

WHERE NEXT

WORLD
PELTON'S W
ADVENTURE
NEXT WEEK

Nevada's Alpine Oasis

GREAT BASIN, THE SILVER STATE'S ONLY NATIONAL PARK, IS A COOL RETREAT FROM THE SUMMER HEAT. AND YOU MIGHT JUST FIND YOU'VE GOT THE PLACE TO YOURSELF. BY LOLLY MERRELL

AMERICAN WILDS

It was a hot desert morning, and we were looking for a sheepherder named Rafael Huaman, who was leading his flock miles deep into Decathion Canyon, a dusty wash creasing the southern tail of the Snake Range in Nevada's Great Basin National Park. On the advice of Great Basin park ranger Rob Ewing, the only park country official in these parts, three of us—photographer Dawn Kish, my husband, David, and I—planned to traverse the length of this little-known park south to north on a ridge entirely above treeline, backpacking five days to the park's highest point, 13,063-foot Wheeler Peak. Ewing, a beefy 44-year-old Northwestermer, was the mastermind behind our route, one he's tramped dozens of times. He intends to have it mapped, maintained, and marked in years to come as the Highland Ridge Route. But for now there are no

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trails on Great Basin's southern flanks, only hundred-year-old sheep paths, so we wanted to ask Huaman about the latest trail conditions—and locations—before setting out.

Ewing's truck bucked us along the rutted dirt road into Decathlon, ripping past rabbit-brush, greasewood, and piñon, leaving a curtain of ochre dust in our wake. Eventually, we met a mass of dirty white wool blocking the road. Ewing stopped the truck, and we jumped out and waded through the flock to speak to the shepherd. Huaman, a Peruvian, is one of many who are hired seasonally by the local sheep bosses and known for their mountain hardiness.

"*Buscas el sendero?*—Are you looking for the trail?" the herder asked over the din of bleats.

"Sí," we replied.

He pointed vaguely east and said "*Sigue derecho*—Straight ahead."

"Well," said Ewing, smoothing his bottle-brush moustache, "looks like you're on your own from here." We had a topo map, a compass, food for seven days, a battered GPS, and the sudden task of adopting a pioneer's sensibility. We shouldered our heavy packs while Ewing strolled back to the truck.

"There's a good chance you won't see another hiker for days," he enthused, waving farewell. "This is Christopher Columbus stuff!"

GREAT UNKNOWN

Only four and a half hours by car from Las Vegas, three and a half from Salt

Lake City, Great Basin National Park comprises 70,000 square acres, mostly at 7,000 to 11,000 feet above sea level. The high elevations make it a cool alpine oasis, even in summer. In fact, the altitude of our hike guaranteed comfortable 80-degree days in the middle of the Nevada desert.

The park is best known—to the extent that it's known at all—for the Lehman Caves and bristlecone pines. One of the caves is a 370-foot-long cavern, frosted with soda straws, limestone draperies, columns, and shields; another, the Lost River Passage, is a veritable ossuary of prehistoric animal bones. The bristlecone pines, meanwhile, are among the oldest living things on Earth, and we were determined to see them up close.

Despite such attractions, Great Basin remains one of the least visited national parks, and though a three-million-dollar visitors center opened in July, it's unlikely the hordes will suddenly descend. Its remoteness is a blessing: Fewer people equals greater solitude.

We spent our first miles wandering through a grove of improbably fat aspen trees, with trunks six feet around. Four hard uphill hours later, as we ascended toward our first campsite, we stumbled on a rotting stick of dynamite, an old hobnailed boot, and holes that had been dug, we imagined, in a desperate search for a fresh spring. We were starting to get concerned about the wet stuff ourselves.

"Hey you guys! Check it out!" cried Dawn. She was several yards up ahead of David and me, hopping

SADDLE UP: The author and her husband, David, scramble the boulder-strewn Highland Ridge Route (left). Right: Resting their weary dogs at Baker Creek

around on a patch of snow. "We've got water!"

Scattered snowfields—which last into July and sometimes August—meant we wouldn't need to scrounge below the ridgeline in search of springs. We set up camp that first night on a soft saddle near a snow patch with the majority of our route laid out in front of us: Five distinct peaks, all above 11,000 feet, lined up like train cars steaming north.

OLDER THAN THE HILLS

The convenient-for-peak-bagging arrangement of the Snake Range is one of the unique features of Nevada's topography, a landscape riddled with geologic fault lines. Nearly all of the more than 300 mountain ranges in the state are next to active faults and were lifted to their current elevation over the last 30 million years. Considering that the Appalachians are 400 million years old, and the Rockies are 75 million, Nevada's peaks are mere babies, growing an inch every hundred years.

Just as some of the ranges are more impressive than others, some of the basins are deeper than others, deep and remote enough to conceal smoking rounds from military weapons testing (or herds of grazing sheep). It's here that author John McPhee traveled with the free-spirited geologist Kenneth Deffeyes for his 1981 book *Basin and Range* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux). McPhee described these mountains as looking like warships on a sand sea.

