Climbing the North America Country Highpoints

By Matthew Gilbertson and Eric Gilbertson

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Figure 1: North America highpoint locations

Introduction

Stretching from the tropical jungles of Panama in the South to the high arctic of northern Canada to the pristine beaches of Barbados in the East, North America offers an astounding variety of climates, ecosystems, and landscapes. Climbing the highest mountain in each of these countries gives the chance to truly experience this diversity. While the mountaintops have nearly unbeatable views, just reaching the trailheads is often half the adventure.

We recently became the first people in the world to climb the highest mountain in all 23 North American countries. On June 11th, 2015, we successfully reached the summit of Cuba's Pico Turquino (elev. 6,476'), which marked the culmination of a 5 year and 16-day quest that began with an ascent of the USA's Denali (elev. 20,310') in May 2010.

In pursuit of this goal, and while studying mechanical engineering in graduate school at MIT, we embarked on nine separate climbing expeditions to various corners of the North American continent: one to Alaska, three to the Caribbean, three to Central America, one to the Yukon of Canada, and lastly one to Cuba. Of the 23 country mountains (where 'country' is defined as a UN Member State), we climbed 19 of them without guides. The only mountains for which we hired guides were St. Lucia, Cuba (both required by law), Nicaragua (due to the risk of land mines), and Belize (for protection from armed Guatemalan gold miners).

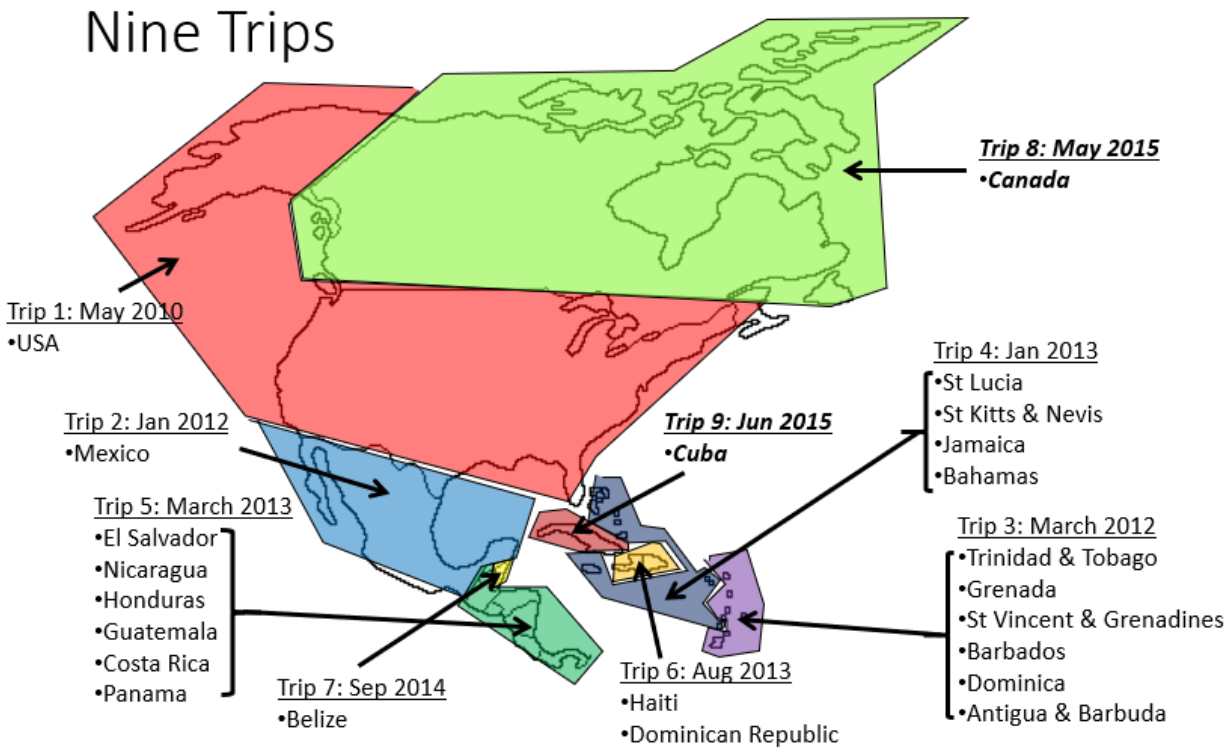


Figure 2: Our nine trips to complete all the highpoints.

We consider the USA's Denali and Canada's Mount Logan (elev. 19,551') to be the most challenging of the 23 high points, both of which required ski plane travel on and off the mountain, plus two weeks of arctic high-altitude glacier travel over heavily crevassed terrain to reach the summits. The third most difficult was Belize, which involved a thirty-mile tractor ride through knee-deep mud and two days of bushwhacking through pristine jungle with an armed military escort to reach the summit of Doyle's Delight. Cuba posed a unique challenge because it is currently not permissible for US citizens to visit Cuba for the purpose of tourism.

We were born in Berea, KY in 1986, and studied mechanical engineering at MIT for undergraduate, masters, and PhD degrees. Matthew now lives in Palo Alto and Eric lives in Seattle.

Motivation

In 2012 we stood atop Guadeloupe peak, the highest point in Texas, looking out at the vast expanse of desert and mountains surrounding. This was the last mountain in our journey to all of the state high points of the USA, which had brought us to some of the most scenic glaciers, forests, and deserts in the country. We had years ago realized this state-highpointing journey was a great way to experience the beauty of our home country and decided to expand our travels to see more of the mountains of our home continent.

Why this book

The goal of this book is to document the trips we took to each of the North America Country Highpoints. These trip reports give the reader enough information to successfully reach the summit of each of these 23 highpoints.

No resources currently exist, in print or online, that compile information on all North American high points in one place. In fact, many highpoints have no published route information at all outside of this book. For some mountains the only available information is SRTM (Shuttle Radar Topography Mission) topographic maps, which can have high enough errors to obscure the true highpoint location. In these instances of multiple possible highpoints, we give reports on the routes we took to each mountain, and detail our own GPS measurements and research determining which one is highest.

You don't have to be working to complete every country highpoint in this collection, though. This book is still a great resource to add a mountain climb to any Caribbean vacation, or a scenic side hike to a road trip in Central America. Though a few of the mountains are multi-week expeditions, most are day hikes accessible to the casual weekend hiker.

Several countries have disputed highpoints, and we've aimed to resolve these situations with our own research and measurements to give the high pointer the full story. In some instances in the Caribbean the location locals consider the "summit" is in fact only a low point on a crater rim of the tallest mountain, and we provide clear information in these instances of how we reached the true high point.

This book presents reports from each mountain in the order that we climbed them, grouped into the nine trips we took.

What is North America?

To define the boundaries of North America we defer to the United Nations. The United Nations Statistics Division defines the continent of North America to include Northern America, the Caribbean, and Central America [1].

In selecting countries and highpoints for this book we have followed this definition and consider as countries the member states of the UN whose mainlands are located within these boundaries.

Some confusion may arise for overseas territories that are located within continental North America, but whose parent countries are on different continents. For example, the islands of St Pierre and Miquelon lie within North America, but they constitute an overseas territory of France. Because these territories themselves are not independent countries (as defined by the UN), we group them with their parent countries and thus do not include them with the North America list.

We define the country highpoint as the highest point on any land owned by the country excluding foreign embassies. This ensures, for instance, that the highpoint of the Bahamas is indeed in the Bahamas and not in a foreign embassy in the United States, even though the Bahamas may technically own the land at the embassy.

Trip 1 – United States of America

United States of America
Denali 20,310ft

Author: Matthew Gilbertson

Team MIT: Matthew Gilbertson, Eric Gilbertson, Dan Walker, Darren V, Woody Hoburg

May 16th -May 28th, 2010: thirteen days plane to plane

Schedule:

Day 0: Sat May 15th: Fly in to ANC, buy & repackage food, stay in Microtel
Day 1: 7am shuttle to Talkeetna, meet with rangers, fly to Base Camp on glacier
Day 2: Move to 7800ft, camp there
Day 3: Move to 11,600ft, camp there
Day 4: Rest at 11,600ft
Day 5: Cache at 13,500ft, camp back at 11,600ft
Day 6: Move to 14,200ft
Day 7: Pick up 13,500ft cache, sleep at 14,200ft
Day 8: Rest day
Day 9: Move to 17,200ft
Day 10: Rest day
Day 11: Wednesday May 26: Summit day, sleep at 17,200ft

Day 12: Sleep in until noon, hike down through the night
Day 13: Hike all morning, arrived at Base Camp at 7:00am, fly out of glacier
Day 14: Sat May 29: Woody, Darren, Dan take shuttle to ANC and fly home; Matthew and Eric have rest day before backpacking in Denali National Park for a week

"Let's go see what the top of the country looks like." Darren said. Our elevation was 20,100ft—about 200 below the top.

Through the past eleven days we had ascended 13,000 feet over 13 miles. But the final 2,000ft of climbing had been grueling. Even though we had tiny packs (compared to days ago) each step upward was now a monumental feat. There was one-half the oxygen here as at sea level. Every twenty seconds of hiking you needed to rest for the next thirty to catch your breath and slow down your pulse. Imagine climbing Mount Washington, NH, with an extra 200lbs on your back, while breathing through a small coffee straw, while the mountain is made of soft sand. That's the effort level of the final 2,000ft up Denali.

We paused a few seconds to catch our breaths. You couldn't speak a complete sentence without needing to refill your lungs. We had split into two groups; Eric and I had just summited while Darren, Woody, and Dan were on their final pitch to the top.

Me: "Almost there…[gasp]…just watch out…[gasp]…for the Polish people [gasp]"

Dan/Woody/Darren: "Let's do it! [gasp]…"

Day 0-Saturday May 15th:

The five of us had swooped into Anchorage on Saturday May 15th from across the country: Eric/Dan from Boston/Cambridge; me from Maryland; Woody from California; Darren from Virginia. Our goal was to climb Denali (aka Mount McKinley), the highest point in Alaska, the country, and the continent.

Eric and I were seeking the crown jewel for our state high points collection. We could worry later about our remaining 14 state high points (mostly the southern and north-central states). Since Alaska was on the list we had to climb it. We invited Darren, Woody, and Dan to join. I believe all responded an enthusiastic YES within 10 minutes of the invitation email.

We had all managed to push and persuade our advisors/employers to give us the three weeks off that we figured we would need. We had all read trip reports or books that warned that even three weeks might not be enough because of the high potential for bad weather. We heard that sometimes people could even be delayed for days on either end of the trip because the glacier planes needed good weather to land on the glacier.

We thus set up a tight schedule and wanted to get onto the glacier as soon as possible. Eric and I descended upon Anchorage first, around 3:30pm on Saturday. Dan/Woody/Darren landed later. We grabbed our bags and put them in the rental car. We each had about 130lbs of non-food gear. We dropped off the bags at Microtel Anchorage (best rates in town) and pulled in

to Walmart for some hardcore food shopping. We each took a cart and a deep breath and stepped inside.

We had created a Google spreadsheet for everyone to list their food preferences. Here's the food we bought that we ended up eating:

Dinner: For dinner we picked up pasta, couscous, and some Ramens. Couscous and Ramen are super simple because you just need to add boiling water, and it's a cinch to clean up. We got some good sausage, pepperoni, and brought some meats that we had dehydrated. We also dehydrated some vegetables and pasta sauce. Many thanks to Kate for the dehydrated spices that along with some Dan-Walker-cooking made our dinners particularly awesome.

Lunch: We picked up 20lbs of cheese split up into five gigantic bricks. We also had a cracker mix of Triscuits, Gardettos, Combos, and cheese crackers, along with some Tortillas.

Breakfast: Bunch of oatmeal for some, and cereal/powdered milk for others.

Snacks: Soft fruit bars, cookies, Great Value chocolate chip/fruit/nuts trail mix, Jell-O (for a real tasty post-dinner dessert).

Eric and I got quite a few looks while we were shopping. I guess not too many people are pushing around two overflowing full shopping carts. I think we had about 10 boxes of oatmeal, 10 bags of mini-wheats, 20lbs of pasta, 30 boxes of couscous, 10 huge bags of crackers, 5 x 5lb cheese bricks, 20lbs of sausage, and about 300 Ziploc bags. On three separate occasions people asked us for help because they thought we worked there. We planned on eating a lot of food in 20 days. On the nutrition facts a box of couscous might say "3 servings" but when you're working as hard as we would be you can divide that number by three or four.

An hour and a half later we traded $950 for 250 lbs. of food. I guess for five hungry hikers for 20 days that's not too bad, especially considering that we're in Alaska, where most prices are way higher. Heck, I probably eat for more than $9.50/day in the city. I think a lot of other climbers buy expensive Mountain House free-dried food, which costs about three times as much and produces three times more trash.

When we got back to Microtel it was time to repackage everything. We began the daunting task of pouring all the food into Ziploc bags. The original food packaging produces a tremendous amount of trash, both in mass and volume. By repackaging food into resealable bags, you can get rid of all the extra plastic and cardboard. Through years of trial and error and especially from the Appalachian Trail, Eric and I discovered that by far the best bags are the Ziploc one-quart freezer bags. Eric and I cleared the room and began our assembly line.

We poured the food into the bags and lined them up into two huge matrices on our bed. Each column of the matrix was one person's food. Darren, Woody, and Dan landed around 7:30pm and made it to the hotel around 9, and helped us finish up. In the end we had about two big trash bags full of waste packaging. We ended up reducing the amount of trash we carried up the mountain from about 3lbs/person to just a few small, compact ounces of Ziplocs.

We've found that 2lbs of food per person per day is about right. So, for twenty days that's 40lbs per person. With Darren's handy hand scale, we each picked out about 40lbs of our favorite food bags. It was like a little shopping trip all over again. We ended up with about 50lbs of extra food. I guess that's better than not having enough. Bedtime finally came around 1:30am.

DAY 1

We wanted to get an early start, so we had reserved a shuttle to Talkeetna at 7am with Denali Overland Transportation for $160/person. Talkeetna is the town that you fly out of to get onto the glacier. In retrospect it might have been cheaper to rent a big van and park it in Talkeetna during the trip, but we didn't want another thing to worry about.

As soon as we got to Talkeetna after the 2.5hr ride we started weighing our bags. Our air carrier, Talkeetna Air Taxi (TAT), requires that each bag be less than 80lbs and have the weight written on it, for better balancing on the plane. Each person is only allowed 125lbs (supposedly a TSA rule, extra weight costs more), so we ended up with 625lbs of gear/food for the five of us. The flight was a staggering $500 per person roundtrip. But TAT had good customer service. They sold us some bamboo wands and let us store our extra stuff during the trip. They have a safe for valuables too.

Next, we needed to have a meeting with the rangers. As the park requires, we had registered for the trip more than 60 days in advance with the team name MIT. We each paid the $175 special use fee and sat down. Our ranger discussed the sanitation procedures on the mountain, which consists of using a Clean Mountain Can (CMC). You do your business in a plastic bag lining the small plastic cylindrical can, and when the biodegradable bag fills up you tie it off and throw it into a deep crevasse. (That's much nicer than needing to carry it out!) Our ranger didn't even ask us about our experience. I guess the assumption is that if you're willing to pay that much money you probably know what you're doing. But we later discovered there were plenty of people on the mountain who didn't have a clue.

Once we were done with the half-hour ranger meeting, we noticed a board in the ranger station with climber statistics. So far this year, 235 people had attempted the mountain and only 20 had succeeded. This doesn't look promising, I thought.

TAT informed us that the weather was too bad for flights at the moment. We were getting worried we might not make it onto the glacier that day. But after a quick hour we got a call from TAT that the weather had cleared and flights to the glacier had resumed. We were up. It was show time.

Four of us would be flying in a single-prop Beaver five-person plane. (I bet Woody knows more of the details of the plane.) Darren drew a short straw and would fly in a different plane. The planes were awesome. They had retractable aluminum skis that allowed them to land on snow. There were a bunch of other bush planes with huge tires all around. These planes were Alaska-tough.

It was one spectacular ride. In a plane that size you really feel like you're flying, unlike in a commercial jet. We flew over some genuine Alaskan bush thick with muskeg. Some lakes still had ice. We flew through a couple of clouds and finally "The Great One" was in sight. Denali. Mountains and glaciers stretched from one end of the horizon to the other, but Denali towered a full mile above everything else. It was absolutely massive.

We first followed the Tokositna River, then flew up the Kanikula Glacier. Soon a high mountain pass came into view; it was called One Shot Gap. "That's our gap," the pilot said. With what seemed like only a hundred feet to spare on each side we shot through the gap and were over the Kahiltna Glacier, which would be our friend for most of the expedition. We turned into a little valley and a small city of tents came into view below. Base Camp. We landed smoothly and the pilot cut the engine. We dragged our monstrous load of luggage out of the way.

Weeks ago I thought, "Man, that seems kind of lame that you need to take a plane onto the glacier — if you can land on snow, why not just land on the summit? Where do you draw the line? How high can you land and still say you climbed the mountain?" We found out the location of the 7200ft Base Camp is one of the closest spots to the summit that is free of crevasses and also outside the wilderness boundary. So even if you found a crevasse-free landing zone higher up on the mountain you'd get in trouble for landing there because motorized vehicles are not allowed in the wilderness.

But still, I thought, if your goal is to climb the mountain under your own power wouldn't it be much more honorable to start from a town or a road, rather than getting flown in to a seemingly arbitrary spot on the mountain? Before we left we looked into this option, but that would basically add a month to the trip. Imagine hauling seven weeks of food and 100lbs of gear through trees, bushes, and rocky terrain, then having to pick your own way around moraines and crevasses all the way up the glacier just to get to base camp where most of the 1200 other annual hikers start. Some people do it, and it's admirable, but we didn't have that kind of time to spare. Maybe we'd save a trip like that for next time.

But if starting at 7,200ft still sounds dishonorably high, think about other state high points. For Mt Whitney you start at 8,300ft and climb to 14,498ft. For Mt Rainier you start at 5,500ft and climb to 14,410ft. And for Mt Elbert you start around 10,000ft and climb to 14,330ft. Plenty of high points even have a road to the top. With that reasoning a net climb of 13,000ft for Denali sounds honorable enough to me. Not to mention the fact that it's glaciers all the way.

We checked in with Lisa, the Base Camp ranger, and she gave us six gallons of white gas fuel that we had paid for back at TAT. Since we would be obtaining 100% of our water by melting snow, we had each brought a stove: three MSR XGK's and two one-piece Coleman stoves (all used white gas). We've found through Winter School that one of the biggest pains of winter camping is huddling around the stoves after dinner and shivering while the snow melts into drinking water. It takes hours each day. So, with a stove for every person we could speed the painful process up substantially.

Next, we each picked out a sled from the well-used stack. Normally when towing a sled you want a rigid connection between you and the sled so that if you go downhill the sled doesn't

crash into the back of your ankles. People often do this with two skinny PVC pipes. But since we would be roped up the whole time, for downhills we could attach the sleds completely to the rope, by prussiking the front and back. For uphills we'd pull the sleds behind us with a simple rope. The route is pretty much either all uphill or all downhill. Woody had the brilliant idea to bring some elastic cord which absorbed some of the stop and go while walking and eliminated a lot of jerk from the sled.

As soon as we landed we needed full skin protection from the sun. With clear skies above and bright snow all around and below us it was like we had two suns shining upon us. We definitely appreciated our special glacier glasses and last-minute purchase of nose guards. We covered our heads and necks with hats and handkerchiefs. Woody won with a white Arabian explorer-type hat. We slathered on the sunscreen and got to work setting up the tents.

The sun was so intense that the tents acted like greenhouses. Outside it might have been in the 20's (Fahrenheit) in the shade, 50's in the sun, and 70's in the tent. Later on in the day the sun went behind a mountain and thankfully we were in the shade again. We tried to sleep but for those of us with minus 40F down sleeping bags we basically had to lay on top of our bags all night to keep from sweating. Eric and Dan brought thinner bags with thermal liners which allowed them to customize the insulation of their bags. We all brought some kind of vapor barrier liner (VBL) which you would wrap around yourself before getting into the sleeping bag. This waterproof barrier would prevent body moisture from saturating the sleeping bag as you slept and would maintain its warmth. But lower on the glacier most of us were too hot to need the VBLs.

Darkness never really came on the glacier that night, but we were all tired enough from two days of travel that we nevertheless slept 12 hours. It had taken us all less than 36 hours to travel from our origins all the way to the glacier, with enough time to purchase/repackage food and meet with the rangers along the way. Things couldn't have gone smoother so far. Now that a big chunk of the logistics had been executed flawlessly, it was time to actually start climbing the mountain.

DAY 2

When we woke up the next morning it was time to put on the armor and prepare for battle. Suiting up for glacier travel with a huge backpack and sled is a lot different than suiting up for a simple climb up Mount Washington, NH. Eric and I were on one rope and Dan + Woody + Darren were on the other, with Darren in the lead. We heard the glaciers were huge in Alaska, so Eric and I tied in 40m apart while Dan/Woody/Darren were about 30m apart. We each had enough gear to build an anchor in case the other(s) fell in: a picket, an ice screw, an ascender, beaners, slings, and a belay device.

With my wide-rimmed cowboy-like hat and handkerchief across my face along with all kinds of weapons dangling from my harness I felt like an outlaw in the Wild West. My gear jingled with each step and I could draw an ice screw like a handgun. We donned our packs and hitched our sleds and we were ready for battle. A battle with Mount McKinley. We buried two days' worth of food at base camp and marked the cache with a bamboo wand and a flag provided

by the Park Service with our name on it. We would use this food if we came back to Base Camp during a storm and had to wait a while for a flight out.

Before we left we got to see the National Park Service helicopter come in for a dramatic operation. First the chopper landed near the ranger tent. Pretty soon it took off with a long rope dangling 100ft below it. One dude with a body harness and fighter-pilot helmet clipped in to the bottom of the rope and was hoisted high in the air. That dude was in for one wild ride I tell you. I hope he's bundled up, I thought, otherwise he'd be a dangling human popsicle in that wind. He and the chopper disappeared down the valley and cruised up the glacier. We had no idea what they were up to. About an hour later they came back and the dude unclipped. Weird, we thought. Later, when we got off the glacier we learned the reason for the dangerous mission.

Now it was time to head out. Eric and I marched in front with Darren/Woody/Dan (I'll call them 'DWD' from now on) covering the rear. We started down the only downhill of the ascent, 'Heartbreak Hill.' It's only heartbreaking on the way back when you have to climb it. Pretty soon we were down on the good old Kahiltna Glacier. Luckily, we were early enough in the season and the snow bridges were thick enough that we couldn't see any crevasses in our path. This demonstrated the benefit of hiking on such a popular path: we could see where 200 people before us had walked this season and hadn't punched through into a crevasse, so we felt pretty confident that we would be safe.

The sun blazed overhead and Eric and I stripped down to shorts and a t-shirt and slathered on the sunscreen. It felt like 90 degrees. The bowl of the Kahiltna Glacier acted like a heliostat with us at its focus. By mid-afternoon another tent city came into view: 7,800ft camp. This would be our camp for the night. There were already a bunch of snow walls from previous climbers, which were built to shelter the tents from the wind and drifting snow during storms. "What storms?" we thought as we looked at the bluebird sky. But we knew that "the weather can change *in an instant"* around here.

We set up our hardcore MITOC two-person and three-person Trango tents in some vacant spots. It was only 4pm so we still had some time before dinner. Dan rigged up a nifty shade canopy so we could sit without getting toasted. Woody pulled out the snow saw and started cutting snow blocks. The snow in the Whites is never compacted enough for blocks, so we were novices at first. In cutting out the blocks, you had to keep in mind the mechanical engineering principle of design for manufacturing, which suggests that we should cut the blocks with the right draft angle so we can extract them. If you angle the cuts the wrong way it might be impossible to extract the block.

Either Dan or Woody cut the angles just right on the first block but then were faced with the dilemma of how to get it out. "This sounds like a job for an ice screw!" Woody suggested. Dan sank two ice screws into the block and extracted the specimen flawlessly. Our campsite neighbors came over to admire it and it became our dinner table. Ah, the simple joys of camping on a glacier. That would be just the beginning of our study of snow block architecture.

That night we met a few of our neighbors. The two guys camping next to us were from Seattle and Park City, UT and brought a life-size, ahem, X-rated blow-up figure whom they

named Molly Tucker. From then on we referred to them as the Molly Tuckers dudes. Later, three Japanese climbers silently and swiftly built camp next to us. The three of them cooked and slept in a tent 50% smaller than our two-man tent. Who are those guys, we wondered? A Dutch climber whispered: "those are the famous Giri-Giri Boys from Japan; they're probably doing something crazy." Interesting neighbors indeed.

DAY 3

Next day we woke up a little earlier to beat the heat. The tentative plan was to camp at 9,800ft camp, as recommended in our guidebook ("Denali's West Buttress: A Climber's Guide to Mount McKinley's Classic Route" by Colby Coombs). But we would see how we were doing when we got there.

We suited up for battle. This was starting to feel routine. We pulled out of camp just in front of a 12-person guided group, split into three teams. Approximately 25% of climbers on Denali are part of guided teams, and each client pays about $6,000 to the guiding companies, which covers everything except gear once they get to Anchorage. By comparison each of us paid about $1,100 once we got to Anchorage for food, transportation, and the permit. Although from what I hear the guided companies had pretty good food.

Eric and I made it to the top of Ski Hill and waited for DWD. We thought it was kind of steep, but it turned out to be an ant hill compared to some of the later climbs we would face. The guided group passed us and then we met up with DWD. A little higher up we had a little powwow. We decided to rearrange the groups for increased efficiency: Eric/Matthew/Dan on one rope, Darren/Woody on the other.

We also talked about camp. You climb the mountain slowly in order to acclimate to the thinner air. On other mountains most of us had felt the debilitating headache and nausea associated with acute mountain sickness (AMS) before and didn't want to experience that again on Denali. Our book suggested ascending an average of no more than 1,000ft a day to properly acclimate. But below 10,000ft none of us had really felt symptoms of AMS before so we felt the recommendation to limit our day to only 9,800ft was too conservative. I think that recommendation in the book might be fitness-limited and not altitude-limited. So, we decided to try and push on to the next camp at 11,600ft. We would spend a rest day there to acclimate.

We all agreed on the plan and split up into two groups. We agreed to radio in periodically with our FRS radios. Pulling all our gear up to 11,600ft camp in one shot was hard work but our first team made it to camp around 5pm. Walking into camp felt like walking into a town in the Wild West. We cowboys strolled in down Main Street. For a second everyone stopped what they were doing around camp and sized us up, then went back to their business. If there were tumbleweeds, they would have drifted across the street. There were probably 75 other people in camp.

Luckily there was an awesome vacant campsite that was perfect for two tents, and complete with an attached cooking area. This was one of the only places in Alaska where it was OK to cook right next to your tent without having to worry about grizzly bears. We chopped out

a massive block for a dinner table and pitched the tents. We radioed in and Darren and Woody were on their way up. They arrived by the time we had gotten camp set up.

One of the things to look forward to each evening was the weather forecast. It was given by Lisa, the Base Camp Manager, at 8pm every evening on Channel 1. It was followed by a trivia question. Around 7:58pm every evening the entire camp would go silent and everyone held up their radio. The forecast for the night at 14,000ft was "Up to a foot of snow with lows around 5 above." With weather like that we were glad to be in a solid campsite, with a rest day to look forward to the next day.

DAY 4

We woke up late the next morning to a mere two inches of fresh snow on the tents. I guess that's better than a big blizzard. I don't think any of us felt symptoms of AMS, but we all felt pretty lethargic. Part of us didn't feel like doing a darn thing. But from our fast-paced lives we temporarily left behind I think some of us felt a little torn. From being on the go all the time during the school year and for the past couple of days, part of my mind said, "what are you doing just sitting around, you need to be doing something productive!" But we *were* doing something productive; we were acclimating. By resting now, we were enabling ourselves to climb higher the next day. Ascending too fast can lead to AMS, which can progress to High Altitude Cerebral Edema (HACE) or High Altitude Pulmonary Edema (HAPE), which are both bad news. So eventually we all felt completely comfortable sitting around doing absolutely nothing.

After a couple hours of sitting around it became time for a little boondoggle. From working on trail crew for the Inyo National Forest several years ago, Eric and I became familiar with the word 'boondoggle.' It's something that you do to feel important, to feel like you're working, but isn't really necessary at all. We decided it was time to "flush the toilet." Around here that action takes on a slightly different meaning than at sea level, since you have to dispose of human waste in deep crevasses. We had identified one such potential crevasse next to camp. There were two bamboo wands stuck into the snow next to it to form an X, the sign for WATCH OUT. We had to check it out to evaluate its suitability for our purposes.

We suited up for business and Eric belayed me out to lip of the crevasse. I didn't want to get too close, but it looked pretty deep. You would not have wanted to fall in. It looked like a good place to empty the CMC. Darren became the designated flusher. He tied off the CMC bag and Eric belayed him out to the edge. With a dramatic flourish he tossed the bag into the abyss and it plunged into the icy bowels of the glacier without a sound. "That was a good four seconds before it hit anything," Darren said. That's how you flush the toilet at 11,600ft.

A little while later it was time for another little boondoggle: crevasse rescue practice. I felt the least experienced with building a Z-pulley, so Darren and I tied ourselves together and he jumped into a pit I dug. I was pulled to the ground and had to self-arrest. I tried building an anchor, but the snow was so soft it pulled out, a scary sight. Dan showed me that if the snow is too soft you don't pound a picket in vertically, instead you bury it horizontally and it holds a lot better.

Toward evening after the skies had cleared and we were back to blazing sunlight we suddenly heard a rumble near the outskirts of town (camp). Everyone around dropped what they were doing and looked up. It was a big avalanche coming down the cliff. Giant snow chunks rumbled down the hillside and pulverized each other into a big cloud of white that made it all the way down to the trail but stayed safely away from camp. That was another advantage of camping in an established site that people used year after year: it was probably out of reach of avalanches.

Ahh, it was nice to have a quiet day on the mountain. We relaxed on our carved benches around the dinner table. We prepared a gourmet meal of pasta with dehydrated sauce, spices (from Kate), sausage, and dehydrated tomatoes. The forecast was good weather for the next few days.

DAY 5

We woke up the next morning refreshed and ready for action. Since the terrain between 11,600ft camp and the next camp (14,200ft) was so rugged and we still had about 120lbs each, we decided to make the move in two loads, known as a "double carry." The first climb out of camp was Motorcycle Hill, followed by Squirrel Hill, and then across Windy Corner. We would carry roughly half the gear in our packs up to the well-used cache site at 13,500ft and bury it there, then hike back down to sleep at 11,600ft camp. The next day we would move the rest of our gear all the way to 14,200ft camp, then pick up the cache the following day. That was the plan suggested by the guidebook.

Eric and I took the lead again with DWD behind us. Unfortunately, a slower 5-person Polish team had started just moments before us. It's tough to walk off-trail and pass, though, because the surrounding snow is way softer than the trail. In typical Polish fashion (as we later discovered) they refused to step aside to let us pass, so we slowly trudged past them in the soft snow on the side of the trail. It was tough work. By the time we completed the pass Eric and I were totally out of breath and took a while to regain it. But it would have been even more agonizing to hang out behind those guys all the way up Motorcycle Hill.

The top of Motorcycle Hill gave us an awesome view of 11,600ft camp. From above it looked like a small village in a developing country. We could see how campsites had sprung up on either side of the main trail into town and people were working on new campsites on the outskirts. Little alleyways separated the different compounds. Just like a real village, this one had its share of sanitation problems. The rangers instruct everyone to urinate in communal sites to localize impact, so you could see giant yellow stains from half a mile away. Everyone treats or boils their water anyhow just to be safe. It was an interesting lesson in the need for urban planning.

Next was the even steeper Squirrel Hill. As we climbed we got an awesome view of the corniced ridge on the other side of camp. There was so much snow on the ridge that it was hard to tell what was snow and what was bedrock. As we got even higher we realized we were completely above the clouds, called 'undercast' in Mount Washington forecasts. You felt like an airplane immune to the weather below.

Pretty soon we were at the 13,500ft cache site. “Wait, where’s Windy Corner?” I asked Eric. “We already passed it,” he said. I guess Windy Corner wasn’t so windy today; we didn’t notice any difference between it and any other mountain pass. We tried to radio in to DWD, but the signal didn’t carry far enough. We hung out by a big hole that our Dutch predecessors had already dug and looked for something to keep us occupied while we waited for DWD.

I came up with a brilliant idea for a boondoggle: building a house structure out of bamboo wands. We needed to mark our cache site with some style; we couldn’t just stick a little flag in the snow like everyone else. We needed to make ours stand out. First, I made a cube and Gorilla-taped the ends together. Then I made a square-based pyramid on the top. Voila. We had the only house-shaped cache marker on the mountain.

We needed another boondoggle. We needed an official flag. I cut a section of yellow trash bag out and taped it to a wand. Then, in red Duck tape, I taped ‘MIT’ on the flag and made a skull and crossbones beneath it. DWD made it up at that point and we buried a bunch of stuff. Unfortunately, Darren had a runaway altitude-induced nosebleed. But we made the most of it, and piled a bunch of the bloody red snow on top of our cache pile. With a bamboo house, MIT skull and crossbones flag, and bloody snow watching over our cache we were confident nobody would dare to lay a finger on it.

We turned around and headed back to camp. Descending was an order of magnitude easier. Gravity was now cooperating with us. It made the air denser and gave us less potential energy as we descended. Good old gravity.

When we got back to camp I had to take care of a little business. While we were waiting at the cache site for DWD, another climber on his way up had approached me and Eric and bashfully requested a special favor. It turns out that his group had accidentally forgotten to dispose of their CMC bag in the crevasse at 11,600ft camp before they had left. They had left the bag in their campsite. If a ranger found their special surprise and discovered the owner, they could get a big fine (this actually happened to someone when we were back in Talkeetna). So, the guy respectfully asked if we could throw the bag away for them, and we would be duly rewarded. I said no problem. As soon as we got into camp I found their little surprise and pitched it into the toilet crevasse.

When we got back to our campsite we were amazed at the effects of the intense solar radiation. Objects that aren’t colored white heat up a lot more on the surface of the glacier. A pair of pot grabbers (a ‘spondonnagle’ if you’re an Aussie) that we had left on the dinner table had melted their way about three inches deep and then had frozen into place. A snow shovel that was anchoring our tent had heated up the snow around it and had crept about six inches, extruding snow through two holes as it moved.

But more importantly, our sleeping bags had dried completely in our greenhouse tents and were nice and fluffy. I remembered how difficult it had been for me and Eric to dry out our sleeping bags when we hiked across New Hampshire in January a few years back. Basically, every day they got wetter and wetter from body moisture and lost most of their insulation after just a week. We were planning to be on Denali for three weeks. That’s why Dan suggested that

everyone use a vapor barrier liner. But with intense sunlight we could get away with a little bit of moisture in our sleeping bags and wait for them to dry out during the day. If it got stormy and cloudy things might be different…

We finished dinner at a reasonable hour and it was time to get to bed. It was still weird to go to sleep at 11pm when the sun was still out, but we were getting used to it. We found that it never really got dark, just twilight. The sun would officially set around 11:30pm in the north-northwest and rise around 4:30am in the north-northeast. The darkest part of the night occurred around 2am, but even then you could see outside just fine without a headlamp. At night the sun would drop just a little below the horizon for five hours. From 11:30pm to 2am was just one long sunset. From 2am to 4:30am was one long sunrise.

Over the entire trip we couldn't see any stars, just Venus. When the moon was full it did just the opposite of the sun, rising late and setting early, and stayed just a little above the horizon. It was bizarre. Later on in town I heard someone ask a local, "isn't it hard to get used to all this daylight?" I thought to myself, it depends where you're from; if you're from Alaska it'd be hard to get used to so little summer daylight in the Lower 48!

DAY 6

Today the plan was to move the rest of the gear to 14,200ft camp. We stashed our snowshoes since we would just be using crampons higher up on the mountain. We said goodbye once again to our camp and climbed back up Motorcycle Hill and then Squirrel Hill. Once again Windy Corner was no big deal. We were delighted to see that people had heeded our warnings and nobody had touched the cache. The bamboo house, MIT flag, and bloody snow were still diligently watching over as we walked by. They would need to watch over it another day because the plan was to retrieve the gear the next day. Eric and I strolled into 14,200ft camp first and were stunned by its size. There were probably 50 tents spread all over the place. Even though we had beaten the rush, including our Polish friends, there was no room for us at the inn, so we pretty much had to make our campsite from scratch.

We needed to rest first though. At this point we were currently higher than probably 99.999% of the rest of the country. We were 300 feet below the elevation of Mount Rainier, Mount Whitney, and Mount Elbert, the three tallest mountains in the lower 48. The air was pretty darn thin. But we were only at the base of Denali. We still had over a mile of climbing to go.

As we rested I brought out one of the little toys I had hauled up: a solar charger for my camera battery. I bought a waterproof, durable 7W Powerfilm Rollable solar panel online before I left. The nominal output was 12V. Theoretically, even with 10% efficiency it should have enough juice to charge my battery via the battery's car charger with 12V input. I tried for weeks to test the system in Cambridge, but it was never sunny enough to produce enough current. I was worried I would need to buy another solar panel. But finally, just before the trip, the sun finally shone upon Cambridge and the charger seemed to charge the battery successfully. I decided to bring the system on the mountain but didn't have too much confidence after only one test.

But it turned out the sun was so intense at 14,200ft high up on the glacier that the system worked beautifully and charged the battery successfully. The whole reason I brought the system was to ensure that Eric and I would always be able to take pictures (I also brought two extra batteries and so did Eric). Now we were in business. Woody also brought his own solar charging system that charged an intermediate battery and had success too.

After a little breather it was time to get started digging camp. There was some talk of a chance of snow, so we wanted a bomber campsite to shelter us. Eric and I started sawing away in our own little campsites. With each campsite we got more and more ambitious and demanded a greater level of perfection. This one was going to be awesome, we resolved. We would cut blocks out of the middle of the campsite and pile them up for walls. This way the distance between the top of our tent and the top of our wall—our level of protection against the wind—increased twice as fast than if we had excavated outside camp.

Pretty soon DWD made it up and now we had five construction workers excavating the site. Before long we had two tent spots with roughly 6ft walls along with a sheltered cooking area. Behind our compound we had a plush super-secret latrine area where you could use your CMC without anyone seeing you. Privacy was otherwise scarce at 14,200ft camp.

While we were working on camp we experienced a thing I called "Mountain Magic." When hiking the Appalachian Trail you're lucky if you come across what's called "Trail Magic," which is where nice "Trail Angels," often AT alums, park at road crossings and offer food to hungry hikers. Sometimes you'll discover Trail Magic in the form of coolers with drinks and fruit that Trail Angels leave in the middle of the woods. While we worked on camp a few nice climbers on their way down the mountain were pulling around sleds offering free food. They said they summited early and had extra food they wanted to get rid of so they wouldn't have to carry it down.

It was mutual benefit: they were exhausted and still had 7,000ft to descend and wouldn't need the food anymore; it would just slow them down. We didn't necessarily need the extra food, but it was nice to pick out a few items that were different than what we had brought like cookies and different bars. This wasn't a favor that would be repaid immediately. Hopefully we would also summit early and be able to reciprocate the favor to the next round of climbers on their way up…

As we finished up camp a guide from another expedition on their way down asked if we could do them a favor and watch their tent to make sure it didn't blow over. They would be back with another group of clients the next evening. In exchange we could use the tent for cooking. We gladly obliged. It turned out that the tent was absolutely perfect. It was a huge pyramid-shaped tent with a big pole in the middle. The bottom was dug down about five feet and had a nice circular bench for people to sit around. Most importantly, it enabled us to cook without needing sunglasses and headgear to protect us from the sun. Every day so far we had worn our sunglasses and hats pretty much from the moment we crawled out of the tent in the morning until the moment we crawled back in for bed.

It was a debate between couscous and Ramens this evening. Woody, Eric, and Dan selected a Ramen/couscous combination while Darren and I stuck to couscous. While we were eating a dude knocked on the tent and asked if we were the MIT group. He thanked us profusely for cleaning up his group's little surprise back at 11,600ft camp and gave us a nice bar of premium Toblerone chocolate to show his appreciation. We said thank you and split up the bar as well as we could into five precisely equal portions, but two small chocolate triangles were left over.

All five of us concentrated on the two pieces and contemplated how to split them equally between five people. This could be complicated, we thought; it would be difficult for each of us to get exactly 40% of one piece. We could melt the two pieces down, Dan suggested, and cast them into molds in the snow so we all got exactly one-fifth. Wow, that could be cool, we thought. Or we could mash them up and split the mashed chocolate into fifths. Or maybe a neutral person or middleman could cut them into 40%-sized chunks and unbiasedly distribute them.

We focused our brainpower onto the problem. Surely three mechanical engineers, an aeronautical engineer, and a chemical engineer from MIT could develop a workable solution. Woody went outside to meditate for the solution on the latrine. I stared at Dan. Dan stared at Eric. Eric looked at Darren. Darren looked at the chocolate. We were deadlocked. It was a hung jury. Just about that time Woody ran triumphantly back into the tent and declared he had the solution. He threw me the two tiny chocolates and said, "Matthew should get both of them because he's the one who did the dirty work and threw the CMC bag in the crevasse." Brilliant! Everyone nodded in agreement. I gave one chunk to Eric because he also initially agreed to do the dirty work for the person. We all sighed with relief that that problem had been solved justly.

DAY 7

The next day our plan was to pick up the cache we had buried at 13,500ft. I think we were all feeling a little bit of AMS and dehydration from the day before. We needed a couple of low-key days to recuperate. As we hiked down we noticed that the trail transected a gigantic crevasse via a thinning snowbridge. We could see a giant crack on each side of the trail and it looked like the snowbridge the trail crossed didn't have too many more days. Indeed, our guidebook showed that later on in the season the route changes and goes around the crevasse. I definitely wouldn't want to be last person on the current route, who prompts the change to a different route!

Our bamboo house, MIT flag, and Darren's bloody snow had watched vigilantly over our cache the past couple days. Now it was time to relieve them of their duties. We exhumed our stuff and put it in our empty packs. Before long we finally had all our gear at 14,200ft camp. We were exhausted from the little two-hour workout and the past couple of epic days.

We lounged around camp the rest of the day reading fine literature. Four of us brought books to kill the time while resting and waiting out bad weather. Without a book in my hands keeping me busy I might have been compelled to walk around and waste my energy. I read *Skunk Works,* while Eric read *Seven Summits,* and Dan brushed up on his *Freakonomics.*

Dan's sun canopy made a nice shelter. We lounged about in our down booties beneath overboots. We put on our down jackets for extra warmth and puffiness. There were plenty of cozy spots around camp to dive into a book and immerse ourselves for a few hours in a different world.

DAY 8

I think we all finally felt pretty good today, but our schedules and bodies called for another day of rest. We were planning to haul our gear up to the next camp—17,200ft camp—all in one shot, called a "single carry." The route between the two camps contained the trickiest and steepest terrain of the entire route. We could see the infamous fixed ropes on the steep 55-degree slope high above us. The fixed ropes had been placed there by guiding services and/or the Park Service because it was too icy to self-arrest. So, if you started sliding you'd go all the way to the bottom or end up in a crevasse. Without the fixed lines we would have needed a whole bunch of ice screws for protection. The fixed lines would be safe because we would just clip one of our ascenders onto the rope and slide it up as we climbed. If we fell the ascender would catch and we wouldn't slide more than a couple feet. But from the bottom it looked incredibly steep. It looked like Alaska's "Golden Staircase" from the movie *White Fang*.

"I don't want to have to climb that twice," Darren said. We all agreed. It would be miserable to have to do a double-carry up that steep slope. And descending the lines didn't look like a cakewalk either. Plus, beyond the fixed lines was the also-infamous Washburn's Thumb perched on a knife-edge ridge. This was another shorter set of fixed lines with a 3,000ft slope on either side. From what we had heard and read, most people do indeed double-carry this portion. If we double-carried and cached gear high up on the ridge, we thought, we would want to cache five days of food (10lbs/person), along with some stoves, fuel, and shovels (about 10lbs/person), for a total of only about 20lbs/person.

I said: "If someone told me, 'you can either climb that whole route twice just because you can't handle the extra 20lbs, or you could suck it up and quit being a dang Nancy and do it all in one shot,' I'd opt to avoid the Nanciness." Everyone else nodded their heads in agreement. So the plan was for one epic day tomorrow with packs of probably 75lbs. We needed a rest day to prepare for it.

We lounged about some more in the morning browsing our fine literature while observing the climbers on their way up. A couple of 12-person guided groups were on their way up the fixed lines. It looked absolutely brutal. From our camp far below the people seemed to be standing still. Either they're sissies or it's really steep, or both, we thought. The weather was so beautiful a huge number of people were on their way up; we counted probably 30 people strung along the route.

With such awesome weather prevailing above us and in the forecast, it was a little agonizing to sit around camp and twiddle our thumbs, but the name of the game today was once again patient acclimatization. The reason 14,200ft camp was so massive was that this was the camp where people waited out the weather. Even with just a little wind or snow the trek to 17,200ft camp would be dangerous. We saw a bunch of people headed up in front of us, but it

seemed that even more were behind us. By flying in to the glacier on a weekend we had picked a popular starting day. But by avoiding a double-carry farther down the mountain and with plans for a single-carry tomorrow we had set ourselves up to be slightly ahead of the pack. As more people poured in camp grew throughout the day.

