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## ***Stop 30. Sequoia and Kings Canyon***

Arrival datetime: Sunday, May 26, 6:30PM  
Sites visited: Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks  
Accommodations: Grant Grove  
States traveled: California

On the way out of the LA area, we passed scores of fruit farms. We saw twelve foot tall orange trees with literally hundreds of oranges, miniature trees with orange-looking fruits on them, grape vines, cherry trees, and acres upon acres of shrubs and full grown trees being grown in transportable containers for replanting. We stopped at a stand to bring some of this fresh fruit with us to Sequoia and ended up with strawberries, avocados, oranges, and mangos.

We also stopped for lunch, in Bakersfield, the only major city between our points of origin and destination. The high school had big “pride” murals for their team, the Drillers. We had never seen a high school sports team focused on a blue collar trade before. We guessed that there was oil in these parts. We lucked into a little Mexican place, Tapas. Lucky because it was the only place open in the downtown area on the Sunday before Memorial Day. But the food was good too. The manager was so happy to see someone fully appreciate his shrimp burrito, we felt guilty telling him we were just passing through.

Just South of the Park Entrance was a huge lake, and literally thousands of cars, RVs and boat trailers were parked around it. This slowed us down quite a bit,

especially as we pulled off on what we thought was an overlook to get a view of it. The overlook turned out to be just a bunch of cars and trailers looking for a place to park. The ground was uneven and we scraped bottom trying to get through. The volume of traffic using this makeshift parking lot had made it necessarily one-way traffic and we had to ride over a curb to get out, preserving the car’s undercarriage by exiting at an angle that put us on the highway headed the wrong way. It was 89° degrees but there did not seem to be any swimming. It was only Memorial Day, after all.

We arrived at the Ash Mountain entrance, the south entrance to Sequoia at about 5:30PM with a half a tank of gas. Remembering the twisty roads from our previous visit, Michael asked the Ranger at the Visitors Center about how long it would take to drive to Grant Grove. The reply was two hours, and we turned around to get gas just outside the park, heading back in a half hour later. But it was still sunny and we enjoyed views of Moro Rock and other distinctive peaks from the overlooks. We were back in a land of tall mountains, 6-8000 feet of rocky outcroppings, no more of the 2-3000 foot brown hills of Southern California. The rock colors were a uniform gray, no rainbow effects like

those in the desert. Also in striking contrast to the peaks of Utah and Arizona, these were covered with tall dark green trees from head to foot. This green continued no matter how steep the slope, until the very top where caps of jagged granite edges provided no soil for growth, or snow filled deep crevices in the green surface. But vertical stripes of desert varnish still showed on the larger of the rock faces, like the flat face of the dome of Moro Rock. The effect was serenely beautiful.

There was just enough daylight left to see the Giant Forest. There was a two-mile flat loop trail called "Congress Trail" starting from the world's largest tree, named "General Sherman." General Sherman stands 275 feet tall or so, weighs about 1,385 tons, the diameter of its largest branch around 7 feet, and its circumference near the ground is about 103 feet. We say "or so" and "about," because the park brochure also says that it adds enough wood growth every year to equal a 60 foot tree of average size, and who knows what year the facts for the brochure were gathered. We had been to Sequoia about 10 years ago and knew that if you have only one hour of daylight to spend, this was the place to spend it.

Some of the trees along the Congress Trail were actually taller or broader than the General Sherman, but none were of the combination of proportions that allowed them to be named the largest. Most were not named, the practice of naming, we read, having become out of vogue sometime after the Civil War. Most of the trees were not even Sequoias, as Sequoia groves are inhabited by the pines, oaks, and cedars of the surrounding forest. Sequoia groves are little pockets of



*Michael in the Giant Forest.*

Sequoias in areas of the forest that have the required abundance of sunlight, soil nutrients, and water required for them to flourish. The smallest of them look like feathery green ferns. The younger ones, under 100 years, look like Christmas trees, perfectly symmetrical though their branches and fine needles are a bit too flimsy to support very heavy ornaments. Fire at the base will keep away harmful parasites and increase the tree's share of sunlight and water, so most of the bases of the older trees are burley and scarred. They lose their symmetry, their topmost branches survive the longest and their needle-saturated extensions grow very thick and rounded at the edges.

