

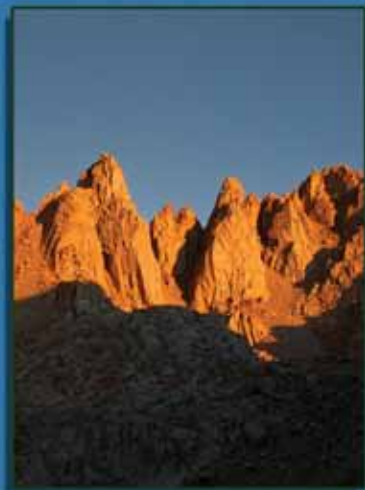
# Hiking the High Sierra



The Best Hikes  
and Scrambles in  
the Sierra and on Kauai

*Sierra • Death Valley • Yosemite • Island of Kauai*

**Branch Whitney**



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The Best Hikes and Scrambles  
in the Sierra and on Kauai

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Huntington Press  
Las Vegas, Nevada

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# Dedication

This book is dedicated to all those who will join me in the fight to keep *our* land free.

# Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the following people for their guidance and knowledge: “Crazy” Kenny Amundsen, Mark “Throw Down” Beauchamp, Davis “Dead Horse” Finley, Ed Forkos, Luba Leaf, Richard Natale, Eva Pollan, and “Wrong Way” Richard Baugh. And thanks to the gang at Huntington Press. It’s great to work with people who want to do things correctly and care about quality.

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# Introduction to the Hikes

The book you hold in your hands contains some of the best hikes and mountaineering routes in the Sierra and Yosemite and on Kauai. No lame hikes here—those hikes are in the book next to this one. These are the hikes you'll be telling your grandchildren about over and over until you realize they left an hour ago. From the highest peak in the United States, Mt. Whitney (14,494 feet), to the Na Pali Coast Trail, a seven-mile hike along the Pacific Ocean in Kauai, these are the hikes you'll want to cross off your bucket list.

For the first time in print, this book gives you crystal-clear directions to some of the best peaks in the Sierra. No vague descriptions here. You won't wonder if the author ever did the hike. Eight of the California's 14ers are in this book, plus some other real gems that you just might like better than the 14ers.

Are you into the super hardcore hikes? This book has you covered with Badwater to Telescope Peak, 21 miles with more than 11,000 feet of elevation gain. You actually start below sea level. North Pal, LeConte to Corcoran Traverse, and Norman Clyde are no slouches either.

With this book, you won't need to buy separate guidebooks for each area and you don't have to get used to different authors' writing styles. Hiking and peak bagging are the perfect activities in this economic down time. They're healthy, fun, and inexpensive. Why ever go back to work?

So enjoy these hikes and remember, it's the route that makes a great hike, not the peak.

## How This Book Is Organized

Both hiking destinations have a brief introduction, followed by the hikes. I don't bore you with a lot trivial and dull facts to crank up the page count (and the price). Driving directions are from the closest towns. You can obtain driving directions from where you live to the nearest town via the Internet. Each hike has information about the best season, difficulty of the hike, and other factors, so you can quickly determine if you're interested in the hike.

I don't write about the flora and fauna. Those are fancy words for plants and animals. It's not my thing and there's too much diversity. If you're interested, you can find information on the Web.

### Format of the Hikes

**Trailhead:** Name of the trailhead and if the trailhead is marked.

**Distance:** Noted in miles. All distances are up and back, unless specified.

**Elevation gain:** How many feet you gain to the summit or destination.

**Elevation of peak:** Height of the peak. Listed only for hikes that go to peaks.

**Time:** Time it takes to complete the hike, up and back.

**Difficulty:** Scale 1 (easy) to 5 (very difficult).

**Danger level:** Scale 1 (safe) to 5 (use caution).

**Class:** Amount of climbing. Class 1 to class 4. See below for more.

**How easy to follow:** Scale of 1 (well-maintained trail) to 5 (cross-country route).

**Children:** Is the hike appropriate for children (ages 5 to 11) accompanied with an adult?

**Waypoints:** USGS waypoints. WGS 84 datum, unless noted.

**Fees/Permits:** If there's a fee or permit required, it's listed below with additional details.

**Best season:** In which season(s) to do the hike.

**Driving directions:** From the nearest town to the trailhead.

**Permits:** How to obtain official permission. Most hikes don't require permits.

**Comments:** Warnings, insights, and sometimes history about the hike.

**Lodging:** Information on where to find a motel room and campsite reservations.

**The hike:** Step-by-step guide to the hike.

## Trails Versus Routes

The hikes in this book are classified as either trails or routes. Some hikes follow trails, then become routes once they leave the trail. There's a huge difference between trails and routes. A trail hike is very easy to follow and generally well-marked. To return just retrace your steps on the same trail.