The results of tectonic action are evident everywhere you look: old seafloors, buried

At 7,000 to 11,000 feet above sea level, Great Basin's altitude guaranteed comfortable 80-degree days in the middle of the Nevada desert.

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SKY'S THE LIMIT: Lounging under the great wide open in the Snake Range, where it's possible to go for days without seeing another hiker

rivers, deep limestone caverns, veins of gold, volcanic springs, ribbons of silver, and enough fossils to keep thousands of roadside rock vendors sitting in their aluminum lawn chairs for life. The "warship" we chose to explore the second day proved a most superlative example of the region's geologic history. As we humped from south to north, the terrain got younger, higher, rockier, and more spectacular.

This formidable landscape has also been the stage for some dubious human activity, like that of a geography grad student from the University of North Carolina named Donald Currey. In 1963 the young naturalist stumbled upon a 252-inch-circumference bristlecone pine while wandering the Highland Ridge and guessed that the tree was about 4,900 years old. But he wanted to be sure, so in 1964 the forest superintendent at the time helped him

cut the tree down to count its rings. As it turned out, Currey was right; the pine had been growing for 4,950 years. They'd just killed the oldest known tree on Earth.

We spent the night camped in a grove of these ancient trees on a lunar landscape of pea-size limestone gravel. Around us, the golden wood of the bristlecones split into an Escher-like illusion of six different trees taffying around themselves.

FIRST CONTACT

On our last day, a black thunderstorm lurked over our camp at Baker Lake, so we took the day off from backpacking. When the sun broke in, two peregrine falcons flew laps around the high walls surrounding the sapphire lake, which dwindled to a snowy point at its western shore. We washed clothes, napped, played poker, and attended to

blistered feet while it rained intermittently. David went fly-fishing and caught a rare Lahontan cutthroat trout, which he carefully released back into the icy water.

As Dawn and I wandered over an iceberg parked at the head of the lake, a boisterous group of campers hiked up from the trailhead (Baker Lake being one of the few trailed destinations in the park)—a reminder that we hadn't seen anyone else in three days. Come evening, snow fell between the rainstorms, so the next day we decided to skip the southern route to Wheeler's summit and tackle it from its more accessible northern approach, with the day hikers—families, older couples, some trail runners, even a woman in espadrilles.

At the top, we walked across great slabs of limestone and looked out over the route we'd spent the last days tramping. The ridge meandered out from under us, past a blue-tinged glacier reclining directly below, over the impressive ragged-looking north faces of the peaks we'd climbed, past the bristlecone archipelago, and on down to Decathlon Canyon, where Huaman was no doubt still tending his flock.

When we broke camp at dawn and hit the well-beaten path out, it was liberating to walk on a marked trail without having to watch our every step. We descended through Engelmann spruce, mossy streams, aspen groves, wildflower meadows, then juniper, piñon, sagebrush, and finally the greasewood that saw us out of the basin days before.

We'd passed a remarkable five ecosystems in three hours. Then, finally, reluctantly, we entered a sixth: the asphalt trailhead parking lot. We consoled ourselves with the promise that we would be back. Nevada's best kept secret had become ours as well. ▲



ADVENTURE GUIDE: GREAT BASIN NATIONAL PARK

One of Great Basin National Park's greatest assets—its isolation—makes it about a four-hour drive from the nearest airports. Rent a car at **McCarran International Airport** in Las Vegas, take U.S. Route 93 north for 286 miles, and look for signs to the park's entrance, near tiny Baker, Nevada. Or fly in to Salt Lake City, 240 miles east, and take scenic U.S. Route 50. Once in the park (there's no entrance fee) proceed 13 miles to the **Wheeler Peak Campground**, whose 37 sites (\$12; 775-234-7331) sit nestled in a cool 9,950-foot-high aspen grove. Several trails leave from the campground, including the 4.3-mile (one-way) Wheeler Peak Trail, which passes two alpine lakes (Stella and Teresa) before heading to the summit. No permits are required for backcountry camping, and sites are first come, first served. After working up a sweat, retreat to the 50-degree natural air-conditioning of **Lehman Caves**, near the visitors center a quarter mile from the entrance. Explore its rococo formations on a 90-minute tour (\$10; www.nps.gov/grba). Reserve your space in the summer months because tickets sell out fast. The closest town is Ely, 65 miles west, where the 76-year-old **Hotel Nevada** (\$30; www.hotelnevada.com) has slot machines in the saloon-style lobby and a 24-hour restaurant. In the desert hamlet of Baker, five miles from the park entrance on U.S. Route 50, is the clean and friendly **Silver Jack Inn** (\$55; www.silverjackinn.com) and its **Lectrolux Gallery Café & Movie House**, an ideal spot to enjoy a well-earned latte.

—L.M.