THE PALISADES

The Sierra Nevada

By

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TEMPLE CRAG
Venusian Blind Arete - 5.7
Moon Goddess Arete - 5.8
Sun Ribbon Arete - 5.10

MOUNT SILL
The Swiss Arete - 5.6

POLEMONIUM PEAK
U - Notch - WI3
V - Notch - WI3+
Although Mount Whitney is the highest peak, the Palisades is the throne room of the Sierra Nevada. The Palisades, named by the Brewer party of the Whitney Survey in 1864, are home to seven of California’s 14,000ft peaks and some of the regions finest alpine climbing. The Palisades are situated east of the town of Big Pine and are approached from Glacier Lodge trailhead by two narrow and dramatic glacier-carved canyons following trails that zigzag through slopes of sage, manzanita, and Jeffrey Pine to emerge in an alpine wonderland. In summer the flowers by these pine-shaded trails are abundant and kaleidoscopic.

The Palisade is a complex area of milky turquoise lakes fed by glaciers, lofty peaks and passes, deep gullies, hanging basins, sunlight ridges, blocky talus slopes, turrets and towers capped by a blue sky that is often interrupted by rushing clouds. It is a special place where you can refresh your spirits and listen to the heartbeat of the earth.

The first ascent of the Middle Palisades (14,040-feet) was made on August 26, 1921, by Francis P. Farquhar and Ansel F. Hall. "With a shout we greeted the summit as its first visitors. ... The summit of the mountain is an extremely narrow knife-edge. We had to use great care in moving about, as there were many large blocks just poised on the brink."

The rock isn’t the smooth granite found in some parts of the north Sierra, but a highly weathered granitic bedrock that forms a complex rock topography that isn’t always rock-solid. This is a big mountain area with all the attendant objective dangers.

All the Sierra greats have made their mark here. Norman Clyde from his cabin home in Big Pine Creek explored the Palisades extensively and got the first ascents, usually alone, of Mount Gayley, the Palisades most lofty peak North Palisade, Starlight Peak and Thunderbolt, as well as many lesser peaks. Since and before then many climbers have made their mark including: John and Ruth Mendenhall, Robert Underhill, Joseph LeConte, Francis Farquhar, Don Jensen, John Fischer, Smoke Blanchard, Bob Swift, Gordon Wiltzie, Doug Robinson, George Lowe, Bob Harrington, Bruce Binder and Peter Croft. For many years local mountain guides, operating as the Palisades School Of Mountaineering, had a camp near Third lake below Temple Crag.

The area is split in to Palisade north and south by a rocky spur formed by Mount Gayley and the popular Temple Crag. The Palisades crest is a 7.5 mile long ridge and has 2 named peaks, 2 above 14,000-feet with the rest over 13,500-feet. On north side of these summits are a series of glaciers, the most southerly in the US, the biggest being the Palisade glacier.

Described in this guidebook are some of the technical challenges of the North Palisade area accessed by the North Fork of Big Pine creek: the celestial aretes of Temple Crag, the mountainous Swiss Arete that summits Mount Sill, and the icy couloirs of U and V-notch above the Palisade glacier.

WHERE

The Palisades are situated west of Big Pine in the Sierra Nevada and are approached via the north and south forks of Big Pine creek from Glacier Lodge trailhead, 11 miles west of Big Pine which is 15 miles south of Bishop. From Glacier Lodge it is 6 miles along the north fork of Big Pine creek to Temple Crag and 11 miles to the Palisades Glacier.

WHEN

For rockclimbing the season begins in June and extends to the first snows, usually anytime between September and December. In the winter the Palisades are the holy shrine of California backcountry skiing.

PERMITS AND REGULATIONS:

NORTH FORK OF BIG PINE CREEK

Overnight stays require a free WILDERNESS PERMIT. The quota for the North Fork Of Big Pine Creek is 25 people, 10% of which is reservable ($5 administration charge and 40% is walk-in (free) at any of the Forest Service Ranger Stations. For reservations call 760-873-2483 and visit http://www.fs.fed.us/inyo to educate yourself fully on backcountry regulations.

Bear Cannisters can be rented for $5 per week from the Forest Service and local outdoor shops. Bear canisters are not legally required but are recommended for the North Fork of Big Pine Creek. Open woodfires are not allowed. The WHITE MOUNTAIN Ranger Station in Bishop (760-873-2500) is open from 8 am to 5 pm daily for walk-in Wilderness Permits and bear cannister rental (or Wilson’s Eastside Sports in Bishop). In the south, the MT. WHITNEY Ranger Station in Lone Pine (760-876-6200) is also open daily from 8 am to 5 pm.

