

Plain of Six Glaciers Hiking Trip – July 13, 2013



At 615 hours, three vehicles left the Sobey's Gaetz South parking lot, in Red Deer, heading south, then west at Airdrie via Cochrane and the Trans-Canada Highway 1, to Lake Louise. The plan was a day of hiking a classical and well known trail within Banff National Park called the Plain of Six Glaciers Trail and to reach the Plain of Six Glaciers. The group consisted of eight gals and two guys of whom eight were locals and two out-of-towners, Edmontonians, who drove up bright and early to meet the group. Given the distance to the trail head, and the hike planned, the trip coordinator orchestrated a tight itinerary and a prompt departure. Luckily, for one of the out-of-towners, and his late arrival on the scene, he got a lucky break and was able to catch the last vehicle out, as the driver, needed cash for the teahouses that were on the trip's itinerary.

The group reached the Lake Louise Chateau's parking lot at 930 hours and was off on their adventure by 1000 hours. The first destination was Lake Agnes Tea House. We walked along the shoreline of Lake Louise and then headed right, just beyond the Chateau, to start a steady climb through subalpine forest to the tea house. At the first switchback we were provided with a clear and elevated view of Lake Louise.

Our first stop, and a quick break, was at Mirror Lake, which has the Big Beehive Mountain's cliff face as its backdrop. We decided to head left, instead of right, which would take you to the Little Beehive, to a shorter route to the Lake Agnes Tea House. A junction was reached quickly, where one has the choice to climb up to the tea house, or take the Highline Trail to the Plain of Six Glaciers Trail. The climb to the tea

house is done on two steep wooden staircases. At the top of the stair case you can see the waterfall that is created by Lake Agnes's outlet stream.

Lake Agnes Tea House was a cooler, but busy spot, and it is where most of the group started a regular ritual of adding and removing of layers. All through the hike, there were times, based on location, where it felt more like winter, then mid-summer, and at times, we thought and were certain that we would be caught in a shower. But, as soon as that thought crossed our mind, we hit a spot, where the sun could peak through and provide us with an abundance of warmth.

Lake Agnes Tea House is the highest situated tea room in Canada. It was built in 1901 by the Canadian Pacific Railway and rebuilt in 1981. It is a lovely spot for a rest and break.

We connected from the Lake Agnes Tea House to the Plain of Six Glaciers Tea House via the trail along Lake Agnes, up to the Big Beehive ridge, and back down to the Highline trail, to form a 14.6 km loop. The distance from the tea house and the Big Beehive is 1.6 km. We climbed, and enjoyed the switchbacks, up the Big Beehive's north side, as the climb up provided elevated views of Lake Agnes. At the top, we detoured to the additional trail offered that leads to a gazebo and more stunning viewpoints overlooking Lake Louise, the Chateau and Bow Valley. The colour of the water of Lake Louise from this viewpoint doesn't give the appearance of water but rather that of a solid substance. The boats that were on the Lake appeared more as flies in a bowl of soup. At the gazebo, we met up with a very gregarious Clark's Nutcracker, who managed, unexpectedly, to sneak a large peanut off of one of us. Unfortunately, that peanut didn't go down easy either, and after several attempts, the smart Nutcracker realized that he had to find a spot to break the peanut.

The group enjoyed lunch and some good hiking camaraderie at the top of the Big Beehive, before embarking the south slope of the mountain. The south slope has a steep descent, for 1 km, before it hits the junction with the Highline Trail that runs up-valley from Mirror Lake. We turned right and followed the Highline, as it descends across the lower slopes of Devil's Thumb to the intersection/junction with the Plain of Six Glacier Trail. It was from this point that the trail markers indicated another 1.4 km to the Plain of Six Glacier Tea House.

On the way to the Plain of Six Glaciers, the group witnessed a helicopter rescue exercise, where an individual was dropped off at a certain spot, and picked up, minutes later. For some of us, hanging from a rope, off a helicopter, and amongst the stunning scenery, appealed.

From the Plain of Six Glaciers Tea House, there is another 1.6 km of marked trail, to get you to a closer view of the glaciers, and of Mount Lefroy, Mount Victoria and Mount Aberdeen. The group decided to hike on first, before resting at the tea house. The name Plain of Six Glaciers comes from the hanging glaciers of the three Mounts, as well as the lower Victoria and Lefroy glaciers and the hanging glacier on Popes Peak. Beyond the marked trail, for the adventurous hiker, there is additional unmarked trail, to bring you right to the base of Victoria glacier. And, most of the group was adventurous, keen on tackling a bit of scree, and hungry for the additional miles upward. The pictures that were taken at the glacier were well worth the scrambling up, and the scurrying down, the scree slope. At this vantage point, one has a very good view of Abbots Pass, which sits between Mount Victoria and Mount Lefroy. The hike beyond the tea house, both marked and unmarked, is approximately an hour return trip to and from, and is well worth the time. The unmarked trail follows a lateral moraine, which is a parallel ridge of debris deposited along the sides of a glacier. At first look, one can assume that there are no longer six glaciers; however, with a closer look it is clear that the large gravel fields conceal the underlying glaciers.



At the Plain of Six Glaciers tea house, the group stopped, rested, and took in a late afternoon tea or hot chocolate and dessert, or for others, a rich bowl of hearty soup. And, of course, take in the stunning scenery, which surrounds the tea house. The tea house sits at an elevation of 2100 meters. It was a beehive of activity with both avid hikers and avid tourists. Any of the pricey menu items are highly recommended in that it is experience that is bought and that you are paying for, and of course, the price, of serving at such a remote location. Within the group, some were curious as to what it would be like to serve at the teahouse, and what the work schedule would be like. We learned that the ladies worked a 5X2 shift and were provided with cabins/lodging right at site. The original teahouse was built in 1929 by Swiss Guides employed by the Canadian Pacific Railway. It was a rest stop for mountain climbers en route to Abbots Pass. The tea house has no electricity or running water, as such; all the menu items are prepared on site and cooked on propane stoves. Again, some within the group wondered how much flour that they must haul in for all those apple pies, and at the beginning of the season, when all the supplies are helicoptered in, determine the quantity of flour needed.



The last leg of the hike, a 5.5 km hike, from the Plains of Six Glaciers teahouse back to the parking lot, was a very relaxing and enjoyable hike, along a number of steep rock faces and the iconic lakeshore trail. The descent at the tea house was interesting as there were many individuals, at that five o'clock hour, ready to head home. The scene from above must have given the illusion of a herd of mountain goats heading into the meadows. Near Lake Louise, a few adventurous and dare devilish rock climbers were spotted maneuvering their way along the steep rock faces and the group marveled at their agility to this.

We stopped at a bench along the lakeshore trail to take an overdue picture of the group, tired, weary, but satisfied at the beautiful hike that was completed. All in all, we hiked about 18 km, and were on the trail for a good eight hours. A few of us got to the parking lot sooner, washroom on our minds, than two others. Two of us stayed behind, to take in the infamous Lake Louise sight a bit longer, and assist a couple of Irish men with capturing their visit to the Lake.

The group enjoyed supper at Boston Pizza in Cochrane, and shared good laughs, of the day, and of sharing one's vehicle. Apparently, one within the group wasn't too keen on supper, and more focused on driving the speed limit. Others, in the back seat of the vehicle, had to loudly state their displeasure at the slow ride, and for the driver, to step it up. On the trail, though, we did take our time, to take in the scenery, and the fresh mountain air.