



North Peak Couloir

Trip Notes

North Peak Couloir

California is well known for a sunny climate and fantastic rock climbing but less well known for its alpine ice climbing. Come late summer and fall the snows of the past winter have melted off, and repeated freeze and thaw cycles have transformed the snow to firm neve and water ice. This provides straightforward ways to the summits of many Sierra peaks.

North Peak is another one of the great introductory ice routes in the High Sierra. It has the added benefit of a short approach and return, making for a reasonable day car-to-car. The climb includes six pitches of snow and/or ice up to about 50°, followed by a short rock scramble to the summit and an easy descent.

Itinerary

This is a long one-day climb. We meet early and plan on a 10 to 12 hour day round trip, generally retracing our steps for the return. We approach via the Saddlebag Lake Trail as it traverses around the lake for a mile before flattening out at the head of the lake near Greenstone Lake. We continue past small lakes and tarns, steadily climbing towards North Peak. We surmount a steep rocky ridge, climb over a loose moraine and we are at the small glacier below the peak.

We gear up with crampons and pull out axes at this point. Before long we enter the couloir. The bergschrund can present a short challenge to overcome, then we are in the couloir proper. We belay on ice screws or rock anchors on the wall of the couloir. There are about six pitches of climbing and if the gully is hard ice the calves will be working hard by the time we reach the top. On the other hand soft neve snow will be a bit easier on the legs.

A rest here will revive us and get us ready for the final 300 feet to the top. There is a little low fifth class rock and we emerge pretty close to the summit.

The descent is easy with long sandy slopes back down to Conness Lakes and a glorious descent over rock slabs and through verdant meadows. Then comes the final trail section back to the parking area.

Elevations and Distances

Trailhead to summit to trailhead 7.5 miles 2525' of gain 2525' of descent

Meeting place and time

We will meet at 6:00 a.m. at the trailhead parking area for Saddlebag Lake. If coming from Lee Vining, drive west on Tioga Road towards Tioga Pass. Turn right onto Saddlebag Lake Road just before the Tioga Pass Resort. The road turns to dirt and you'll continue uphill a couple of miles to the parking area on the right-hand side near the end of the road opposite the dam. If you get to the marina you have gone too far. You should be fed, packed, and more or less ready to go.

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, and all necessary group climbing gear. 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 this climb is only one day, there is less time for basic instruction but we do help coach and refine your movement on snow and ice.

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 Croff'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 North Peak and 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.



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Equipment List for North Peak Couloir

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 leather boot 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.
- Two locking carabiners and a couple of non-lockers.*
- A lightweight belay/rappel device.
- Daypack. 25-35 L pack.

Clothing

We will discuss exactly what to bring when we meet. Have these items with you so you are prepared for any possible weather conditions.

- 1 pair of socks.
- 1 mid-weight long-sleeve top. Capilene, Merino or other synthetic.
- 1 pair of long-johns or tights. Capilene, Merino or other synthetic.
- 1 warm pair of pants.
- 1 warm shirt. Synchilla or 200 weight works well.
- 1 warm jacket. A down jacket is preferred with around 800 fill.
- Waterproof Jacket and Pants - Lightweight and non-bulky. Side zips on the pants should be long enough to slide on over boots. Jacket must have a hood.
- 1 pair of climbing pants.
- 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 warm hat/beanie. Synthetics are less itchy than wool.

- Sunhat.

Etc.

- Sunglasses. If you wear corrective glasses you might want a second pair.
- Water Bottles. Two 1L bottles or a hydration system holding up to 2L.
- Camera/phone camera.
- Personal toiletries. Include some TP and a bag to pack out the used from the crags.
- Sunscreen and lip screen. SPF 30+. Make sure the lip stuff actually contains a sunscreen.
- Bug repellent. Only needed in spring and early summer.

Food

- You are responsible for water, snacks and lunch for the day.

Shared equipment provided by SMC

- Ropes
- Climbing equipment
- First aid kit

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, warmer boots and extra handwarmers
- Women – see our "Women on the Trail" information sheet at the Women's Trips pages on the website.