

A Wall of White

By Stephen Sexton

Kerry the bus driver deposited me outside the general store in the sleepy desert town of Campo, California, located only half a mile from the Mexican border. The bus tore away in a plume of dust and left me standing in the baking sun with my backpack on, an eerie silence quickly settling in its place. It was a serene quiet that would never really leave me for the ensuing weeks. I was attempting to hike the 4265km long Pacific Crest Trail, a national trail that stretches all the way from Mexico to Canada, following the mountain chains along the west coast of the United States.

I was setting out knowing it would be an extra big challenge this year - the Pacific Crest Trail was sitting under a record snowpack in many areas. Drawing an early start date when my permit was randomly assigned back in January, I had been given April 2nd. Starting this early meant that unless a heatwave ensued, I would definitely be hitting the high Sierra Nevada by early May - too early even in a normal snow year. The trail had become so popular in recent years (particularly after the movie and book 'Wild') that a permit system had to be introduced to control the number of people on the trail. There were 50 permits allocated each day to leave the border with Mexico and every day had been fully allocated through all of spring and early summer. There were literally thousands of us all scattered along this trail, attempting the impossible.

Back in January when the start date had been assigned to me, starting early seemed like a good idea, as it gave me extra time to finish the whole thing should I be held up for whatever reason. Literally the day after the permit draw, a huge storm hit the Sierra Nevada and it didn't stop blizzarding for about 6 weeks through late February and into March. My heart sunk as every day I nervously watched the snow pile up on the weather reports knowing it was going to make my thru-hiking attempt very difficult indeed.

But of course these thoughts needed to be banished for now. 2019 was my year to do it and there was no backing out now. I had about 1200 kilometres of desert terrain to get through before the Sierra Nevada mountain section anyway, so first things first.

I grabbed a canister of gas from the general store, the last remaining thing I needed before starting. Setting off for the border, I was heading in the wrong direction to Canada, but needed to touch the border fence before turning around and heading north again. My photo was taken by a trail volunteer next to the PCT monument at the border wall and I signed the trail register, sticking my finger through a small hole in the formidable looking border wall wrapped in barbed wire before finally setting off. While my mind was coming to terms with the significance of what I was just embarking on, it quickly was brought back to the present moment when I came across a majestic snake stretched across the trail. It was long so I had to take a very wide detour to get around it, amazed that something like this could happen within my first few hundred metres of trail.



I pushed on for a few hours, calling it quits at 9 miles (15km) this first day, as I'd been up since 2am for my flight to San Diego, and had constantly been told by other hikers to ease my way into things lest I get an injury. My first campsite was elevated above the surrounding terrain so that some nice views were on offer. Rain clouds were setting in though, so my rain fly was set up in readiness. I was camping in the vicinity of about four other hikers, so I wandered over in their direction to say hello. They were all obviously very experienced, possessing the latest and greatest in ultralight equipment. My gear was only middle of the range, attaining a base weight (pack weight without food and water) of roughly 9kg. Ultralight packers generally get down to less than half this weight. One of them was 'cowboy camping' tonight (sleeping on a mat in the open without a tent), and I admired his bravery given the clouds above us. I settled into my tent again, all the while some grave thoughts entering my head. What was I doing attempting this? I was out of my league here.

Rising early, I set out and had a quick chuckle to myself as I saw the cowboy camper had been smashed by the big storm during the night. The first decent climb arrived when I hit Hauser Canyon. Kerry the bus driver had warned me about this. I was pretty happy with how I handled it and would quickly learn that the whole trail is one ascent after another. In fact as the name suggests, the Pacific Crest Trail follows the various mountain chains up the west coast and a source of great frustration at how the trail seemed to want to climb every little hill in the area just for the sake of it, often taking a ridiculously inefficient route to get there as well.

Not far into the morning I met a girl who had seen a cougar (mountain lion) in the area. I knew they were supposed to inhabit these areas but having one spotted in the immediate vicinity I was in was definitely disconcerting. There had been a couple of fatal attacks by cougars over the previous year and I knew they were a serious threat. Reassuring myself that they were just big pussy cats, I came across a footprint of one on the trail and it became apparent just how big these pussy cats were!

The footprint looked fresh so I pushed on with all senses on full alert, constantly looking behind me as I knew an attack normally comes from behind. All was fine of course, and I soon came across the little village of Lake Morena, meeting a young Danish guy called Stefan. He was sitting on a park bench drying

his tent from the previous night's storm, and we got talking. He admitted he was finding it really hard and felt like quitting. I told him he couldn't quit now - we were only 25 kilometres into the whole thing! He went on to tell me he was "just a party guy", from a very wealthy family and had never had to suffer at all his whole life. Indeed he had never even slept in a tent until last night, a fact I found astounding given the size of the trail he was attempting as his first ever hike. He told me he had already called his father in Denmark to help get him out of here, alluding to a possible helicopter ride. Wow, this was indeed a funny thing to hear. I liked the guy though, at least he was being honest about things.

If I was to be honest with myself I wasn't exactly feeling it myself either. The terrain in these early parts was somewhat dull and uninspiring. My hiking up till this point had always been in some epic and beautiful mountains and here I was in the relatively barren terrain of a desert. However over the coming weeks I would come to realize just how magnificent the desert can be, especially in spring when it is blooming after record winter rainfall.

Over the coming days my confidence grew. I had received a video call from my brother and nephews in an area of cell reception and the conversation had definitely boosted morale. My brother told me my nephews in Australia loved hearing what I was doing, and was inspiring to many people. This gee-up worked and I definitely had my mojo back. However this new found confidence took a minor setback when another storm rolled through in Mount Laguna that night. It was mainly a windstorm, but wind is the bane of tent camping as it means the tents flap all night allowing absolutely no sleep at all. Trees were groaning all around me and I kept imagining one crashing onto my tent.

The next morning, having not slept at all, I couldn't find two of my tent stakes when I went to pack up. After thoroughly scouring the dirt all around, I concluded the wind had been so strong that it must've dislodged them with such force that it threw the stakes a long way off. I passed a guy who said I must be a good hiker, as I was the first person who had passed him in 20 miles. He wasn't carrying a pack, explaining that he had come to hate tent camping so much that he had talked his wife into driving on remote dirt roads to let him sleep in their campervan. I wondered how long that could last before his wife got sick of that. He described his tent as a 'torture chamber' and after last night's debacle I couldn't help but agree with him.

I was putting in some serious miles now, despite being on no sleep whatsoever. In fact some of my biggest days on trail were after no sleep, probably just a strange coincidence. I passed people all day, except soon an older guy, 53 years old, caught up to me. He was from Hungary, and we shared a few things in common. His name was also Steve (his real name was a strange Hungarian name). Like me, he had also walked the Camino de Santiago, a pilgrim trail in Spain. Additionally we had both written a book about our experiences on the Camino. However as the day progressed and I got to know him better, I came to realize he is a minor celebrity back in Hungary. We later connected on social media and I saw thousands of followers, along with pictures of him on the red carpet in Budapest, and him on talk shows on both radio and TV. He had told me used to be a stage actor before he took up hiking, a true renaissance man!



‘Camino Steve’ (left) and me

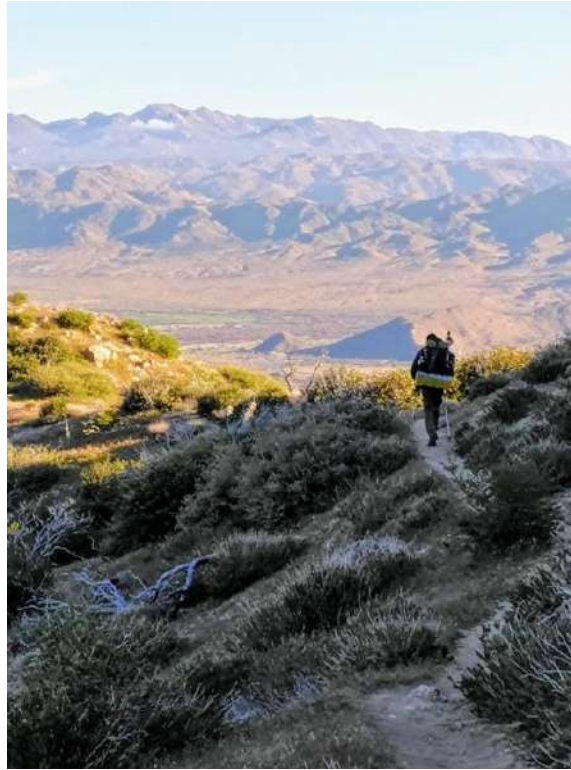
Steve was attempting both the Appalachian Trail and the Pacific Crest Trail in one year. He had already done a third of the AT in late winter and early spring, and was now on the PCT until Kennedy Meadows at the start of the Sierra Nevada section, at which time he would go back to the AT to finish that trail before returning to the PCT when the snow had melted and finishing this trail. It seemed ambitious to me but he was clearly a super-hiker, as his average daily distance was around 50km or more. His hiking resume was very impressive too, knocking off numerous other famous and exotic trails all around the world, but nothing on the scale of what he was attempting this year. He told me his previous biggest ever day of hiking was 76km, fairly impressive! I had managed 64km one day in New Zealand, but that was out of desperation to avoid tent camping in the torrential downpour I had been caught in.

