

WENKCHEMNA PASS, BANFF NATIONAL PARK, ALBERTA

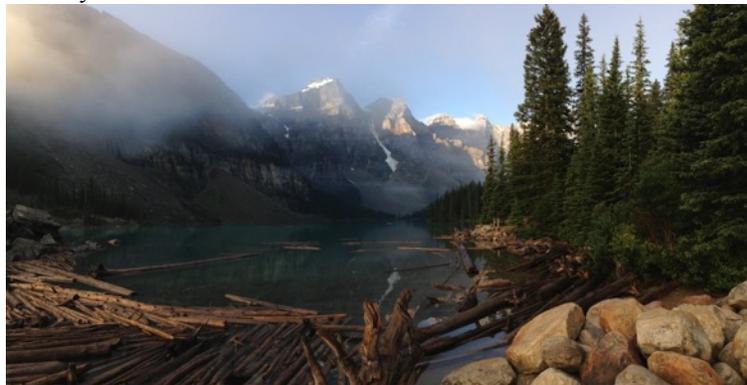
The trailhead for Wenkchemna Pass is located at the Moraine Lake trailhead. Note that parking is limited in the Moraine Lake area, so arriving very early at the trailhead is generally required to get a parking space. Also, there are frequently minimum hiking group size restrictions due to bear activity in the area, so it is advisable to check in at the Lake Louise Visitors Center (where you can also ask if there have been any recent bear sightings) or the online trail conditions report (which will just tell you if there is a restriction) before attempting this hike. For this hike, having a good map is recommended but not an absolute must. I used the Gem Trek Lake Louise and Yoho TOPO map.

The trail to Wenkchemna Pass from the Moraine Lake trailhead is 9.7 kilometers one-way. Eiffel Lake, located 5.6 kilometers from the trailhead, is a worthy destination for a short hike. Even just getting to the stunning viewpoint of the Valley of the Ten Peaks, approximately 3.4 kilometers from the trailhead, is an excellent hike. For a longer hike than just to Wenkchemna Pass, one can continue beyond the end of the Wenkchemna Pass trail in three directions, two of which would probably require excellent climbing skills to get far and the other of which will certainly require good navigational skills. It is generally windy at the top of the pass, so be aware that additional exploration on unstable terrain may be more dangerous in these conditions. We were fortunate enough to do this hike on a rare non-windy day. To the right (northwest) from the pass, one can scramble up the slopes of Wenkchemna Peak to quickly get good views down the Valley of the Ten Peaks; note, however, that the scree slope does quickly become too steep and slippery for the average hiker to be able to progress far. We did this about 7-8 years ago and found it to be an excellent short addition to the hike. To the left (southeast), one can hike approximately 3/4 km along a use trail, which is quite well-defined in places, to where the ridge towards Neptuak Mountain begins to transition from "walkable" to actual climbing. To the north from this vantage point, one can see Opabin Pass, which leads across the Opabin Glacier towards the Lake O'Hara area (in Yoho National Park), as well as Hungabee Mountain, which is above the Paradise Valley. To the south, one can look down the Prospectors Valley, part of Kootenay National Park. We did this route on this trip (August 2016); it is also an excellent addition to the hike. The third option, which I'm assuming would be an incredibly difficult day-hike, would be to hike down into the Prospectors Valley from Wenkchemna Pass, and visit the Eagle's Eyrie rock formation as well as the nearby lakes. I haven't attempted this hike, but I did speak to a park ranger who did it. Hikers looking to visit the Prospectors Valley from Kootenay National Park can hike up from the Marble Canyon trailhead. It's 10.5 kilometers to the junction with the Fay Hut trail (2.5 kilometers further, up a nearby valley) and with the Kaufmann Lake trail (which has been unmaintained since the major fire in the Marble Canyon area; there are now a lot of downed trees which must be climbed over to continue on the trail, according to this park ranger, who had also recently hiked this trail). It is apparently also possible to hike up to the Eagle's Eyrie from where the Kaufmann Lake trail turns north and leaves Prospectors Valley; however, this is reported to be a long, arduous, and boring hike because of navigating around the creek and the burned trees, and the route to the Eagle's Eyrie is supposedly easier from the Wenkchemna Pass trail.

