

Mt. Wheeler – the Highest Mountain in New Mexico

Part 2 - Return to High Places



Our backdrop was snowcapped mountains and below us were sparkling turquoise lakes. After five hours battling with high altitude and thin air, we finally made it to the top of Mt. Wheeler, 13,161 feet. The wind was blowing ferociously, but our spirit was high. We were tired but not completely exhausted. What made this climb so special was I reached the summit with Tom Eddie, a 70 years old man who has the spirit, vitality and energy of a young man. He likes life and life likes him.

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Williams Lake with Aspen Grove

Bandelier is a small park. In four days, we accomplished all of our goals. We have no other plan, so Tom's email arrives just in time. He suggests us to drive north and regroup in a small town called Taos.

We arrive at Taos early evening and would like to have dinner with Tom, but Tom has not yet checked in to the hotel. Next morning, we greet each other and Tom is happy to see us. Immediately he mentions a hike that he did yesterday and he does not mind



doing the hike again with us. He looks at me with a wicked smile and says, "You will love this hike!", so we jump in to our vehicle and head north.

The drive to the lake is beautiful. Young leaves of the aspen grove unfold to greet spring. Their bright green foliage and white straight boughs stand out among the dark shadows of the conifers. At the elevation of 10,000 feet, the air is crisp and fresh. I have a good feeling about the hike.



mountain range.

It is a two miles hike to a glacier lake, Williams Lake. The Lake is located in Carson National Forest, one of the five National Forests in New Mexico. The trail leads to the lake is arguably the most popular trail in the Taos Ski Valley. The trail at some places is steep. It climbs more than 700 feet per mile. At the end of the hike, we are rewarded by a stunning view. The glacier-fed lake is enclosed by serrated mountain peaks. Many of the peaks are still covered with snow. I really have no idea that New Mexico has such a beautiful

Alluring Images

I cannot take my eyes off of those white peaks. They look intimidating, but yet so inviting. All that I can think of is to CLIMB them.



It is a mistake that Tom takes me here. I can not rest until I set foot on those high places.

We find a nice picnic area to make tea and coffee, eat cheese and crackers. While we are admiring those high peaks, Tom tells us that one of those peaks is the highest mountain of New Mexico, Mt. Wheeler with elevation more than 13,000 feet. My heart jumps. “Really, which one is it?” I ask. “Not sure” Tom says. “Since we are here, we may as well climb it” I cannot help but revealing my contemplation. Tom and HY dismiss my insane idea right away. “No, no, I am not climbing it” Tom replies. “I can drop you off tomorrow, you climb it yourself” HY unenthusiastically answers.

Knowing so little about the mountain, I am indecisive as well. How many miles to the summit? What are the trail conditions? How many hours will it take to reach the top? What kind of climbing gears will I need? When should be the turnaround time? Can I do it alone? What is weather like tomorrow? I have no answer for those questions. But

I am not about to give up yet. On our way back to the hotel, I use my iPhone to check out the mountain. The more I learn about the mountain, the more I want to do it.

Return to High Places

Before 2011, most climbers used the traditional route; a 16 miles Bull-of-the Woods Mountain Trail to reach Mt. Wheeler. In 2011, a new route was constructed, a crew of 8 people working 12 hours per day, built a 4-miles trail with hand tools to the top in 14 days. But the trail is much steeper, climbing 3,000 feet in less than 2 miles. The climb requires no technical skill, but patience (go with slow pace), common sense (afternoon thunderstorms) fortitude and determination. The hike is definitely doable. But my spirit is dampened when I read about the approaching storm tomorrow. I go to bed restless. Maybe next year, I will return.

Next morning, Tom and HY give me a big surprise. They change their mind and will climb Mt. Wheeler with me. I am elated but still concern with the weather. We quickly pack our foods, drinks and warm clothing and head towards Williams Lake. This is the 3rd time Tom hike on this trail, but he does not seem to mind. I know Tom is uneasy about reaching the summit; I assure him that I will accompany him to the top.



We are still below the tree line. HY takes off. Tom and I stay together until the end. Tom is a great partner, although a slow hiker but he is talkative and extremely funny man.

alpinist. Nearly five year later, I am back and feel instantly at home.

Once we reach the trailhead, my anxiety is running high. Last time I stood on top of a high mountain was August 2008. It was a gruesome climb to Mt. Rainier with Koti. The altitude sickness and the exhaustion still terrify me even today. After that climb, I made peace with high places and forever retired from high altitude climbing. I accepted that fact that I was no

There is a distinctive sensation for being surrounded by snowcapped mountain. The Sherpa in Himalaya once told me that high places are for people to come and cleanse their souls. I am not sure my soul needs to be sanitized but I most certainly feel that my soul is lifted by looking at those white peaks.



We still have a long way to climb. Tom is thinking to quit which I will not allow. He just needs a little push and pampering. I know he would regret it later if he does not try harder.

Tom was once a Colonel in the Air Force. In his young age, he ran 5 mile every day. Chinese has an old saying that “even a broken boat has few useful nails”. I have confident that Tom can make it to the top.