Feeling pretty beat up after walking 40km on no sleep, I came across a decent camp site with other people around so I let him push on into the early evening twilight alone. It had been a great day hiking in cool clouds along a ridgeline with spectacular views revealing themselves when the clouds parted for long enough. We were up quite high and could see the Salton Sea away to the east in the far distance, sweeping desert vistas and spectacular craggy canyons in the foreground.

That night I heard a pack of coyotes from inside my tent, their howls penetrating the ear plugs I had come to be addicted to. It had been another night of incessant wind, the tent flapping giving me another night of poor sleep. Part way through the night I had decided to take the rain fly off to stop the flapping, and had gazed in awe at the starry sky above, seeing several shooting stars.

Finding myself awake at the crack of dawn, I noticed dark and menacing clouds billowing over the nearby mountain once more, so decided to get going early before any rain started falling. When I emerged from my tent I found a steaming pile of coyote excrement right outside my tent door, a nice welcome gift from the locals.

Descending down into a valley all morning, there were beautiful views towards the north all the while, before crossing a wide plain at Scissors Crossing. Many people chose to resupply here by hitchhiking into the nearby town about 15 miles away, but I decided to push on as I didn't want to break the momentum I was in. There was some water and free snacks provided by 'trail angels' left under a bridge here, and I refilled my water bottles and took the opportunity to eat this free food, amazed at how generous some people are towards the hiking community. It would be the last bit of water available all day.



Heading north, Scissors Crossing in the distance

I started a steep climb up a canyon wall, traversing a razor thin trail. I was going fast and rounding a corner when all of a sudden something jumped down from a rock ledge and started chasing me backwards. I managed to do a ninja move in the other direction to which I was travelling, the terrain dropping off precipitously to my left. It was an angry rattlesnake. It took several lunges at me while I backpedalled, trying desperately to strike my leg. How it missed is anyone's guess. I would think about an inch must've separated its fangs from my leg.

My adrenaline now through the roof, I suddenly found myself trapped. The snake was camped against the canyon wall on the right with nowhere to go and I needed to get past it while avoiding falling off the cliff to the left. It was still very angry - its tail rattled away, the loud buzz shattering the otherwise silent desert air. Knowing there was simply no alternative but to go past it, I summoned the courage to leap around it. I decided I had to stay up the trail a bit and wait for 15 minutes to warn Tim and Nellie, a couple I had just had a nice chat with before beginning my ascent and would soon be passing by.

I waved my hands and yelled “snake!” sending them both into panic mode. I yelled out how it was hiding in a small bush right next to the trail and sure enough they spotted its head. The trail was so narrow it definitely would’ve got them if I hadn’t stayed to warn them. They were frozen in place for five minutes deciding what to do, so I decided to push on. Subsequently I heard this snake had held up a whole chain of people as word filtered back down the trail.

As I pushed higher up the canyon wall again, fighter jets roared overhead. In fact they had been roaming the skies above the valley all day, but this time the pilot must’ve spotted us hikers because he was clearly buzzing us. The roar was ear-splitting and I could almost feel the heat from the after-burners as it flew right over me. Far from being annoyed, I found it thrilling, and it just added to what had already been a very interesting day.

After managing 45km, I finally set up camp. There was a good reason I had decided to put in another big distance day- I was running out of food. By forgoing resupplying at Scissors Crossing, I had forced myself to hike from Mount Laguna to Warner Springs (120km) in three days, or else I’d have no food. In fact all day I had only had two packets of Ramen noodles. There is hardly any energy in noodles either, so essentially I was operating on zero. I pitched my tent in a spot with another commanding view and collapsed into it. As I lay down I snuck a look at my body- it was already wasting away from all this physical toiling and it was only day five. If I made it all the way to Canada I would be a walking skeleton by then.

I had my first decent sleep here, the wind having gone away. Waking at sunrise, I refilled my water bottle at another cache provided by trail angels. About twenty minutes into my day I was passing a bush and heard some serious movement going on behind it. I knew I was in cougar territory so of course the worst thoughts entered my head. I decided the best form of defense is attack so I let out a loud and guttural roar, something you’d expect to hear on the plains of Africa, enough to frighten any animal within a 10km radius. To my horror I heard a human voice go “What the f@ck!”

This was of course an awkward moment, as a guy about my age emerged from behind the bush, having a chuckle at my expense. His name was ‘Marbles’ and he’d been answering nature’s call behind the bush. We laughed the whole incident off, but of course he decided that it was worthy of a trail name for me. Every hiker gets a trail name on the PCT, and I was about to get mine. He decided I should be called ‘Cougar Bait’. The name had a double meaning of course, so I wasn’t too thrilled with it, but decided I’d keep it as I didn’t want to go without a trail name for too long. Everyone introduced themselves by their trail name, so I was glad I could now be like a true thru-hiker.

Marbles and I walked about five miles together - he was good company and was clearly quite a bit of a trail legend. He had never completed the whole trail in one year, but was instead endeavouring to do big section hikes over multiple years. In the ensuing days I would discover Marbles is known by virtually everyone.

On the approach to Warner Springs I passed through beautiful fields covered in yellow and purple wildflowers before arriving at Eagle Rock. As its name suggests, it’s a huge rock that looks like an eagle with its wings outstretched, making for a very instagrammable photo. Lots of other non-hiking tourists

were there, and a Czech mother and daughter asked if I wanted my photo taken so I agreed. The mother wanted a chat and was suitably impressed by my plans to hike so far. She said I looked like Brad Cooper (with less hair?) and tried to set me up with her daughter, dropping hints I should ask for her daughter's number and telling me she is single and a great catch. The daughter was standing right there and didn't even look embarrassed by her mother's forwardness. The mother had a loud voice and I looked around to see many other tourists listening in to this rather funny conversation. I took the daughter's number out of politeness but quickly moved on, glad to escape the crowds and this reminder of the outside world.

Arriving at Warner Springs towards dusk, I met a bunch of people on my approach who I would later see a lot of. Many people, mainly young ones, form trail families or 'tramilies'. I knew I wanted to hike predominantly alone, mainly because I found it too painful to wait for others whose walking pace was slower, but also because I just liked being on my own while hiking. Many tramilies were formed in these early days, and some of the people I met here were people that I'd walk a lot with over the coming days.

Warner Springs was where the social side of the trail really kicked off. The setting helped - all the thru-hikers tent camped in a small field next to a community centre that was manned by volunteers providing all manner of services for hikers. The town clearly knew that we represented big business and went to all manner of effort to make this a memorable trail town. I was able to buy more food here, check my emails, do some much needed laundry and have my first shower, the first in nearly a week. It was only a bucket shower where you poured cold water over yourself while you stood in a stall, but oh how sweet it was to scrub away all that dirt.

Because everyone is camped so close you basically spend the whole time chatting to others. Many people already knew about the Cougar Bait incident and my rattlesnake encounter - word travels along the hiker grapevine pretty fast it seemed. Marbles showed up later on, and he introduced me to lots of people as well, including a cool girl called Feathers. The three of us sat around talking until the sun went down. She was a total hippie, essentially living on the trail for six months every year.

The following day I stayed around camp helping to erect a giant tent with about ten others in the blazing heat. Deciding this wasn't much of a way to spend a rest day, I decided to hike out that afternoon, putting in about 10km of uphill walking in serious heat. I passed a lady walking slowly with a gold knee brace on so I asked her about it. She told me she had injured her knee just before she was due to start the trail. She had already sold her house after a divorce, so was now locked in to this attempt to walk the PCT. It reminded me of how a lot of people do these sorts of epic hikes to overcome grief, choosing to replace mental anguish with physical anguish. A bung knee while attempting 4200km of hiking was definitely adding to the challenge. I wished her good luck and hiked on, stopping to cool off in a little creek before making camp right off the trail on the edge of a ledge with a grand view of the sunset.

Three people camped nearby and while they tried being quiet for my sake, they woke up early and so of course I had to as well. I soon passed Mike's Place, a place I first heard about at Warner Springs. It is a trail angel's house (in the middle of nowhere) and Mike essentially hosts thru-hikers in his backyard, providing free pizza cooked in a giant outside rock oven, as well as free beer and marijuana. I didn't get

to meet him when I passed through that morning as he wasn't there, and almost all the remaining hikers from the previous evening had already hiked out. By the looks and sounds of it I had missed a giant party.

A caretaker friend called Cyclops (he only had one good eye) and another guy called Strange Bird were there, and plowed me with food and drink. I slipped a few dollars in the donation jar on the table. Cyclops kept telling me how dangerous the area I was hiking into was- it was still covered in snow as the mountains that surround Los Angeles are high in altitude. Apparently several hikers had already needed rescuing and were lucky to be alive after sliding on the snow. I met a few more people after Mike's Place, including a girl called Anni from South Dakota.

A bunch of people were camping at another trail angel's place, this one called 'Mary's Place'. It was far less wild than Mike's Place, more just a place to camp with an outhouse for a toilet and a random bookshelf filled with a collection of classic books for hikers to read while in camp. The next morning I bumped into Mary who was out having a horse ride on the trail. Stopping for a brief chat, I thanked her for her generosity before bumping into Anni again. We got talking and she told me she'd been a top swimmer and had now just finished college and was trying to figure out what to do with her life. We came to a highway that has a famous café a few miles down the road. A trail angel called Grumpy was waiting for us, as when he spotted us from afar he yelled out 'free ride!' We eagerly accepted this kind offer, as three miles of needless walking is to be avoided at all costs.

This bar and restaurant called Paradise Valley Café was a favourite for thru-hikers and at least half of its patronage was made up of people covered in dirt with backpacks, using every spare electrical socket to charge our phones. Outside, while we waited for others to arrive, I discovered one of my big toes had the biggest blister ever seen. While someone was filming with their phone, I popped it using my sterilized pocket knife, a big crowd of hikers surrounding me to watch the spectacle. A roar erupted from the crowd when it burst with tremendous force, sending watery liquid flying everywhere. I washed up before joining Fielding, Sobo, Ranger and Tom in the restaurant for a hearty meal washed down with a chocolate beer. It was almost a competition to consume as many calories as possible in these little pit stops we made, and I definitely consumed my quota.

I set off on my own after a couple of hours, attempting to hitchhike back to the trail but abandoning the effort when a police car rolled up to the carpark I was in. The rest of the day was long and uphill, but gradually the views became better and soon I was on a ridgeline with Anni, the sun setting across Los Angeles to the west, and Palm Springs in the Valley to the east. It was a magical place to be, hard to put into words. Because it was such a high and narrow ridgeline with sweeping views in both directions, it almost felt like we were camping in the sky. We were pitched next to each other and talked between our tents. Many people were cowboy camping by now but I still hadn't chosen to try this, preferring to sleep in my open tent with the rain fly off as a kind of compromise.

The sunrise over Palm Springs the next morning was equally impressive, the desert all pink from the soft glow of the morning sun. I woke Anni up with classical music playing from my phone and she emerged from her tent with a big sleepy smile on her face to start the new day. We continued along this ridgeline

before starting a serious ascent towards the dangerous mountains I'd been warned about at Mike's Place. It was here that Anni told me her phone was broken and she had no beacon or satellite device as a safety measure. She was essentially hiking blind, because hikers rely heavily on the Guthook PCT trail app to navigate and know where water sources are, etc.

Upon learning this, I rightly or wrongly assumed some responsibility for her safety and welfare, as we were now good friends. I didn't mind playing navigator, but the annoying thing was that she was quite a bit slower than me, so I constantly had to stop and wait for her to catch up. We came to a very confusing area with burnt forest and without a navigation app you'd definitely get lost, as there were multiple false trails leading in the wrong direction.



Looking north, towards Apache Peak and San Jacinto

After waiting for her at a crucial junction to make sure she took it, she looked annoyed I had waited and told me to keep walking without her. I warned her how dangerous that was, but her instructions were made clear. Soon after parting I met Crush, a very cool guy, one of the most unique and funny individuals I've ever met. Tall, skinny and good looking, he had a way of talking that was just so enthusiastic, one couldn't help but be enamoured with the guy. He didn't have the lightest or best equipment either, letting me heft his pack to see how heavy it was. But he was a really good hiker when he wanted to be, despite the handicap. Crucial point- when he wanted to be. He would often camp under trees for long periods, but when he was hiking, it was super-fast. He was an all or nothing kind of guy.



Crush

Soon after meeting him he blitzed the steep climb up to Apache Peak. I was back to hiking on my own and came across the first snow patch of the trail. It wasn't just any snow patch either. It was across a chute about 100 metres wide and required crossing a very steep angled slope that fell away hundreds of metres towards rocks far, far below. I had been carrying microspikes since the border for exactly this situation, the extra weight now being worth it. They provide some grip on the icy snow, for to cross these slippery slopes without them is certainly rolling the dice. If you slip on ice, the speed you gather as you fall gathers so much pace it is essentially like free-falling through the air, until you come to grief on rocks or by hitting a tree.

I nervously crossed the icy slope, not daring to look down to my right. One slip and it was all over. Upon making it to the other side I realized Anni would be crossing this on her own. I knew she didn't have microspikes and the trail was getting quite hard to follow in the snow. I knew she was at least an hour behind me now, so I just hoped someone else would be nearby to help her out if she needed it.

The rest of the day the snow got worse and worse, no longer snow patches but rather a constant snowpack around a metre deep. None of the slope crossings were quite as steep and sketchy as that first one however. The knee deep snow was all mushy now from the afternoon sun. Navigation had become a crapshoot as the snow was sending false trails in lots of different directions. Using the app was the only way to know I was heading in the right direction. I reached Saddle Junction and Devils Slide, the trail that dropped down to the town of Idyllwild, another resupply point. It was an incredibly steep descent and late afternoon by now, so all the while I was getting paranoid for Anni's safety. She would potentially be forced to camp up high on snow and maybe even lost.

Upon reaching the bottom of the trail, it was still about 5 miles to the centre of town. After about five of us had unsuccessfully tried to thumb a ride into town from the few remaining cars leaving the carpark, we gave up and started road walking, my legs screaming out in objection. However within a few hundred metres a lovely local couple picked us up, willing to have our dirty and stinky bodies and packs

strewn all through their clean car. We didn't all fit in, so they split us into two groups and drove back to pick up the others. This sort of generosity is what makes the trail so special.

Idyllwild is a pretty unique town. Sitting at the base of San Jacinto, one of the biggest mountains in the Los Angeles area, the town mayor is a Labrador, and we happened to pass him on the ride into town. He was sitting in the back of a pickup truck, wearing a tie around his neck and smiling at all the passing people looking at him.

We were dropped off at the local campground and I could hardly muster the energy to set up my tent. My blisters were getting incredibly bad, my feet so torn up so bad it was a talking point amongst other hikers. I was shocked when Anni rocked into camp about an hour later. She looked even more tired than me but I was stoked to see her. She knew I'd told multiple people to look out for her, and appreciated my concern, if a little baffled at why I would care so much. I don't think she realized just how much danger she was putting herself in by being without any means of navigation in such a dangerous area. I think she had followed some people in the end, forcing herself to keep up with them.



Anni

That night, after errands had been run and I had my first proper hot shower, a big group of about ten of us went to Los Gorditos, a local Mexican restaurant for margaritas and tacos. Feathers was there too, the first time I'd seen her since Warner Springs. We ate and drank ourselves silly with huge pitchers of free flowing margaritas, enjoying the chance to relax and unwind. Crush was there, being his usual incredibly stoke-filled self and putting everyone in stitches. We went for pizza at another restaurant next before I attempted an escape to rest my weary bones. Returning to camp, I found a beer placed outside my tent door, someone leaving it there as a way to entice me into the big campfire a lot of PCT hikers were standing around.



The next morning I had to be up early to join a big group who were getting a pre-arranged ride in the back of a pickup from a trail angel. About a dozen of us wedged into the back of his truck, and were whisked back up to the Devils Slide trailhead in order to start the big climb back up the mountain to the PCT. Most of these people were going to climb San Jacinto, which wasn't a part of the PCT and which therefore didn't really attract me as it also would be very dangerous with all the snow. I had my mind set on conquering Fuller Ridge, the next part of the PCT and itself supposed to be very treacherous as well. Camino Steve from Hungary had sent me a photo of him next to a very steep snow slope on Fuller Ridge, dropping into oblivion and the look on his face was sheer terror.



We all started up the trail, gradually spreading out as our different walking speeds became apparent. Crush was motoring up as if the slope didn't even exist, despite his pack weighing more than anyone's. We finally made it up to Saddle Junction after a couple of hours and waited for the others to catch up. It was while waiting here that a middle aged local hiker announced to everyone that a PCT hiker had died at Apache Peak yesterday, falling to their death. It was heavy news and made me realize I probably knew them as I passed Apache Peak yesterday and it must've been right around the time I was there. But then again most people I was travelling with yesterday had made it into Idyllwild that night.

No one really wanted to talk more about it, and I subsequently never heard another thing, so I'm reasonably sure the guy was just being a douchebag and messing with our heads, or at least knowingly spreading false or unproven rumours. I had definitely heard about a hiker missing for one week, and there had been several confirmed reports of helicopter rescues taking place, but a death in the same area I had been in on the same day as I was there seemed a little too close for comfort. Later that day I

heard from a girl called Sobo that she had seen a guy take a serious fall down the chute at Apache Peak and need helicopter rescue. Perhaps that was the incident that the guy was referring to.

While waiting I also had been setting up my phone's app for the hike on Fuller Ridge. However my phone's GPS wasn't working, the blue dot showing my position not showing up on the screen. The Australian guy Nick I was planning on hiking with had suddenly decided to summit San Jacinto instead. To make matters worse, the other group that was going to tackle Fuller Ridge had departed about twenty minutes ago, and I didn't want to attempt the dangerous area on my own without navigation. So I was left with no choice- I would follow everyone else up San Jacinto, despite my trepidations. It annoyed me, as it would cost me a day or two's progress on the actual PCT trail. I was never a mountaineer, and bagging peaks was something I didn't really understand. Nonetheless, it would prove to be a big adventure and a fortuitous stroke of luck that I was made to do it by circumstance rather than volition.