It was time for another boondoggle; our minds could only absorb so much text at this altitude. We decided to head over to the "Edge of the World" for a good view and the chance for cell phone service. Our guidebook said some people can get a signal if they stand close enough to the edge. We roped up and headed out towards the edge of camp. Along with about three other groups with the same idea, we arrived at a rock outcropping above a who-knows-how-many-thousand-foot drop. We prudently placed some pickets, ice axes, and screws in for protection and a few of us whipped out our phones to try to contact that special someone down in the States.

After the crowds had cleared and it became clear that our cell phones wouldn't get service, Darren decided that he needed to inspect the edge a little more closely. Woody built a bomber anchor and belayed Darren out to the top of a rock that you wouldn't want to fall off. I don't think he could even see the bottom because we were above the clouds. When Darren was satisfied, Woody and Dan determined that they needed to take a look as well.

Our Polish friends showed up and also determined that they needed a good look. But they wanted to spice it up a little bit, to make it a little more thrilling. Instead of building an anchor one burly Polish dude crouched down and got a wide stance. That was their anchor. With the five of them still roped together, three stood right behind the burly dude and one smaller woman walked out to the edge. The burly dude had coiled the rope around his torso.He "belayed" the woman out to the threshold of the abyss. We held our breaths because if she fell they were all going downtown. Their system had actually multiplied their individual risks of falling by a factor of five. "Let's get out of here," one of us whispered, "I don't want to see them get killed."

For the past three days I had been itching to make one vital improvement to the aesthetics of our campsite: we really needed an arch. Something like that could really elevate our campsite to a new level. The others concurred. As the others excavated a new kitchen site I took the extra blocks and started building the arch. Toward the top of the arch I started cutting the blocks at a slight angle so they would begin to arch inward. I cut a keystone block and one block for either side. Eric and Darren each placed a block and I dropped in the keystone block. It was kind of amazing to see everything go together like that and reinforce itself, it worked surprisingly well. I granted Woody permission to christen the keystone block as he saw fit. He carved 'MIT' on the keystone to credit our cumulative engineering prowess. We got some compliments from our neighbors.

To make rest day even more exciting we got to see another helicopter landing. While we were on the glacier we had seen the helicopter buzzing overhead nearly every day so far. "I thought that was only for emergencies," I said. The chopper swooped down and in a big cloud of snow touched down near the ranger tent. We got some lessons in helicopter dynamics from Woody. Days later, when we were already off the mountain, we learned the reasons for all the helicopter excitement that week. We heard rumors that a French climber had fallen high up on the mountain and died. The helicopter was retrieving his body.

In another bizarre case, a Polish woman had apparently hiked up to 14,200ft camp and decided she didn't want to go up or walk down. She wanted a helicopter to come pick her up. NPS determined that there was nothing physically wrong with her and she could hike out easily. She refused and hung out for three or four days before her relatives back in Poland had persuaded the Park Service to fly her out. I'm sure it was not a cheap ticket off the mountain.

We tuned into the weather from Lisa the Base Camp Manager on Channel 1 at 8pm that evening and it looked to be beautiful for the next three days: no snow, clouds, or wind. The temp was forecast to stay below zero at 17,200ft with minus15F at the summit. That's about as good as it gets for late May. After the weather came the eagerly-awaited trivia question. "Which animal injures the most hikers each year worldwide?" You're supposed to think "bear" because we're up in Alaska. "Other people," one person answered, "Dogs," another replied. "Dogs is the right answer," Lisa said. That was the extent of our communication with the outside world today.

DAY 9

8am: time for action. We wanted to head out of camp 'early' to beat the guided groups. It would be agonizing to be stuck behind a slower group all the way up the fixed lines. We took only the essential gear and cached the rest. We packed five days of food, our most reliable MSR XGK stoves, a gallon of fuel, camping gear, and mustered our strength for what would be our second-to-last epic climb. We pulled out just ahead of our neighboring guided group and with me and Eric in the lead we struck up the mountain. We had had three solid days to gaze upon the fixed lines and contemplate our destiny. We could see 2,000ft of climbing right in front of us, two-thirds of the day's total. We were hungry for some more altitude. We were psyched.

After about half an hour we were above 14,500ft, and higher than any land in the lower 48 states. The only way you get higher than this in the rest of the country is with an airplane. Pretty soon we passed a group of South American climbers. One of them had collapsed and sat down next to the trail. Eric offered to help, saying the Spanish word for help: "ayuda," but the climber and his buddies waved us off. We slowly inched by. Pretty soon six of his eight companions had abandoned him and kept climbing. The two others kept him company. It must have been the altitude. I guess his companions didn't want to be showed up by five Americans each hauling four times as much weight as them.

Now near the beginning of the pack, Eric and I reached the bottom of the fix lines. It was so steep—supposedly 55 degrees at the steepest part—that snow didn't stick. It was solid blue ice with a few dustings of snow. A giant crevasse would eat you up if you slid the whole way down. A predecessor had dropped a trekking pole a few feet off the trail but it was too dangerous to recover. We couldn't make any mistakes here. First Eric clipped on his ascender, then backed it up with a beaner attached to some independent webbing from his harness. That allowed him to safely transfer his ascender from one section of rope to the other. We remained roped up because it would be too dangerous to unrope with a giant crevasse right below us. And plus, if I fell and my protection failed I would hopefully be saved by Eric's equipment.

Pretty soon it was my turn to attach myself to the fixed rope. Ascenders are pretty cool devices that allow rope to slide through them one way but a cam-shaped piece with teeth jams

the rope if it tries to go in the other direction. The alternative would be to use a prussik, but you would need to re-tie the prussik for each of the ten or so different ropes which would take a while.

It was excruciatingly steep. For 800 vertical feet we climbed up steep, smooth ice without a comfortable place to rest our feet. That section alone gave my feet blisters that persisted for the next week. Our gigantic packs resisted every vertical step. My crampons seemed to just barely stick. I fell twice against the ice and thankfully my ascender caught me immediately. Just getting up from the fall was a monumental feat. Once I had muscled my pack into position I stood in place for a few seconds to catch my breath. Finally, after about ten sections of rope we were at the top of the fixed lines and looked triumphantly down at camp far below. DWD were just starting up the fixed rope in the midst of a traffic jam of other climbers.

We paused for a few seconds to revel in our newfound view. We were currently at 16,200ft, higher than most of the mountains around us. Glaciers stretched out like rivers in every direction. It was down every way we looked, except for one: the West Buttress. We still had a long ways to go. But we were beginning to taste it. Pretty soon Eric and I were at the base of Washburn's Thumb, a gigantic rock outcrop above a steep section, named after the famous cartographer and route pioneer, Bradford Washburn. By now we felt like pros at the fixed lines so we cruised up.

The next part of the route took us over a knife-edge ridge. On the right was a nearly-vertical 2,500ft drop to 14,200ft camp. On the left was a rocky 2,000ft-3,000ft slope onto another glacier. Luckily the Park Service had pounded pickets into the snow along the ridge. Most pickets already had webbing and some even had beaners. With 40m of rope between us we could comfortably clip through one or two pickets at a time. In the longer gaps Eric would place one of our own pickets or ice screws. I guess you could call it "sport mountaineering."

Pretty soon we rounded a little hill and staggered exhaustedly into 17,200ft camp, the final camp before the summit. There were only two partially-made campsites remaining when we arrived so we grabbed them in a hurry. Half the work was already done for us; all we needed to do was dig out the campsites a little more and strengthen the walls. I threw down my pack victoriously. "How do you like them apples?" I yelled.

We were exhausted but there was still plenty of work to be done to make the campsite livable and awesome. We spent the next two hours excavating blocks from our little quarry before DWD arrived. At first we saw Darren appear on top of the last hill. I threw my shovel in the air to indicate it was us. Life moved at half-speed at 17,200ft. There was a little nub of a hill to climb to get to our campsite but it morphed into a small mountain. Darren, Woody, and Dan trudged in quietly. We were all too tired to even speak or congratulate each other.

I could cut only about three blocks before I became exhausted. The air was definitely thin, but I didn't really perceive myself as being out of breath. It felt like there was something mysterious slowing me down. I could rest for a minute and feel fine, but after five short minutes of activity I needed a break. I felt out of shape. Dan had a nifty device that fit over the fingertip and could measure heartrate and blood oxygen saturation. Like little doctors we eagerly tried it

out whenever we got to a new camp. Most everyone's pulse was near 100 bpm with about 88% oxygen saturation. As expected, our oxygen saturation had been decreasing the higher up we went, while our pulse increased to compensate.

Finally, we had two nice tent sites and a kitchen carved out complete with stylish benches and tables. In the meantime probably twenty other climbers had slowly trickled in. Every one of them exhibited the half-speed "17,000ft stagger." Most were too exhausted to say anything and quietly got to work on their campsites. About a third single-carried like us. We were pretty darn lucky to be the first ones in camp because all the latecomers had to start from scratch on new campsites and didn't get walls that were even half as tall as ours.

We were all really happy to have our big down jackets at this camp. In the sun it felt warm, like temps were above freezing, but in the shade of the snow wall our thermometers read minus 5F. But to me it didn't quite feel as chilly as the minus 5F in New Hampshire that we were used to. Maybe that was because around here, unlike New Hampshire, the sun was always shining and the wind was light. But another factor might have been in play: the thinner air. It seems reasonable that air with half the density would conduct and convect your heat away more slowly than sea-level density air, making it feel less cold. That would be an interesting thermodynamics problem…

Another big plus of the lack of darkness was the pleasantness of cooking. In New Hampshire in the winter you're always fighting darkness. Most often on overnight trips in the Whites you get into camp just around dark and have to sit around the stupid stove for hours on end in the darkness melting snow while it gets colder and colder. Here at 17,200ft you could sit for hours and cook in the sunlight. Cooking wasn't faster here, it was just a lot more pleasant. I think that's why we didn't end up needing more than three good stoves the entire trip. In NH we would have used all five stoves.

The forecast predicted good weather for at least the next few days. But we needed a solid rest day to recover and acclimate. It had been a monumental day and we fell asleep rapidly. I had incorrectly assumed it would be our toughest.

DAY 10

I awoke late the next morning to the sound of a jet circling loudly overhead. "What's going on," I wondered. It looked like a Boeing 737 and it seemed really low. "Why's it flying so low and so loudly?" But then I remembered that we were at 17,200ft, about twice as close to the big jet cruising altitude as at sea level. Not to mention there was probably only one-fourth the air between us and the jet. The jet made a giant circle around Denali with a period of 13 minutes. We could see seven huge circular contrails in the sky already.

The other big news item at 17,200ft camp this morning was the number of people attempting the summit. We saw a long line of people headed up the hill outside of camp, on the way up to Denali Pass. The weather looked perfect for it. We hoped it would be just as good for our summit day tomorrow. We saw the line of climbers traversing a steep slope. We wondered

why it was taking them so long. We guessed they were probably placing a lot of protection along the way.

Today was another day for reading fine literature. We settled back into our sun-warmed tents and sleeping bags and looked forward to a day of rest to build up our energy for the planned summit day tomorrow. My book, *Skunk Works*, talked about the secret Lockheed stealth projects back in the 60's and 70's. Eric read about the first guys to climb the Seven Summits. I turned the pages and grimaced from the deep crack developing in my thumb from the dryness. We observed that no matter how good care you took of scrapes, nothing healed at this elevation. I had a few cuts on my hand that hadn't healed at all in the last five days. It's easy to get infections at altitude because wounds never close. I guess our bodies were working so hard they didn't have the resources to devote to healing superficial wounds.

We kept this day low-key and felt good about it. We seemed to be acclimating well and none of us ever had a headache for long. We also maintained our voracious appetites, which can sometimes dwindle at altitude.

We tried to psych ourselves up for the day tomorrow. We heard that some teams take up to 12 hours round-trip to summit. "Why could it take so long," I wondered aloud, "it's only 3,000 vertical feet over 2.5 miles, that's about 30% less distance and elevation than Mount Washington." Altitude was the answer, we figured. But nevertheless we predicted that with light packs we should cruise up the mountain, as we had so far.

We tuned in for the weather for one final confirmation that tomorrow would be the day. "Forecast for the summit…," base camp manager Lisa said "…for tomorrow—[howling]" We heard a bunch of howling on the radio. "What?" Woody said. All we could hear on Channel 1 was a bunch of bizarre howling. The we heard "everyone at base camp is dead…[howling]."

It turned out that some idiot somewhere on the mountain was overpowering the weather transmission from Base Camp. "I'm not going to give the weather because people are howling," Lisa said indignantly. A random person on the mountain broadcasted "hi Lisa, this is the howling person and I'm really sorry, could you please hook us up with the weather?" But then the howling began again. We didn't hear any forecast that night because some jerks wanted us to hear their howling instead. If we had seen the howling people they probably would have gotten tackled by everyone at 17,200ft camp.

"Jerks," Woody said, "tomorrow is the day we need the forecast the most." But we figured that since the forecast from yesterday called for decent weather, with temps around minus 15F at the summit, it probably hadn't changed in the past day. We figured we still had a perfect day of weather to look forward to…

DAY 11

Dawn broke on our summit day. The ranger had advised us to start late, around 10am, when it was a little warmer, and there would still be plenty of sunlight on the way down. Over the years plenty of people had gotten frostbite on summit day. We didn't want to join their ranks.

I knocked on DWD's tent. "Rise and shine, it's show time!" I yelled. We sat around the kitchen and ate our power breakfasts: me with my cereal and powered milk, DWD with their oatmeal, and Eric with his Pop Tarts. We each had our own recipe for success. The rest/acclimation day had paid off yesterday and we were all feeling ready. Months of planning, weeks of physical effort, luck, and the help of our fancy gear had brought us to this spot.

We suited up like soldiers preparing for war. I punched Dan in the shoulder to test his armor. He reciprocated. We were ready. DWD took the lead with me and Eric bringing up the rear. "Ok, move out," Darren said. Like a two-pieced hundred-meter snake we slithered out of camp.

Pretty soon we were reunited with our long-lost Polish friends. They were a bizarre sight to behold. Four of them were tethered about 3ft apart. One small Polish woman walked unroped in a big down jacket without a pack close behind them. She looked like a small lost child. They marched with synchronized footsteps. Darren, in the lead, caught up to the five of them before the first hill. He patiently waited behind them and when it became apparent they wouldn't step aside he began to pass them. The kept marching along.

Finally, they got the message and let us pass. DWD slowly crept by them and then Eric began to pass. But up ahead Darren got to a steep section and needed to go slower. We all slowed down. Then the Polish people suddenly decided to keep going. They were walking in the middle of mine and Eric's rope but tried to ignore it. We crept along but pretty soon Darren got to a steeper slope and needed to place in a picket for protection. No matter, the Polish people kept marching in the middle of our rope. They got to the steep section and decided to forego the fixed pickets altogether.

Things were getting complicated. I was still standing on flat ground at that point twiddling my thumbs and watching the little fiasco unfold in front of me. The problem with the Polish people walking in our rope is that if they fell they could pull us with them. Luckily the five of us were anchored so we wouldn't fall far. On the other hand, if we fell we could dislodge the Polish people and they would start falling without protection to catch them.

The Polish people clearly had no idea what they were doing, as well as no sense of climbing etiquette. They were a walking contradiction. The purpose of being roped together on a steep slope like that is so that you can clip through pickets. That way, if one person falls a picket stops them and the whole team from sliding down the mountain into a crevasse. For goodness sake, the Park Service provided the blasted pickets so you could be safe without needing to carry your own. By tying in so close to each other, the team couldn't even use the NPS-provided pickets, and didn't bring any of their own. Since they were roped only three feet apart, if one of them fell they would immediately bring the other three down with them. Now instead of one person needing to self-arrest all four would need to self-arrest to catch a fall. They had successfully multiplied their chances of falling by a factor of four. We didn't want to have them reducing our own safety.

As I nervously watched ahead while they stepped on and got their crampons tangled up in the rope between Dan and Woody, I could see two other teams of about five people starting to

catch up to us. They were roped in a similarly senseless manner. My sixth sense told me they were also Polish. “Oh great,” I thought, “this is about to get even more interesting.” Pretty soon Darren stopped and let the five original Polish people pass. Our rope was so long that I was still standing stationary on flat ground and starting to get cold. At last we all started to move and things became a little more efficient.

Pretty soon the other five-person group caught up to us. They were roped up about ten feet apart—slightly safer—but didn’t want to use the pickets either. Of course, they were also Polish. Yet another five-person group appeared behind them roped up in a similarly scary manner. “Yes, we’re all Polish,” the guy said to me. “Did you come here together?” I asked. “No, we’re all different groups,” he answered. Darren was placing pickets and clipping in up ahead which explains why we were slower than all the other groups that avoided the pickets. I sat at the back of our 100m snake stationary as Darren wrestled with an obstacle far ahead. I couldn’t really see Darren, let alone hear him. I stood there, stationary, and observed the lead Polish dude shuffling about impatiently. He’s gonna do it, I thought, he’s gonna pass us too.

He cocked his head to the side and asked, “You predict to slip?” with a look of confusion. “No I don’t expect to slip,” I answered, “but since the pickets are already here we might as well use them, it doesn’t take any extra work.” “But your rope, it’s so long,” he commented. “The longer it is,” I answered, “the more pickets you can clip through and the safer you are!”

He turned around to his companions, said something in Polish, and they decided it was time to pass us. I mean, I felt bad that we were standing stationary there on the trail and they had to wait for us, but that’s just how it is on the mountain. It’s not really safe to pass on such a steep slope. He said, “We going to pass, OK?” There was nothing I could do. “Just stay out of our rope,” I said, “stay below it. BELOW IT.” “OK no problem. Bye.” Of course they walked above our rope. Luckily mine and Eric’s rope was comfortably clipped through two pickets. If the Polish dudes fell, they would be in trouble, not us.

It was like the Polish dudes had taken to heart just a single sentence from the Denali climbing book: “you need to be roped up to each other to climb Denali.” They didn’t seem to know *why* they needed to rope up or *how* to do it. The just got the shortest rope they could find and tied themselves to it. Oh, you’re supposed to be 30m apart? Why, you can’t talk to each other when you’re that far apart.

I watched painfully as they slowly trudged past us. Up ahead Eric banged his ice axe against the snow, a universal sign of frustration. We were probably twice as fast as those Polish guys but the five of us clipping into and out of pickets slowed us down significantly. As frustrating as it was though, slowing down a little to clip into some pickets and protect ourselves from falling was pretty important. It was definitely worth it. Through clenched teeth I vowed to pass everyone who had passed us.

After two tough, complicated hours everyone including probably twenty Polish people had reached Denali Pass, at 18,200ft. The route ahead was steep with 2,000ft of climbing but thankfully there wasn’t enough exposure to warrant too many more pickets.

It was apparent that we cruised at different paces. We decided to split ourselves up independently: me/Eric would go in front with DWD behind. Each rope team had enough safety gear to bivy on the mountain: a pot, stove, fuel, food, pad(s), shovel, and sleeping bags. Our packs were way bigger that everyone else's we passed that day but at least we had a decent safety margin. That's the Winter School way. That's the safe way. The plan was for me/Eric to summit and come right back down to meet DWD. If any of them were feeling bad they could tie into our rope and we'd take them down while the others summited. If they were all feeling good, we would hike with them back up to the summit.

As we discussed the plan we began to realize it was actually kind of cold. We each put on almost all our upper layers including our heavy down jackets. On my upper body I had two polypro layers, two fleeces, a shell, and my heavy down jacket. It must have been cold because I climbed in all those layers for the rest of the day and didn't overheat. Thank goodness it stayed sunny with light winds.

All the Polish climbers went by. Now it was our turn. After a little while we officially split up, and Eric and I pushed on ahead. Without the need to place protection we were indeed faster than the Polish groups. We began to pass them. I believe they were surprised. We trudged through the soft snow on the side of the trail and gradually made our way to the front of the pack. Of course it wasn't a race, but it was sure nice not to have to wait behind the Polish teams going way slower than we wanted.

As we climbed we moved slower and slower. We were walking in a slow-motion movie. Every few steps we had to stop, rest our heads on our ice axes, and catch our breaths. Features that seemed so close for our brain doubled in apparent distance for our body. We wanted desperately to keep climbing but an invisible hand was holding us back, weighing us down. The thinning air and our yearning for the summit made us forget about our hunger. We tried to force some food down but couldn't stomach more than a few bars. We tried to drink some water but even in our insulators our bottles had frozen shut. It must have been way colder than it seemed.

We could see the summit ridge on the other side of the Football Field. Just a little bit higher and we'll be on top. We dragged our bodies to the base of that last hill. From a distance it seemed like an insignificant little nub, just a false summit before the peak. But when we climbed a few feet up it turned into a towering obstacle. This was going to be way harder than we expected. Five steps…rest…breathe…five steps…rest…breathe. I didn't want to look down because I knew we hadn't climbed much yet. I didn't want to look up because I knew we still had a long ways to go. I just looked at the footprints in front of me. People had made it up successfully yesterday. We would make it today. It was probably a 500ft hill but it seemed much higher.

We were going to make it. By gosh we were going to make it. Even if I broke my leg at that point I still think I would have made it to the top through sheer willpower. Ugh. My mind was now overpowering my body. So far during the past seven hours of ascent I had two little fruit bars and a few swigs of water. I'm not sure what my muscles were running on; I'm pretty sure I had exhausted most of my body's reserves over the past eleven days. Finally, we made it to the summit ridge.

The summit was in sight beyond a sharp corniced ridge. The Polish people were just starting at the base of the hill. If we didn't blow our lead the summit would be ours alone for a few moments. It was awfully tempting to just throw caution to the wind and dash to the top without placing protection. But we didn't come all this way to fall off the mountain just below the summit. Eric was better at placing pickets, so he went in front. "LET'S DO IT!" I yelled.

We had a few choices which way to go. To our left we had a 500ft crevassed slope down to the Football Field. To our right we had a full five-thousand foot drop to the Ruth glacier. Behind us we had the way we had come. In front we had the summit. I knew which way I was going. The ridge was literally as sharp as a knife—a really dull one I guess. With no flat top it was safer to favor the 500ft drop over the 5,000ft drop so we walked carefully on the left slope. Fortunately, there were a few pickets placed by the Park Service that we could clip through. I guess it was cheaper for them to invest in a few pickets than in a rescue. No helicopter in the world has ever rescued anyone at this altitude.

Ten pickets later we found ourselves on the roof of America. YEEEAHHHH!! I roared at the top of my lungs. I yelled so loud I actually knocked the wind out of myself for five minutes. We were currently the highest people standing on solid ground in all of North America. We saw the Alaska Range unfold beneath us. There were gigantic mountains with awesome glaciers a full *two miles* below us. We could see the Kahiltna Glacier spreading like a frozen river fifty miles away. It was like we were in an airplane. Except here on Denali the awesomeness extended 360 degrees around us and 180 degrees from horizon to horizon. Like few other places in the world we had a full and complete hemisphere of unobstructed view all around us. Nothing was taller. The closest taller mountain was Kanchenjunga on the Chinese/Indian border, 5,400 miles away.

A few years ago I had never expected I would be standing here. I thought, "I guess if we're going to climb the 50 state high points that includes Denali. But Denali's for real mountain climbers, like Everest. It sounds a little too dangerous to me." But here I was. MITOC's Winter School had turned the tide. Eric had turned the tide.

After a couple minutes of pictures and awe it was time for the most important picture. I wanted to give credit to MITOC, the MIT Outing Club. Through five years of Winter School we had gained our foundations in winter hiking and climbing. We started out as freshmen students but now we were the senior leaders, instructing the next generation. Just for the occasion my girlfriend Amanda had made one shirt for me that said "MITOC RULES" and one for Eric that said "DENALI" My idea was that the two of us would stand together with the t-shirts and get a picture on the summit of "MITOC RULES DENALI."

Problem was, with temps of minus 15F and a little breeze it was awfully chilly for a photo in just a t-shirt. I was already starting to feel sick from the altitude and wanted to get down soon. I had thought ahead and just slipped my t-shirt over the top of my down jacket. Eric decided instead to go for the glory. I asked Eric, "where's your Denali t-shirt; Amanda worked so hard on it?" "I'm wearing it," he said. "Oh jeez." After a few minutes of hemming and hawing, Eric decided to go for it. "Now you better take this picture quick Matthew," Eric

warned. Like a bolt of lightning he stripped off all six of his upper layers and I snapped a quick picture of him posing without his shirt. I guess you could say I chickened out.

He extricated the Denali t-shirt and put everything back on. Not often do you wear a t-shirt over a down jacket. We precariously perched my camera on my backpack and clipped it in. We didn't want that camera falling off the mountain. Finally, we got our summit picture.

We had stood for 15 minutes on the roof of North America and needed to get down. I was getting a big headache and was going downhill fast. I had had that same feeling on Mt Shasta years before and knew it was only going to get worse. I needed to get the heck out of there while I still could. Our usual tradition is to get a picture of me jumping and Eric juggling on top of the state high points, but we didn't have time for those rituals now.

We staggered off the summit. Now we were only halfway through summit day. We passed some Polish friends on their way up. They had ditched their packs at the Football Field. Next, we met up with Darren, Woody, and Dan. They were doing awesome and feeling pumped. I wished that I could go back up to the top with them, but I was feeling miserable. We planned to radio in periodically and meet each other back at camp. Eric and I moved out and DWD moved up.

The "towering little mountain" that we had struggled up turned back into a nub of a hill on the descent. With gravity helping us we were probably going four times as fast on the way down. We blazed past all of our other Polish friends on their way up. That day, by our count, 25 people summited: the five of us and twenty Polish climbers. The numbers were similar yesterday and would be about forty tomorrow. That was probably the most successful three-day period on Denali so far this year.

I felt like we were descending a completely different mountain than we had come up. Now we could walk down at a normal pace; someone had just released the "slow motion" button. We cruised to Denali Pass and faced our last major obstacle of the day: the steep side slope. Unfortunately, the wind had blown all day and filled in the trail with soft snow, making it much easier to slip, especially since we were the first ones down. Camp was tantalizingly close; we could see it less than a mile away. It was now 8:30pm, we had already been hiking for eleven hours and were exhausted. We were ready for sleep. Once again it was tempting to throw caution to the wind and make a dash for it without placing protection, we could probably go twice as fast. But I had to remind myself that we didn't come this far just to fall off the mountain on our way down.

I had Eric go in front because I knew he would be more liberal in placing protection. We slowly made our way across the steep slope. About halfway we looked back and saw some Polish friends appear behind us. "You've got to be kidding me if you're not going to place protection on this slope," I said aloud. Luckily, they kept their distance and didn't compromise our own safety. The slope felt so long because we could no longer just put our minds on cruise control and march down. We had to concentrate the whole time on our footing, the rope, and placing pickets. We had to make sure each footstep was solid.

Near the end, when there was no longer a huge crevasse below the slope and we had determined it safe enough to stop placing protection, my tired foot slipped and I began to slide down. Come on, I thought, not when we're this close. I planted my ice axe weakly and slowed down after 40 feet. I was too tired to hike back up so I made a new trail.

We staggered on and dragged ourselves up the last little Heartbreak Hill to camp. Eric immediately plopped down on his pack and held his head in his hands. I laid down in exhaustion onto the snow. It was cold but I didn't feel it. I was zapped. I was drained emptier now than after the Boston Marathon. We had done it. We were back.

Now we awaited DWD's return. We had tried to radio in, but I guess we were out of each other's range. The time was 10:30pm. After 12 hours Eric and I were wiped so we figured DWD would be zombies by the time they showed up. We had each only eaten two bars all day and drank a few sips of water before the bottles had frozen solid, even the ones in insulators deep in our packs. We would have needed a thermos to keep the water liquid all day. We fired up the only stove we had and began the slow process of melting snow. After an hour and a half we had finally thawed our own water bottles and used their contents to create three liters of boiling water. As tempting as it was to drink it ourselves, we decided that since we were feeling OK we would save all the water for the other guys. We had no idea of their condition. We knew they would appreciate hot water. In the meantime, we put the hot water bottles in our jackets for mutual warmth retention.

Next, we began to melt some snow for cooking dinner. We finally heard a crackling transmission from Woody that they had reached Denali Pass. Now that we could see them in the distance we relaxed a little. If they had been in bad shape I don't know if I would have even been strong enough to offer much help. At midnight I began to turn into a zombie myself. We sat there on the cold benches around the stove. The sun had set and it was probably minus 10F. We were too tired to talk. We just looked. I learned to appreciate just how much heat it takes to bring one liter of minus 10F snow all the way to boiling.

Around 12:30am Darren emerged over Heartbreak Hill. Then Woody. And finally Dan. We were all back. The three of them sat down on the benches. Nobody really said anything. We all stared distantly at the stove. "You guys did it, congratulations!" I pounded Darren and Woody on the backs. They sipped from their hot water bottles and we all ate some couscous. Then the three of them went into their tent and fell asleep. Eric and I stayed awake for the next hour creating some water for ourselves and finally got to sleep around 1:30am.

DAY 12

Our bodies were totally shot so we slept in until 11:30am. We weren't in any hurry to get down. We knew that the biggest obstacles ahead of us were Washburn's Thumb, the long fixed ropes, and not punching through lower down on the glacier. After that we would be at Base Camp and within reach of Woody's finish line: a cheeseburger in Talkeetna.

A huge line of people was headed up the mountain for the summit. Darren counted forty people, including what looked like two twelve-person guided groups. I'm glad we weren't

tangled up in all of that. We packed up and headed out. Camp had grown dramatically over the past day; people were probably encouraged to head up by the stellar forecast. DWD went in front with me and Eric bringing up the rear and together we made our way slowly, carefully, down the sharp ridge. Pretty soon our close-roped Polish friends appeared again out of nowhere and blasted by us. They still didn't seem to understand the purpose of the anchors in the snow that we were using.

After Washburn's Thumb it was time for some more fixed rope action. Going down was going to be kind of tricky because ascenders are designed to work while you're going up, not down. We would have to hold the ascenders open while we descended, and if we slipped we would release them and hopefully they would catch the rope. First Dan, then Woody, then Darren, then Eric disappeared over the steep edge. I'm glad we had the ropes to follow because the clouds had rolled in and we could no longer see the bottom. We were descending into a white abyss.

Pretty soon I joined the rest of our group at the bottom of the fixed lines and the clouds broke, giving us a good view of 14,200ft camp. I was amazed. While we were away camp had doubled in size. New campsites had been added all around the edge of town. People were pouring in. This was probably the peak couple of weeks for climbing Denali.

We remembered our cache and realized with disgust that our packs were about to get a lot heavier. "Hey, let's give away some food," Woody said. Dan and Darren excavated the gear and we put all our food that we weren't going to eat into three sleds. Since the weather had been so awesome and enabled us to go fast we had a huge amount of food to spare. Like the ice cream man with his ice cream truck we towed the sleds around camp hollering "FREE FOOD, get your free food here!" People emerged like prairie dogs from their shelters. Most were bashful at first but when we conveyed to them that we really didn't want to carry all this food down they dug in.

We were especially thankful when a guide came out to browse our sleds; he had probably been through this dozens of times before and knew what to grab for his future clients. He grabbed about six pounds of cheese, pounds of oatmeal and crackers, and about six bags of pasta from our sleds. We were delighted. He also grabbed a spare gallon of fuel. Our packs were getting lighter and we were making people happy.

Most of the food was gone in twenty minutes. But we still had a few pesky pounds of pasta. Maybe the Korean team would like it… They didn't speak much English but once it became apparent that we were giving away the food instead of selling it they opened up. "Pasta?" they asked. "Oh yes, pasta, macaroni, very good," we said. "OOHH, macaroni!" We stacked four pounds into their open arms. "Sank you, Sank you!" they said. They bowed deeply and I bowed and with big smiles all around our sleds were basically empty and we were on our way.

We had tentatively planned on spending the night at 14,200ft camp. But Woody's cheeseburger awaiting him in Talkeetna was becoming increasingly more attractive. Even though it was 7pm we felt pretty good and decided to push down to 11,600ft camp and reevaluate. I held my head high as we moved out of camp. People in camp were waiting with uncertainty for their

shot at the summit but we were already victorious and were on our triumphant way down. I thought I could hear trumpets playing in our honor in the distance.

It's not often that you look forward to "flushing the toilet." But for us that meant the chance to stick our nose over a deep crevasse and throw the CMC bag in. We normally steered clear of crevasses and didn't get to look into them. I had a full CMC on my backpack and needed to lighten the load, so I identified a suitable-looking crevasse a little ways off the route and hollered for Eric to stop. He got in self-arrest position in case I fell in. I grabbed the CMC bag and marched toward the lip of the chasm. I pitched the bag in and I'm not sure it ever reached the bottom, the crack was so deep. It might still be falling to this day. We continued on our merry way around Windy Corner which was luckily calm today.

Having the sleds took all the fun out of descending. We tied the sleds onto the rope between us and Eric went in front. My job as the back person was to keep tension in the rope, which meant I was holding the sleds back the whole time, trying to prevent them from crashing into the back of Eric's legs. On the steeper slopes like Squirrel Hill and Motorcycle Hill the weight of the sleds on my harness was so uncomfortable I flipped my sled upside down. That way the duffel bag had so much resistance with the snow that Eric had to work a little to drag it down the hill. I felt pretty clever. On leveler terrain I took Darren's suggestion and tied some extra rope to the nose of the sled, which allowed me to steer it much better and things went much smoother.

Meanwhile, DWD cruised behind us with Darren in front, followed by Woody on skis, and Dan in the back. Woody had skinned most of the way up the mountain on his skis while the rest of us trudged in snowshoes. Now it was time for Woody to reap the rewards of his labor. We enviously watched as Woody snowplowed down.

By 11pm we strolled into 11,600ft camp. It was pretty quiet in town that evening so I hope our excitement at having successfully summited didn't wake anyone up. We still had energy, so we decided to cook some dinner and keep going. Hopefully we could push all the way to Base Camp that night. It also felt nice to finally take off the dang sunglasses and not need to put on sunscreen now that the sun had set. We figured we might as well hike all night and take advantage of the lack of sun and far more pleasant temps. That was the nice part about being this far north in the summer. We scarfed down some sausage and pasta, compliments of Chef Dan, and rolled out sometime after midnight.

DAY 13

Around 1am we saw a bright orange light appear just behind a mountain far down the Kahiltna Glacier in front of us and soon saw the full moon appear. It was a serene time to hike. There was the perfect amount of light. We walked toward the full moon, which over the course of the next few hours rose just a little ways above the horizon and then headed right back down. We met a couple of oncoming hikers. I wasn't sure how to greet them. It was 2:30am. There's "good morning" and "good evening" but it doesn't seem right to say "good night" when people aren't going to bed. I'm not sure they understood English anyhow.

Pretty soon I was out of water. I had miscalculated and needed a liter to get me to Base Camp. Dan graciously whipped out the stove and fired it up. As we sat there we looked up at Denali. The massive mountain towered two vertical miles above us. It looked like one gigantic wall. We were five miles away, so it seemed to flatten out into one monster face. As we sat there we also noticed that there were some new dips in the trail: the snowbridges over the crevasses were thinning. I had heard this was a low-snow year, but I didn't expect the crevasses to open up this early. We knew we had to be careful. Luckily we were hiking at night, so the snow bridges should be stronger. A Polish couple on their way up warned that we better get off the glacier before the sun comes up or it could get "dangerous."

A few miles later we learned what they had been referring to. We were walking through an area thick with postholes from people who had sunk in during the heat of the previous day. Eric tried to step around but as soon as he stepped on virgin snow he sank down up to his waist. Luckily his feet weren't dangling in the thin air of a giant unseen crevasse but still I got ready to self-arrest. Was there a giant crevasse underneath, I wondered. If so, why hadn't he punched through the whole way? We guessed that there probably was a crevasse underneath this big minefield and that maybe the snowbridges were melting faster because they were less dense than the glacier snow. In future minefields we learned to step exactly where other people had stepped and to crawl when necessary in order to avoid plunging through. I wouldn't have wanted to be anywhere near that area in the heat of the afternoon. That snowbridge was probably looking at its final couple of days.

We slogged through five other minefields. It was slow going. Each step you took was a thrill. You wondered if your foot would hold or plunge into blackness. Finally, we reached the bottom of Heartbreak Hill. Actually, in comparison to the other Heartbreak Hills we experienced on different parts of the trip this one seemed to be a piece of cake. We had known about this hill since Day 1 and could mentally prepare for it. The other hills came out of nowhere when we weren't psyched up for them. Step by step we inched our way up. At 7am the pirate flag marking Base Camp's landing strip came into sight. We strolled in triumphantly and threw our packs down victoriously.

My favorite part of the day came when I undid my harness with relish and threw it violently against the ground. I was finally off the rope. Eric and I had been roped up pretty much every day for thirteen days. Wherever I went I had to make sure I didn't step on the dang rope, and make sure it didn't get tangled on anything. We had to go at exactly the same pace. If I needed to go to the bathroom we both had to stop. And I always had to hold that ice axe in case Eric plunged in. Base Camp was safe enough that we could finally detach that umbilical cord and be free. I had me a big old bowl of granola and powdered milk to celebrate.

"What do we do now," I asked Eric, "it's 7am and we've been hiking for eighteen hours straight, we need some rest. But the blazing sun is about to come up and people are waking up in Base Camp. It would be tough to sleep here."

"We fly out," he answered. The glacier planes started flying in around 8am. I really hoped we could get some sleep right after we landed in Talkeetna. While we waited for DWD I said to Eric, "man, I can definitely see how people could get hurt on that mountain. On summit

day if you don't really listen to your body and get down quick you might not be able to walk out. And the temperature wasn't too forgiving even on a good day like we had."

"Yeah," Eric said, "and lower down on the glacier you better hike at night or you're gonna punch through. I don't think many people know that." Pretty soon we saw DWD appear next to the pirate flag at the end of the landing strip. "All right, we did it!" I said.

We organized our trash to show to Lisa and disentangled our sleds. We hoped they would serve the next climbers as well as they had served us. We talked to Lisa and got into the departures queue. It turns out that a twelve-person guided group had gotten there last night and were first on the list for departure with our air carrier, TAT. We noticed at that point that there were actually three "terminals" at the Base Camp landing strip: one for Hudson Air, Talkeetna Air Taxi, and K2 Aviation. Each terminal had its very own unique-colored sled protruding vertically out of the snow. On the sleds were duct-taped the letters H, T, and K. Wow, it was a real official airport. Woody joked, "ok everyone, now you can't take any sharp objects onboard the aircraft." We laughed. Our glacier gear consisted almost entirely of sharp, pointy, dangerous weapons.

Unfortunately, there weren't any planes coming that could take all five of us at once. One of us could fit on the first airplane, one on the second, and then three on the last, Lisa told us. "Who wants to be first?" Woody asked. Nobody wanted to be first. It was like we all wanted to stay on the glacier a little longer. We were scared to return to the uncertainties of civilization. In order to make this completely, 100% fair it needed to be randomly decided. But where do you obtain a random number on a glacier? This could be difficult. We proposed a variety of solutions. Darren suggested making five small sticks, with one shorter than the others. The person drawing the short stick would be It. Blast it, though, it turned out we couldn't find sticks (or any plant life for that matter) on the glacier. We would have to use bamboo wands.

But Woody was concerned this wouldn't be random enough. "What if we had a five-sided die?" I asked. Unfortunately, we couldn't find one of those either. Eric proposed another solution: "How about I just pick a secret number between 1 and 100, everyone else picks a number and whoever's closest is It?" "But what about you?" one of us asked. "If nobody is closer than 20 than I'm It," Eric answered, "the chances should be one-in-five for everyone." But then Eric backed off: "when people pick random numbers they usually pick prime numbers though, like 23 or 17, so it's hard to get truly random."

Woody was uneasy. "That doesn't sound random enough to me, what else can we do?" Eric offered an improved scheme: "I'll pick a number between 1 and 5 and write it in the snow. Everyone else picks a different number and whoever gets it right is It, otherwise I'm It." Most of us nodded our heads that this could work. But Woody was still skeptical: "but like you said, people often pick prime numbers so this still won't be random enough."

We were deadlocked. Nobody wanted to be It. Nobody would back down. We all stood our ground. Pretty soon the first plane landed and started loading up. This was getting urgent. Lisa hollered "ok, MIT, first person." Woody turned to us. "OK, fine, we can do it your way Eric, but I'm still not convinced we're going to achieve true randomness." We all sighed with

relief that the deadlock would end. Eric hastily wrote down a number in the snow behind us. Darren guessed the number correctly, so he was It. He would take the hit. He loaded the plane and took off. Without argument I volunteered to be the next person. My decision wasn't totally random, but I could live with it. At least it meant I would get to change into tennis shoes before Dan, Woody, or Eric.

After one of the most awesome plane rides of my life I was back on the ground. Changing into tennis shoes never felt so good. While we were gone spring had come to the rest of Alaska. For the first time in two weeks I saw trees and animals again. Dan, Woody, and Eric didn't end up flying out until three hours later. In the meantime, I gave the CMCs back to the rangers.

It was Friday and we had finished the climb a full week early. Dan, Woody, and Darren decided they would rather get some work done and give back to their employers a week of vacation that they didn't really have in the first place, so they moved up their flights to fly out of Anchorage tomorrow. Since Eric and I were taking the whole summer off anyhow, we said to each other "how often do you find yourself in Alaska in the summer with a week to kill?" We decided to go backpacking in the northern half of Denali National Park, an area that contained actual wildlife and not as much snow.

After a few showers in the TAT bunkhouse we strolled into downtown Talkeetna for some food. "I bet we could find my cheeseburger in there," Woody said. We walked in to Denali Brewing Company and sat down. The waiter gave us some water. "Wow, you don't even have to melt the snow to get water here!" I observed. We sank our teeth into our best meal in two solid weeks. Dan played around with Woody's phone and suddenly raised his eyebrow in surprise. Woody slowly put down his cheeseburger. "What?" he asked with a full mouth. "Dude, your phone's got a random number generator," Dan said. Woody: "D'oh!"

Trip 2 - Mexico

Mexico
Pico de Orizaba 18,491ft

Author: Eric

Dec 31, 2011 - January 3, 2012

Schedule:

Day 1: Flight to Mexico City, bus to Tlachichuca (8,500ft)
Day 2: 4WD to Piedra Grande Hut (13,800ft), acclimation hike to 15,600ft
Day 3: Rest/bad weather day at Piedra Grande Hut
Day 4: Summit (18,490ft) and 4WD back to Tlachichuca

"You guys are crazy to climb this mountain unguided!" the climber exclaimed to me as he staggered into Piedra Grande Hut, shaking off the layer of ice that coated his entire body. The storm outside had been relentless for the past 16 hours, oscillating between snow, sleet, rain, and most recently the freezing rain that now coated him head to toe.

"We made it halfway up the mountain but could only see 10 feet and our guides told us we had to turn back," he finished. I looked outside at the storm and hoped Matthew and I would have better luck on our summit day.

Dec 31

We had flown in to Mexico City on Saturday afternoon and hit the ground running. After a brief delay at customs explaining that the suspicious bags of white powder we had brought were in fact leche en polvo (powdered milk) and not cocaine, we made it to the Estrella Roja bus terminal to buy two tickets to Puebla.

Public transportation around Mexico City is amazing – there's a bus leaving every 20 minutes to any destination you can imagine, and most cost only a couple dollars. Matthew and I splurged on the first class, direct bus to Puebla (still a good deal at $15 for a 2-hour journey). They gave us complimentary snacks, a drink, had a movie on board, and the seats were more

spacious than a standard American Greyhound bus. On the way we were treated to great views of the 17,000ft mountains Popo and Izta, the second and third tallest mountains in Mexico.

We pulled into Puebla at 6:45pm and needed to catch one more bus to the town of Tlachichuca at the base of Pico de Orizaba. The only problem was, there were over 70 bus gates, each serving at least five cities, but we couldn't find any that said Tlachichuca. I started asking random people if they knew "donde esta el autobus a Tlachichuca?" (Where's the bus to Tlachichuca?), but nobody had any idea. It was as if I started asking people in South Station in Boston how to get to North Groton, New Hampshire.

Even the official ticket-selling people gave conflicting answers on which gate but finally we stumbled across the one (gate 5, for future reference). It was 7:30pm, and the bus was supposed to have left at 7:15pm but was luckily still delayed for some reason. Unfortunately, though, there were over 50 people in line already and we'd heard the bus only had seats for about 40 people.

"There's no way we'll make this bus," Matthew lamented. It was New Year's Eve, and everyone must have been on their way home to celebrate. Gradually the line started creeping forward as people got on the bus, and one official-looking person outside waved over to us to throw our huge backpacks underneath. We were going to make it after all!

Matthew got on first, and when it was my turn I claimed the second-to-last remaining seat. But more and more people kept piling on. It would be standing-room only for them for the two-hour ride. Matthew was near the front and gave up his seat for an older person, but in the back where I was everyone standing was about my age, so I saw no need to relinquish my seat. We pulled out at 7:45pm and made it to the small town of Tlachichuca about two hours later.

A nice girl on the bus showed us how to get to our hostel, and we arrived at the Canchola hostel by 10pm. Even though it was New Year's Eve we were way too tired to stay up until the official stroke of midnight. We figured 10pm Central Time meant midnight Atlantic Time, so we celebrated the New Year with all the people of Eastern Canada and then went promptly to bed.