The waning sun kept us from sauntering in our best John Muir style, regretfully as

we were now firmly in his territory. We drove on to Kings Canyon National Park, where we checked into our cabin at Grant's Grove. By then it was 7:30PM and we asked about evening Ranger programs. We heard there was one at 8:30PM called, "An Evening with John Muir." We had to see it, but had to have dinner first.

We had read about the "no reservations" policy in the dining room, so even before checking in, we had put our name on the list to be called for dinner. It took a while to get the hostess' attention, but she told us it would be a ten minute wait. Careful observation of the situation in the dining room told us otherwise. There were several tables of two and four before us, and they had not been called in ten minutes, or even fifteen. At first we were not concerned, Jennifer wandered in the gift shop while Michael hovered close enough to hear our name. But at 8:05PM, we were the next name on the list and had been for ten minutes. We studied the menu so we would be able to order quickly. Jennifer went to the bar to see if we could order food there, but the bored looking teenager behind the three linoleum footstools said that we could only get appetizers. As Jennifer walked back to the front of the room, she saw a table being seated by a waiter, a table of four. The waiter was giving directions to the busboy to clean up another table, saying it was for Michael, party of two. The hostess was nowhere to be seen. Jennifer grabbed Michael and they sat at the table. As the waiter crossed the room, she caught him and said, "We are trying to make the Ranger program at 8:30, we know exactly what we want and it is very simple."

The waiter paused, "Where are your menus?"

*"We looked at some up front, we don't need them."*

*"Who told you to sit here?"*

*"I overheard you tell the busboy this table was for Michael for 2. We are Michael."*

He was caught, "OK what do you want?"

We ordered. Five minutes later, a waitress came by. It was her table, but the waiter let her know it was handled. Apparently, he had taken advantage of the poor job performance of the hostess to snag the tables of 4 for himself, and we had caught him. Jennifer made a quick trip to the restroom. As she came back, the hostess was calling "Michael." Jennifer told her we were already seated, and she seemed relieved. It was 8:15PM and dinner was on the table. We ate in seven minutes. As we had asked for our check at the start, we had only to deal with the hostess to pay it. Luckily she was at her station and we paid cash, making it even easier for her by telling her how much change we needed. We left the waiter 25% tip.

We hurried into the outdoor amphitheatre, taking a precious minute to get our coats from the car, as it was about 50 degrees. As we approached, we noticed a group of people gathered around a campfire off to one side of the stage. We joined the cozy group, happy to see the ranger among them, thinking the John Muir program would be held around the campfire. But no such luck. After all stragglers seemed to be in, the Ranger moved to the stage and tested the microphone. Then we discovered that our triumph over bureaucracy at dinner

had really been unnecessary. The Ranger spent ten minutes giving out junior ranger awards to kids who had completed some workbook put out by the park system. Michael kept saying, "I want a patch." Jennifer reminded him that the hat he had gotten at the Grand Canyon had a little hiker stick figure on a patch on the crown.

Then the Ranger spent five minutes singing a little song with accompanying body movements to get people warmed up. "My aunt came back," he would sing, and the audience would repeat, "My aunt came back." "From old Japan," he sang, and the audience after him, "and she brought back," he continued, again begin echoed, "a big white fan." Then he would make fanning motions, as did the audience. By having his aunt travel the world, he had us doing ten motions at once and we were quite warm by the time he settled down into his impersonation of John Muir.

He spoke with a Scottish accent of the scootchers he and his friends had done as boys in Scotland. Scootchers were wildly daring activities like descending to cellars of decaying old castles. He went on to the story of crossing the Atlantic with his family, and almost dying inhaling methane gas while trying to dig a well on a farm in the northwest. He had since learned that miners carried canaries with them into caves when they dug. The canaries served as lethal gas detectors. If the canary died, it was time to get out of the mine and clear it of fumes. He learned from that episode that one should never act as one's own canary. He told the story of almost losing his sight while working as a mechanic. He learned from that episode that one should save ones eyes for the glorious views of nature. He walked

south to Florida and got malaria, learning that he was not ready to travel to South America as planned. He instead caught a boat to San Francisco and the rest is history. Were it not for his writings on the Valleys and Sequoias of California, and his entertainment of influential politicians on camping trips, there may never have been a National Park System.

