

# **NOTES FROM THE COLORADO TRAIL July 26-31, 2009**

By Chuck Nisbet

## **Participants:**

Five guides: Chris, Tina, Kevin, Manny and Ryne

Fourteen hikers: including Tracy, Chuck, Katie, Richard and Ellen

One trail dog, Morgan

Of sixteen guided and supported treks I have experienced to date, this one had the finest collection of individuals and the best hikers. Usually, there is at least one crazy/annoying person who detracts from the enjoyable ebb and flow of daily events, but not this time.

## **Acclimatizing for the Colorado Trail**

We spent four days in the beautiful and charming old mining town of Silverton, Colorado to acclimatize for the strenuous Section 7 of the Colorado Trail. Kerry and Koala joined us for two of our three day hikes and found everything to their liking. We all were taken aback by the beauty of the day hikes around Silverton. The drives to the trailheads were an eye popping spectacle all by themselves. Thank goodness for four wheel drive. Once on the trails, Alpine lakes, wild flowers, and jagged mountain peaks dotted the landscape wherever we looked. We loved our modest accommodations at the Triangle Motel and our short walks to all our dining adventures. How about an Elk burger and sweet potato fries? Rich took no time to establish rapport with all waitresses guaranteeing us the best service. We even had time to sit through a reading of a one act play on the inability of the sexes to communicate. Our three day hikes totaled about 25 miles and we all felt energized and strengthened for the upcoming Colorado Trail.

I should not fail to mention our special adventure near the end of day three. We were coming down from emerald green Columbine Lake when dark clouds rolled in. A light rain began followed by thunder and lightening. Needless to say, we picked up our pace to get down off the mountain and into the tree line. Katie, Rich and Ellen were a ways ahead of Tracy and me. All of a sudden, out of nowhere lightening struck with a furious flash, crack and bang. I jumped, turned white, and looked to see if Tracy was all right. Never had I experienced a lightening strike so close. Unnerved, we raced for the trees where we found Rich, Katie and Ellen spread out and hunkered down among the trees. You can be sure we all now know the proper position to assume under such conditions.

## **The Colorado Trail:**

The Colorado Trail is a 500 mile recreation trail that stretches from Denver to Durango in the southwest. This U.S. Forest Service and private sector project started in 1973 and finished in 1987. The trail is divided into seven segments for non-through hikers. We did the 75 mile Section 7 from Silverton to Durango.

## **Colorado Mountain Expeditions**

Only one company operates on the Colorado Trail. Colorado Mountain Expeditions offers guided and supported treks. Hikers supply their own tent (which they must put up each night) sleeping bag and pad. Hikers carry a day pack with three liters of water plus

rain and cold weather gear, lunch and trail snacks, or about 15 to 20 pounds. CME shuttles our other stuff to each campsite every night.

Our trek began on Sunday, July 26th as we all met shortly after noon in Durango and were driven to Big Molas Lake public camp ground just five miles south of Silverton. We put up our tent with the assistance of guide Manny who made sure our tent pad was not extending beyond the border of our tent. Otherwise the rain could seep in. He also showed us how to leave the rain fly open just a bit for ventilation and ensure we don't wake up with moisture everywhere inside the tent. Once the tents were up and all belongings stowed inside we gathered for an orientation meeting with our guides from Colorado Mountain Expeditions. About mid afternoon the clouds came rolling in and it started to rain. Tracy and I retired to our roomy, comfortable, four man tent for some reading and resting. Ellen, Richard, and Katie took advantage of the free time for a short stroll from the highway down to our campground offered by our guides

About 5:30 appetizers were put out to tide the hungry hikers over till dinner. Dinners typically were served at 6:30pm. Hearty and tasty fares each night like spaghetti, pork stir fry, fish tacos, and orzo with chicken breast were enjoyed by all. Our deserts each night consisted of one of the following; double chocolate cake, lemon bars, pound cake and strawberries, raspberry bars or chocolate rice crispy bars. All were prepared in advance of our trek by lead guide, Chris's wife and two daughters. After dinner and a brief description of the next days hike, we all made our lunches and placed them in the bear proof cooler for overnight. No food of any type was kept in out tent as animals small and large might decide to visit, like chewing their way in.