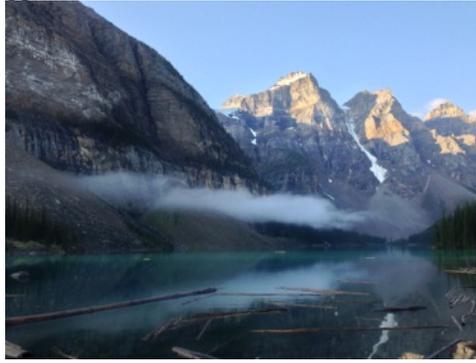
On our drive from Lake Louise Village to the Lake Moraine parking area, the low clouds and fog began to clear (so that we were only getting brief views of the surrounding peaks from the road); when we arrived at the lake, the fog was almost gone there:



Panorama of the interesting fog in the Valley of the Ten Peaks:



This small finger of fog moved in over the lake in the time between when we parked (which is when the photos above were taken) and when we headed out on the hike after packing up our supplies:



Looking over at the fog going over The Rockpile and up towards the Tower of Babel:



The trail to the Wenkchemna Pass/Larch Valley fork starts off by steadily gaining elevation, then switchbacks and begins to get steep:



There isn't much of a view on the hike up to the fork, which is approximately 2.4 km from the trailhead; here is the fork where hikers going to Wenkchemna Pass or Eiffel Lake go to the left and those going to the Larch Valley and Sentinel Pass (or on to the Paradise Valley) take the right fork:



After about a kilometer from the fork, the trees start to thin and we begin to get excellent views of the Valley of the Ten Peaks:



Panorama of this view of some of the Ten Peaks; note especially the convoluted glacial moraine to the right of center in this photo:



Looking ahead at our first view of Wenkchemna Pass; it doesn't look too far from here, but the trail circles around the valley, which adds some distance:



Another panorama of the Ten Peaks; from left to right they are Mount Babel, Mount Fay, Mount Little (barely visible behind Mount Bowlen), Mount Bowlen, Bowlen, Mount Perren, Mount Allen, Mount Tuzo, Deltaform Mountain, and Neptuak Mountain:



Here the trail leaves the trees entirely, and it appears to be possible to descend the slopes of Eiffel Peak here to reach the bottom of the valley, and perhaps hike across to the glacial moraine and Wenkchemna Glacier, which can be seen below the peaks on the right:



Looking up towards Eiffel Peak, which is (surprisingly) visible through the clouds, to the left in this photo:



I've heard that there is a route up to Eiffel Peak from here, but the use trail we found when we attempted the hike to the peak (see my report from August 2011) left the Larch Valley trail, and this does not look like a friendly route to the peak from here:



Another panorama of the Ten Peaks, with Panorama Ridge (on the other side of Consolation Valley) starting to become visible to the far left:



There were some nice flowers along the trail through here (the sun angle was better to photograph these flowers when looking back along the trail):



The eastern end of Eiffel Lake comes into view as we round a corner:



Wenkchemna Pass is starting to look closer now, but we still have more than 4.5 km to go (just under half the remaining distance and elevation gain):



Looking up towards Eiffel Peak from here:



Panorama of the Ten Peaks, with Eiffel Lake to the right, and Wenkchemna Peak now visible above and to the right of the lake:



Looking across at an interesting tall and narrow ridge on the glacial moraine (below center in the photo). The peak on the left is Deltaform Mountain, and the one on the right is Neptuak Mountain:



There were a few small pink flowers growing out of the rocks along the trail:



Looking up at what could be a potential climbers route to Eiffel Peak (or it might be just a use trail to a nice picnic spot overlooking the lake):



The views were increasingly impressive as we continued along the trail:



Notice how high up the trail is above the valley:



The mid-morning lighting was such that we were seeing the nearby peaks reflected in Eiffel Lake:



The trail continues to a rocky outcropping which is generally considered to be the end of the Eiffel Lake trail:



The trail passes by some interesting rocky cliffs:



Looking up at the southwestern slopes of Eiffel Peak (the peak is no longer visible here):



The pass to the right in this photo is called Wastach Pass, and the small peak just beyond it appears to be unnamed:



The clouds were starting to block Wenkchemna Peak from view, but were clearing around the Ten Peaks:



Yet another panorama, looking towards Wenkchemna Pass (which doesn't feel like it is getting nearer anymore):



It is possible to follow a use-trail down to Eiffel Lake, but most hikers seem to choose not to go down to the lake itself:



Looking up towards Eiffel Peak (right of center):



I'm not sure how far one could get by following this steep valley up towards Eiffel Peak, but falling rock would probably be a concern:



The views along this part of the hike were incredible, and they were even more spectacular on our way back with the better sun angle:



There were some bunches of yellow flowers growing out of the rock piles through here:



Looking up at Eiffel Peak again; it looks much too steep to ascend towards the peak from here:



Looking back towards the eastern end of the Valley of the Ten Peaks:



This flatter area had less water than I recall it having on our last trip here, so thankfully there were noticeably less mosquitoes:



This rock wall leading up to the unnamed peak west of Wastach Pass is very steep and appears loose:



Panorama with the Ten Peaks on the left half of the photo, Wenkchemna Pass right of center, and Wenkchemna Peak to its right:



Looking back at Eiffel Peak from here; notice the ridge (against the sky) which must be ascended to reach the peak; the first stretch doesn't appear too difficult, but then it gets worse:



More of the upper part of the valley now becomes visible; the trail circles around under the peaks, rather than cutting directly to the pass:



Looking straight ahead at Wenkchemna Peak, with a flower-lined creek just to the left of the trail:

