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Desert Trail Summary and Planning For Future Hikers

At the end of an obscure thru hike I usually like to provide as much planning / notes as I can for future hikers. However, it's hard to imagine many people using these notes as only 2 people have hiked the Desert Trail ("DT") in the recent past. But I'll do it anyway cause I like to and cause maybe, just maybe someone else will thru hike the Desert Trail and this will be helpful.

Caveat:

THESE ARE MY OPINIONS. YOU MAY NOT AGREE WITH ME. Everyone is different. I hope for these notes to be helpful and provide an honest account of what the Desert Trail is like but you need to do your own further research and make your own decisions. I'm probably not like you. You may not like what I like.

Initial Reading:

I'd also suggest reading my first 6 entries in this journal. They give some helpful and interesting background on the Desert Trail as well as what I thought about the trail before I started. They are meant to accompany this entry to some extent and I didn't want to repeat myself.

Overall:

The Desert Trail is an insanely amazing route. If you like the desert, it's hard to image a route this long that could possibly exist elsewhere and be more

awesome. But if you don't like the desert or don't know what the hell you are doing then well, the Desert Trail definitely isn't for you. For us, it was the hike of a lifetime and we've done a lot.

The 2 Parts of the Desert Trail

When I say the "original DT" or "original 1,500 miles" or the "Mexico to mid-Oregon" route I am referring to the approximately 1,500 miles that were routed from the Mexico border through California, Nevada and to Highway 78 in mid-Oregon and completed in the early 2000's. When I say "Colter's route" or the "northern part of the DT" or the "mid-Oregon to Canada" route I'm referring to the 700 or so mile extension from Highway 78 in mid-Oregon to Canada that Colter developed and hiked in his 2012 thru-hike which the DT creators originally had contemplated. I'll talk a bit more about this a few sections down.

State Summaries

This will just be a brief description by State. I don't think I can really do it justice, I'd suggest reading my detail entries for more information.

California: This was my favorite state. Full traverses of Anza Borrego (largest state park in the lower 48), Joshua Tree National Park, Mojave National Preserve (a whopping 1.6 million acres) and a 200 mile traverse of Death Valley National Park. This is freaking amazing. I thought California was also the hardest as it had the highest percentage of XC and the longest water carries. It's also lower elevation with greater potential for really hot weather.

Nevada: This was Heather's favorite state. It's more mountainous than California and mostly above 5,000' with many forays above that up to about 9,800'. There's also more remote jeep road walking and a fair bit of difficult XC through sagebrush and horse trails as well as excellent playa walking. Nevada is an amazing state to traverse on foot, we did it once before on the Hot Springs Trail and loved it. This route was completely different and only once crossed the Hot Springs Trail.

Oregon: Oregon is a mixed bag. The first half is more similar to Nevada, maybe a little lower and not quite as difficult to Drinkwater Pass (with the exception of the Steens / Pueblo's crossover with the Oregon Desert Trail which is pretty rugged and mountainous). The second half you enter National Forests for the rest of the state and alternate between dirt roads and trail with trees, real trees!

Washington: Washington is also a mixed bag. It starts out in National Forest like northern Oregon, but quickly exits around Dayton and enters Wheatland.

Miles and miles of farmed wheat fields. This has a lot of roadwalking but we found it to be very beautiful, peaceful and unique. Then you pick up a rail trail for like 75 miles and then a bike trail into the big city of Spokane. We enjoyed this whole section too. Lastly, you reenter national forests and mountains to finish off the Desert Trail.

Difficulty

I don't know how to begin to explain this. I guess overall I would say the Desert Trail is really, really difficult. Then I would say that there are some very easy miles on old jeep roads and some very, very difficult miles of cross country ("XC"). But no matter what, it's a difficult route. It was really never made to be thru-hiked. It was primarily routed to be hiked in about 20-30 mile sections. Each section started and ended at a road (sometimes paved, usually 4wd) and you were meant to cache water at these spots or have a friend pick you up or shuttle a car. Maybe you would hike a few sections. It wasn't seriously routed for people to walk from Mexico to Canada in one go. The guidebook does mention the word "thru-hike" a couple times in its thousands of pages but really it was routed to walk from water cache to water cache that you placed for your section hike and then Steve would pick you up for a post section hike steak dinner!