A large white tent was put up at each camp site which served as our kitchen and eating area. After each meal we took our plates and silverware through a line of six buckets: first, scrap excess food off, second, brush plates with hot water, third, brush plate with hot soapy water, fourth, rinse in hot chlorine water, fifth, rinse again in hot chlorine water and sixth, place plate in drying rack.

Each morning we awakened at 5:00 am and it was cold! Tracy somehow managed to dress herself while still in her sleeping bag. Quite a feat! It seemed Rich was one of the first voices I heard enjoying hot coffee in the dinning tent. Despite the cold, Ellen always showed up for breakfast in her shorts, oblivious to the temperature. A hot breakfast of either eggs, pancakes, oatmeal or French toast with bacon or sausage was served at 5:30 am. Then it was pack up and strike the tent. Usually, we departed camp by 7:30 am.

Then there was Morgan, the trail dog owned by our lead guide Chris. Morgan was a one owner dog. Whenever anyone would call her name, she would just stand there and look at them as if to say, "you are not my master, I'm not coming to you." But Morgan was sweet and well behaved. She never barked. She never jumped up on you. She never begged for food as we sat around the open tent eating all our meals in camp chairs. Whenever Chris moved she bolted to be by his side.

Finally, one note of luxury. One could take a shower after the day's hike. A two sided tarp/screen was set up off in the trees. In front was a five gallon bucket that would receive 2 ½ gallons of hot water per guest. Inside the bucket was a sump pump powered by two 12 volt batteries. A plastic pipe went from the bucket over the top of the tarp with a small shower head at the end. Pull on a plunger and the water dribbled out. Push on the plunger and the water shut off. So you took your clothes off in windy, 40 degrees weather, quickly got yourself wet, then turned off the water supply to conserve and soaped yourself down, shivering all the time. Turn on the water again and try to rinse yourself off, chirping and jiving all the time. Then out comes the tiny sports towel and dry yourself best you can and get dressed as you are damn cold. Hopefully, you could complete the process without running out of water. How many showers did we take? One!

Day One was a killer. It was soooooo long. Tracy and I had never hiked 21 miles before. We started off slow and kept up that pace. The sky was clear and temperature cool as we started. On all hikes there was a leader and sweep. The leader would occasionally place a small piece of pink tape on the trail held in place by a small rock to remind those behind we were indeed still on the Colorado Trail. The sweep in turn would pick up the pink markers. Sadly right at the start Katie's knees started bothering her so she wisely decided to abort the hike and save herself for another day. As we all hiked on the first 15 miles didn't seem all that bad. But then we began to fade. Thank goodness for El Fuego's suggestion of the 5 Hour Energy drink. It really helped get us through. The final 6 miles were a real challenge. After eleven long hours on the trail, we finally dragged ourselves into camp dead tired. What a relief to discover Rich, Katie and Ellen had put up our tent. What a gift! It was starting to rain! We dove inside and rested until dinner.

After the first day it was obvious that Texan runner Mike was the strongest hiker in our group. He was right behind the leader from beginning to end, without hiking poles as an aid. Over the course of our trip I had several opportunities to talk to this accomplished but modest and reserved man with small town Michigan roots.

Day Two was shorter, only 11 miles. Still tired from day one we reluctantly plodded along. But at least the day would be significantly shorter. Clear skies at the start again but about 2:00 pm the clouds rolled in. We were shortly treated to lots of rain. When we finally arrived at the road where the shuttle awaited to drive us down the mountain to the camp, the rear wheel drive van was stuck unable to proceed without risk of going over the side. Not a good prospect. But then being stuck here for hours on the side of the mountain and the chance of more rain didn't look so bright either. We all stayed calm and quiet while the guides radioed each other with suggestions. Finally, the owner of Colorado Mountain Expeditions, Chris, also the lead guide, arrived with the heavy duty flatbed truck. Everyone vacated the vehicles and walked up to a clear dry spot in the road. The guides chained up the 12 passenger van and pulled it out of the mud and up to dryer road. We piled back in the vehicles and proceeded slowly back down the mountain to our camp site.

The guides rotate each day. Two get to hike while the other three drive all the stuff to the next campsite and set up the big white tent. Good news for today. We are staying two nights at the same campsite. Tracy and I enthusiastically put up our tent. We are actually getting good at it.

