

Longs Peak Hike

By Wendy Zhou (January 2, 2012)



View of Longs Peak from our campsite

Longs Peak is the highest peak in Rocky Mountain National Park, at 14,259 feet. It is the 15th highest peak in the state of Colorado. The Keyhole route to the summit has five major sections:

From the trailhead to the Keyhole (6.7 miles, at 13,150 feet) → the Ledges (0.3 mile) → the Trough (600 feet up from 13,300 to 13,900 feet) → the Narrows (0.3 mile) → the Homestretch (300 feet up)

“There have been joys too great to be described in words, and there have been griefs upon which I have not dared to dwell, and with these in mind I say, climb if you will, but remember that courage and strength are naught without prudence, and that a momentary negligence may destroy the happiness of a lifetime. Do nothing in haste, look well to each step, and from the beginning think what may be the end.” — Edward Whymper

Many climbers have become writers, even though climbing and writing use different parts of our bodies and are totally different activities. However, they share one common thing: both connect body to spirit. I am far from qualified to be called a climber, yet as an avid hiker I appreciate and thoroughly enjoy both hiking and writing. They exercise both my body muscles and my brain; more importantly, they allow me to explore our infinite nature and then share the experiences with others.

I started hiking only in 2007. Before then I was a city girl who had never actually hiked. The Longs Peak hike is the most challenging hike I have been on, and it will remain in my memory for a lifetime.

It was 7:00 p.m. on July 27, 2010, at Glacier Basin Campground in Colorado. Twenty-five of our Chinese Mountain Club (CMC) hikers had just finished dinner, and we were busy packing for the early morning start of our Longs Peak hike. I packed two peanut butter sandwiches in a container, three hardboiled eggs, a muffin, an apple and some nuts, energy bars, and chocolate in separate plastic zipper bags, then put everything into my backpack. I filled up four bottles of water, checked my headlamp batteries, raincoat, jackets, maps, first aid supplies, and gloves. I heard questions being asked at times; otherwise, most were quiet with only the sounds of everyone bustling about packing. Finally, I placed my backpack outside of my tent, along with my hiking poles, boots and socks before retiring for the night.

It was a beautiful summer night. A few clouds were floating in the sky. The campground was delightfully showered by moonlight. Looking up at the summit of Longs Peak, I thought about how hours later I myself might be standing on the top of it, an excitement grew inside of me. I prayed that the weather would hold through tomorrow. I crawled into my tent and took out the trail information. Under my headlamp, I reviewed the instructions one more time, and then put them back into my pocket. I turned off the light and tried to get some sleep. It was still early for bedtime. I was nervous. Nearby, a group of students was playing guitar and singing songs. I tossed and turned for quite a while, trying to push the music out of my head. The last time I checked my watch was at 10:30 p.m. before dozing off.

“Get up, it’s time!”

It was Chung’s voice. I wasn’t sure if I was still dreaming. I looked at my watch, which showed 1:30 a.m. Quickly jumping up and putting my clothes on, I felt my head was heavy from lack of sleep. In less than 30 minutes, everyone was ready. We got into three cars, heading to the trailhead of Longs Peak.

We arrived at the trailhead at 2:30 a.m. The sign board showed the elevation was 9,405 feet. The parking lot was already packed with cars and people. We did a few warm-up stretches and signed up at the ranger station. My heart was beating fast. I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself down. At 2:50 a.m. we took off, starting an unforgettable daylong journey.



Iris, Maria and Jingyih in the parking lot

This was my first “fourteener” hike. (A fourteener is a mountain that exceeds 14,000 feet (4,267.2 m) above mean sea level). I had been overwhelmed by excitement when we were planning this trip. However, my excitement was increasingly replaced by

nervousness as the time approached. Although I love challenges of all kinds, I was only an intermediate hiker in our group. I didn't know if I could take this challenge physically, regardless how much I wanted to achieve the goal of making it to the summit

This hiking trip was well planned by our leader Chung, and twenty-five of us arrived at Rocky Mountain National Park four days ahead of the hike on July 23. We had increased the level of hiking difficulties every day, in order to acclimatize to the altitude. Every day turned out to be a challenge.