This routing creates 2 difficult issues for the thru-hiker. First, water. I'll talk about caching later but there isn't a whole lot of natural water in many places on the trail. Second, it's just really hard. Sometimes the sections are routed such that if you were hiking over the weekend with a day pack or maybe a light backpack and have all your water cached, you'd be like, yeah this is doable. But on a long thru-hike sometimes this can feel like overkill. But that's also what makes the DT an amazing hike. It's routed through some of the most amazing desert landscapes in the country and you can choose to walk where you want.

Really the hardest part about the DT is the XC. Imagine hiking a 2,200+ mile trail where about 1,000 miles there was no trail. 1,000 miles of XC. Imagine that? The AT, PCT and CDT combined have 0 miles of XC [Technically the CDT does have some XC, but really it's super minimal and you have Guthook so it's really not hard and nothing like the DT]. So imagine 1,000! It's slow, it's hard, it's amazing. Not all XC is created equal, I'll talk more about that later.

Also, imagine you are carrying a ton of water. Like 2 gallons. Or imagine you had to drive 2,000 miles to cache water in several dozen places. Or imagine the sun is relentlessly beating down on you and will never go away and there isn't anything taller than your knees for as far as the eye can see. Imagine you have to hitchhike into town on a road with a car every 30 minutes. Imagine

you have to call places on your own to ask to mail or drop off a package because no hikers have been there before you. Imagine every cactus in the area wants to stab you and every cat claw wants to grab you. Imagine every cactus needle will try and pop a hole in your neoprene. Imagine you have to downclimb dry falls, climb up things you never thought were hikeable, walk through lightening storms so crazy in Nevada your hair will stand up, weave around sagebrush so dense you never want to see a sage again, drink water so full of sulfur you'll burp it out for days....and on...and on....and on.

That's what the Desert Trail is like. Also imagine views so amazing you just become jaded cause it's beautiful 100% of the time. Imagine you hike for 1,500 miles without a tree so you have 360 degree views all the time. Imagine hiking so hard that your endorphins are pumping so high when you get through it. Imagine abandoned jeep roads so easy that you've never been happier hiking in your life on a road. Imagine water that tastes so good, no matter how bad it is. Imagine how happy you are when that one trucker stops to take you into town for Taco Bell. Imagine how thankful you will feel when that one cafe in town treats you nicely and your whole day feels good. Imagine being on a road trip to cache water and wondering what it will be like to be back at this spot hot and thirsty in 3 months. Imagine seeing every sunrise and sunset for 4-5 months. Imagine doing something that made you happy every single day. That's also the Desert Trail.

So is the Desert Trail difficult? Fuck yea. But it was so worth it.

Length and Miles Per Day:

How long is the Desert Trail? That's a good question without a perfect answer! My computer drawn GPS track is about 2,000 miles. But this is significantly understated due to the natural understatement of mapping something on the computer vs walking it in the real world and then even more so due to the massive amounts of XC on the DT. There are a ton of miles where a straight line is simply drawn on the maps for the route. Except there are sage, cactus, creosote, blackbrush and so many other plants in the way that Steve frequently calls it a "slalom course". You will find yourself doing small weaving the entire time adding much distance. I would estimate my GPS track is understated by at least 10% on average. So I'd say the Desert Trail is about 2,200 miles but honestly, who really knows!

We took 128 days to hike the DT and per my journal hiked 2,038 miles. But as I mentioned above this is definitely understated. Assuming we hiked at least 2,200 miles then that's an average of 17 per day which is higher than I expected when I was doing this math. I feel like we took a fair amount of zeros, not like PCT newbie hiker zeros but we still did take days off in town

and such. Colter and Dirtmonger were significantly faster than us, but I still feel like our timing was pretty solid. I'd say we were average on speed but if you are qualified to hike the DT then you will probably be faster than us. It just seems like the people who can hike a trail like this are probably also fast for some reason.

Terrain:

This needs to be split between the original DT 1,500 miles and the 700 mile extension to Canada. For the original 1,500 miles, there is almost no singletrack trail. I'm serious. If there was 30 miles of total singletrack trail I'd be shocked (no Steve, I do not count "trail" as horse/burro trail or deer trail from 20 years ago!). The 1,500 miles is about 60% XC and 40% jeep roads in my estimation. I'll further describe this as I think it's important.