Day Three was our rest day as we got to sleep in and then only hike 6.5 miles. They shuttled us back up the mountain to the end of yesterday's hike and we hiked back to our campsite. We had an easy and beautiful ridge walk with cool morning weather. By one o'clock all were back in camp. Tracy and I rested, read and napped for the balance of the afternoon. What a treat.

Talked a lot on the trail that day with Jack, a judge and board member of the Colorado Trail Foundation. Great sense of humor and conversationalist. We went on and on about the state of the economy, past comedians, and the law. His lovely wife Karen would tolerate our talks and slower pace for awhile then zip right on past.

Day Four another big hike of 18 miles. Stayed with lead group for two hours but their pace was too fast for me. Rested, ate a sandwich and started off again. Lucky for me there would be no rain today during the hike. Started feeling stronger and stronger and didn't want to take long breaks. Soon I was in the lead and climbing with energy. I was in overdrive and loving it. I arrived at Kennebec Pass (11,750 ft.) with no need to rest and ready for the steep 3 mile decent into camp. At about 3:00 pm I saw the big white tent and strolled into camp in high spirits. Since Tracy had not hiked that day she put up the tent and was tucked away warmly inside due to previous high winds and some rain. Katie and Rich had also taken the day off and were now packing up for the drive back to Durango. Unfortunately Katie and Rich had to leave the Colorado Trail a day early because of a snafu in their airline reservations. For our appetizer hour margaritas and chips were served to the delight of the celebratory hikers. By 6:30 during dinner, the rains came down on us again. But no worry, by morning it was clear again.

Day Five another big hike of 18 miles and our last day. Everyone up on time. Ellen, Tracy and I geared up for another demanding hike with a whole lot of downhill. We stayed in the back and kept up a slow but steady pace, just in front of our sweep Tina. Fortunately, the weather was overcast and cool. We were told it can be very warm as we descend into Durango. Like the other days we didn't see much of Ellen as she hiked up close to the front. This whole trip Ellen seemed to move along the trail effortlessly as the rest of us huffed and puffed. The trail wound its way through the trees around and down mile after mile. Again I had the opportunity to chat a bit with Jack. What an interesting man. Had to defend Jack against Karen's unjustified criticism of his spousal behavior. It was all in good fun. Near the end it started to sprinkle and we put on our rain jackets. Tracy suddenly picked up her pace and I didn't see her again until the hike was finished. She had had enough of this ordeal and just wanted the whole adventure over. Picture taking, soft drink gulping and group hugging brought our time on the Colorado Trail to an end.

**Trek Overview** (elevation in feet)

	<u>Day 1</u>	<u>Day 2</u>	<u>Day 3</u>	<u>Day 4</u>	<u>Day 5</u>
	21 miles	11 miles	6.5 miles	18 miles	18 miles
start	10,880	11,120	10,400	10,600	9,800
end	11,120	10,400	10,600	9,800	6,960
low	10,800	10,400	10,400	9,800	6,960
high	12,490	11,970	10,840	12,260	9,800
total					
gain	3,120	1,480	440	1,960	1,080
loss	2,590	1,700	240	2,220	4,460

**Summary:**

What made this trek so special? **The people.** What a diverse collection of family, friends and support staff. All were considerate, friendly, unpretentious, flexible, interesting, non-demanding, cooperative, good natured and great hikers. **The flowers.** Everyday we were treated to fields and hillsides of wildflowers. In the meadows wildflowers commonly were five and six feet high. There were Larkspur, Elephant Head, Cowslip, Lupine, Columbine (the state flower), Mountain Geranium, Corn Lilly, Miners Sock, Thistles, Mountain Astor and five different colors of Indian Paint Brush, **The views.** Much of our time was above the tree line. Thus, we could see for miles. Always an array of different peaks in the distance, some, jagged, some round, and others pyramid shaped or notched. **The endeavor.** As they say, this was a real butt kicker. Long, long days. Contending with the rain. Bundling up against the cold, Adjusting to the altitude. Eating constantly the best we could (body burning over 8,000 calories on long days). Trying to fall asleep on the hard ground and not having to get up to pee in the middle of a cold Colorado night. However, if nature did call you out of your tent, at 11,000 ft. you were treated to a sky full of bright, bright stars and I believe a few passing satellites. All in all this was some kind of special experience to remember but probably not to replicate!

p.s. all mistakes are unintentional