



The Mendel Couloirs

Trip Notes

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Mt. Mendel, 13,710', sports the two best known gully ice climbs in the Sierra. Logically known as Mendel Left and Mendel Right, the couloirs split the impressive north face of the mountain and offer two tantalizing choices to the summit. First climbed in the late 1950's this remains one of the most highly coveted ice climbs in the range and Mendel Right is regarded "the" classic Sierra ice route - legend has it that Chouinard invented the curved pick on this climb. The route offers up to ten pitches of climbing that approach 65 degrees at their steepest with a final 5.6 rock pitch completing the climb. Often midway up there is a chockstone that melts out of the couloir creating the crux of the climb.

The left gully, also known as Ice Nine, was first climbed ten years later than Mendel Right, in 1967, and offers a more challenging climb. You may see Mendel Left and Ice Nine described as two separate routes but they are indeed one and the same. Conditions vary tremendously but at its best the climb is a narrow twisting gully, inclined at up to 80 degrees (and some vertical sections) and often little more than two feet wide of continuous ice to nearly the top. In drier years the vertical sections are steep rock chimneys and are very challenging.

Following a winter with plenty of snow, September is the prime time for these routes but in drier years July and August are best.

We usually guide the right hand climb but the choice is yours. In either case the climb is sure to be a great adventure to the top of one of the High Sierra's great summits.

Itinerary

Day 1: The approach hike begins west of Bishop at the North Lake trailhead, elevation 9,300'. Lamarck Col is the destination and at over 13,000' it can be a grind. Only 6.5 miles from the cars, it takes most of the day. Lamarck Col is one of the gateways to Kings Canyon National Park but we seldom see other parties on the trail. There are several choices of camp spots: sometimes we camp on a sandy bench partway down from the col. Other times we drop all the way to the canyon bottom and camp at some of the tiny lakes in upper Darwin Canyon.

Day 2: We are out of camp before first light, climbing up a steep, loose moraine bound for the bergschrund at the base of the couloirs, which are only a few hundred feet apart. Either choice of route takes us to the summit and our descent is via second and third class scrambling to the east.

Day 3: We reverse our steps on the third day, taking a final grand view from Lamarck Col before descending all the way to our cars.

Elevations and Distances

Trailhead to Darwin Canyon camp	6.5 miles	3760' of gain	1180' of descent
Camp to summit to camp	2.25 miles	2170' of gain	2170' of descent
Camp to trailhead	6.5 miles	1180' of gain	3760' of descent

Meeting place and time

We will meet the first day at 7:00 a.m. at the world headquarters of Sierra Mountain Center, 200 South Main Street, in Bishop. We are on the east side of Highway 395 in the second block south of the south most traffic light (intersection of Line Street and Main Street/Highway 395). Or if you prefer, just across from the Mountain Rambler Brewery. We will do a final gear check, distribute group equipment and carpool to the trailhead.

Dates and Prices

Check the latest brochure, call us or go to our web site for dates and rates. Should minimum participant numbers not be reached you will be given the option of paying our private rate, rescheduling, or canceling. Price includes guiding, permits, all necessary group climbing gear, tents, kitchen gear and breakfast, lunch and dinner daily (you bring hot/cold drinks and snack items). Scheduled dates include USFS trail fees. Private programs do not.

Prerequisites

You should be in good physical condition, have some backpacking experience and have the ability to traverse broken uneven slopes with a moderate pack. Prior experience at altitudes above 10,000' is recommended. You should have basic snow and ice climbing skills and be able to climb moderate angle ice since we will not be instructing basic skills along the way, but we will be refining them.

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Ratios

On these climbs we limit the ratio to two climbers to one guide. This enhances safety and ensures a timely arrival at the summit before potential weather changes.

Notes and other information

The best guidebooks are Supertopo's "High Sierra Climbing" by Chris McNamara and Peter Croft's "The Good, The Great, and the Awesome". Get them from Maximus Press.

The best of course is "Eastern Sierra Ice" by SP Parker.

We also have our unpublished guide to Mendel and its routes available on our website.

The SMC web site has photos, a map and more information.

Preparing for Success

If it has been a while since you have climbed outdoors or you are unsure of your current skill level relevant to the climb you wish to undertake, we strongly suggest a "warm-up" day of multi-pitch climbing, such as Crystal Crag. This allows you and your guide to work on systems and communication, increasing your efficiency on the overnight climb. You will do better on the main climb with this day.

Mountain climbing requires endurance. Your objective may be remote (miles in with substantial elevation gain) and you need the stamina to approach, climb, and descend all day (12hrs+). The day prior to the climb consists of an approach with overnight packs. The climbs are often long and sustained with a gully descent. This means long days requiring all day endurance so incorporating endurance training into your fitness regimen is essential.

Acclimatization

The higher in elevation you go, the less oxygen there is in the air. This, combined with very dry air, means you will work harder to do the same activities, get dehydrated faster and recover more slowly. It takes days for your body to adjust to these changes. We highly recommend that you spend at least one night at moderate altitude (higher than 8,000') just prior to the trip. Spending a night in Mammoth would do the trick or better yet, camped at an even higher trailhead, such as the Mosquito Flats trailhead. Please refer to our Planning for Success info sheet for more info.

Bears

Bears can be a problem at the trailhead. Do not leave food or other scented items (deodorant, soap etc.) in your vehicle. There is limited food locker storage at the trailhead so do not bring extra items with you to the trailhead. Clean up all trash prior to your trip. Failure to take precautions can cause the vehicle to be ripped apart by a bear and the added insult of a fine from the Forest Service.