Yosemite was the first National Park, but here at Kings Canyon, they emphasize that saving the trees that was the strongest spark, so Sequoia was the second, and they were the third, just one week after the first two. However, they were called General Grant National Park at the time and they were distinct from Sequoia, but now it is common to see, "Sequoia & Kings Canyon" as if they were the same place. Also, there were so many border changes and add-ons and National Monument versus National Forest designations, etc., it gets too confusing to bother to follow. Moreover, there is a privately developed residential area smack in the middle of it. Were anyone looking for a doctoral dissertation in the field of land preservation, this seems an exemplary example of the politics involved in saving land from resource destruction and mass development.

Appropriately enough, we decided to hike to Muir Grove on Memorial Day. Partly because of the John Muir angle, but also because we could find no description of the hike in any of the park material, and it was Memorial Day, so we were looking for a way to see big trees that would not be overcrowded. The Muir angle paid off, it was not a hike, but a saunter. Our Ranger-as-Muir had said that Muir adopted the word because "hike" sounded like work, and roaming the mountains was



*The sun filters through Sequoias in Muir Grove.*

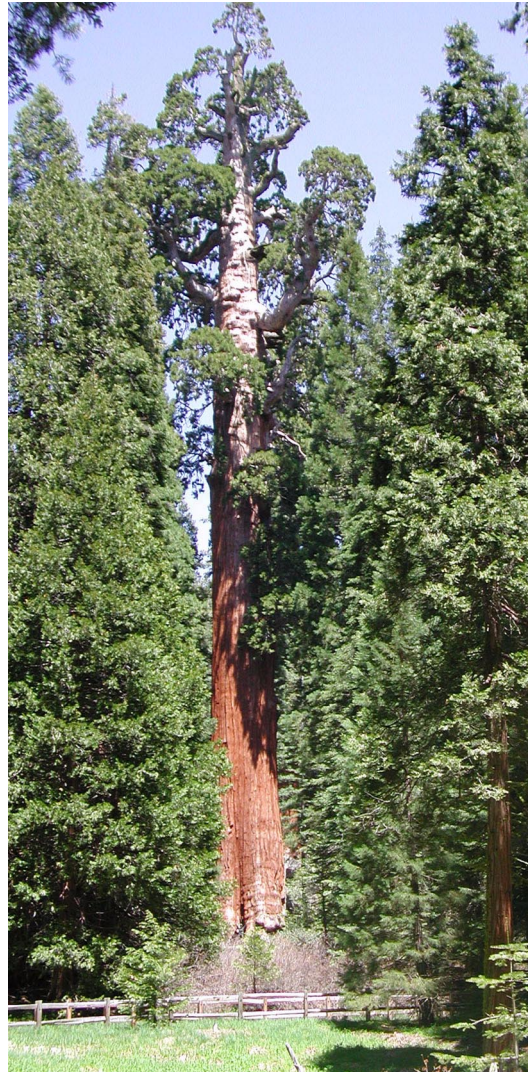
never work. Englishmen on pilgrimage, upon being asked where they were going by local, non-English speaking individuals, had replied as best they could, “the land of the saints,” or “saunt terre,” or something like that in whatever other language they were trying to speak. Anyway, it was not understood by the locals, who spoke of the pilgrims as those claiming to “saunter.” We would have to look up in Muir’s writings whether the Ranger got the etymology right or even close, but by our memory, this Ranger was close enough. Since reading Muir ourselves, we had always endeavored to saunter. For us, this means taking time to see and examine thoroughly what you are passing as you hike, even if it means going very slow and stopping a lot.