Jan 1

Tlachichuca

We slept in the next morning and then one of the hostel owners – Maribel – treated us to an authentic Mexican breakfast of tortillas, frijoles, and huevos (eggs). That was just what we needed before attacking Orizaba. With full stomachs we were prepared for the last assisted leg of the journey – the ride up to the Piedra Grande Hut. Tlachichuca was at an elevation of around 8,000ft, and the standard route up Orizaba started at the end of a rough 4WD road, 6,000ft higher up at the Piedra Grande hut.

The Canchola hostel was equipped with at least seven impressive off-road vehicles that looked capable of handling the worst roads Mexico could offer, and at 11am we loaded up into a tough-looking red truck with our driver Jose. Jose didn't speak any English, but I knew enough

Spanish to converse with him a little bit. He estimated he'd driven climbers up to Piedra Grande at least 50 times! But he hadn't made it to the summit himself yet.

As we left Tlachichuca we got our first good look at Orizaba and it was pretty impressive. The top was covered in a smooth dome of snow, ending in some steep cliffs and waterfall ice on the Northwest side. It was hard to believe we were seeing all that snow way down in Mexico, when it still wasn't even jacket weather down in the valley.

The road got worse and worse as we climbed out of the valley, passing by cornfields and through the small village of Hidalgo. At Hidalgo we turned into what looked like a random back alley, but it continued up the mountain as the road changed to dirt. Eventually we caught up to two pickup trucks each with about ten teenagers sitting in the back. I guess this is where the road started getting rough, because Jose got out and flipped some 4WD switch on the front wheels, and we soon saw all the teenagers jump off the back of their truck and start running alongside it. Apparently it couldn't make it up the steep, slippery road with all that extra weight.

Jose had no problem, though, and we soon passed the other trucks when they got as far as they could make it. By about 13,000ft we popped out above treeline, and after a sketchy rocky section requiring every inch of clearance the truck had we pulled up to the famous Piedra Grande Hut.

This wasn't your typical little Appalachian Trail shelter – it was a tough rock building capable of sleeping 60 people, with big glass windows and a solid door that protected it from the elements. It was empty when we arrived, though, so we found a nice quiet-looking corner on the third floor of bunks and deposited our packs. It was completely clear outside, and we could even see the summit of Orizaba. We milled around outside for a while and eventually some climbers started making their way down in the early afternoon.

We first met a guy from the US that was disappointed he'd had to turn back early because his friends had altitude sickness. Then we met a couple from Australia happy to have reached the summit and eager to give us beta about the infamous Labyrinth section. ("Whatever you do don't go right at the labyrinth like we did," they warned). Another climber was hobbling down with a bandaged knee and said he came from Cancun only yesterday (at sea level!) and made it within a few hundred feet of the summit before succumbing to altitude sickness and turning back.

More climbers came down and they almost all warned us to stay left at the labyrinth (a maze of rock, ice, and snow chutes going up the mountain between 15,500ft and 16,000ft). In all we talked to about 15 or so climbers and probably half of them successfully summited, with the rest just turning around early because they hadn't acclimated. This wasn't too much concern for us though: we had given ourselves six full days on the mountain to bag Orizaba, and most people that had failed had tried to acclimate in only one or two days.

By mid-afternoon a couple more trucks pulled up to the hut, one with some tourists looking for snow. They started hiking up the mountain, and we decided to hike up a little ways too to help acclimate (following the climb-high-sleep-lower mantra). The route started following an old aqueduct, and then started ascending some scree and boulders up to the base of the

labyrinth. We weren't really planning to go very far, but kept walking higher and higher until we found ourselves at 15,600ft at the base of the labyrinth. And neither of us even had a headache! We joked about just continuing up to bag the summit right then, but we were still in tennis shoes, and with no ice axes or crampons we probably couldn't make it up the steep glacier.

We scouted out a good route on the *left* side of the labyrinth and noted a few good campsites too if we decided to make a high camp the next day. We then hiked back down to the hut, which by now was packed full of climbers. A group of 17 climbers from Duke University Business School (in North Carolina) had just arrived and were planning to summit the next day. They were really friendly and told us they'd climbed La Malinche (14,600ft) a few days ago to acclimate and were confident their five guides could get them up Orizaba the next day. Matthew and I were skeptical that they would be properly acclimated, but apparently the guides must have approved of their plan.

All the trucks and tourists left by late afternoon, and by about 7pm all the climbers had eaten and were starting to go to sleep. A mountaineer's schedule is almost the opposite of a normal undergrad's schedule – you go to sleep around sunset and get up around midnight to get an alpine start on the mountain. This helps so you can summit and get back down before the afternoon when bad weather tends to come in, and when the sun heats up the snow and ice making climbing conditions more dangerous.

Matthew and I were planning to take another acclimation day the next day anyways, but we still went to bed around 7pm to start shifting our internal clocks to Mountaineer Time.

Jan 2

I had to get up around midnight to go to the bathroom (being well-hydrated helps with acclimation) and I noticed a new dusting of snow on the ground and some snow showers in the air. "This can't be right," I thought, "it's the dry season November to March and, based on everything I've read about Orizaba, it never rains or snows in the dry season." I went back to sleep not too worried, since Matthew and I had enough time to ride out some weather, but I knew the Duke climbers might be in for trouble. They said they'd only given themselves one summit day before they had to fly home.

I heard them get up at 1am and they were all out climbing by 2:30am. Matthew and I rolled out of our sleeping bags at the sane hour of 8am with an honest 13 hours of sleep in the bank for future usage. By now the ground was all white, but the precipitation had changed to freezing rain at our elevation! Not my idea of a fun summit day. We had planned to move camp up to 15,600ft that day, but were certainly content to stay in the hut while it rained outside.

The hut was once again deserted, with only two other climbers (Mark and Joel from the Tennessee/Alabama area), and a local Mexican, Carlos. We mostly just hung out talking and reading, killing time in the hut all day but justifying to each other that we were working hard acclimating.

Around 2pm, Carlos noticed some climbers coming down through the clouds and we all jumped up to see the action. It was still freezing rain outside and the climbers looked miserable. They came inside and were two Duke climbers and one guide. They had gotten half way up the mountain but turned back because of bad weather. I didn't blame them for turning back, but I probably wouldn't have even started in that weather.

Gradually, more Duke climbers came trickling back. Some said they'd even made it within 400 vertical feet of the summit, but the guides had made the call that it was unsafe to continue. Most of the climbers looked so happy to be back in shelter that they didn't really care that they'd missed the summit. That's definitely understandable seeing that they were all completely covered in ice.

Later in the afternoon we saw a Japanese team stagger into the hut, and they had actually summited! They still looked just as miserable as the Duke climbers though. In all we calculated over the past two days roughly 45 climbers had attempted Orizaba and only a third had been successful. That's a pretty low ratio, and probably speaks more to climbers underestimating the mountain than the mountain actually being that difficult.

Matthew and I had meticulously packed our packs ready to head out to high camp at a moment's notice if the storm abated, but by 5pm we accepted the fact that we'd be spending another night in the hut. Carlos said the wind usually came from the south and this was unusual that it was coming in from the east. He couldn't remember a storm like this during the dry season for the past two or three years. Other guides said they thought the storm could last two or three days. That might be painful waiting around, but we still had the time to ride out this storm.

Nevertheless, I planned to go outside every hour starting at midnight to check on the conditions and potentially give the summit a shot that night. None of the Duke people had complained of altitude issues, even though they were at best acclimated to 14,000ft. Matthew and I had spent a few days at 14,000ft now so figured we should be ok too.

Somehow a few trucks made it up the icy road and gave all the Duke climbers rides back to town. Yet again the hut oscillated back to a deserted state, with only me, Matthew, Mark, Joel, and Carlos still around. We all went to bed around 7pm again that night – not because we were tired as much as we knew there wasn't a whole lot more to do when it was dark, and we didn't want to waste our headlamp batteries reading more books.

That night the mice came out in full force. Maybe they had harassed the Duke climbers down on the first floor the previous night, but now they'd graduated to the third floor. I'd stored my food bag right next to me and kept hearing a chewing sound around 8 or 9pm. I finally rolled out of my sleeping bag and hung the bag up from a stray nail in the ceiling and went back to bed. Then at 10pm I was woken again as I felt a small creature ran right across my forehead! This time I got up and went outside for a bathroom break. On the way I saw all kinds of mice running around the floor, trying to get out of my headlamp's light.

Jan 3

Somehow I managed to sleep til around 12:30am, when my alarm went off to check the weather. I didn't have high hopes (since it had still been snowing at 10pm), but amazingly when I got outside I could kind of see the summit! Of course, it looked more like a brief break in the clouds but was possibly a good sign. I told Matthew, Mark, and Joel and we all decided to check again at 2am and see if it improved at all.

At 2am it was completely clear outside above the hut. The cloud line had dropped to below the hut and it was undercast. It was kind of windy, but at least not snowing and Matthew and I decided to go for it. Mark and Joel decided to give themselves one more acclimation day and went back to sleep as Matthew and I packed up.

By 3am we were out the door and climbing up Orizaba. Based on everything we'd read and heard from the guides we should have started no later than 1am to beat the afternoon clouds, but that was assuming a standard 6-10 hour ascent time, which we figured we could still beat. Now we were glad we'd scouted out the way up to the labyrinth, because the trail that had been easy to follow on Sunday was now covered in snow and it was dark out. I led the way, roughly following the path until we got to the base of the Labyrinth. Here we donned the crampons and started heading up to the left. It was steep, but nothing like the 50-degree ice some climbers had said they encountered on the right side. We didn't even take out the ice axes for our route.

We reached the top of the labyrinth at 16,000 feet around 5am and found ourselves at the base of the glacier. I guess technically it was a glacier, but we'd heard the only crevasses on the route were a few inches wide, so we didn't actually need to rope up.

We started climbing straight up with Matthew in the lead, and the wind died down until it was basically calm. At about 17,000ft we finally felt it was steep enough to break out the ice axes. By then it was light enough to not need headlamps anymore. We were starting to feel the altitude now, and measured that we could take between 40-60 steps up the mountain before we'd need a 30-second break to catch our breathes. Luckily, we didn't have headaches (a bad sign of altitude sickness) – we were just short of breath.

By 7:15am we popped out on the rim of the caldera at around 18,000ft and were greeted by the warm sun rising above the clouds to the east. We unfortunately just missed sunrise, but it was still a spectacular view with undercast surrounding most of the mountain.

We rested briefly before continuing around the rim of the caldera to the true summit at 18,490ft. We still felt great, and had enough energy to take our standard fare of summit ritual pictures (jumping, juggling, shirts off). It had only taken 4.5 hours to climb up and we figured probably only a couple more to go down, so why not just enjoy the summit for a few hours? It wasn't even windy, and though our thermometer read just under 0F, we felt pretty warm just sitting in the sun in our down jackets.

As we were eating a snack Matthew saw something moving around and it was a mouse! How would a mouse get all the way up on that snow-covered summit!? It must have hitched a ride in somebody's pack. Matthew felt sorry for it and offered a few granola crumbs, which the mouse gratefully accepted.

After about an hour we decided to just take a nap up there, and actually slept for about 20 minutes. Finally, we got a little bored of hanging out and eventually headed down around 9:30am. Going down was much faster since we didn't need to take those breaks every 40-60 steps, and we made pretty good time. Matthew tried to glissade halfway down, but he had waited too long and by then the snow wasn't steep enough for him to pick up speed.

By the top of the Labyrinth we were getting really hot and took off most of our layers. We were careful to cover up with sunscreen, but I still got a nasty burn on my forehead. We followed our tracks back through the Labyrinth and were surprised to see Mark and Joel at the bottom. They were doing an acclimation hike (a good idea) and were just about to turn around. They thanked us for providing a good set of tracks to follow in that section, and we hiked down mostly together to Piedra Grande.

"Muy rapido, muy rapido, felicidades!" Carlos said, congratulating us on our speedy ascent. I guess he had been able to watch us most of the way from the hut that morning. It was 11am now and we had the rest of the day to rest and relax. Matthew was starting to feel some bad effects from the altitude and tried to get some sleep in the hut, while I wandered around outside talking to Mark and Joel.

We had told our driver to pick us up Wednesday, so were expecting to spend another night in the hut since we'd finished early. The road was covered in snow and we didn't think any vehicle could make it up anyways. Later in the afternoon our suspicions were confirmed as we saw a few Guatemalan climbers walking up the road. They said their car drove them up most of the way but couldn't get past the snow. Later we saw two Americans come up with a mule carrying their packs, and then a few Romanians riding horses up. We didn't feel like hiking down so spread all our stuff back out to prepare for another night in the hut.

Then we heard an engine outside and were astounded to see a big truck carefully making its way up the road, slipping occasionally but eventually reaching the hut. The driver hopped out and asked if there were two climbers there needing a ride back to the Canchola hostel. That was us! But how did he know we'd summited already? All we could figure out was Carlos must have radioed down to tell our hostel the news (even though we hadn't told him where we were staying and he wasn't even affiliated with the people at our hostel).

We gladly packed up our gear and jumped in the truck. Matthew especially felt like the lower altitude would make him feel a lot better. Joaquin Canchola expertly drove us down the treacherous road and two hours later we were safely back at the hostel enjoying another authentic Mexican meal.

Trip 3 – The Lesser Antilles I

Trinidad and Tobago
El Cerro del Aripo 3,084ft

Author: Eric

March 22-23, 2012

"There aren't any rental cars left at all," the woman at the Budget car rental counter said, looking around guiltily.

"But how can that be – I reserved one last week for this day?" I replied in disgust, producing a printout of the Budget car rental confirmation email I had received. That didn't seem to faze her as she went back to talking on her cell phone.

It was doubtful any taxi would take us up the rough La Laja road we needed to drive on to reach our goal – El Cerro del Aripo, the highest mountain in Trinidad and Tobago – and there certainly wouldn't be any other cars on that lonely road to give us a ride. The clock was ticking too – we had given ourselves 24 hours on the ground to bag the summit, but that had already been reduced by three hours when fog delayed our connecting flight out of JFK. Any more delays could certainly jeopardize our chance of success, since we didn't really know if there was a trail or not to the summit, and jungle bushwhacking at night would take a very long time.

"Did she mean no rental cars anywhere, or just from Budget?" Matthew asked me. It wasn't clear so we walked around a little and started talking to another lady.

"Yes, we have a Nissan hatchback for four hundred dollars a day," she replied.

"Four hundred US dollars?!"

"No, Trinidad dollars. The conversion is six to one with US," she replied. Phew, that sounded more reasonable, so I immediately accepted. After some standard paperwork she walked us out to the parking lot and showed us the car.

I had agreed to be the driver today and was already a little nervous. We had meticulously researched every mountain on this trip (six country highpoints in the Caribbean), with trip

reports, driving directions, GPS tracks, and flight and car reservations, but had overlooked one small but important detail: Trinidad (and every other country we planned to visit as it turned out) follows a British driving system where cars drive on the left and the car steering wheel is on the right. I guess there was no way for me to prepare for this back in the US had I known it earlier, but it would still have been nice to know more than 20 minutes in advance.

Luckily I don't drive very often, so you could say I started with a mostly clean slate and didn't have any US-style driving habits ingrained too deeply in my mind.

We were each travelling ultralight – with only a carry-on backpack each – so we threw our gear in the back seat and I took the wheel. After a few confidence-building practice laps around the parking lot I felt brave enough to take on Trinidad's roads, so at 10:45am we pulled out of the airport toward the town of Arima. The first step was to fill up the gas tank. Unlike in the US, in the Caribbean they give you a rental car with a basically empty fuel tank and you're supposed to return it with the same amount of fuel that it started with. Also unlike the US, the gas stations in the Caribbean don't post their fuel prices.

I found a nearby gas station and started filling up, with the goal of getting the tank half full so I could return it approximately empty. Half a tank is at least $20 US right? So 120TT dollars. I kept my eye on the pump gauge but after only 30TT it registered full. Gas was less than one USD per gallon here! I know Venezuela heavily subsidizes its gas prices, and since Trinidad is so close to Venezuela maybe they get subsidized too.

Our next step was the most critical one of the trip – getting to the correct trailhead/bushwhacking start. There's actually very little useful information online about routes up Cerro del Aripo, and I'm pretty sure after quite a few hours of research Matthew and I found absolutely everything. All of that had amounted to one sentence on mountain-forecast.com saying "start at the end of La Laja road," and one reference in a Caribbean hiking guidebook saying the route started past the Aripo caves (which were on the other side of the mountain from La Laja road).

Through a friend of a friend I managed to contact a local hiking guide in Trinidad, but from our correspondence I could only guess he was trying to purposefully be unhelpful so that we would need to hire him as a guide. At one point I emailed him a planned route overlayed on a topo map of what I thought might be a way to the top, and asked if that was the route. His one-line response was "I would guess so". That was less helpful than a simple yes or no!

Finally, Matthew had a breakthrough and found this report from a local field biologist: http://ttfnc.org/photojournals/2011-1.pdf

It looked like we should drive along La Laja road until we saw a scenic waterfall, then walk east along a ridge to the summit, possibly bushwhacking or following a trail. That information would have to be sufficient.

I started driving to Arima as Matthew navigated with our fancy new GPS. We had bought a new one specifically for this trip because there were no GPS topo maps available for the Caribbean, but with this new GPS we could load satellite images taken from online for

navigation. Unfortunately, those didn't tell us which roads were one-way, and it took quite a while to navigate through Arima. Finally, we found the Arima-Blanchisseuse road and headed north. Thick jungle started replacing houses and we started feeling like we were truly a long way from Boston.

"Turn here, this must be La Laja road," Matthew pointed out. The road was completely unmarked and I don't know how we'd have found it without a GPS or a guide. Up to this point the roads had been in decent shape, with only a few potholes here and there, but this road was really rough. There were branches and potholes all over the place, and I had to drive carefully since our car only had about six inches of clearance. We kept climbing higher and higher, passing a couple shacks but mostly pure jungle. We soon crested a ridge and started descending into the Guanapo Valley.

Now came the critical decision – from google maps (the only map source we had), La Laja road extended all the way down to the bottom of the valley. However, a small side road apparently cut north along the top of the ridge. Would we follow the mountain-forecast.com route description to drive to the end of La Laja road? Or go with the field ecologist and take the side road?

It seemed safest to trust the ecologist, so we soon turned left on a little dirt road. We caught glimpses through the trees across the Guanapo valley to what looked like had to be Cerro del Aripo. On this road we got our first glimpse of jungle wildlife too, when a big monitor lizard darted across the road.

We were both keeping our eyes peeled for any sort of waterfall, because this would be our only confirmation that we should start hiking. About a mile in we crossed a small bridge and indeed saw a waterfall, but it didn't quite match the picture in the ecologist's report. We debated back and forth whether this could be the same one. Maybe it's changed over the years from a big flood or something?

The road kept going along the ridge, and we decided as long as it kept this elevation we should keep driving just in case. Soon I rounded a turn and the road got really steep. My wheels started spinning, so I backed up and tried again with no luck. "Looks like we're walking from here," Matthew said. I carefully backed the car up and pulled as far off the side as I could. It was 12:30pm and we had 5.5 hours of daylight left.

Outside the car it felt and looked surprisingly like a July day in Kentucky – temperature in the 80s F, humid, with very similar vegetation. And there was mercifully no mosquito welcoming committee!

We started up the road with a few liters of water, rain jackets, and a little bit of food. Just past the steep hill, after no more than five minutes of walking we saw another waterfall, and this one matched the picture exactly. Finally, we had physical confirmation that all our driving had been in the right direction. The road split here and we took the uphill direction, now following a GPS track Matthew had guessed at from satellite imagery. We passed a few "No Trespassing" signs and "Please Don't Pick the Fruit" signs as we walked past a few shacks and banana trees.

Soon the road entered the woods and turned into 4WD territory, and then to a mere hiking path. It was pretty well-maintained with no blowdowns, so must actually be used occasionally.

We crested a ridge and the trail continued down the other side, but another faint herd-path looked like it continued east along the top of the ridge. This had to be the ecologist's route, and it was consistent with what we'd plotted on the GPS, so we took it.

This path certainly saw less traffic than the previous one, but was easy enough to follow because it always stayed on the top of the ridge. We hiked at a fast pace, knowing we were still a mile or two line-of-sight from the summit and not sure if this path would fizzle out into a bushwhack or not.

Around 2 pm we hit a small clearing with a 1ft-by-1ft concrete block in the middle with the number "98" written on a small piece of metal. We searched around and the trail had indeed disappeared. Could this be the top? "This looks like the summit picture from the ecologist's report, but according to the GPS there's another local maximum 0.5-mile south on the ridge that might be taller," Matthew noted.

I looked at the GPS map and the point we were on and the one south were both enclosed in a 940m contour, but the one south had a larger area enclosed in the contour and thus had a good chance of being taller. However, obviously everyone who took the path we'd taken must have thought our current location was the summit, since the path ended here and there was an official marker here.

"I didn't come all this way to climb the second-tallest mountain in Trinidad and Tobago," I proclaimed. "Let's go climb that other one just to be sure." Matthew reluctantly agreed, and we plunged into the jungle. If anyone reading this tries to repeat our route, definitely bring a machete. Every tree has a million little vines hanging tautly down from its branches to the ground, and each vine acts like a magnet toward your legs. The worst part about the vines is that you can't just power your way forward and break them – they're just too strong. With a machete we could have sliced our way through everything but as it was we had to carefully detangle ourselves each time we encountered the vines.

Another piece of equipment you should bring – Kevlar gloves. Most of the trees are covered in ferocious thorns, so every time we tripped on the vines and flailed our hands out to catch something, we'd get impaled by the dang thorn trees.

Somehow we managed to plow forward, making slow but steady progress. The previous summit had registered 942m on our GPS and at one point Matthew noted a reading of 944m. "Wait a minute," I said. "You're not on solid ground, though. There's 2m of roots and branches below you."

That was another difficulty – solid ground was often hard to find with all the roots and plants. We pushed farther south along the ridge, though, until it felt like we were starting to descend again. Matthew whipped out the GPS and checked again. "948 meters! This is the real roof of Trinidad!" he exclaimed.

Were we the first ones to actually reach the top of Cerro del Aripo? At least we knew that ecologist didn't quite make it, and probably most other people settle for the second tallest point also.

We snapped some victory shots, collected some victory rocks, and started the long bushwhack back. You'd think it would be easier on the return journey, but it seemed like the vines and thorn trees had just gotten more ferocious. Finally, after half an hour we staggered back into the clearing at the false summit. We snapped a few pictures here just in case, and then continued west along the trail. Somehow we lost the trail two or three times on the way back, but managed to re-find it each time. We soon reached the well-maintained trail, and then popped back out at the fruit farms.

"Shh," Matthew said, turning around. I heard the person too, probably a farmer picking fruit. We trod as quietly as we could, remembering the "No Trespassing" sign at the bottom. Luckily the farmer didn't see us, and we soon made it back to the car. It was 5:30pm, and we had 11.5 hours left before our flight to enjoy in Trinidad. We decided the best way to enjoy those hours would be sleeping. Our previous flights had been Boston to JFK 8pm to 9pm, then JFK to Trinidad 4:30am to 9am, with almost no sleep in between. We had anambitious schedule planned for the next four days as well (at least one new country each day), and this might be our only chance for a full night's sleep.

We wouldn't dare stoop to the level of paying to sleep, though. I took the wheel and we started driving back down La Laja Road until we thought we were close to the main road. Then we found a nice wide part to pull off on, with a little farmer's path leading into the woods. I brought a tarp and Matthew brought a bug net and we rigged up a nice little shelter using sticks and paracord. We slept well from 7pm to 2:30am, then got back in the car and drove the 1.5 hours back to the airport.

As usually happens when we rent cars, we'd done something to the car that we hoped the rental agency wouldn't notice. Usually we just scratch the underside from the car bottoming out (which the rental person never notices), but this time I'd accidentally ripped up the underside of the front bumper pretty badly when I was backing down the steep dirt road. It was actually ripped enough to be audibly dragging on the road when I drove. Before the rental person came to inspect it, though, we'd carefully tucked the ripped part under the car so that it would only be visible if you lay down on your back to look underneath the car.

Perhaps it was also a wise choice for us to return the car at 4 am when the rental inspector was the most tired. He came over and seemed to inspect every inch of the car super carefully, but miraculously he didn't notice the broken bumper. He handed us our receipt, and we thankfully walked back to the airport to start the next country of our journey – Grenada.

Grenada
Mount Saint Catherine 2,756ft

Author: Eric

March 23, 2012

"Excuse me, what is the address of your hotel?" the Grenadian immigration officer repeated, looking quizzically down at our immigration card. We had no plans to pay just to sleep in Grenada, so had just written "airport" in the address box on the immigration card. We figured that was better than writing "the woods," which was where we were planning to sleep. Apparently that had turned up some red flags – nobody shows up to a Caribbean island without the intent of sleeping in a hotel.

"We're just planning to stay in the country for less a day – enough time to climb Mount Saint Catherine and drive straight back to the airport," Matthew replied. "We probably won't even have time to sleep."

We both knew we would most likely end up sleeping at the trailhead of Mount Saint Catherine, but thought that might sound even more suspicious because camping might not technically be allowed. Maybe this story would sound better.

The officer turned around to talk to his supervisor, probably saying something like "wait, are they allowed to do that? What do I write in the address box?" Then he turned back around, stamped our passports, and handed them back to us.

"Yes, I've climbed Mt. St. Catherine also," he started. "You should start at the small town of Paraclete. You should hire a guide there because they know the way. You can see the whole island from the summit!"

We thanked him and headed out to pick up a rental car. It was 8am, and we had a full 25 hours before our flight the next morning to St Vincent. I had reserved a car with Archie's Rentals, and we soon found Archie himself just outside the terminal.

"Hello, welcome to Grenada," he said giving me a warm handshake. I gave him my name and started filling out all the paperwork. "Now we'll have to take a short trip to the police office

first, so you can get a local driving permit," he said when I had finished. Matthew and I smiled – we had done our research on this part of the trip.

"I have an international drivers permit," I replied, whipping out the permit triumphantly. "Will that work?" We had invested an hour back in Boston earlier that week to bike over to the AAA office downtown and pay the $15 for an "International Drivers Permit," that was supposedly applicable in over 150 countries, including Grenada.

"Yes, that's just fine," he replied. "Some people don't accept that, but I've looked at the written law and it's allowed here. Just show that to the police if they pull you over." Yes! We'd just saved ourselves at least an hour of hassle in Grenada – definitely worth the hassle back in Boston.

"The keys are in the ignition of that car across the street," he said pointing.

"Wow, you couldn't get by leaving the keys in the car in Boston," Matthew said.

"Well, I bet you'll find every parked car in Grenada unlocked with the keys in the ignition," Archie replied. "It's such a small island; you wouldn't get too far stealing a car."

Our car was a green Suzuki Escudo 4WD jeep – perfect for the roughest roads we might encounter. As in Trinidad the steering wheel was on the right side of the car, so that meant driving would be on the left. I took over driving again since I'd already had so much practice, and since Matthew was the expert at using our new GPS.

The fuel tank this time literally read sub-empty, so after we pulled out of the airport we quickly stopped at the nearest gas station. For some reason they didn't accept VISA here, and we hadn't bothered to get any EC (Eastern Caribbean dollars, the standard currency around there). Luckily, though, they did accept US dollars, and that got us a full tank. Gas here was more on the order of $5 per gallon, so definitely not subsidized by Venezuela.

It's a good thing I'd had a warmup day driving in Trinidad, because the roads in Grenada are terrifying. As if driving on the left isn't scary enough, there are blind turns every couple hundred feet, and the roads are just barely wide enough for two cars to squeeze by each other. And instead of shoulders they have water drainage ditches on the sides that you don't want to get too close to. To make matters worse, we were heading against all the rush hour traffic heading into St George, so every blind turn had an oncoming car whizzing in from the opposite direction.

I took it slowly, with Matthew expertly navigating through all the unmarked roads until we made it out of the city and started climbing into the jungle. Mount St. Catherine was on the opposite side of the island, so we'd get to see most of the country while driving there.

It started raining as we passed through the Grand Etang Forest Reserve, and then we dropped back down to the metropolis of Grenville. Grenada doesn't actually seem that touristy for a Caribbean island: we didn't see a single other white person ("gringo", as we called them down there), and I didn't see any hotels. Maybe we were just in the non-touristy part of the island. I suppose most tourists head for the beaches while we were heading as far from a beach as possible in Grenada.

We turned northwest at Grenville, passing through the unmarked towns of Paradise, Mt Horne, and finally Paraclete. Of course no roads were labeled, but Matthew expertly kept us in the right direction.

Shortly after Paraclete the road turned to two concrete ruts with a gap in the middle. This was where the people in the trip reports we'd read had parked their cars and started walking, but we had a secret weapon – four-wheel-drive. I continued up cautiously as the road got steeper and steeper, until at one point I had the pedal to the metal on the accelerator, but the car wouldn't budge.

"Wait, try flicking this lever from 2WD to 4WD-H," Matthew suggested. I flicked the lever, and presto! The car started moving again! We kept chugging along slowly up the road as it leveled out, and then started climbing even more steeply. I was a little worried because the concrete was covered in wet moss in places, but thought the 4WD could still handle it.

Eventually even this road got so steep that, with pedal to the metal on the accelerator we still weren't budging. "We really need it in 4WD-L," Matthew noted, since we were currently in 4WD-H for high gear. But the lever wouldn't budge anymore. There were operating directions next to the lever, but they were in Japanese so not very helpful. I think they said we needed to switch into park before we could change gears again, but the jeep was already so precarious on that steep slippery road that we didn't dare put it into park. We decided we could take the hit and walk the rest of the way from there.

I backed down and tried to find a place to do a 3-point turn, but as my wheels edged over into the dirt shoulder the whole jeep started slipping down the mountain. I hurriedly turned the wheel hard so we'd slip back onto the concrete, and luckily the wheels caught once they got off the dirt. We drove back down to the base of the steep part and parked the jeep on the side.

"Get your game face on – it's hiking time now," Matthew said. We threw a rain jacket and some water in our backpacks and started up the road. This road would get us to the top of Mount Hope, and from there a trail would lead along a ridge to the summit of Mt St Catherine.

Lucky for us there was some information online about Mt. St. Catherine (unlike Cerro del Aripo in Trinidad), and we were pretty sure we were heading in the right direction. After 10 minutes we reached the end of the road at the huge cell-phone towers on top of Mt Hope. We then started looking around for the start of the trail. I almost started down something that kind of looked like a trail, but then Matthew whipped out a trip report he'd found online that had a picture of the start. "That's definitely not it," he said, looking at the picture. "I bet it's behind that shed over there though."

We walked over to the shed and it exactly matched the picture from the report! Well, it was grey instead of blue, but the paint probably had just worn off over the years. Behind the shed was a trail that looked like it had been freshly cleared of vegetation – yes!

Every report we'd read of Mt. St. Catherine warned of thick vegetation and unimaginable amounts of mud, but maybe we'd gotten lucky and the trail had improved since then? We'd brought zip-off pants and optimistically started out in shorts, since apparently the vegetation was

all cleared. However, that soon changed when we reached a piece of orange surveyor tape that said "End." Now the nice little trail turned into more of a bushwhack, with plants hanging over from both sides so that you couldn't really see your feet. The trail was extremely muddy, as expected, but the worst part was one particularly evil and unfortunately abundant species of plant – razor grass.

We don't have razor grass up in New England, but I'm sure you can guess what it is. It's a grass stalk that's basically an extruded triangle or prism that's razor sharp on all edges. And it's not just sharp like your average corn stalk – razor grass will slice through your skin no matter which direction you contact it in. If you follow this trail, definitely bring a machete and Kevlar gloves, or be prepared with lots of Band-Aids back at the trailhead.

Matthew and I soon put the pant bottoms on to save our legs, but there was nothing we could do about our hands, and they got pretty badly cut. We pushed on, though, and eventually the path left the razor grass and went back into the trees. The mud was pretty annoying – any time the trail descended or ascended we would inevitably slip onto our butts, and when the trail was flat the mud collected in large shoe-sucking pools.

We caught glimpses through the clouds of Mt. St. Catherine and kept pushing on until, at 11:45am we punched through the trees and reached the summit. There was a modest cell-phone tower on top with an electronics room underneath that was humming with the noise of radio traffic. It must have been a repeater station. It seemed weird that all that infrastructure would be on the summit with no road access. More surprising is that workers have to go up there pretty often for maintenance and the trail is still in terrible condition.

One non-fleshy casualty of the razor grass was Matthew's pants – they developed a huge rip in the thigh area that threatened to trip him if his knee poked through on the way down. Somehow he found a canvas bag stuck in a tree near the summit and fashioned a patch out of that (you'll have to see the pictures).

I imagined seeing the whole island from the summit, but we were socked in with clouds so couldn't really see anything. I found some rocks to juggle, and we snapped a few pictures before heading back down.

The return was just as difficult, but this time we knew what razor grass looked like and were able to cautiously avoid most of it. We staggered out from behind the shed by 1:30pm, covered from ankle to thigh in mud and bloodied all over our arms and hands from the razor grass. There was a truck now on the top of the road with a few workers off-loading something. They said hello, but didn't seem interested in talking further so we walked back down to our jeep. We had originally planned to just camp at the base of the trail, but the hike took much less time than we anticipated.

"Why don't we just drive back to the airport and try to hop on an earlier flight to St Vincent?" Matthew suggested. That actually made a lot of sense – we had only given ourselves 11 hours on the ground in St Vincent if we left the next day as planned, but that was a pretty slim safety margin if La Soufriere had any tricks up its sleeve (which in fact it did, as we would find

out). I agreed, so we retraced our route through Paraclete, Grenville, and back to St George, arriving at the airport at 4:30pm. I parked the car in Archie's lot and we walked inside to see what was available.

"We have a 9pm flight tonight to St Vincent," the LIAT representative told us. "And, well, the 3:15pm flight today still hasn't left so if you're quick you might be able to get on that one."

"Absolutely!" we both replied. It was a $50 change fee, but definitely worth it to increase our chances of success on St Vincent. I ran back to the car to pack up our bags, while Matthew took care of paying for the new tickets. As instructed by Archie I just left the keys in the ignition and walked away back to the counter.

Even though we each just had a small backpack, which had made it with no questions on carry-on for the previous two flights, this time the ticket agent said each bag could be a maximum of 15 pounds or would need to be checked. We absolutely didn't want to check anything for fear of it getting lost and delaying us, but were also in a hurry and were willing to do whatever the LIAT people said. They weighed Matthew's bag and said it was too heavy (20 pounds), so had to check it. I secretly took a food bag out of my backpack and hid it out of sight before I put my pack on the scale. It came in at exactly 15 pounds – ha.

Matthew quickly removed a few valuables from his pack, gave the agents the backpack, and we rushed over to security. We got through just in time to catch the flight to St Vincent. I bet not too many tourists are satisfied with a mere 9-hour layover in Grenada, but we accomplished our goal of climbing the highest mountain, and even got to see a large portion of the island by driving around.

We were two-for-two so far with Trinidad and Grenada, and everything had gone exactly as planned. That wouldn't be the case for St Vincent, though, as we would soon find out.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines
Soufriere 4,049ft

Author: Matthew

March 24, 2012

"So tell us about your hike today; which mountain did you guys climb?" The reporter tilted the microphone towards me and the video camera zoomed in. "We climbed to the top of La Soufrière," I replied, not sure whether to look at the reporter or the camera.

Obviously the news team from Saint Vincent and the Grenadines TV (SVGTV) knew full well which mountain we had just climbed – we were standing here at the trailhead for La Soufrière, the highest mountain in this tiny Caribbean island nation. They just wanted to orient viewers at home.

"And how was your hike?" "It wasn't easy I answered." My gaze descended slowly past my bloody, lacerated arms, past the muddy, gruesome gashes on my legs and settled onto my feet. "And you hiked in those?" she asked, referring to the foam crocs (slippers) I was wearing. "I had to because LIAT [the airline] lost my backpack, which had my shoes, pants, food, and rain jacket."

The camera slowly ascended and focused in on my arms. They wanted the viewers on their couches at home to get a good look at the damage inflicted by their country's tallest peak. Oh if they could only know how hard it had been…

GETTING TO SAINT VINCENT

La Soufrière would be country high point number three of the trip for me and Eric. We had just come off successful ascents of Trinidad and Tobago's Cerro del Aripo and Grenada's Mt. St. Catherine the previous two days and were hoping to be three-for-three after St Vincent and the Grenadines. It was Spring Break for us and we wanted to knock off a few country high points, with Barbados, Antigua, and Dominica next on the list.

Just like the other two mountains, hours of internet searching in Cambridge had yielded precious little information about La Soufrière. We knew simply that it started at the "Rabacca" trailhead in the northern part of the island. We also had a GPS track from another hiker but were

uncertain of its accuracy. We realized then that we might have to gather some info from locals when we landed.

The few trip reports we found all said that either "you are required to hire a guide" or "you darn well better hire a guide." But based on Google Maps terrain research the route looked pretty straightforward, so we figured we'd be able to figure things out ourselves without a guide. The only question would be which peak was highest – Google Earth's topo data showed that a few nearby peaks were all within ten feet elevation of each other. To make things even harder, in every single satellite photo (Google Maps, Bing Maps, and Garmin Satellite Imagery) the true summit of La Soufrière was socked in with clouds and thus invisible. We could find no hiker photos of the true summit either. But we just assumed that enough people probably climb the mountain that the true summit and trail would be pretty obvious. (Boy were we wrong about that.)

The original plan had been to sneak in La Soufrière during an eleven-hour window between Grenada and Barbados. We'd fly into St. Vincent 11am, clear customs, pick up a rental car and hit the road, reaching the trailhead at 1pm. We'd finish the (apparently) four-hour hike by 5pm, be back at the airport by 7 pm and have three hours until our 10 pm flight to Barbados. Somehow, though, we managed to finish Mt. St. Catherine in Grenada in record time and miraculously caught an earlier flight to St Vincent, which landed at 5 pm, which meant we'd have an extra three-fourths of a day for La Soufrière. That move would turn out to be crucial to our success.

THE CHECKBOX

The first indication that La Soufrière would not be easily defeated came shortly after we landed. "So where are you guys staying tonight?" the immigration officer asked. "We're on a big hike tomorrow so we'll just sleep in our rental car at the trailhead." On the customs form, in the little box that said "YOUR INTENDED ADDRESS IN ST VINCENT:" we had just written "Airport," figuring it'd be an acceptable response, as it had been in Trinidad and Grenada. We explained the situation.

The immigration officer thought about it for a while, then summoned her superior. "That's fine if you want to camp, but I can't let you into the country without a hotel address on this form," the superior said. "I'd suggest talking to our travel agent over here, she will let you know which hotels were available."

With disdain we walked over to the travel agent. By this point we had the attention of all three of the immigration officers in the entire country. Everyone in the room knew that no matter which hotel room we reserved we wouldn't be staying in a hotel tonight. But they would be satisfied if they could simply check off the box that said they had an address for us.

I talked to one hotel and made quick reservation, then scribbled their address in the correct box. Trying to keep a straight face, the immigration officer looked once more at our immigration forms, then gave a nod of approval. Welcome to Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. "Please proceed to customs next," she said. Which brings us to Snafu #2 of the trip.

OUR FRIENDS AT LIAT

We waited patiently at the conveyor belt as the luggage went around and people claimed their suitcases. Lest the reader overestimates the size of the SVD airport, I'll set the record straight: the baggage claim conveyor belt loop cycle time is about seven seconds. Our flight was one of probably only four that day. There's one immigration officer booth, and I believe that most of the airport staff was napping before we arrived. Before long all of the luggage was claimed, but my backpack was nowhere to be found.

"Dang it," I said to Eric. Earlier we had read online about LIAT's dismal record with lost luggage and had sworn to check no bags during our trip. Our schedule was so tight that we couldn't afford to waste two hours waiting for a bag. Hours earlier in Grenada, however, we had to move very quickly as soon as we arrived at the ticket counter and realized that we had only minutes before the earlier flight departed. The LIAT rep weighed my bag and said it was 20lbs – too heavy for carry-on luggage on these tiny Caribbean planes. Ten of those pounds was probably the mud and swamp water from Mt. St. Catherine that had saturated my shoes and clothes. I had traded out the muddy outfit in favor of my clean clothes and crocs for the flight.

"We're going to have to check this bag," he said. We were in such a hurry to catch the earlier flight that I hastily removed my electronics (GPS, cell phone, and camera) from the backpack and reluctantly handed the backpack over without arguing. The pack contained my ultra-thin sleeping bag, rain jacket, air mattress, bug net shelter, international driver's permit, and sunscreen. I remember thinking, "Wow, I'll be in trouble if they lose that bag. I can't hike in the outfit I'm wearing. But there's no way they'd lose my backpack." Little did I know that the bag also contained my glasses, contact solution, spare contacts, Android phone, food, and the precious route descriptions which we had spent countless hours compiling.

Well lo and behold we were here in Kingstown, St. Vincent and the backpack was nowhere to be found. "Crap," I said. We headed straight over to the LIAT ticket counter to sort things out. They said the next flight wouldn't arrive for another three hours. We weighed our options. "Is there any place in town where I could buy some shoes, pants, and contact solution? We're hiking up La Soufrière tomorrow and would like to leave tonight." I didn't want to be bushwhacking through no Caribbean jungle wearing little more than beach attire. "No, I'm sorry" the LIAT rep replied, "Everything closes early here on Friday night. The stores won't open again until Monday."

"Crap." Eric and I began to deliberate. We could either 1) wait three hours until the next flight –but what's the likelihood my backpack will be on that one? Or 2) stay in a hotel tonight and see if we can find some store in the morning to buy shoes or 3) hit the road tonight and suck it up tomorrow without long pants, shoes, or a rest for my weary eyes.

We didn't want to blow our lead. "When the bag arrives," I said, "please hold it at the front desk and we'll pick it up tomorrow. We'd like to start hiking tonight." "As you wish," she replied. "I hope you enjoy your time here in St. Vincent and this incident doesn't put a damper on your hike to La Soufrière."

With frustration we stormed out of the airport. Well at least once we get the rental car things will be in our hands, I remember thinking. I can tolerate one night without taking out my contacts, along with some light bush whacking with less-than-ideal footwear, if it means that we'll be able to finish this mountain. I mean, the backpack will surely arrive before we leave tomorrow night, right? We walked over to the Avis parking lot to pick up our rental car, which brings us to Snafu #3.

OUR FRIEND MR. CURTIS

Our actual rental car reservation was for the following day at 11am, but since we'd read that Avis was open until 9pm and there seemed to be quite a few cars in the parking lot, we figured we'd walk over there and easily pick one up early. We knocked on the door to the office. No answer. Wait a few minutes, knock again, and still no answer. Hmm. "This isn't looking good," I said, "let's call one of those numbers written on the Avis sign." But in order to use a payphone I'd first need some St. Vincent cash.

I walked over to some taxi drivers at the airport. "Do you know where I could exchange some currency?" I asked. "Sorry," one man answered, "the banks close early on Fridays, you'll have to wait until Monday, what's the problem mon?" We were starting to notice a theme here. "Here's the situation," I said, "we'd like to rent a car from Avis, and they're supposed to be open now, but there's nobody in the office."

One taxi driver, who later introduced himself as Peech, stepped forward. "I know the owner of Avis, let's give him a call." He dialed the numbers on his phone, but still no answer. "Well I know where he lives; I can give you a ride over there." We hopped into his taxi and sped off into the hills above Kingstown. "This is Cane Gardens," Peech said, "it's where all the rich people live." We continued climbing up the hill until we arrived at a car dealership. "That's Curtis right there, he owns Avis, catch him quick." Curtis had just opened his car door and was getting ready to leave when we approached him.

With a smile, he said "You're just in time, come in here and I'll get you a car." Turns out Curtis owns a car dealership too. We stepped into his office and I immediately had a little uneasy feeling about Mr. Curtis. It was hard to put my finger on it, but he and his employees seemed a little bit slick. Maybe it just came from being a used car salesman, I thought. I tried to push it out of my mind. We had been lucky to catch him before he left for the evening.

The paperwork went smoothly, especially because Eric already had already gotten an International Drivers Permit from AAA in Boston, which meant that we wouldn't need to pay a visit to the already-closed Kingstown Police Station for a local permit. "We've got a four-door Suzuki jeep for you," he said as he showed us to the door. Perfect! We thought. We wouldn't need to worry about rough roads with that vehicle. "And in St. Vincent we drive on the …" Curtis said. "Left," Eric responded. The past few days Eric had had a decent bit of experience with left-side-driving so he figured that he could handle St Vincent too. With a grin Curtis waved us goodbye. But there was something subtle in his grin that made me feel uneasy.

Somehow Curtis had managed to provide us with fuel tank that read sub-empty so we knew we'd have to gas up ASAP before the two-hour drive to the trailhead. We stopped at Shell where I picked up some ice cream then made another stop to get some spoons at a local restaurant. I triumphantly returned to the car with the plastic spoons. With a half-gallon of ice cream, we were equipped for the journey ahead. Eric inserted the keys into the ignition, which brought us to Snafu #4 for the trip.

THANK YOU MR. PEECH

Eric rotated the keys but the car would not respond. "Uh that's not good," he said. Try again. We could hear the spinning of what we figured was the starter motor, but the engine wouldn't start. Soon the starter stopped spinning and the car was silent. "Uh-oh, that probably means the battery is dead," I said. We waited another few minutes and tried again. Nothing. "Let's go talk to Peech, see what we can do," I said.

