
Stop 34. Lassen Volcanoe

Arrival datetime: Saturday, June 8, 5:30PM
Sites visited: Lassen Volcanic National Park
Accommodations: Drakesbad Ranch
States traveled: California

Just outside of Lassen, we hit the 10,000-mile mark on our trip. Michael made a little sign that said “10K” on it and set up the tripod to take a picture of ourselves holding it at the side of the road with the car. Luckily, we had great scenery for the background. The entire drive from



Michael and Jennifer at 10,000 miles.

Tahoe to Lassen was through rich green forest. Between towns of five or six buildings, an occasional stream, meadow, or snow-covered mountaintop peaked out alongside the road. The towns themselves were for the most part closed, as it was Saturday. Michael needed a haircut and we stopped at two or three places before we realized that people just don’t work on Saturday out here.

We stopped for lunch at a trailer park on Lake Almanar. Actually at a little café that was surrounded by trailers that

people had converted into permanent homes. One had a gorgeously healthy iris garden out front. Several had wooden decks as permanent and well crafted as any on a \$300K home in suburban New Jersey. Though not as crystal clean as Tahoe, Almanar had a similar appearance. The water was Caribbean blue, its shores were tree-lined with mountain ranges framing the view on one side. Mount Lassen was the tallest peak. It dominated the landscape, but its relatively flat top and gentle snow-splotched slopes made it look inviting, like a ski area.

We arrived at the southwest entrance to the National Park at about 3:00PM and immediately realized that there was no road through the park to our lodging, which was at the southeast entrance. We decided to delve a bit into the park anyway, and maybe do a short hike before retracing about 30 miles back to where we should have turned east instead of west to go to Drakesbad. Barb from the Tahoe Shore House had suggested we hike at Bumpass Hell, a short trail through mud holes and steam vents. We set out for it, early on passing a few steam vents with people milling about them, the stench of sulphur sending the Cadillac into a “Check Engine Soon” state.

Piled up on either side of the road was no less than four feet of solid snow. The Cadillac information console now said, “Ice Possible” and showed the temperature as 36°. But somehow we did not connect that roadside snow with being able to explore the park on foot, and we ventured on. There seemed to be a lot of parking lots with no signs to let people know why they should be parking there. Close examination of the map told us we had passed our trailhead. We turned around and pulled into a parking lot that turned out to be the trailhead for Lassen Peak. The trail was completely covered in at least five feet of snow. A sign warned, “Snow and Ice on Trail. Trail Hazardous.”



Snow at Lassen Volcanic National Park.

Michael threw a few snowballs as he is wont to do on these occasions, and Jennifer pulled on another sweatshirt and gloves. The next parking lot down was an ice-covered lake, then the trailhead to Bumpass Hell. But the trail was closed. We realized that the value of the afternoon’s adventure was to be observing the geometric formations of the snow covered volcanic peaks. They were indeed beautiful and some of the shapes very strange indeed. One looked like a Mickey Mouse cap, rounded granite ears on either side of an igneous dome. One

looked like a series of long thin ice crystals.

We stopped on the way down where the Cadillac had reacted to the sulphur and found a very short snowplowed trail and a few bridges over hot sulphur springs. We were gazing at one and heard a sound like a frog monster, “gaplug...kaglob...gablu...” It was coming from a crater-like mud hole. Sand-colored, silty, liquid mud was boiling up to the surface. We now noticed many of these “mud pots” scattered around the streams.

We stopped at the Visitors Center, hoping at least to see a video. But the Visitors Center on the southwest entrance was an information kiosk. The Ranger told us we could hike Mount Lassen if we wanted to, though the trail was snow covered and dangerous. She also told us that interpretive exhibits further in the park were open. We headed toward Drakesbad, hoping that the Ranch would have better weather and thus more options for outdoor activities.

We arrived at the Ranch at around 5:15PM. “Billie,” the proprietress, gave us the rundown on hikes from the lodge, including a very short one to the hot springs fed pool. She let us know when mealtimes were, and that they would be announced with a dinner bell. She told us about the recreation room and the nightly campfires. She informed us that there were no keys for the rooms as they operated on a trust system.