We sauntered to Muir Grove. The walk was mostly through dense forest, but there were several clearings. We passed snow along the trail, littered with pine needles, but still hard and deep enough that a softball-sized rock thrown into the middle of it bounced right off. We passed clearings tiled with sunlit slabs of flat rock. We passed a few small streams, some large enough to host miniature waterfalls, some small enough just to darken the path. We passed red-branched manzanita bushes and blushing pink wildflowers, chartreuse moss and aromatic cedar. We passed a huge rock of an overlook whose view married distinctive treetops of Sequoia and distant granite tops of mountains. After an hour or more, we arrived at the burn amber, fire-scarred trunk of a giant

Sequoia tree. We looked straight up and the density of the treetop obliterated the sky. Behind it was a grove of 15-20 similarly mature specimens. Judging from what we had learned in the literature compared with our brief experience, these were over 2000 years old and over a thousand tons in weight. We could not get one in our camera lens, but tried a few panoramic shots to see if we could piece them together later.

We sauntered around the trees for a bit and headed back to the overlook for lunch. It was still a bit cold but the overlook was bright and sunny with a natural rock bench overlooking the mountain ranges and treetops. Upon the bench, someone had placed a trail marker so it was easy to spot. The air was cool, fresh, and crisp. Our lungs were completely cleansed of the humid smog of the California Coast. We could hear Muir urging us to get out of our cities, to go in groups if we have to, but to experience the mountains first hand. We were doing just that!

Back at Grant Grove, we visited Kings Canyon's answer to General Sherman: General Grant. General Grant was the second largest tree in the park, the third largest in the world. It too, was set in a grove surrounded by other giants of its kind. These were named for states, but again, it was emphasized that names had lost importance. This site had some historical significance as early settlers had lived in the hollow of one of the fallen trees while they were building themselves a cabin nearby. That cabin was still standing, though it had been "restored" three times. The tree was also still lying and still able to provide shelter. It had once been used as a canteen for visitors.



*The General Grant tree with Jennifer standing at the base (look to the left).*

The self-guiding trail booklet and signs were very informative, using real trees as examples and helping the visitor focus properly, e.g., "the fire scar on the downhill side of the Missouri Tree (on the right) indicates that..." This self-guiding fountain of illustrated information had to be the crown jewel of the park.

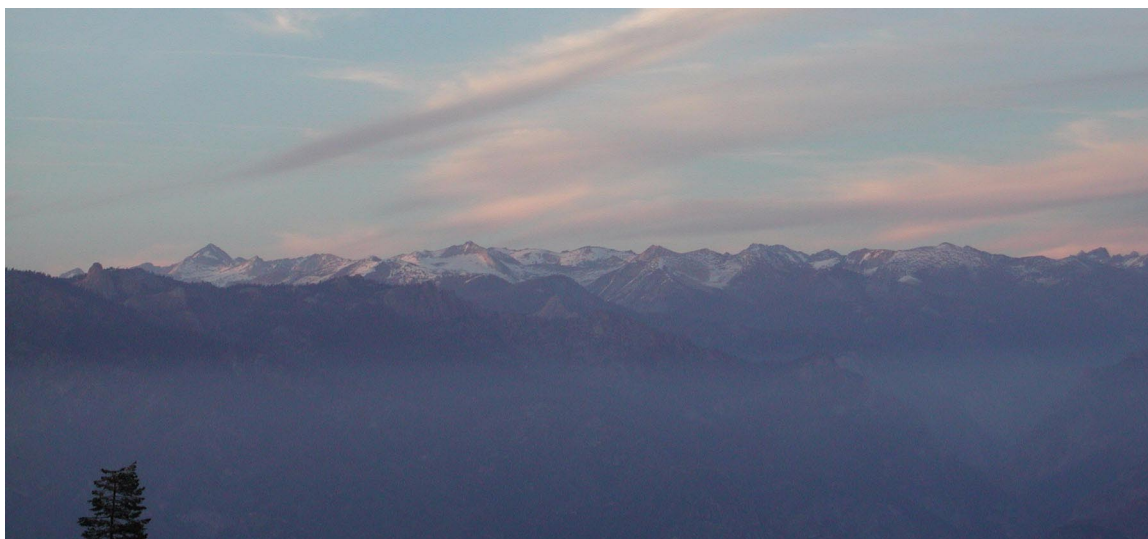
As Memorial Day weekend was over, we were one of five tables dining room. With three waitpersons, we had worse service than the night before. Not only was it

slow, there were mistakes on both the food and the check. Just the food was the same, diner fare.