For the original 1,500 miles not all XC is created equal. There is some sublime and easy walking XC. Think like walking on a flat and hard playa with not a single plant. Or "desert concrete" as Steve likes to call it. Or a firm packed wash. Or an alluvial fan with channels heading in your direction. Then of course, there is a lot of really hard and slow XC. Think that same alluvial fan except you are walking against the grain and dipping into and out of rocky gullies over and over. Or a huge flat valley except there is a ton of sagebrush, or black brush or a million other plants. It's not really bushwhacking but you are weaving and can never keep a straight line. Or the deep sandy washes. And then there is the really hard XC. The stuff with hills and mountains. Those last climbs out of the gullies and over the ridge. Some of the ridge walking and then steeply up and down. Some sketchy sidehilling at times or climbing around dry falls and such (nothing technical or truly dangerous though).

As for the jeep roads. 40% may sound like a lot but you will be praying for those jeep roads at times. And I would say 99.9999% of the time we never ever saw a vehicle. A huge portion of the jeep roads are either completely abandoned or undrivable. And the 2 tracks that are drivable are never driven. Or so rarely that it's unlikely you'll see a car. There are some miles on better graded dirt roads but overall that wasn't too much and I wouldn't ever complain that there was too much jeep road. It was remote and great hiking. Mostly felt like we just had 2 singletrack trails side by side.

As for the northern 700 miles there is a big change. The route is much more National Forest better graded dirt roads. Some of these and the overall quantity might be more than some hikers like. There is also a moderate amount of trail. Maybe 240 miles. There is very little cross country, although the small amounts there are can be tough. We also found the singletrack to be at times very badly maintained or basically abandoned in the National Forests.

On our GPS track I've tried to note these areas and at times we have mapped a possible alternate around.

Should I hike all the way to Canada?

This is probably one of the biggest decisions you'll have to make in planning. See my planning entries for this history on this routing by Colter of the final 700 miles of the Desert Trail. Personally we enjoyed the final 700 miles to Canada but I do think it begs evaluation for each person. You can check out Dirtmonger's blog for his thoughts, in hindsight it seemed that he would have preferred to have stopped at Drinkwater Pass (about 60 miles north of Highway 78 – the 60 miles from Highway 78 to Drinkwater Pass continue more like the original DT). It really is a tale of 2 different trails. The first 1,500 miles are really desert. Really desert. And so much XC and overall very difficult and adventurous. From Drinkwater Pass north the trail changes, mostly due to the fact that the desert basically ends. You start to enter National Forests. So trees. And no more XC. Mostly forest service roads and trails. It's just totally different. We enjoyed the change and liked finishing the route off to Canada but I can also see Dirtmonger's point. You are hiking this crazy desert trail for 1,500 miles and then bam, a totally different trail hits you. For some people I think just stopping at Drinkwater Pass would be a great finish. It would basically be the finish of the “desert”. But the original Desert Trail concept was to go to Canada and I think Colter has done a great job of getting there.

Colter's route of about 680 miles consists of about 20 miles of XC, 240 miles of trail and the remaining 420 miles of dirt roads, generally forest service roads. There is some pavement in those 420 miles but not a lot (although there are a couple stretches through the wheatlands and from Blanchard to Newport). This is a totally different mix from the original 1,500 miles of DT, but like I said we still enjoyed it. The forest service dirt roads range from pretty remote and low use to much higher grade than the original DT. Pretty typical for forest service road walking, at times it felt like too much/a bit mundane but it's not like we found a better alternate Colter didn't see or something. The trails were pretty disappointing at times though. The forest service, without much trail funding, has let many of these trails go to the point of practically being abandoned. It was pretty frustrating to be stoked for real trail only to find it in such bad condition we couldn't wait to get off it. We've tried to note these on the GPS track (or in my daily journal entries) and sometimes propose an alternate option. Included in the 240 miles of trail is also 75 miles of rail trail in Washington which is a really nice walk, albeit a bit rocky. We felt like much of Washington changed back to a desert type environment as we were walking through the wheatlands and scablands. We were very happy to have continued on to experience these unique environments and finish at the Canadian border.

But everyone is different, you'll have to consider what your goals are and choose.