Once again we walked down the little hill to the airport and consulted our friend Mr. Peech. He tried dialing all the phone numbers for Curtis, the car's owner, but couldn't get through. We also tried the number on top of the rental agreement, which should theoretically get you through to a person 24 hours a day in case of emergency. Nothing. "Let's go to Cane Gardens and see if we can catch him," Peech said. Once again we hopped into his taxi and sped up the hill. But when we arrived at Curtis's car dealership it was deserted. "OK, let's drive to Curtis's house." We drove a little farther down the road to his house but still it was also empty. "OK, let's drive to his pharmacy – he owns a pharmacy downtown." But big surprise the Curtis Lewis Pharmacy was also closed. We tried the phone numbers once again. Nothing. Our options were running low.

"Where's this car parked? Let's take a look at it," Peech said. We drove over and he parked his taxi van alongside our Suzuki. He popped the hood and looked at the battery. He listened while we tried to start it. "Yes, your battery is dead," he said. He grabbed some jumper cables from his car. We stepped back while he went to work. By this time a small crowd had gathered around us, offering suggestions. We were the entertainment in Kingstown for the night.

He started his van, we started our jeep, and after about ten minutes of work we finally had a car that would start. "Thank you so much Peech!" we said. "Keep in mind though that this doesn't fix the problem," he replied. "We can't be sure that the battery will start tomorrow morning. You don't want to find yourselves at Rabacca with a car that won't start. It's a lonely place and not many people go there, so it would be hard to find help. I really think you should stay in town tonight and talk to Curtis in the morning." He could tell that we weren't too excited about doing that.

"If you really insist on starting your hike tonight, I think the only option for you would be to drive towards Rabacca, but stop along the main road at the turnoff for the trailhead. Park the car there. You'll have to hike about forty minutes up the road to the trailhead, but you guys are strong; you'll probably be faster. And if the car doesn't start in the morning you'll be along the main road and you can flag someone down to jump start your car. People are nice here, someone will help you."

Eric and I were surprised. Peech seemed to sense our determination to get started tonight. I looked at Eric. “Ok, we’ll do that,” Eric said. “Just be sure you don’t use the air conditioning or the radio,” Peech warned, “You don’t want to drain that battery.” And with a hearty handshake and generous tip we bid farewell to our little welcoming party and pit crew and headed north.

THE MACHETE DUDE

“So, basically, what we gained this evening was simply the knowledge that the car might not start in the morning,” I said. We wound through the dark, curving, mountainous roads and after two hours finally arrived at a road sign that read “<- La Soufrière Trail.” “It must be a forty-minute hike from here to the trailhead I guess,” I said.

With the car still running we contemplated our options once again. It was like we were in the movie Speed where the bus couldn’t go slower than 55mph or it would blow up. It was ten pm and we were both completely exhausted. We had woken up that morning at 2:30am in Trinidad, flown to Grenada, climbed the Grenada high point, and then flown here. It was exceedingly tempting to just drive to the trailhead and park there. But we also wanted to be able to get a jump start in the morning if our car wouldn’t start.

“How about this,” I proposed, “we drive up to the trailhead tonight, drop off our water and camping gear. Then we drive back down and park here. Then we hike back up that road with minimal gear.” I didn’t have a backpack and didn’t want to have to carry a ten-pound water jug in my hand. “Ok, that works,” Eric answered.

We turned onto the (indeed very lonely) little road and headed up the hills and into the darkness. We passed through what appeared to be banana plantations with small mysterious little cinder block homes. About half-way up we had to slam on the brakes as a shirtless dude wielding a machete leaped out of the road. Apparently he had been sleeping in the road after a long day of work. I dreaded the point during our hike up that we’d have to pass that dude again without the protection of our car.

At long last we pulled into a parking lot that proclaimed itself as the trailhead for La Soufrière. We ditched our heavy stuff in the bushes and reluctantly dragged ourselves back into the car. We paused for a moment. “Man, it’s awfully tempting to just turn the car off right now, isn’t it?” I said. “Yep,” Eric answered. We sat there with the car running, staring off into the jungle. With a sigh, we came back to reality. “Well we don’t want to be stuck here, do we?” I said. “Let’s get this over with.”

In twenty minutes we were back at the bottom and with some momentary hesitation we finally turned the car off. We grabbed what few possessions we had left and began our painful trudge up that same road by the light of headlamp. I should have enjoyed the pleasant little night hike through the palm trees, with the sound of the crashing waves of the Atlantic in the distance, but the thought of the machete-wielding dude made me uneasy. If that dude had nefarious intentions, we were sitting ducks. He could be waiting in the bushes, ready to spring upon us. I picked up a small palm frond and held it tightly in my hand. It obviously wouldn’t be any match

for a machete, but at least it had the shape of one, so perhaps in the darkness the machete dude might mistakenly think we were armed.

Halfway up the road a quick flash caught the corner of my eye. I immediately froze, clenching the palm frond tightly. All my muscles tensed. I waited for the sound of footsteps and the whoosh of a machete. Silence. I slowly turned my gaze in the direction of the flash and saw two big eyes looking at me from ten feet away, illuminated by the reflection of my headlamp. Gulp. But something in the eyes seemed a little strange. They were spaced awfully wide for a person. No, that can't be a person, I thought. Soon I could see the outline of some stubby horns and I knew what type of creature I was facing: it was the abominable jungle cow.

"Why'd you stop," Eric asked. "Well there's a cow here," I answered with a voluminous sigh of relief. We nodded to the cow and kept walking.

A CONCRETE MATTRESS

At last we arrived at the La Soufrière trailhead at 11:15pm. Now things were once again under our control. It was us versus the mountain, with no people or machines between us. But before the big battle we needed a good rest. In Trinidad and Grenada, with such tiny backpacks our sleeping gear had already been absolutely minimal. Now, without my backpack, our gear was as bare-bones as you could get. But with a rainless sky and air temperature of 65F our margin for error was generously large. We found a nice little picnic pavilion and rolled out our tarp onto the concrete. I wrapped up in Eric's spare poncho for warmth and fell asleep within minutes. The hard concrete wasn't exactly comfortable, but we were just so dang tired that it didn't matter.

THE CLIMB

Now we've finally arrived at part of this story where we climb the mountain. We knew that we had a long day ahead of us, we just didn't know at the time how long it would be. So we got up with the rest of the avian jungle wildlife at 6:30am and scarfed down a quick breakfast of bagels and granola bars. We stashed in the bushes what little spare gear we had and hit the trail. It was so hot and humid that we took off our shirts within minutes. I felt like I was missing something. My only gear consisted of the thin swimming trunks and crocs I was wearing along with a little black stuff sack that contained my GPS, camera, and cell phone. It was the most ultra-light I had ever hiked. Meanwhile Eric carried a little food and water in his backpack.

We'd read a trip report from some Coloradans that the hike had taken them just two hours round-trip. We already knew that our hike would be longer because we figured that they probably stopped just short of the actual high point, which of course was our destination. La Soufrière is a huge volcano that forms the entire northern half of the island. At the top of the volcano is a massive one-mile wide caldera. Meanwhile, our research showed that the La Soufrière's highest point was located about a half-mile from the crater rim. For our intended route, on the GPS we'd simply drawn a straight line from the crater to the summit and assumed that the going would be easy.

As we climbed, the trees became shorter and shorter and the fog grew denser. After an hour the GPS indicated we were nearing the crater rim. The trail began to level out and suddenly I noticed that fifty feet in front of me the trail vanished into fog. I got the impression that we were close to the edge of the world. As I drew closer to the edge I inched forward more slowly and all of a sudden a thousand foot drop-off materialized. I gasped at the enormity of the sight below me.

LA SOUFRIÈRE

In front of and below us was La Soufrière's gaping, smoldering, mile wide caldera. I turned my head left and right as far as it would go and the caldera was so gigantic that I still couldn't see the whole thing. From the crater rim it was a thousand-foot drop to the crater's floor and it appeared that there was no easy way down. In the bottom of the crater was an annular lush valley surrounding a gigantic, black, smoldering pile of rock that was probably only a few decades old (the last eruption was in 1979). There was even a small lake at the bottom. We could only speculate how the water drained out.

We had read descriptions and seen photos of this crater but no 2D representation could justly capture the magnitude and magnificence of the scene before us. We guessed now why so many people get to this point and turn around, claiming they've been to the "summit" of La Soufrière: 1) the view at this point is probably the best view of the mountain you'll get on a cloudy day and 2) lots of people are probably acrophobic and don't want to hike any farther.

We could also begin to guess why everyone else hires a guide. We had heard that there was only one "easy" way down into the crater, and you reached it by hiking clockwise along the crater from our location. We'd heard that the route down was steep but there's a thick rope you can grab onto. If you're afraid of heights the prospect of walking ten feet away from a thousand foot drop might be intimidating. Also, we figured that the descent point on the ridge might be hard to find. So it might indeed be reasonable to hire a guide. But not for us. We didn't need a guide to tell us to stay away from the edge, and we could probably find the rope on our own.

For now, we would stick with the plan to hit the high point first, then on the way back maybe we'd try to find the way down into the crater if time permitted. It was just 8am so we figured we still had plenty of time. According to the GPS we were just 1.3 miles' line-of-sight (LOS) from the summit. Piece of cake, right? The trees seemed short enough that even if there wasn't a trail the bushwhacking would probably be no big deal.

TO THE SUMMIT

We turned right and headed counterclockwise along the crater rim towards the high point. The trail gradually petered out and brought us to the shore of a small and unexpected lake. "That's weird, this wasn't visible in any satellite photo," I said. We had gotten a brand new Garmin GPS two weeks earlier that was capable of storing satellite photos and even our own custom maps. So in most places (in the US as we later found out) the resolution is so good that you can zoom in and see individual trees. But as we zoomed in our location it was completely

white – all clouds. “I bet so few people are interested in satellite photos of this area and it’s always so cloudy that nobody’s able to get a clear shot of this mountain,” I said.

We skirted the lake and walked up to a low rise in the bushy hills. “Hmm, there should be a big old mountain behind those clouds,” I said. The GPS indicated we were just a half-mile LOS from the top. We watched as the clouds wafted through the high plateau. Soon we noticed a small gap coming and looked intently towards the mountain, ready to take photos.

The cloud gap passed slowly by, revealing the giant sleeping behind it. Our jaws dropped. For a moment we were speechless. “Uh, well one thing I can tell you is that we ain’t going straight up that,” I said. From this side the mountain appeared as an insurmountable fortress. As we gazed from bottom to top the steep jungle slopes blended into dark, sheer volcanic cliffs. As our astonishment abated we got to work. We knew this could potentially be one of our only clear views of the mountain that day. This could be our only chance to plan a route, so we had better get a good look at that mountain, we thought.

We snapped a bunch of photos then began our discussion. It was obvious that from here on out that there wouldn’t be any trail. We were completely on our own. It was at this point that our excursion transformed from a simple day hike into a full-fledged mountain adventure. It was actually kind of thrilling. For a moment we felt like we were back in the California Sierra Nevada, planning a route up some 14’er. Here in St. Vincent, however, there wasn’t snow and talus to navigate around, it was jungle and waterfalls.

“See that little gulley there, next to that cliff and above those trees?” I said to Eric, “I think that’ll go.” “I don’t know,” he replied, “that’s pretty steep, what about down there?” “I don’t think so, those trees are probably pretty dense,” I answered. After some back and forth we soon we had a plan worked out. There weren’t too many features to refer to, so it wasn’t even clear that we were both talking about the same route, but with mixed feelings of excitement and uncertainty we set out towards the first obstacle.

THE BARBED WIRE JUNGLE

We were entering uncharted territory. We could very well be the first people who’ve ever taken this route, we thought. Judging by the tree top heights the terrain seemed pretty flat so we made a beeline toward the beginning of the route. We began walking through dense waist-deep bushes, unable see what our feet were stepping on. After just a few steps though, to my horror the ground all of a sudden vanished from below me. I plunged into the bushes, falling about six feet before coming to a stop in some dense trees. I looked back and realized that I had just stepped into a little gulley. I yelled back to Eric, cautioning him to watch out for this trap.

I extricated myself from the bushes, thankful that at least I had my shirt on. My legs and arms were already getting cut up and I worried about what kinds of interesting little jungle plants awaited us higher up (like Grenada’s razor grass). We realized that this was going to be much harder that we thought. Soon we were thrashing through super-dense bushes, not sure if we were stepping onto rock or branch or thin air.

"Bushwhacking" is a relative term. There's the easy kind of bushwhacking, where the trees are spread apart, there's no undergrowth, and you can walk without worrying about your eye getting poked out or your clothes or skin getting shredded. You can see many feet in front of you and can easily plan your route. It's basically like hiking on a trail. I'll call that Grade 1 bushwhacking. On the other end of the spectrum is Grade 10 bushwhacking, à La Soufrière. It can sort of be likened to swimming. Sometimes you're standing, other times you're on your belly, slithering through trees, not sure how far you are above the ground. It's dark, wet, and you're always getting tangled up with the fallen trees and dead bushes. You need to protect your eyes from branches with sunglasses, but with all the exertion and moisture they fog up quickly and you can see almost nothing.

You come out of a dense thicket with uncountable slashes on your legs, and you recall feeling so many sharp pricks that it's impossible to remember where each slash came from. It's a veritable jungle of barbed wire. You're worried that you might have to turn around, and your anxiety causes you to stop taking pictures. These are the moments that don't get documented, the moments where you're giving it 100% but still not sure that it will be good enough. You measure your speed in feet per minute, not miles per hour.

Once in a while we could crawl on top of some bushes and get a bit of a view where we were headed. We decided to aim for a gully where maybe the trees wouldn't be growing so thickly. As we looked back on the route we had taken we realized that just by looking at the treetop heights the route appeared flat, when in reality the terrain was super rugged. The vegetation had effectively smoothed out the topography. Once in a while I'd take a step and realize that I was barefoot, that one of my crocs had fallen off. I'd dig desperately through the trees and finally locate it. This would definitely not be the place to lose your footwear. Each time I would reaffirm my condemnation of LIAT's baggage handling.

Unfortunately, the gulley presented its own challenges. We'd be walking up rocks and then would suddenly encounter a ten-foot waterfall and have to start bushwhacking again. It was excruciatingly slow going. But inch by inch we climbed.

THE CRUX

Eventually a big black rock emerged above us, and this was our cue to head right. I wasn't sure, but I think I remembered that the apparent crux – the hardest part of the route – was nearby. I rounded the corner and there it was – the slope that we had been worried about. The thick jungle grass couldn't mask its verticality. From afar it hadn't seemed so vertical; we figured that if it had grass it must still be a gentle slope. But from up close it presented quite the obstacle. I began to second-guess our path. Had we turned too early? Maybe we should have followed that gulley a little farther? Maybe it's less steep farther around that corner? Or maybe we should go back down that gulley and over to the easier route we had seen?

But at this point the prospect of turning back, of giving up a single one of our hard-earned inches, was as repugnant as the smell of my filthy jungle-mud/swamp-water pants. No, we weren't turning around at this point. If we can just make it up this steep pitch, the promised land of easy terrain will be just beyond it, right?

With my muscles twitching I approached the wall. My adrenaline was pumping and I had somehow become a rock climber. From this perspective it was pretty obvious that we had fifteen feet of solid vertical climbing. I grasped the first tuft of thick jungle grass as close to the roots as I could get and pulled myself up. As I climbed, each grass clump started out as a handhold and then became a foothold. With a firm tug I tested each plant before entrusting any weight to it, but still I felt that at any moment one of the clumps would pull out of the thin soil. Fortunately, the trees and bushes and grass below were so dense that a fall probably wouldn't be a big deal, just a thrill and an inconvenience. Nevertheless, I clenched the grass tightly. I dug my hand in as deep as it would go and tried to grab each clump by the deepest roots.

With my pulse sky high and fight-or-flight response activated I wriggled up through the grass and with a final pull I was at the top. Even though the slope above was still probably a 45 degree angle it felt pretty darn flat. With plenty of branches to hold onto I anchored myself in place and waited for Eric. "I'm at the top!" I yelled, "And it looks like this route will go!"

Finally, Eric emerged over the lip and we paused to catch our breaths. I tried to peek over the pitch we had just climbed but couldn't see over the grass. We had just free-soloed a fifteen-foot vertical pitch by holding onto jungle grass. We looked back on our route in the valley below. It had taken us an hour to cover just a quarter-mile. But at this point we felt like we could practically spit on the summit because the ridge was in sight and it didn't look like there was any funny business in between. "Well I can tell you one thing," Eric said, "We're not taking the same route down."

THE SUMMIT RIDGE

After another five minutes of moderate Grade 5 bushwhacking we had gained the ridge. To our amazement (and delight) we discovered an overgrown user trail along the ridge. Normally we'd have been disappointed to see this sign of man so near the top after so much of our own hard work. Normally we'd be disappointed that someone else had been here before. But today our only emotion was relief. This meant that not only was there a trail to the top, but moreover there was a trail down. If the trail was followable at the summit it'd certainly be followable farther down the mountain. Who knows where it led but it's surely be easier and safer than the route we had taken up.

With victory in sight we turned right on the ridge and headed east. As I mentioned before, there had been some uncertainty in the actual summit location and elevation. Several points along the ridge all seemed to be within a few feet of elevation of each other [reference: Google Earth]. But with a trail to follow we'd have the liberty of visiting all the candidate summits and could determine which one was the actual high point.

We reached the top of the first local maximum (4032ft) but it was obvious that the next one was taller. When we gained the second summit (4049ft) we noticed that the trail fizzled out. Now it certainly seemed that this was tallest but we couldn't be sure about the third summit. To make it official, we headed towards the third summit. After some Grade 4 bushwhacking we reached the third local maximum, elevation 4007ft. Beyond the third summit the ridge kept dropping. So we turned around, backtracked to the second local maximum (well I guess you

could call it a global maximum then, for the country at least), and found ourselves, for the second time, on the roof of St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

At that moment, if you don't count people in airplanes, and you assume that nobody was hiking up the high points in Guadeloupe, Martinique, and Dominica, the closest higher people were probably in Venezuela, 275 miles away. Not quite as good as on Denali, we thought, but pretty good nonetheless.

Now it was time for the summit rituals. We had a well-established routine on the state high points: photos of both of us with raised arms, juggling photos, jumping photos, and the collection of a small rock; but for country high points the customs had not yet been established. In addition to the photos we made it the new ritual of scarfing down some food on the summit because we were pretty darn exhausted. Surprisingly the time was only 10:57am, an elapsed time of just 3h57m. It felt like it was already late afternoon.

We lingered on top for a few more minutes, but surrounded by the foggy, viewless sky and with a lingering cloud of uncertainty about the route ahead of us we decided it was time to go. We couldn't find a summit rock so I grabbed a little stick instead.

CRUISE CONTROL

Now the tide was beginning to reverse. Before, we had been climbing through the brush, working against gravity, defying the trees that tried to hold us back, getting farther away from civilization. Now we were on a trail, where people had walked before, gravity was helping us go down, getting closer to the trailhead. With a trail to follow we were almost on cruise control. Now it wasn't exactly what many people would consider to be a "trail," but compared with what we had climbed through it was basically a road. With a trail to follow, the uncertainty in the route was almost completely erased. We just had to follow the trail and we'd get back to where we started.

The trail followed the ridge, passing a few sketchy no-fall zones, before leveling out at sort of a little col. Eric and I were starting to believe that maybe this trail kept going to the west side of the island, which was definitely not the side we wanted to end up on, so we decided it was time to leave the trail and resume our bushwhacking. We spotted a dry riverbed a quarter-mile away and knew that the going would be much easier down there. We looked for the shortest way down, held our breath, and plunged into the bushes. It was tough, but nothing compared with what we'd climbed through. Half an hour later we spotted the riverbed in front of us. "We made it!" I yelled. "Whoa, wait a minute," Eric said, "It's a ten foot drop to get down there."

We did a little scouting back and forth and finally found a suitable route down that ended in a doable five-foot drop. At last we found ourselves in the middle of a huge dry riverbed. There were large boulders everywhere but with plenty of hard sand to walk on it was easy going. If the trail had been a "road" then this riverbed was an interstate. With all the wet vegetation we couldn't figure out why the river bed was dry, but we sure appreciated it. Maybe it only fills up when there's a hurricane, or a big storm? We knew we wouldn't want to be down there during a flash flood.

CLIFFED OUT

Now at this point, just to make things interesting, it began to rain. Hard. Fortunately, we found a little cave underneath a cliff and hunkered down inside it for some shelter. From the coziness of our cave we observed fifteen minutes of torrential downpour and noticed some trickles starting to form in the riverbed. I was expecting at any minute to see a big wall of water come roaring down the riverbed, but fortunately the rain eased up. We continued our little trek down the "interstate" and I soon noticed a curious topographic feature in front of me. It appeared that the riverbed, along with a small trickle of water, vanished into thin air. "Uh-oh, I think I know what that means," I told Eric. We walked a little farther and found ourselves standing on the threshold of a 30ft waterfall/cliff.

"Well that's just great," I said to Eric. "Ain't no way we're downclimbing that." We looked to the right side and saw a steep, but potentially down climbable slope. We put our game faces on. It was bushwhacking time again. And this time it was back to the old Grade 10 junk we had swam through on the way up. But descending this stuff was whole different ball game.

As I slowly descended I went to plant my left foot on what I thought was level ground, but to my dismay there was nothing but air beneath it. Luckily I had been holding onto a strong tree, so in a split second I found myself swinging in thin air. "Eric, watch out for this," I yelled back, "it's a ten foot slope." Unfortunately, one of my crocs had fallen off and preceded me into the little abyss. So carefully I lowered myself into the bushes, trying not to put weight onto the bare foot, and was reunited with my little slipper. Most of the time the vegetation was a total nuisance, but on this occasion, I could hold onto some of the jungle grass to slow my descent. We made it past that obstacle and pushed on. Well, that's ten feet down, we've got twenty to go before we're back at the riverbed, I thought.

We descended a few feet more. I remember thinking, "I wonder what those last fifteen feet are going to look like, it's getting pretty steep," and all of a sudden air materialized once again beneath my feet. The brush was so dense that I wasn't able to fall more than a few inches. Those fifteen feet were indeed very steep, but with the super dense brush we were able to ease ourselves down it safely. Finally, we were at the base of the little waterfall. It was pretty much vertical and definitely not down-climbable.

We brushed ourselves off and kept walking. After a little boulder scrambling the riverbed began to widen out even more. "Wow, this is just too easy," I said to Eric. "It's about the only easy hiking we've done today." We began to congratulate ourselves on finishing all the hard stuff. We just had to descend a little farther along the riverbed, then climb up to the crater rim, where there'd be a trail, and it'd be easy going again.

But a short while later we rounded a corner and found another little topographic feature to greet us: another waterfall. Fortunately, there was only a little trickle of water in the riverbed so we could safely approach it closely to see what we were up against. But this wasn't an ordinary little waterfall, this was a full-fledged cliff that dropped about sixty feet. We didn't dare walk close enough to peek over.

Neither of us was too surprised; one more obstacle like this just seemed par for the course. “Well that’s too bad,” I said, “I don’t know how we’re getting out of this one. There’s cliffs on every side of us. There’s no way we’re walking around this one.”

BACK ON CRUISE CONTROL

“Why don’t we backtrack a little; it seemed like there was a little hill we could climb up back there,” Eric said. “Maybe we’re close enough to the crater that we can just walk up to it?”

With little optimism I agreed, and we headed back up the riverbed. We came to the base of a steep – but doable – hill and started climbing. “Hmm, that’s weird,” Eric said, “this almost looks like a trail.” We climbed a little higher and lo and behold the trail opened up before us. Salvation! We noticed some discarded shoes and some trash on the trail and knew things would be getting easier. It’s not often that you rejoice at the sight of trash, but when it means that your life is about to get a lot easier it’s something to celebrate.

After another hundred feet of climbing we were back on the crater rim and back in business. We were now on the opposite side of the crater from this morning, so we’d need to hike halfway around it, but with a nice trail to follow it was almost trivial. Once again, just to make things interesting, it began to pour. This time it was very hard.

Eric and I threw on our meager rain gear and plodded on. Luckily it was still in the upper 60F’s so even though we were already completely saturated we were still warm. I looked down and began to contemplate the crocs that I was wearing. The most treacherous part wasn’t the lack of foot protection from branches, it was the lack of friction. The foot/croc friction and croc/ground friction coefficients were both pretty dismal, meaning that (especially on steep climbs) I was at risk for my crocs slipping with respect to the rocks and also my foot slipping out of my crocs. It was particularly treacherous during this torrential downpour.

HUMAN CONTACT

Eventually we spotted a curious sight in front of us. Other people! They were probably just as surprised as we were. We talked with the lead dude and found out they were part of a big group headed from one side of the island to the other. They had started at the same trailhead as us, were walking along the rim of the crater, and were planning to take another trail down to the leeward (west) side of the island. Everyone greeted us with a look of surprise. Maybe they were surprised we didn’t have a guide. Maybe they just didn’t expect to see anyone else trudging through this rainstorm high on this volcano. When we reached the end of their group we noticed three guide-looking dudes each carrying a big bucket. They gave us each a nod of approval. I figured that if anyone ever asked why we didn’t have a guide I’d just tell them that Eric was my guide and he’d say that I was his guide. We were guiding each other, I suppose.

Sometime while we were passing their group we noticed the big rope leading all the way down to the crater floor. It was steep, but not unreasonable. We were tempted to do it, but we had already attained our objective today and didn’t feel like pushing our luck any further.

For the rest of the hike our minds were on cruise control. True, the wind was howling, driving the torrential rain into our faces. I had to hold my hood on my head and at one point I finally brought my arm down; with it drained a full cup of water that had accumulated in the elbow area. But this was the easy part. We just needed to follow the trail in front of us and didn't need to think too hard about much else.

BACK ON THE REAL TRAIL

We made it back to our starting point on the crater rim, completing a big loop. With my mind still on cruise control and with super-dense fog, we almost didn't recognize the spot and nearly kept going. We took one last look into the crater and noticed twenty brand new waterfalls that had just formed. Some cascaded all the way from the crater rim, a thousand feet down to the floor. It was amazing to think that somehow all that water drained out underground.

We turned back onto the main trail and began the one-hour descent back to the Rabacca Trailhead. The tiny little trickles we had barely noticed on the way up turned into full-blown creeks on the way down. You could still jump over them but we couldn't help but wonder what our "dry" riverbed looked like right about now.

The rain soon let up. After passing a few hikers near the bottom we suddenly heard a bunch of people talking up ahead and after climbing one last hill we were finally back at the start. As we emerged into the parking lot a news-reporter-looking-dude was pointing a video camera at us. I gave him a big thumbs-up.

"WE SAW IT ON WIKIPEDIA"

A woman with a microphone pulled Eric aside and began to interview him about the hike. Turns out they were interviewing everyone who had "climbed the mountain" that day. When it was my turn they asked me the standard questions about what mountain I had climbed. When we told them how difficult it had been and showed them the scars on our arms and legs they probably wondered "which mountain did they climb?" They probably couldn't figure out just why our bodies were so torn up on such an easy trail. I'm not sure they understood the distinction I tried to make between "where the trail stops" and "where the highest point is."

At the end they asked me how we had heard about this mountain. "We're trying to climb several Caribbean country high points this week," I said, "and we heard about La Soufière on Wikipedia." I could tell that wasn't the answer they were expecting.

But our hike wasn't exactly over yet. We still had another three miles back to our car with a potentially-dead battery. We mingled with the people in the parking lot, trying to make friends, in the hopes that someone would give us a ride down, but it appeared that everyone was pretty comfortable hanging around and wasn't prepared to leave anytime soon.

FINISHING WITH HONOR

"Fine, let's just get out of here," I said to Eric, "at least we can control what time we make it back to the car." We packed up our meager belongings and trudged down the mountain. As we passed through a grove of palm and banana trees I noticed something yellow in the grass

ahead of us. Bananas! We looked around to make sure nobody was looking and scarfed down the ripe ones. It was our first dose of fruit in the past three days. The clouds thinned and soon the sun came out. Our sunscreen was still in my lost backpack, but at this point I didn't even care if I got sunburned, it would only be a minor discomfort compared with the gashes on my arms and legs.

We heard some cars speeding down the mountain and stuck out our hands and waved, hoping that they could drive us down the last mile of road. But the drivers simply waved back and kept going. "Maybe we should have stuck out our thumbs," I said to Eric, "I wonder what the gesture for hitchhiking is down here?"

Finally at 3pm we arrived back at the car, finishing honorably under our own power. "What do you think the chances are that it'll start?" I asked Eric, "I say it starts." "I'll say it starts," Eric said. And indeed it started. "Now how do you like them apples?" he asked.

Along the two-hour drive back to the airport we got our little tour of St Vincent that we had missed in the darkness last night. As we drove along the spectacular coastline it was pretty clear that very few tourists come to this part of the island because there wasn't a single hotel in sight.

We were back at the SVD airport by 5pm and knocked on the Avis door, ready to give Curtis a piece of our mind. Of course the door was locked. "Well it's nice we flew in yesterday," Eric said, "because there's no way we could have done this mountain in eleven hours, especially with all this hassle with the rental car."

VICTORY

After we got done unpacking we sat down next to our Suzuki and talked about what to do next. Mysteriously my backpack still hadn't been found yet, but the LIAT reps said they were still looking for it. With five more hours before our flight to Barbados we still had plenty of time to see the sights and sounds of Kingstown. But we couldn't muster the energy to stand up. We both sat there, in the parking lot, silent, with absolutely no desire to do anything. We were exhausted.

I thought about my contacts and rubbed my dry, red eyes and reluctantly came to the conclusion that I ought to find some contact solution before we left. My eyes couldn't take much more of this. I summoned a taxi and we embarked on wild goose chase to pharmacies in downtown Kingstown that eventually came back fruitless. It appears that nobody in the country wears contacts.

We dragged our stuff into the airport, slumped down onto the benches, and awaited our flight. La Soufrière had taken a lot out of us, but today we had won. It had been at the expense of some blood, some sleep, and perhaps my backpack but we had won. We hoped that our next mountain, Mt Hillaby in Barbados, would fall more easily…

(Note: the backpack was finally located and repatriated two weeks later. I think US customs abandoned their inspection of its contents after they got a whiff of the one-gallon of two week old Grenadian jungle mud and swamp water infused into my clothes and shoes.)

Barbados
Mount Hillaby 1115ft

Author: Amanda

March 26, 2012

Caribbean or Guatemala? That was the question that our party of four had been deliberating for about a month leading to spring break 2012. Matthew and Eric were on a quest to be the first in the record books to complete all North American high points, including Central America and Caribbean Islands. My mom and I were enthusiastic about accompanying them to achieve their goal as long as that didn't mean stepping over Nicaraguan land mines or wielding a machete to trail find in Trinidad. Near decision time, Guatemala seemed to be the top candidate, especially because our trip would coincide with the epic 2012th year of the Mayan calendar. Once we heard that ancient ruin sites were notorious for violent drug gang activity, though, the Caribbean seemed like a sweet alternative.

We settled on three islands to do together: Barbados, Dominica, and Antigua, and Matthew and Eric would complete several others (the machete-wielding kind) before my mom and I arrived. Being the gentlemen that they were, Matthew and Eric offered to let my mom and I select which islands we preferred. I was drawn to Dominica (dahm-in-EE-ka) because it was described as a mountainous, rainforest oasis for hikers. Barbados and Antigua (an-TEE-guh) were necessary bookend stops to make flying in and out of the U.S. affordable. Even so, they sounded interesting given that Barbados had a rolling, green, Scotland-like interior perfect for driving around, and Antigua had a… well, Antigua seemed just necessary.

This trip report is about our first shared destination – Barbados. (Read about the others in Matthew's accounts.) I called Matthew weeks before our trip to ask, "Hey Matthew, is spending

180 dollars a night on a hotel room in Barbados going to be okay? That seems to be the typical rate in the Caribbean. Can't find anything cheaper." "No way!" Matthew protested. "I'm going to look too and get back to you tonight."

As usual, that night Matthew discovered a place on hostels.com going for U.S. $80 a night called "Cleverdale Apartments" on the southern coast of Barbados. Reassuringly, one review had just been posted the day before complimenting the apartments' cleanliness and the staff's friendliness. My mom's only hesitation was that according to google maps, the apartments appeared to be located in the blue-shaded region on the map, that is, right in the Caribbean Sea! "Don't worry. That's probably not accurate." Matthew reassured, and we all started looking forward to our upcoming ocean-front property.

A week later in Barbados, the Cleverdale Apartments proved to be a steal! On a quiet back-street a block off the main road, the apartments had a clear view of aqua waves, rolling in from the Caribbean Sea. In fact, all we had to do was walk across a one-lane road and a flat concrete foundation of a prior home, and there we were on the beach! A pair of palm trees shaded a group of locals playing a game like dominoes or Chinese Mahjong. Several wooden row boats were anchored just offshore, bobbing up and down with the waves. Dark-skinned children were shouting and playing in the water.

We had the entire apartment, meaning two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a kitchen, a living room, a wrap-around porch, and a backyard with a clothesline, all to ourselves. Within walking distance, a local grocery store provided everything we needed to cook ourselves a wholesome meal. The owner of the apartment, an expat from Germany, and a staff member, a friendly half-Bajan and half-German young woman, welcomed us to "no-problem country"!

The no-problem mentality proved to be true. Still, I would like to caution future travelers of two noteworthy issues. One was driving on the left side of the road. Without having had any experience, we adapted quickly. However, exiting the airport, one was immediately thrown into multi-lane turnabouts that shocked, confused, and disoriented the brain. Equally startling was that anytime one tried to use the turn signal, the windshield wipers sprung across one's view (because the windshield wiper and turn signal knobs were switched).

Car passengers started counting how many times on perfectly sunny days the windshield wipers were deployed. I think it was four times on our final day in Barbados, which was a major improvement. Another issue was that while the Cleverdale Apartments were otherwise wonderful, my mom and I were attacked by mosquitoes overnight despite using mosquito nets. Bug spray and anti-itch solution became our methods of choice for not being eaten alive.

Consistent with what the guidebooks said, rental car was the best way to have most freedom when exploring the island. With a car and GPS, we traveled to each face of the island. The south coast had calm Caribbean swimming beaches. The north coast was characterized by deep blue Atlantic waters crashing into dramatic cliffs. The west coast was "where all the rich people were". In the interior, we cruised through green sugar cane fields gradually climbing toward Matthew and Eric's ultimate destination: the high point Mount Hillaby. Along the way, we also made one stop at Welchman Hall Gully, an important natural formation and protected

place for flora and fauna. Interestingly, one could earn a little extra cash by collecting the invasive species of snail inhabiting the area.

Snails would also be a prominent feature of my brief yet comprehensive high point account. As I was telling Matthew, if I were to describe our trip to the high point, I would say something like, "We drove to the high point. We got out of the car. We walked about 10 feet uphill then we made it to the high point! And, there were a lot of snails."

Despite the anti-climax, it still counted. We made it to the tallest point of one more independent country, where few had made a point to travel to before and where one could climb up no further. While the hike itself was less than challenging, it had taken much more than that to get ourselves there. Although guidebooks strongly recommended the use of guides, Matthew insisted that we figure it out ourselves. Therefore, getting to that point involved many days of scouring maps, researching logistics, and traveling that far – though limited information was available on the internet. There we were somewhere in the middle of Barbados at the limits of a far-out road (with no one else except snails and locals nearby), and the sense of adventure filled us. Having made it to another high point, we boarded our Bajan rental car, and I pulled confidently back into the left-hand side of the road.

Dominica
Morne Diablotins 4747ft

Author: Matthew

March 27, 2012 (Matthew), Dec 31, 2012 (Eric)

"I'm stuck!" Amanda's mom exclaimed. We were high up on Morne Diablotins – the tallest mountain in the Caribbean Island nation of Dominica – and tantalizingly close to the summit. But the untamed Dominican jungle threatened to block us from reaching our objective. The trail – or shall we say "route" – which had begun as a well-maintained, well-behaved (albeit steep) path up through gigantic chataniere trees and palm fronds had transformed into a muddy slog through a steep obstacle course under and over slippery kaklen tree roots mixed with some scrambling up slimy jungle boulders. One moment we were squelching through ankle-deep mud,

the next we were slithering like snakes through the tangled mess of roots and branches. We were beginning to understand the origins of the playground "jungle" gym.

To make things interesting my attire consisted of just three items: a pair of swimming trunks and one Croc (slipper) per foot. Our friends at LIAT Airlines had decided to add to the challenge of our little Caribbean hiking adventure by losing my luggage somewhere back in Grenada. I figured that by now the luggage was long gone, and hoped that at least some little Grenadan boy could benefit from the shoes, clothing, camping gear, and Morne Diablotins maps and route descriptions that were in my lost backpack.

I had to be extra cautious with each step because occasionally I'd step into a big mud pit, keep walking, and realize a few steps later that I was missing one of my Crocs. Although the mud was nice and squishy under my bare feet, with the threat of razor grass and sharp jungle rocks ahead this would not be the place to lose your footwear. I'd then quickly retrieve my slipper before it was swallowed. Fortunately, Amanda and her mom had come better-prepared with hiking boots and a pair of knee pads, which had so far proven indispensable.

But my primary concern was not my feet, it was the route itself. Before the trip I had conducted a substantial amount of research about the route and found a good SummitPost page about Diablotins. I also had an email from another person who had hiked it years ago. Although I didn't have any of the printed information with me, I didn't recall any mention of the sheer rootiness of the trail from anything I had read. It was just supposed to be a "steep hike." With this many roots, I thought, you'd think they'd feature prominently in any trip report. At that moment I vowed that when it was time for me to write this trip report I'd give the roots more of a mention. But even though the actual route didn't seem to match the description, our GPS indicated we were still headed towards the summit (whose coordinates I had copied from Google Earth).

But now we faced the most serious challenge of all: The Squeeze. Mrs. Morris was pinned tightly between roots and rocks, her chin buried in the mud, unable to move. We didn't want her to have to spend the remainder of her Caribbean vacation stuck underneath this tree. She pulled on a branch with her left hand, I pulled on her right arm, while Amanda pushed from behind. "Ow ow ow ow ow!" she yelled in agony. We paused to catch our breaths and began to laugh. We laughed at the ridiculousness of the whole situation. On a Caribbean vacation most people hang out on the beach. Here we were, covered in mud and bruises, as far from the beach as you can get. Our objective for this vacation was a little different. We wanted to stand on the summit of Dominica.

With one final pull, push, and squeeze, Amanda's mom wriggled free. We brushed ourselves off, pleased with our little victory. It had been a tough half-mile. But with the afternoon daylight growing shorter we knew we'd really have to hustle the last half-mile to the summit.

THE NATURE ISLAND

We had a few different goals for this trip. First and foremost, we wanted to take advantage of Spring Break. Second, we wanted to visit some new countries. And third: as long as you're in a country you might as well climb to the highest point. So far on the trip Eric and I had climbed the highest mountains in Trinidad & Tobago, Grenada, and St Vincent & the Grenadines. Then we rendezvoused with Amanda and her mom in Bridgetown and climbed the highest mountain in Barbados. Then the plan was for me, Amanda, and her mom to fly to Dominica and climb the highest mountain, and then afterwards we'd climb the highest mountain in Antigua & Barbuda before flying back. Eric had to leave to visit an oil rig in the Gulf for his research, so he'd have to come back for Dominica some other time.

Dominica is nicknamed the "Nature Island" for its "unspoiled natural beauty" (according to Wikipedia) and after driving around for a little while it's easy to understand why. Unlike Barbados or Trinidad or Grenada where much of the land is developed, Dominica is like one big mountainous rainforest. Even though it's still a tiny island, with only 70,000 people, there is still plenty of wilderness. Our first night on the island we stayed in a tree house at the 3 Rivers EcoLodge near Rosalie. The house is built around a gigantic chataniere tree way back in the woods.

DRIVING ON THE LEFT

The next morning, we woke up bright and early to the sounds of the tree frogs and, with Amanda at the wheel, headed north towards Morne Diablotins. Now, driving in Dominica isn't exactly like driving in the 'States. First of all, you had better not forget that you drive on the left-hand side of the road in Dominica (the same is true in the other non-French Caribbean islands). Second, the roads are so windy and the turns are so sharp and steep that sometimes the two roof supports at the front of the car obscure your view and you either need to arch your neck to see around the turn or stick your head out the window. Clearly the geometry of our car was not designed for driving around 360-degree turns. And third, there's often a steep drop-off on the side due to a drainage ditch or guardrail-less cliff, which sometimes makes the passengers (and driver) uneasy. But Amanda faced the challenge with bravery and took the helm of our Suzuki jeep with confidence while I navigated with the GPS. Amanda's mom, meanwhile, provided moral support.

As we reached the intersection at Pont Cassé in the interior, we realized that we were low on gas, so we pulled over to the side of the road and approached a group of locals to ask where the nearest gas station was. One dude stepped forward, and with a smile said something completely unintelligible. As Amanda and I tried to process what he said, or even what language he was speaking, some of the words started to become clearer. He was indeed speaking English, but we just needed a moment to orient ourselves with his dialect. We eventually understood that the nearest gas station was in Jimmit, and that he would hop in our jeep and show us how to get there. We were a little hesitant to let him in at first, but he looked like a nice enough fellow so we let him in.

The official language of Dominica is English, but it turns out that many people speak Antillean Creole, a blend of French, Carib, and African languages. The French influence might

explain why the country is pronounced “dome-in-EE-ka”, with emphasis on the third syllable, unlike “Dominican Republic.” So we figured that this dude probably spoke Creole too, which we thought was cool. We let him off at a little village called “Warner,” although from his pronunciation it sounded more like “wuh-nuh,” and gassed up on the west-coast town of Jimmit.

As we continued north the road quality improved dramatically. We found out that the government of China had actually paid for the rebuilding of the road, along with other public works projects in Dominica. Not really sure how they choose Dominica, but we were sure happy about it. An hour later we made the critical turn at the sign to “Morne Diablotins National Park and Syndicate Visitors’ Centre.” While planning the trip I had carefully marked on the GPS the coordinates of even the tiniest of turns, expecting them to be non-obvious. In reality, however, it was pretty easy to navigate around because there were plenty of road signs.

Six miles later we rounded a turn and spotted the sign indicating the Morne Diablotins trailhead. “The hike to the mountain’s summit takes 2-3 hours one-way. Hikers should not attempt the hike after 10:30am… Certified guides are strongly recommended. Enjoy your climb and for your safety do not stray from the trail!” the sign proclaimed. We had heard that guides were recommended but figured we’d take our chances without one. I always feel that having a guide takes away the elements of the excitement, of self-reliance, and the sense of discovery that you gain by leading the hike by yourself. Besides, the first hundred feet of visible trail looked perfectly obvious – why would you need guide for a trail like this?

We pulled over into a little grassy parking lot and suited up for the hike. It was surprising to me that there weren’t any other hikers. It was a beautiful Tuesday in the dry season, we figured there’d maybe be other Spring Breakers here at least. But throughout the course of the day I gradually realized why most people chicken out of this mountain in favor of snorkeling.

THE HIKE

The trail started surprisingly steeply, gaining 1600ft in just 1.4 miles – that’s a 21% grade! But the beauty of the jungle around us distracted us from the steepness of the climb. It was pretty much your textbook rainforest; massive chataniere trees with sprawling roots, palm trees, gigantic jungle ferns with dense foliage that blocked much of the sunlight. Higher up you could see the canopy layer with huge parasitic yucca-looking plants dripping with moss and a couple of bright red flowers. There wasn’t much wildlife to be seen, but we guessed maybe they were more active earlier in the day or at night.

After 1.4 miles of stair climbing up the well-maintained trail we topped out on a grassy knoll. From the GPS I knew that we still had another 1.1 miles to the summit, so it wasn’t time for back-patting yet. But it was still early in the day so we guessed that with the good time we had made on the climb we’d be getting back to the car plenty early. The highlands were all socked in with clouds, but occasionally as the clouds drifted by we caught a glimpse of the ridge that led to the summit. It looked like we were in for more of the same: steep and jungley.

We turned back to the trail and noticed something ominous: the condition of the trail deteriorated significantly. The trail we had ascended had been nice and wide with plenty of

stairs, good drainage, and plenty of headroom. By contrast the trail ahead was a dark, muddy, and tangled with roots. No big deal, we thought, this is probably just one tough stretch and soon it will improve.

THE JUNGLE GYM

Slithering through the roots required a certain level of agility and upper-body strength. Sometimes you'd have to hang onto the roots above your head and Tarzan-swing yourself over a mud pit or branch. Sometimes you'd crawl through the mud on all fours in order to squeeze under a tree. You'd extricate your arms and legs on the other side of the mud pit with a loud squelch. Sometimes you'd get to a tangled mass of roots in front of you and ask yourself: "Is that an 'under'-tree or an 'over'-tree?" As we proceeded the questions kept coming, both mentally and verbally: how did these roots get to be so exposed? Why are the roots so high up? Are these roots or branches? How on earth do I get around this one? If they call this a trail, why don't they cut these things? Why'd they stop maintaining the trail? Is this the right trail? Is this even a trail at all?

Progress was painfully slow. Nobody said much. We stopped taking pictures. If there had been just a hundred feet of roots, then it'd simply be a fun little obstacle course. But with what was looking to be a solid mile of them our chances of reaching the summit before sunset seemed to be slipping away. Our speed slowed to less than half a mile per hour. It also began to dawn on me, and all of us I think, that we'd have to climb down the same steep roots and rocks on the way back. Even if we turned around now that meant that we were only halfway done. But, determined to reach the summit, we pushed on, hopeful that just around the corner the trail would open up.