Porters

Want to do the climb but concerned about carrying the overnight pack through the rough terrain or want to save the knees from the steep descent back down? We can provide the services of a porter to carry the heavier and bulky items, leaving you with a lighter day pack for the trip. Porters can be used for just the up or the down as well. Contact the office for more information.

Equipment List for the Mendel Couloirs

The following list is a general guide and will assist you in packing for the program. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have specific questions regarding equipment or if you need assistance prior to making a purchase. The following list will vary according to the time of year, and your individual requirements. When packing **THINK LIGHTWEIGHT!** Items with a * can be rented from SMC.

Climbing equipment

- Boots.* A high quality mountaineering boot is essential for warm feet. We recommend a plastic boot such as an Asolo or Scarpa or a leather boot such as a Sportiva. We have rentals.
- Poles.* Telescoping probe type are best.
- Ice Axe.* A standard 70 cm. general purpose axe will suffice for this route. A shorter tool is optional.
- Second Tool.* This should be an ice hammer and we recommend a straight shaft rather than a bent.
- Crampons.* These must be compatible with your boots.
- Harness.* We recommend an alpine style harness that is easy to put on with large boots and crampons.
- Helmet. Should be comfortable and lightweight. We provide these for the program if you do not have your own.
- Two locking carabiners and a couple of non-lockers.*
- A lightweight belay/rappel device.*

Other essentials

- Internal frame backpack of 60-70 L. This must fit all of your personal gear and group equipment. If your pack compresses down you do not need the following item.
- Small day pack for climbing. 20-25L with attachment points for ice axe and crampons.
- Sleeping bag. This should be rated to about 32°F.
- Sleeping pads. A Thermarest and foam pad. A 3/4 Thermarest on a foam pad makes a good combination. Bring a repair kit along with a Thermarest in case of holes.

Clothing

- 2 pair synthetic or wool socks.
- Long underwear top and bottom.
- Warm pants, to layer between base and waterproof layer, such as softshell fabric.
- Another fuzzy sweater top, such as fleece or Polartec.
- Pile/fleece/softshell fabric jacket.
- Light down jacket; synthetic fill is second choice. This is optional & can replace the previous item. For in camp or in cold weather.
- Good quality rain/wind pants and rain jacket. Must be water proof and jacket must have a hood. Don't skimp on your rain gear.
- Shorts for on the trail.
- Climbing pants. We like the softshell type fabrics.
- 1 long-sleeve sun shirt. We recommend a "hoody" style though anything that covers your arms and is synthetic is great.
- 1 short-sleeve T-shirt. Synthetic, not cotton, so it can dry quickly and wick sweat from your body on sweaty, but windy, days.
- 1 lightweight pair of polypropylene or similar gloves.
- 1 pair of heavier gloves.
- 1 warm hat/beanie. Synthetics are less itchy than wool.
- Sunhat. Better to cover up than just rely upon sunscreen.

Etc.

- Sun glasses. Good quality. If you wear corrective glasses you might want a second pair in case of breakage.

- Water carrying system with a capacity of 2-3 liters. We recommend a 2 liter bladder for daily trail use and an additional Klean Kanteen insulated bottle for drink flavoring, coffee, etc. This can be your thermos and additional water bottle.
- Headlamp. With a spare set of batteries.
- Eating and drinking equipment. An insulated mug with a lid. This can double for a bowl. Fork and spoon.
- Pocket knife. Small Swiss army style, not a large Leatherman.
- Personal toiletries. Toothbrush and toothpaste. TP & a ziplock bag to carry out the used.
- Sunscreen and lip screen. 30+ SPF. A 1oz. bottle will be enough. Make sure the lip stuff actually contains a sunscreen.
- Personal Medical Kit. The guide will carry a large kit so yours will predominately consist of foot repair items, mild pain killer such as Advil, and bandaids.
- Camera/phone camera. Small enough to fit in a pocket; please no giant cameras with multiple lenses.
- Plastic Trash Sac. Handy for keeping gear in outside the tent should it rain.
- Trekking poles*. These are not essential, but can be handy on the trail. It is your choice, but they do save the knees on long descents.
- Optional reading material, journal, Kindle, etc.

Food

- We include meals from lunch on Day 1 through breakfast on Day 3. Bring your own snack items like cliff bars, power bars, or gorp concoctions for all days. Also bring your favorite hot drinks (tea, hot chocolate, cider etc.). A days worth for most people would be 2 bars, 3 ounces of gorp, and perhaps a candy bar. Don't over do it.

Shared Equipment Provided by SMC

- First aid kit
- Shelter. We will provide lightweight, storm worthy tents. If you have your favorite, by all means bring it, but we do want to pair people up where possible to reduce weight.
- Stove. We provide MSR Whisperlite stoves.
- Group climbing equipment.
- Water purification. A sad but true fact of life is that much Sierra water is contaminated. Iodine may be used individually or the group can carry a gravity style purifier.

You specifically don't need

- ⊗ Big first aid kits (we have a comprehensive one).
- ⊗ Deodorant or any toiletries beyond those listed above.
- ⊗ Items that are not on this list.

Additional Thoughts

- Some people, particularly women, tend to run colder than others. If this is the case add another layer or two, a warmer sleeping bag, warmer boots and extra handwarmers
- Women – see our "Women on the Trail" information sheet at the Women's Trips pages on the website.