Water

Oh, water. Life revolves around water on the DT. Overall I'd say this: There are almost no natural water sources in California and you need to cache. Nevada has a surprising number of good springs that are pretty reliable and you could get away without caching at all although I would suggest caching to I-80 (Lovelock) to make life easier. From I-80 north into Oregon to mid-Oregon you don't need to cache unless you really want to. You'll still be carrying water but the carries are not as long. And then for the 700 mile extension to Canada water isn't really a major issue at all. It's pretty plentiful. There are a few stretches in the National Forests or wheatlands that were longer carries but nothing to stress about.

I am going to write a separate long entry about water and caching. We did a lot of long water carries in California even with caching and same with southern Nevada, but it was totally doable. I hate carrying water but I just got used to it and it was part of every day life. We also cached food in 6 different spots with our water caches and this was a huge benefit. I didn't realize how big a deal this would be but only carrying 3-4 days of food instead of 7-8 days when you also are carrying a lot of water daily turned out to be one of the best decisions of our planning. I'll write more in another entry.

As for quality, we never treat our water and were fine. There really just aren't a ton of natural water sources, especially in California and Nevada. But if you treat your water then you will want something because you might find tiny springs or pools that you desperately want but have been fouled by cattle or horses. These can be pretty nasty but you'll still want the water. Since our hike was later in the season we have very little extra water and didn't have much of this. We did have a couple sources in Nevada that were brutally trashed by cows (Paintrock spring), although overall there are very few cows near the original DT. On the northern 700 miles there are a lot more cows in the National Forest.

Resupply

Resupply is not as easy as on other trails. In a separate entry I will list all of the resupply options and summarize what's at the stops. I wouldn't say the carries are brutally long very often but the places you stop at times can be very desolate and not have much. Because Colter cached water and food for the first 1,500 miles and because Dirtmonger hikes like twice as fast as we do, they resupplied less than we did which resulted in us being creative at times.

But that was kinda fun, it's rare to hike a trail where you are the first hiker to have ever resupplied in that place. I think I've added a fair number of places to resupply over what Colter and Dirtmonger did. It also helped to cache food 6 times in the first 1,000 miles to Lovelock as I mentioned above. That reduced the amount of food we had to carry at any one time to about 4 days or less, pretty sweet. From Lovelock north, we did do 2 long carries of like 140-160 miles (Gerlach to Denio and Burns to Austin House), a few typical 100 miles carries and a bunch less than that. Nothing crazy (although the 2 bigger one's were tough) and we weren't particularly hiking very big miles. If you decided to cache water north of Lovelock then I would food cache at least for the 2 big carries.

Guidebook / Maps / GPS / Navigation

See my planning entries for a better history and description of these items. Steve's guidebooks for the first 1,200 miles are amazing! They are gigantic, difficult to purchase and pricey, but I was really happy to have carried these. The detail route description is incredible. The intricate hand drawn trail on the maps so cool. The amount of information on flora, fauna and geology is simply astounding. We learned so much while hiking, probably more than all of my other trails combined. We especially enjoyed learning at least 30-40 new plants that we would commonly see which felt like we knew our surroundings better than usual. The one challenge I had was that there is so much information in the guidebooks it could actually be hard to follow along at times. I would be walking along looking at the description from point to point and in between would be an entire page on geology or something. My eyes would have to scan way ahead and pick out that one sentence that told me what to look for next. But overall these books were incredible and I would highly recommend you get them. You could hike the trail without them I guess these days but in my opinion it would be a disservice to the trail and yourself.

From northern Nevada to mid-Oregon there is a separate mapset of 7 foldout maps that were produced before the guidebooks I believe (Steve's guidebooks stop where these maps pick up). These are pretty nice and have a brief description of the trail and show the trail on the topo maps. These also are not super easy to obtain, see my planning entries for more discussion. Lastly, for the final 700 mile extension you'll want to see Colter's blog (see below for more info) which contains summaries in word documents on his sections.

Within Steve's guidebook are super detailed maps with a beautiful intricately hand drawn trail. These are the 24k topo maps, pretty zoomed in and the trail was drawn by Steve from his years of reconnaissance in the 90s and early 2000's. The one drawback is that the maps have a very narrow corridor, just a

mile or two so if you ever get off trail by accident or on purpose you need another source. That leads me to GPS.