Some stretches were especially tricky, particularly when there'd be a tangle of roots above a steep pitch of rock. Sometimes you'd be rock climbing, sometimes tree climbing, sometimes trying to squeeze between roots. By about 1pm, the trail finally leveled out a little and we got our first glimpse of the summit, 0.4 miles away. The clouds had parted for an instant and we could see a pointy hill a little ways up the ridge. It was impossible to visually gauge distance; the dense tree cover provided no reference for your eye. The 0.4 miles indicated by the GPS seemed trivial, but with this type of trail that could take another hour.

PRECIOUS ELECTRONS

Finding the route was challenging. Occasionally there was flagging tape on the trees, but there certainly weren't any cut branches to follow. The only way to find the trail was to head for the black roots and avoid the green moss-covered ones. The roots were black because enough people had walked on them to rub off the moss. But it was such a lush environment and the trail was so seldom used that often there'd be moss covering everything and you'd be completely baffled about the location of the trail. We'd try a few different directions until we found the right one, then confirm it with the GPS. I was starting to realize why some people hire guides, although I certainly never regretted doing our hike unguided.

One time, at a particularly dense and confusing area, I decided to whip out the GPS to see which direction I should look for the trail. I didn't have the trail on the GPS, but could at least see which direction would take us to the summit. But to my dismay the GPS had turned off. The batteries were dead! "Shoot," I said. I had forgotten to bring spare AAs too. Usually Eric and I are super-cautious about relying on the GPS. In case the primary GPS fails we'll bring maps, a compass, and we had recently acquired a new GPS, which meant that our old one could serve as a backup in case the primary one failed. But Eric was currently using the spare GPS while he climbed the highest mountain in Antigua. And since my maps were probably being folded into paper airplanes by some little boy in Grenada at that moment, we suddenly found ourselves without a good map.

Proceeding without the GPS made me uneasy, but it wasn't a show-stopper. We still had plenty of daylight and even if it got a little dark we had each brought our headlamps. Nevertheless, I tried to play it cool and didn't tell Amanda or her mom about it. Soon enough we figured out the correct trail anyhow and kept going.

By 1:15 I knew we were getting close but was starting to get a little doubtful about the validity of the trail. There had been quite a few possible intersections back there where we could have deviated from the correct route. I really needed to fire up the GPS to confirm. I pressed the ON button, but as soon as it powered up it immediately shut off. Shoot, it doesn't even have enough juice to turn on. Then I remembered the trick we had learned in Winter School about warming batteries up. Even though it was 70F it might still work, I thought. I put the two AAs in my hands and rubbed them vigorously, trying to coax the last few chemical reactions to take place and release their precious electrons. I breathed on them for a while, then popped them back into the GPS and to my surprise it turned on! I quickly discovered that we were just 500ft from the summit, then hurriedly turned the device off.

THE ROOF OF DOMINICA

Moments later we rounded another small hill and could finally taste the summit. We noticed a mysterious little circular marker embedded in the rock and bent over to inspect it. "Inter-American Geodetic Survey | Do Not Disturb | Diablotin | 1953" it read. The summit! Wait, the summit? The next hill was obviously taller, based on both visual observation and the GPS. Perhaps this summit marker had been placed on a cloudy day when the surveyors couldn't even see the actual summit? Very likely, we figured, since we've read this area is always cloudy.

After a final fifteen minutes of bush scrambling at last we found ourselves on the roof of Dominica. It was an exciting moment, but our enthusiasm was subdued because we knew that we'd have a very tough hike back and we probably wouldn't return before dark. It was nothing but clouds in every direction, but a little bit of sun occasionally poked through to us. We could see the jungle extending about a quarter mile below us until it blended into clouds. We wondered if perhaps there was even another, taller mountain hiding somewhere in the clouds that had never been spotted, like Brazil's Pico de Neblina.

There was actually a nice little grassy bald on the summit and even some dry rocks we could sit on. It had been a long time since we last had seen grass, dry rocks, and sun. On the

summit we could finally relax a little; we wouldn't be getting any deeper into the jungle, and we knew that we could overcome each of the obstacles we now faced on the return trip. We sat down and opened our little gourmet lunch of bread, cheese, beef jerky, green peppers, granola bars (from the US), and agua. Only a few words were spoken, but we all shared a common sigh of relief at having made it half-way.

We captured the two all-important summit photos: one of the three of us, one of me holding Amanda up. We took a backup photo on Amanda's camera just in case mine failed. The hike had certainly been fun, but we didn't want to have to repeat it for just a single photo like Mt Greylock in Massachusetts or High Point in New Jersey. This made Country High Point #2 for Amanda and her mom and #18 for me.

THE PLUNGE

We took one last look around, took a deep breath, psyched ourselves up, and plunged back into the jungle. We knew that the descent would be tough, but at least we knew what we were up against. We took it slowly and carefully.

Staying on trail was even tougher during the descent. Twice we found ourselves off-trail and had to retrace our steps. Even though we never went farther than 50 feet off trail, it was still an eerie sensation that it was so easy to lose the trail. Someone who had hiked it years ago told me that during their descent they had lost the trail and found themselves bushwhacking through the jungle in the dark. He told me it had been "probably the scariest moment of my life." We enabled our super-alert modes and stayed vigilant.

My crocs had held up so far but my feet weren't too happy about it. The cool mud was comfortable to walk on, but embedded in the mud were tiny grains of sand that had rubbed my toe-knuckles raw. As the wounds dried out they became painful. Without socks I needed to improvise, so I took a few clumps of moss and stuffed them around my toes. It worked like a charm.

We triumphantly emerged from the unmaintained section and rejoiced at the stairs below us. True, the stairs were steep, but at least we wouldn't be climbing over any more roots. This stretch of trail was much more doable in the dark, but we still had to be cognizant of the trail and especially had to watch out for waterbars.

On descents it's easier to get off trail because you're going in the direction that gravity is pulling you, just like a drop of water. When water falls it takes the steepest way down. Some trails have waterbars to divert the water off trail and into the woods. But often the little creeklets that form near these waterbars look like trails because there's no vegetation and the ground is muddy, just like a trail. So that's one reason to be particularly alert during descents.

As we neared our finish line the last glorious rays of setting sunlight filtered through the canopy and illuminated the path before us like a golden staircase. We emerged from the bush, victorious, at 5:58pm. "We're back!" I said. It had taken us eight hours total, about 30% longer than the sign had predicted. Maybe the sign isn't actually referring to the summit, we wondered, maybe it's just talking about the end of the maintained section?

A REWARD

With a big sigh of relief, we posed for one last photo in front of the sign. In the photo you can see us all covered in mud from waist to toe. When I headed into the woods for some final business I noticed a curious yellow sphere on the ground. Hmm, I thought, I've seen one of those before. It was a grapefruit! Turned out that I was in a grapefruit-tree grove and there were plenty more hanging on the tree. I clandestinely whacked a half-dozen of them off with a long stick just like a piñata and we chowed down on an exquisite celebration snack of grapefruit and corn flakes. It's actually a nice combination when you're hungry. It was Diablotin's little reward for a successful day of climbing and staying away from the beach.

The next day Amanda's mom generously treated us all to a night in the magnificent Papillote Wilderness Retreat near Roseau where we relaxed in the natural hot springs among the sounds of hummingbirds and waterfalls. Amanda and her mom eased into the warm water and laid back. "Now this is my kind of vacation!" Amanda's mom said.

Eric's Ascent

Author: Eric Gilbertson

Dec 31, 2012

I switched my 2-door RAV 4 into park, turned off the ignition, and started rotating the steering wheel far to the right. I was parked on a slight incline at the trailhead of Morne Diablotins in Dominica, and didn't want the car to roll too far if the brakes failed. As I kept rotating the steering wheel I heard an ominous "click," and then the wheel locked. "Uh-oh," I thought. The wheel now wouldn't turn in either direction. I struggled for 20 minutes, but nothing worked to unlock the wheel. I was out of cell service, on a lonely road in the middle of the jungle, far from any city, at night. I could still climb the mountain, but getting back to the airport may be tricky with a car stuck turning right. I sat down on the ground to ponder my options.

WINDIEST ROADS IN THE WORLD

I was in the Caribbean for a week over Christmas Break trying to finish off a few more country highpoints. On Sunday, Dec 31, I descended from Mount Scenery, the country highpoint of the Netherlands, on Saba Island and boarded an early afternoon flight to my next objective, Dominica.

I landed at Melville Hall, Dominica at 3:45pm on Sunday and immediately approached the car rental counter, with my Budget car reservation printed out in hand. There were three rental counters in the building, but only one person sat behind the desk playing with his cell phone.

"Hi, I have a reservation," I said, handing him the form showing my 4-door economy car I'd selected online. "All the cars are out. We only have an 8-passenger van," the man responded matter-of-factly. The reservation form obviously had no significance down in the Caribbean.

"Um…do any other rental places have cars?" I asked hopefully. The man turned to his side and woke up another guy napping in the corner. "Yeah, yeah I got a car mon," the second man said. "A 2-door Rav-4." "Great! I'll take it," I said in relief.

I filled out all the paperwork, walked back into the airport to buy an official Dominica drivers permit, and then got in the car. The Rav-4 was the best vehicle I could have hoped for in Dominica: it was short and narrow enough to easily navigate small, windy roads, and all-terrain enough to get up rough gravel.

On the dashboard of the car a sign warned in big letters "DRIVE ON THE LEFT. HONK OFTEN." I looked at the sign, and then thought back to Matthew's description of his experience driving in Dominica a year ago. He had said there wasn't a straight stretch of road in the whole country, that almost every turn was a blind turn, and that the roads were extremely narrow with no shoulders. This sign corroborated his description, and I mentally prepared myself for the difficult journey ahead. It didn't help matters that Dominica is left-side drive, the opposite of the US.

I carefully backed the car up, and pulled out of the parking lot. Luckily it's difficult to get lost in Dominica. There's basically just one road going around the island with few turnoffs. I headed north out of Melville Hall, driving intermittently through lush jungle and small villages. I was amazed how many blind turns the Dominican DOT could throw into every mile of road. I had to honk the horn several times a minute, it seemed, trying to warn potential oncoming cars to stay out of my lane. The roads were narrow enough that it was almost impossible to avoid drifting into the opposing lane during a turn.

I passed through the small villages of Wesley, Anse Du Me, and Hampstead before hitting the first major town – Portsmouth. I had arrived in Dominica with no food in my backpack – thus having nothing to declare and clearing customs quickly – and now I stopped to stock up for the next day. I drove around looking hopefully for a grocery store, but couldn't recognize any building as obviously selling food. I finally asked some locals and they pointed me to a nondescript little building. I went inside and scrounged up some bread, junk food, and water bottles from the meager pickings and then continued south.

As the sun was setting I turned off the main road just before the town of Dublanc at a sign for Sindicate. This road was even narrower than the main road, and wound straight up the hills into the interior of the Island, but luckily there were no other cars out tonight. I wound through fruit plantations, then into the jungle until finally reaching a sign for Morne Diablotins half an hour later. I pulled off the road, parked the car, and that's where the steering wheel got stuck.

STUCK

After my initial 20 minutes of fighting with the steering wheel, I had sat down to ponder my options. Give up and go to sleep, hike the mountain in the morning, and afterwards walk/hitchhike into town to find a tow truck to get me back to the airport. Walk until I could find

a cell signal, and call the rental company to ask what to do (but they were already closed). Fight the wheel again.

I chose option three. What could it hurt to struggle a little more? I spent another 15 minutes trying to press every button in the car, pushing the car back and forward, kicking the wheels, yanking the wheel really hard, all to no avail. The car wouldn't even turn on when I tried to turn the keys. Finally, I tried sticking the keys in just halfway, and then pulling the wheel the opposite direction, and presto! It unclicked and returned to its normal position.

I let a huge sigh of relief, took out the keys, and didn't dare touch the steering wheel again. Finally, I could worry about merely climbing the mountain. I took out my small tent, walked past a sign that may or may not have said 'no camping', and camped about a hundred feet into the woods.

THE JUNGLE GYM

I awoke at 7am and was packed and ready to go thirty minutes later. Now I could with certainty recognize the letters that spelled 'no camping' on the sign at the trailhead, but I had already taken down my tent so didn't worry about it.

The trail at the base was steep but very well-maintained, with wooden steps leading through lush jungle. After an hour and a half, I emerged on a small knoll poking out above the trees, with a view that I imagined being amazing if I weren't inside the clouds. I suspect this is the point where most people stop hiking, because the trail seriously deteriorated afterwards. The viewpoint was obviously not the top, but I could envision it taking someone 2-3 hours to climb up there, and the trailhead sign had warned the hike could take 2-3 hours.

Beyond the viewpoint the trail basically turned into a muddy jungle gym. That morning I had made the decision to hike in crocs instead of sneakers, and the muddy trail was now vindicating that decision. Sometimes the trail would be flat, with shin-deep muddy sections that would suck the crocs right off my feet. Other times it was steep, requiring me to use my hands to pull my body up on tree branches. At all times it was a jungle gym. Big roots crisscrossed the trail at waist or head height almost the entire way, requiring acrobatic skills to crawl over, under, and through the jungle gym.

If I'd had an axe and a full day I could have cleared out the entire trail, but for some reason the Dominicans decided not to maintain this last stretch. Perhaps they want people to truly earn the summit of the country. I struggled through the jungle for 45 minutes before emerging on another small rocky outlook. I noticed a small geological survey marker in the rock that said "Morne Diablotins." This is the second place people might be fooled into thinking was the summit. On a cloudy day like today it certainly looked like the tallest point around, and it even had this official marker to prove it. But, I knew from Matthew's account hiking this mountain the previous year that this was merely a false summit.

I admired the view into the clouds for a moment, but then plunged back into the jungle. Fifteen minutes later I finally emerged on the true summit of Morne Diablotins, as verified by my GPS and the fact that nothing was obviously taller around me. It had taken 2.5 hours from the

car, just as the sign at the trailhead had predicted (assuming it actually meant travel time to the summit for a reasonably-fast hiker). It had been drizzling most of the morning, but miraculously as I got to the summit the clouds broke and I got a panoramic view of almost the entire island.

I hung out for about 10 minutes, until the clouds rolled back in and it started drizzling again. The summit was actually kind of exposed to the rain, so I ducked back into the jungle and continued back down the trail.

BACK TO THE CAR

I soon emerged from the jungle gym and started hiking down the normal trail. Not far past the exit of the jungle gym I met a couple hiking up the trail. “How much farther?” they asked, predictably. “Um, I left the top an hour ago,” I responded. They looked disappointed. “And the trail gets a lot worse real soon. You have to use your hands most of the way to climb over and under stuff. It is pretty fun, though.” I could see what they were thinking ‘worse?! It’s already a hard trail!’

The man in front looked down at the muddy crocs on my feet, my bare chest (I was going shirtless since it was raining) and my skimpy little day pack. He and his wife were decked out in serious hiking boots, big packs, fancy trekking poles, and all kinds of fancy hiking accessories. “Do you live around here?” he asked. “You do this mountain a lot?” He must have thought I was treating the hike pretty nonchalantly based on my attire and attitude.

“Nope, never been here before,” I responded. “Good luck. I should also mention; the first viewpoint you get to isn’t the top. And the second one that has a little marker in the rock that says ‘Morne Diablotins’ is also not the top. The trail gets even worse after that one, but the next viewpoint actually is the top. Have fun!”

I continued down the trail, jogging at this point because there were no jungle-gym roots to get in the way. I don’t think I’d told those people a single word they’d wanted to hear, and I wouldn’t doubt if they turned around at the second viewpoint (or maybe the first) and called that close enough.

By 12:30pm I reached my car for a 5-hr round trip. I celebrated by picking a few grapefruit from the trees nearby and eating some lunch.

BACK TO THE AIRPORT

Somehow I’d planned on the hike taking all day based on other reports I’d read, and here I was with half a day still remaining. I decided to explore a little more of Dominica, so drove back down to the main road and looped up to the northern peninsula, then back down towards the airport. I passed the airport on the east coast of the island, drove into the jungle in the interior and found a stealthy dirt side road to camp out on that night.

Antigua and Barbuda
Mount Obama 1319ft

Author: Eric

March 26, 2012 (Eric), March 30, 2012 (Matthew)

Eric's Ascent Report

I'm here to report that anyone who thinks they've completed a full New Hampshire presidential traverse is most likely missing out on one critical mountain – Mount Obama. Nope, you won't find this one on any White Mountains maps – it's actually way down in the tiny Caribbean nation of Antigua and Barbuda, and is indeed named after President Barak Obama.

I set out on March 26 to complete the final mountain of my first official presidential traverse. Matthew and I had completed four Caribbean country highpoints in the last four days, but had to part ways for this one so I could get back to Boston a little earlier. He would come back to tag Mt Obama several days later.

Mount Obama presents probably the biggest logistical difficulty of all the Eastern Caribbean highpoints, not because of any technical difficulty but because of a certain barbed-wire fence surrounding the summit. The official summit is owned by a cell-phone company, which you must contact to get permission to pass by the fence. But the difficulty is getting that permission.

Matthew and I had spent countless hours online researching trip reports from Mt Obama and emailing people to see how they got access to the top, but with no luck. (There were only a few people we found that had actually made it inside the fenced area). Finally, I'd had a breakthrough after contacting a tourism officer in the newly established Mt Obama National Park. She said she could arrange for the summit to be opened for us at a specific time, but we would need a guide, at a price of 100USD.

"I'd rather just sneak over the fence at night then pay for a guide," Matthew told me. I agreed and continued negotiating with the tourism lady. Finally, the very day I was planning to fly out of Boston (and be completely away from email), she agreed to have the summit gate opened for us at noon March 26 (for me) and noon March 30 (for Matthew), and we would not be required to have a guide. I quickly accepted, and hoped she would relay the message to the

security people as promised. It was unclear how long the gate would be open, so I absolutely had to get there by noon to be sure.

I left Barbados on the 8:20am flight Monday morning, expecting to land in Antigua at 9:45am and to have just enough time to summit by noon. However, flights aren't always operated as by-the-book in the Caribbean as back in the US. LIAT airlines decided to add a 30-minute stop in St. Lucia to the middle of my supposedly direct flight to Antigua. I guess they had to pick up a few more passengers, though there was nothing I could do about it.

I landed in Antigua at 10:15am and this time I had learned my lesson on the most efficient way to clear customs: even if you're planning to camp out (like I was), you should always make up a legitimate address for the hotel you're supposedly staying at on the immigration form. They'll never actually check that you have a reservation, and this prevents any unnecessary questions from the immigration officer.

I picked a legitimate hotel in Antigua (Eva Way in Seatons), which I had no intention of staying at, and wrote that on the immigration form. This time voila! Instead of the extra half-hour of hassle Matthew and I had gotten at the St. Vincent customs for not producing a hotel address, this time I was whisked through with no questions!

I immediately found the rental agency and picked up a 4-door sedan. I was almost relieved to see Antiguans drove on the left side of the road – at this point I was almost more comfortable driving on the left than on the right.

I was 11am by the time I hit the road, and the chances were slim that I would make it to the summit by noon. Driving was definitely more difficult without Matthew navigating, but I managed to follow signs to St. John's, and then more signs to Bolans, which I knew was in the right direction. My trailhead was in Christian Valley, and when I saw a "Christian Valley Agriculture Center" sign just outside of Bolans I immediately pulled off. The road was dirt, but it headed in the right direction so I took it.

I had to swerve around a few enormous water-filled potholes and drive over a few rough rocky sections, but by 11:45am I reached a gate with a sign reading "Mt. Obama National Park." This was the right spot! And I hadn't even made a single wrong turn!

I quickly hopped out of the car, stuffed some food and water in my pack, and took off. I passed through the gate and saw a huge rock with a "Mt. Obama" plaque mounted on it. I'd seen pictures of this rock online, so knew I was definitely on the right route.

The trail cut into the woods behind this sign, starting out as an old dirt road but gradually thinning into a narrow trail. The trail looked like it had been created pretty recently, and I suspect it was cut when the national park was made back in 2010. This forest was much dryer than those of the other Caribbean islands I'd hiked on, and definitely didn't feel like a jungle. I could have been out for a hike in the hills near my house in Kentucky for all I knew.

The trail followed a dry stream bed, and then started switchbacking up more steeply. Noon had come and gone, and my GPS said I was still 0.25 miles line-of-sight from the summit.

I figured everyone is so relaxed in the Caribbean, these security guards will probably be late anyways, right?

By 12:20pm I popped out on the access road to the top and knew I was safe: if the security guard started driving down I could just stop him. At 12:30pm I rounded the final turn in the road and saw the infamous fence with the "No Unauthorized Access" sign, and the gate was open! All the logistical planning had paid off after all! (For future reference, though, I did notice a large tree growing right next to the fence to the left of the gate that would provide very easy access over the barbed wire if one happened to find oneself locked out).

There was a large building with a blue jeep parked outside, and I assumed the security guard was inside the building (I never saw anyone though). I made my way up to a rock outcrop at the official summit and propped my camera up for a picture. Unfortunately, my last battery had started reading low back in St. Vincent, and I decided to not take any more pictures until this summit just to be sure. Luckily the summit photo worked, as well as one juggling picture and one other scenery shot, but then the battery died.

I put my GPS on the summit for 15 minutes to try to get an accurate elevation, and came back with about 1370ft. This was important, because Google Earth had indicated that an unnamed local maximum a mile south on the ridge was actually significantly taller than Mt Obama. With such uncertainty in the highest point in Antigua and Barbuda there was only one solution: climb both mountains.

With this GPS measurement saved I packed up my bag and started heading toward the other peak. Matthew had marked the exact location of the summit on the GPS in case a trail didn't actually lead there. (This was our old GPS that didn't have any overlayed satellite images or topo maps on it, so just showed my location coordinates on a blank background).

I followed the road back down to my previous trail, and then followed another trail south towards the other summit. The trail didn't actually reach the summit, so I bushwhacked up the ridge until I hit the waypoint marker. My GPS read only 1334ft here, and I couldn't find any higher reading even after bushwhacking a few hundred feet in either direction along the ridge. This was perplexing, because google maps is usually trustworthy, and had definitely indicated this ridge was taller. Could it have been an issue with the GPS? I would have to wait until Matthew hiked here a few days later to confirm the elevations with our newer GPS model, but I was certain of one thing: I'd at least been to the highest point in Antigua and Barbuda, no matter which of the two points was actually taller.

Satisfied with my success I hiked back down, reaching the car by 2:30pm. I still had plenty of time to burn before my flight out the next morning, so decided to drive around till dark and then find a place in the woods to sleep.

I drove west through Bolans, hit the coast, drove through Falmouth and English Bay, and kept driving along the loop road not caring if I made any wrong turns, just trying to see the country. I stopped at one cool spot called "Devil's Bridge", with a natural rock bridge over the ocean. I eventually made it back to St. John's, and completed an entire circumnavigation of the

island by 6pm. I knew the Christian Valley trailhead was in the woods, so I headed back there to sleep just as the sun was setting.

This time, however, I noticed a security guard in the little building near the gate where I had parked. This presented a dilemma – I wanted to just sleep in my car (I didn't have a bug net so couldn't really sleep outside), but I was worried I'd get in trouble with the security guard for trespassing. I figured I had two options: either sleep in the car and hope he didn't even notice I was still in it, or go and ask him for permission. If I just slept in the car without talking to him, I'd probably be worrying all night that someone would come knocking on the door and kick me out. But if I talked to him, there was a good chance he'd tell me I couldn't sleep there.

I debated back and forth for about half an hour, but finally decided to go talk to him. Caribbean people I'd met so far were all pretty easy-going, so maybe he'd be too? I went over and knocked on the door.

"Hi, is it okay if I just sleep in the car over there tonight? I have a real early flight tomorrow so probably won't be here very long." I asked as politely as I could. "Oh yeah, no problem mon," he replied in a thick Jamaican-sounding accent. "There's another shift coming in at 10pm, but I'll tell them you're cool mon. Where are you from?" "Thanks! I'm from the United States, and just came down here to climb Mt. Obama today," I started.

We talked for a while and he was a pretty friendly guy. He said he'd lived in New York for a few years, but had to come back to Antigua where the weather was warm and sunny all year round.

I went back to the car relieved that I'd made the right decision. It's actually not that comfortable sleeping in a small car where you can't really extend your legs, but I managed to get a few hours of sleep. I made it back to the airport with no problem and successfully caught my flight back to the states.

Email me if you want my GPS track or the contact information for the Mt Obama National Park tourism person who can get you access to the fenced-in summit. Matthew later measured with the more-accurate GPS that Mt Obama is 1374ft tall, and the other unnamed point is only 1355ft tall. While the absolute measurements my not be as accurate as a sight survey, they are pretty trustworthy as relative measurements that the northern summit is the true highpoint.

Matthew's Ascent Report:

Author: Matthew

"I just wanted to let you know that we're cool with you guys being up here, but normally that gate isn't open," a worker for Antigua's Cable & Wireless told us. "There's all kinds of antennas up here: for airlines, for the government, for the cell phone network and so usually that gate is locked. That's why there's a big fence around everything." He pointed down at the reinforced 10ft-tall barbed-wire fence and sturdy steel gate through which we had just entered.

"Yes, thanks so much for coming up here just to open the gate for us, sorry we're a little late," we replied. Amanda, her mom, and I breathed a huge sigh of relief. At last we were standing here on the summit of Mt Obama, the highest point in the Caribbean nation of Antigua and Barbuda. Compared with the other two other country high points we had climbed earlier that week, Dominica's Morne Diablotins and Barbados' Mt Hillaby, Mt Obama had been the biggest question mark. We'd read on SummitPost that since the summit area is fenced off, that in order to stand on the actual summit of Mt Obama you have to be "very lucky in that you need somebody from the crew working for the company Cable & Wireless" to open the gate for you.

Well luck had been with us because Eric had somehow managed to make contact with a Ms. Vashti Ramsey from the newly-created Mt Obama National Park which apparently manages the summit; said she'd have the gates open for us at whatever times we wanted. Things would be a little complicated because Eric was going to be in Antigua on a Tuesday while me, Amanda, and her mom would arrive on a Friday, so we were hopeful she could accommodate two days. "How about noon on both days?" we asked. "Hi the security will be there at both times and will open the gates for you," she replied. Perfect! we thought.

But our confidence in Caribbean managerial processes had been eroded that week when LIAT Airlines lost my backpack in Grenada and offered almost zero help in trying to locate it. It appeared unlikely that I'd ever see my backpack again or even receive any compensation for it. So even though Ms. Ramsey had given us her word that the gate would be open, we didn't have much confidence that our request would make it far enough down the chain of command to someone who actually had the keys to the gate. But lo and behold the gate was open. Thank you Mrs. Ramsey.

"What do you mean you mean you're late? We didn't open that gate for you," the worker replied. "We came up here to do some work today. You guys are lucky that we were up here and the gate was open."

"Wait," I answered, "I emailed Vashti Ramsey and she said she'd have the gate open for us at noon today." I looked down at my watch and it was 12:15pm. Amanda, her mom and I were still out of breath from hustling to try to get up here in time.

"Now I don't know this Ms. Ramsey you're speaking of," he answered, "but we had some maintenance we needed to do up here today. But like I said, it's no problem that you're up here, mon." "Ok, thanks!" I answered.

Had we really been that incredibly lucky that they happened to be working up here at the exact time that we had planned to arrive? Had it really been a total coincidence? As we stood there admiring the commanding view of the entire island we tried to piece together what had happened…

We left the Ellen Bay Inn Hostel around 8am so we could be on the summit by noon. It's not often that you have to make an appointment to climb a mountain, but we figured that if that's the extent of the red tape then we could certainly handle it. At least they didn't close the mountain altogether.

Two weeks earlier, Eric had stumbled across the Mount Obama National Park website, which provided a form to contact park administrators. We figured we'd first try to see if we could arrange a visit to the top "officially," and if that didn't work we'd find an "unofficial" way to get to the summit. On the website Eric made contact with Ms. Ramsey, a tourism officer. At first she offered a spot in a guided group at a price of $100pp but after a little pushback she said it'd be OK for us to hike up the 2-mile access road to the summit ourselves and the gate would be open for us at noon.

Three days earlier Eric had successfully summited Mt. Obama on his way back to the States to visit an oil rig in the Gulf and had reported that the gate was opened as promised and he had encountered no difficulties. He had taken a scenic hiking trail to the summit from the north, but after a tough jungle hike earlier that week on Dominica, Amanda, and her mom and I decided we'd stick to hiking up the summit access road instead because we knew it'd be free of jungle roots, wet rock scrambling, and swamps.

With Amanda at the wheel we first stopped by Shirley Heights for a nice view of the western half of the island, then headed to Falmouth Harbour to check out the huge yachts and sailboats. We watched as a couple of young dudes, who had just returned from a deep-sea fishing trip, butchered up about a dozen three-foot wahoos right there on the dock. They sold their fillets within minutes.

We continued west towards Mt Obama and turned onto an unsigned little gravel road that led to the summit. Luckily I had marked it on the GPS because it was pretty inconspicuous. I suppose we could have driven up higher, but rather than risk offending any Cable & Wireless officials, and in order to make it an actual hike, Amanda parked the car in the bushes underneath some banana trees where nobody could see it.

We started hiking up the road and noticed we were in the middle of a big fruit plantation. There were mangoes, bananas, and oranges all over the place but unfortunately they needed a few more weeks to ripen. I noticed a worker picking weeds and with a strong Caribbean accent she asked "you headed to Boggy Peak?"

"Yes," we replied. Within the last few years the mountain's name had been changed from Boggy Peak to Mt. Obama, but we figured that not everyone had gotten the message yet. "Straight up that road, then turn left," she said. We were glad to see that we were on the right track and that we weren't the first ones to climb the mountain. Maybe that meant the gate would actually be open for us?

The road steepened and grew rougher and we knew we had made the right decision to proceed on foot. Pretty soon we passed a sign that said "PRIVATE ROAD NO ADMITTANCE TO UNAUTHORIZED PERSONS." "Well then it's a good thing that we're authorized," I said. We kept walking.

A little higher up we heard some vehicles struggling up the steep incline below us. Soon a white van carrying six people and marked with some official-looking logo zipped by, followed by a white truck. "All right, they must be the ones who are opening the gate for us," we thought.

At that point we were running a little late so we decided that I'd run ahead to the top to make sure they kept the gate open.

I ran as fast as I could and struggled to keep my crocs from slipping off my feet. At 12:11pm I rounded the final corner and saw the open gate! They were waiting for us. I hustled into the summit compound, up the steps, and passed by a real official-looking dude with some worker-looking people behind him. I said hello and he nodded. With just that simple nod I relaxed because that meant it was OK for us to be here. A few steps later I was on the summit of Mt. Obama, followed moments later by Amanda and her mom.

We saw two not-so-official looking worker dudes walking around at the summit and went over to talk to them. One was wearing a Yankees cap, the other wore a more traditional Caribbean hat. After a few minutes of discussion, we came to the conclusion that we had just been incredibly lucky to hike to the summit at the moment they had to perform some routine maintenance, which required the opening of the gate.

From the top we could see almost the entire island of Antigua from Caribbean to Atlantic. (By the way, the preferred pronunciation is "an-TEE-ga and bar-BYU-da," rather than "an-TEE-gwa and bar-BOO-da"). We posed for the traditional summit photos of 1) the three of us, 2) me holding Amanda, and 3) a panorama, and picked up a tiny rock.

After a little more tomfoolery the two not-so-official looking dudes came over to us and the Yankees fan said, as gently as possible, "Um, so we're done with what we needed to do up here, so if you're ready to go, we'd like to ask you to um, leave."

"Ok, sure, that's fine, we'll head out now," we said. At that point I noticed that they were the only two workers still up here. The official-looking dude and five others had already left in their van and it looked like these two guys had been stuck babysitting us. We thanked them for their patience and willingness to let us do so much fooling around.

On the way out the other guy showed me a guava bush near the summit but unfortunately the fruit wasn't ripe yet. As they loaded up in their truck we asked him why it's called "Mt. Obama." He turned around cleared his throat. This was the moment he had been waiting for. "To understand why," he answered, "you'll first need to understand the Antiguan culture." And then he launched into a discussion about cultural responsibility and Antiguan politics and a few other topics that I can't remember. I was just happy to have climbed the mountain and didn't have the mental capacity to engage in a philosophical discussion so I just kept nodding my head. Fortunately Amanda and her mom understood what he was talking about so they politely let him keep going.

When his discourse was over, we thanked them both profusely and started walking back down the road. They locked up the gate and gave us a big wave as they sped by.

"I think I've figured it out!" I said. "So remember how there were two vehicles that drove by while we were hiking up? Well, I bet the official-looking dude in the first vehicle was the only one who knew Ms. Ramsey. She told him that we'd be here at noon today. Now that guy must be pretty nice, but he can't justify devoting an entire trip up here just to let in some tourists.

So he invented the story that some maintenance needed to be performed up here at noon today. Now he couldn't perform all that maintenance alone, so he brought his buddies with him. All eight of them.

As soon as he saw us enter and gave me the nod, he knew that his work was finished and he could leave. He knew the other two guys would babysit us. So he was probably the one who knew we were going to climb the mountain today. What do you guys think?" "It's possible," Amanda said, "that's really nice of them to take time out of there day to open it up just for us. That worked out really well."

On the way down we had one last little piece of business to attend to. Based on Google Earth elevation research it appeared that a nearby summit was actually 60ft taller than Mt. Obama, as measured by hovering your cursor over the map and looking at the elevation. Could it really be that Mt. Obama wasn't actually the tallest mountain in Antigua? We had to find out.

Three days earlier, Eric had discovered with his GPS that the potential higher summit was in fact 35ft lower than Mt. Obama. But just to be absolutely sure, we wanted to confirm that with our newer, more-accurate GPS. Eric said there was a nice trail and only some light bushwhacking so we decided to go for it. In about fifteen minutes we were thrashing through the grass on the summit-in-question and came to the conclusion that with an elevation of 1355ft, it was actually 19ft lower then Mt Obama's 1374ft. Nineteen feet isn't very much though.

Satisfied that at some point that day we had stood on Antigua's highest point, we turned around and continued walking down the access road. On the way down we snuck a couple of oranges. We hopped back in the car and headed towards one of the more conventional tourist destinations in the country: the beach. Unfortunately most of the Atlantic-side Caribbean island beaches are closed to swimming due to strong rip currents so there aren't many beaches with bodysurf-able waves. But it was still refreshing to jump in the warm Caribbean water.

PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN

Back at the hotel later on that night we had exquisite, authentic Antiguan lobster celebration feast; it was "authentic" because the hotel's owner had actually caught the lobsters himself while snorkeling! We woke up the next morning, the last day of our successful and exciting Caribbean vacation, but I couldn't push out of my mind a nagging feeling of regret. True, we had accomplished all of our goals on this trip: three country high points (six for me), swimming in the Caribbean, adventure, hiking, sleeping in a treehouse, and had even snuck in a little relaxation time. But I wasn't completely satisfied, there was just one little thing missing, one thing that prevented me from feeling 100% fulfilled: a visit to the pirate ship.

When we had first pulled into Seaton's Village the first evening we were met with a spectacular view of Ellen Bay. There were a few islands, covered in mangrove trees, and some picturesque palm trees on the beach but the thing that caught my eye most was the gigantic "pirate" ship that sat rusting away a few hundred yards offshore. Well, OK, it wasn't exactly a pirate ship, but it's in the Caribbean, so I'm going to call it a pirate ship – a ghost pirate ship, if you will. It looked like a giant fishing vessel that had been abandoned five years ago. The paint

was peeling off and it was covered in rust. It wasn't clear if it was resting on the bottom or still floating, but it was one massive ship. After a close look at the photos it looks like the ship was 180-200ft long. At that moment I decided that I needed to stand on that ship.

Here we were, on the last day of our vacation, and needed to drive back to the airport in a few hours. Time was running out. But as if he had read my mind, David (the owner of the hotel) said he'd take us down to the beach and we could paddle around in the kayaks. Perfect! I asked him about the pirate ship and he said it was still seaworthy, sitting in about 60ft of water and that the owner had abandoned it a few years ago but didn't want it back. "Would it be OK if I climbed on it?" I asked hopefully. "Nobody will mind," David answered, "but I don't know why you'd want to do that."

He brought us down to the water, showed us the boats, and bid us farewell. He had business to attend to. The three of us paddled around a little to get acquainted with the kayaks then of course we made a beeline towards the ship. It was a little creepy approaching such a large, abandoned boat, but there was nobody to tell us no. We headed for the little rickety wooden ladder hanging off the side and I tied my kayak to the bottom rung. As I climbed up the ladder I felt like a Somali pirate commandeering an innocent ship. Meanwhile Amanda and her mom paddled around, guarding the area.

I climbed over the top rung and was on board. It was truly a massive ship. I peeked down into the cargo holds which were probably 20ft deep but didn't see any fish. As I stood on the ship I could see it rocking ever so slightly and noticed a long thick rope fastened to some mangrove trees on a nearby island. It was time for some exploration.

Obviously, my first mission was to check out the steering wheel. Did it actually look like one on a pirate ship? Indeed, it did. There was even the cool little lever you could push forward to change the throttle. I tried pushing it from OFF to FULL SPEED but unfortunately the ship didn't budge. I nosed around in the map room and found some interesting nautical charts of Central America, along with some instructions about how to pass through the Panama Canal. There was a huge spherical liquid-filled compass like the one on the Titanic. I peeked into the crews' and captain's quarters and was relieved not to find any skeletons.

Everything inside the ship was thrown around in complete disarray, as if the ship had been abandoned in a big hurry. But more likely, it had probably been looted over the years and there wasn't anything valuable left inside, including the treasure chests. I climbed up a few flights of stairs to the top of the ship and relayed my findings to Amanda and her mom. Amanda said she was on her way up.

Soon there were two pirates on the ship. We were real pirates of the Caribbean. I gave her a tour of the bunk rooms, mess hall, kitchen, map room, command deck, and cargo holds. We peeked down into the engine room, but without headlamps it wasn't too enticing to descend any deeper into the bowels of the ship. It could be where they kept the prisoners.

Content at last, we decided it was time to abandon ship and head back to America. We walked over to the dilapidated ladder that hung over the side. "Do you want to go first or do you

want me to go first?" I asked Amanda. "You can go first, so I can see where you step," she answered.

I climbed back over the side of the ship and slowly transferred my weight onto the top rung. It looked like this ladder had been there since the ship was abandoned. Years of sun and the elements had caused some of the wood to rot away and the ropes were becoming frayed. It didn't look like would last much longer. But since I was able to climb up it, surely it'd hold up while I climbed down it, right?

I carefully lowered myself to the bottom rung and my feet brushed the water. I pulled my kayak over and gingerly eased myself into the seat. But as I picked my foot off the final rung I heard an unmistakable, agonizing pop. The three of us froze. I was safely in my kayak but I looked behind me in time to see left half of the ladder detach from the ship and drop into the water. "Uh-oh," I said.

The three of us stared at the broken ladder for a moment, speechless. It was like we were in an Indiana Jones movie or something. The left support rope had broken. That ladder had faithfully supported my weight when I had climbed up and somehow, during the last millisecond that it bore my weight during my descent, it decided to break. The right half of the ladder still clung to the ship, but the ladder was now just a tangled mess of wood and frayed rope.

I looked up and saw and expression of terror on Amanda's face. "Well, looks like you might have to jump off," I said. The water was warm and we were so close to shore that she could have made the swim easily. In fact, she could probably have beaten me back to shore if she swam and I paddled. "Or you could climb down the rope at the front of the ship to the island," I suggested.

After a moment of deliberation, she decided that she'd try the ladder. It looked pretty risky. With only half a ladder left, that meant that the one remaining rope had to support her entirely. I was worried that if the rope broke as she descended the heavy ladder rungs could hit her head as she plunged into the water. Me and Amanda's mom paddled out of the way so that in case Amanda did fall she'd have a comfortable fall into water instead of on top our kayaks. It was probably a 12-foot drop.

She took a deep breath and threw her left foot into the tangled remnants of the ladder. Then her right foot. Then she grabbed on. It held. As the rope creaked painfully in protest and the ladder rungs grated agonizingly against the steel hull of the ship Amanda descended as swiftly as possible. I fully expected the ladder to detach from the ship at any moment, sending Amanda and a bunch of wood and rope into the Atlantic. As Amanda neared the bottom I quickly brought my tandem kayak beneath her and she dropped in. "You did it!" I said. "Whew!" She let out a vigorous sigh of relief.

Now it was time for Amanda's mom to get in on the excitement so she dropped off the side of her kayak and started swimming back to shore. Amanda hopped in the empty boat and we escorted her mom back to dry land.

We drove back the airport an hour later, now fully content with our successful Caribbean vacation. From jungles to beaches, from left-side driving to bushwhacking, from mountaineering to buccaneering we had gotten a good taste of the Caribbean.

Trip 4 – The Lesser Antilles II

Saint Lucia
Mount Gimie 3117ft

Author: Matthew

January 1-2, 2013

On January 1, 2013, we crossed a line. It wasn't a tangible line like you might find on a soccer field or a highway or a country border—this line could not be straddled with two feet. It was a line that we had never crossed, and had never wanted to cross, before. Not a socially-imposed line demarcating lawful from unlawful or good idea from bad idea, we had crossed those lines before in search of adventure. This line was a moral line. It was self-imposed and self-enforced, separating honor from shame, courage from cowardice.

On January 1, 2013, we hired a guide to help us climb a mountain. The location was the tiny Caribbean island nation of Saint Lucia ('loo-shuh'), the objective was Mount Gimie ('jimmy'), and our guide would be Mr. Smith Jean-Philip.

As Eric and I wound through the hills of rural St. Lucia above the capital, Vieux Fort, in our rental car—a Mitsubishi Lancer GLX sedan—to the designated meeting point with Mr. Jean-Philip, we weren't quite sure what to expect for tomorrow. This trip would be the first time we

had ever hiked with a guide. Would he hike fast enough? Would he actually be there to meet us? Would he ask for any more money? Would he take us to the actual summit?

"Well we already agreed on $100 per person," I said to Eric, "that's what I negotiated when I talked with Smith on Skype a few weeks ago. I told him we were poor college students. And he knows our time constraints." "Yeah, it's a shame that we're required to hire a dang guide for this mountain," Eric said, "there'd be so many fewer question marks if we were completely on our own." "Well we didn't have any alternatives," I said. "I Skyped the government phone number for the National Parks Service in Saint Lucia, and they said that you're required by law to hire a guide. There's not really any way we can argue with that; I guess; it was a government person I spoke with."

"It just seems suspicious that they referred us directly to Smith," Eric said. "It sounds like he's an official government ranger." "We'll find out soon enough," I said. According to the map, we'd arrive at the designated rendezvous point with Mr. Jean-Philip in less than ten minutes.

PIRATED MOUTAINEERING IN THE CARIBBEAN: 2.0

It was New Year's Day of 2013 and the commencement of another highpointing adventure in the Caribbean. On the menu for the next week were ascents of the highest points in four Caribbean Island countries: Saint Lucia, Saint Kitts, Jamaica, and the Bahamas. Successful ascents of these four countries would put us at 18 of the 23 North American country high points, and put our goal of all 23 within reach within the next few years. We had knocked off the first five Caribbean country high points during Spring Break 2012: Trinidad/Tobago, Grenada, St. Vincent & the Grenadines, Barbados, and Dominica, and now were back in the Caribbean for Round Two.

The schedule was aggressive and ambitious. The way the flights worked out, we would have about 24 hours on the ground in Saint Lucia before our next flight to Saint Kitts. Eric was already down in the Caribbean, having climbed the high points in Dominica and Netherlands (on the island Saba) over the previous two days. He had landed at Saint Lucia's smaller, northern airport, Castries, that morning, and had an unexpected and undesired adventure acquiring the rental car.

As we had learned in Spring Break 2012, and would be further reinforced on this trip, things operate a little differently in the Caribbean. It turned out that the rental car agency with which Eric had booked online didn't actually exist (luckily he hadn't paid them any money). He went over to the only staffed rental car counter in the Castries airport and, after considerable hassle, the details of which I'll spare the reader for the sake of brevity, ended up with quite possibly the only available rental car in the northern half of Saint Lucia. He then drove the hour or two south to Vieux Fort to pick me up once I landed from Atlanta.

SMITH JEAN-PHILIP

As soon as we hopped in the car, I gave Smith a call. We had spoken a month ago, as well as the previous week, via Skype, and had attempted to hammer out some of the details of the trip. The plan was to meet Smith that afternoon, camp somewhere near the Mount Gimie

trailhead, start hiking early the next morning, and be off the mountain by noon so we could catch our 4pm flight out of Castries.

"Hey man, what's up?" Smith answered in his friendly, laid-back Caribbean accent. (For the record, his first name is Smith, and last name is Jean-Philip.) "Did you guys make it to Saint Lucia?" he asked. "Yep, just landed," I said. "We're in the car now. Where should we meet you?" "Ok, drive on the main road to Fond Saint Jacques," Smith responded, "after forty-five minutes you'll see me on the side of the road." "Ok, great, can we start hiking early tomorrow, say 5am?" "Relax, we'll talk about it when you arrive. Miguel will be guiding you tomorrow, we'll talk about it with him."

