

HORSESHOE MEADOWS

WOULD YOU LOVE TO HIKE IN THE HIGH MOUNTAINS WITHOUT TRUDGING UP A STEEP TRAIL? THIS ROUTE TAKES YOU TO ONE OF THE HIGHEST ROAD-ENDS IN THE SIERRA, AT AN ELEVATION OF NEARLY TEN THOUSAND FEET. FROM HERE GENTLE TRAILS WEND THROUGH MEADOWS SURROUNDED BY GLACIER-CARVED GRANITE PEAKS AND BRILLIANT MOUNTAIN LIGHT.

What to expect: This paved route climbs an extremely steep mountain face with a long series of sharp switchbacks. If you have good tires and brakes and not too much fear of heights, go for it! Closed in winter; call Inyo National Forest for information.

Length: 22 miles.

Driving time: 1 hour, one way.

Getting there: From Lone Pine start at the traffic light in the center of town and turn west, toward the Sierra, onto Whitney Portal Road. The route starts here at the intersection.

Along the route: Routes 2 and 3 share the beginning of this route from Lone Pine into the Alabama Hills. At 3.1 miles take a left turn onto Horseshoe Meadows Road, which is paved and well-marked. At 3.7 miles a sign on the right, "Point of Historical Interest," indicates the pullout on the left where a white rock commemorates the filming of the 1939 classic *Gunga Din*—this was the film's "Canyon Temple" site. At 4.7 miles the road crosses Tuttle Creek, named for Lyman Tuttle, one of the organizers of Inyo County and the county surveyor from 1866 to 1872; and Diaz Creek, named for prominent Lone Pine citizens Rafael and Eleuterio Diaz who owned a ranch on the creek's

lower reaches in the 1860s. The next creek crossed, at 5.3 miles, is the north fork of Lubken Creek which was named for John Lubken, one of the earliest Owens Valley pioneers.

After this the real climb begins. Use a low gear, take your time and trust gravity and traction to keep you on the road. The steep ascent allows many good views down to the mostly-dry Owens Lake. The reddish color of the 110-square-mile lake bed comes from various types of algae and bacteria in the soil.

