



# WHITNEY PORTAL

THE TOP OF THIS ROAD IS BASE CAMP FOR THOSE WITH PERMITS TO CLIMB TO THE HIGHEST POINT IN THE CONTIGUOUS 48 STATES. FROM THE VALLEY FLOOR TO THE TOWERING SUMMIT, LOCAL PEOPLE, HOLLYWOOD STARS AND THE STATE AND FEDERAL GOVERNMENT HAVE ALL VIED FOR ROLES IN THE HISTORY OF THIS VERTICAL SLICE OF EASTERN CALIFORNIA.

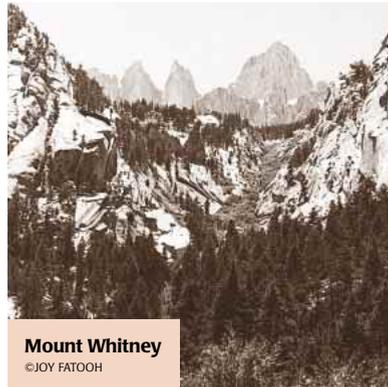
**What to expect:** This route is paved but narrow, steep and winding with dramatic switchbacks. The road is closed in winter when its higher reaches are covered with snow; call the Inyo National Forest for information.

**Length:** 12 miles.

**Driving time:** about 45 minutes, 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:** Like Route 2, this route begins in Lone Pine and enters the Alabama Hills. The description of that route tells how the town and the hills got their names, and what makes them a popular film backdrop. At 4.3 miles the Whitney Portal Road passes the Cuffe Guest Ranch, another testament to the Alabama Hills' link to Hollywood.



Mount Whitney  
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Originally opened in 1925 by pioneer movie director Clarence Badger, this was a favorite fishing retreat for stars including Douglas Fairbanks Jr., Mabel Normand, Joan Blondell and George Brent. The ranch was operated by Irene Cuffe, "the actress of a thousand faces," beginning in 1949. Whitney Portal Road was built in 1936 by the CCC—the Civilian Conservation Corps, part of Roosevelt's "New Deal," which hired and trained young men for conservation work. Many historic features such as meticulously-built rock walls in national parks are the work of the CCC, as hands otherwise left unemployed by the Great Depression were put to work on the public's lands.

The steep, sharp switchbacks along the Whitney Portal Road were prominent in scenes in the Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz film *The Long, Long Trailer*, in which Luci surreptitiously fills a travel trailer with her

rock collection until it's too heavy to ascend the grade. The road is also featured in the 1941 classic, *High Sierra*, starring Humphrey Bogart.

With its quick climb up the mountains, this road has long offered a way for Owens Valley residents to escape the heat. Father Crowley, the charismatic priest and early promoter of Eastern Sierra tourism for whom Crowley Lake (Route 15) was named, is one who built a summer home along this road—one of the residences visible on the left at about 7 miles.

There are excellent views of Mount Whitney at many points along the road. In 1871 Clarence King, the first head of the U.S. Geological Survey, climbed what he thought he had identified as the tallest peak in the then-United States and named it in honor of his colleague Josiah Whitney, state geologist of California. But it was soon discovered that King had climbed the wrong peak. And before he could return to correct the error, three fishermen from Lone Pine reached the true 14,495-foot summit and claimed naming rights, calling it "Fishermen's



Whitney Portal Road, 1930s  
COURTESY U.S. FOREST SERVICE

Peak." It was not until 1875 that a bill promoted by King passed the state legislature and the name Mount Whitney became official.

The peak is obscured by the forest and nearby cliffs by the time the road arrives at Whitney Portal. At an elevation of 8,631 feet, this is the trailhead for Mount Whitney. Each year over ten thousand people obtain permits to make the strenuous 22-mile round trip hike to the summit. If you want to try this climb you need to apply for a permit in advance. You can use the waiting time to get into top condition, properly equip and acclimatize yourself, and learn about the dangers of altitude sickness and lightning storms which might force a life-saving decision to turn back. Meanwhile, enjoy the cool mountain scenery of the Portal itself.