Things were starting to make a little more sense now; it sounded like Smith was the agent and Miguel was the actual guide who would be hiking with us – the two of them had their own little guiding company.

We tried unsuccessfully to pick up some groceries along the way, but all of the stores were closed because it was New Year's Day. "Well I guess we'll have to rely on the food we brought," Eric said, "I'm glad I brought some granola."

Eric deftly maneuvered the now-familiar steering-wheel-on-the-right-sided car, typical of many of the Caribbean Island countries that we had visited so far. The roads were narrow and windy, but mercifully sparsely-trafficked due to the holiday.

After fifty minutes, we still had not yet spotted Smith and I gave him a call. "Yeah, you just passed us," he said. "Turn around and drive back five minutes and you'll see us." "Ok, will do," I said.

We wondered how exactly he knew it was us. "There are still a decent number of cars on the road, how does he know which one is ours?" I said. "Well there probably aren't too many other white-skinned gringos like us on these roads," Eric said. (We would later discover that the correct term for us was "honkies.")

SMITH & MIGUEL, INC

Five minutes later, we rounded a corner and spotted two gentlemen waving from the side of the road: it was Smith and Miguel. They were both in their twenties, the same as us. "Hi, I'm Smith," the taller gentleman said as we rolled down the window, "and this is Miguel, he's going to take you up Mount Gimie tomorrow." "Ok, great," we said, introducing ourselves.

Smith and Miguel hopped in the car. "I'll show you where to go," Smith said. He directed us up through the village of Fond Saint Jacques and into the rainforested countryside. The roads were steep and rough, but the Lancer managed without trouble. After thirty minutes, we arrived at a small neighborhood at the intersection of three rough concrete roads. "My house is up there," Smith said, "we'll stay there tonight." Five brightly-colored concrete houses were perched on the steep hillside and several more were under construction.

Smith said that he had lost his house and car to a landslide during a recent hurricane and had narrowly escaped with his life. The government was currently building new housing in areas

less-susceptible to the ravages of hurricanes. All of the houses were perched on ten-foot tall concrete stilts, which evidently put them at less risk. It was a cute little outpost in the jungle, surrounded by palm trees.

We discussed with Miguel the agenda for the next day, including the early departure we needed to ensure we would make our afternoon flight. Miguel was on board for a 3:30 am start, and was confident that we would have plenty of time to spare. We were curious to see where the route started, as Google Maps indicated that the road continued for another couple of miles up the hill.

"Let's drive up the hill," Smith said, "so we can see where you'll meet Miguel and what road you'll take in the morning. We wound farther up the steep, single-lane road and hoped that we wouldn't have to pass any other cars. Finally, after about two miles, the rough pavement turned to gravel. "The trail starts another twenty minutes up this road," Smith said.

"I don't know," Eric said, "I'm not sure we'll be able to get up this with our car." Now, Eric and I have driven a considerable number of low-clearance rental cars up rough roads in our day, but this one just didn't look possible. Maybe it's just this one rough patch? Maybe the road gets better just around the bend? We had asked ourselves these questions before on other similar roads and had always arrived at the answers of "no" and "no," respectively. Eric attempted the first fifty feet but we decided to retreat after it became clear that the car would bottom out. The hike would begin here.

CAMPING AT SMITH'S

We turned around, dropped off Miguel at his house in the tiny village of Migny, and proceeded back down to Smith's house, where we would stay the night. "Where can we set up the tent?" we asked Smith. He pointed to a dusty, rocky area below the house. "You'll have plenty of room there," he said. This was obviously the first time that Smith had dealt with tenting clients, because it was about the roughest, rockiest, most un-tentable ground that you could find. But it was the only flat ground around, so we told him that it would work. We guessed that most of Smith's clients probably stay in hotels in Vieux Fort and meet him in the morning.

As we were setting up the tent, Smith's girlfriend invited us into the house and prepared some magnificent fresh orange juice for us from a couple of fresh oranges. Meanwhile, she, Smith, and a few friends chatted vociferously in Creole with each other. They said that all of the kids in Saint Lucia learn Creole as their first language, and learn English in school. It sounds similar to French, but we couldn't pick out many words.

We retired to our tent and set our alarms for 3am, theoretically giving us six hours of sleep. In reality, however, a loud TV and a bit too much merriment upstairs kept us awake.

THE "NEED" FOR A GUIDE

"Man, it's unfortunate that we've got to hire a guide for this trip," I said as we lay on the rough ground in our thin sleeping bag liners, trying to sleep. "I wish we didn't have to put up

with all of this and that we could just hike the trail by ourselves. I'd rather just start hiking it now, I'm not getting any sleep anyhow."

"Yeah, it adds a lot more uncertainty having a guide," Eric said. "What are the chances that Miguel will actually be there at 3:30am? That'd be bad if he was late. But even if we did it by ourselves, it'd be tough to find where the trail starts, especially in the dark."

Extensive research over the past few weeks in Boston had uncovered precious little information about Mount Gimie (a.k.a. "Morne" Gimie) or St. Kitts' Mount Liamuiga, which we would climb in a few days. The six or so reports that mentioned Mount Gimie gave ambiguous statements pertaining to guided trips. "You'll need to hire a guide for Mt. Gimie," one said. Well, what does "need" actually mean? "Need" is really an ambiguous word. Is it required by law or does the author of the report just think it's a good idea? If it's a matter of being arrested or fined, we'll listen to that. But if it's just a suggestion, we'll take it as that and hike it by ourselves.

In our opinion, there's much more of a sense of thrill if you do all the research yourself and execute the climb based 100% on your own decisions, without having a guide. Perhaps things might go more smoothly if you hire a guide, but, in our opinion, there's really a loss of satisfaction if someone else is holding your hand, telling you where to go, and making the important decisions. For us, hiring a guide has always been our last-resort tactic to get to the top. We had managed to avoid it in climbing all of the US state high points and in all of our country highpointing adventures thus far.

As we dug deeper, we came across more ambiguous terminology with respect to guides and Mount Gimie. You "must," "should," "had better," "need to," "have to," hire a guide. What does that mean? Is it required? Who requires/enforces it?

To clarify this issue, a month before the trip I called up the Saint Lucia Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries with Skype and asked this question directly. Previously, Eric and I had dealt with trip planning and coordination mostly through Google, and occasional email when necessary. But over the years, we had learned that a well-placed phone call can often clear up important issues much more quickly.

Janice, the government official I spoke with, answered that you are required by law to hire an official guide, and subject to fine without one. Perhaps, we speculated, it's their way of boosting the local economy or increasing tourist dollars. She gave me the number for Smith Jean-Philip, one such certified guide.

PLANNING

So I gave Smith a call. "Hey man, what's up?" he said with a strong Caribbean/Creole accent. "We'd like to climb Mount Gimie on January 2nd, and we heard that you're a guide who could lead us to the top," I said. "Yeah man, I can help you," he replied.

"Ok, great, we just have some tight time constraints I'd like to discuss. We're wondering if we can start hiking really early in the morning on January 2nd, because we have an afternoon flight out of Vieux Fort."

"What time do you arrive?" "1pm on January 1st. We'll have a rental car and will drive to meet you." "Great, sounds good man." "So how early can we start hiking? 4am?"

"How's the weather in Boston," he said, "is it cold?"

"Yep, it's cold up here," I said, looking outside at the December snow. "But is it OK if we start hiking at 4am?"

"Snow? Wow, I'd freeze to death! How many days are you in Saint Lucia?"

"Just one full day. Would we be able to start at 4am?"

"Wow, that's not much time, man, very little time."

"Would we be able to start that early?"

"Relax man, we'll talk about it when you arrive."I was starting to get a bit impatient. I couldn't tell if the Skype connection was bad, or if Smith had a problem communicating, or if it didn't jive with the Caribbean style to plan things with one hour of resolution more than one day in advance, but I couldn't get a straight answer from Smith about our start time. To maximize our chances of success and mitigate the uncertainty presented by a guide, Eric and I wanted to hammer out all of the details in advance. Eventually, however, when I got the sense that an early departure would probably work, I gave up trying to get a direct answer, and broached a different matter.

NEGOTIATING THE FEE

"How much will the trip cost?" I asked. Smith thought for a moment. "300 dollars for both of you." "You mean 300 US dollars total, so $150 for each of us?" I had read that they often deal in USD in the Caribbean. "Yeah."

"Wow, that's too much," I said, my default answer to no matter whatever number he suggested. "We're both poor college students and don't have much money. I don't think we could afford that. How about $150 total, so $75 per person?"

"Are you crazy? $300," he answered indignantly. It didn't sound like he would budge.

"Ok, how about $200 total, so $100 per person. That's the most we can afford to spend."

"He thought about it for a few seconds. "Ok, $200. But that's very low, it's usually a lot more." "Well thank you, Smith" I said, "we will each bring $100 in cash." "Ok man."

"So, just to confirm, we'll meet you in the evening on January 1st, then climb early in the morning on January 2nd, and the total is $200," I said.

"Ok man, call me when you get to Saint Lucia," Smith said, ambiguously dodging the question. "All right, will do, see you in one month."

Shortly before we had retired to the tent, I told Smith that we would pay him when we finished the hike the next day, and reminded him of the $200 that we had agreed upon. "You know, $200 isn't really a fair price for two people," he said, "It's usually $300. Come on guys, I'm letting you stay at my house too, and people don't usually do that."

"$200 is the price we agreed upon," I said firmly. We both stood there for a second, not sure what to say. I felt a bit worried because we hadn't paid him yet, and there was so much uncertainty for tomorrow, that I didn't want any bad blood between us to mess up our chances of success. I also wanted for us to make a good impression on Smith so that this could potentially set a precedent for future international clients like us. I probably should have stood my ground, but I decided to offer a compromise. "How about $200 and we'll make a website for you? That could help to attract many more clients."

Smith thought about it for a second. "Ok, $200 and a website, I like that," he said. He began to settle down, and I could tell that he was satisfied. (Note: here is the link to Smith's guiding website, which we created: http://climbgimie.wordpress.com)

As we lay on the hard ground, trying to get to sleep, we realized that, despite the communication difficulties, so far everything had gone according to plan. We hoped for similar success in the morning, and drifted to sleep with the sound of reggae blasting through the jungle from somewhere in the distance.

ASCENT OF MORNE GIMIE

Four short hours later, our 3am alarms painfully jolted us awake. We quickly packed up the tent and scarfed down some granola bars before hopping in the car. After a ten-minute drive up the ultra-steep, unlit concrete road, we noticed a fellow emerge from the small dark roadside hut up ahead. Miguel. It was 3:30am exactly. He didn't have a headlamp, but did have his rubber boots, backpack, and machete and was ready for action. "Awesome," I said to Eric, "I'm glad to see that Miguel's a man of his word."

Miguel hopped in the car and we drove another five minutes up the dark road until the rough gravel began at the village of Migny. Time to start walking. We parked the car and proceeded by foot up the star-lit jungle path. Miguel was accustomed to hiking in the dark, but we let him borrow one of our spare headlamps.

"If you had a truck, we could drive up this road and we'd save about thirty minutes of walking," Miguel said, "but that's OK, we still have enough time. It's thirty minutes to the hiking trail, and we'll be at the top in four hours."

As we would discover that morning, Miguel was also a man of precision. In the Smith & Miguel Guiding Services Company, Smith was the businessman and the coordinator, while Miguel was the man of action who actually led people to the top. Softspoken Miguel is no bragger, but we learned that this would be his 24th ascent of Mount Gimie. He knew exactly how

long each section of the trail took for the average client and whenever we stopped for a break he gave us his estimate for our time to the summit. He frequently consulted his cell phone for the time and was probably one of the few people in the country who saw a clock more than once a day.

After thirty minutes of hiking up the dark, steep concrete road, we noticed a chain across an overgrown side road. “Ok, turn right here,” Miguel said. Silhouetted against the stars, the dark forms of two tall peaks loomed in the distance. We had finally laid eyes on Gimie. We followed closely behind Miguel as we walked through the tall, wet jungle grass of the overgrown field. Miguel had dressed appropriately, with rubber boots and blue jeans; our tennis shoes, meanwhile, were soaked within minutes.

At one point, we paused at the intersection with another trail. “This is the old trail up Mount Gimie,” Miguel said, pointing to the right. “It was washed away in a landslide during the hurricane a few years ago. So now we’ve cut a new trail.” We continued for another ten minutes before turning into the woods at a small pile of logs. “This is the new trail,” he said. “A few other guides and I made it and maintain it.”

PLUNGE INTO THE JUNGLE

We squeezed between a few trees and plunged into the jungle. The trail was scarcely wide enough for our shoulders, but certainly provided a much easier route through the woods than bushwhacking. “Wow,” I said quietly to Eric, “there’s absolutely no way that we would have found this on our own. No signs anywhere. I guess that’s one nice thing about having a guide.”

“Well after this, we’ll have the GPS track,” Eric said quietly, turning to me, “and then anyone could follow it to the top without a paying to hire a guide. Although that wouldn’t really be fair to Miguel, because he’s the one who maintains the trail.”

We began to descend steeply down a muddy, slippery slope that eventually brought us to a river crossing. “We’ll rest here,” Miguel said. “Three more hours to the top.” Miguel scooped some water directly from the stream. “It’s OK to drink,” he told us.

We certainly believed him, I mean, here we were, high up in the pristine jungle of St. Lucia, with perhaps not a single other person within the entire watershed. This was the type of water that you could bottle and sell in the US. But we never take chances with water; we’d heard too many horror stories of friends contracting Giardia from untreated water, and weren’t taking any chances here. So we popped a few iodine pills and set our timers for 30 minutes.

THE REAL CLIMB

“Ready to go?” Miguel asked after we scarfed down some granola bars. “Now the real climb begins. You guys are fast, it’s probably only two more hours from here.” We followed Miguel up a steep hillside. Twilight began to filter through the dense trees above us. In front, we could hear the occasional whack-whack of Miguel slicing through some recently-downed trees.

In this type of jungle, we figured, a trail like this could probably be rendered invisible after just a few months of neglect.

As we ascended the steep, muddy trail, I consulted the GPS and realized that we were going to be at the top a lot sooner than expected. "Hey Miguel," I said, "Have you ever seen sunrise from the top?" "Nope," he said, "today might be the first."

Finally, at 6:07am on January 2nd, 2013, after 127 minutes of hiking, the trail leveled out on a small grassy bald, and we stood on the summit of Saint Lucia. "Good work Miguel!" I said. We exchanged high fives all around. "I guess we'll have to wait for sunrise, the GPS says it'll rise in twenty-one minutes."

SUNRISE FROM THE SUMMIT OF ST LUCIA

The lights of Vieux Fort glittered in the distance and the northern half of the island spread out before us. We realized that even though St Lucia is a tiny country, there's still actually quite a bit of wilderness in the island's interior. If you were dropped off in the middle of the island without a machete, it could take days to make your way out to the nearest road. As the cloudless sky grew brighter, clouds suddenly began to appear, obscuring the horizon. Sadly, the sunrise was hidden by clouds, but we still managed to capture some decent photos.

Miguel took the opportunity to chop back the summit grass, which he said had grown about a foot in the past few weeks. He unzipped his backpack to reveal a dozen oranges. "Remember the orange plantation we passed through this morning?" he asked. "These are from there." He carefully butchered the oranges with a small knife and shared them with us. Needless to say, they were incredible.

We hung out on the top for a good 45 minutes before heading down. At this point, it was pretty obvious that we would have plenty of time to catch our afternoon flight. The forest was drenched with dew from the dawn clouds and we had to be careful not to knock the water off the trees that we grabbed. As we descended, Miguel took a little more time to chop out some fallen trees that we had crawled under earlier that morning. It was impressive to see him hack through six-inch trees with a nothing but a machete.

During the descent we caught some spectacular views of Gros and Petit Pitons, two tall, picturesque triangular peaks situated on the south coast of the island. Farther down, when we encountered the stream, we took a quick side trip to a beautiful series of waterfalls. During the heat of the day, it would have made an excellent place for a swim.

FINISHED

By 9am, we were back at the car, for a roundtrip time of five hours. We dropped Miguel off at his house in Migny and handed him the $200 cash. It felt painful to pay that much money to climb one mountain, but at least it was supporting Miguel and his trail building efforts. We bid Miguel farewell and continued driving for one last visit with Smith.

Smith came to greet us as we pulled into his village in Fond Saint Jacques. "How was the climb?" he asked. "Excellent!" I said. "We made it to the top for sunrise." "Great," Smith

replied. “Miguel called and told me that you paid him $200. You know, that’s really not a fair price, it should really be $300.” “But we’re poor college students,” I replied, “and we already agreed on $200. And I’ll make you the website, remember?” We could tell that he wasn’t satisfied, but that would have to suffice. “Ok, that’s good,” he said.

NORTHWARD

We bid farewell to Smith and headed north towards Castries, where our flight left in a few hours. After two hours of winding through the rugged countryside, we arrived in Castries and proceeded to the airport. Right next to the airport was your textbook white-sandy-aquamarine-palm-tree beach. “Well I guess we’re all the way down here in the Caribbean,” Eric said, “we might as well take a quick dip in the water.”

“Ok, sure, I guess we’ve got plenty of time, and ought to rinse off some of the jungle stench and filth before the flight,” I said. Even though we were in the southern Caribbean, it was January and the water was a bit chilly. After ten minutes, we were done. “Good enough,” I said to Eric, “I’m satisfied.”

We made our way to the airport to return the rental car. Turns out that we had had the car for 24 hours and 30 minutes, and inquired about waiving the second-day fee that we had originally planned on. “Isn’t there a 30-minute grace period?” Eric asked the woman at the counter. “Yes, there is,” the woman at the rental counter said, “but since you’re returning the car after one day instead of two days, you’ll have to pay an early return fee of $15.”

“Are you kidding me?” Eric said. “We have to pay if we return he car early?” It was as if Smith had contacted the rental company and asked them to try to extract just a little more money from us. It seemed that she had just pulled that number out of thin air.

After twenty minutes of hassle involving calling managers and arguing, we managed to save $15 on the rental, and gladly said goodbye to the trusty Lancer. We sunk into the comfortable seats of the Castries Airport and breathed a big sigh of relief. We had accomplished all of our goals in Saint Lucia. We had summited Mount Gimie and had safely made it to the airport. The next mode of transportation would not be under our control. The first leg of the trip was complete, and now it was onwards to Saint Kitts.

St. Kitts and Nevis
Mount Liamuiga 3793ft

Author: Eric

January 2-4, 2013

"Why take the risk?" the man asked as we finished describing our situation to him. Matthew and I had just staggered out of the jungle onto a random road on the northeastern side of St. Kitts Island. It was well after dark, and we were on the opposite side of the island as we intended to be. For the past 12 hours we'd been bushwhacking through the rainforest of Mt. Liamuiga, trying to climb to the highest point in the country of St. Kitts and Nevis. All we wanted now was a ride back to our rental car on the other side of the island, some dry clothes, and some way to clean our lacerated hands, arms, and legs. The razor grass and ferns had certainly not been friendly to us today.

The man raised an interesting point. All mountaineers accept some level of risk – that's part of what makes climbing mountains exciting. Our level of acceptable risk in climbing Mt. Liamuiga just happened to be higher than his level. He thought we should have hired a guide to hold our hand on the way up and lower the risk to zero, but we felt that would take all the fun out of climbing the mountain.

"Look – there's a van coming! Flag him down to give you a ride back to St. Paul's," he exclaimed before we could respond. We quickly threw our muddy packs in the van, hopped inside, and took off into the night.

AL'S RENTAL CAR

The journey began 24 hours earlier, when our flight from St. Lucia touched down in Basseterre, St. Kitts on Wednesday evening. We'd just finished climbing Mt. Gimie, the highest mountain in St. Lucia, that morning, and were eager to bag another country highpoint for the trip. With only one small carryon backpack apiece we quickly bypassed the checked-baggage line and went directly to customs.

"Hello, welcome to St. Kitts. What is your business on the island?" the custom agent asked us. "We're climbing Mt. Liamuiga, the highest point in the country," I responded. "We'll be here two nights and we're staying at the Marriott Hotel."

Two thirds of what I said was truthful, and luckily the customs agent wasn't suspicious about the hotel part. Customs agents generally need to fill in a little box with an address of where you're staying, and they don't know what to do if you tell them you'll just find some woods to camp in. As we'd learned the hard way on a trip to St. Vincent the previous year, the whole process runs a lot more smoothly if we just gave the agent a hotel address that he could write in his little box, even though we had no intention of staying in a hotel.

"Ok, enjoy your stay," the agent said, stamping our passports and waving us through. We rushed outside and immediately saw a man holding an Ezee Car Rental sign. "Matthew?" he asked as we approached. "Yes, that's me," Matthew replied.

We had been extremely lucky to arrange this car rental. This particular week happened to be Carnival on the island of St. Kitts, and every single car rental agency we'd called weeks earlier had been completely booked. A rental car was essential to making our summit plans work with only one full day on the ground, though. The day before flying to St. Kitts we tried one last time calling up rental agencies and got lucky – a tourist had decided to leave early and had returned a car to Ezee car rental, and this car was waiting for us now.

"Come with me, I'll drive you to the police station to get your driver's permit, then to my house to pick up the car," Al, the rental owner told us. We threw our bags inside and Al started driving. "Where are you staying tonight?" Al asked. "Um, we'll look for a good place in the woods to camp near St. Paul's at the base of Mt Liamuiga," I responded. I could easily lie to a customs agent about sleeping in a hotel, but it felt wrong lying to Al when we'd be using his car on the island. "Camping? No, I don't think that's a good idea," Al responded. "Not with my car." "Is St. Kitts not a safe country?" Matthew asked.

"No, St. Kitts is safe," Al responded, somewhat defensively. "But…You just never know what kind of people are out there. If you're going to camp, you need to talk to the St. Paul's police and park at the police station so you can be sure the car is safe." "Ok we'll do that," Matthew responded quickly. Matthew apparently had no qualms with being slightly dishonest to Al.

We soon pulled into the Basseterre police station and walked inside to get the driver's permit. It was only 8:35pm and the station was supposed to be open until 9pm, but nobody was around. Apparently they had decided to leave early today. Such is the norm in the Caribbean.

Al didn't seem too surprised. Matthew and I were kind of expecting something like this to happen. Everything had gone exactly according to plan over the past four days – Mt. Scenery on Saba Island, Morne Diablotins on Dominica, and Mt Gimie on St Lucia had zero setbacks. We were due for a major setback soon and we knew it. Now it looked like we'd have to wait overnight in Basseterre until the station decided to open sometime Thursday morning, and at best be climbing Mt. Liamuiga by Thursday afternoon. That didn't bode well for actually reaching the summit.

We all quietly walked back to Al's car and sat inside. "So…What's the plan?" Matthew asked as Al started the car. "I don't know." Al responded. He backed up and started to exit the

parking lot, but we were blocked by a huge float from a carnival parade that was driving down the street. We waited in the car for a few minutes, then Matthew looked back at the police station. “Hey, there’s someone there now!” he said.

Al turned off the car and we jumped out, running over to the station. We gladly handed over the $24 for a St. Kitts driver’s permit and loaded back up into the car. We then drove to Al’s house and started filling out the rental paperwork. Something seemed a little bit sketchy about Al’s operation. All the transaction had to be in cash, including a $200 deposit for damages to the car. And the whole operation was based out of Al’s house. “Now this car is brand new with no scratches, and I expect you to return it that way,” Al warned us. With that we took off into the night.

THE SECRET ENTRANCE

Matthew was behind the wheel this time, looking to log a few more hours of left-side driving to his résumé. I had done all the left-side driving on our previous Caribbean trip, and the previous November in New Zealand, but Matthew was a little rusty, having only driven one time on the left side nine months ago in Dominica. Basseterre provided a rough introduction – the streets were still clearing out from a carnival parade and hundreds of people were trying to exit. Cars were bumper-to-bumper with people darting across the roads and overflowing off the sidewalks.

Luckily we managed to squeeze in behind a police car that was going down a closed street, and exited the chaos with no damage to the car. We headed west from Basseterre and continued driving clockwise around the island. There’s really only one main road that loops around St Kitts, so it was hard to get lost.

In the town of New Guinea, we spied a corner general store that looked open, so I jumped out and grabbed handfuls of whatever food I could find. The pickings were pretty slim, but we’d brought no food with us and would eat whatever we could find. I returned to the car with several bags of cookies, chips, and other assorted junk food which would provide sustenance for our climb the next day.

At St. Paul’s I whipped out the GPS and changed into serious navigation mode. Now it’s important to know a little background about why we chose to start our climb from St. Paul’s. If you do a google search for Mt. Liamuiga you’ll find tons of websites of people claiming to have climbed to the very summit of the mountain. Delving deeper into the websites you’ll realize that all of these people merely hiked to the crater rim, 1,000ft lower than the true summit. The trail basically everyone takes, what I’ll call the tourist trail, starts from somewhere near St. Paul’s and ends at the crater rim. Unfortunately, almost everyone takes a guide up the tourist trail, and no reports actually describe how to get to the trailhead. Tourists just meet their guides in town and the guides do all the navigation to get them to the rim.

Matthew and I found references to the existence of a trail to the true summit, but couldn’t find where it actually started. I emailed the only person I could find who claimed to have hiked this trail, but he did it with a guide and had no idea where the trail was. What he did remember

was that he had to ask at least 10 guides before he found one who actually knew the way to the summit. But he couldn't remember the guide's name.

Satellite images were no help because in all satellite images from multiple sources Mt. Liamuiga was completely covered in clouds. Contacting the tourism office was no help because they assumed the tourist trail went to the true summit, which it did not. The final element revealing how difficult it would be to get to the summit was a forum post on lonely planet from 2009. The person asked the same question I'd been asking – has anyone out there been to the true summit of Mt. Liamuiga and can tell how to get there? There have been no responses to that post in the last four years.

When planning the logistics of our Caribbean Highpoint adventure we had to make a critical decision: the flights worked out such that for one of St. Lucia or St Kitts. we could only have 24 hours on the ground to make the climb. With so many unknown variables about St. Kitts we wisely chose to give ourselves 36 hours on the ground there and shift the shorter day to St. Lucia.

With a full day to climb the mountain, we decided the option with the highest chance of success would be to hike up the tourist trail and bushwhack through the jungle to the true summit. Even if we'd wanted to hire a guide it was unlikely we'd find one who knew the way to the true summit in our limited time on the island. And, more importantly, we were fundamentally opposed to hiring a guide.

Several days before the trip Matthew discovered the GPS coordinates of the trailhead for the tourist trail as of 2008, and we pieced together via satellite images which dirt roads would lead to this trailhead. Unfortunately, the trail had been rerouted in 2010, but we decided to follow the old trail anyway since this trailhead was the only one we knew the location of.

With all this research under our belts we expertly pulled the car onto a random, unmarked, rough dirt road on the outskirts of St. Paul's at 9:47pm and started driving uphill. Needless to say, we had no intention of parking at the police station tonight as we had told Al.

Matthew cruised slowly up the road, being extra careful not to add any new scratches to Al's car. Gradually the road got less rough as we drove through open fields, until we reached a sign for Kittitian Hills Estate, followed by a large red sign warning "Danger Construction Site – Authorized Personnel Only."

There was a gravel pulloff here, and we pulled the car over and out of sight of the road. It was clear now why the trail had been re-routed in 2010. There were a bunch of houses being built here and the future owners didn't want hikers driving through their front yards. But nobody was living there yet, and the construction workers were long-since done for the day, so we figured we could quietly pass through the site and nobody would care. Even if someone found our car it was parked before the big red sign so wasn't technically violating any laws.

We packed up our belongings in our backpacks, locked the car, and started walking up the road. We soon reached a big locked gate, which we crawled under and continued into the construction site. At least ten or twenty fancy new houses were already halfway built, and this

would indeed be an awesome place to live. We actually took shelter in one of the houses when it started to rain, but continued hiking after donning rain jackets.

After walking for half an hour we exited the construction site into the woods and found the remains of the old trail. We hiked up a little ways until we found a flat spot in the woods, where we pitched our tent and went to sleep for the night.

THE CLIMB

It rained on and off all night, but by 8am the pattering on our rainfly had stopped and we reluctantly crawled out of the tent. The previous morning in St. Lucia we'd gotten up at 3am in order to get up and down Mt. Gimie in time to catch our early afternoon flight, and we were still trying to recover some sleep this morning.

It was unclear how difficult the bushwhacking would be to get to Mt. Liamuiga today, but we knew the summit was only 0.75 miles' line-of-sight from the top of the tourist trail. Even in the densest woods that should take at most an hour or two, so we ought to be able to tag the summit and backtrack back to the campsite easily before dark, we reasoned. So we stashed our tent and all extra gear in the woods with the intention of retrieving them by midafternoon, then driving around touring the island with our remaining time. If only it had been that easy…

With light packs we started up the trail at 8:30am, and soon reached the intersection with the new rerouted trail. We had no idea where the new official trailhead was, but were relieved to know that we'd be following a well-maintained path the rest of the way to the crater rim. We maintained a decent pace up the trail and by 9am caught up to a group of four tourists being led up by a local guide. They were moving agonizingly slowly, and we basically ran by them up the steep trail, exchanging only brief "Hellos." "Leave some for us at the top!" the guide joked to us. That would be our last human contact for a long time.

A half hour later we reached the end of the trail at the crater rim. The jungle was engulfed in clouds, with no views across the crater to the summit. We began to realize why every single satellite image we'd found had the entire mountain obscured by clouds. Now came the critical decision that would determine the difference between agonizing defeat or easy success in the rest of the climb: do we traverse the crater rim clockwise or counter-clockwise?

THE BUSHWHACK BEGINS

We hadn't really planned this far yet. We were kind of hoping we'd get a view from the rim and be able to assess which direction might actually go. What we did remember from the pictures we'd seen was that the summit was very cliffy on both sides, but perhaps slightly less cliffy going counter-clockwise. The best idea was probably to briefly check out each direction and pray that one had a user trail we could follow to the top.

Matthew started walking right at the crater rim towards the "Devil's Thumb", a big rock sticking up that we'd seen falsely mentioned in some reports as the "true summit." Past the Devil's Thumb I noticed a few cut branches in the woods. I ventured into the jungle to investigate, and the cut branches continued farther along the rim. It certainly wasn't a trail, and

probably would have been invisible to most tourists, but evidently someone had passed through the jungle here with a machete, following the crater rim. This was the user-trail we had suspected might exist.

"Bingo!" I yelled up to Matthew, "If this machete path leads all the way to the summit, we'll be back by lunchtime!" "Let's go!" Matthew replied.

We didn't even think twice about checking the other direction. This way had clearly been traveled before, so it must go to the summit, right? If you merely looked at the ground you wouldn't be able to tell anyone had ever walked here, but most of the annoying branches between knee and head height were cut, so the going was easy. Matthew led the way into the jungle. We were both shirtless because of the jungle heat, and didn't yet have to worry about getting cut up on branches.

It was super easy to follow this route, which stayed exactly on the crater rim. We were feeling better and better about our counter-clockwise decision. Why don't more people take this route? we wondered.

After about 45 minutes we reached a small clearing in a knoll of ferns, which would have been a nice viewpoint if the mountain hadn't been engulfed in clouds. According to our GPS we were about 2/3 of the way around the rim already, and should be to the summit in no time at our current speed. But the cut branches seemed to end at the clearing, and there was some weird object on a stick in the middle.

THE STAR WARS HELMET

"Huh? What's a Storm Trooper helmet doing way up here?" I asked, walking up to the weird object on the stick. "That's a Boba Fett helmet, dufus," Matthew corrected me. For some reason there was a helmet of the Star Wars Bounty Hunter perched on a stick in the middle of the clearing. And next to it was a croquet mallet. We were prepared to stumble across all sorts of strange things in the middle of the jungle, but somehow Star Wars helmets and croquet mallets hadn't made our list. We put them on for some pictures, but then got on to the more serious business of finding the trail.

Apparently, as we discovered, the helmet and mallet signified the end of the machete path. Or, shall we say, the end of the easy stuff. The clearing was surrounded by dense ferns in all directions except the way we had entered. Since we didn't have any machetes ourselves, the only option was to plunge into the ferns and continue to follow the crater rim. Matthew took the lead, pushing branches to the side, swimming on top, or crawling underneath to make progress. The way was marginally easier for me, though if Matthew got too far ahead it was nearly impossible to discern his path as the branches closed back in behind him.

Eventually the rim narrowed and we crawled up to a large rock outcrop. A cliff dropped sharply to the left, so we descended right to get around. As we dropped lower the dense, difficult ferns were replaced by open jungle and the bushwhacking became considerably easier. We traversed around the base of rocks, then scrambled back up to the crater rim.

Here we encountered thick, chest-high bushes that we struggled to crawl on top of or power through. We sorely wished we'd brought machetes, but I don't think the plane would have allowed those as personal carry-on items.

The rim steepened until we were climbing up using our hands, eventually reaching a small local maximum. Matthew whipped out the GPS. "We're only 300ft line-of-site from the summit!" he exclaimed. "It must be just on the other side of that last hill in front of us." "But that's not just a little hill," I observed. "There's a 10-ft vertical cliff on the top, and it looks wet."

THE FORTRESS

We stared hard at the cliff as the clouds passed in and out. This was definitely the crux of the route. A very steep vegetated slope led up to the base of the vertical cliff. To the right and left of the slope were huge cliffs dropping into oblivion, one into the crater and one to the outside. A narrow bushy ridge connected us to the slope. The 10-ft cliff section by itself looked potentially doable, if it were dry and unexposed. But a fall there could be disastrous, especially given how remote we were. It was unclear if anyone else had ever even been here before, let alone climbed this cliff.

"I don't know…" I said. "Looks sketchy." "Why don't we at least get a closer look?" Matthew replied. "Maybe it has awesome handholds. I've been leading all morning, so it's your turn." "Ok fine," I replied, starting toward the cliff.

I carefully traversed the ridge and started toward the vegetated slope. What hadn't been obvious from afar was that the slope had a 6ft-tall overhanging cliff on the bottom that was obscured by hanging branches. Unfortunately, none of the branches would hold body weight to pull myself up. I looked up at the cliff, and it still looked like it might possibly go. "I don't know – why don't you come over and look too?" I yelled over to Matthew.

Matthew came over and bravely balanced on a small root, and pulled himself over the first overhang. He then scrambled carefully up the vegetated slope to the base of the top cliff. The cliff was wet and mossy, and had a couple roots nearby that might hold body weight and might be able to get a climber over the top. When Matthew held his hand up he was within two feet of reaching over the lip of the cliff.

But a couple roots that might almost hold body weight seemed a bit too risky to trust, given our remote location and the exposure of the cliff. Moreover, we weren't certain the route would get any easier after this cliff, and without a rope it would be extremely difficult to retreat if we made it past this cliff.

Matthew glanced longingly at the top of the cliff, just two tantalizing feet beyond his reach, then glanced behind him at the long drop into the jungle. "This isn't worth it," Matthew yelled down. "We'll have to find another way." "Sounds good, come back down then," I replied, relieved that I wouldn't have to scramble up that sketchy cliff.

We retreated back across the narrow ridge and started descending right through more waist-high bushes. An enormous 100ft-tall rock wall loomed ominously above to our left,

forcing us to traverse lower to find a safe route around. We tried to stay as close to the base of this cliff as possible, to minimize elevation lost, and this required what we like to call vertical bushwhacking. At times we needed to traverse near-vertical terrain, relying on holding fistfuls of bushes close to the roots. We carefully traversed and downclimbed until we could traverse no more. Two ridges visibly led up to the base of the cliff, with a steep gully in between. It was impossible to cross the gully at this elevation, so we decided to hike down the ridge to find a safe crossing.

Matthew led the way through the short bushes, the angle lessened and we thought we could descend into the gully. We dropped down left, and the bushes got thicker and taller. Then the slope steepened as we entered more trees, downclimbing and using our hands to prevent us from falling. All of a sudden Matthew disappeared.

"Oww! #@$%!" I heard a few seconds later. "Are you okay?" I yelled down. "Yeah, I'm ok. Just took a 10ft fall over this cliff but thankfully this root caught my leg. Be careful." Matthew yelled back up.

I carefully downclimbed the cliff and met up with Matthew. We vowed to be much more careful. Injury here was not an option. The route looked equally cliffy below, so we tried traversing back up the gully. I led the way, but the farther I went the less safe the route became. I ventured back into vertical bushwhacking territory, and saw an even larger cliff open up below me.

"This isn't going to work," I yelled back. "We need to climb back up to the ridge and try another route." We reluctantly backtracked all the way back to the top of the ridge, and followed the ridge farther down the mountain. Eventually we followed a less-steep descent toward the gully, and the bushes changed into trees and jungle. Walking through the open jungle was super easy, and we were certain we'd eventually reach the bottom of the gully – a small victory at least for the day.

STUCK

I came to a point where I could actually see the bottom of the gully, but, as came as no surprise, it was guarded by a 15ft cliff. This one didn't have any convenient roots or branches to downclimb, though. And in either direction the cliff became taller. We were stuck. It didn't look possible to get into the gully here, and farther down it looked even more difficult. Farther up was no option either. We were starting to worry we might not make it up Mt. Liamuiga after all.

"Let me take a look," Matthew said as I walked away from the edge. Matthew peered over, and thought it might be jumpable. "You're not allowed to get hurt, remember?" I warned. "Nobody's going to help us way back here in the jungle." "I'll be fine," he replied. "Remember how we learned to take falls in soccer practice, where you roll to absorb the impact? I'll just do that."

Matthew threw his backpack down first, committing himself to descending, carefully lowered himself as low as possible on a nearby tree, and then jumped. "Easy peasy!" he yelled back up, after rolling on the ground unscathed. I reluctantly followed, and also made the landing

safely. From here we started climbing up the other side of the gully towards the next ridge, which was luckily not guarded by any more cliffs.

TOO MANY CLIFFS

The jungle closed in as we ascended until the bushwhacking became difficult again. At the top of the ridge we turned left and ascended back up towards the monster rock wall defending the summit. At the end of the ridge we reached the rock wall again, and saw that it somehow kept extending around the mountain. Was the entire summit guarded by a ring of 100ft cliffs? It sure appeared that way.

We walked along the base of the cliff and stumbled across what could almost be construed as a path. Either that or a place where some rocks had fallen and killed the vegetation. Matthew tried to follow it downhill, but then it disappeared. I tried to follow it along the cliff, but it also disappeared. Maybe we were just so desperate to find the mysterious summit trail that we imagined this thing was a trail. It clearly wasn't, unfortunately.

We continued along the base of the monster cliff, until we encountered more vertical bushwhack traversing. This sketchy bushwhacking was starting to get old, and we were starting to make backup plans. "We could always just start bushwhacking down, and follow a drainage until we find civilization," Matthew suggested. "We certainly can't go back the way we came. We kind of burned that bridge when we jumped down that 15ft cliff."

"We still have a few hours of light left," I replied. "I think our safest bet is to assume a trail exists to the summit and find that trail. Then we can just follow it back to civilization and hitch-hike back to our car." "True," Matthew replied. "In theory if we keep traversing around Mt Liamuiga we're bound to hit the trail, if the trail indeed exists."

We decided to backtrack from the vertical bushwhacking and try to find another way around. As before, we dropped down the ridge into the next gully, then bushwhacked up to the next ridge. Here the bushwhacking became horrendous. Thick, chin-high ferns clung together in a dense wall to halt our progress. When we tried to push through them our hands and bodies became lacerated. We finally decided to put our shirts and pant-bottoms on despite the heat, but it was too late to save us from innumerable scars. The most frustrating part was that we had no view at all of where we were going. The clouds were as thick as ever, and we were relying on the GPS to see where the true summit was.

LAST CHANCE

Eventually we reached the top of this ridge (ridge number three for those counting). It was 5pm, one hour before sunset. "Let's follow this ridge up, and if we get cliffed out again then I give up." Matthew said. "If we're stuck bushwhacking in the dark our only option will be to descend as far as we can and hope to find civilization somehow. If we miss our flight tomorrow morning, then so be it. This is our last chance."

I agreed, and we continued up the ridge with as much determination as we could muster. The bushwhacking was as difficult as ever, and Matthew bravely led the way. At 5:30pm

Matthew disappeared in front of me and I heard a yell. “Well what do we have here?! A trail! Now how do like them apples?” he exclaimed.

“Hallelujah!” I yelled back, stepping onto what was obviously a trail. Many more words of thanksgiving were dropped that probably shouldn’t be repeated in writing.

THE SUMMIT

Trail was actually an overly gratuitous description of what we’d found. It was more of a muddy path that had branches cut from the sides, and was probably walked on only a few times a year. But it was infinitely easier than the bushwhacking we’d endured for the last eight hours, and almost certainly led to the summit.

We scrambled up the trail, climbing over small rock outcrops and even using a rope left tied to a tree at one point. Finally, at 6pm, just as twilight was setting in, we stepped onto the very summit of Mt. Liamuiga. The summit was marked with a small St. Kitts and Nevis flag and a little black mailbox. I knelt down and kissed the ground, I was so happy to be there. Matthew collapsed onto the ground, taking the first real rest of the day.

We looked inside the mailbox, hoping to see a summit register, but unfortunately it was empty. I pulled out a bag of cookies and started scarfing them down. Somehow I’d forgotten to eat most of the day.

We didn’t want to stay long, though, since thick clouds were still rolling in and out, and it would be dark at any moment. We took summit pictures on each of our cameras (for redundancy in case one failed), grabbed a few summit rocks, and then started descending the trail. Now I turned my GPS on, so that we would each have GPS tracks of this trail. Our plan at this point was to take the trail to wherever it met a road, and hitch-hike back to our car from there. The GPS tracks we would generate would be extremely valuable to anyone who wanted to reach the summit without repeating our harrowing bushwhack adventure.

CRUISE CONTROL

We felt like we had just merged from a small country road onto the German Autobahn. We were moving at least five times faster on this trail than when we were bushwhacking, and didn’t even have to think about which direction to go. It was like being on cruise control.

Soon it got dark, though, and we had to break out the headlamps. The visibility was still pretty poor, since the light reflected off the thick fog, but we had no trouble following the trail. As we descended we entered a more wooded section of the jungle and dropped below the cloud layer, so our headlamps provided better visibility.

DISAPPEARING TRAIL

Lower on the mountain the jungle opened up and the trail actually became difficult to find. It had been easy when we just followed the open path through the dense bushes, but going through open trees it was much less obvious. Every few minutes we would lose the trail, then spread out trying to find it. Whoever found it got to be the next leader.

Eventually we reached a point where the trail was marked intermittently with yellow duct tape on the trees, and this made progress much more rapid. By around 8pm we reached the edge of a farmer's field and the trail disappeared for good. We tried to follow an old road that showed up on our satellite images, but unfortunately that road disappeared and we were forced to bushwhack through the dense grass in the field. Alas, our GPS track is almost perfect, but future mountaineers will still be on their own to find an easy way to the edge of that field.

HUMAN CONTACT

By 8:30pm we stumbled out of the field on to an honest paved road, and could finally rest easy that we were off the mountain. We flagged down a passing van and hopped inside. "Could we get a ride to St. Paul's?" we asked the driver. "Sure, that'll be two dollars," the driver replied. This type of van was the standard bus service for locals on the Island. "Two dollars per person?" I asked. "No, two dollars total," he replied. We gladly handed over the money and sat down for the 20-minute ride back to St. Paul's.

THE POLICE ENCOUNTER

From "downtown" St. Paul's we walked up to the random unmarked dirt road we had found the previous night, and continued up to our car. The car was exactly as we had left it, hidden from sight of the road and with no new scratches. Matthew unlocked the doors, and we quickly threw off our soaked shoes and changed into our comfortable crocs.

We both sat down and started eating any food we could find. Gradually our gazes reached down to our lacerated and dirty hands, arms, and legs. Those wounds would need some serious cleaning, or they might get infected.

"It pains me to say this, but I'd almost consider staying in a hotel tonight to clean our wounds," Matthew ventured. "I guess, but I have a firm price ceiling of $100," I replied. "We could always wash up in a restaurant or gas station if it came to that." Matthew had written down the phone numbers of three hotels on the island, just in case, and started calling up. Marriott was $300, another one was $200, and the Sugar Bay hotel was $109. "Ok fine, I'll do $109," I reluctantly agreed.

The hotel was back in Basseterre, as far away from our current location as possible on the island, but we nevertheless reserved the room. There was only one more point of business for the night – retrieving our tent and stashed gear from the trailhead.

It was 9:30pm by this point, and there were obviously no construction crews still working. We knew the road continued another half mile from our current location, and saving a half-mile of walking was invaluable to us at this stage of the day. We thus made the critical decision to drive past the "Authorized Personnel Only" sign to the locked gate, park the car, and start hiking up from there.

We hiked for about 15 minutes before finding our gear stashed exactly where we'd left it, then turned back down the road. At this point we were both hiking shirtless because it was so

hot. As we rounded the last corner through the construction site I saw some peculiar blue flashing lights exactly where I remembered parking our car. Uh-oh.

We both instinctively turned off our headlamps to turn invisible, but the damage was already done. We had certainly been seen at this point, and besides, we needed to get back to the car. If it got towed we'd really be in trouble.

We calmly walked down to the car and approached the two police cars with the flashing lights. Three police officers were conferring around our car, and one turned around and pointed a huge flashlight right in our faces.

