

A JAW-DROPPING STOP ALONG THE SIERRAS

Marcy Wong & Donn Logan Architects offers travelers an unexpected sanctuary in high desert country — by Kimberly Olson



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF MARCY WONG & DONN LOGAN ARCHITECTS

AS MODERN-DAY ROAD-TRIPPERS RAMBLE THROUGH THE EASTERN SIERRA ALONG HISTORIC HIGHWAY 395—ONCE A DUSTY WAGON TRAIL—A KALEIDOSCOPE OF SCENIC BEAUTY UNFOLDS, FROM INDIGO LAKES TO TOWERING SNOW-CAPPED MOUNTAINS. ALTHOUGH THE EYES CERTAINLY DELIGHT AT SUCH NATURAL WONDERS, AFTER DRIVING LONG STRETCHES OF HIGHWAY, TRAVELERS' STIFFENING LIMBS AREN'T QUITE AS HAPPY.

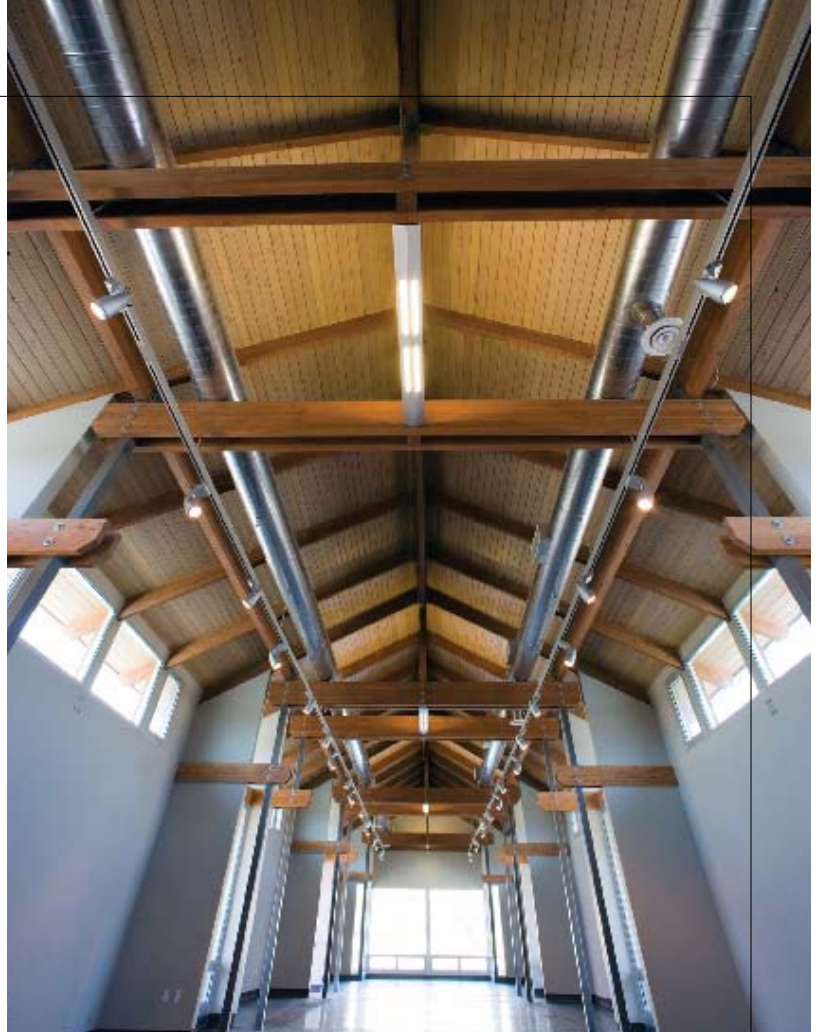
Pass into the tiny hamlet of Lone Pine, though, and a welcome site pops into view: the new Eastern Sierra Inter-Agency Visitor Center, where road-weary travelers can stretch their legs, have a picnic, and learn about the area's history.

Situated at the foot of Mt. Whitney, the 6,500-square-foot visitor center sprang from the imaginations of Berkeley-based Marcy Wong & Donn Logan Architects, which designed the building for a multiagency group headed by the U.S. Forest Service. The existing center—which was outdated, too small, and expensive to heat and cool—was past its prime.

Wong and Logan were asked to create a new center that would complement its natural surroundings; they turned to rural California for inspiration. "We looked at big hay barns and other agricultural buildings all over," Logan says. "We wanted to design something that—as you approach it from a mile or two away—would look normal and natural."

While the center's simple forms offer a gentle nod to the area's agricultural and railroad buildings, the team avoided being too imitative. "The center is the gateway to Inyo Valley for visitors," Wong says. "So the client wanted it to be an iconic image, a memorable building." Once the center was up, Wong and Logan's peers certainly found it to be just that: It won a 2005 Design Merit Award from the East Bay chapter of the American Institute of Architects.

Working with East Bay landscape architect Ron Lutsko, Wong and Logan created a landscape that connected the building with its larger environment. Visitors enter the center via a trellised walkway that will be draped with vines, creating a pleasant, shaded walk from the parking lot. Once inside, they notice



that the building's exterior materials—including cedar and some local basalt rock that had fallen naturally from nearby Westgard Pass mountain—are artfully used in the interior as well. “Using stone was important because we wanted to use materials that reflected the region,” Wong says. “It’s satisfying on a basic level, and it’s also sustainable.”

The duo oriented the building so one end faces Mt. Whitney like a telescope, giving visitors a jaw-dropping view out of two oversized windows. The windows’ placement also reduces summer heat gain and boosts daytime lighting. The pair even placed white, reflective-light shelves below the higher windows to bounce daylight deeper into the space. In other green-conscious moves, they used a reflective roof to prevent heat retention and keep the center comfy during Lone Pine’s brutally hot summers, and opted to heat and cool the building using nonpolluting geothermal energy.

Visitors who want to bone up on the region’s cultural and ecological history can slip into the center’s bookstore and its exhibit gallery. “We want visitors to be blown away by the exhibits,” Logan says. “We created a simple space so that when exhibits are installed, the clarity of the architectural image will remain and be an important part of the experience.” An experience they hope will inspire visitors to get back on the road, rested and revived, and continue to explore.