About a dozen of us set off in single file for the summit of San Jacinto. The trail quickly turned from snow patches to constant snow and we soon emerged above the tree line. The slope started to get more serious, but nothing I couldn't handle. It was still reasonably early so the snow wasn't too mushy and slippery yet. However by the time we reached the final push to the summit, we had lost the official trail a long time ago given how buried it was in snow. There were once again too many false paths going in all directions, so the group splintered up into smaller groups as no one could decide the best way to go. By now the slope was insanely steep, the snow was baked by the midday sun, and one slip meant dire consequences after what would be a fall of several hundred metres or more onto trees and rocks far below.



I have always been one of those hikers that trips and slips all the time, so I was very nervous in this final ascent. I tried to keep to areas where if I did start sliding my fall could potentially be broken by an isolated tree after about 10 metres instead of five hundred metres. I kept thinking to myself that this could be my last day on earth.

At the top it was actually worth it, perhaps there was something to this peak bagging business. The view was simply incredible, Palm Springs directly below us and the pale creams and pinkish hues of the desert mixing in stark contrast to the white alpine environment I was in. I could see the famous Coachella music festival taking place down in this valley, and thought I could almost hear the music given we were directly above it. There were about a dozen other people up here, most of them Palm Springs locals who had caught a tram up from the east side and hiked or skinned up (on skis) before skiing down again. To the west was Los Angeles and we stayed up here all afternoon watching the fiery red sun slowly sink on the horizon, playing chess and drinking beers that had been carried up. There was a very small rock hut here at the peak, and the unbelievable plan was to spend the night in it. The thought of twelve of us crammed into this area and actually sleeping seemed literally impossible.



As the sun set we decided we had to get set up before there was no light. So we went the 100 metres down to the cabin and awkwardly set up sleeping pads on the rock hard, cold and wet floor, made worse by the fact I knocked a water bottle over sending huge amounts of water all over the floor. There were two double bunk beds, but they were in such a state of disrepair that only the smallest of us could risk sleeping on them and even then there was a strong chance that during the night the top person would crash through onto the bottom person. I chose the central floor between the two bunks, intentionally setting up next to Anni. When we'd all settled down for the night like a tin of sardines, a sort of quiet settled eventually settled in and Anni and I pulled a few moves on each other, but the less than ideal conditions and complete lack of privacy put a lid on things. I also had Nick the Aussie guy pressed right up against me on the other side!



The following morning, our now heavily bonded trail family woke up at first light, some bleary looking eyes from lack of sleep. We needed to get going early, before the sun cooked the snow and made it too dangerous. The previous day I'd been dreading this morning's coming route – we were going to take a shortcut via another route to the one we ascended on, known as the western route. It was believed to be even gnarlier than the ascent. Indeed the first mile was incredibly sketchy as the slope was at least 60 degrees and any slip would be catastrophic. However the route got mellower the further we descended until it was a walk in the park. The trail was still largely buried under the snow but our navigators did a great job of steering us in the right direction. We rejoined the PCT after a couple of hours and proceeded towards the dreaded Fuller Ridge.

However to my relief Fuller Ridge was also much easier than I anticipated. There were a few sections where it was a little sketchy but in no areas did I think dying was a distinct possibility, unlike on Apache Peak and San Jacinto. After this ridgeline we began one of the biggest descents of the entire trail, roughly 7000 feet. Our crew from last night in the hut had broken up into smaller groups, but Anni and I rejoined many of them later that night at a nice spot directly below the now very impressive view of San Jacinto's snowy summit straight above us. It was good to be warm and back in the snow-free desert again.



View from my tent up to San Jacinto

The following morning Anni and I were the last to leave camp, except Crush who was taking things easy as well. The three of us were walking together when we saw a giant snake crossing a dirt road. It was a sight to behold how long and majestic this thing was. From my limited knowledge of American snakes, it seemed to me that the Rattlesnake was the only one to be fearful of, and this wasn't one of them.

We came to the i10 freeway which connects Los Angeles to Palm Springs and there was an overpass across a dry creek bed that allowed us to cross under it. Of course there was the usual trail magic left at these types of places and this batch was one of the best yet- cold beers, Gatorade, orange juice, and even some snack food. I remember Crush being particularly hilarious at this point. This guy was just so incredible. The thing I liked about him was that he was just so real and genuine, but yet he could be so funny. He had no ego about him at all - and sarcasm wasn't how he got his laughs.



Trail magic under the overpass, before others arrived

About 30 minutes after leaving this nirvana, Crush caught up to me and asked if I had my Sawyer water filter with me. I didn't and he explained he had seen it back under the bridge and wondered if it was mine. My heart sunk as I had to backtrack so far and get it. Any further than this and I possibly would've

decided it was too far. Although having a water filter is pretty much essential in these parts, so there was never really a doubt in my mind. I put down my backpack and started running back.

I found a crowd back there and they felt sorry for me having to do the big backtrack, throwing me another beer and suggesting I chug it right there and then. So I did, and they loved it! I went back on my way again, semi-jogging/fast walking. Eventually I caught back up to my set-down backpack and a couple of hours later I caught up to everyone again, passing huge wind turbine farms whose whirring towers were a sight to behold. This valley between Palm Springs and LA was like a wind funnel and it made sense to put a wind farm here as there was pretty much a non-stop gale force wind blowing at all times. The final 10km was uphill and incredibly tiring. We were now in a big canyon carved out by Mission Creek and tomorrow's hike would be another huge ascent up in the direction of Big Bear, a ski resort and another resupply point.

Anni and I camped next to each other again and the next morning we started out together before coming to Mission Creek and needing to cross it. Everyone else was on the far bank sunbaking and one guy was even meditating on his own. Quite a zen and blissful place to find ourselves. Anni got caught up in the whole serenity and took off all her clothes except for her bottoms. I took a swim in the creek with Diego, a super interesting young guy of about 30 years old whose tales of his real life job kept me enthralled. He was a botanist and lived with wolves in a log cabin in the middle of the Montana wilderness and his stories of how the wolves came to accept him were simply incredible.

Everyone was set in for the long haul on this beach of sorts, Diego's red sunburn more than a little disconcerting, as his skin was covered in blisters but he didn't seem to care. I decided I'd had enough and wanted to keep moving. Anni tagged along of course- after all, she knew I was her navigator now and she'd be foolish to leave me! She had tried to get a new phone in Idyllwild, but had to order it over the internet and delivery time meant she had to mail it forward rather than wait a week. She was still hiking topless, only underwear on. The hikers we passed were more than a little bemused of course, as was I!

It was a brutal uphill climb crossing Mission Creek at least two dozen times. The first crossing we tried to rock hop, but in the end it became obvious it was pointless to sit down and take our shoes off each time, so we just let our shoes get completely wet and crossed with no delay. The terrain was rather desolate given wildfires had burnt any tree cover from previous seasons. I remember feeling a little despondent about the whole thru-hiking thing at this point, though I knew it was just a short term feeling. We camped up at 7400 feet so it was rather cold again, although no snow just yet. I was a little tired of the whole Anni situation, given I was constantly waiting for her to catch up. It was totally not her fault though - she was a tough girl, hardly ever whinged about anything and was good company. The fault lay with me for being so impatient, and I knew that.

Back on the trail after a cold morning, I once again got hit by pessimism as lots of blown down trees were constantly blocking the trail, requiring constant detours. The landscape was still quite ugly and burnt, but the higher we climbed the better it got. Finally some big alpine peaks loomed into view again - this time it was San Geronimo, and it was still buried deep in the white stuff. Fortunately the PCT didn't

climb this mountain, one of the few big ones it chose to detour. Instead we angled towards Big Bear Lake. Beautiful fir trees were returning to the landscape, and beauty seemed to increase with every step I was taking.

After bumping into a bunch of familiar faces at a rest stop, Anni and I pushed on for another big day, choosing to camp a few miles out from Big Bear so that we could essentially have a rest day tomorrow but not have to pay for a hotel. There was the big full moon of Easter this night, no clouds and it was warm. It was a magical setting, desert vistas off one side, the white of San Gorgonio on the other. The stargazing was incredible of course, but we were asleep after only a few minutes of taking it all in above us.



San Gorgonio

We took a 'zero' in Big Bear, meaning we didn't hike any miles that day. We shopped at Dollar Tree, a fantastic store where everything literally costs one dollar. No matter the item. A great place to resupply as all the food they stored was non-perishable and perfect for hiking. We checked in to the local hostel where it was filled entirely with PCT hikers and included free breakfast and dinner. Anni and I got a private room together, but we still ate with everyone, including Argentinians, Swiss, Danish, French and a Spanish couple. Anni finally got her new phone too, so the weight of responsibility was off my shoulders now.



Funnily enough I just wanted to be alone again- so I told Anni I wanted to put in a couple of big mile days while she wanted to stay another day and rest. We both knew it was potentially the last we'd see each other, as she was quite a bit slower than me and would never keep up if she was left to walk on her own. I knew I was mad to want to break free like this given I liked her so much. I guess I was feeling the pressing need to make some solid progress given it was such a long trail.

With my washing finally done, I gave Anni a big hug and set off outside towards the road, sticking my thumb out and getting picked up pretty quickly. It was an older lady called Linda, and she had a heart of gold. This was a trail town, used to PCT hikers like myself, and she knew exactly where I needed to be dropped off again. Only towards the very end of the twenty minute drive (most of it totally out of the way she was headed), did she drop the fact she was Christian and was going to pray for me and my safety on the trail. God bless her and trail angels like this, they were truly some of the nicest and most generous people on this earth.