We start our hike around 10:00am. It is definitely a late start for a high altitude climbing. The rule of thumb is, start early, turn around at noon to avoid the afternoon storm and be at the lower ground when the lighting hits. We already break the first rule. I kind of set the 12:00pm turnaround time, but with the late start, it is unlikely that we will stick to rule #2. I first take the lead, but within minutes of our hiking, we miss the trail. HY wants to turn around and quits. Tom and I are not a quitter. I keep searching for the missing path. Luckily, some early climbers are on their way down. The trail is only 50 feet behind us. We miss the sharp 360 turn. Once we are back on the track, the

climbing becomes fairly easy. Tom and I stick together and I refuse to let him out of my sight.



Finally Tom reaches the saddle, Wheeler Peak is within reach.
GO TOM, GO!

times and each time, I am able to convince him to move on. An hour later, we look across the white peaks; their summits are at the same altitude as we stand. We have made good progress. Tom tries to give me the “turnaround” excuse once more, but I refuse to give in. He may be overweight, but he is a strong fellow. Base on my climbing experience with other climbers, I know Tom can make it. Besides, it is Tom who introduces Mt. Wheeler to us, and I feel I owe him this favor. I want his grandchildren to be proud of him.

Above tree line, we are greeted by cheeky marmots. They are hopping effortlessly alongside

We hike on long switchbacks, certain sections are very steep. An hour into our climb, Tom begins to show shortness of breath. We are already above 11,000 feet, the air is thin and our lung demands for more H₂O. He becomes sluggish and needs break every 5 to 10 steps. I stay closely behind him, count the steps and encourage him not to give up. At one point, he is barely able to talk. He holds up his hand, signals me to stop and let him rest. He takes 10 deep breaths, and moves forward again. Many times, he says to me:

“I need energy to climb back down; I think I am going to turn around here, Chi.”

“Are you exhausted Tom?”

“No”

“ok, let us take it slowly, you can do it”

We probably have this conversation more than 20



Do you see the resemblance between the Marmot and Tom? 😊

us, disappear and reappear between rocks. They are funning looking creatures. I do enjoy photographing them.

Final Push to the Top

After five long hours, the summit of Mt. Wheeler is within reach. On the saddle between Mt. Walter (13,141 feet) and Mt. Wheeler (13,161), I turn to Wheeler Peak, half hike and



We made it, Tom I am proud of you!!!!

We are happy, congratulate each other, take many photos and forgive all the ugly things that we said to each other. ☺

We summit around 3:30pm, the afternoon thunderstorm never arrived, and the approaching storm has not yet reached the mountain region, but at the edge of horizon, a heap of cumulus clouds is building up. Soon the rain will fall.

Thunders, Lightings and Hails!

Caught by the storm at high elevation is dangerous. I urge my partners to head down, and head down FAST! Well, Tom is hiking very slowly. He complains about this joins. I keep watching those clouds and remind Tom that there is a storm approaching. Later, we reach a drop-off section that is entirely covered with snow. Some hikers shorted cut the hike by sliding down to the slope. I will not do it because it is very steep. Tom and HY want to try. Tom inches to the slope and he falls. The snow reaches up to his knee. He struggles to get up and he breaks his hiking pole. Now HY wants to join him. I just

half run towards the summit. Perhaps I have been hiking slower than normal, I do not have any symptom of altitude sickness or shortness of breath. I still have energy to climb high. Half way to the top, I look back and only see HY behind me. I leave Tom with HY assuming HY will accompany Tom to the summit. How wrong am I! Getting a little bit frustrated, I run back down to the saddle. The big guy is talking nonsense of quitting again!

“I am happy to reach this far, Chi”

“It is only a short walk, come on Tom, I get you this far, I cannot give up now”

“Ok”

See how easy it is to get him moving!

On the summit, our payoff is nothing short of grandiose. Views span the high desert all the way to the snow-dusted mountains of Colorado.

shake my head and leave these two “boys” there. When I see them again, they both have a very wet bottom.

Clouds continue to build up but we finally arrive at the junction below the tree line. Half hour later, we hear thunder rumbling in a distance. Dark clouds loom above the pine forest and lightings piece the sky, yet no rain. The afternoon sun has melted most of the snow in the forest, and they turn into rivulets. Water is everywhere which make our hike not much easier. The first drop of rain eventually arrives, but it does not last long. The rain turns into hails, pouring down on us mercilessly. Worse, the Mexican foods I ate last night do not agree with my stomach. I have this uncomfortable feeling whole day and it picks this moment to become unbearable. I tell Tom I need to hide behind a tree to get rid of that pain. He leaves me behind like a gentleman, and the rest of the story should be kept private.

When three of us reunite at the parking lot, our spirit is still high. We have just climbed the highest mountain in New Mexico! We jump into our vehicle, laugh and chat and continue to head to the unknown. Stay tuned for our next adventure!



The biggest reward for the hike, met three handsome guys on the trail, I mean HANDSOME

To be continued