Before the trip, I had spent a lot of time studying the hike. It is an elevation gain about 5,000 feet and a 15-mile round trip. The peak is 14,259 feet high. The first six miles would be a somewhat ordinary hike to the Boulderfield Campsite. I calculated the time and speed. If I could keep up at 2 miles per hour plus take breaks on the way, I would arrive at the Boulderfield around 7 a.m., where our six backpackers, who preferred to do the hike in two days instead of one, had camped the night before. Then I would have another five hours to reach the Keyhole and finish the remaining one mile to reach the peak by noon. I was told that we needed to head down by or before noon to avoid thunderstorms and lightning.

Nevertheless, it wasn't an accurate statement when I called the first six miles an ordinary hike. We were above 10,000 feet, and my backpack weighed about ten pounds, a lot more than I usually carry on day hikes. Five minutes after I started, my breath was getting shorter; my legs were getting weaker.

There was a full moon that morning, so it was not pitch dark, but dim. The weather was a little chilly, around 40 F, but perfect for hiking. I quickly merged myself into a long line of discrete dots of headlamps. Like a long living snake, the line sometimes spread out extensively; other times, it curled in zigzag patterns. Scanning the number of people hiking ahead and behind me, thinking that we had all come from different places to this very trail at this very moment, I felt we were somehow emotionally connected. A spiritual bond had brought us to this trail. I didn't know who most of the people were, or what professions they worked in, but I knew that we all liked the outdoors, mountains, and challenges. It was a spectacular scene to hike in darkness with hundreds of strangers, and also a number of my dear friends.

Winnie, from Canada, was hiking behind me. Her headlamp batteries were low, so she followed in my footsteps to see the trail better, which turned out to be a great help to me. Being one of the most experienced hikers in our CMC, Winnie had started hiking since '90s, and had hiked in many places in different countries. Thus, she was a much more knowledgeable hiker than I. I was not aware of that at that moment, but later I was so grateful to have her accompany me on the way up. Without her, I wouldn't have finished my journey to the top.

Hiking in darkness wasn't much fun. Nothing could be seen but the snake of lights spreading out all the way ahead, and the full moon in the sky. Occasionally some people passed me. I tried to push the thoughts of tiredness out of my head, but I had nothing else to think about. I could hear my own heavy breathing. I felt my heart was pounding so hard. I was pulling my left foot in front of my right, then the right foot in front



Witnessing the beautiful sunrise

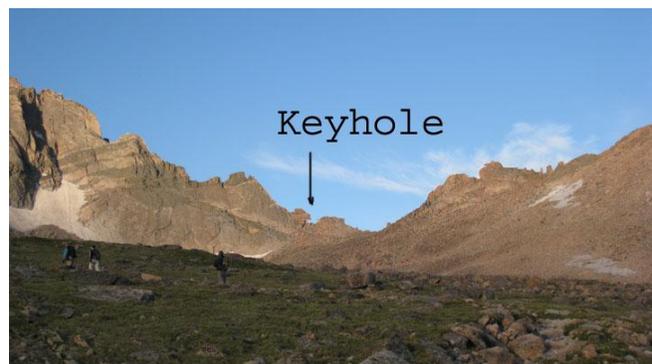
of the left, repeating it over, and over again, endlessly. The only way I could check the distance I had gone was by my watch. After about 45 minutes had passed, I started hearing the sound of a brook. I knew that I was passing Alpine Brook. It was followed by a wooden bridge which matched the description I had read about. A little more time passed, and we were marching above the timberline. Gradually, a strip of orange light appeared from the East; it was the start of a new day. For the first time hiking at above 10,000 feet, I felt that I was so close to the sun. I turned off my headlamp. It was getting brighter and brighter. I enjoyed every second of the changes, taking pictures, and momentarily forgetting the tiredness.



Young people passed by me

I took breaks along the way while many people passed by me. There were fathers and sons; friends; husbands and wives; lovers; different combinations, and different groups. We greeted each other, wished each other good luck. The sun was completely up by then.

It was exciting to see the Keyhole emerging into my view. Keyhole is a unique rock formation in the shape of an upside down keyhole. It is this formation that gives the route its name. It is from here that the trail becomes much more



First glimpse of the Keyhole

difficult. It is also the spot to evaluate whether or not to continue to the summit based on your physical condition, the weather situation etc. In fact, many people turn back from here. I had seen many photos of it on the Internet, but to view it with my own eyes was a different experience.

At this point, I knew that I had almost finished the first six miles and was getting closer to the peak, but didn't realize that the real challenges had just started.



The Boulderfield Campsite

By 7: 10, we had reached the Boulderfield Campsite. Our six backpackers, who had arrived and camped here a day earlier, had already left. We took a long break here, with our two other teammates Maria and Gordon who had hiked with us for quite a while. We ate some food, drank water and took some pictures.

We started passing a field of boulders in different shapes, sticking out of the ground randomly. We needed good coordination to walk on each boulder. The Keyhole was in our view, but was far from reachable. It seemed to remain the same distance from us no matter how hard and how long we walked toward it. I was focusing on each boulder I stepped on. However, after a while, I heard Winnie calling me:



The Notorious Boulderfield and Keyhole! Winnie is in light green.

“Wendy, you are heading in the wrong direction.”

“Gosh!”

I looked up and found the Keyhole was already on my left side. I turned and walked toward the Keyhole again. Inside my head I was blaming myself for not paying

enough attention to the direction but only to my footsteps, which resulted in wasting both energy and time. I recognized the difference between an amateur hiker and an experienced one and decided to follow Winnie.

We planned to have a rest at the Keyhole, and I wanted to leave my hiking poles and maybe my backpack there to summit lightly. Then we could pick the stuff up later when we returned. However, when we reached the Keyhole, it was a completely different picture from what I had expected.

The moment I reached the top of the Keyhole, where I could see the back of the mountains, I saw that they dropped thousands of feet down. I felt as if I were standing on the top edge of a highrise building. My legs started trembling. I saw a narrow path marked with bull's eye blazes which we had to follow. A few spots where one could sit had been occupied by the people who arrived earlier. They looked as if they had taken some bar stools up to a spot at 13,150 feet elevation and were sitting in the middle of nowhere. The Keyhole seemed to be their final goal, so they were relaxing and enjoying the spectacular views in the sky.



The back of the mountains behind the Keyhole

The sudden open space was both breathtaking and thrilling to me. Before this point, if all the hardships I had dealt with were tiredness and the difficulty of balancing on random boulders, from here on, I was starting to deal with massive exposed open space. Many people were returning after exploring a little further. The trail was so narrow that I had to find a spot to position myself where I was safe enough to let them pass on their way back. I remember a woman murmuring when she was passing me, “This is not worth risking my life for.”

All these elements scared me. I wanted to continue but it would totally depend on Winnie. I knew that I wouldn't go without her company. We leaned on some rocks, discussing what to do.

“What should we do?” I asked Winnie. “Would you like to go further? I am very scared, Winnie.”

“I am 50-50. Either way will be fine. I am not that scared, but just tired,” Winnie answered.

“Then let’s continue, Winnie.” At that moment, what I remembered was a phrase from an article by another CMC member, Helen, which had been posted on our club’s website, “I kept going on as long as I could move my feet forward.”

“OK.” Winnie followed. I was overjoyed to hear this.