The DT would be much harder without GPS! The guidebooks are incredibly detailed and written assuming you don't have a GPS, much of the directions talk about going towards Azimuth XX, but you know, these days with GPS navigation is much easier. But it's still pretty challenging on the DT. Here's the big thing I want to get across:

THERE IS NO ACCURATE GPS TRACK!

When I talk about my GPS track what I'm talking about is how Heather and I took the maps in the guidebooks and traced the hand drawn track from the maps onto Caltopo.com. This means that we took a track drawn by Steve and just replicated it on the computer and then loaded that into our GPS. This also means it is not accurate! No one has actually walked the DT with a GPS and recorded an accurate track**. But that's fine. The desert is so open with obvious features and Steve is so good at navigation that his hand drawn route is very accurate so our GPS track seemed very accurate. Plus a lot of the time there was no one "right" way to go somewhere. A lot of the XC is just a suggested best way to go, you can do whatever looks best to you on the ground. We found having the GPS to be an extremely helpful tool at times. Sometimes choosing the correct wash when there are dozens of side washes would be almost impossible. Or the correct abandoned jeep road in the middle of nowhere. Or are you *definitely* entering the correct canyon or climbing over the exact correct ridge/peak The desert is so open that generally you wouldn't actually be lost, but the GPS really helped with all those micro-navigation's and just made life easier. But at the same time it was only so helpful. It wasn't perfect, for example you can't exactly see how to climb around a small dryfall or the exact tiny gully up to the tiny ridge or some of the many, many tiny decisions you have to make all day. That's where the guidebook came in handy and just our many years of experience navigating and reading maps and the landscape.

If you only know how to walk on a singletrack trail or wander around with Guthook in your hand trying to get back on a line then you will probably die on the Desert Trail. Seriously. You should know how to read a map and know how to make good decisions. My GPS track will not save you.

**This statement isn't perfectly true. It appears that during the Desert Survivor's Relay in the early 2000's (see planning entries) that they carried a GPS and GPS'd the entire route. I have no idea what happened to this track nor do I want to. In my opinion, having a perfectly accurate GPS track takes the adventure out of the hike and only encourages unprepared hikers to come

to a trail. Also, there is a hiker who hiked about 450 miles of the DT in 2019 who is GPS-ing the trail, but her tracks are very different as compared to the actual guidebooks. She does not have the guidebooks or maps and is just connecting waypoints that Dirtmonger plotted at home and has on his blog. Therefore her route is much more of an educated guess as to exactly where Dirtmonger went. We overlaid her route with our route for the 450 miles and it was fun to see where she went versus where we went. I give her a lot of credit, she is adventurous and skilled doing it this way, but a large percentage of the time her route was different than the guidebook route. Like it would be the same in a canyon or wash as that was the obvious route but on the flatter, non contained areas it would vary wildly at times. This is just a heads up that if you come across those tracks just to know what you are getting. Clearly you could walk that way, she did, there are many ways to walk the DT at times.

Other Resources / The DTA

There isn't a whole lot out there on the Desert Trail. If you google the Desert Trail you mostly get stuff on the Oregon Desert Trail. The 2 main resources would be Colter's blog at:

https://bucktrack.com/Desert_Trail_Thru-Hike.html

and Dirtmonger's blog at:

<https://freedirtmonger.blogspot.com/p/desert-trail.html>

I produced a GPS track, water info and resupply info that builds upon what these 2 have provided. These are located in other journal entries in this journal.

And then there is the Desert Trail Association which only kinda exists anymore. You can read more in my planning entries but currently the DTA's website is still down so it's almost like the Desert Trail doesn't exist! The reality is that's it's probably too far gone to be recovered and maybe that's ok. This route's original concept was 40+ years ago and really finalized in the early 2000's with Steve's guidebooks and the Desert Survivors Relay. Since then almost no one has hiked the DT and nothing has been done on the ground specifically related to the DT. But in those 20 years literally almost nothing has changed. We found the land almost exactly as Steve described it 20+ years ago. We even found a lot of cairns he made back then and even some that were from the 1980's and 1990's! There was one spot north of Luning where a huge solar field had taken over Steve's XC valley route so we just walked a bit to the east still doing XC. There was also a new small mine in the area which had a small dirt road going around the outside of it rather than

the DT route which went through the now mine. Those are the only 2 big changes we noticed the entire 1,500 miles which is pretty incredible. So whether anyone hikes the Desert Trail or an association exists or a federal agency recognizes it, the route doesn't seem like it's going anywhere. That's not to say that an active Association wouldn't be beneficial or recognition from the BLM or trail maintenance from the Forest Service, but the last 20 years to me have proven that those things aren't mandatory for a route to still exist. Really the most important thing to have occurred since the Desert Survivor's Relay in the early 2000's was Colter's 2012 thru-hike which brought attention to the route and his website documented his hike and his 700 mile extension to Canada.

The one other resource would be the section summaries from the Desert Survivor's Relay in the early 2000's. These are just cool to read. They are no longer on the internet but I think can be found on the waybackmachine and I saved myself copies which I think I will include with the other materials I'm producing.

Seasons / Weather

This is a really tough one. I feel like there is really no perfect season to hike the Desert Trail. Not only can it be too hot but honestly it can be too cold. There are probably 3 things to think about. California is mostly lower and mostly a lot hotter. Death Valley is the main choke point, it can get way way hotter than anywhere on the route. Then Nevada, which can be hot in summer, is actually quite high and can be very cold and snowy if you are too early. You spend pretty much all of your time above 5,000' and spend a lot of time higher and top out in the 9,000'+ range. Of course, if you wait too long Nevada can be plenty hot in summer at the DT's lower elevations. Then the Oregon mountains (the Blue's) can definitely have a lot of snow so you don't want to get there too early.

Colter started March 1 and had a fair amount of cold weather, cold rain and even a decent amount of snow a few times. The mountains in Nevada are high, up to 9,000' or so. Oregon and southern/northern Washington of course hold snow through the spring and beyond. If you don't mind the cold then Colter's March 1 start date might be closer to what you want. He did take 2 weeks off at Lovelock to cache additional food/water so that purposely delayed his entry into Oregon where there was still a fair bit of snow. I would maybe suggest March 15 personally, March 1 seemed really early to me but he's from Alaska and handles the cold way better than us! The upside to all this is that he had far less hot days than we had. It didn't seem like he had much hot at all until summer in Washington and by then even if it's really hot, you generally have way more options for shade and water.

I was initially considering starting April 1 (due to working through 3/31) and was a bit concerned about the heat once I reached Death Valley in early May. If I had done this start I think it would have been tight and probably 50-50 whether it would have been really uncomfortable.

Dirtmonger I think started in almost mid-April and seemed to have incredibly hot weather at times in the first month. He also got delayed a little with an ankle injury on trail so I don't really know his exact timing, but he seemed to have a heat wave that was pretty brutal. He also had a lot of violent thunderstorms in Nevada. If I had to guess I'd say his start date of April 9 seemed a bit too late.

And then there was us. I think we ended up with some really good timing but I wouldn't call it perfect. I don't think anything is perfect. We hiked from Lovelock, NV north to Canada in June and July, took the month of August off from the DT and hiked the Oregon Coast Trail and then hiked from Lovelock south to Mexico from mid-September to mid-November. For us, our hike from Lovelock north was on the warm/hot side but that was what we preferred to a colder hike. But I think for a lot of people this might have been a little too warm for them. You'd have to read my daily entries to get the gist of how it was for us, it's hard for me to generalize here. Similar to Colter it was really hot for us at times in Washington when we were walking through in July, but like I said, at least there was usually shade and water was better. For Lovelock south, we definitely needed to take the month of August off. Nevada would have been a bit too hot at the low elevations, but probably nice up high. But the real issue would have been California. It is still really hot in all of California on the DT at that time and Death Valley would have been impossible. Our restart in mid-September ended up being perfect. Nevada was warm but not hot. Death Valley was going to still be a bit iffy by the time we got there in early October, but we didn't get a heat wave and instead had low to mid 90's which was fine given our overall options and then California in October/early November was quite good. So overall pretty good. We only did it this way as our start got delayed (see planning entries) and I studied the temps along the route for a long time to come up with this plan.

Dangers

The DT can be a dangerous trail if you don't know what the hell you are doing! I'm not gonna go on and on, but will repeat from the GPS above. If you don't know how to read a map you really shouldn't be on the Desert Trail. There are just too many little decisions to make, even with an inaccurate (or even if there ever is an accurate) GPS track. You should also be an expert in how to handle water. How much you personally need for a 30+ mile carry over hard terrain in 90-100 degree heat. This is no joke. If you fuck this up you will be in

trouble. As Steve likes to say, there is no surprise water in the desert. You will not come across some extra source or a person to help you out and you have to be able to estimate if the next source will actually have water, this is not easy! Those are the 2 main things. There's nothing else crazy that comes to mind. There are rattlesnakes but that's not really a big deal. Steve like to talk a lot about breaking your ankle in the thousands of kangaroo rat holes on the XC's. I guess a fighter plane which seem to strafe the sky a lot could accidentally drop a bomb on you. Lightening actually is always a real issue. It's really open out there. There were a few times where some severe thunderstorms were coming and there was literally nothing taller than our knees, Dirtmonger has a few crazy moments in his blog more than we did thankfully.

Gear

I'm sure you know your gear so here's just a few thoughts:

-Zip off pants were important to me. Unless you want your legs scarred have pants or knee high gaitors!

-I bought a pair of Dirty Girl gaiters for the second half of the trail and it was one of the best little gear purchases I had done in a while. There is so much XC that I finally was able to block all the crap getting in my shoes and especially the cheat grass that was driving me insane.

-My Neoair was a disaster this year. I've carried it on other desert type trails and never had as many punctures as I did on the DT. Maybe it's just bad luck, I swear I was trying to be careful. Heather only had 1 puncture the whole trip which was easily fixed.

-Go light on the rain gear. You most likely won't get much rain, but will want something for sure if you start on the early side. Check out some of Colter's pictures up high in the snow!

-Go heavy on the sun protection, whatever works for you. The sun can be relentless and you might not have anything taller than your knees as far as the eyes can see. I couldn't have done the DT without an umbrella. I used it while walking at times but not a massive amount. But for breaks it was really key to be able to get under some shade. I was impressed with how good it felt to be on a break with no shade but my umbrella. I thought it was still going to feel terrible but overall it was great.

-Go light on the shelter as generally it won't be raining. Personally I would have something fully enclosed although you can get away with a tarp surely.

Heather cowboy camped most nights, for me I set up my shelter most nights. There was the occasional section with mosquitoes or flies, but nothing like some of the other trails when bugs are bad (maybe this would have been worst if we were heading into Oregon when the snow was melting).

Wildlife

Wildlife was pretty great for a desert trail. I saw a number of Bighorn sheep in a half dozen different areas. The wild horses and burros are awesome in Nevada. Some rattlesnakes. Lots of vultures and hawks. Some elk in Oregon. Lots of antelope in Nevada and southern Oregon. A couple bears in the northern 700 miles. A few foxes. Deer occasionally. Lots more birds than I would have expected. If you want a really good idea of wildlife on the DT, check out Colter's blog, he saw a ton and is an expert spotter!

Cell Service

Wow, the country is really getting covered for cell phones. I was pretty shocked by how often one of us had service. I have AT&T and Heather has Verizon. We were also able to hotspot each other if only one of us had service. There are still plenty of places we didn't have service including some town stops but overall I'd say we averaged service every other day which seems like a lot for a really desolate and remote trail.

Start / Finish

Logistically getting to the start in Jacumba is pretty easy. It's about 1 hour 15 minutes east of San Diego. There is a public bus but it only runs Monday and Friday so that's a bit inconvenient. You could get out to the El Cajon transit center any day and then take an Uber which is probably around \$ 80 or so.

Finishing is a little tougher. You are going to have to hitch out of whatever spot you plan to finish. If you can hitch back down to Newport then there is a bus that will take you to Spokane with airports and Greyhound. There are other options too I'm sure, you'll have to figure it out based on where you finish. We finished at the Nelway border crossing when I severely sprained my ankle and limped for 3 days to the finish. Dirtmonger finished here too. Colter finished just over the Washington border in Idaho, near where we finished the Hot Springs Trail. This is a more remote finish and will require hiking south back out and hitching more remote dirt roads to civilization.

Permits

There are basically no permits on the entire 2,000+ mile route. You should hike this trail just cause of that!

Technically we needed a free one to camp from a backcountry board in Joshua Tree but we didn't get to a board till we were leaving. But no big deal. I can't think of a single other permit that we even technically needed. Death Valley requires no permits, nor does the Mojave Preserve.

