**13.5er**

**A Tale of Almost Climbing Telluride’s Wilson Peak**

By Jenny Willden

Wilson Peak is a formidable adversary. From afar, climbing the mighty face looks daunting—if not impossible—as the black, snowcapped peak is more akin to Mordor than a hiking trail. As it came into view while riding Telluride’s gondola on our first night in town, I unleashed a few choice words upon realizing it was Coors Mountain, the peak we intended to climb and crack a beer on top of the following morning.

Topping out at 14,017 feet and rising high above Telluride in southwest Colorado’s San Juan Mountains, Wilson Peak is one of three 14ers that make up the venerable Wilson Group along with El Diente and Mount Wilson—a conglomeration known as some of the toughest and most technical of Colorado’s fifty-two 14,000-foot peaks.

Wilson’s rugged look is what inspired Coors Brewing Company founder, Adolph Coors, to use it on his logo way back in 1873, and the peak still graces their beer labels today.

It’s this famous label that’s the cause of this adventure thanks to a package created by *The Hotel Telluride* called ***‘*Crack a Coors on Wilson Peak.’** The title entails exactly what it includes: hiking/climbing then toasting atop a 14er! An avid mountaineer and Coors drinker I’m not, but the gimmick—and challenge—intrigued me. Despite never having attempted a peak over 9,000 feet before I thought, “What the heck!” and signed up…convincing an equally inexperienced friend of mine to join. Best. Decision. Ever.

**The Climb**

Our guide, JC, from *San Juan Outdoor Adventures (***tellurideadventures.com***)*arrives at *The Hotel Telluride* at the ungodly hour three a.m. to pick up my friend Rachael and me to shuttle us to the start. Early mornings are vital for climbing a peak this big as severe thunderstorms typically roll in after noon…or so we thought.

We drive silently in the dark until JC asks, “So is this your first 14er?” “Yes,” we both say sheepishly, letting the following silence hang in the air. JC tells us not to worry and discusses the climb, which features Class 3 and Class 4 sections, and the slow pace he plans on maintaining since we’re newbies. Class 5 is the most difficult free climbing rating for mountaineers, so Wilson isn’t exactly a cakewalk, but doable with the help of a guide, ice axe, and crampons provided by *San Juan Outdoor Adventures.*

If being a rookie isn’t a bad enough way to start, I open the trunk when we arrive at *Rock of Ages Trailhead* to find my pack sopping wet. My hydration bladder had leaked, soaking my clothing, snacks, and depleting most of my water supply. Luckily our guide JC brought extra water, but the damp pack ensured a wet bootie for most of the climb.

The hike itself is both arduous and arrestingly beautiful. We set out in darkness from the *Rock of Ages Trailhead,* the most popular start, and trek through woods before hitting a ridge as a colorful sunrise fills the sky. I likely stop for too many photos and not enough snacks I start to feel a little sick when we reach 12,000 feet. Luckily, force-feeding myself cures it, but I pay attention to how I feel as Altitude Sickness can affect anyone.

We pass wildflowers, unfamiliar rocks, and discarded mining equipment left from the silver and lead heyday as we reach the snowfield. The bare slope steepens we add crampons and ice axes to our arsenal, moving slowly and occasionally postholing up to our thighs, requiring us to dig ourselves out with our trekking poles.

**Foiled by Weather**

After endless snow climbing we reach the first saddle, *Rock of Ages*, and things go (figuratively) downhill. My leaking pack, deep snow, and our slow pace have put us behind on our timeline. As we rest atop the saddle, watching dark clouds building in the distance, JC breaks the bad news that summiting is unlikely. A veteran mountaineer with over 50 climbs on Wilson Peak, we trust him implicitly, but it’s tough to hear.

JC says we can continue to the final saddle at 13,500 feet before turning back, and I find myself increasingly slowed by the elevation. At the top we pause for photos and to watch giant marmots scurry over the rocks. It’s a breathtaking view as you can see the peaks of the entire Wilson Group from this vantage point. We could have enjoyed our celebratory Coors here, but they’d been accidentally left behind. Plus, it seemed like cheating to crack the can without bagging the peak.