MOUNTAIN GUIDES: SIERRA MOUNTAIN CENTER

If you require a mountain guide for alpine route in the Sierra Nevada call Sierra Mountain Center run by SP Parker and Todd Vogel. Call them at 760-873-8526 and a visit to their website is a must www.sierra-mountaincenter.com

APPROACH: TO GLACIER TRAILHEAD AND CAMPING FROM BIG PINE

In Big Pine, turn west on Crocker Street between the Mobile and Texaco Gas Stations. Continue up into the mountains for 11 miles until you see the sign for Big Pine Creek Campground and Glacier Lodge. At Glacier Lodge there are several Forest Service Campgrounds (reservations 877-444-8777) and the excellent Glacier Lodge Resort (www.jeweloftthesierra.com where you will find a campground ($15), cabins ($70 a night) and a small convenience store (open 7am - 8pm).

At the time of writing the construction of a mountain hut at Glacier Lodge to accomodate 60 - 80 people is planned for the spring of 2004.

Parking

If you are doing the route in a day, park at the last parking area just before the gate and the start of the trail. Overnight parking is lower down the road.
**Introduction**

The Palisades

**North Palisade Area**

The Celestial Aretes of Temple Crag: Venusian Blind Arete 5.7, Moon Goddess Arete 5.8 and Sun Ribbon Arete 5.9...Perfect names for these long routes (20 pitch minimum) that ascend the ridges of the impressive fluted northeast face of Temple Crag. Whilst these routes may have moderate technical ratings don't underestimate the commitment needed. They are often done in a day from the trailhead or a camp at Third Lake. All these routes will excite the soul and light the imagination.

The Swiss Arete 5.8 on Mount Sill

A mountaineering route involving a long approach sometimes over snow, lots of scrambling, and a technical arete to this peaks 14,162-feet summit, and then a straightforward but technical descent. Popular to do from a high camp either at the base of the glacier or from Sam Mack Meadow. It is a very long day from the trailhead and only should be attempted from here by the fittest parties.

**U and V - Notch**

Follow in the footsteps of Norman Clyde, Yvon Chouinard and Doug Robinson up these narrow gullies of ice to the Palisade Crest. The V-notch is the more classic and harder. Be prepared for a glacial approach, be able to overcome the bergschlund, then delightful steep ice or hard snow climbing to a choice of summits and a descent either the way you came up or over by Mount Sill.
There is no better introduction to the Sierra Nevada alpine climbing than Temple Crag: the approach is easy to follow, overnight permits are relatively easy to get, and the climbing and the rock is beautiful. The most popular routes here are the Celestial Arêtes: Moon Goddess, Sun Ribbon and Venusian Blind. Venusian Blind is the easiest of the three aretes The next step up from Venusian is the adjacent Moon Goddess Arete (they also share the same approach and initial pitches). Moon Goddess is more involved, longer in length and the route finding is trickier than its easier neighbor. The Big daddy is Sun Ribbon

Most camp below Temple Crag before their assault. But if you are experienced, relatively fit, and can move fast it is very do-able in a day from the trailhead.

WHERE

Temple Crag is situated near the Palisade Glacier and is approached via the north fork of Big Pine creek from Glacier Lodge trailhead, 11 miles west of Big Pine which is 15 miles south of Bishop. From Glacier Lodge it is 6 miles hike to Temple Crag.

WHEN

The trail to Temple Crag is usually free of snow from early June onwards to the first winter snows in October. The snow bank at the base of the cliff usually persists throughout the season, although the later in the season you go the less snow approach you will have to endure or enjoy.

STRATEGY

With an early start fast and competent parties can climb any of these routes in a day from the Glacier Lodge trailhead. Most, however, especially if coming from low elevations, prefer to spread the adventure of two or three days. One day to approach, set up a camp, acclimatize and reconnoiter the route, then one day to climb the route and return to the trailhead.

PERMITS AND REGULATIONS:

NORTH FORK OF BIG PINE CREEK

Overnight stays require a free WILDERNESS PERMIT. See page 261 for how to get one.