A route is much harder to follow. I have photos of key landmarks to look for and waypoints you can enter into your GPS unit. I realize not everyone has or uses a GPS. All of the hikes can be followed without a GPS, but using a GPS is very helpful. It all comes down to common sense. People were doing these hikes long before anyone heard of a GPS or Waypoints. You should never rely solely on a GPS unit. If it quits working, well, you're SOL. Not good if darkness is coming.

An example of a trail hike is Half Dome in Yosemite National Park. It's well-maintained and clearly marked. The hike to North Palisade Peak in the Sierra is a route. Once you leave the trail, you navigate by landmarks. These types of hikes are much harder to follow and should only be attempted by experienced hikers. It's unlikely you'll see another hiker on a route.

## Time Estimates

Time estimates are averages. Some people will finish the hike much sooner; others will take much longer. The rest of you will make me look psychic. Once you do a few hikes, you'll have a better idea of how my time estimates apply to you.

## Dangers

Because of rock fall, many of the hikes in the Sierra are dangerous. If hiking in a group, be very careful not to dislodge rocks. Also when you're at 14,000 feet, it can snow even during summer months. Come prepared for cold weather if hiking above 12,000 feet.

To minimize the danger, always hike in a group (four hikers are the best) and tell someone where you're hiking and when you believe you'll be back. Cell-phone coverage is still spotty (boy, that's a surprise!), but you can always try to make a call.

**Tip:** turn your phone off until you need it. Your battery will last a lot longer when it's not constantly searching for a signal.

## Class Grades

**Class 1**—Like walking on a sidewalk.

**Class 2**—Hiking over uneven terrain. Hands are used for balance only.

**Class 3**—Climbing requires using hands and feet. Exposure is minimal.

**Class 4**—Climbing steep rock. Exposure can be significant. A rope is recommended.

**Class 5**—Technical rock climbing. Does not apply to hikes in this book.

## Weather

Weather is a major concern. Do Middle Palisade during a snowstorm and you'll be lucky to come back alive, if you're not prepared. This is pretty simple: Check the Internet before you hike. If not, you could be sweating in 110+ temperatures or freezing in below-zero temperatures. The rule of thumb is weather forecasts aren't dependable more than three days out. There are several good websites for weather. I like [www.wrh.noaa.gov/](http://www.wrh.noaa.gov/). You can pinpoint the elevation you'll be hiking or camping at by clicking on the map.

## GPS Waypoints

Most of the hikes in this book use the current datum (WGS 84), though I've heard this is going to change in the future. A few of the hikes

use the older NAD 27 datum for waypoints, which is duly noted within those hikes. In no case does a single hike use both WGS 84 and NAD 27 waypoints. For those hikes, you need to set your GPS unit to NAD 27 CONUS. This is important, as you'll see several varieties for NAD27. For those who are curious, CONUS stands for Continental United States.

When I began hiking, NAD 27 was the standard. I could find no easy and reliable way to convert NAD 27 to WGS 84. Why didn't I just redo the hikes and record new waypoints? I'm currently working 20 hours a day as a shower-curtain-ring salesman with my partner, Del Griffith.

## Hiking Etiquette

Most hikers go to the mountains to escape the problems of the city. Let's not bring those same problems to the mountains. Always practice no-trace hiking by using these guidelines.

1. Drive and ride (mountain bikes) only on roads and trails where such travel is allowed; hike only on established trails or paths, on rock, or in washes.

2. Help keep the area clean. Pack out your trash and recycle it, pick up trash even if it's not yours, and dispose of human waste properly. Bury all human waste at least 200 feet from the trail and at least six inches deep.

3. Protect and conserve desert water sources. Carry your own water. Leave pools, potholes, and running water undisturbed.