As we descend we see a family trekking up toward us. Dressed in t-shirts and looking unprepared with technical gear needed for the summit, they ask why we’re turning back. JC says, “We’re yielding to the weather,” in hopes they will too, but unworried; they soldier on, leaving JC shaking his head as we navigate down steep trails with loose rocks toward treeline.

Once we’re away from the group, JC regales us with terrifying stories of near-lightning encounters, and we then understand his decision to not make the final hour-long climb to the summit.

The downclimb is a thrill, thanks to JC introducing us to glissading, which he claims is “French for butt sliding.” Armed with our ice axes we sled down two soft, snowy slopes, a bizarre but exhilarating experience to have in July. This method of travel is known to be dangerous, so don’t attempt without a guide or expert knowledge.

We get to treeline just as the big storms begin, and I wonder what became of the family attempting to summit. After nine hours we reach the car, and though missing the summit was saddening, I learned a big lesson while (almost) climbing a 14er: **The peak is just a possibility.** Summiting is not something to rely on as the basis of your enjoyment (or the basis of a story) and the reward must instead be derived in the climb itself.

We may not have cracked a Coors, but just reaching 13,5000 feet is 4,500 feet higher than we’d ever climbed, and I feel pretty badass for the achievement. We’re lucky to have undertaken such a grand adventure with such a fantastic guide, and we can’t wait to return to conquer Wilson Peak (and perhaps Mount Wilson) soon.

**Telluride’s Small Town Charm**

Telluride, a former mining town turned outdoor adventurer paradise, is located 6.5 hours from Salt Lake City in southwest Colorado. Tucked in a box canyon at an elevation of 8,750 feet, it’s surrounded by North America’s highest concentration of 13,000 and 14,000-foot peaks—meaning the views just walking down Main Street are unbelievable.

A policy against chains and a strong sense of preservation keeps Telluride looking much the same as it did in its Victorian-era mining heyday, but with updates like boutique shops and modern restaurants. Our favorites being *221 South Oak,* a small fine dining bistro with a seasonally changing menu and a bevy of vegetarian options, and neighboring *Oak*, a slopeside bourbon and BBQ joint that’s drawn national acclaim.

Next to Oak is the free gondola that connects Telluride to Mountain Village, a newer town with a multitude of shops, hotels, and entertainment. The 12-minute ride offers the best views in town and also accesses the ski resort trails for hiking or biking. This free gondola is the first transportation system of its kind in North America.

Telluride’s famous for festivals and you can catch two of their biggest if you hike Wilson Peak this fall: The *Telluride Film Festival* and the *Telluride Blues and Brews Festival,* both held in September.

Learn more about Telluride at **visittelluride.com.**

**Where To Stay and Cracking a Coors Details**

*The Hotel Telluride*, a 59-room boutique hotel on the edge of town, makes a perfect base camp for exploring the town and mountains. It’s a short walk to shopping, restaurants, and the free gondola to Mountain Village, but they also offer shuttle service if you’re weary from the hike. Perks like free bikes for guests to use, pet-friendly facilities, comfortable beds, heavenly massages, and outdoor hot tubs net bonus points.

Plus, The Hotel Telluride created the *Crack a Coors on Wilson Peak* trip so if intend to have the full experience, staying here is a must. The double-occupancy package includes three-night stay at the hotel, daily breakfast buffet, private guided hike from San Juan Outdoor Adventures to the summit of Wilson Peak, packed lunch and Coors beer for the summit, and two 60-minute spa services at the hotel following the hike. If you’d like to summit a 14er but are lacking experience, this is the way to go. Prices start at $1,499 and the package is available through September 15, 2015.

Read more about The Hotel Telluride and Crack a Coors at **hoteltelluride.com.**