'll skirt the very base of the massive White Mountains, the forgotten "second range" that marks the beginning of the Great Basin region.

The White Mountain range will never be loved as the majestic Sierra Nevada is. There is no comfort zone in the Whites, just beauty of the very harshest sort. By the time storm clouds hit the range, the Sierra already has wicked away most of the precipitation, leaving the Whites with just enough water to support only the most tenacious vegetation. More than 4,000 years of blowing ice and sand have blasted the range's celebrated bristlecone pines into gnarly, grotesque forms. The ancient trees are not celebrated for being pretty, but rather, one would think, for being mean enough to survive in the Whites for so long.

Like the Benton Crossing area below it, the White range is one of the most desolate and out-of-the-way wild places in the state, yet it's also a hub of scientific research. The University of California maintains research stations at Mount Barcroft and Crooked Creek to study everything from the last genetically pure strain of Paiute trout to the electrical storms and

wild winds that occasionally send huge pieces of lumber flying around the summit like match-sticks.

Choosing a route through the Whites is easy -- the White Mountain Road, draped precariously along the crest of the range, is the only developed road in and out of the area. It's a spectacular ride that could rightfully be called a drive into the sky. The long, winding road is paved up to Schulman Memorial Grove at 10,100 feet. (The grove is named for the scientist who first determined the age of bristlecone pines.) From there, it becomes a graded-dirt road that meanders up and down across the ridge-line for 11 miles to Patriarch Grove at 11,200 feet.

Should you choose to continue to the locked gate at 11,800 feet, it's a drive you -- and your car -- will never forget. The barren flora gives way to a talc-white wasteland. The sight of a car churning across a landscape better suited to a lunar rover is something one never really gets used to. >From the parking area at the locked gate, it's a staggering day-hike to the Mount Barcroft research station at 12,400 feet and, finally, to the rounded knob of White Mountain peak at 14,246 feet.

The sole campground in the range is aptly named Grandview. The view may be grand, but the accommodations are less than great -- little more than a flat dirt circle off the road at 8,000 feet, with pit toilets and no water. The "wild" weather comes and goes, but winds strong enough to blow a quart pot of boiling water off a camp stove have been known to pop up even in the summer.

The payoff for spending a night at the often-deserted Grandview is simple: Walk a hundred yards down the unmarked dirt road at the west end of the camp and the entire south Sierra, from Mount Whitney to Mount Dana, unfolds in front of you.

>From Grandview, there's almost a hundred square-miles of glorious nothing -- the Saline and Eureka valleys -- stretching all the way to Death Valley. Sitting deep in the heart of some of the last really wild country in California, it's easy to understand why some people are driven to extremes.