The trail we chose for our hike the next day started from General Grant's parking lot. Surprisingly for what we thought had to be the major park attraction, we found the parking lot closed for refinishing. We guiltily parked in a dirt turn-around area a quarter mile up, but there was an easy trail to General Grant from just about everywhere in the area, and we found our trailhead with the help of the construction workers, who told us that where we parked was just fine. Where we hiked was just fine as well. We saw not one other person the entire time we were out, except upon leaving and returning to the General Grant parking lot. It was a beautiful day, 70° and sunny. There were spontaneous little streams emerging along the trail, cool breezes emanating from them. We started on an old dirt road, taking side trips and loops into more dense forest. For the most part, we were in Sequoia groves, so the sight of a big tree at an angle that gave us an interesting view provided several Kodak moments. The midpoint was an overlook of Sequoia Lake. We sat on a flat-topped rock in the sun and ate our cheese and crackers lunch. Only the potential threat of a bear sighting shook our serenity. A loud crash of a fallen limb or an especially noisy scamper of a squirrel would send us into a momentary horizon scan and noise-making, bear-scaring ritual. Michael had carved the end of a long stick to a sharp point and would use it to toss pinecones loudly away from our path. Jennifer clapped her hands.

The Visitors Center was still open upon our return. It was small and not very informative, so Michael asked the Ranger if there was a video. The Ranger seemed happy with the request then formally announced that a slide show program would begin in the auditorium in 5 minutes. We wondered why they just didn't show it automatically like they had done at all the other parks, but we were happy with the program. It made us decide that the next day we would venture to Cedar Grove. Back at our cabin, we sat on the porch and read, enjoying the relative isolation of it, combined with the apparent lack of other cabin occupants. We had a leisurely dinner, by now having no expectations of food or service. We walked to the market to refresh our lunch supplies and were annoyed by an errant car alarm. A fellow traveler remarked to his companions, "They should require intelligence tests before they sell someone a car alarm. You know it is never a burglary." We laughed aloud in agreement.

After dinner, we drove up to Panoramic Point to see sunset colors across the Sierras. We have been to most mountain ranges in Northern New England, to various ski resorts in Colorado and Utah, and even to Denali in Alaska. But never have we seen mountain ranges as consistently tall and majestic as these misty blue and green Sierras. Individually, each would have been the center landmark of an entire region or county. But together, they highlighted only each other, each distinct enough to clearly identify it from the sketched domes, peaks, and slopes that ran across two signboards. Many of the misty blue peaks were snow covered, dwarfing the



*Panoramic Point at sunrise.*

closer, lower, green ridges that were themselves 8-9000 feet in elevation. Near the base of the closest ridge was a pear shaped lake, its royal blue surface a shimmering mirror of the beauty surrounding it. From the sign, we identified it as Hume Lake, and Michael remembered that a Ranger at the Visitors Center had recommended it as the closest place around to swim safe from the unpredictable currents of the local rivers and streams.

The view was so beautiful we came back the next morning for sunrise. We had been the only people at the peak the previous night, seeing one person descending as we ascended and one person leaving for the parking lot at the top. In the morning, there were no people. We surprised deer and coyote on the road and we were the only car in the parking lot. Hence, we feared bear as we brought coffee and danish up the 300 yard paved path from the parking lot. We talked loudly and Jennifer clapped her hands occasionally. Finally we made it to the top and scrambled up a four-foot rock.

We knew it not tall enough to keep a bear away, but certainly tall enough to keep one from noticing us right away. It was surrounded by manzanitas that had pink buds with darker pink at the base. We ate our danish and waited.