APPROACH: TO THIRD LAKE FROM GLACIER LODGE

The trail up the North Fork of Lone Pine Creek is a beautiful hike in its own right and very simple to follow (see map). For the most part the trail follows the creek, although there are two alternatives in the initial part of the hike (take the high road to avoid steeper switchbacks) and always stay left at any forks. You will pass an old stone house that used to belong to the Hollywood star Lon Chaney, it is now a Ranger Refuge. You are deposited after about 5 miles at First and Second Lakes and a fine view of Temple Crag.

CAMPING

Good sites can be found near the outlet to Second Lake. There are several spots that are less good on the southern side of the lake. Some very nice spots are located immediately below the Dark Star Buttress feature of Temple Crag. These spots have the advantage of being quite close to the climbs and away from the main trail. Later season these spots usually require a ten minute walk for water (bring a bag). These sites necessitate carrying your overnight pack over the small moraines that project from the crag towards Third and Second Lake, an arduous task. If you intend to attempt other objectives in the canyon you will probably want to camp somewhere over by Third Lake (but avoid the ghetto camp near the main trail on the north east side of the lake).

OVERVIEW OF TEMPLE CRAG

A great overview of Temple can be had from near Second Lake, where the main trail intersects the lake. From this spot one can easily see the giant north buttress known as Dark Star (though it contains other routes as well) which drops down to form the lowest point of Temple Crag. From the toe of Dark Star Buttress to Contact Pass the face of Temple Crag is more or less evenly divided into thirds by two deep gullies, usually snow filled. The right hand gully is the Mendenhall Couloir and the left gully (unnamed) divides the Moon Goddess Arete (left of the gully) from Sunribbon Arete. Each gully feeds a permanent snow field which usually coalesces into one large snow field, locally known as the Two Lobed Snow Field, but in dry years can form two separate icy slopes. The Celestial Arete routes are accessed via these snow slopes.
**INITIAL APPROACH DESCRIPTION**
The initial approach to the base of Temple Crag can be made several ways depending on where you camp. The shortest approach is via the south side of Second Lake but this involves quite a bit of sand and talus. Still, this is probably the best way if you are just climbing a Temple Crag route and/or positioning your camp as close as possible to the base of the Crag. If approaching from Second Lake you’ll follow the south side of the lake first on a trail then on talus to the base of a sandy moraine. Here you’ll find faint trails ascending the sand and scree of the moraine (this is the moraine that descends from Contact Pass). If heading just to the base to climb, as opposed to heading to find a camp, you’ll follow these faint trails all the way up the moraine towards the aretes. (Late season Second Lake will be your last water if you’re heading directly to the Aretes). If you’re heading to find a camp close to the base of Temple Crag, as recommended above, you’ll want to aim for an area where the top of the moraine changes angle dramatically, about 400’ gain above Second Lake. Contour towards the base of the Crag from this point to find the nice sandy camp areas mentioned above. If approaching from Third Lake you’ll cross the outlet to Third Lake on a log jam “bridge” (bad in periods of high runoff; take the Second Lake approach then) and follow a faint trail around the south east side of the lake. This trail gains the top of the small moraine about 200 feet after you leave the log crossing. Continue along the moraine top for a few minutes but eventually you’ll want to strike out across the moraine, aiming straight for the lowest point of Temple Crag (Dark Star Buttress). The moraine can be a slog but take heart as it’s only fifteen or twenty minutes to easier terrain. You’ll see the occasional cairn as you traverse the moraine but really is no good way across this area. Eventually you’ll reach the sandy camping area at the base of Dark Star, described above.

**FINAL APPROACH DESCRIPTION**
Make sure you have identified the arete that is your objective before you even attempt the final approach. It can be difficult to find the left aretes when you get up close; as with any big alpine route, having a general sense of where the route goes before you get on it is important. Don’t rely on the route description for all of your route-finding. Take a good look at Temple Crag from the outlet side of Second Lake. The Celestial Aretes can be seen best in morning lighting and then again in the afternoon.

**TIP: AVOIDING CRAMON USE**
In warm weather it is usually possible to avoid the need for crampons by hiking up to the snow fields the afternoon before your climb and punching in a “stairs” while the snow is soft. The next morning things will be firm, ice axe recommended, but if you did a good job with your steps the trail will be easy and crampons will be unnecessary.

**TIP: WATER**
Running water can usually be found afternoons only just before where the approach heads up the snow field. It seems to “turn off” at night but will be running again by the time you come back down.
Approach to the Start of the Route

Both Moon Goddess and Venusian Aretes are approached via the left lobe of the two lobed snow field. You can avoid the snow by climbing the steep rock band below the routes directly but this is not recommended. Climb the snow slope heading for the point where one can easily head left on a scree covered ledge. Generally this involves several hundred feet of moderate snow climbing. This ledge is a good place to transition to rock shoes. The ledge quickly becomes third class as you scramble left to the toe of Moon Goddess Arete and the start of fourth class climbing. For Venusian starting heading left from the Moon Goddess approach at the point where the fourth class turns briefly back into third class. You'll trend up and left for another 200’, heading for a series of 40’ to 60’ tall right facing corners. The route starts at the highest of these, on the left side of a feature that is more a blunt buttress than an arete. There is a minor true arete to the right of this feature that joins the buttress several hundred feet higher. It works to climb this too, but it is quite loose and not recommended.

The Climbing

The first pitch trends up and left via the left facing corner mentioned above. Many belays are possible but a good ledge with a natural anchor comes along 150’ out. Two ways are apparent from here, the preferred trends slightly right on moderate ground, passing through a steep 5.7 hand crack which splits the buttress higher up. A large ledge belay caps the tight moves at the end of the pitch (watch for the loose boulders as you move onto the ledge). The next pitch is short and reaches a horizontal section. To avoid heinous drag belay short then move the belay to the end of the horizontal stretch. Pitch four heads up directly from the notch and is 120’ in length. Great face climbing with some cracks for protection lead to a large but sloping stance with a block for the belay anchor. Variation: the face 30’ to the left of the normal route is a nice but poorly protected alternate.

Pitch five has two route options: either way move left across a small gully and onto the right side of what will become a sharp arete. The first option is to climb directly up the right side of the face, angling slightly left to a small stance about 140’ out (5.6). The other option is to continue moving left after crossing the gully, working around a small roof, through a steep area, and back right to join the first option. Neither way is particularly well protected; the left option is better climbing and more solid.

Pitch six is fourth class except perhaps for the moves just off the belay. Stop the pitch below a steep area with a prominent diving board flake. Pitch seven carefully avoids the diving board with some nice 5.7 thin moves then a short 5.7 hand crack with good exposure (loose blocks at the top of the pitch). The belay is in a horizontal section with a nice ledge. Pitch eight is short, up a nice face, to another horizontal stretch which is more technical than the last. It is suggested to stop the pitch short, bring up followers, have them climb by and down to the next ledge. Downclimb to them, finally moving the belay all the way to the end of the horizontal section, belay at a fixed pin at the start of the next steep area.

Pitch nine climbs a steep face with some 5.7 (and a fixed pin) to the top of a tower. Options from this point: From near the top of the tower, climber’s left (towards Mt. Alice) there is a rap anchor that allows one easy access to the adjacent gully. Twenty minutes of third class lead to the summit plateau from the rappel. Or: downclimb 20’ off the tower and along the ridge to a poor belay. Cross a spot where four feet of the horizontal ridge are "missing" (poor pro, exposed) and continue with 250’ of fourth class to the summit plateau.

Escapes

Generally escape is made to the right. It is not as easy to escape Venusian as it is Moon Goddess; for this reason if the weather is questionable or other factors are extant Moon Goddess may be a better choice.
**Moon Goddess Arete**

**Temple Crag** (12,998 ft.)

Approach To The Route

Moon Goddess is approached via the left lobe of the two lobed snow field. You might be tempted to avoid the snow by climbing the steep rock band below the routes directly but this is not recommended. Climb the snow slope heading for the point where one can easily head left on a scree covered ledge. Generally this involves several hundred feet of moderate snow climbing. This ledge is a good place to transition to rock shoes.

The ledge quickly becomes third class as you scramble left to the toe of Moon Goddess Arete and the start of fourth class climbing. Continue out the ledge until you round an outside corner, the ledge becomes three or four feet wide and fairly exposed at this point. Two hundred feet of fourth class, more or less straight up, lead to temporarily easier ground and the start of Moon Goddess. From afar, and up close in certain light, it appears that Moon Goddess starts as two aretes that join about 500’ from the start of roped climbing. With this perspective the proper route is the left arete though not everyone sees it this way. The true start has a faint gully to its left that becomes more incised the higher it goes. (This gully serves as a good escape route if taken anytime prior to the ninth pitch).