My hiking poles were no longer helpful but were now an impediment to me, as I needed to use my hands to climb rocks from time to time. I found a small grotto where I could leave the poles so I could free my hands. After that, each muscle in my body joined in combat to climb or cross the rocks. At one point, I had to hold on a metal handle attached to the edge of a big rock, moving my body around of the rock to pass it. I didn’t dare to look down. Below me was a drop of hundreds of feet. While I was carefully planting each step forward, I found myself constantly looking for Winnie’s light green jacket. When I saw her moving within my view, I was calmed and continued moving forward. I would get nervous when I lost sight of her. In hindsight, I come to apprehend what a little pacifier means to a baby. Winnie played the role of my pacifier then. She would not be aware of that except that I have now revealed the secret.



Winnie's light green jacket



Cherry was climbing the Trough

From the Keyhole, we only had one mile to the peak. The hands of my watch pointed to 8:36 when we continued from the Keyhole at 13,150 feet. Following the red and yellow dot bull’s eyes, we turned left and scrambled south onto the marked path, which is called the Ledges. The route climbs up before descending 100 feet. It took us another hour to reach the bottom of the Trough, near 13,300 feet. We took another break and had a little snack.

The Trough is about a 600 foot steep climb. We met Ben and Cherry and Xia Ma while we were ascending the Trough. Loose rocks here made the trail slippery. We needed to pay attention to the falling rocks to avoid being hit. My energy level was very low. Every step was a struggle. I had to stop to catch my breath every few steps.

The oxygen level was about 40 percent less than at sea level, so I needed to breathe two or three times in order to get the same amount of oxygen. I felt that almost all of my energy had been drained

from me. When I revealed my worries to Ben, asking how I could make it back if I was already dead tired then, he said to me: “Don’t worry about this now, Wendy! Just keep going up slowly and carefully.”

Amazingly, our friends Sandy and Jingyih were on the way down while we were still desperately scrambling up. We asked them how much difficulty we faced ahead. Sandy warned us that the last part, the Homestretch, was really scary, because the hike was almost vertical. I felt both excitement and doubts at my ability to continue. Once again, I had to put these thoughts away, focusing on the difficulties that I was facing. Finally, at 10:50 a.m., I reached the top of the Trough at 13,900 feet.



**Xiaoma taking a break;
Nancy waiting at the top of
the Trough**

Nancy and Paul were waiting there. Paul stated that he had a bad headache and was going to head back. Nancy anxiously asked me, “Wendy, should we turn back? It is too dangerous to go further.”

“But we are not far the top, Nancy! It is only less than one mile. Let’s continue!” I didn’t want to give up even though I had doubts about what I was saying.

After a little hesitation, Nancy agreed. I was happy to have her joining me.

We were entering the Narrows. As you can imagine from its name, the Narrows is a ledge on the side of the mountain that varies from between one to a few feet wide. It presents the most exposure along the entire trail. This part is notorious for fatal accidents. Just glancing from a few feet away, I thought it was impossible to cross it, as I could barely see a path, only people moving around gingerly on the wall of the mountain. I didn’t know where they were setting their feet. However, if I focused only on my next step, I figured that I could always find a spot to move forward. It was the exposure which was the hardest part to deal with, harder than actually moving my feet forward. If I misplaced my foot, it was more than a thousand-foot drop on the right side. Just thinking of this possibility made me tremble. I didn’t have a chance to



Crossing the Narrows

enjoy the spectacular view. I walked, constantly leaning against the mountain, and took pictures during short breaks. Those breaks not only helped me to catch my breath, but also focused my mind. There were badly positioned rocks which we needed to carefully scramble around, and I paid more attention to avoid any fatal mistakes.

The last section was called the Homestretch, a sheer 300-foot path up to the summit. When I was doing research on the trail on the Internet, I copied a photo of it from some website, and posted it on my Facebook page, stating that if I could take a photo of it myself, I would get myself a nice gift.