4. Allow space for wildlife. Teach children not to chase animals.

5. Leave historic sites, Native American rock art, ruins, and artifacts untouched for the future. Admire rock art from a distance. Stay out of ruins and report violations.

## Change

Everything in this book is accurate and current, but things change. Trailheads can be relocated, trails can be altered, permit procedures can change, and websites can disappear. However, mountains don't move, even though I had a reader claim they did! My point is, do some research before leaving on that once-in-a-lifetime hiking trip. I've listed numerous websites throughout the book, but who knows how long they'll be around?

## Companion Website and Blog

My own website, hopefully, will be around for many more years. It's located at [www.hikinglasvegas.com](http://www.hikinglasvegas.com).

Here you'll find more than 360 hikes you can download in PDF format for a small fee. There are photos of hundreds of peaks, slide shows of hikes and even videos.

I write about hiking news on my blog: [hikinglasvegas.blogspot.com/](http://hikinglasvegas.blogspot.com/). Well, that's about it. So, dear reader, take a hike!

# CALIFORNIA



# Introduction to Death Valley

Death Valley National Park is home to the lowest point in the United States, at 282 feet below sea level. It's also the largest national park in the contiguous United States, covering 3.4 million acres. The park is home to peaks and canyons along with sand dunes and Charles Manson's last hideout.

Telescope Peak is the one to bag in Death Valley. Appropriately named, from its summit you can see the U.S.'s lowest (Badwater) and highest (Mt. Whitney, 14,494 feet) spots.

I've provided two hikes to this must-do peak. The normal trail is 14 miles (up and back) and a very enjoyable hike. The Badwater to Telescope Peak hike is one of the premier hardcore hikes in the country. You gain 11,000-plus feet in a single hike!

Death Valley is managed by the National Park Service. Permits aren't required for hiking; however, there's a \$20 per vehicle entrance fee, good for seven days. All national park passes are accepted. There are no restricted hours for hiking the trails. The Visitor Center, located at Furnace Creek on Highway 190, is open from 8 a.m.-5 p.m. daily. Death Valley is on Pacific Time.



PHOTO 1

## Telescope Peak Trail

**Trailhead:** Mahogany Flats campground, marked

**Distance:** 14 miles, up and back

**Elevation gain:** 2,916 feet

**Elevation of peak:** 11,049 feet

**Time:** 5-7 hours, up and back

**Difficulty:** 3

**Danger level:** 3

**Class:** 1

**How easy to follow:** 1

**Children:** No

**Waypoints:** Not needed

**Fees:** None

**Best time to hike:** Summer



From Stovepipe Wells in Death Valley, drive west 9.1 miles on CA190 and turn left (south) onto the signed Wildrose turnoff on Emigrant Canyon Road. Drive 20.4 miles and turn left onto Upper Wildrose Canyon, a paved road. Drive past the Charcoal Kilns (7.3 miles) and continue another 1.5 miles to Mahogany Flats. The last 1.5 miles are on a rough gravel road. A high-clearance vehicle is recommended.

**Comments:** Many hikers consider this one of the best hikes in the Southwest, but Telescope Peak, the highest peak in Death Valley National Park, just might be the best desert peak, period. From the peak you can see the lowest point in the United States (Badwater) and the highest point (Mt. Whitney). Even Charleston Peak in the Spring Mountains is visible on a clear day. Make sure to bring water. There's no water at the campground or along the trail.

**Lodging:** Stovepipe Wells: [www.stovepipewells.com/](http://www.stovepipewells.com/). Make reservations well in advance.

**Campground:** Mahogany Flats, free, open March through November, no water. [www.death.valley.national-park.com/camping.htm](http://www.death.valley.national-park.com/camping.htm)

**The Hike:** The trail starts across from the sign in Photo 1. In less than 100 yards, there's a self-registry. Be sure to fill it out. The trail heads south, gaining almost 1,000 feet in elevation, before turning west. It traverses below Rogers Peak, easily identified by the radio antennas at its summit. After a small gain in elevation, the trail comes to picturesque Arcane Meadows. You get your first view of the Sierra from the meadows. At this point you've hiked about 2.5 miles and have gained almost 1,500 feet in elevation.