The first six pitches are fairly straight forward, with minor variations here and there. In the event an escape is needed it is usually easy to rap with one rope into the gully on the climber’s left of the arete. One rope raps back down the gully to the start of the climb. Two ropes would make the escape procedure much more enjoyable. At the end of what is usually the sixth pitch the First Tower is reached. This is passed on the right with an upward trending traverse (5.7). Don’t be tempted to run this pitch all the way to the notch, as many before you have, heinous leader-paralizing rope drag will result. Instead, the leader should trend high as he rounds the steep face, aiming for a small horn/tower above the notch. It is easy to belay from here. Have the second stay low, below your stance and belay them directly to the notch. Rap or downclimb off the horn.

From the notch it is your last chance for easy down escape by rapping into the gully (past this point to escape off the route it is best to go up and over). Next pitch: to avoid drag as you climb out of the notch: climb the corner and belay short at the base of a chimney. For the short version of Moon Goddess continue up the chimney above, exiting to the left at the top of the chimney. A short rap leads into the gully but instead of descending down the gully four pitches of fourth class lead to the summit plateau. Done this way Moon Goddess has only 10’ of 5.7 on it and is only 12 pitches long, most of which are fourth class.

To the top: Climb the chimney mentioned above but exit right to a 20’ long left facing corner (5.8). Belay on a boulder/ledge. You are now on what has been called the Ibruim Tower or the Second Tower. It takes three pitches to regain the arete. Start by heading up and right to broken ledges. Belay short to avoid drag. The next pitch is often missed, much to the parties detriment: start by down climbing 25’ to a sloping but easy ledge system. Follow this for nearly a rope length to terraced small ledges at the base of a crack/chimney system that goes straight up. (Avoid the diagonal cracks). 140’ of sometimes loose 5.7 regains the arete. Several short pitches, downclimbing, and a rappel lead to the summit plateau. By the time you unrope on the plateau you’ll have done 15 or so pitches.

GEAR LIST

- Camalot #1, #2 More in the 1-2 range if you don’t bring the hexes
- 4 shoulder length runners each w/ 2 ‘biners
- 6 shoulder length runners each w/ 2 ‘biners
- 2 or 5.6 20’ competitors

Add for Moon Goddess: Micro Camalots: 3, 4
Camalots 7, 10

**THE TOP**

80’ .. 5.7
80’ .. 4th

170’ .. 5.6

**FIRST TOWER**

- 4th

**Ibruim Tower**

* north side

80’ .. 5.7
80’ .. 4th

150’ .. 5.6

**THE TOP**

80’ .. 5.6
80’ .. 4th

170’ .. 5.6

5.7

5.6

80’ .. 5.7
80’ .. 4th

170’ .. 5.6

5.7

5.6

80’ .. 5.7
80’ .. 4th

170’ .. 5.6

5.7

5.6

80’ .. 5.7
80’ .. 4th

170’ .. 5.6

5.7

5.6

80’ .. 5.7
80’ .. 4th

170’ .. 5.6

5.7

5.6

80’ .. 5.7
80’ .. 4th

170’ .. 5.6

5.7

5.6

80’ .. 5.7
80’ .. 4th

170’ .. 5.6

5.7

5.6

80’ .. 5.7
80’ .. 4th

170’ .. 5.6

5.7

5.6

80’ .. 5.7
80’ .. 4th

170’ .. 5.6

5.7

5.6

80’ .. 5.7
80’ .. 4th

170’ .. 5.6

5.7

5.6

80’ .. 5.7
80’ .. 4th

170’ .. 5.6

5.7

5.6

80’ .. 5.7
80’ .. 4th
**Approach To The Route**

Sun Ribbon Arete is accessed via the gully that divides it from Moon Goddess Arete. In early season, steep snow is climbed up into the gully where a large ledge system (impossible to see until you're there) leads to the first 5.7 pitch of the route. Later season or in low snow years it is usually possible to climb the moat between the snow and the rock to up the first pitch, avoiding snow altogether. This negates the need for ice axes/campons. In certain light it is possible to see the first pitch from afar; look to the right of the approach gully for an area of light colored rock that has darker, orange-ish rock to its right. All this is several hundred feet up and left from the toe of the Sunribbon Arete. The first pitch climbs strenuous 5.7 cracks where the orange rock and the lighter rock meet in a huge (30') left-facing corner.

**The Climbing**

Find your way to the first 5.7 pitch. (There have been several direct starts done, they are in the 5.10 range). This leads to several hundred feet of third class and the start of the first arete. The first five or six pitches are straightforward, with many belay options and minor route finding decisions. Eventually you'll find your self at the top of the first arete, looking at the Tyrolean Traverse.