What she neglected to mention was that the rooms had no electricity. In the room were two kerosene lanterns and a gas fed stove. A fire extinguisher completed the



A kerosene lantern is our only light source at Drakesbad.

set of utilities. The bathroom did have a flush toilet and running water, but the hot water faucet never got hotter than the cold water faucet at Death Valley. We were stunned.

Michael read the instructions on a little placard near a lantern and managed to light them both. He also figured out how to work the gas stove. We debated over what valuables to bring into the room, then decided to bring them all while we were in it, and leave them in locked in the car when we were not. We walked over to the pool. It was hot enough, but the trek back to our room would have frozen us, so we decided to consider it again the next afternoon. We stopped in the recreation room. An ice filled tub of beer and one of soda were on the porch. Above them hung a sign out sheet, trusting the charges for the beverages to the honor system. Inside were games, toys, books, and a small gift shop that employees were just beginning to stock. We considered buying an extra flashlight, but decided we would live through one night to see how we did. The dinner bell rang and we headed for the dining room.

Our name was on a table next to the stove and by a window. Perfect for us, a heated view. There were two entrée choices, the meat and vegetarian. Again perfect. Dinner was accompanied by a small but tasteful wine list and topped with carrot cake. No choice in the desert department, but again, perfect for us. We came back in our room and got ready for bed. We noticed the campfire getting underway from our window, but the cold and the fact that we had already brushed our teeth made the marshmallows not so appealing. Jennifer had some work to do on the computer. The light from the screen was tolerable as long as the batteries lasted. But Michael had to stop reading at 8:45PM and we went to sleep. We got to sleep so early we got up in the middle of the night for no apparent reason. But we soon found one. The stars were in full bloom. Again, Michael picked out planets and tried to identify constellations. Jennifer just gazed.

On Sunday Michael got up to turn on the car to check the temperature. 34°. But it was sunny and we decided to bundle up and hike anyway. Our destination was Terminal Geyser, and it seemed like it might be warmer there. We did not have heavy jackets, so bundled up in four layers of clothing. The forest was dense with trees. Snowdrifts were randomly strewn on the forest floor and melted into seasonal springs, many muddying our path. Gradually, the clear bubbling water in these streams gave way to yellow-banked streams of gray-brown claylike mud with a bit of water running over them. Soon after, we came upon Boiling Springs Lake.

The lake was a quarter acre of steaming water at the base of sloping shores that

gave the appearance of a crater. Voluminous steam rose and swirled lazily with the morning breeze. The slanted yellow, rust, orange tinted shores were marred with various sized eruptions of dried mud. These holes bubbled with mud or hissed with steam. A staff member at the Ranch had told us a fellow worker had lost his leg accidentally stepping into a boiling mud hole here by exploring too closely so we stayed on the path. The surface of the lake itself had several spots that seemed to be shallower and have little eruptions a foot or more below the surface. In these areas, the water literally boiled.



Boiling Springs Lake.

We hiked on to Terminal Geyser. There was more snow and a few times, we lost the path, until we realized that we should have been walking on the snow that covered it. Walking on the snow was like walking on a wet, moss-covered rock. We had to have careful footing as it was slippery, but our feet did not sink into the snow, they rested a centimeter or so into it, and there was plenty of traction. Several paths started to merge with ours from all different directions, but strategically placed signs kept us on track. We descended a steep ravine. The trail hugged the bottom of the cliff we descended until on the other side it emerged at the base of a canyon-shaped slope. We stood at the mouth of the canyon looking up at a 30-foot cloud of steam. From the steam cloud flowed a stream. On the opposite shore was smooth flat surfaces colored with short grass and pastel-colored rock. On our shore were longer grasses and more randomly distributed rocks, the percentage of rock increasing as one drew nearer the stream. Here and there along the stream, steam vented from the water. The water itself was room temperature or even cool. The steam vents were underneath the bubbling brook and steam emerged through it.

We heard the kaplup of a mud pot near the source of the steam cloud, but it was surrounded by jagged rock and porous-looking crust. We could not get close enough to see inside any of them. We did cross the stream and approach as far as we dared on the path. But steam vents no more than a foot off the path made us turn back. We kept remembering that the supposedly experienced Drakesbad staffer had gotten to close to a thin crust of earth. The site was from another planet.