I was feeling refreshed from my day off, and blasted onto the trail, finally able to hike at my own pace and loving the physical challenge of hiking at speed. I remember coming up behind a solo female hiker who was clearly lost in her own thoughts and didn't hear me approach from behind despite my intentional kicking of rocks and banging my hiking poles together - generally trying to make my presence well and truly known, short of singing a song or something. She jumped about 10 feet in the air when I was within a few metres of her and screamed loudly. I apologized profusely, but she was so visibly shaken and still trembling so I had to just smile, apologize and keep walking.

I camped that night under a big tree beside a fast flowing and deep creek. It was completely concealed from the trail, so I took the chance to go for a swim and wash up. It felt so good after a big day of hiking in the heat. A couple of others came into the area to camp that night, but were so far away it was almost like I had the place all to myself. The full moon of Easter was still shining strong above.

I woke under the grand tree beside the river and set out again, meeting a guy called Ties (pronounced “Tees”) from the Netherlands, about 30 years old. We got talking and he told me he had a girlfriend of six and a half years but was walking the trail without her as she got a serious job offer and had to leave Amsterdam for several months of training anyway and he wanted to knock off this dream of walking the PCT while she was gone. He was such a fast hiker that it was only going to take him a few months too. Besides Camino Steve, Ties was the best hiker I had come across. I would see a lot of him over the coming week.

I came across some natural hot springs that were earmarked by the app I was using as a place where people love to get nude, and indeed, about 50 people were here, about half of whom were PCT hikers and the other half were Los Angeles locals who had hiked in. About half the people were indeed sans clothing, and the hot springs themselves were pretty good despite the crowd. I had a quick dip but didn’t stay too long. I also had lots of cuts and didn’t want them to get infected by the water. The trail was following another canyon with a river in the middle, and there were a few crossings, the biggest over a footbridge. This was my biggest day so far, over 50km. I kept walking until just before darkness, struggling to find a suitable camp site and starting to panic before finally finding somewhere near Stillwater Lake, a huge man-made reservoir.



Yes they are bare bottoms! The hot spring is centre right.

On settling into my tent that night I remember looking at my skin and noticing it was saggy. I was wasting away so quickly that my skin was now loose. It was a disturbing sight! I woke to heavy condensation all over my tent, despite the clear skies. In fact condensation was a serious issue every morning for the next few nights, for reasons I couldn’t fathom. Not having the time to wait for it to dry, I just stuffed it in its casing again, hoping I’d remember to dry it later. The trail skirted around the edges of Stillwater Lake and it was actually a magical place, despite the fact it was man-made. I met a guy called Nate who was an intelligence officer with the US Army and had worked with Edward Snowden in

Hawaii before all that went down! He was good company and we hiked together for a few hours as we approached the famous McDonald's at Cajon Junction.



Stillwater Lake, layered mountains beyond

The trail crossed under the i15 freeway here and there were multiple fast food outlets conveniently right off trail. We were a sight to behold in the busy McDonalds, about a dozen or more of us present at all times. We stood in stark contrast to the general public, completely filthy and skinny as rakes with huge backpacks and walking poles. One guy in line next to me started chatting and said he had tried walking a small section of the PCT in the past but completely failed, quitting after a few days. He was in awe of us and thought we were all “magnificent athletes”. Nice words from a nice man. He also told me he had heard that a famous hiker called Second Chance was in this very McDonalds only yesterday. This guy was possibly the most famous on the trail, as he was attempting to walk to Canada weighing about 400 pounds. He was morbidly obese, but had already lost about 60 pounds and getting faster with each day. He had started very early knowing he would need the extra time. I was soon to catch up to this famous guy. And I say famous as he was blogging on YouTube with a following in the millions. I had heard about him from virtually the moment I started on trail. Hopefully I would pass him tomorrow. In the meantime, I devoured four burgers, two apple pies and a sundae. And I still wasn't full. My body was crying out for calories, even if they were of the low quality variety provided by McDonalds. After all, if Second Chance could stop at McDonalds then I definitely could!

I met up with Ties again and we hiked on with full stomachs, soon coming across a water cache left by trail angels that would be the last until Wrightwood, over a day away. I filled up three huge containers containing over 5 litres of water (that's 5kg!) and set out on what would be the biggest ascent of the whole PCT - over 7000 feet in one continuous pitch. The plan was to knock off a few miles before sundown but leave the majority until tomorrow. With heavy packs back on our shoulders, we began up the mountain again, rising above the madness of Cajon Junction and what has to be the busiest valley I have ever seen. There are literally thousands of cars and trucks moving through this pass at any one time, a river of white or red lights, depending on what direction they were travelling. And to make it

even busier, there was a railway line connecting the rest of the US as well and freight trains were constantly passing by. The traffic did not stop during the wee hours of the night either - it was literally bumper to bumper at all times.



Ties - only a super hiker can pull off spandex pants!

As we climbed in the fading light, I was wondering how we would find a place to sleep, as there was literally nowhere given the steepness of the terrain. Sleeping right on the trail itself was a distinct possibility. Our apps were telling us there were no camp sites for a long way too. However right before I was about to whip out my headlamp for some night hiking, we came across a ledge right off trail. It was only big enough for one so I offered it to Ties and said I'd scout ahead. After going ten minutes further I backtracked and said I'd have to be camping with him tonight. Fortunately I found a coffin-sized patch of reasonably flat ground just beyond where he was, but it was very rocky and only suitable for cowboy camping, definitely not a tent. I couldn't believe it had taken me this long to try cowboy camping, but I quickly decided it was great. I was perched on a ledge overlooking the river of red and white lights snaking up the Cajon Junction pass like arteries and with the surrounding big mountains and twinkling lights of the Los Angeles metropolis off in the distance, it was a pretty incredible setting. Not needing much of a dinner after the gorging in McDonalds, I was content with a bit of peanut butter straight from the jar.

Train and truck horns were audible all night, but I managed to sleep with the still big Easter moon blazing above. Strangely I awoke on sunrise to my sleeping bag completely soaked, despite the air being clear. Then I remembered being in the middle of a big condensation cloud during the night. It had been so strong that it had soaked everything as much as heavy rain would. My sleeping bag needed drying before setting out again, so I let Ties push on without me. The sunrise was suitably spectacular and by

the time it was fully up I had already knocked out some steep miles. As I knew already, the day would be uphill the entire day. I passed another Dutch guy called Tim, a bit unfriendly to be honest. I asked him if he'd seen Ties, but he replied he didn't want to meet other Dutch people actually and hadn't. I didn't want to waste much time trying to get to know him and we parted ways.

I came up to a small group of three, one big guy and two others, passing them quickly with a brief greeting before thirty seconds later realizing that the bigger guy looked exactly like the photos I'd seen of Second Chance. And as I met others nearby I asked them and they confirmed it had been him, showing me selfies they'd taken of them together. I could've turned around and done the same myself, but to be honest I wasn't feeling like that was something I wanted to do. He was probably sick of being a celebrity after all.

I hit snow again, some bad enough to put on microspikes, but it wasn't as sketchy as it was near Idyllwild. I eventually made it to the highway that led to Wrightwood and stuck my thumb out. I was a little annoyed Tim the unfriendly Dutch guy appeared soon after and joined me. I was even more annoyed when another group appeared ten minutes later and took up a position where they were trying to snake us for the first hitchhike ride. So Tim and I simply walked further on than them, shooting them death stares as we took up our new positions. They got the drift and decided to give up until we'd been picked up first, sitting on a nearby table. It was a deathly quiet road as the far end of this highway was still closed for the winter, but alas Tim and I eventually got picked up by a local.

He was very eccentric, one of those uniquely American types with vast conspiracy theories. He swore black and blue he had seen a Sasquatch (a yeti) at Silverwood Lake a few years ago, telling me this story while staring at me through the rear view mirror, disturbing given the narrow mountain road we were now twisting and turning on. How he managed to see the road as well I have no idea as his eyes never left mine. Despite him bordering on being crazy, I couldn't help but be appreciative of the ride, as otherwise we were screwed. He dropped us off on the main road in the middle of town in the soft afternoon light and I proceeded to resupply at the local supermarket and charge my phone again in an area set aside especially for PCT hikers. Lots of trail angels called past offering beds for the night, or left their phone numbers on bulletin boards around town. This was a very hiker friendly town. I ran into a few people I knew, and even met a girl called Cougar Bait as well. We laughed at it, debating who the original Cougar Bait was and who was the imposter.

I was still undecided as to whether I should be spending too much time here in Wrightwood, as Ties had told me he wasn't going into Wrightwood but would push on to Agua Dulce (and the famous 'Hiker Heaven') instead. This was a huge stretch without resupply that could only be contemplated if you were a super-hiker like him. I had now resupplied and suddenly decided I wanted to press on, so I stuck my thumb out again and almost instantly got a ride from another local called Mark, this one a very intelligent and well-spoken man and we had a very good chat about all manner of deep issues in our short 15 minute ride back to the trailhead. He dropped me off and we shook hands like best friends before I waved him off and I hiked on for about half an hour until I came across a great camp site in the fading light. I recall receiving a message from Camino Steve who was a few days in front of me, saying that the trail ahead was extremely dangerous and someone had died on Baden Powell, the next big

mountain the trail crossed and which loomed up directly in front of me as I set up camp. It was another sobering moment. However I believe this information was incorrect, because no one I came across ever heard another story about a fatality there. A girl had fallen in the snow and been seriously injured, requiring a helicopter evacuation recently, but it was another thing for someone to die. However for now I had to believe him, so being solo again at this critical junction I made the decision I'd road walk the next day on an alternative route rather than climb Baden Powell on my own. Ties was on his own too so I felt like a bit of a wimp in comparison, but I had to acknowledge that I simply didn't like hiking in snow in any case. I was constantly slipping and sliding, and everything became wet. It just wasn't fun.