**THE TYROLEAN**

While this can be avoided, why would you do that? How often do you get to do a tyrolean traverse in real life? Plan this through the night before: a Tyrolean Traverse is a horizontal rappel. First challenge is getting a loop of rope over the block on the other side of the span. Forget the lasso technique. The best method is to find one end of the rope, anchor it, feed about thirty feet from this end into a pile by your right foot. Skip five or six feet and make a new pile of thirty or so feet on your left foot. Anchor this end near this point, too, just so lose rope doesn't go snapping off when you attempt a throw. Make sure both piles are feeding from their tops. Hold the rope so the loop of five or six feet between the piles drops down and almost touches your toes, each thirty foot pile is coiled loosely in a hand. Gauge wind direction and caffeinein level, give it the old “one-two-three”, throw each loop of rope at the same time, one from each hand, and you can probably do it in less than three tries. Rope across? Now you need to set up your horizontal rappel. Un-anchor the rope, pass it through the fixed rap anchor and tie it off in such a way that a continuous loop is formed, tension it as best you can. I prefer to take the end of the rope, tie a knot, clip a 'biner, pass the other side of the rope through this, make a munter, tension, tie it off with a mule knot. There are other systems that will work. Cross the span. A friction knot might be helpful getting up the other side if you weren't able to make your ropes really tight. Once across you can make a real anchor or just leave what you have. Whatever you do you'll want to see if you can circulate the rope in the system and get the knot side back across. Otherwise your partner should undo it and you'll re-rig on your side of the span.

**Back on the route:** easy ground to the next small tower. You can pass this on either side. The fastest way is to get to the first of the two small towers and rap climber's right 25'. A rap station is usually found on the first tower for this purpose but it seems to come and go (and there's one that you'll not be using on the top of the next small tower, 20' away). So rap those 25' to the right and lead a short pitch horizontal and around the corner to the base of the crux pitch.

**Possible escape:** from the end of this horizontal section it is easy to do a diagonal lappel left into the gully. 45 minutes of four class lead to the summit plateau.

**Crux pitch:** There are several ways that all meet about 100' above the notch that starts the pitch. One way heads left from the belay to a 5.9+ handcrack with an off route bolt. After the crack, rattle crag climbing leads to the belay stance straight up. Or: head out right from the belay past two fixed pins. A 5.9+ face move gets you into a nice 5.9 hand crack. Loose 5.8 cracks and blocks lead to a good stance (same stance as other way). The belay at the end of this pitch is pretty much straight above the belay at the start of the pitch. If you go the right (as opposed to the left) way you can pull your rope up, drop it, haul packs, drop it, and safely belay the second. This doesn't work as well the left way. Four more pitches of straightforward climbing lead to a rappel. From the rap six or eight pitches lead to the top, with some 5.7.

**Escape**

It is easy to continue the rapp another twenty feet into the gully to the left of the route. Twenty minutes of scrambling lead to the summit plateau. By the time you get to this point you've done the best climbing on the route.
Mount Sill is an impressive mountain, its cuboid mass looks large even from Highway 395. The original inhabitants of the Eastern Sierra called it “Ninamishi” or Guardian Of The Valley and it is clear why once you have viewed it from the Owens Valley. Even close up, although its summit is lower than some of the neighboring 14,000ft peaks, it still looks the tallest. The first technical climb up Mount Sill was the “Starr Route” climbed by ?????? in (first actual ascent), this the descent route if you are doing any of the “modern” routes on Mount Sill.

First ascent details...

The Swiss Arete up the north face of Mount Sill is a classic mountaineering challenge. You will enjoy a beautiful hike, a glacial experience, will have to cope with high-altitude and then you will be one with the rocky ridge of the Palisades that contain seven of the fifteen 14,000ft peaks in California. Good rock and an exceptional summit experience with great views are the icing on the cake.

The approach from the trailhead is 10 miles (a round trip of 20 miles) with a total elevation gain of 6,353-feet, of which 1,000-foot is 4th and easy 5th class rock climbing with a obligatory moves of 5.6 and 5.7 at the distinct crux. The ability to climb long sections of 4th and 5th class and being able to move over sometimes loose 3rd class terrain solo is required. Wherever you start your summit attempt from be prepared for a big day out.

WHERE

Mount Sill is a 14,162-foot peak that splits the Palisade Crest, located west of Big Pine and approached from the Glacier Lodge trailhead via the north fork of Big Pine creek. The base of the Swiss Arete route is 10 miles stiff hike from the trailhead.