"Good evening officer," Matthew started, "is there a problem?" "We got a call from security about trespassers on the site," the officer replied. "What are your names?" "Matthew and Eric Gilbertson," I replied. "We've been climbing Mt. Liamuiga all day and are exhausted. We bushwhacked for 10 hours and are really cut up," I said, showing my hands and trying to earn some sympathy points. "We read online that the trail started here," Matthew added. "We forgot a bag at the trailhead this morning, and just ran up there tonight to retrieve it," he finished, almost telling the truth. "We've just been here for 30 minutes and didn't touch anything in the construction site."

"Where are you staying tonight?" the officer asked sternly. "The Sugar Bay Hotel in Basseterre," I answered quickly. It was lucky we had just made that reservation, in case they decided to check. I suspect they would not have been too happy if we'd said we were planning to stealth camp again. The police officers looked at each other, and seemed to agree that we were not a threat to the safety of the citizens of St. Kitts and Nevis. "Get in your car and we will escort you out of the site," the officer said to us.

We quickly opened the car doors and started driving down. The police cars followed closely behind until we exited the dirt road. We then drove to the main road and started heading toward Basseterre.

The police encounter was unnerving enough, but we were even more worried that the police may have contacted Al, the car rental owner. After all his warnings against camping and against parking in sketchy locations, here we had gone and parked in a sketchy location, camped, and been caught by the police! During the encounter we'd had the strange sense that they were expecting the names we gave them, and that they must have contacted Al. We could only hope we could assuage his anger by returning his car unscathed and with extra fuel in the tank.

NO VICTORY DINNER

We reached Basseterre at 11pm and checked into the hotel. By this hour every single gas station, grocery store, restaurant, or other establishment that might sell food was long-since closed. We staggered into the room and had a meager victory dinner of a few crushed crackers and some soggy cookies. We'd have to save the celebration for another day. We each took long showers trying to scrub every bit of dirt out of our wounds, and eventually made it to sleep around midnight. Five hours later we got up, packed our bags, and started driving back to the airport.

THE CAR RETURN

We saw Al standing outside the airport, as we'd agreed, and we pulled up next to him. "So, how was St. Kitts?" Al asked. We weren't sure if he knew what happened, but we decided to tell the truth just in case he knew. "We ended up camping out at the base of Mt. Liamuiga and climbed it yesterday," Matthew started. "Then we stayed in a hotel last night." That was actually truthful.

"I got a lot of calls about you guys last night…" Al replied. I gulped. Here it comes. "Let's take a look at the car," he continued. We walked around as he meticulously inspected every inch of the car. Then he got inside and turned it on to check the fuel. Luckily we had filled it extra full. "Looks good, have a safe flight home," he said. "Thanks!" we replied.

Al drove the car away, and we both breathed huge sighs of relief. He knew exactly what had happened but, as we suspected, a clean car with a full tank of gas was adequate to make him happy. We soon got on our plane and headed towards our next adventure – Blue Mountain Peak, the highest mountain in Jamaica.

Jamaica
Blue Mountain Peak 7402ft

Author: Eric

January 5-6, 2013

"I think I've figured out why Google Maps didn't route us this way," Matthew said as I inched our car down the rough dirt road to the bottom of the river valley. "There's no bridge!" In front of us was a fairly wide river, and only the remains of an old concrete bridge that had probably washed away decades ago. There was another dirt road on the other side, but it was unclear how we would get there.

We were deep in the Blue Mountains of Jamaica, trying to climb Blue Mountain Peak, the country highpoint. The only way around this river was to drive three hours all the way back to Kingston, and go around a different way. But what was to say another bridge wouldn't similarly be washed out? We could walk from here, but that would add a painful 10 miles to our hike. I pulled over to the side to think things over.

Soon I heard some Reggae music blasting and a low-riding Toyota Corolla full of Jamaicans appeared around the corner. Without even slowing down the car cruised right into the river and then emerged unscathed on the other side.

"If he can do that, so can we," Matthew said. "We've got an extra six inches of clearance over that guy so it should be no problem."

Indeed, we had heard the roads would be pretty rough in this part of Jamaica and came prepared with a 4WD Suzuki XL7. I pulled back into the road, cruised through the river, and emerged safely on the other side.

"No problem!" I said. "If that's the worst Jamaica can through at us then we have nothing to worry about."

Matthew and I were in the Caribbean for winter break and had just gotten off successful ascents of the country highpoints of the Netherlands (Saba Island), Dominica, St. Lucia, and St. Kitts and Nevis. On Friday morning we landed in Kingston, Jamaica, dirty and cut-up from an epic struggle to the summit of Mt. Liamuiga the previous day, but ready for the next mountain. We picked up our trusty 4WD Suzuki XL7 at the Zoom rental counter and thus started the next leg of our Caribbean adventure.

I took the wheel this time, since I was more accustomed to left-side driving than Matthew and was more excited about driving on rough roads. With the AC at full blast to combat the 90-degree January heat we cruised out of the airport and into downtown Kingston.

Matthew expertly navigated as I drove through the crazy traffic-clogged streets. We stopped briefly at a grocery store to resupply and then headed north on B1. I soon turned east on Gordon Town Road and began getting a taste of true rural Jamaica. Most turns were blind turns, and the road was only 1.5-lanes wide as it weaved precariously along cliff edges. Luckily it was paved, though still full of potholes. At several towns local people with shovels were trying to fill the potholes with dirt, though this would only be a temporary solution.

We followed the roller-coaster road for another hour before taking a lunch break just outside Mavis Bank. I was amazed such a large town could exist so far up in the hills when anyone who entered the town had to have come on the same roads we just drove on.

Outside of Mavis Bank we ran into our first river-crossing obstacle, but made it safely across to the other side. This river roughly marked the boundary between bad road and terrible road. Only the toughest vehicle could proceed any farther. Luckily I was behind the wheel of such a vehicle.

We passed through the small village of Hagley Gap and then entered into true 4WD terrain. The road cut steeply up the mountain at a 20% grade, and then became deeply rutted out and rocky as it wove up Blue Mountain Peak. There were still small houses along the sides, but the only vehicles parked at the houses were motor bikes and tough Landrover Defenders. We eventually reached another small village, Penlyne Castle, and the road grade finally relented. I continued east and passed a few hostels that must have catered to hikers. Past the last hostel we met the scariest stretch of road: half the road had slid off the side of the mountain and what remained was only barely wide enough for one car to squeeze by. And that section was slightly leaning off the mountain.

Matthew got out in front and directed while I slowly inched my way forward. He then hopped in and we kept driving. Eventually we reached a super-steep 180-degree turn that we didn't dare attempt, and parked the car there on the side of the road.

We just happened to be outside the gate of a coffee plantation, and the security guard came out to see what the commotion was. Hi, is it okay if we park here?" Matthew asked. "We're climbing Blue Mountain Peak this evening, and we'll be out by tomorrow morning." Oh, no problem mon," the guard replied. "Nobody drives up here anyways."

We started packing up and the guard, "Junior," hung around talking to us. He looked like he had a pretty lonely job guarding this gate all day long when hardly anyone ever ventures up here, so he was eager to have someone to talk to. We gave him some extra fruit as we ate a snack, and then headed up the road on foot.

By now the sun started setting, and we agreed the car definitely couldn't have made it much farther up the mountain. Soon we passed the last coffee plantation gate and the road turned into an honest trail. We hiked up the trail for about an hour until we reached Portland Gap, a flat area with picnic tables, tent sites, and even primitive cabins. We didn't see anyone else around and started looking for a good tent site when it suddenly started raining. It was then an easy decision to investigate the cabins.

We poked our heads in one cabin, and decided it was an excellent place to sleep. The cabin was one big room, with no lights or anything, just a floor. In the corner was a pile of old foam pads people must use to sleep on.

We were travelling light to be able to take everything just as carryon luggage, and had thus only brought thin liners instead of actual sleeping bags. This worked perfectly for all the other countries when we'd camped close to sea level, but it was actually pretty chilly up here close to 5,000ft. I put on all my layers and sandwiched myself between a couple of the old pads, and this got me warm enough to make it through the night.

In the morning the rain stopped and we started hiking around 9am. The trail was very well-maintained and wove gradually up the mountain. We hiked up for a couple hours and by noon reached the summit. Unfortunately, the top was in the clouds. A huge metal pyramid marked the true summit, and we climbed to the top hoping for a view, but without luck.

It was pretty chilly up there above 7,000ft, a sharp contrast to the 90-degree heat down in Kingston. We found an old building near the summit, but it had been ransacked by vandals and wasn't in any shape to provide a good night's sleep.

After a quick snack we started back down, passing one guided group on the way. Back below Portland Gap we emerged into the sun and got excellent views all the way down to the ocean and Kingston.

"I thought we read there was an entrance fee to the park, but I didn't see any signs that said we had to pay anything," Matthew said. "Well don't complain about that, maybe we just got lucky," I replied. Just then we heard the sound of an engine, and a man on a motorbike rounded the corner. He stopped when he reached us.

"Hello, I'm with the Blue Mountain Park. How many days were you in the park?" he asked. "We just spent one night," Matthew replied. "That'll be 20USD each," the man said. That sounded a lot higher than any price we'd read online, but we got out our money and paid him anyways. With a wave he cruised up the mountain and we continued down.

Back at the car we met Junior still guarding the gate. We told him about the park fee and he assured us we'd overpaid and that the guy on the motorbike had pocketed the extra. There was nothing we could do about it, and he hadn't taken our summit from us, so we didn't worry.

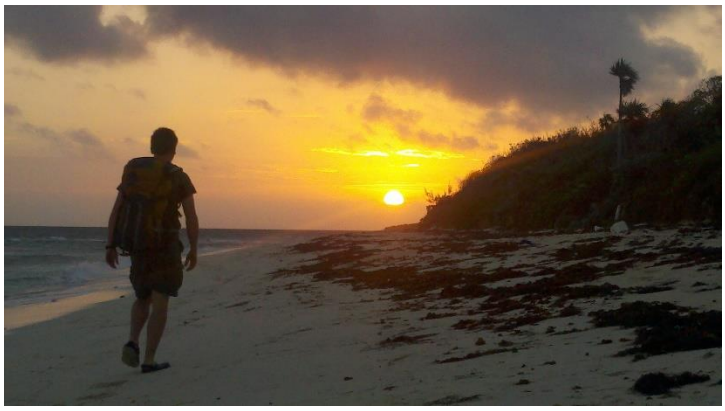
I got back behind the wheel and with a final wave to our friend Junior headed back down the mountain. The road to Hagley Gap was just as scary in this direction, because the car would often skid on the extremely steep dirt sections. We safely made it down, and then had a decision to make. It was only noon, and we didn't fly out until the next morning. That left plenty of time to see more of Jamaica.

"Looks like we can turn left here and take a different way to the coast, and see something new," Matthew said. "Let's do it," I replied.

The roads were still extremely rough, but a notch better than the section from Hagley Gap to Junior's guard house. We drove through the small villages of Trinity Ville and Hillside, trusting our GPS satellite images to guide us on the turns. After a few hours we finally popped back out on the ocean. Here we turned east following the coast until the road cut inland at Golden Grove. Our map showed a picture of a viewpoint and a lighthouse off to the east, so we cut through some sugar cane plantations on backroads and eventually reached the ocean again.

We found an incredible campsite next to the crashing waves with no other buildings in site. I think this was the easternmost point of Jamaica. In the morning we drove back along the coast to Kingston to catch a flight to our next country highpoint: Mt Alvernia in the Bahamas.

The Bahamas
Mt Alvernia (Como Hill) 207ft



Author: Eric
January 6-7, 2012

"Ooooh, staying at the Atlantis Hotel are you?" the Bahamas customs woman asked us, looking up from our immigration form. "That's the fanciest one on the island you know." "Yes ma'am, we're treating ourselves well in the Bahamas," I replied, trying to keep a straight face as I glanced over at Matthew. The customs woman happily stamped our passports and let us by. We proceeded to walk out of the airport, crossed the main entrance road, and ducked into the nearby woods to find a good place to camp.

We don't usually like to lie to a customs agent, but we had no intention of spending hundreds of dollars just to sleep in the Bahamas one night when there was a perfectly good set of woods just outside the airport. If I'd written on the form that we really intended to sleep in a patch of woods we'd seen on satellite images she likely wouldn't have let us by. I had just accidentally chosen to write down one of the fanciest hotels in Nassau.

We had just climbed the country highpoints of the Netherlands (Saba Island), Dominica, St. Lucia, St. Kitts and Nevis, and Jamaica over the past week and the Bahamas was last on our list for our Christmas vacation. After searching around the palmetto and pine tree forest for a few minutes we finally found a flat spot with no glass or metal shards and threw out our tent for the night. You would usually have to pay a premium to sleep so conveniently close to the airport – just a 5-minute walk away – but our spot was free! In fact, in our travels we've only found one other international airport that provided stealth camping opportunities as close to the terminal as this, and that was way up in Roviniemi, Finland.

The Bahamas highpoint is probably the second easiest in all the Caribbean, after Barbados. Unfortunately, it's not on the same island as the main international airport, Nassau, but can be accessed with another short flight and some road walking.

We rose early Monday morning and walked back to the airport. By 9am we were on a Sky Bahamas plane to the highlands of the Bahamas on Cat Island, about 100 miles southeast of Nassau. We landed at The Bight after about an hour, and were greeted by one of the smallest airport buildings I've ever seen. It was basically a one-room glorified shack, with a few chairs

for people to sit in and a bathroom. The airport only gets a couple flights a day, all from small planes, so I guess they don't need any major facilities.

We'd given ourselves 24 hours on the ground on Cat Island, so had plenty of time to walk the five miles from the airport directly to the highpoint. Cat Island is a long, narrow sliver of land with just one road running north to south, so we simply got on the road and started heading south. The day was already getting hot at 10am, even though it was early January. As we left the airport we noticed there were very few houses around, just pine and palm-tree forests as far as we could see. We would definitely have no trouble camping on Cat Island tonight.

In Freetown settlement we saw a small general store, and stopped in to buy some water, food, and sunscreen. We kept walking along the road past a few old churches until we saw a small hill in the distance with a building on top. That had to be the summit – Mt. Alvernia.

At Doud's Settlement we turned at the police station up a road heading toward Mt Alvernia. After passing through some small farmer's fields and walking up a few hundred feet of trail we found ourselves on the roof of the Bahamas. The summit of Mt. Alvernia is capped with a curious stone structure that looks like a cathedral from a distance, but is really a hermitage built by a catholic priest in the mid-1900s. There's a tiny one-room church, a 20-ft tall observation bell tower, a bedroom, a shower room, and an eating room. The priest must have been pretty short, because all the rooms have very low ceilings.

We climbed up in the bell tower and got amazing views of Cat Island, seeing the ocean on both the west and east sides. A couple from India soon hiked up to the top, looking for some morning exercise before hitting the beaches. We all admired the views for about an hour, then started heading down.

"It would just be wrong to come all the way to the Bahamas and not even touch the beach," Matthew said as we were walking down. "Yeah, that's true," I replied. "At the very least we need to be able to say we swam in the ocean once on our Caribbean vacation if someone asks." There was a postcard-perfect white-sand beach just at the base of the mountain, so we quickly jumped in and cooled off. It was refreshing, but there were no waves to body surf, and we got bored after about ten minutes.

Based on our map of the island the east coast was completely uninhabited, and it might be a fun adventure to make it over there somehow. Plus, we could then camp right on the beach and nobody would care.

We dried off and starting walking back up the main road, then cut east on the first side road we found. The road deteriorated soon, but eventually we reached the east coast and cut through the woods to the beach. This beach was obviously untouched by tourists. We found huge conch shells in the sand, and interesting debris washed up from the ocean.

Farther up we found the coolest beach items – coconuts. We'd never actually seen coconuts in the wild, only in grocery stores. "I could sure go for some coconut milk right now," Matthew said, shaking one of them to hear the liquid slosh inside. "I'm sure we can find some way to crack one open," I replied.

There was conveniently an old board with a nail sticking out nearby, so we pressed this against the coconut shell and hit it with a rock. It poked a smooth hole inside. Matthew eagerly pressed his lips to the hole and leaned back to let the milk trickle out.

"Ewwww!" he exclaimed, spitting out the liquid and hurling the coconut back into the ocean. "That's disgusting!" "Maybe that one had been floating in the ocean for a bit too long," I guessed. "Let's try to find a fresh one."

We saw some palm trees back in the woods, so walked up to those and indeed found some fresh coconuts on the ground underneath. We performed the same operation to open them up, and this time were rewarded with sweet, fresh coconut milk. We actually opened up enough coconuts to fill us up for dinner that night.

Once it got dark we pitched our tent right on the beach and were treated to the pleasant sound of waves breaking all night. In the morning we rose just before sunrise, walked back to TBI international airport, and started our journey back to Boston.

Trip 5 – Central America

El Salvador
Cerro El Pital 8957ft

Author: Eric
March 23, 2013

"Why have we not passed a single car in the last 20 minutes?" Matthew asked. "There were plenty of cars on the road before the sun set."

"I remember reading it was dangerous to drive between San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa at night, but I thought the rest of Honduras was safe," I replied, starting to get a little worried. It was 10pm and we had just crossed the border from Guatemala into the southwestern corner of Honduras.

"Well, there's nothing we can do now but keep driving," Matthew said. "We have to get to Cerro El Pital tonight."

Finally, I saw a set of taillights ahead of me. It was a pickup truck moving very slowly, and we soon caught up. There was a lone man sitting in the truck bed dressed in camouflage and holding a large assault rifle. He looked nervous, glancing back and forth between us and the drivers. "POLICIA" was written in faded black letters on the rear door of the truck.

"We're gonna stay right behind this truck as long as possible," I said to Matthew. "Something's not right around here when the only vehicle on the road besides us is a police truck with an armed guy in the back."

"Yeah, even though he's going slow, we'd better not pass," Matthew replied.

We trailed the police truck for about 20 minutes, until we entered a deserted town near the El Salvador border and the truck turned off on a side road. We were then back on our own.

THE IMPOSSIBLE ITINERARY

We were in Central America for Spring Break with plans to climb six new country highpoints over the next week. It would be an aggressive and complicated schedule involving multiple flights, rental cars, taxis, mountain bikes, and sleepless nights to fit so much action into so little time, and planning had begun a full eight months earlier.

Our original plan was to complete this trip in the summer, and we hatched a plan to rent a car in some major city in Central America and simply drive between all the highpoints. Driving ourselves would be much faster than taking buses and taxis, and would allow us to compress six countries into just one week of vacation.

But some further research revealed it's not quite as easy as driving a rental car between the US and Canada. In fact, we couldn't find a single car rental website for any central American cities that allowed any cross-border travel! I dug a little deeper, and a lonely planet online forum suggested the Avis in Guatemala City might allow cross-border travel, and the Hertz in San Pedro Sula, Honduras might also.

Since the car rental websites prohibited cross-border travel, the only solution seemed to be to call the companies up on the phone. So I brushed up on my Spanish, fired up Skype, and started making some phone calls. The San Pedro Sula rental allowed travel only into Nicaragua, and the Gautemala City Avis allowed travel only into Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. We noted this information, but ultimately decided to postpone the trip.

Fast forward to the spring, and we started finalizing our plans to complete the trip during the last week of March. To complicate matters we learned that the Nicaragua Highpoint was covered in landmines and the only safe way up was to hire a local guide, Roberto Castellano [he's literally the only person who knows the safe way up]. I found the guide's email and phone number, and after a few communications settled on a date he was free and we could possibly make.

With this constraint, we figured out the only way we could hit all six countries (except Belize) in Central America would be this: Fly to Guatemala City and rent from Avis; drive through El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, and back to Guatemala City; fly to Costa Rica and rent a car; fly to panama and hire a taxi; then fly back home. There was basically no margin for error, but the plan might just possibly work.

GUATEMALA

Our first flight left 6am on a Friday, and unfortunately I had an important robotics conference paper due that very day. I made my final revision to the paper at 3:30am Friday morning, clicked submit, then immediately jumped in a taxi for the airport.

We left the snows of Boston and that afternoon touched down in the heat of Guatemala City. The Avis rental agency at the airport confirmed that they did indeed allow cross-border travel, though it didn't sound completely by the book or official. The only documentation they gave us permitting this travel was a printed piece of paper saying "Cross-border travel permitted to the following countries: _____."

The agent merely wrote in pen "El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras" in the blank spot, and handed us the paper. We figured worst case we'd just bribe the border agents and get through anyways.

I got behind the wheel first, and was immediately thrust into the most chaotic driving I've ever experienced. It was like jumping into a cold river – there's no slowly turning up the temperature, you just have to adjust to it quickly. Cars weaved in and out of each other with no regard for turn signals or traffic laws. Motorcycles zipped between the cars with inches to spare, and pedestrians darted across the road randomly.

Matthew booted up our GPS and directed me through town, and somehow I managed to avoid any collisions and safely made it onto the four-lane Carretera Jacobo Arbenz Guzman heading northeast out of town. The driving was briefly as easy as driving on an interstate highway in the US, but it didn't last long. We soon turned off this main road near Zacapa, and headed south on a two-lane road.

It was night by now, and multiple factors combined to make this section especially difficult. The road was heavily-trafficked by large tractor-trailor trucks, which went extremely slowly up the winding hills. The road had enough blind turns that it was very difficult to safely pass the trucks, and the road had so many potholes that even if I started to pass, I might have to slam on the brakes and abort the pass due to a gapping hole in the road ahead.

We stopped at a grocery store just south of Zacapa and loaded up on food for the trip. We'd brought some snack foods from the US, but were hoping to supplement it with some authentic Guatemalan food. The store didn't have much, but we did manage to buy some tortillas, queso (cheese), and jamon (ham).

HONDURAS

Matthew took over driving around 9:30pm, and we soon reached the Honduras border. It wasn't extremely obvious how we were supposed to proceed. There were no other cars around for us to follow, and no gates, just an overhang and an office. We drove up, and stopped next to a security guard. In hindsight we could have just kept driving, but we got out of the car and walked inside, and some official people stamped our passports and collected a small fee from us.

On the Honduras side the roads were eerily deserted, in sharp contrast to all of our driving earlier in the day in Guatemala. We eventually caught up to a lone police truck with a heavily-armed officer in the back, but when the truck turned off we were back on our own.

"Good thing we're almost to the El Salvador border," Matthew said. "I think it's safe to drive at night over there."

We soon cruised up to the border and, just like before, it was deserted. We parked and walked around, but couldn't find a single person to stamp our passport or take our fees. I'm not sure why we kept looking. Maybe we were concerned that at the next border they would be looking for an entry stamp and we might get in trouble without it. Eventually a security guard ambled around the corner, and said we might find a border agent a few hundred feet back up the road.

I walked over, and sure enough, one lone agent was sitting in a small booth next to the road. He must have left to go to the bathroom when we passed by earlier. Matthew and I gave him our passports, and he wrote down the passport numbers in a tattered old notebook, then took a small fee and waived us by. We didn't realize it at the time, but these two border crossings would turn out to be the only easy ones of the whole trip, requiring no bribes or helpers and taking only ten minutes instead of over an hour.

EL SALVADOR

Safely in El Salvador we finally started seeing other cars on the road again. We drove into San Ignacio and then turned left following signs for Cerro El Pital. The mountain was

(conveniently for us) right on the border with Honduras, and is actually a popular-enough hiking and camping destination to earn its own sign on the main road.

We drove up the steep windy road into the mountains until we reached a small village. From here the road turned to dirt, and was a bit tricky for our 2wd car. A few times I had to get out and remove some large rocks from the road, and once Matthew had to back up and try a section a second time at higher speed to avoid spinning out the tires. We managed to get to the end of the road around 11pm, and threw our sleeping bags and tent into our backpacks for the short hike to the summit.

The summit of Cerro El Pital is topped with a big radio tower and a 4wd access road, so the hiking was short and easy. After 15 minutes of walking we finally reached the roof of El Salvador. It wasn't terribly scenic: a fence ringed a beat-up concrete building next to the radio tower, and barbed wire marked the Honduras border right next to the summit stones. There was also no view for us because it was nearly midnight. But none of that mattered to us. The summit of El Salvador counted just as much as the summit of the US for the country highpoints, and we'd just checked another one off the list.

We snapped some victory shots, then hiked a short ways down into the woods and pitched our tent for the night. The next morning we climbed back up to the peak to get some daylight pictures, then walked back down to our car. We cruised easily back down the road and started heading for our next objective – Mogoton, the landmined highpoint of Nicaragua.

Nicaragua
Cerro Mogoton 6909ft

Author: Eric

March 24, 2013

"See this marker here?" Roberto asked, pointing to a stick poked in the ground with a yellow "Campo Minado" ribbon tied to the top. "This is where a landmine was removed from the

ground." We were hiking through the jungle on the Honduras-Nicaragua border on the slopes of Cerro Mogoton, the tallest mountain in Nicaragua. "Are there still landmines in the jungle?" I asked. "We cleared most of them on the Nicaragua side, but we aren't certain we got them all." Roberto replied. "That's why you need to walk exactly where I walk."

CERRO EL PITAL TO HONDURAS

Matthew and I were in Central America for the week trying to climb the country highpoints of El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Panama. By Saturday morning we had successfully climbed Cerro El Pital in El Salvador, and started driving southeast towards Nicaragua.

Cerro Mogoton in Nicaragua would definitely be considered the crux of the mountains on our agenda. It's not particularly tall, or remote, or physically difficult to climb, or even difficult to approach. The problem is that Cerro Mogoton is land-mined.

Back in the 1980's, the Honduras-Nicaragua border was land-mined by the Sandinistas, and the mines were never removed after the conflict. Now nobody knows exactly where the landmines are, and the jungle border is likely still very dangerous. Unfortunately, Mogoton, the tallest mountain in Nicaragua, is directly on the border, and thus directly in the danger zone.

Matthew and I are ok with bushwhacking through the jungle, hiking long distances, ice climbing, rock climbing, crossing glaciers, night hiking, or trespassing to climb a mountain that needs to be climbed, but crossing land-mined ground is beyond our danger threshold. It sounds a little like crossing a glacier in which you don't know where a crevasse is that you could fall into, except on a glacier you have a rope to prevent you from falling into the crevasse. On Mogoton a rope wouldn't provide any protection from land-mines.

However, through Jonathan Wunrow's "High Points - A Climber's Guide to Central America" book, we found that there is a local coffee plantation owner – Roberto Castellano – who lives in the nearby town of Ocotal and has actually helped clear landmines from the jungles around Mogoton and knows a safe way to the summit. He had guided people to the summit before, and agreed to guide us up as well.

We started driving Saturday morning at 8am from near the summit of Cerro El Pital in El Salvador. Our Google driving directions predicted a six-hour drive to Ocotal, Nicaragua, so we figured we would get there by midafternoon, with plenty of time to meet up with Roberto and make arrangements for the climb the next day. At this stage in the trip we hadn't yet discovered that the more accurate driving time estimate in Central America is to double the Google maps estimate.

We descended steeply from El Pital and took Calle 4N towards San Salvador. The road was amazingly smooth and straight, and there were no tractor-trailer trucks to pass. We soon reached the outskirts of San Salvador, and merged with the Pan American Highway, which luckily bypassed the city. Here the highway was four-lane divided, just like the interstates in the

US. It was amazing to be able to pass any slow car or truck, without worrying about oncoming traffic. We had learned in Guatemala that not all roads offer such easy opportunities to pass.

From San Salvador we continued southeast past San Vincente and San Miguel, before reaching the Honduras border at Goascoran. Somehow we had managed to squeak through the previous two border crossings on Friday with minimal hassle, but now it was time for us to experience the chaos and corruption of an authentic Central American border crossing.

Matthew slowed down at the border crossing as a uniformed police officer approached the car and handed us a piece of paper. The officer then immediately walked away without saying word, but right behind him a "helper" approached the car. These "helpers" are locals that, for a fee, will help gringos figure out which paperwork they need to fill out, cut in line to hand in the paperwork directly to the officers, and tell the gringos which police officers need a little bribing to make the process smoother.

"Follow me, follow me. Park here, park here," the helper guy said, motioning for us to follow. We parked the car and got out to figure out what to do next. "Take this form to the police officer on the other side of the building," the helper said. "You need your car documents."

"Ok, we'll follow you," I replied. Luckily he spoke good English. We took all our valuables out of the car, locked the doors, and proceeded to the police station. Here we waited in line for a few minutes, handed the officer our documents, and he gave us a piece of paper with an official stamp. Next, we went to the other side of the building to a customs window, but were daunted to see a line of 30 people waiting in front. "Don't worry, don't worry," the helper told us. "My friend save a place in line for you."

Another man at the front of the line waved to us with a smile, and told us to take his place. Somehow we were able to cut right to the front and nobody cared. We handed the passports to the customs agent who gave us stamps and some other document.

We paid the helpers $10 and said goodbye to El Salvador. We drove away and began the next stage of the crossing – entering Honduras. This time a police officer stopped us and asked to see our car documents. The helper jogged over next to the car and stood by intently. The officer kept studying the documents carefully for five minutes, and then said something to the helper I didn't hear.

"The officer says you don't have the right documents and he can't let you through," the helper told us. "But, I think if you slip him $40 he'll let you pass." "This is ridiculous," Matthew said. "We have so many documents one of them has to be the one he's looking for."

"I think the point is he wants money no matter if we have the right documents or not," I replied. "We can either argue with him and spend the rest of the day here, or pay him the money and move on."

We were about to fork over the $40 to the police officer, but the helper rushed back over to the car and motioned for me to put the cash away. "Wait, wait, it's OK," he whispered urgently, "you'll pay him later."

We were a little confused about what to do next, but the police officer mysteriously waved us through. Now we could officially start the process of entering Honduras. The helper got a friend to cut to the front of the immigration line with our passports and get the official stamps, then we went to some other building to make copies of all our documents and submit them to some other random building. "You've got to be put into the system," he said. At the end of the procedure we gave the helpers $20 to split, and after an hour were finally through the border and driving in Honduras. If we'd had to figure everything out on our own, I'm sure we would have been there an extra two or three hours.

GOASCORAN TO OCOTAL (NICARAGUA)

The roads in Honduras were noticeably worse than El Salvador, with deep potholes every few hundred feet. Luckily the roads were generally flat and straight, so passing large slow-moving trucks was not a big problem.

We drove along the Pan American Highway through San Lorenzo and Choluteca, and reached the Nicaragua border and El Espino just at dusk. As usual, a policeman came and handed us a form, but this time there was no helper behind him. Perhaps the helpers had all left at dusk.

We were the only ones at the border, so we drove to the customs booth, filled out the form, and handed it to the officer. We then paid him $3 each, got the stamps on our passports, and walked back to the car.

"Can it really be this easy?" Matthew asked as we walked away. "There's got to be more to the crossing than this," I replied. "That was almost as smooth as a US-Canada crossing."

We continued driving down the road, and then a man with a gas mask on waved our car to stop. It turned out he needed to spray our tires with some chemicals before it was allowed to enter Nicaragua, and we needed to pay him a fee to do it. We handed over $5 for the car, got it sprayed, and kept driving. Next we passed a building that said "Tourismo" on the front, but the lights were off and nobody was around. We kept driving, thinking we had made it through the border, but were stopped at one final checkpoint.

A woman walked over to the car and asked for some type of document. Matthew handed her everything we had, but she couldn't find the one she was looking for. "You need to go back to the Nicaragua customs booth and get this document," she said sternly to us (in Spanish). In hindsight, if we had slipped her some money to let us through, we would have saved an extra hour of hassle, bribery, and beauracracy.

But alas, we weren't bold enough to offer her money and turned around to go get the document. This time a helper appeared and started guiding us through the process. He woke up the people in the customs booth, and we got our passports stamped, paid some fees, got our vehicle documents copied, handed them in to some other person who gave us some other documents and charged us some other fees. We thought we were done as we triumphantly walked back to the car, but a police officer had noticed us two gringos and decided to come get a piece of the action.

Even though our car had already been inspected by another officer, this policeman insisted on inspecting it again. He had a fiber-optic camera that he inserted under the hood, in the fuel tank and under the seats. He seemed to be inspecting extremely thoroughly, but he never once opened up our backpacks. It looked like he was just putting on a show. If we'd really wanted to smuggle something, we could have left it in a plastic bag on the passenger seat and he wouldn't even have noticed it.

Apparently satisfied with his inspection, he asked us for some final random document. I handed over the fistful of papers we'd accumulated. He picked out one in particular, and said it was missing an official Nicaragua stamp signifying that our rental car was allowed to drive in Nicaragua.

"Where do we get the stamp?" I asked. "We already have the document from the rental agency giving us permission to drive in Nicaragua. What more do we need?" (All conversations were in Spanish). "I need to call up Interpol and the police station in Managua to verify that you are allowed in, but they just closed. You'll have to wait until tomorrow morning," he replied.

I translated for Matthew. "That's bull*$&%," Matthew replied. "We have every document we need. This stupid officer just saw two gringos passing through and wants a piece of the pie." (I didn't translate that to the officer.)

"I think the officer will let you through if you give him some money," the helper whispered to me.

"Ok, how much does he need?" I whispered back in frustration.
"Twenty dollars should do it," he replied.

I angrily got out my wallet and handed the officer a twenty dollar bill. He took the bill, quickly stuck it in his pocket, looked around, and then walked into a building with one of the car documents. Thirty seconds later, he returned with a little stamp on the document, and said we could go.

"Are we finished?" I asked the helper. "Yes, finished!" he replied. "Now how about some money for me?" "Ok here's ten dollars," I said, handing him the bill. "Gracias."

We got back in the car, drove back to the checkpoint, and the woman accepted our new handful of documents and let us through. We were starting to accumulate so many random documents that we could have stapled them together into a novel. By now it was 7pm and we were way later than anticipated. I had told Roberto we'd be in Ocotal in the afternoon, and hoped he would still be awake by the time we got there.

We arrived in Ocotal by 8pm and I immediately called Roberto. We had stopped next to the Mirador Hotel, and he said he would come meet us. Meanwhile, I decided to step inside and see how expensive this hotel was, to determine if we should stealth camp or not tonight. It looked very nice, but we were concerned it might be too expensive.

"It's $14 per night," the clerk told me. "OK, so for two of us that's $28 then?" I asked. That was way cheaper than we expected. "No, it's $14 for the room total," he replied. I immediately accepted. That's the same price we'd pay to stay at a USFS campground in the US, so it was totally worth that to sleep in a hotel in Nicaragua.

Shortly later, a truck pulled up to the hotel and three guys walked in. One was our guide Roberto, and the other two, Joel and Fernando, were climbers from El Salvador also looking to climb Mogoton. I apologized for being so late, and explained how we didn't realize the travel time would be so long on the roads and the border crossings.

Roberto was super nice and understanding, and he said Joel and Fernando also coincidentally wanted to climb Mogoton this week so he combined our trips. The plan was to get picked up the next morning at 4:30am and try to get up and down the mountain before the afternoon heat.

Matthew and I had an excellent Chicken Fajita dinner for $3 at the restaurant next door, and then quickly went to sleep.

CERRO MOGOTON

We were both up at 4:15am and waiting outside by 4:30am. We waited for a while and finally at 5am Roberto drove by in his truck. "I'm sorry, the other guys are still sleeping," he said. "They should be awake by the time we get back."

We hopped in the back of the truck and drove across town to Roberto's house, where Joel and Fernando had spent the night. Everyone was awake now and we loaded into the back of the truck. Surprisingly, Joel and Fernando were also trying to climb all the country highpoints of Central America, though not on quite the compressed schedule Matthew and I had to work with. In fact, Fernando was trying to climb each highpoint twice! He'd already done Mogoton, so this was his second time around.

Riding in the back of the truck was super fun and brought back memories of Kentucky, when we'd occasionally ride in the back of pickup trucks. Unfortunately, it's illegal in the US, as far as I know, but in Central America it's a common form of transportation, and you'll see up to ten people in the back of a truck sometimes.

Roberto drove us east of town on NIC 29, then turned north on a dirt road into the mountains. The sun was just rising as we drove past small farms, and then up into the forests. Occasionally we had to drive through creeks in the truck, and up extremely steep dirt roads that our 2wd low-clearance car would have had no chance on.

After an hour we pulled into a small coffee finca where two guys were processing coffee beans in a big pool of water. We all hopped out and Roberto went over to talk to the farmers. After a few words were exchanged we all put on our packs and started hiking behind Roberto. Initially we kept walking up a road through the coffee plantation.

"Over there in those bushes I discovered a landmine a few years ago," Roberto noted, pointing to the bushes next to the road. It was a stark reminder of why we hired a guide like Roberto who knew the safe way up the mountain.

Eventually we left the coffee plantation and re-entered the forest. The road became extremely steep here, and Roberto said a truck had recently fallen off the side and they'd needed a winch to rescue it. Maybe that was why he wanted to walk this stretch of road and leave his truck safely at the base.

The road ended at the top of the steep hill, where a small wooden hut was perched. A woman walked out and happily greeted Roberto, and we all sat on benches outside for a break. It looked like this woman had a small farm of banana trees on the side of the slope, or maybe she just lived off the land by herself. Fernando and Roberto each had a machete, which they took out and sharpened on a stone outside the woman's house.

We soon waved goodbye to the woman and started descending into the woods down to a small stream. It makes sense that the safest place to walk in landmine territory would be on the rocks of a streambed, and this is exactly where Roberto took us. Roberto was hiking in rubber boots, so he could walk right in the middle of the stream, while the rest of us rock-hopped on the edges, careful to not step on the ground.

We continued up the streambed for a mile or so, before stopping for another break on a big rock slab. Roberto passed around a bag full of some type of small fruit that tasted really good, and I passed around a bag of cookies. "We're making good time," Roberto said. "We should be to the top in two or three hours. Now we leave the streambed."

Up to this point I would have been ok following this route without a guide, but once we left the streambed I knew it was imperative that we follow someone who knew the safe route. Roberto went in front with his machete and we followed closely behind in single file. Roberto said he'd climbed this route 37 times over the past four years, and it showed since the route was worn down to almost look like a trail. Soon we came upon a yellow ribbon tied to a tree next to the route. Roberto unfurled the ribbon to display the words "Campo Minado - Peligro" (Land Mines – Danger).

We snapped pictures next to the ribbon, and smiled knowing that we would be safe despite the danger around us. We continued up deeper into the jungle, waiting every once in a while for everyone to catch up. It was important that we didn't lose sight of each other.

Eventually we gained a ridge and saw a small concrete marker that said "Honduras/Nicaragua." This was the official country border. "You guys are in Honduras now, and didn't even need to show your passports!" Roberto said.

We continued walking along the ridge behind Roberto, catching occasional glimpses through the trees to the valleys and farms below. By 9:30am we came upon a particularly large concrete marker, and we had reached the summit of Mogoton, the highest point in Nicaragua. Matthew immediately climbed on top of the marker and started taking pictures. Fernando and

Joel soon arrived and we all exchanged high-fives and fist pumps. Joel had brought a huge El Salvador flag that he takes to his summits, and we all got in a picture together.

It felt like lunch time, since we'd woken up so early, and Roberto distributed an amazing selection of homemade tortilla chips, frijoles, and queso. All I had was some granola, but I tried to pass that around too. A few mosquitoes started to bother us, but Roberto assured us we were lucky to be here now, during the dry season, and that the bugs are horrendous in the wet season. Matthew and I hadn't realized it, but we hit Central America at the perfect time. The dry season lasts November to April, and May to October is much wetter, with many more bugs. Today was nice and sunny though, and the mosquitoes didn't bother us much at all.

"Do you guys want to take a different way down?" Roberto asked, as we were finishing up eating. "Certainly!" we all responded. It's always funner hiking in a loop, as long as each way is clear of landmines.

Roberto led the way farther along the ridge along a faint path, then dropped down the side of the mountain. He pointed out several wooden structures that the military had used as a camp when they were clearing the area of landmines. Every once in a while we would see a stick jutting out of the ground with a yellow ribbon on it, and Roberto said these marked places where landmines were removed. They were all right next to the path we were walking on, and further highlighted the risk of traveling without a guide in this jungle.

We continued along ridges with occasional views out into the farms of Ocotal, and then reached the edge of a coffee plantation. Here we hiked along a barbed-wire fence, and soon met up with a dirt road leading back down into the valley. Several workers were picking coffee beans on the side of the hill and we stopped to talk to them briefly.

Roberto started jogging down the road with a big smile, perhaps because he was happy to be off the mountain and back on safe land. We jogged behind him, and soon arrived back at the truck. The coffee processing building was busy now, with two more trucks parked and more workers. We washed off with a hose near the building, and then hopped in the back of the truck. Roberto gave us another fun ride down the mountain, and we saw quite a few Nicaraguans up in the forest swimming in the streams to avoid the midday heat.

Unfortunately, Matthew and I had forgotten to bring sunscreen, and we got roasted in the back of the truck. It's easy to trick yourself into thinking you'll be okay when there's a strong breeze blowing by cooling you off (like in the back of the truck), but the breeze does not, in fact, prevent sunburn at all, as we found out.

By 12:30pm we arrived back in Ocotal and dropped Joel and Fernando off at Roberto's house, then drove back to the Hotel to drop me and Matthew off. Roberto brought out a guest book for us to sign, and we saw he'd had a few Norwegian guests he'd guided up Mogoton back in January. It turned out I recognized one of the names as a climber I'd emailed back and forth with in the fall about climbing one of the Caribbean country highpoints.

Roberto charged us each $60 for the climb, which seemed totally reasonable for his one-of-a-kind knowledge to get us safely up and down the mountain. We gladly paid him for the

climb, with a generous tip, and waved goodbye. We were already starting to plan our next move: driving to Honduras to climb Cerro Las Minas (a mountain without landmines, despite the name).

Honduras
Cerro Las Minas 9347ft

Author: Eric

March 25, 2013

THE TAXI STRIKE

"Quick! Get in the car!" Matthew yelled. We both sprinted back to the car, followed by a handful of Hondurans. We jumped inside, slammed and locked the doors, and quickly turned on the engine. The van in front of us was already rolling forward, and a kid on the side of the road was urgently motioning us to follow.

I gunned the engine, then slammed on the brakes inches behind the van. Up ahead a pickup truck full of heavily-armed Honduran military men with big assault rifles was approaching a wall of taxi rickshaws blocking the road into the small town of San Juan, in rural western Honduras. The taxis reluctantly opened a small gap just large enough for the military vehicle to pass through, but they obviously had no intention of keeping that gap open once the truck passed.

The military truck rolled forward through the wall of taxis, but before the taxis could close the gap another pickup truck squeezed through, and then a car. Everyone started honking their horns and yelling as the excitement built that we might actually clear the line that had been blocking our path all morning.

I carefully tailed the van in front of me, quickly accelerating then slamming on the brakes to stay as close as possible. But I wasn't fast enough.

"Stop! Truck!" Matthew yelled. A big cargo truck had quickly nosed in front of me from the side, and I was forced to relinquish my spot in line. I could tell from the expression on the driver's face that he would have no qualms with pushing my little car off the road.

By now we were at the line of taxis, and I could see them angrily trying to cut in front of the passing cars and close the gap yet again. The truck ahead of me barreled through, but it was moving too fast and a 6-ft gap opened up in front of me.

On the left I saw a green taxi start accelerating toward the gap, confident he would cut me off. I immediately stepped on the accelerator, with no intention of stopping. If a collision happened, I thought, so be it. We couldn't afford to be stuck in San Juan any longer. We had a mountain to climb today.

OCOTAL TO SIQUATEPEQUE

Our journey to Cerro Las Minas, the highest mountain in Honduras, started Sunday afternoon in the small town of Ocotal, Nicaragua. We had just come off a successful climb of the land-mined Mogoton, the highest mountain in Nicaragua, and started driving out of town around 1 pm. The roads in Nicaragua were surprisingly smooth, contrary to our previous Central American driving experiences, and we soon made it to the Honduran border crossing at El Paraiso.

Border crossings in Central America are a mixture of chaos, corruption, bureaucracy, and inefficiency, and it's amazing any cars ever make it through. Add to this that nobody at the border speaks English, and I only know some rusty Spanish from undergrad, and you can imagine the crossings wouldn't be trivial.

Our first indication of the impending crossing was a stationary line of tractor trailer trucks lined up two deep on the side of the road. These guys must have the toughest time crossing borders: some drivers had even strung up hammocks under their trucks and gone to sleep. Matthew cut around the trucks in the oncoming lane and soon reached the front of the line.

We stopped at a gate across the road, and a man walked toward the car and handed us a piece of paper through the window. As he turned to walk away a second man, who we'll call "the helper," ran up to the car. Every border crossing has at least one of these "helpers," basically some guy who waits until he sees a gringo drive up and try to cross. The helper will fill out forms for you, cut through lines to get your forms in first, direct you what to do next, tell you which cops need a little bribing to speed up the procedure, and try to rip you off for money at every turn in the process. They also make the crossing take less than an hour instead of three hours, so in the end are probably worth a little bit of money.

Everything following transpired in Spanish, but for clarity I'll assume it's in English.

"Park here, park here," the helper said, motioning us where to go. We pulled off on the opposite side of the gate and got out. Two other Honduran guys noticed the gringos and swooped in as well.

"Give me your passports, I'll bring them to the police office to fill out the paperwork," the helper said, pointing to the paper we'd been handed. "No," I replied. "I need to always see the passports." "Ok, but I'm coming with you. I need to see those passports the whole time," I responded. "How much is the Nicaraguan exit fee?" "Twelve dollars per person. Don't worry, I'm an official worker," another man said, holding up a little ID badge. I didn't trust him, though. He could have easily forged that badge.