I didn't get much sleep from more strong winds, so I set out early, following a long and deserted road all around the edges of Baden Powell, passing big rock falls and mini avalanches along the way which justified why they chose to close this highway every winter. It was still closed, big barriers preventing cars from being there. I was completely on my own walking in the middle of the highway and listening to music through my headphones when I got startled by a car coming up behind me quite fast and dodging the huge rocks littering the highway. How he got through the barriers I have no idea.

I came across Ties only 200 metres from where the trail crosses the highway again after the Baden Powell section. It had been a mind-numbingly long walk on hard bitumen and I was feeling a little guilty so when I got 'busted' by Ties walking on the road I was suitably embarrassed. I was never hiding the fact, but I guess I hoped he'd never know. Anyway he told me it hadn't been too bad up there - but then again, he was a super-hiker, so perhaps his judgment was off. I followed him for a while on another big ascending section though constant snow, before realizing I just couldn't keep up with him. Some of the sections required microspikes and certainly required concentration.

The trail crossed another highway and I took my shoes off to dry my wet feet. At this point a huge blast of wind hit the highway and the inner soles and my socks took flight, flying about a hundred metres down the road and one inner sole would've kept blowing away but for the miraculous position of a PCT hiker at the precise point it was passing by. I was so glad for this minor miracle and thanked him profusely. He went on to tell me another section of trail ahead was closed due to an endangered species or something like that, so another big section would require road walking. Road walking is actually quite hard as the hard surface wears the joints out when you have a big backpack on your back. I finally hit more dirt trail but quickly called it a day when I found a good camping site at only 2pm. It would be another seven hours before darkness fell, and I'd be lying in a hot tent all that time with nothing much to do, but there was no alternative really. This was another dark day of thru-hiking. Fortunately there weren't too many.

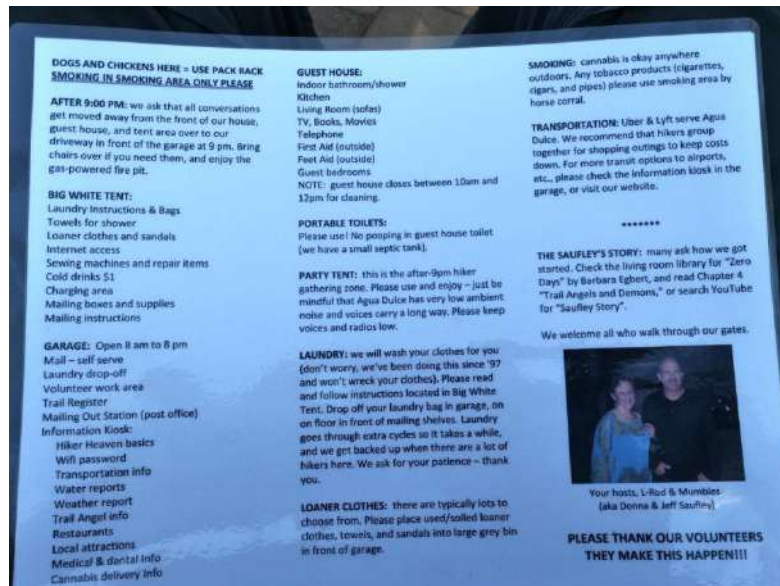
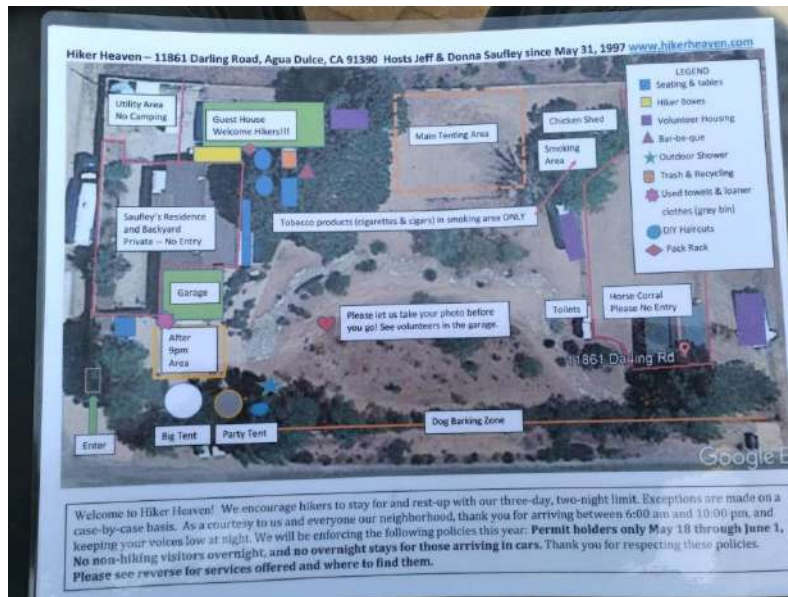
I made up for it the next day, putting in another 50km up and down mountains in the baking sun. It was relentless and made worse by the fact I was alone. I did have a few chats along the way, including a nice older Oregon couple who showed me what Poodle Bush looks like. It was well that they did show me, because it can cause hospitalization if it comes in contact with skin. It looked, and smelled exactly like marijuana, and they told me that once some young PCT hikers had mistook its identity and tried to smoke it, nearly dying in the process.

I camped at Meadow Flats campground, an official camp site run by the forest service but in the middle of nowhere and there was only one other European guy there when I showed up. I was in touch with Anni on my phone who was of course a few days behind by now and she was telling me she needed to see a doctor in LA and was panicking because she didn't know how to go about getting there. I did her a big favour by posting on a PCT Trail Angel Facebook group about the fact she needed a ride into LA, and somehow arranged a trail angel to pick her up at a designated spot on a remote highway in the middle of nowhere the next day. It was a minor miracle it had all worked out for her.

Once again I was completely shattered from the big day in the heat and relentless climbing. I came to realize that while hiking under such conditions my mind quietens down to such a degree from the physical effort that it is almost like I am meditating. Such is why I hike I guess - to quieten my overactive brain. Of course, constantly being in nature is incredibly therapeutic as well. As the famous naturalist John Muir said, "Into the forest I go, to lose my mind and find my soul".

The next day was hiking in very hot weather again. I hit a small settlement called Acton, really just a camping ground. I stopped and bought ice cream, enjoying the air conditioning and chatting to other new hikers I'd never met. Back on the trail I nearly got heat stroke as I approached Agua Dulce, having to lie down in the shade a few kilometres short. This was the town where the famous 'Hiker Heaven' is, possibly one of the most memorable trail angel places on the entire PCT. I'd heard about it almost from the start so was quite excited to be approaching it, if I could just make it before I collapsed. I bumped into Ties outside a Pizza shop, too exhausted to talk much. So we just sat together and ate and mumbled a bit to each other as we scoffed down food in the shade from the powerful overhead sun.

We walked the extra mile to Hiker Heaven down a side road from the centre of town. It was predictably amazing. Words struggle to do justice. It was essentially a block of land with a few campervans and demountables on it as well as a garage on the side of a house that was filled with about five volunteers at any one time. One of these volunteers gave us (and every new arrival) a briefing on how everything works. It was a military style operation in its efficiency, designed to help a PCT hiker in every way possible. We could hand our laundry in to be done by volunteers. We could even get things like haircuts at a little salon station under a tree beside the outdoor shower. There was a big campervan that was set up as a social gathering place, but the dominant feature was a big sea of tents set up next to each other. About 50 in a small area, quite a sight to behold. I found one of the last remaining patches and set up shop. Once again, it is important to remember, that all of this was set up by a trail angel and they expected nothing in return. Nothing! Not even a donation jar. It was seriously incredible and a sign of how tight the PCT hiking community is.



The mood was very chill, but there was still a lot of socializing going on. I met loads of cool new people. I was camped right next to the smokers section, where hay bales were placed so people could sit around. So I was right in the middle of it. Almost everyone was tucked away in their tents by dark, not wanting to keep others up given how closely everyone was sleeping. Indeed it needn't have mattered though, as during the night there was a nonstop cacophony from all manner of species. There were some loud owls hooting from the trees, and chickens were roaming the grounds, constantly clucking and seemingly walking right next to my head so close did they seem. The roosters were crowing and once again a pack of nearby coyotes was howling from the nearby hills and local dogs were barking back at them. Horses in the yards right next to our tents were neighing and of course the Homo Sapiens in their tents were being equally loud – snoring loudly, tossing around in their sleeping bags that never ceased to rustle and zips

that seemed to shatter any brief silence when someone had to get up and pee. It was quite the menagerie.