WHEN

The north fork of Big Pine Creek is usually free of snow from early June onwards to the first winter snows in October. Depending on the year there may still be much snow around the Palisade Glacier and on the descent down the L-shaped snow field of the Starr Route of Mount Sill. It is wise to bring instep crampons and an axe at any time of year.

STRATEGY

With an early start fast and competent parties can climb the Swiss Arete in a day from the Glacier Lodge trailhead. Most, however, especially if coming from low elevations, prefer to spread the adventure over two or three days. One day to approach, set up a camp, acclimatize and reconnoiter the route, then one day to climb the route and return to the trailhead. The best places to camp for the Swiss Arete are at Sam Mack meadow or at several bivvy spots near the Palisade Glacier, especially near Mount Gayley.

PERMITS AND REGULATIONS:

NORTH FORK OF BIG PINE CREEK

Overnight stays require a free WILDERNESS PERMIT. See page 261 for how to get one.

CAMPING - SAM MACK MEADOW

Sam Mack Meadow is the camping spot of choice for the Swiss arete being only three miles and 3,000-feet of elevation from the summit of Mount Sill. To get there continue on the Big Pine Lakes trail until past Third Lake where a sharp left turn up through talus leads to this sheltered canyon. Please pack your poop and any other waste out with you, sanitation is a serious issue here. Bear cannisters are obligatory.

APPROACH TO THE START OF THE ROUTE FROM SAM MACK MEADOW

From Sam Mack Meadow take a sharp left across the stream and head up a winding trail (the Glacier trail) through stunted pines and small cliffs. The trail starts to traverse left and eventually hits a loose boulder moraine. There are several lines of cairns leading through the boulders all of which emerge onto superb glaciated slabs. Follow the slabs upwards following numerous cairns to a point overlooking the glacier and below the north face of Mount Gayley. This point is marked by numerous bivy sites.

The next section traverses boulders and loose scree to Glacier Notch (not a good place to eat your lunch!). Cross large boulders and then loose scree for a few 100 yards before heading diagonally up left towards an obvious weakening in the ridge on the left. There are several different routes up to Glacier Notch. Start by ascending some right to left ramps and then traverse back left over loose 4th class terrain and eventually up to the Notch. Care is need on this section and some people may want to make a short rap on the return trip (no fixed anchors).

You get a superb view of the whole route from Glacier Notch. If you are feeling confident leave you gear here and ascend diagonally across scree to the base of the route.
**The Swiss Arete**

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**The Swiss Arete III 5.8 of Mount Sill**

FA: Spencer Austin, Ruth Dyar, Ray Ingwersen, Richard Jones and Joe Momyer: July 1938

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**THE DESCENT**

Descend 3rd class ground down the SW ridge for 200-300’ to a point where it starts to ease in angle and there is a small notch marked by a substantial cairn. From the cairn down climb steep 4th class ground for 70’ then start to trend right across ledges. There is a fixed rap point here that might be needed early in the season or if you are tiring a bit gripped. There seems to be a line of descent down left but this is NOT the way to go. Climb up a few feet to a saddle between Apex Peak and Sill and you will see an easier angled chute leading down to the base of the route. Keep to the left of the snow and zigzag down through loose boulders. At the bottom of the chute you will probably need to make one rap depending on snow conditions. There are at least 2 rap points. Head back across scree to Glacier Notch.

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**EQUIPMENT**

Rack: Standard alpine rack: one set of stoppers (Rocks 1 to 8), Cams #1 to #3, long slings (if it is a big snow year or early in the season take an ice axe/instep crampons for the descent)

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**THE ROUTE**

There is around 800ft of climbing to the summit from the start of the route. Much of the climbing is 4th and 5th class on generally excellent rock. There are many ledges for belays. You can run a rope length out and belay, as there are many belay opportunities. Some may prefer to move roped together on the easier ground and belay for the steeper technical sections. The route starts up slabs to join the arete/ridge proper. There are several alternatives here. One option is marked on the topo-topo and is described here.

Easy 3rd class slabs lead up left for 200’ to a point overlooking a big corner (marked above). Head up steeper 4th and 5th class ground following cracks to emerge on the ridge crest at a flat area. Easy climbing along the ridge leads to a point at which it steepens. Now follow beautifully solid 5th class cracks and flakes up the crest for a couple of pitches until the way is blocked by a steep smooth wall.

