

North American Classic Route Description



Mt. Whitney, East Face

Grade III, 5.6

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Approach: The hike in to Iceberg Lake on the North Fork of Lone Pine Creek Trail is not particularly straightforward. Head up the Mount Whitney trail. Exit to the right in about a mile at a sign. The Forest Service has marked an earlier possible exit with a sign stating that this is not the trail to the North Fork of Lone Pine Creek. The North Fork Trail then winds through a forested area heading up the drainage. After a while it takes a left turn and heads directly for a creek crossing. The old trail goes up the right or north side of the drainage and will get the unwary hiker into a serious willows thrash. There has been an attempt recently to discourage people from taking the right turn by piling downed branches onto the old trail. The trail on the south side is quite good for an un-maintained trail, so any sign of a willows thrash is an indication the left turn was missed.



The North Fork Trail winds up the drainage, then goes back north towards the granite cliffs to another crossing of the North Fork Creek. A little further up the canyon, it ends at a large triangular shaped block that is detached from the cliff. This marks the start of the Ebersbacher ledges, a bypass for the last of the willows. The Ebersbacher ledges zig-zag to a better trail through a sandy, forested area. These ledges do not go back towards the Owens Valley much more than about 150' so going any further than that indicates you missed the upward exits from the ledges. In particular, going down or losing elevation is a bad sign. This is usually not much of a problem going up but it seems to be something to keep in mind when coming back down. I have seen people rappelling further down the canyon from the strangest perches. The Ebersbacher ledges trail has been re-routed somewhat and now goes right up to the cliff and winds as close to the cliff as possible instead of staying close to the edge of the big drop into the canyon. The trail goes up and breaks out of the canyon at Lower Boy Scout Lake. So far, this has been the straightforward part.

The trail past Lower Boy Scout Lake is indistinct. There are several trails and paths up through the scree and talus at the west end of the lake. This confusion is exacerbated when snow covers the slope at the west end of the lake. The correct trail stays close to the



Trail past Lower Boy Scout Lake
Go below smaller boulder

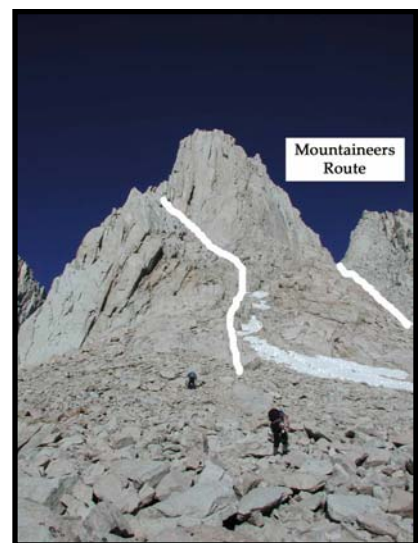
inlet creek flowing down from the upper slabs, and is easy to locate. Looking up the scree slope above the inlet to the lake are two gigantic boulders. The trail goes right underneath the lower, smaller, right hand boulder. There is an old trail that goes above the gigantic left hand boulder. The next hazard is to find the path back to the north and cross the water flowing across the slabs and get on the slabs. The trail skirting under the boulder goes up and then

heads north towards an improbable-looking break in the slabs. Head for this break, go down into the break, cross the stream, and get on the slabs on the other side. The water may be running down across these mossy slabs and can make picking a path through to the other side skittish. There are also several faint trails running up scree slopes on the south side through breaks in the willow that should be avoided. Now, head up the canyon towards the treeless outlet from Upper Boy Scout Lake.

The trail does not go to Upper Boy Scout Lake but now breaks south and up hill. Go up this section, which winds back to the west along the south edge of the bottom of a large longish ridge. The trail goes steadily up and over several moraines and then appears to head up hill towards a waterfall. This waterfall, or the cliff to the left of it, can be ascended but it is far better to continue further west about 200m, which requires a modest amount of downhill, and locate the second break in the cliffs. There is another wet area but the trail stays to the left to avoid it. Above the cliff is Iceberg Lake, base camp for parties ascending the East Face, East Buttress, a lot of routes on Russell, and home to about half the Sierra's marmot population.