The next day was a zero. Half the tents had packed up and left for the trail again, the other half were staying like me. I had the good fortune of my tent being right next to an English guy called Six Weeks. He was the nicest guy ever, sincere and generous. He was wearing hearing aids, and despite them he repeatedly had to ask again what I had just asked. He told me he was going deaf...and blind. It was getting worse with every year. There was no disease or condition as far as he could tell me - just "bad genes". Hiking this hike was his way of proving to himself that his body could still perform. Sadly, it was proving to be otherwise for him. He was hiking very slowly and had been at Hiker Heaven for about a week with a foot issue. 'Psychosomatic' he told me, going on to explain that he believed his injury was possibly all in his head. He was quite depressed, believing that his dark and quiet future was looking very grim and I couldn't help but feel extremely sorry for him. He was married to what must've been an amazing girl back in England.

The others I met that day included Superman and Crypto (an older man who wore a Superman shirt all the time and his furry friend that was his hiking partner), a guy called Josh and two hardcore looking German brothers, one of whom was very extroverted, the other who hardly said a word. I remember the extroverted one told me incredible stories of underground nightclubs in Paris, the details of which should never be made public. He was a very cool guy.



Superman and Crypto

Four of us ordered an Uber to go to a big supermarket in a town about half an hour away, as the one in Agua Dulce was woefully inadequate for hikers with outlandish prices to boot. Of course we all bought too much food but that just meant it would be a nonstop eating marathon before we hit the trail again. Being in town was always a good opportunity to eat fresh fruit and vegetables, as their intake was obviously lacking while on trail.

My diet on trail was extra monotonous. I had fallen into a routine of buying and eating the same thing for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Breakfast was instant oatmeal with no milk, just water. It was the flavoured variety to make it edible. Lunch was eaten on the fly, so just muesli bars, blocks of cheese, chocolate bars, cookies, trail mix and things like that. High energy, low weight and volume. Dinner was always instant mashed potato with tuna mixed with some butter, olive oil or mayonnaise. Always. So town was a chance to mix things up a bit and remember how good eating can be.

Many people took resupply very seriously, prepping months in advance of the PCT and having someone send boxes to post offices in towns along the way. But I had read on blogs and knew in my heart as well that doing it like that could potentially be very frustrating if parcels were lost or delayed, etc. Not to mention I didn't have many people in the US I was prepared to ask such a big favour of either.

The next day I was back on trail early, packing up at first sunrise and trying to be as quiet as possible so as not to disturb the people sleeping in. The trail was climbing for most of the day, the mountains less severe than those I had come from, but the trail still climbing nonetheless. The views from high up were quite memorable, layered mountains silhouetted against each other in the distance, smooth in their appearance. I was headed to another trail angel place, this one only a big day's hike away. It was called Casa de Luna and was going to be another interesting stop to take. Some people bypassed it given Hiker

Heaven was so close but I didn't want to miss out on what would be another memorable trail angel experience.



Layered mountains en route to Casa de Luna

As soon as we hit the Green Valley highway, there was an older hippie called Scott waiting in a car for us. I had caught up to a girl called Trooper and the two of us jumped in the back of the car and Scott whisked us the ten minutes down the road, stopping first at a little grocery store for us to buy some beers. This was a party place apparently, Scott made that very clear. We were dropped off outside the house before Scott returned to the trailhead to pick up more hikers. We got a brief run down from another volunteer, and told to choose a Hawaiian shirt from the hundreds hanging on clothes racks. Everyone was sitting around chatting and drinking. We were told to find some spare ground in the backyard to pitch our tent. It was a huge backyard, many acres in size, but covered in thick forest, so that one could camp in relative privacy. The whole forest was adorned with little ornaments and small messages hung from trees, like 'What happens in the forest, stays in the forest'. This place definitely had atmosphere. I pitched my tent and then rejoined the crowd at the front of the house, Hawaiian shirt on and six-pack in hand.



A free dinner was served to us (and indeed to every hiker that showed up, every single day of the hiking season!) It was tacos, and delicious. We were also given PCT bandanas, emblazoned with the map of the trail. However the price for accepting it was to do a little dance in front of everyone and give Terri a big bear hug. She was quite the gregarious host. It was her place and she and her husband were very entertaining and made everyone feel welcome. I played a guy called Wes in chess. He was an ex-Marine, in a reconnaissance unit and he was a Master-level chess player, rated 2100. He beat me 2-1, I was quite thrilled to win one game of course. He was from Seattle and quite obviously had a vast intelligence to him. I loved meeting these types of people. I also met some more Aussies, Molly and Zach, as well as a guy called Walkabout.

The next morning some of us who were leaving had a group photo after being served pancakes and coffee for breakfast, once again for free. While taking the group photo, the somewhat overweight Terri dropped her trousers and mooned everyone, making us double over in laughter and the perfect photo was taken. "Whoops, it's a bit early for that isn't it!", she said.



Scott dropped four of us at the trailhead again after breakfast, and gradually we spread out along the trail. It was a big day, but with all the energy from eating and drinking in the body I handled it fine,

punching out 42km despite the late start to the day. One of the water sources along the way was an underground reservoir but the app had recent comments from hikers saying it was contaminated by a dead bear in it! I went up to inspect it and sure enough there was an overwhelming stench of something dead, so I hiked on and became very thirsty given there wasn't another water source until the place I hoped to camp at later that night.

Camped next to this water supply, I was on top of a ridgeline. There was another couple nearby - possibly lesbian as they were two dykey looking girls sharing a tent together. We waved at each other to acknowledge each other's presence, but beyond that they were camped far enough away to offer relative privacy. However during the night a HUGE storm blew through the area. I was on top of the ridgeline of course, a precarious position for lightning strikes. Indeed while I was in my tent I was counting the seconds between lightning flash and thunder and with every strike it was clearly getting closer, such that soon there was hardly any pause between the two. One lightning strike must've hit a tree right nearby so loud was the boom, along with the ferocious rain of course. Lightning strike is a very real danger while camping, a much bigger risk than things like bear or cougar attack, and so I was lying in my tent feeling extremely vulnerable. I wondered how my lesbian neighbours were faring in all this.

The next day I emerged early to find them already gone, hopefully not blown away. I hadn't slept much, if anything, but luckily it would be mostly downhill now, towards 'Hiker Town', not quite a trail angel place given they charged money, but nonetheless a very authentic experience once again. It was a place set up as an old western town, with the office a saloon and small log cabins as single rooms for hikers to stay in for 10 bucks a night, or you could tent camp for free if you wanted. I chose to take the opportunity to sleep on a bed given it was so cheap.

There was another area where people all came together and socialized, and Cruze Control (who I had met back in Casa de Luna) showed me a photo on his phone of a cougar he had seen on the trail that morning. I would've been right behind him, so it was quite confronting to see it. They are very hard to see in the wild apparently. The belief is that if you see one it is likely right before you are going to be attacked, so good at stealth are these creatures.

Hiker Town even had some beat up cars that hikers could just jump in for the express purpose of driving the ten miles down the road to a store which was owned by the same owner as Hiker Town. We could resupply there, and eat at the café inside the store too. A group of us ordered burgers and salad after driving in an old BMW to get there. When I got back to Hiker Town I remember chatting with Duchess who was in the little cabin next to mine. She was 72 years old, and had written several books, including one espousing the benefits of walking for aging people, believing that walking increases the length of telomeres in our chromosomes, thereby delaying the aging process. Her appearance was testament to this theory. She was very interesting of course and told me stories of her youth travelling to the Himalayas on the Hippie Trail.

The next day I woke up early and four of us set out in short order, spaced out by several hundred metres. We followed the aqueduct which supplies water to all of Los Angeles, piped from the nearby Owens Valley. At one point it was a huge pipeline we were following and we walked on top of it. It was

pretty much the first bit of proper flat terrain I had experienced on the PCT thus far. I had consumed an entire block of cheese by midday and suddenly found myself hiking like a demon with all this energy and flat terrain (possibly propelled by flatulence from the cheese!).

I walked with an older guy whose name escapes me, and we arrived at another of the numerous wind farms found in southern California. We found some more trail magic here - cans of free soda left for hikers. I drank one but took the opportunity to part ways and hike alone again. It got steep again as we had crossed the plain now. I ended up hiking over 55km that day and could easily have kept going so strong was I feeling, but instead finding a great campsite in the lee of a strong wind as dusk closed in. The wind had been strong all day actually, but had mostly been a tail or side wind thankfully. I was camped on another ridgeline in a small forest but with views to the desert valley beyond.



I woke early and walked 15km to Willow Spring Road where I hitchhiked to Mojave rather than Tehachapi where most other hikers went. This was based on the fact that I could see a Motel 6 that was dirt cheap but got good reviews. The driver who picked me up was nice, a girl my age who was married to a test pilot and who flew on all sorts of highly classified missions none of which she could tell me (she probably didn't know what he got up to either). She had lived in Australia for a while in her younger years and loved it. She dropped me off at the motel where I got my laundry done and shopped for food as well. I bought a huge tub of ice cream and watched TV in bed all afternoon. Very relaxing. I only saw one other PCT hiker in the motel and he was doing the same.