The just past full moon shone brightly behind us, so we could see clearly. Mist rose off of Hume Lake in such a thick cloud we at first thought it may be a glacier or snow melting into the lake that had been too dark to see the night before. Mist also rose from the snow-covered peaks. It filled the valleys with soft clouds, barely noticeable yet visible because they laid blurry lighter blue lines across the deep blue mountains beyond. The dawn's colors crept extremely slowly into the horizon, first a wispy pink, then deeper pink until, suddenly, the full light of the sun banished the deeper colors from the sky, a blaring white blaze that obscured all other vision. After a brief interval, the sky returned to a wispy pink before asserting itself into the full orange blaze of daylight by 6:30AM.

We got back into the car and descended into the Canyon that had been below us. Though some of the red cliffs were faintly reminiscent of Zion, the closest we had ever seen to Kings Canyon was Yosemite. We were not surprised at one overlook to see a quote from John Muir comparing the two, finding Kings Canyon “grander.” It was grander in size, even deeper than the Grand Canyon. The architecture of its walls, first uplifted by geologic shift like Zion, then carved out by glaciers like Yosemite, had as much variety as them both put together. It was hard to take it all in. We took it in one aspect at a time. First we noticed the shape of the canyon, its opposite walls folding into each other and disappearing into the crevasses. Then we noticed the river carving out shear cliffs, using the binoculars to determine that the pure white substance at the bottom of the canyon was not snow but foam. As we descended, we noticed the incongruity of the tall Yucca flowers crowning the topmost slopes while tall cedar and pine loomed below. At last we reached the glacier-cleared valley, the roaring river and the green meadows.



*Yucca flower.*

We got out of the car frequently to take pictures, then finally to spend some

hours sauntering from Roaring Rapids Waterfall to Zumwalt Meadow and back. Glancing about, we noticed lots of purple lupine and other wildflowers. At the edge of Zumwalt Meadow was a rocky cliff base with a large variety of smooth igneous rock, molten rock seepage evident from the wide variety of minerals and plethora of dikes.

The river itself took on the characteristics of a waterfall in many places. It jumped and swirled over and around rocks and tree trunks, definitely rising over the trunks of healthy trees and submerging what used to be small peninsulas. We wanted to have lunch along the water and went hopefully to Muir Rock. It was a tabletop-flat 100 square foot surface, balanced at an angle along the river about 5 feet above it. But it was covered with Rangers in river rescue equipment. About a dozen young men seemed to be on a training mission.

It was hot in the valley, over 80 where it had been in the 60s the day before at Grant Grove. By late afternoon, we were ready for a swim.

The Ranger had said Hume Lake was the only good place for swimming, but the National Park newsletter had made us feel leery about going to there. Under “Hume Lake” and “swimming” it said, “at Hume Lake Christian Camps.” We approached warily, getting gouged for 50 cents over market value for gas at the Christian Camp in order to talk to someone to find out where the swimming was. They directed us to Sandy Cove, where a sign told us that it is actually operated by “California Land Management” under a “Special User Permit from the U.S.D.A. Forest



*Roaring Rapids Waterfall.*

Service.” We donned our bathing suits and assembled assorted beach accessories. We descended the 100 yard path to the beach and laid down on the sandy shore to bask in the sun a bit, to prepare for what would surely be an invigorating swim in brisk recent snow melt.

But we should not have bothered. We should have kept our view of the Lake as pristine as it appeared from Panorama Point. The first thing we noticed was a lone plastic bag floating on the surface. Then we noticed some beach debris, bottle caps, cigarette butts, and straws. But humans will be humans and we ignored the warning signs. Michael was in up to his shins before he noticed the

dead tadpoles lining the shoreline. We debated the possible causes, all bad. Michael strolled 200 yards down the beach to the only other occupants to ask what they thought. They appeared to him to be locals, they claimed to come fishing every week. Yes, they had noticed the tadpoles, but they were not there last week. One woman in the party had gone swimming and claimed to “feel fine.” Michael came back and reminded Jennifer that John Muir said never be your own canary, so let’s use the tadpoles. We removed our towels from the beach, retreating to a bench in the shade. The breeze off the water was cool and invigorating enough for us.



*The roaring Kings River.*

A shower was as refreshing as we needed anyway. And dinner again at the lodge

was as close to being a canary as we needed to be.

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Miles traveled: 451  
Departure datetime: Thursday, May 30, 8:10AM  
Departure weather: 60° Sunny