The next section is the crux (see topo). Make an airy step right into a corner (good crack) and up to a sloping ledge, possible belay. Climb a steep crack in the corner or on the right wall to easier ground. This whole section is about 70’. After the crux, romp up fantastic 4th/5th class ground (many ways to go) to emerge at the summit!
“Even in California we can have weather. Even in August a climber can freeze to death. It’s no joke. We need to be prepared.”

Craig Harris (Dingus Milktoast) reflecting on an epic summer ascent of V-Notch that included a snow storm and freezing winds.

Two of the most sought after technical couloirs in the Sierra, U-Notch and V-Notch lie above the Palisade glacier. The U - Notch is perhaps the North Palisade’s most popular route as it climbs up to the attractive notch on the ridge dividing Polemonium Peak and the tallest route in the range, North Palisade which was first climbed by Norman Clyde in 1928. The U-Notch Couloir is a 700-foot, 40 degree slope and although moderate does require competent ice climbing skills including overcoming a bergschrund which is regarded as the crux of the climb. The neighbouring V-Notch couloir involves around 900’ of ice climbing of 40 to 60 degrees and is usually about 90% ice offering more technical and sustained difficulties than its easier angled neighbor. V - Notch was first ascended in ice conditions by Yvon Chouinard and Doug Robinson in October of 1970. Both routes require rock protection as well as a handful of ice screws.

WHEN

U and V - Notch are usually climbed in late summer and fall when there is a good chance of neve and ice, rather than post-holing through early season snow.

STRATEGY

Most parties make a base camp at either Sam Mack Meadow or bivy near the glacier below Mount Gayley and get an early start, to hopefully avoid any stone fall, and return to camp the same day.

Special Equipment

As always come prepared for inclement weather. It can snow in August. Bring crampons and two axes, your standard alpine rack to 3” (bring some extra slings) and four or five ice screws. Don’t forget glacier goggles and sun block. You can get away with one axe on U - Notch early in the season, but later when this chute is mainly ice bring two.

PERMITS AND REGULATIONS:

NORTH FORK OF BIG PINE CREEK

Overnight stays require a free WILDERNESS PERMIT. See page 261.

APPRAoch

See the approaches to Sam Mack Meadow and the Palisade Glacier on page 267. Most parties contour around south toward Mount Gayley and then right (northwest) across the glacier to U and V - Notch. Beware of crevasses and wear glacier goggles.

U - NOTCH TO NORTH PALISADE

The bergschrund at the base of the U - Notch is often the crux of the climb, especially during drought years. If the bergschrund is open, climb the easy class 5 rock to the right of it. Once in the couloir climb several pitches, keeping left at the rocks to the notch at the top of this chute. Protection can be rigged in the gully walls as well as on the snow slope. Once you reach the top of the chute there is a chimney/dihedral on your right, rated 5.4. Climb the chimney to the summit ridge, dropping into a small bowl briefly and then up boulders to the exposed summit of North Palisade. The traverse to the summit can be tricky especially early season if there are patches of snow around, and it is surprisingly longer than most expect.

Descent

Descend the summit ridge back to the top of the chimney where there should be rappel slings. Rap down the chimney, two rappels back to the top of U - Notch. You can either down climb the U - Notch or rappel. Many prefer to downclimb if the snow in the gully is good as it is relatively straightforward and a lot quicker (and warmer) than rappelling. If you do rappel there are plenty of rappel slings at intervals down the chute, but beware of getting your rope stuck.

V - NOTCH TO POLEMONIUM PEAK

Again the bergschrund is thought to be the crux of the climb and must take it slightly left of center. It can be steep. Look for snow bridges and be prepared to climb several feet of near vertical neve or ice. Follow the left side of couloir for first 4 pitches, then cross to the right side to the top. Pitches 3-5 are definitely exposed to rock fall. There are around 8 pitches in total. Protection and belays are ice screws supplemented by rock gear where you can. Scramble up the ridge to the summit of Polemonium Peak.

Descent

Unless you are forced to by bad weather or an emergency it is not recommended that you descend the way you came as the anchors are poor. The descent from V - Notch involves traversing the crest of Polemonium Peak toward Mount Sill. Once near Mount Sill descend to the notch behind Apex Peak and the L-Shaped snowfield next to Mt. Sill which can either be mostly rock or snow depending on the year. There are rappel opportunities if needed. See the Sill descent on page 277.