The trail weaves west around Bennett Peak (9,980 feet) before descending slightly to another saddle. It now travels along the east side of the ridge and offers great views down into Hanaupah Canyon and the floor of Death Valley. The grade remains slight as the trail continues on the east side of the ridge. Unfortunately, the peak you now see isn't Telescope, which is still about 1.5 miles and 1,000 feet higher. Wind-blown bristlecone pines are scattered across the ridge here. When the grade be-



PHOTO 2

comes extreme, the trail climbs via switchbacks. Finally, the trail crosses to the west side and Telescope Peak is in sight (see Photo 2).

Once at the peak, you realize why it was named Telescope. The views stretch forever. Out to the east is the lowest point in the United States: Badwater. In the opposite direction (west) is the highest point: Mt. Whitney. There's a sign-in book at the peak.

**To Descend:** Retrace your steps.



PHOTO 1

## Telescope Peak via Shorty's Well Route

**Trailhead:** Intersection of West Side Road and Hanaupah Canyon Road, marked

**Distance:** 21 miles, up and back

**Elevation gain:** 11,300 feet

**Elevation of peak:** 11,049 feet

**Time:** 12 to 16 hours, up and back

**Difficulty:** 5

**Danger level:** 5

**Class:** 2

**How easy to follow:** 5

**Children:** No

**Waypoints (WGS 84):** See page 17

**Fees:** None

**Best season:** Mid-October



From CA190 and the intersection of Badwater Road, drive 6 miles on Badwater Road and turn right (west) onto the signed West Side Road. Drive 10.8 miles on this excellent gravel road. Turn left at the signed Shorty's Well. Drive a couple hundred yards and park. Walk back to West Side Road and across to the signed Hanaupah Canyon Road. This is the trailhead. You're 253

feet *below* sea level. The trail heads south to Telescope Peak (see Photo 1).

**Comments:** This is one of the classic extreme hikes in the country. Gaining 11,300 feet during a day hike is no easy feat. *You must be in excellent shape and have done numerous all-day hikes before attempting this.* To avoid the heat of Death Valley, most hikers start around 3 a.m. Forget trying to do the hike during a full moon. It disappears behind the ridge a little after 4 a.m. during mid-October. The first 8.8 miles are along Hanaupah Canyon Road. It should be light by the time you reach the end of the road.

The smart way to do this hike is to have a car at Mahogany Flats, the official trailhead for the Telescope Peak hike. Once you reach the summit, you have only to hike 7 miles down the official *trail* to your vehicle at Mahogany Flats.

**To Mahogany Flats:** From Stovepipe Wells in Death Valley, drive west 9.1 miles on CA190 and turn left (south) onto the signed Wildrose turnoff on Emigrant Canyon Road. Drive 20.4 miles and turn left onto Upper Wildrose Canyon, a paved road. Drive past the Charcoal Kilns (7.3 miles) and continue another 1.5 miles to Mahogany Flats. The last 1.5 miles are on a rough gravel road. A high-clearance vehicle is recommended.

Although this hike description doesn't start from Badwater, it does start below sea level and gains more than 11,000 feet. Starting from Badwater adds about 4 miles and it's imperative you find Hanaupah Canyon Road ... not an easy task in the dark. *If starting the hike at night, bring a flashlight or headlamp and extra batteries. Good luck!*

**Lodging:** Stovepipe Wells: [www.stovepipewells.com/](http://www.stovepipewells.com/). Make reservations well in advance.

**Campground:** Mahogany Flats, free, open March through November, no water. [www.death.valley.national-park.com/camping.htm](http://www.death.valley.national-park.com/camping.htm).

**The Hike:** Walk west 8.8 miles up Hanaupah Canyon Road. At the road's end, *you've gained over 3,300 feet* and you're in Hanaupah Canyon. Head west through the canyon a couple hundred yards where the canyon narrows slightly. Walk to the south (left) side of the canyon and pick up a footpath that hugs the south side as it heads deeper into the canyon. In about 400 yards, the footpath divides. Continue straight to the spring surrounded by vegetation (see Photo 2). The footpath continues along the left side of Hanaupah Spring (Waypoint 1) to an obvious opening through the dense vegetation where you can get water. Don't take

chances; use a water filter. (We scouted the hike in late August and the spring was flowing. I believe it's a dependable water source.)