Winnie at the bottom of the Homestretch

Nancy and me to get to that point; he accompanied us up again cheerfully. We used our fingers to grasp at cracks between rocks and pulled our heavy bodies up, then repeated the moves to reach the next one. It took us 45 minutes to finish this part. H.Y Lee and Su had arrived there earlier. Winnie, Cherry, Ben, Xiaoma, Chung and Nancy arrived one after another, followed by me. It was noon when I reached the top, which was like a huge football field. At 14,259 feet high, I could barely walk anymore. We took some pictures together, enjoyed the feeling of being on the top of the world and the breathtaking views. I didn't have any appetite, but forced myself to eat an apple. Twenty minutes later, we saw dark clouds floating above our heads, and we knew that we had to head down before the weather changed.

It didn't shock me when I saw this almost vertical section. I knew this was the last part before reaching the top. I was overwhelmed by excitement while my body still had to deal with the thin air and low energy. To me the climb appeared way longer than a normal 300-foot path. The top remained the same distance from us, no matter how hard we scrambled. I saw Chung, Nancy's husband, coming down from the top. A big smile appeared on his face. He might not have expected



At the top of Longs Peak with H.Y. Lee

I recalled a famous saying about mountaineering: "When you are on the summit, you have only halfway succeeded." I knew I would collapse any time if I were at ground level; however, later I was amazed at how much human beings could extend our endurance when there was no option.

Going down, we followed each step we had taken when we came up. It was said that usually people use five points of the body instead of four coming down from the Homestretch. Besides using our four limbs, we sat down on the rocks and moved gradually between them. Fortunately I am tall, so it was relatively easy for me to have my feet reach the next rock when I was sitting down. Shortly after we began heading down, it started hailing. The rocks became slippery. Much more attention was required on each step down. Winnie, H.Y. Lee, and Su were moving fast. Soon they disappeared from our view. Ben, Xiaoma and Chung were helping us on our path down, while Nancy and Cherry and I followed. We made our way slowly in order to avoid any error. People passed us from behind from time to time, until finally we were the last group on the trail.



Nancy in red and me in blue on the way down

My first goal was getting back to the Keyhole, then passing the Boulderfield. I knew after that, I would only have to deal with fatigue without any risk to my life. However, the intervals felt like forever. I felt my energy level was almost zero. I picked up my hiking poles at the Keyhole. When we reached the Boulderfield, the boulders were all wet from the rain and hail, which increased the danger. Our backpackers picked up their backpacks at the



My last picture of Keyhole as well as my last photo of the hike

Boulderfield. After we passed the Boulderfield, it was still drizzling. I took my last picture of the Keyhole, said goodbye to it, and knew I was safe by then. There was another 6-mile hike back to the trail head and it was 5 p.m. already.

I was all wet, cold and tired. Cherry passed me a bandana and wrapped it around my neck to keep me warm. Soon it got wet, too. I felt hungry but had no desire to eat. In order not to be a burden to my teammates, I forced myself to have some nuts while I mechanically moved my feet after them. I couldn't make any efforts to speed up anymore but I was proud that I was still moving forward, continuously. I kept telling myself I

could not fall, as at this point nobody could carry me down. At times, I felt the trail became a blur and realized that tears were welling up in my eyes. As a former city girl, this was the first time I had ever pushed myself to the brink of exhaustion. Nancy and Cherry patiently accompanied me while others were hiking way ahead of us.

It was almost 9 p.m. when we reached the trail head. We had spent a total of 18 hours on this hike, which was 4-5 hours longer than average for the trail. But we made it!

We couldn't take showers that night as the public shower place closed at 9 p.m. We went to a restaurant, but I hardly ate. When I climbed into my tent, I pressed my leg muscles, and every inch hurt as my fingers moved around, but at least I was still alive.

I swore that I would never go back and do this hike again. However, I find my mind has revisited many times, including right now.

"You cannot stay on the summit forever; you have to come down again. So why bother in the first place? Just this: What is above knows what is below, but what is below does not know what is above. One climbs, one sees. One descends, one sees no longer, but one has seen. There is an art of conducting oneself in the lower regions by the memory of what one saw higher up. When one can no longer see, one can at least still know." — René Daumal.

"Happiness is only real when shared" — Jon Krakauer, Into the Wild