

Are We There Yet...? A Pilgrimage To Fuji-san

By: Nicholas Klar

"You are wise to climb Mt. Fuji, but a fool to do it twice" - Japanese Proverb

In Japan Mt. Fuji (or Fuji-san) is regarded with spiritual reverence. Most gaijin (foreigners) staying for any reasonable amount of time aspire to climb it. Mount Fuji is probably Japan's most recognizable symbol and captures the paradoxical mix of spirituality and consumerism that is at the very heart of its modern identity. There are roughly two thousand registered religious organizations based around Mount Fuji along with 117 golf courses. Complimenting this, on Mount Fuji's eastern flank, is a 55-square-kilometre area used by both the Japanese and American militaries for live-fire exercises.

Every day during the summer climbing season over five thousand tourists / pilgrims make their way up the mountain. As opposed to the traditional saying I hereby wish to coin a new gaijin phrase – "You're a fool to climb Mt. Fuji, you'll have a better time in Roppongi". Rather than tell you the deep meanings of Fuji-san, which can be found in any other proper travel book, I will just tell you about my pilgrimage.

In May I received a call from my friend Rananda. As she was only staying the one year, her sister was coming for a visit before she left and did I want to climb Fuji-san with them next month? Why not? It was on my 'to do' list, and I would be in the area that weekend for a retreat anyway. As the day approached Rananda decided to switch the dates so I was left hanging. Determined still to go I called my old mate Todd. Now, anyone that has spent time backpacking or in international company will know that Canadians and Australians tend to bond. If we knew what was in front of us we might have chosen not to stretch those bonds.

We were going to be climbing in June, two weeks before the official start of the climbing season. The Japanese social orientation precludes them from climbing anytime between September 1st and June 30th, so we were assured of no crowds. Little did we know that it would also assure us of absolutely bugger all else. The national tourist office had advised us that only 'experienced mountaineers' should attempt the climb outside the regular season but we regarded this as mere folly. We started our journey from Niigata-ken at lunchtime. On the way we met Jennifer a fellow English teacher from Nagano who asked if we had the right gear for climbing. "Yes", we claimed, "we've got rain gear and warm clothes." She replied, "Oh, I meant ice picks and crampons." The furrowed brows of insecurity began to crease.

After a succession of trains and bus we arrived in Kawaguchiko at 9pm. Being outside of the climbing season there were no buses to the fifth station, the usual starting point, so we approached some drivers at the taxi stand. According to the guidebook a taxi ride would cost about ¥7,000. The first driver said, "No - too dangerous". The second said, "¥12,000 - yen, not dollars", to which we replied something along of the lines of, "Thank you, but your price is a little expensive. Besides, we live in your fine country and teach English to your wonderful children." Actually it may have been something rather more curt, but I can't remember. The third driver told us ¥10,000, the fourth ¥8,000. The price was falling so constantly we thought of staying all night and by morning we'd make a profit.

However we didn't have that much time, so we decided to go for option four. The driver took us as far as the road would allow. In other words, as soon as it turned to dirt we were turfed out, relieved of our hard earned cash, left on a dark road with no idea where we were and nary a tourist centre in sight. We shrugged, and started to walk. It was 10.30pm, with a supposed four and a half-hour journey in front of us.

We discovered later in the harsh light of day that we had been deposited somewhere near the fourth station. It was at this stage that Todd admitted that he'd forgotten a flashlight. Gradually as the trip wore on he would also admit to forgetting food, a map, and sunglasses in the bright morning that was to follow. He was also only wearing his sturdy track shoes, backed up with rubber boots - standard Japanese baby blue and yellow issue. I was over prepared, having to cart my huge backpack because there were no lockers to be found, and unfortunately no sherpas either. I carried to the top, well almost, of Mt. Fuji about ten kilograms of such useful items as two novels, a walkman and tapes, sandals, spare underwear and socks, my toiletries bag, and a bible to be used on the retreat.

Actually as the night wore on the bible did prove useful. I was continually dipping into it for verses of encouragement like, "In despair I look to the mountains for God...", and "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death..." In my state I was positive I would meet God sooner than originally envisaged. A few years ago I climbed the tallest mountain in Australia - Mt. Kosciusko. This involved a ride on a chairlift and a casual, only slightly strenuous, three-hour walk to the summit. I knew Fuji-san would be tougher, but never in my wildest imagination imagined I would wish to be reborn as Sir Edmund Hillary. Or maybe not born at all - just stay as a twinkle in my father's eye.

Altitude, dehydration, a heavy pack, and lack of sleep soon all began to take their toll. I was sometimes stopping every twenty metres or so to get my breath. Todd - much more young and sprightly than me - was forever prodding me as I lay gasping on the path with encouraging comments like, "Wake up!", "Get going you lazy bastard" and, "I'm glad I revived you, your heart stopped beating". The sunrise that was meant to be so spectacular, happened behind a bank of cloud at 4.15am. By this point we had already well passed the expected four and a half-hour journey time and seemed no closer to the top.

By 6am we reached what we presumed was the 9th station, or was it the 8th? We had hit the snowline, and I had hit a brick wall. At least with the snow we get some moisture back into our system, even if it did include some grit. I decided the view was good enough for me right there. The view being some fields, towns, and lakes in the distance, mainly obscured by cloud. I found a nice piece of dirt outside a closed hut, as they all were, and settled down for a kip. These mountain huts are rest stops that are usually operated by local families. Many climbers (well, those actually climbing at the right time of year) mark their feat by having attendants brand the name of a particular hut and its elevation on their walking sticks. I didn't particular care for any branding or for what elevation I may be at. I just wanted to sleep. Todd pressed on to the top and returned two and a half hours later with pieces of volcanic rock, plus stories of fog and hyperventilation. We could now start down, but the journey was far from over.

The supposed two and a half hour trip down ended up more like four. We finally started seeing other people on their

way up, some of whom were wearing ski boots and carrying their skis. There was snow - but not quite that much snow! We asked some of them for directions to the fifth station and ended up in a workman's camp where we manage to purchase a few expensive small cans of 'Pocari Sweat' – a drink that could be loosely described as a Japanese alternative to Gatorade. Mr. Pocari must obviously sweat quite a bit, or maybe it's the whole family. Anyway, from the camp we were redirected to the fifth station which meant we had to walk back UP for awhile.

While waiting for the bus we stashed away some of the obligatory omiyage (gifts) which is a useful tool for sucking up to your 'higher ups'. We had lunch back in Kawaguchiko and parted ways at the eki. The next day it took ten hours for me to get home, but Todd fared worse. He slept the night in the Minamiotari eki after taking the wrong train. At least the station attendant felt sorry for him and lent him some blankets. At a later date, when our wives were both expecting at the same time, he sent me an email expressing his first piece of sound parental advice, "Looks like our kids will graduate together. When they're old enough to understand we can warn them about the dangers of climbing Mt.Fuji and ordering the entire menu at Mexican restaurants in Kobe."

Later that weekend as I related my experience most people said, "Well, if you'd asked me first..." As for Rananda, she and her sister abandoned the idea of climbing and just ended up taking photos from the base. Smart ladies. My recommendation is that unless you have a masochistic streak you do exactly that. And while you're there Fujiyoshida has one of the biggest and fastest rollercoasters in the world...

About The Author:

Nicholas Klar is a writer and teacher from Adelaide, Australia. His most recent incarnation is as Senior Head of House at a private international college in Shanghai, China where he lives with his family. Apart from his recent book, his only real claim to fame at this time is being the only person in the whole of Shanghai without a mobile phone.

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