The climb itself has its own nuances. From the southern edge of Iceberg Lake the Mountaineers route is clearly visible as the large couloir. To the left of the Mountaineers route there should be a notch visible near the base of the blocky ridge. Head up to this notch. The tower to the left of the notch is First Tower. This notch and the tower to its left are not visible from most viewing angles of the East Face but should be visible from the south end of Iceberg Lake, even in direct sunlight. The notch is the roping up point for the Tower Traverse, the first of the East Face Route's famous traverses.

Pitch 1 (Tower Traverse). This is about 5.3 to 5.4 in difficulty. From the notch ascend the crack and narrow face on the right side of the notch upward and toward the left. This tops out after about 20 feet and after a short step down the traverse itself is started. The traverse is blessed with large obvious footholds but has a disconcertingly minimal number of handholds. The traverse ends and a short chimney is



Climbers heading for notch behind
First Tower

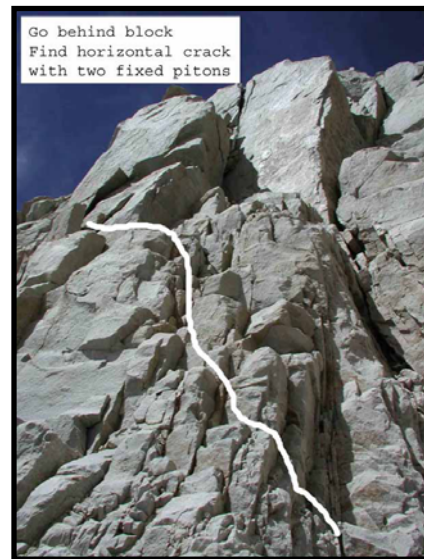
ascended. Exiting from the top of the chimney and moving left brings the climber to the start of the Washboard.

Pitches 2,3, and 4. If you use a rope on the Washboard then it will take about three pitches. There is a nice crack right in the middle of the Washboard and this may be easily ascended. There may be a section of the crack, which will appear bottomed out and difficult to climb, but fortunately many face holds appear on the face to the right. The washboard is rated "third class" but many a climbing team has belayed or roped simul-climbed the Washboard.

Pitch 5. At the top of the washboard is a huge wall. The escape is to the left through a blocky area that is about 40 feet tall. This is about fourth class to 5.7 depending on the crack system chosen.

Pitch 6. Drop down from the top of the blocky area to the lowest sandy shelf that continues around to the right. This is third to fourth class. The targeted shelf is large. Continue around to the right into a small alcove. Above the alcove are two steep (very, very steep) crack systems. To the left of the small alcove is a blocky wall. This is the start of the infamous Fresh Air Traverse.

Pitch 7 (Fresh Air Traverse). Climb up the blocky wall about 20 feet to a shelf running to the left. This passes a large block about four feet by four feet and about a foot thick. Pass either behind this block or on the outside, which is a tad exposed. Step down from the top of the block and take a look at the crux of the Fresh Air Traverse. There should be a nice crack for the hands above a wall with no footholds. This appears to head for a corner facing away from you with a dubious looking face to the left of the corner. There are two bomber pitons in the crack as of the summer of 2002. A couple of quick moves with the hands in the crack and a good stance is soon achieved. Either ascend the crack that drops down to the stance or the face. It isn't as dubious looking when right on top of it. This brings the climber to the base of a long chimney system. Belay from here. This traverse is also about 5.4 to 5.5. The major difficulty would appear to be that the Fresh Air Traverse move itself does not appear to be 5.4 and climbers look to other places on the wall to climb through. The expectation is that "just 5.4" should have lots of obvious holds. Not so, in this case. Glen Dawson was a bold young man in the summer of 1931 to be heading out on this traverse using a hemp rope and sneakers.



Start of Fresh Air Traverse
Go up about 35 feet, then left
across ledge, then behind 6' x 6'
block

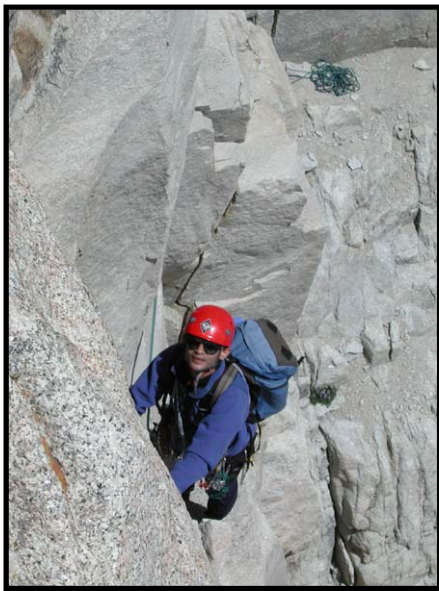
Pitch 8. Ascend the chimney system. This is somewhat harder than it looks but goes about 5.6. This eventually exits to the right at the start of the Grand Staircase. This should be called the Grand Loose Staircase.

Pitches 9 and 10. The Grand Staircase is about 200 to 300 feet of class 3 climbing so if a rope is used it would be about two pitches. All climbers are strongly urged to not use a rope in the Grand Staircase, with the exception of the weird 5.5 move about two thirds of the way up. Dragging a rope over all the loose rocks will only knock this pebble potpourri down on the following climbers who would be right in the middle of the Fresh Air Traverse. The Grand Staircase ends at another wall.

Pitch 11. There are several choices that can be made to escape the Staircase, but the two most popular are the 5.7 off-width to the left and the 5.8 finger crack to the right.

Pitch 12. Above the escape from the Staircase is a long, low fifth class pitch that angles up and back to the right. This is the end of the technical difficulties.

The remainder of the route is third class climbing over blocks. About fifty feet above the last belay spot the route joins the East Buttress Route. Head up about another 300 feet to the summit. In some sense the best is saved for the end. The last move from the blocky region pops the climber over the edge to within spitting distance of the 14,495 foot benchmark and the gaping looks of a flock of startled peak baggers.!



Arun Mahajan leading through crux of Fresh Air Traverse

The descent is via the Mountaineers Route. From the old stone USGS cabin at the summit there should be a stone windbreak visible to the west. This shields the, uh, toilet. Hike past the windbreak about 50-100 feet and look to the right (north). This should be the top of a steep couloir. Head down this couloir about 500 feet in elevation and look to the right (east) for an obvious gap behind a large tower on the ridge. This gap is about 35 feet wide and going through it brings the climber to the top of the Mountaineers Route. If the way down looks anything harder than class 2 then you have found the wrong gap. During dry years this descent should be straightforward. Many years, or perhaps early in the climbing season, there is a snowfield in the couloir and this snowfield is usually

traversed near the top. If the snowfield is icy this can be a dicey proposition and an ice axe at the minimum, or perhaps ice axe and crampons, is highly

recommended. Finally, the route is regularly climbed in a few hours, round trip, by soloists and there have been, no doubt, many an epic involving bivouacking on the route, but most capable climbing pairs should be able to climb this route in five to six hours.

Gear: A light 50 meter rope should work fine for all the technical difficulties. If it was necessary to escape from the route an extra rope would only be useful rappelling the chimney following the Fresh Air Traverse, however, there are many intermediate spots for slings even in the chimney that could be used for rappel points. The traverses themselves would have to be down-climbed or possibly rappelled with a swing to an intermediate spot. A selection of small to medium stoppers is useful. The off-width crack at the exit from the

Grand Staircase can be protected with small stoppers in a crack to the left. A selection of cams is useful. One set of green, yellow, red aliens, and .75 to 2 camalots should cover the rest of the problems. The chimney at the end of the Tower Traverse can be protected with a 3" camalot but there are other options. Bring the usual selection of slings including two long ones. An ice axe and crampons is advisable during high snow years for the descent.

