Get Out!

Devils Postpile National Monument by Ben Wickham

On my most recent trip, I hiked into “The Postpile.” I realized that every other time I’d visited Devils Postpile National Monument, I’d ridden the shuttle and traveled the same routes on the same beaten paths of other visitors to the same exact spots. I wanted to see the park differently, so I decided that I should enter the park differently. On the hike in, I opened the map to figure out where I was going, and found myself looking at the lines of trails and contours imaginatively. Like a vision, a route glowed from the map’s paper and illuminated points and directions I could follow, with the amazing geologic Postpile formation one possible destination among others, and the river connecting it all. Devils Postpile and the Middle Fork of the San Joaquin River Valley were once part of Yosemite National Park. However, in the early 1900s, mining, grazing, and timber interests lobbied to have the park boundaries redrawn and remove the protections that national park status would have ensured for the area (sound familiar?). On this day, I’m thankful for the opportunity to hike through a wild, open valley. When I pass the wilderness boundary and national monument signs, I feel thankful that others before remained vigilant in protecting this landscape. I’m also thankful for the public servants--the Park Service staff, volunteers, and other supporters--that ensure the enjoyment and protection of this special place.

Getting There:
You can ride the required shuttle bus on the only road entering the monument, or you can try hiking in. It’s about a 4.5-mile one-way hike from Horseshoe Lake, over Mammoth Pass, and to the San Joaquin Valley floor. This is an underrated walk (2,000-foot descent) through a wild fir forest and burn area abounding with wildflowers, birds, and staggering views of the Minarets, Ritter Range, and Lower San Joaquin River Canyon.

A note of caution: although hiking out of the valley is not as steep as similar river canyons like the Merced or the Kings, it can be blazingly hot on a summer afternoon (trust me, I know). If you don’t want to hike out, take the shuttle back uphill (purchase your tickets before starting your hike). Or, to avoid the heat, time your hike for the evening. If you must make the sweaty hike mid-day, take plenty of water and budget time for a rewarding dip in McLeod Lake near the top of Mammoth Pass.

Being There:
Devils Postpile itself and Rainbow Falls are a must-see. I enjoyed lunch at Minaret Falls, a classic Sierra cascade over a granite shelf. But if there’s one thing I now find myself coming back for, it’s the river (I like being on it in the evening).

There’s something about the sound and the feel of a river. Where creeks crash, rivers vibrate into your soul. While creeks babble, a river hums at your heart. No offense to the Owens, but a real river is the one thing we lack in the Eastern Sierra. Take the time to enjoy the San Joaquin River at Devils Postpile. Step lightly on vegetation and soil as you access its shore. Soak your feet. Drop a line in the water. Take a swim. Think about the amazing geological art this water crafts as it tumbles towards the ocean. Listen, feel, and then be thankful. Drift into a daydream as the water sings you to sleep and reflect on all the geological, ecological, and cultural layers in this magical place and how a river runs through it all.