The path continues along the spring and in a few yards the canyon opens up again. There's an old mine on the slope to the SE. When the path divides, a mining road begins. Do *not* follow the mining road; instead continue on the path heading west deeper into the canyon. It travels along the south (left) side of the spring again. When brush blocks the path, climb a ledge above the brush. The path resumes after the ledge. The path pulls away from the spring and becomes easier to follow. When the path divides by boulders, take the north (right) fork, which descends slightly. The path heads to the spring and crosses it. Cairns help guide you to the best spot to cross the spring. You are now on the north side of the spring.

Once across the spring, head north about 50 yards to the slope, where a well-defined path heads west into the canyon. The path traverses the slope until it comes to a deep drainage. This is where you head north up the slope to the saddle in Photo 3. It's a long trek to the saddle. Look for a two-foot high cairn at the saddle (Waypoint 2). From the saddle head west following a footpath that skirts around the south side of the ridge.



The path leads to a small saddle. Photo 4 shows the ridge heading west. Hike through a second and third saddle as you continue along the top of the ridge. The route descends to a fourth saddle as seen in Photo 5. You'll lose about 100 feet before reaching the fifth saddle. Photo 6 shows an overview of the route from just before the fifth saddle. The route continues west, then curves north near the outcrops. The peak to the north with the radio antennas is Rogers Peak. You can see the Telescope Peak Trail traversing the slope below Rogers Peak.



The ridge becomes steeper now as the path weaves just to the right of the outcrops seen in Photo 6. As the path continues to climb it tem-



PHOTO 5

porarily disappears as the grade lessens. When the route starts to descend westward to the sixth saddle, veer north and follow the ridge. By doing this you don't lose elevation. This is the first time the route strays from the obvious westward bearing.

Follow this ridge as it heads north and then curves west. Along this part of the route, you're almost due north of point 8170 on the topo map. The grade becomes steep as you head toward the saddle on the ridge, which is south of point 9695 (see Photo 7). The grade lessens

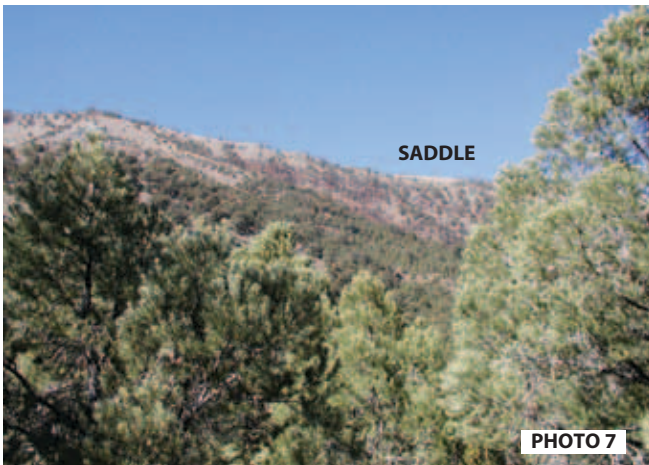
as the route enters a thick forest. The trees obscure your view of the saddle. The route passes a large cairn as the grade becomes moderate. Periodically, you can see the saddle between the trees. The grade increases as it leaves the woods. The more you head NW toward the saddle (Waypoint 3), the less ascent you have on the scree slope. The final ascent of the scree slope is steep.

Once you intersect the trail, head south (left). Unfortunately, the peak in sight is not Telescope Peak. Continue on the trail about 1.5 miles via switchbacks to Telescope Peak.

Congratulations, you just completed one of the toughest day hikes in the United States! Out to the east is the lowest point in the United States: Badwater (minus 282 feet). In the opposite direction (west) is the highest point: Mt. Whitney (14,445 feet). The views are spectacular. There's a sign-in book at the peak.

**To Descend:** Follow the official trail north 7 miles to the trailhead at Mahogany Flats. It's an easy trail to descend. There's a bathroom near the trailhead. From Mahogany Flats, drive down the gravel road and follow it back to CA190. Take 190 east to the signed Badwater Road. Turn right

and drive 6 miles to West End road. Turn right and drive 10.8 miles to the signed Shorty's Well. Turn left and drive a few hundred yards to your car. It's about a 90-minute drive from Mahogany Flats to Shorty's Well.

**WAYPOINTS:**

1. 36.18631N / 117.01974W Footpath
2. 36.19411N / 117.03276W Saddle
3. 36.18383N / 117.08372W Saddle