Terminal Geyser.

By the time we got back, we had hiked about 5½ miles and had ten minutes to spare before the bell rang for lunch. We attributed our fast pace to the cold. Lunch was a salad and sandwich buffet with cookies for desert. We hate buffets because we tend to eat too much and this was no exception. But the food was great. Back in our bungalow, we collapsed on the bed, grateful we had had a chance to turn on the heat to full blast before going up to lunch. “Are we hiking yet?” Michael asked.

“I think so,” Jennifer answered.

Michael made stomping noises with his hands. “We are keeping a good pace, are we at Devil’s Kitchen yet?”

“Kaglob.” Jennifer answered. We giggled for a few minutes, then dragged

ourselves back into the forty degree temperatures to get a close look at more volcanic activity.

The hike started through the meadow, which was actually a fen. That meant it was actually peat bog with plants growing on it. In addition to grasses, there were leafy green plants. Boardwalks on occasion supplemented the path over muddy areas. It was about a mile long, an eighth mile wide, framed on all sides by tall cedar, pines, and on one end, a single snow covered mountain. It was the epitome of scenic.

We passed into the forest and almost immediately came upon snow in our path. We trudged on, admiring the wintry landscape. There were trees so big they looked like Sequoias. We knew we were nearing the Devil’s Kitchen by a steam noise that sounded like a cross between a blowing across a coke bottle and turning on a steam furnace, “uuuoahhhzz.” Were it not for our experience at the Sulphur Works, we would have thought someone was simultaneously moaning and wheezing. We also knew we were getting close by the warning signs, “Mud Pots and Steam Vents are Very Hot. Ground is soft. Serious burns have occurred. Stay on trails and Boardwalk. WATCH YOUR CHILDREN.”

We were actually surprised by how close the trails were to the mud pots and steam vents. One bubbling mud pot splashed sizzling tablespoon-sized liquid rock for several feet, sometimes hitting parts of the trail. Another spewed quarter cups of the stuff within feet of the trail. We figured the park service has to constantly monitor this place and change the



Steam vents and mudpots in Devil's Kitchen.

borders of the trails accordingly. Hot steam often blew close enough to our faces to make us turn away. But we were fascinated and stayed for at least a half hour, leaning over railings to look inside mud pots, trying to time pictures to catch the boiling water at its highest point. Some of the springs had water boiling almost a foot above the surface. It would build up in waves like the fountains in Nashville's Grand Old Opry. It would have been fun to try to set them to music. The landscape itself had the look of another planet. Odd shapes and assortments of boulders would surround one side of a mud pot, while the opposite surface would be smooth pastel-cover rock. Many mud pots were set in flat

pools of desert-dry crusty red, pink, gray, or yellow earth. Pools of water were coated with yellow foam. Water in streams were odd shades of green and rushed silently around rock islands.

Back at the Ranch, we took a swim in the hot springs fed pool. The temperature at the pool read 50°. We had been told that the pool water came out of the spring at 125° and was cooled to 105°. It was hot enough to float around outside, stretching our sore muscles. We had brought soap and shampoo to shower in the cabana by the pool, hoping that it was fed with the same hot springs, knowing that the water in our room rarely made it above room temperature. We were right. We ended

up spending an hour out there. Jennifer was so warm after getting out of the shower that she was able to hang out outside at poolside to wait for Michael.

We had dinner at our usual place, the table by the stove with our name on the placeholder. Unfortunately, the stove was not lit. We had decided to stay up for the campfire so to keep ourselves awake, we walked out to Dream Lake. It is actually a pond a quarter mile or so across the meadow. It had a canoe on it, and both the canoe and the lake were

empty. We paddled around for a while. No great views, but a pretty green oval pond with a family of ducks and very quiet. By the time we got back to the Ranch, the campfire was in such full swing that all the graham crackers were gone. So we had plain marshmallows instead of s'mores. The other guests were discussing their cars and we meandered back to our bungalow. We had a half hour of daylight in which Jennifer read a short story aloud. We slept so well we missed getting up to see the stars.

Miles traveled: 222
Departure datetime: Monday, June 10, 9:00AM
Departure weather: 49° Sunny