The next morning I had great difficulty hitching back to the trail. I waited beside the road with my thumb out at what I thought was a pretty good spot, watching car after car look at me but choose to ignore me, despite my big smile. After two and a half hours I'd cracked the shits, having resorted to waving a fistful of dollars at cars but them still ignoring me. I even had one young guy, clearly stoned out of his mind, pull over at the sight of the money before hearing that I needed a ride just 15 minutes up the road but he changed his mind and pulled away. I cursed the world and decided I'd have to do the mammoth alternative of catching a very infrequent public bus from Mojave to Tehachapi and then get a ride to the trail from that far more hiker-friendly place.

I walked to where the bus stop was but decided to check with a local that it was indeed the right place to wait for the bus. He asked where I was headed, and when I told him to the PCT trailhead he said "No

worries, jump in my car, I can take you there as it's on my way". An unbelievable stroke of luck at the very last opportunity, and saving me about a day's delay.

Back on the trail, I was hiking through the middle of a gigantic wind farm again, the size of the towers hard to fathom. I nearly stepped on another small snake, this one striking my pole twice as I gave it a little poke to try and make it move off the trail. I bumped into the guy I'd seen back at Motel 6 and we had a good chat in the overwhelming heat. There were no trees to provide any sort of shade, and I could only imagine how hard it must be to do this southern Californian section during the peak of summer. I remember passing through a plague of butterflies, all of them dancing in the air around me and seeming to follow me as I hiked. A nice moment for sure.

I found a good campsite and watched the sun set through my tent window. However I didn't sleep well that night as I was so damn thirsty. I'd hiked over 50km and didn't find any water before having to set up camp so I had to lie in my tent thinking of how thirsty I was. By the time I reached a water source 12km into the next day, I'd gone for about 16 hours without a single drop of water. I drank like a camel, much to the amusement of a few hikers I found there. Water is needed for cooking of course, so last night's meal had been just a few muesli bars, so I ate a big breakfast and let the energy seep back into me before moving on.

It was another hot day and I found myself at noon on an excruciatingly steep uphill climb. There were some trees though, at least offering some respite from the powerful sun beating down from above. I ran out of water again, going for 8km without water before bumping into an elderly couple who kindly offered me some of theirs. I was too thirsty to turn this kind offer down. We talked about what our strategies would be for the now imminent Sierra Nevada section.

I was only a few days out now, and it was time to make a decision as to what I would do. It seemed everyone had a different idea as to how to handle it. Most people were going to 'flip' up to somewhere further north where it was lower elevation and come back to the Sierra later in the season when the snow had hopefully melted. But I had serious doubts about this strategy as almost the entire PCT further north was still buried in snow, and to make matters worse it was proving to be a cool spring (outside of the desert I was in at least) and the forecast was for even more snow in the days to come. I was looking at webcams at certain ski resorts the trail passed further north and it was looking very grim indeed. There had pretty much never been a winter like this one since records began.



The next day was beautiful hiking in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. The scenery was magnificent, a highly underrated area given no one ever talked about it. The views were simply overwhelming - the distant white peaks of the Sierra Nevada looming up on the horizon.

I came across the best trail magic ever here. A father and son team had driven all the way from Utah in their van to set up next to the PCT in an extremely remote area where a dirt road provided them access. They had a little outdoor barbeque and prepared an absolute feast for passing hikers. Apparently they were going to be hiking the PCT together in 2021 and wanted to give good karma for their hike. There were toasted sandwiches with egg and cheese, apples, oranges, muesli bars, cans of soda, cookies, tubs of strawberries, you name it, it was here. They had set up camping chairs for us to sit in and about a half dozen of us sat around talking in between mouthfuls, under a shade cloth stretching out the side of their van.

Refreshed and reinvigorated, I set out again after being warned about a rattlesnake seen on the trail just ahead. It was a mammoth climb straight out of Bird Spring Pass where the van had been, and I was so thankful that I at least had the energy to attempt such a climb. It had been a very waterless area over the past few days, necessitating huge water carries over stretches of 30km or more and weighing my pack down.

I lay in my tent and took in the view, loving the golden hour on dusk where the light was soft and the endorphins from a big day of extremely physical hiking kicking in nicely. It had been 55km this day – I'd been putting in huge miles recently and would go on to cover the last 220km to Kennedy Meadows in just four days. And this was incredibly steep terrain in the heat of the desert too, so an incredible push

to the limits of my body. I was so physically present in my body that like I said earlier, it was like a long meditation for my mind. It was almost a spiritual experience to be pushing myself so hard like this.

Of course I knew it was insanity, as getting to Kennedy Meadows a few days early was obviously pointless with the snow like it was. But I had already decided the only valid option for me was to return to Australia for a while. I had no family in America, so I didn't have a place I could hole up in for a while to wait out the snow for a couple of months. I would go insane waiting around like that anyway, without a job to do. I knew flipping would only put me in more snow, so the plan was to go home to Australia for a while and come back later in the year. I was not a mountaineer, and had no experience hiking in snowy alpine environments. Hiking in snow meant buying a huge amount of new and expensive gear (crampons, ice-axe, bigger backpack, etc) plus the logistics of storing other gear and moving stuff up trail where I could get it later. I had a motto in life of 'Keep it Simple' and I was going to live by that. Going up into the High Sierra this early would be like hiking in mid-winter conditions, and knowing your limits is one of the best things a hiker can do. I knew my limits – heck, I didn't even know how to self-arrest a fall using an ice-axe, and this was Mountaineering 101.

The next morning I passed through Walker Pass, stopping briefly at the campground there to chat to other hikers. On the hike out from the pass, I passed a huge trail family of about twenty hikers. I passed them all on the long uphill climb, absolutely loving the fitness that came so easily now after over 1000km on trail. We passed through some more spectacular canyons with views east to the Owens Valley. I found a camp spot that night with George, a middle-aged French American from NYC and Jamie from Colorado, the guy I'd met at Motel 6 back in Mojave. Some others arrived on dark as well, but I never got to meet them as I was already tucked away in my tent for the night. How we all fitted into this small area is beyond belief.

The next day was all downhill in the morning then one final big mountain climb, the last before Kennedy Meadows, the staging post for the Sierra Nevada section. The climb never seemed to end, and I was just so sick of these mammoth climbs in the heat. But then the descent into Kennedy Meadows was simply divine, a smooth and continuous descent that allowed for extremely fast walking on smooth trail with views to the wall of white mountains ahead - the High Sierra. The descent lasted over 20km and then a flat section to end at Kennedy Meadows. I had caught up to a bunch of Chinese hikers, about a dozen of them, all walking pretty fast with extremely small backpacks on. They were all talking Chinese and not friendly at all, but I would subsequently hear they are all crack hikers, their ultralight equipment and speedy walking early proof of this. I nearly stepped on a rattlesnake a mile out from KM, only seeing it at the last second and getting another huge fright. I arrived at the General Store in this extremely small town, more a village than anything. There was a place called Grumpys a bit further down the road where all the action took place, so I hitched a ride with other PCT hikers in the back of a local's pickup and we unloaded to the scene of another tent city of sorts.



The rattlesnake welcoming me to KM

I set up camp near my now firm friend Jamie from Colorado and quickly met a bunch of others including Gauge from New York City, a cool guy who had made his mind up that he was going to go into the Sierra with a bunch of experienced people, despite having about as much alpine experience as me. He was buying up all the gear, spending thousands in a matter of days while he carefully prepared for his departure tomorrow morning. The food carries in the Sierra would be over ten days' worth, and really should be much more, as the going would be much slower in the deep snow, about a mile an hour I was told. There was a significant chance of being held up by more bad weather too - and indeed there was a fresh batch of snow forecast right for when this group would depart. They were too prepped to back out though, and would be hiking into the wild with no cell reception for over a week. Obviously most of them were serious mountaineers and had tons of experience to fall back on, but then there was Gauge. I couldn't help but admire his sheer bravery.

We all went for dinner and beers at the pub across the road and all the chat consisted of what people's plans were from here. The people here were pretty much the first to be heading into the High Sierra for the season. However the vast majority of people were either going to flip further north or bail home like me. I met Stephanie and Paul, an Aussie/British couple that had met on trail and become romantic. They were hilarious together, making jokes about their burgeoning romance in such filthy conditions as a PCT hike.



Mammoth Lakes in early February. A LOT more snow fell after this picture was taken too!

I had arranged for a non-hiking friend who I hadn't seen in over a decade to come and pick me up and take me to LAX airport so my hike had come to an end. Back in Australia I watched with horror as a series of late spring storms blew through California and Oregon right as I had gotten off trail, covering the trail in several additional feet of snow. I heard of hikers getting severe frostbite and seeing huge avalanches, not to mention the dangerous river crossings when the big melt started. I felt my decision to be somewhat vindicated, but vowed to get back on trail later in the summer. Indeed I booked a flight back to make sure I did. By September I was back in America and punched out two additional sections (one in the beautiful Cascade Mountains in Washington and the other near Lake Tahoe) covering 300km and bringing my season total to 1500km. It was of course well short of the whole 4265km, but I was satisfied that I'd got a good dose of the thru-hiking culture and it was an incredible experience that will stay with me forever!

*If you enjoyed this read, please consider buying my book about walking the Camino de Santiago in Spain titled "A Long Walk in Spain" and sold on Amazon in both e-book and paperback versions. Link to Amazon: [Click Here](#)