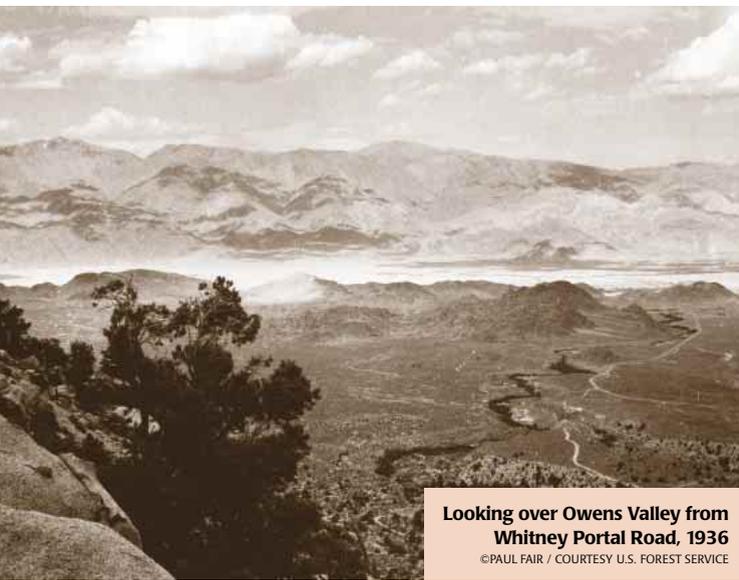
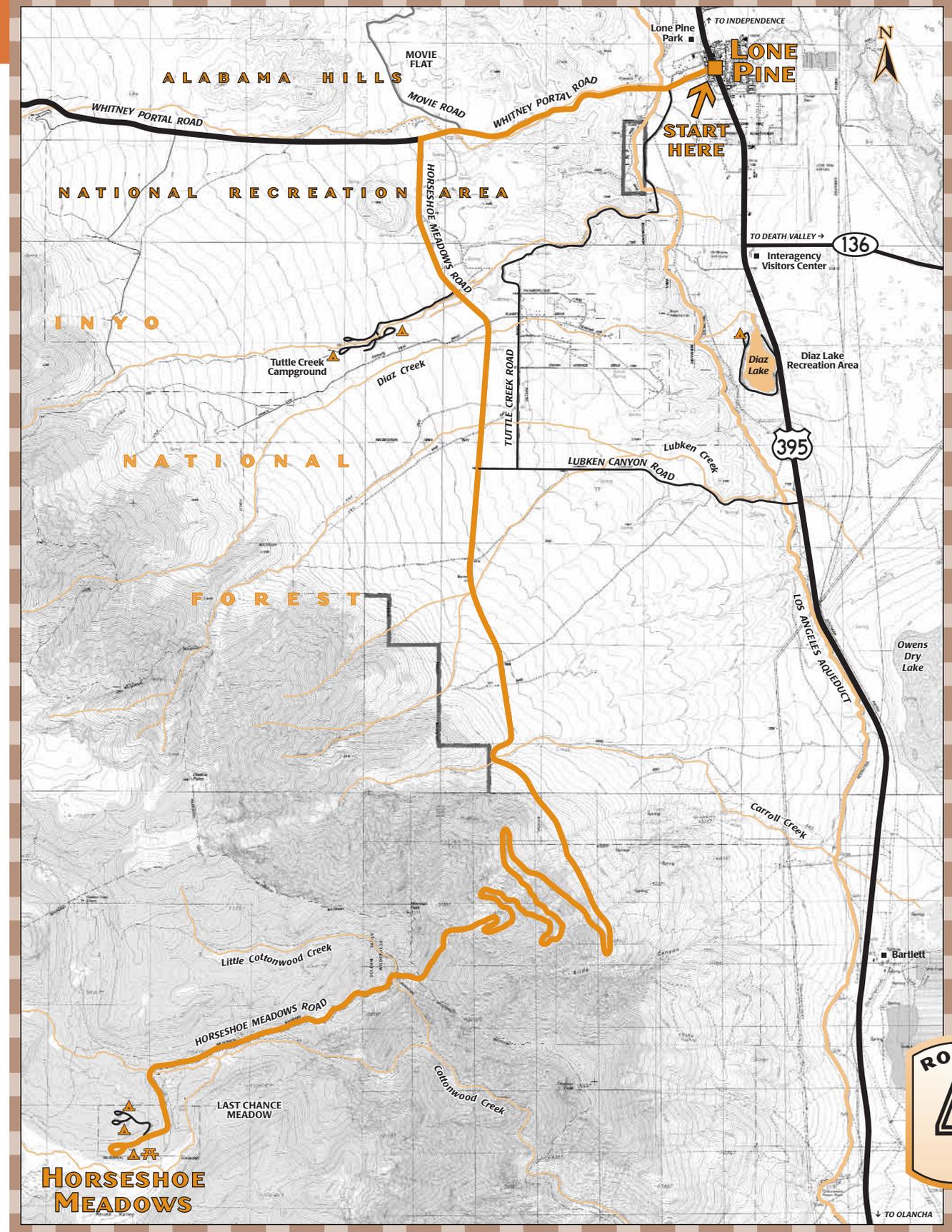
In late spring and early summer lupines may be blooming all along the road. Trees begin to appear as you reach the higher elevations: first gnarled pinyon pines, then curl-leaf mountain mahogany with its shrub-like form, shiny leaves with curled-up edges and, in late summer, seeds with long, fuzzy, silvery tails.

"Walt's Point," a broad pullout on the left at 18.3 miles, is marked by a plaque on a large boulder. This is a popular launch site for hang gliders and you can look down the steep canyon and imagine soaring the thermals over the tree tops and jagged rocks.

At 19.5 miles the road levels off and even descends a bit as it crosses the head of Cottonwood Canyon. At this level there are lodgepole pines, whose twisted needles come in bundles of two, and mountain hemlocks with their drooping tips. At the canyon's head are the ruins of Stevens' Sawmill, where Colonel Sherman Stevens supplied wood for the Cerro Gordo mining operation (Route 1). Wood was taken to kilns on the western shore of Owens Lake to make charcoal for the smelters on the northeast shore.

At 22.2 miles you'll reach parking for the Golden Trout Wilderness trailhead. Horseshoe Meadows is out just beyond the trees that surround the parking area. There are good day hikes and those with wilderness permits can embark upon overnight hikes or horseback rides from here. Meandering through the meadows, Cottonwood Creek supports populations of the lovely California Golden Trout, the state fish which is native to the Sierra's Kern River. In 1876 Colonel Stevens carried thirteen golden trout in his coffee pot from nearby Mulkey Creek, a tributary of the Kern, and released them into Cottonwood Creek.

Remember to use a low gear on the way down! Four wheel drive will give you an extra grip on the road.



Looking over Owens Valley from Whitney Portal Road, 1936
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