

Detailed Day by Day Description for Cottonwood to Onion Valley

Below are very tentative day-by-day itineraries. This can change for many reasons such as weather, minor injury, tired mules or unforeseen circumstances so please be flexible and go with any changes the backcountry dictates.

Day 1 Cottonwood Pack Station over Cottonwood Pass to Chicken Spring Lake

5.3 miles, 1405' of gain, 0 feet of loss

We meet at the Cottonwood Pack Station for a pre-departure equipment check so you need to be breakfasted and semi-sorted but not necessarily fully packed into duffels which will then go onto the mules.

The walk begins as a gentle ascent beside the meadow for a mile before entering the open forest to climb steadily to 11,160' Cottonwood Pass by mile 3.8. We will turn north onto the Pacific Crest Trail, walking another half mile before leaving the trail to follow the creek a short distance up to Chicken Spring Lake.

Day 2 Chicken Spring Lake to Rock Creek

9.7 miles, 700' of gain, 2400' of loss

Returning to the Pacific Crest Trail, the path climbs briefly, gaining 300' in the first mile and then undulates along the side of the mountain with good views of Big Whitney Meadow to the left. The trail enters Sequoia National Park in three miles, dropping steadily through open forest the rest of the day, passing the Siberian Pass junction at mile four and the Upper Rock Creek Trail junction at mile 8.5. The trail will finally cross Rock Creek and then we will follow a use path down the north side of the creek to our camp alongside a beautiful meadow edged by the bubbling creek.

Day 3 Rock Creek to Crabtree Meadow

6.75 miles, 2040' of gain, 990' of loss

The day starts with a steady climb out of the Rock Creek drainage to Guyot Pass, 1,400' in 2.5 miles. Views to the south are into Forgotten Canyon as we descend down the pass, traversing the hillside on a sandy trail. Twisted foxtail pines frame views of Red Spur across the Kern Canyon. Camp is a short distance beyond on a peninsular of pines surrounded by meadows and streams.

Day 4 Crabtree Meadow to Guitar Lake

3.0 miles, 1050' of gain, 160' of loss

We make this day purposefully short to allow our bodies to adjust to the elevation and to set us up for a successful bid for the summit of Mt. Whitney the following day.

After a brief climb from camp into the Whitney Creek drainage, we drop 400' to the Whitney junction near the creek. Turning onto the trail to Whitney, we follow Whitney Creek, passing the ranger station before joining the John Muir Trail in 1.1 miles. Turning up canyon toward Mount Whitney we pass out of the trees at Timberline Lake and finally stopping at our camp above Guitar Lake where Mount Whitney towers 3,000' above us to the east.

Day 5 Guitar Lake to Mount Whitney and return to Guitar Lake

9.2 miles, 3,100' gain, 3,100' loss

Mount Whitney provides several hours of shade after sunrise making the long climb to the top in the treeless landscape less daunting, so we plan to leave camp at dawn. The trail starts off to the southeast for about a mile before starting to climb the steep wall on long switchbacks. We gauge our progress by looking across Hitchcock Lakes to Mount Hitchcock as Trail Junction, at 13,484 feet, is 300' above the top of Mount Hitchcock. Go left at the junction to follow the fairly narrow trail cut into the rock on the west side of the pinnacles. Several "windows" provide stunning views over the Owens Valley and countless desert valleys and ranges eastwards. Another 1.9 miles and 1,000' elevation gain takes us to the top before returning to our Guitar Lake camp.

Day 6 Guitar Lake to Tyndall Creek

11.6 miles, 1,750' gain, 2,250' loss

We retrace our path 2.6 miles down the trail past Timberline Lake to the junction at Lower Crabtree Meadow, but this time we follow the John Muir Trail to the right for 0.8 miles to merge with the Pacific Crest Trail. The trail soon skirts the east side of Sandy Meadow with views to the west of Red Spur and climbs a low ridge before dropping down to Wallace Creek. The creek runs through an open meadow surrounded by pines and the crossing is a pleasant lunch spot at 6.8 miles. Continuing north past the Kern River junction to climb up a ridge to meadows of Wright Creek our views to the east of the Sierra crest including Mount Whitney are stunning. The 1,000' ascent out of Wallace Creek tops out at the treeless Bighorn Plateau (a great swimming lake here) with views of the Kaweah Range and the Kern River Basin to the west before dropping down to camp at Tyndall Creek.

Day 7 Layover day at Tyndall Creek

Because we deserve it!

Day 8 Tyndall Creek over Forester Pass to Bubbs Creek

12.9 miles, 2,250' gain, 3,300' loss

We drop ½ mile down through open forest to the Tyndall Creek crossing and then start the 2,300' climb over 4.4 miles to the top of 13,180' Forester Pass, the highest pass on the John Muir and Pacific Crest Trails. The trail begins through alternating forest and meadows and the landscape becomes more austere as the trail approaches the headwall of the Kings Kern Divide. The last mile switchbacks up the right side of the pass before crossing over to the left side with tight switchbacks over the final grade. At the top our reward is spectacular views of the Great Western Divide, the Kaweah Range, and the tall peaks north of Mount Whitney. Turning north, the trail enters Kings Canyon National Park, dropping down steep switchbacks before the rocky terrain gives way to forest with the final few miles along Bubbs Creek to camp above Vidette Meadow.

Day 9 Bubbs Creek to Onion Valley

9 miles, 2375 'of gain, 2900 'of loss

The trail continues to follow Bubbs Creek to the lower meadow before turning north to climb 1,200' in almost two miles to the Charlotte Lake Junction. From here we climb steadily to Kearsarge Pass enjoying our last views of the high peaks before descending above Big Pothole Lake, past Gilbert Lake and to our pickup at Onion Valley Trailhead. From here we will shuttle back to the Cottonwood Pack Station where you left your vehicles and hope to arrive late afternoon.