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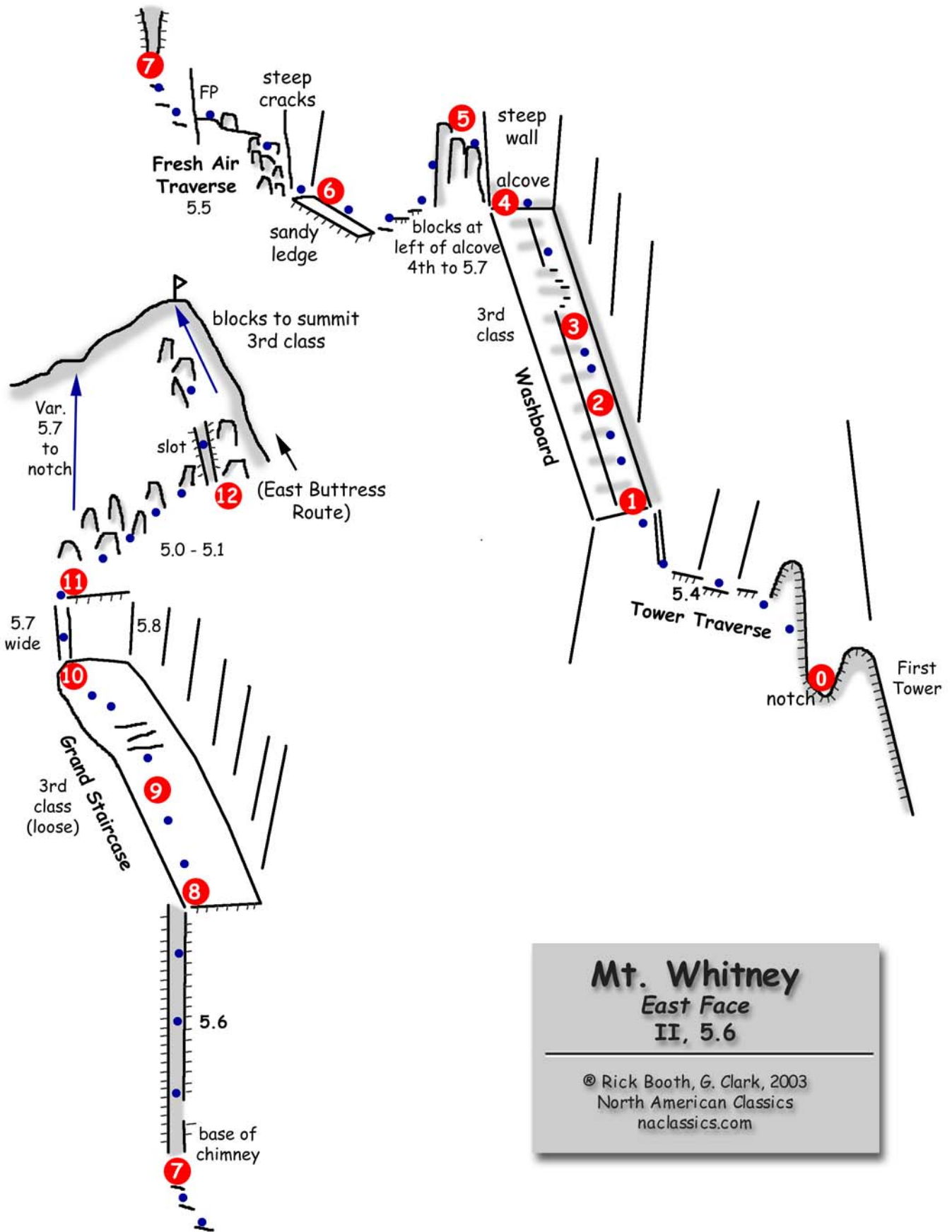
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