"Give me your driver's license and car registration and I'll fill out the car documents," another man said. "You drive up to the next line." "No," Matthew responded. "I need the license to drive the car. I'll drive there and fill it out myself." (I translated this into Spanish for the Nicaraguan guys).

Matthew drove ahead to the next spot the people had pointed out, and I followed the man with the passports. "No problem, we'll take care of it," he kept saying.

I waited around at the police station while the helpers filled out the Nicaraguan exit paperwork, and Matthew drove up to some sort of car registration office. It was all very mysterious what needed to happen, but for some reason the helper guys needed to make copies of all the documents in the car and submit them to some office for a small fee. Then we needed to fill out customs declaration forms to enter Honduras (which the helper guys rapidly filled out – apparently they assumed we had nothing to declare). The helpers cut around everyone in the customs line and walked directly into the office to hand the forms to the workers.

For some reason nobody in line seemed upset. They must have been thinking 'oh, more gringos. They always get the special treatment, for a price.'

"Wait a minute," I said to Matthew, "that helper guy on the Nicaragua side never gave me my change for the exit fee. He's probably disappeared by now counting his earnings."

"Don't worry," Matthew replied, "I just exchanged twenty dollars for Honduran Limpiras with that change lady over there, and turns out she gave me the Limpiras but forgot to take my dollars. Ha, look at that big smile on her face counting all her money! They ripped us off, and we get to rip them off."

Our customs forms got cleared and then we had to submit some sort of car paperwork in another random office. We had been waiting around for a while and by now the change lady was starting to get suspicious. She walked over to Matthew with an angry scowl on her face.

"Where's my money?" she asked, furious. "I changed you 400 Limpira for 20 US dollars, but I don't have any 20 dollar bills in my stack." "I don't know, I only have Limpiras," Matthew replied, showing her the money. Matthew was determined to get some payback for us getting ripped off at the border.

"I'm going to call the police!" she yelled angrily. She kept repeating the word police, and eventually Matthew got scared and just handed her the Limpiras back. We definitely didn't want to get the police involved, because then we'd probably either get in trouble, or have to pay a big bribe, or at the very least get delayed even more.

Finally, the last of the paperwork was finished and handed back to us.

"Finished!" the helpers said. "Now what about a tip?" "Ok here's 200 Limpira," I said, handing him the equivalent of 10 USD. I figured it was totally worth that amount to have these guys guide us through the process. "And for me?" the official guy asked.

"No, I already paid your friend. You guys can split that," I replied. An official worker shouldn't need paid a tip anyways. He walked away dejectedly back to the Nicaraguan side. With that we jumped in the car, and cruised down the road into Honduras.

The Honduras roads were in noticeably worse shape than those in Nicaragua. Yardstick-deep potholes hid behind every turn, and every once in a while we'd encounter the infamous "fallas." In the US a "falla" would be called "a section of road that has fallen off a cliff on the side reducing the road to one lane." However, in Honduras this is so common that a yellow sign with "falla" is merely placed before the section of road. Sometimes, there is no sign warning of the upcoming falla, and instead a big rock is placed in the lane just before the drop-off. Thus, it is important to drive slowly and stay super alert.

I took over the wheel soon after the border, and carefully drove north to Danli, then west to Tegucigalpa. We were concerned that driving through Tegucigalpa would be total chaos, but amazingly we found a bypass around the town, and weren't slowed down at all. Even more surprising, on the west side of the city the road changed into a four-lane divided highway! The road was brand new, smooth, and of the same quality as a standard American interstate. We had never dreamed such a road existed in Honduras, and later learned that it was in fact funded by the US and was intended to connect Tegucigalpa to San Pedro Sula on the north coast.

We cruised out of the city at 60mph, faster than we'd gone the whole trip. We passed through Tamara, Zambrano, and Comoayagua before it started getting dark. Now, if we had been in the US we would have continued driving through the night to the trailhead in Gracias, but in Honduras it's not exactly a wise idea to drive at night. That's when the bad guys come out. We'd heard that people dressed as police officers would setup "checkpoints" at random locations along the road at night. Cars would stop because the checkpoints look official, but the fake officers might rob the drivers, or worse.

We started getting a little nervous outside of Comayagua around 6:30pm when, mysteriously, there were no cars on the road. Then around a corner climbing a hill we caught up to two tractor trailer trucks crawling up really slowly. Between them was a small car also going up very slowly. Why didn't the car just pass? There was a passing lane on the hill. Could the car be staying in between for protection?

At that point we decided it was an excellent idea to quit driving for the day. We soon reached the town of Siguatepeque and found a cheap hotel to spend the night in.

SIGUATEPEQUE TO SAN JUAN

We waited til first light at 6:30am, when the bad guys would theoretically be off the roads, and then cruised out of Siguatepeque heading west towards Gracias. By now the roads were back to standard Honduran pothole quality, and we had to take our time winding up and down the mountains. We soon reached the small town of La Esperanza around 8am, and then the road truly deteriorated. When we had researched the driving directions the previous week, google maps for some reason would not route us on the direct road between La Esperanza and Gracias, even though there appeared to be a road on the map. Now we figured out why.

The road turned to rough gravel and dirt, with large rocks sticking out that we occasionally scraped with the bottom of the car. In some stretches the road changed to steep dusty moguls, and I had to strike a delicate balance of speed: if I went to slow, I wouldn't have enough momentum to make it up the hills before spinning the tires, but if I went to fast I might not be able to avoid the bumps and ruts in the road and may bottom out. We continued on this road for half an hour, before cresting a hill and seeing a pristine paved road in front of us.

"If we have to carry the car to that pavement I'll do it," Matthew said. "We aren't driving back over what we've already managed to drive through."

This pavement signified, hopefully, that the road would be smooth the rest of the way to Gracias. It was looking like we might actually get a chance to climb to the roof of Honduras today after all.

SAN JUAN TO GRACIAS

Our hopes were dashed, though, when we arrived at a line of cars stopped in the middle of the road just outside the small town of San Juan. The driver of a van in front of us walked back to our car and started explaining the situation, but all I could understand was that the road would be closed for a long time.

"Habla Ingles?" he asked eventually. "Si, si!" I responded.

He went back to his van and his son – a college-aged kid named Junior – hopped out and walked over.

"There's a taxi strike in this little town, and the taxis have blocked off the road and won't let anyone pass until they get their demands," he said in perfect English. "Any idea how long that will be?" I asked. "Any chance we could just pay them a little money and they let us through?" That had worked for the police officers yesterday, I was thinking, so maybe it'd work here too.

Junior went up to talk to the taxi drivers, and came back with bad news. “They said they’ll only move for a million dollars! And they’re not even considering moving for at least the next six hours.”

This was indeed bad news. Matthew and my schedule was tight enough that we *had* to climb Cerro Las Minas today in order to have time for our next mountain and to make our flight out of Guatemala in time. We started thinking about how to get around the blockade. The nearest detour road would involve driving all the way back to Sigautapeque and around to the north – probably adding 10 hours of driving. That wouldn’t help. Surely there was some random dirt road around?

We started talking to other people waiting around, and one guy said there were indeed some back roads around the town, but that they were much worse than the road from La Esparanza. Our car had just barely made it through that road, so anything worse was not an option. A bus behind us started emptying and all the passengers walked through the blockade. On the other side another bus emptied and the passengers walked toward and boarded the bus on our side. That was clever – the buses didn’t need to cross, only the passengers. Each bus then turned around and went in opposite directions.

Unfortunately, it wouldn’t help us at all to walk through the blockade. Our rental car eventually needed to get back to Guatemala. Then we saw a funny event unfold. The farmer in the house next to the blockade quietly walked over, opened a gate next to the road, and motioned for a nearby truck to approach. The pickup truck drove through the gate, across the farmer’s field, exited on a gate on the other side, and connected with a road into town. He’d made it past the blockade! Soon another truck followed. But the taxi drivers caught on and immediately ran over to the gate and stood in front, arms folded across their chests.

Now it seemed our only option was to wait out the strike. We couldn’t drive around, couldn’t pay them off, and couldn’t walk through. It looked like, at best, we would be hiking Cerro Las Minas completely in the dark tonight, and at worst have to skip it all together.

After an hour of waiting around the tides turned in our favor and a government SUV and pickup truck full of Honduran Military men drove up to the blockade. I squeezed in behind the pickup truck and narrowly passed through the blockade to the other side. A white truck behind me managed to squeeze through as well, before the taxis pushed back across the road again. In total four vehicles had managed to run the blockade, and luckily ours was one of them. Probably twenty or thirty more vehicles were still stuck on the other side, and the same number were waiting in frustration on the new side now.

“Whooooo!” everyone yelled victoriously as we pulled off to the side of the road, safely past the blockade. Everyone in the van in front of us jumped out and we exchanged high fives and handshakes. We then quickly jumped back in our vehicles and sped out of town, not wanting to risk the taxi drivers or police finding some way to delay us even further.

The road was potholed as usual, but we didn’t mind driving slowly, since we were moving infinitely faster than everyone else still waiting behind the taxi blockade. Just when we

were within sight of the town of Gracias, where our trailhead would start, we encountered yet another delay. A policeman standing in the road waved us down and approached the car.

"Documentos, passaportes," he said sternly.

I handed him the passports and all the documents in the car. We had quite a few random official documents from the border crossings and the rental agency, and surely one of those would be the one he was looking for. He carefully scrutinized everything, but didn't see the document he was looking for.

He asked again for some specific document with a certain stamp on it, but I told him those were the only ones we had. He walked over to a more senior officer, and they both came over to talk to us. The senior officer tried to explain what document he needed, and I again explained that I had already handed over everything we had.

"Great," Matthew said to me as the police officers were consulting each other outside. "They probably just want a bribe and have made up some fictitious document we're supposed to have that doesn't actually exist." "Well, I'm willing to part with twenty bucks at this point if it gets us to the mountain," I responded.

These police officers were surprisingly honest, though. The senior officer walked back to the car, explained that next time at the border we need to be sure to get the xyz documento with the qxy stamp on it, and that this time he'd be nice and let us through. With great relief I took back all the documents and passports and drove out of the checkpoint. I had been certain he would want a bribe.

Finally, at 11am we reached the town of Gracias and turned off on a small unmarked side road to Celaque National Park. Matthew had acquired the GPS waypoints of the road to the trailhead, and expertly navigated us up the back roads. As usual, Honduras surprised us with how rough they can let roads get. This road had obviously not been maintained in decades, and was extremely rocky and rutted out. I narrowly managed to drive the car without scraping the under carriage. Eventually, at 11:30am we reached a point where it looked like the car could make it no farther.

We happened to be near some houses, and the owner said we could park in his driveway overnight for 100 Limpira. We gladly agreed to pay for the peace of mind that our car would be safe, and by noon we were hiking up the road by foot with overnight gear in our packs.

The road improved shortly beyond the house, after it crossed the national park border, but we stuck with our decision to park the car farther back and continued walking. This decision would turn out to be critical later in the day.

After half an hour we reached the end of the road and the beginning of the trail. There was an impressive stone building at the trailhead and a ranger there to collect fees and give us a trail map. The latest information we had read about the park, from 2009, had made it sound like there was no infrastructure, the trails were unmaintained, and there were no rangers. It was

completely different now, with official buildings at the start, all kinds of signs and well-maintained trails, and a hiker log-book that showed people visiting every day from all over the world.

We paid the ranger 100 limpira each for the park entrance fee (about $5), and signed in the log book. Interestingly, we found a sign-in from a Norwegian climber Petter Kragset from back in late January. Back in the fall we had given Petter some information about accessing the highpoint of the country of Antigua and Barbuda (Mt. Obama), and learned that he was planning to climb all the Caribbean and Central America country highpoints over the winter. We were also trying to climb all these highpoints, in fact all 23 country highpoints of North America, and it had sounded like Petter might beat us to it. This sign-in was evidence that he had at least visited Central America, and we indeed had some catching up to do.

Finally, at 1pm we reached the stage of the journey that matched us against the mountain. No potholed roads, no corrupt border crossing police, no taxi blockades, no checkpoints, no badguys at night, just us and the trail up to the summit. It seemed so easy at this point. We just had to stroll up 7,000ft, tag the summit, and stroll back.

We started hiking up the trail, winding over rivers and up switchbacks through the jungle. There were shiny new trail signs every kilometer telling us our elevation, a map, and description of what there was to see in the jungle. We were astounded by how much the park had apparently improved in the four years since our last information about it. We passed by a group of Hondurans and a German walking, down, and then two Americans hiking down.

After several hours we reached Campamento Don Tomas, the campsite we had told the ranger we planned to spend the night. We took a quick snack break and stashed our overnight gear in the woods. It didn't need to come all the way to the summit with us.

We then continued hiking up the trail. As we climbed the foliage changed from jungle to more open forest, and the temperature seemed to get a little cooler. The trail steepened noticeably, and it appeared that this was an older trail, and lower on the mountain the trail had recently been rerouted to be less steep.

We took a short break at the next campsite, El Naranjo, and then made it to the summit by 5pm. In all my research I hadn't quite bothered to remember how high the mountain was. I thought it was around 7,000ft or so, but it was actually well over 9,000ft! There was a small clearing in the trees to the west, and we got views of impressive thunder clouds rolling in. This would have been an awesome place to camp, and indeed we saw a fire ring at the top and a flat place where people probably slept. We had now successfully climbed the highpoints of El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Honduras, and still had Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Panama on the agenda for the rest of the week.

After about half an hour we started back down, reaching our gear at Campamento Don Tomas by around 6:30pm. The campsite was crowded now with five tents and people milling about the fire. We considered our options. We really needed to be to the Tajumulco trailhead in Guatemala by tomorrow at sunset to avoid driving at night. We'd heard that driving at night in

Guatemala was even more dangerous than in Honduras. The driving time according to Google Maps was 8 hours, but based on previous experience we figured doubling Google's estimate is more appropriate in Central America. Thus, we had to get in 16 hours of driving tomorrow before sunset. If we camped here, we'd have to get up at 2am to hike down to the car in time. Or, we could just hike down tonight and sleep somewhere in town and sleep later in the morning.

We weren't really tired enough to sleep yet at 6:30pm, so we packed up our bags and continued hiking down. By 7:30pm we were back at the trailhead and reached the car by 8pm. By this time the gate to the park was closed and locked, and had we driven our car the whole way to the trailhead we would have been stuck until morning. It was thus very lucky that we had decided to park just outside the gate.

The people in the house where our car was parked were astounded that we had already summited Cerro Las Minas. Most hikers apparently take two days, or at least one very long day. We had somehow managed to do it in 7 hours.

I got behind the wheel and we drove back down the super-rough road into Gracias. After asking around for hotels and balking at the price of one fancy hotel we finally found a reasonable place for $30 a night. Usually we like to stealth camp, but this time we calculated we could get more total sleep by staying in town, and thought $15 per person was worth the extra sleep.

By 9:30pm we were fast asleep in Gracias, resting up for our next mountain.

Guatemala
Volcan Tajumulco 13,845ft

Author: Eric

March 27, 2013

I slowed the car to a stop and rolled down the window. A white car was parked in the middle of the road in front of me with its lights on, and a man with a gun wearing a police uniform was motioning for me to pull over. I couldn't help but feel nervous. Matthew and I had heard that it was dangerous to drive in Honduras at night, because armed men dressed as police officers had been known to stop unsuspecting cars and rob the occupants. But we had to drive at night a little bit to make the 17-hour drive from Cerro Las Minas, the Honduras highpoint, to Volcan Tajumulco, the Guatemala highpoint, in one day. It was currently 3:45am and we had just left Gracias, Honduras, hoping that an hour or two of night driving close to morning was safer than the same hour or two just after sunset.

"Documentos. Donde vas? [Documents. Where are you going?]," the man asked, leaning in toward the window. "Vamos a la ciudad Guatemala [We're going to Guatemala City]," I answered, digging out the fistful of random car rental documents and handing it to the man. He seemed like a legitimate policeman, but still might give us trouble. "Salga del coche [get out of the car]," the man said, still looking over the documents. We stepped out and opened all the doors and the trunk so he could inspect inside.

He handed me back the documents, then started rummaging through our backpacks, and taking everything out of the trunk. We stood by patiently, hoping he would finish soon and not find anything suspicious. He must have been looking for drugs or weapons, of which we of course had neither.

When he was done examining my backpack he put it in the backseat and closed the rear door to start inspecting the trunk. But my waistbelt buckle got caught in the door and smashed to pieces as he closed it. I quickly rushed over to inspect it, and let out a groan of agony. I was planning to use that pack to hike my overnight gear up Tajumulco, and I realized how annoying it would be now to hike without a hipstrap.

The man walked over and looked embarrassed at the damage he'd done, and at how upset I was. To be honest, I was exaggerating a bit, hoping to make him feel bad and just let us go. My plan must have worked, because he suddenly decided we were not carrying any contraband, and waved us through. We got back in the car and quickly took off before the man could change his mind.

Matthew and I had just started our fifth day of an ambitious weeklong trip to climb the country highpoints of six Central American countries. We'd succeeded in reaching the easy radio-tower-capped summit of El Salvador, the scary land mined Mogoton in Nicaragua, and the long jungle hike up Cerro Las Minas in Honduras, and next on the lineup was the snow-covered Volcan Tajumulco in Guatemala. The police encounter in the pre-dawn hours of Honduras was hardly our first run-in with law enforcement on the trip, and would certainly not be our last.

After a few more hours of driving we reached the Guatemala border, just as the sun started rising. "How long you think this one'll take, an hour?" Matthew asked, referring to the upcoming border crossing." I don't care, as long as we don't have to bribe anymore corrupt officials," I replied. "It's like they see two white guys and think they can squeeze every last peso out of us."

We'd already crossed a half-dozen borders in the past few days, and were becoming frustrated at how inefficient and chaotic they were, and that we were expected to bribe police officers to get official "stamps" on our documents. This one was looking to be no different.

I pulled past the standard line of tractor trailers parked on the side of the road, then came up to another car moving slowly in front of me. I followed the car to a large overhang over the road next to an official office. This is definitely where we would need our passports stamped and some bribing money for the local police, but surprisingly there was nobody around anywhere outside. It was just barely sunrise, and people must have still been sleeping. The car in front slowed down, then rolled right through the border and kept going on the Guatemala side.

"We could stop and look around and try to get our passport stamped…" Matthew started. "Or we could just cruise through like that guy did and hope nobody sees us," I finished his sentence.

Before I had time to reconsider, I pushed my foot gently on the accelerator and cruised through the border just like the guy in front of me had. I looked in the rear-view mirror, but nobody was running after us, so I just kept going. After about 10 minutes with still nobody following I finally relaxed. We'd been taken advantage of on so many border crossings, but this time it was our turn to end up ahead. I just hoped the next customs agent to see our passports didn't care that the number of Honduras exit stamps didn't exactly match the number of entry stamps.

We were now on familiar terrain – we'd started our trip in Guatemala City and driven this same road on the way to our first mountain in El Salvador. Fortunately, this time we were following the road in the daylight and there weren't quite as many slow-moving trucks to contend with. We passed through San Jacinto and Zacapa before heading west and eventually reaching Guatemala City. Our destination, Volcan Tajumulco, was on the opposite side of the country nearly on the Mexico border, and we still had a long drive ahead of us.

Guatemala City was as chaotic as before, but Matthew navigated expertly and I swerved at the right times to avoid any collisions. On the west side of the city we were treated to a 4-lane highway weaving through the mountains. Now we were entering the touristy part of Guatemala. We passed a few rest stops full of trinket stands and restaurants, and gringos wandering around. This side of the country is popular because of the scenic Lago de Atitlan, and some large volcanoes popular with hikers.

By midafternoon we reached the town of Quetzaltenango (Quetzal-town, as we would later refer to it), and our magical 4-lane highway deteriorated into a 2-lane traffic-clogged road. There were no more touristy stops from here on, though we were treated to views of several huge volcanoes on the skyline. None of them were Tajumulco, but we were getting close.

To encourage cars to slow down in Quetzal-town there are huge yellow speed bumps in front of every intersection, and often at random places along the road. These weren't your standard American-style speed-bumps, though. These were Guatemalan style – aka they will without fail scrape the bottom of your car no matter how slowly you drive. Our car had standard

ground clearance, but no matter how slowly I inched over the bumps I would always scrape. Only one or two times when I came to a complete stop before the bump did I manage to pass scratch-free, but that could have been that the bump was just older and worn-down an extra inch from so much metal contact over the years.

Rental car agencies, however, never check the undercarriage of a car, so we didn't worry too much. At the town of San Marcos, we left the valley and started our climb up the side of the volcano. The road switch-backed aggressively up the steep hillside, and we had to pass quite a few slow-moving trucks chugging up the hill. We soon emerged on a plateau of sorts at 10,000 feet and drove to the small village of Tulichan. The sun was setting by this time, and the cloud ceiling dropped to our elevation, making for very low visibility. At Tulichan a rough road continues a little farther up the volcano, but with our 2wd rental car we decided to park at the base of the rougher road and avoid any chance of getting stuck in the dark and fog.

Our plan to avoid any night-driving in Guatemala had worked perfectly. We were surprised, because our car GPS had predicted an 8.5-hour drive from Gracias, Honduras, to the Tajumulco trailhead. In the previous four days we'd found empirically that in Central America a google-maps or car GPS time estimate is off by a factor of two over actual driving time, mostly due to rough roads and slow truck traffic. We'd thus been dead on target with our estimated 17-hour drive, and had left Gracias at the perfect time to avoid night driving in Guatemala.

It was surprisingly cold when we got out of the car. Just 24 hours earlier we'd been sweltering in the jungles of Honduras, and now we were freezing in the highlands of Guatemala. We quickly started packing our backpacks to start hiking up the mountain and pitch our tent before it got much darker. A few local mutts mosied over to our car to check out the activity and try their luck begging for food. However, Matthew and I were not feeling overly generous, and the dogs soon got bored and left.

We hid all our valuables under the seats, locked the car, and headed up the mountain. The road started out with cobble-stone-like pavement, but then deteriorated to dirt after passing the last outpost of houses. From what we could see of the terrain, we were surrounded by open grassland interspersed with outcroppings of bushes. As we left the last house a small, skinny black dog ran up to us and started tagging along. He looked like he hadn't seen a decent meal in weeks, and we felt sorry enough for him to not scare him away. We even gave him a name – Pedro.

After a few turns of the road we determined we were out of site of the houses, and immediately found a sheltered flat spot in the bushes and set up the tent. Pedro sat diligently watching our every maneuver. I secretly slipped him a handful of bagel crumbs, and I instantly turned into his new best friend. We were now guaranteed a guard dog for the rest of the night, and crawled in the tent to go to sleep as Pedro stood watch.

At 3:30am our alarms went off and we crawled back outside into the darkness. Pedro was there to greet us right outside the entrance, eagerly awaiting a reward for his guard duty. I snuck him a few more bagel crumbs and patted him on the head for a job well done.

Our goal was to see sunrise from the summit, and we quickly threw some food and spare clothes in our backpacks and started walking up the road. We left the tent and our sleeping bags set up, and Pedro laid back down next to the tent and went back to sleep. If he was still there when we returned, I vowed to give him a huge reward for guarding our gear.

The road deteriorated into true 4wd high-clearance territory, and we knew we'd made the right call to leave the car parked lower down. Before long we reached a parking area with several tough looking trucks parked, and here the road changed into a pure hiking trail.

A pine forest replaced the bushy slopes below, and we continued hiking up in the darkness through the trees. Surprisingly, a set of headlamps appeared above us, growing larger until we recognized the outline of three men hiking down.

"Buenos dias [good morning]," I said to the shadowy figures. "Buenos dias," one replied. "Vas a la cima? [Are you going to the summit?]""Si, por la salida del sol [yes, for sunrise]," I replied. "Buena suerte! [good luck!]," he replied as we parted ways.

I couldn't figure out why three guys would be hiking down the mountain at 4:30am. Shouldn't they be going up for sunrise if they're out at that hour, or still sleeping? We continued up the trail, weaving through the trees and occasionally in and out of open meadows. At one point we took a wrong turn that lead to a campsite on the side of the mountain, but we took a bushwhack shortcut back to the main trail with no problem.

At 5am we reached the edge of treeline and passed by a set of several campfires burning in a small ravine next to the trail. As we got closer we noticed people huddled around the fires covered in blankets, and rudimentary little wooden structures nearby. It looked like some Guatemalan hikers getting ready for a sunrise hike, but we couldn't be sure. They definitely looked cold, though. And with good reason – this was the elevation we saw our first snow patches on the ground. It must have been just below freezing then.

Matthew picked up a handful of snow and took a bite. "Mmm, tastes about the same as snow back in New Hampshire," he observed. "I'm sure there'll be plenty more on the top of this mountain," I replied.

Now the trail turned more rugged, and we had to use our hands once in a while to pull ourselves over boulders. The snow patches became more numerous, but never completely covered the ground. By 5:30am the steepness of the terrain began subsiding, and soon enough there was no more mountain left to climb. We officially reached the roof of Guatemala at 5:32am, roughly two hours after starting the hike, and unfortunately well before sunrise.

A biting cold wind blew across the boulder-swept top, and we were not quite prepared for such wind-chill, having only our summer rain jackets and a few poly pro top layers on. Matthew found a semi-sheltered area just inside the crater rim below some boulders and the remains of a large steel cross. We still had a half-hour to kill until sunrise.

I dug out some plantain chips to eat, then started doing jumping jacks furiously to regain warmth in my body. Matthew scrambled back up to the summit and ran around, also to stay warm. We would have been quite the site to see if anyone else were around, but we were luckily the only ones at the summit.

Alpenglow was forming on the horizon, and we found some good picture opportunities in between the jumping jacks and summit laps. By 6am, though, the clouds rolled back in and blocked our sunrise view.

"I've had more than enough being cold," Matthew said. "It's not right to feel this frigid in Central America." "Yeah, I'd say we've enjoyed the summit long enough to leave," I replied between jumping jacks.

We snapped a few last victory pictures and then started walking back down. Now a few Guatemalans started emerging at the summit, obviously having better timing than us for sunrise. They must have been from the camp in the ravine below. As we descended through the boulder section we passed probably 30 people. Most were wearing blankets for warmth, and must have been pretty cold. They were smart to not reach the summit before sunrise like we had.

The hike back was much easier in the daylight, and we easily made it back to our tent by 7am. Surprisingly, Pedro was diligently waiting, tail wagging happily to see us. This time I took out a tasty granola bar and gave him the whole thing. Our tent was still there with all its contents, so he must have done a good guard job while we were gone.

We packed up the tent and sleeping bags, and walked back down the road to our car. Pedro followed us to the small cluster of houses, then ran away toward some people standing outside. I'm guessing they were his owners, and he didn't want to miss breakfast.

The car was in good shape back at the trailhead, apparently not having been broken into. I guess we'd only been gone about 12 hours, but were still relieved after hearing about the prevalence of roadside crime in Guatemala.

Matthew got behind the wheel this time, and at 8am we began the 8-hour drive back to Guatemala City. It should have been a smooth drive back – we knew the way, had plenty of time, and were driving in the daylight, but alas, this was Central America, where nothing is guaranteed to go smoothly.

As we started descending Matthew touched the brakes to slow down, and the car replied with an excruciating sound of metal grating on metal. "Dang it!" Matthew exclaimed, pulling on the emergency brake and steering to the side of the road. "Of all places for the brakes to decide to go out, why does it have to be right before we need to descend 3,000 feet?" "I don't think that means they're useless," I replied. "I think that just means the pads are getting low, and the annoying sound was engineered to cause the driver to go and replace them."

"Sure, that's how it works on cars in America," Matthew countered, "but who can be sure about down here in Guatemala? And even if that is the case, I might wear the last millimeters out of them going down this hill."

We sat and thought about the situation a little. We could try to find a mechanic to come fix the brakes, but that might take a while, and we had a flight to catch early the next morning. It was holy week, after all, and most people weren't working the whole week. We could call the rental agency, but then they might blame us for the problem and still not be able to help. Or, we could be careful and try to get the car back to Guatemala City on our own. We decided on the latter option.

"I'll just shift into the lowest gear going downhill, and pull on the emergency brake if I need to stop," Matthew said. "And I'll lightly tap on the back brakes just so the light goes on when I'm slowing down." "Sounds good to me," I said.

Matthew slowly drove the car back onto the road and shifted into the low gear. We angered a few other cars behind us for driving so slow, but made it out of Tulichan without hearing the grating metal-on-metal sound too often.

As we got a little farther down the road, though, we saw a frightening sight in front of us. Two teenage boys had rigged up a wooden plank across the road with a menacing array of nails sticking up the top. The contraption would surely pop all four tires of any car foolish enough to drive over it. The boys were wearing Halloween masks, and each held a rope attached to one side of the wooden plank.

Matthew pulled on the emergency brake just before the plank, and the car ground to a stop. Two more boys wearing masks then jumped out of the bushes and ran towards the car shaking bottles full of coins. I quickly locked all the doors as they pounded on the windows, shaking their bottles.

"What in the world is going on?" I asked. "It looks like they want us to pay them to let us pass." "I ain't paying those little hooligans a penny," Matthew replied.

We sat in the car waiting as the boys kept shaking their bottles. Matthew honked a few times, and the boys eventually gave up. One boy pulled his rope, and the plank slid off the side of the road. We quickly drove through, giving the boys angry looks out the window.

A little farther down the road we encountered two more boys on the side of the road, this time much younger and a little less nefarious. They were also wearing masks, and as we approached they pulled a small rope tight between them so it blocked the road. This time Matthew slowed down only slightly, knowing the little rope could do no damage to the car, unlike the previous ploy. When they boys saw we weren't stopping, they let the rope down just in time for our car to drive through.

One set of mischievous boys may have been merely an isolated event, but now that we'd passed two sets of masked boys we were began thinking it was more than just coincidence. Was

this some equivalent of Halloween in Guatemala? Was there some significance to the Thursday of holy week?

We made it safely down the hill using the emergency brake, then entered the village of San Marcos. In the middle of town, we turned a corner and saw a group of about 30 young men in their 20s lining the side of the road, and across the road was an even more menacing wooden plank with a nasty set of spiky nails sticking out in all directions. As before there were ropes on each end, and a man holding each rope.

Matthew pulled on the e-brake to stop just before the wooden plank, and the men started walking over towards the car. I made certain all the doors were locked, and we just stared ahead, trying not to look at the men. Matthew honked his horn several times, but the men still wouldn't let us through. It was a standoff. A few cars started pulling up behind us, and the men in the road began to realize we were not going to give in. Matthew honked again, and one man reluctantly dropped his rope as the other pulled the plank out of the road.

Luckily that was our last encounter with the roadblocks, and we managed to escape without losing any tires or money. We drove back through Quetzal-town, then onto the 4-lane highway into Guatemala City. All the while we would downshift and use the e-brake to stop, tapping on the actual brake lightly to turn on the back lights.

About half way to Guatemala City we came across a scene almost straight out of a James Bond movie. A bus was stopped on the side of the road and a man was standing on the roof tying down some chairs. The bus slowly started moving, but the guy on the roof hadn't yet finished his job. As the bus got up to highway speed ahead of us the man on the roof made his final knots in the rope, then turned around and started walking towards us. By this time the bus was going 60 mph! He turned around and climbed down a ladder to the back of the bus, then opened the door, hanging onto the ladder by one hand, and crawled inside. He was completely nonchalant about all the Indiana Jones-like maneuvers he'd just accomplished right in front of us!

We arrived in Guatemala City around 4pm, and decided to test the back brake just in case it had changed. Amazingly it didn't squeak at all! The whole drive over from Tajumulco it had made excruciating metal-on-metal squeaking sounds whenever we tapped it, but somehow it decided to turn silent right when we needed it to!

We pulled into the Avis rental station at the airport, and with another stroke of luck, were just barely early enough to save a full day on the rental. We had reserved the car until the next morning to give us plenty of buffer to make all the unknown driving times, but miraculously didn't need that buffer.

I told the rental agent that the brakes had been making some noises, but when he tested them out he couldn't hear a thing, so didn't charge us. I don't think I've ever been as relieved as I was then to walk away from a car. We'd driven that car all through the rough roads of Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala and came through without a single scratch (except for the undercarriage, which was not noticeable).

We spent the night in a hostel a block from the airport, and the next morning got on a flight to San Jose. Our next adventure was just starting – a climb up Cerro Chirripo, the tallest mountain in Costa Rica.

Costa Rica
Cerro Chirripo 12,530ft

Author: Matthew

March 28-29, 2013

"Hola señor, queremos subir Cerro Chirripó y nos gustaría comprar un permiso." ("Hello sir, we plan to climb Cerro Chirripó and we'd like to buy a permit"), Eric said to the ranger sitting behind the counter. We had just walked into the ranger station at the base of Cerro Chirripó, the highest point in Costa Rica. "¿Ok, qué día quieres subir?" ("Ok, which day would you like to climb?"), the ranger asked.

Eric paused for just a moment. This was a question that we had been expecting and whose answer we had carefully contemplated and crafted over the past couple of weeks. Our answer could take one of two forms. We could either answer truthfully, which would be certain to draw skepticism from the ranger, and could quite possibly unravel our entire plan. Or, we could give another answer that was, ahem, a slightly different version of the truth, but would elicit a more favorable reaction from the ranger and enable us to execute our plan.

"Mañana," Eric said, "nos gustaría subir en un día de mañana." ("We would like to climb in one day- tomorrow.")

"Ok, bueno, es posible subir el Cerro Chirripó en un día, pero hay que empezar a caminar muy temprano, como a las 4 o 5 de la mañana." ("Ok, good, it is possible to climb Cerro Chirripó in one day, but you must start hiking very early, like 4 or 5 in the morning"), the ranger answered. "Es 8,000 colones por persona para el permiso." ("It is 8000 colones per person for the permit.") (~$15 USD).

Eric and I both breathed a huge mental sigh of relief and forked over the permit fee. Things were proceeding according to plan. No answers such as "sorry, the permits are sold out" or "no, you can't climb it in one day" – those were the answers that we had feared. From the ranger's response, it sounded like it was relatively routine for people to climb it in a day, so we thankfully didn't arouse any suspicion. However, we would not be climbing Chirripó tomorrow. The climb would begin this afternoon.

We were in Central America for nine days of country highpointing, and had just arrived in San Jose, Costa Rica at 9:35am after successful ascents of Volcán Tajumulco (Guatemala), Cerro Las Minas (Honduras), Cerro Mogotón (Nicaragua), and Cerro El Pital (El Salvador) over the past seven days. Next on the menu was Costa Rica's Cerro Chirripó and Panama's Volcán Barú – in total, the trip would be a six-mountain "hexafecta" of country highpoints.

We were hoping for a bit of a respite with Cerro Chirripó. The road trip through Guatemala/Nicaragua/El Salvador/Honduras had been, at times, harrowing, thrilling, and frustrating. There had been bribes, border crossings, inspections, car problems, heavily-armed police checkpoints, rush hour gridlock, livestock in the road, and of course the occasional unmarked section of road where half the pavement has fallen off a cliff. Oh, and not to mention we did climb some mountains along the way, but that's more of a footnote because the hikes were all much easier than the driving. As we looked to Cerro Chirripó, with its 24 miles of hiking (roundtrip) and >9,000 ft elevation gain, we eagerly anticipated more time spent hiking rather than sitting in the car.

We passed through Costa Rican customs and rendezvoused with Amanda and her mom, who had arrived in San Jose the previous day and had toured around the city. Next stop was Europcar to pick up our RAV4 rental SUV. Our friend Adam Rosenfield, who climbed Chirripó in Dec 2011, had advised us that the road to the trailhead was rough, so we opted for the heavy-duty SUV to minimize any chance that our vehicle would be a limiting factor to our success.

Compared with driving in Guatemala, driving in Costa Rica was a breath of fresh air. Here in San Jose, there were road signs, traffic lights, clean streets, occasional painted lane lines, and a general orderliness of things that made you almost feel as if you were driving in the US.

Google Maps estimated a driving time of 3 hours from Juan Santamaria International Airport to the Chirripó ranger station, and the way the roads were looking, we felt that it would be an accurate estimate. (For comparison, Google's driving time estimates in Guatemala and Honduras turned out to be half of the actual times.) The first part of our journey took us through the mountains, and around el Cerro de la Muerte (Mountain of Death). We drove through the clouds and lush jungle and eventually reached an elevation of 11,000ft, just 1,500ft shorter than Chirripó! But thankfully, the highest point in Costa Rica is not attainable by car.

By 2pm, we had reached San Isidro Del General, and turned off the main highway, following signs for Parque Nacional Cerro Chirripó. Fifteen additional minutes of driving would bring us to the ranger station, the biggest question mark in our plan.

With permits in hand, and after a warm "gracias," we strode confidently out of the ranger station, hopped into our RAV4 with Amanda and her mom, and continued up the rugged gravel road towards the Chirripó trailhead.

EXECUTING THE PLAN

As we neared the Chirripó ranger station, we reviewed the plan. Since Eric spoke Spanish, he would speak with the ranger as I stood nearby. Amanda would jump in if any translation help was needed. We would be climbing the mountain at night, but we wouldn't tell that to the ranger. Perhaps our plan was perfectly OK, perhaps the ranger would be totally OK with it, but what if he wasn't? In the end, we played it safe and told him we'd be climbing tomorrow, and he nodded with approval. In less than five minutes, we had our permits and continued up the steep, bumpy road to the trailhead. We hadn't started climbing the mountain yet, but we relaxed with the satisfaction that our plan was falling into place.

By 3pm, we had reached Hotel Uran, located within 200 feet of the Chirripó Trailhead. Amanda and her mom would be staying there tonight. We had heard about Hotel Uran from Adam's trip report, and it was perfect because it not only provided a nice, cheap (~$15/person) place to stay close to the trailhead, but also gave us an authentic address that we could fill in on the immigration card when we landed in San Jose.

Amanda and her mom had come prepared with some delicious pre-hike food, which we voraciously scarfed down at the hotel. They graciously gave me and Eric some granola bars, cookies, and crackers that they had brought down from the States. The four of us started hiking together under the hot, dry afternoon sun. "Well if it stays this clear tonight, maybe we'll be able to see both oceans from the top!" Eric said optimistically. Let's just say the weather at the summit turned out to be vastly different than the weather at the trailhead.

Each of the twenty kilometers to the summit is marked by a beautiful engraved plastic sign, and each has a nickname like "El Quetzal" or "El Jilguero" ("the goldfinch"). Amanda and her mom accompanied us to KM1, "Los Monos" ("the monkeys"), and bid us farewell. "What time do you think you'll be back?" Amanda asked.

"It's hard to say." I told her. "Maybe 1 or 2 am? We'll have to start driving back to San Jose at 5am, so we'll want to wake up at 4:30am. It's 4:15pm right now, and 24 miles total, and we average 3mph, so maybe 8 hours from now – that'd be 12:15am?"

"You guys are gonna be tired," she said, "You better eat all that food! And here's the secret knocking-on-our-hotel-door-for-entrance code when you come back! And be safe!"

Eric and I waved goodbye and started jogging. We figured 8 hours would be a pretty reasonable estimate, but hoped it would be less so we could get some sleep at the hotel before the drive back to San Jose. Although we had gotten some sleep in the Guatemala City hostel the previous night, the past week of stressed driving and long days had drained the tank of sleep and we had not yet been able to refill it. But the bright sunshine and excitement of the climb ahead of us kept us alert, and we made good time up the steep, rugged trail.

INTO THE DARKNESS

We reached the (unmanned) entrance to Cerro Chirripó National Park at 5pm, about seven hours before our permit actually became valid. We had already passed a decent number of hikers on their way down, but no obvious rangers yet, so we weren't too concerned. If any ranger made a fuss about our permit, we'd just tell them that we decided to get an ultra-early start in order to make sure that we had enough time to reach the summit in the daylight. Instead of starting at 3 or 4am as suggested, we just decided to start at 4pm for an "ultra-alpine" start.

The sun set at 5:45pm and we busted out the headlamps 45 minutes later. The climb was a sustained 12% grade and we took off our shirts to help stay cool. Several kilometers later, we spotted a magnificent hut just around the corner. It would have made a spectacular place to sleep, but alas, we had neither the time nor the supplies to camp there, so we would have to pass it up. In an effort to be as stealthy as possible, and not attract any attention, we switched off our headlamps and tiptoed by the shelter, guided by starlight. It appeared that nobody was inside, but we slinked by quickly nonetheless.

After a few more hours of climbing, we crested a ridge and the wind began to pick up. The lights of San Gerardo and San Isidro twinkled miles below us in the valley, but it was difficult to discern the landscape ahead. It appeared that we were walking towards a giant cloud, and indeed we could see faint flashes of lightning in the distance. "Well, we'll just have to make it to the top before that thunderstorm gets here," Eric said.

At about 7:45pm, we reached the main hut, called Base Crestones. It was an impressive complex of buildings, complete with electricity and, according to Adam R, even Wi-Fi. A cold drizzle began to blow on us, making the hut look even cozier. But we had to resist the temptation to enter the hut; there were certainly rangers inside who would likely implore us to stop hiking if they caught us. So we switched once again into stealth mode, and snuck past the hut incognito.

At this point, the trees began to thin out, the trail became rockier, and the cold, steady wind-driven drizzle intensified. We could see that we were now hiking up into a cloud; this was the end of the clear, pleasant weather that we had enjoyed thus far. In the darkness, the trail became a bit trickier to follow, but luckily we had the GPS track from another person's ascent, so we were never off-trail for long. As we climbed, the temperature dropped and the drizzle intensified, and before long the conditions became miserable: temps in the upper 40Fs, pouring rain, 20-30mph winds, and a slippery, steep, rocky trail. Not to mention, it was dark.

We picked up the pace in an effort to increase our heat production and reduce our time spent in misery. At times, it was almost as bad as my ascent of Montanha do Pico in the Azores during Hurricane Nadine, except here we were climbing without the aid of daylight.

THREE MINUTES ON THE SUMMIT

"Just a quarter mile line-of-sight to the summit!" I yelled to Eric over the roar of the wind. "Awesome!" he said. "Let's tag it and get out of here!"

We turned a corner and were faced with a seemingly vertical wall of rock. It was difficult to determine the nature of the obstacle before us, but we knew that it couldn't be too sustained if the summit was that close. We scrambled up the rocks and pushed on into the cold, dark, wind-driven downpour. Finally, at 8:48pm on March 28th, 2013, we clambered over the last few rocks and were on the summit of Costa Rica.

"Well so much for being able to see the Atlantic and Pacific," I yelled to Eric. "Yeah, maybe we'll have better luck tomorrow night on Barú," Eric replied. "We've got time for just a couple photos before my hands go numb," I said. We hastily snapped a few pictures in front of the summit sign. "Ok, time to go," I said. "No, we've got to sign the summit register" Eric shouted. Eric opened up a rugged green steel box perched near the summit sign and grabbed the pen.

He could barely hold it, but as he pinned down the other pages to keep them from flapping in the driving rainstorm, he managed to scrawl into the notebook our names and the current date and time. "Ok, now it's official," he said. "We're outta here." "All those days of effort spent planning this trip and all that traveling for just three minutes on the summit," I said, "but it's absolutely worth it."

STEALTH MODE

Relieved that we had accomplished our goal, but mindful that we still had 12 miles of hiking and 9,000ft of descent, we carefully descended the slippery summit rocks. Forty minutes later, we were back at the hut and the rain had slackened. "Well I don't think we really need to be stealthy anymore," I said to Eric. "Even if someone catches us and is unhappy, they can't take away the fact that we've been to the summit. We've just got ten hours to get from here back to the San Jose airport." "Well, we still ought to be stealthy," Eric said.

We turned off our headlamps and tiptoed by Base Crestones. All the lights were off and everyone was likely asleep inside, preparing for an early morning climb. Even if there's no need to be stealthy, it's still more fun to act that way.

As we continued to descend, we had a chance to dry out our soaked clothes. We had brought rain jackets, but had foolishly allowed our base layers to get drenched before thinking about putting on the waterproof shells. But thankfully, the temperature was forgiving, and it wasn't a big deal. Around KM4, we were a bit spooked to see a ten person group ascending silently in the darkness. Hopefully they had brought a headlamp, we thought, because they're going to need it higher up. We guessed that they were probably headed up to see the sunrise, and must have started around 10pm. We said "hola" as they passed by.

I glanced down at my watch. "It's midnight," I said to Eric, "we didn't quite beat eight hours." "Well that's OK," he said, "I think we'll still make it in a respectable time."

We made it back to the trailhead at 12:21am, for a total time of 8h28m. We were exhausted, and looked forward to a few hours of sleep. We triumphantly knocked on the door to Amanda and her mom's hotel room, and went to sleep on the floor soon afterwards. We managed to get almost four hours of sleep before waking up at 4:30am for the 4-hour drive to San Jose.

ONWARDS TO PANAMA

We returned the rental car, breezed through security, and arrived at the gate for our flight to David (Panama) with two hours to spare. The plan was to fly to David, catch a taxi to Boquete, then start climbing Volcán Barú that night. As I lay on the floor, drifting in and out of sleep, Amanda graciously offered me a sub that she had bought at Subway, which I gobbled up voraciously. From coordinating the car rental to guaranteeing that we were always well-fed, Amanda and her mom had done everything they could to help make our climb possible and pleasant.

During our 24 hours in Costa Rica, we had spent 8.5 hours hiking, 8 hours in the car, 4 hours sleeping, 2 hours at the car rental agency, 1 hour eating, and a total of about thirty minutes chill-axing. Just another routine Spring Break highpointing trip.

Panama
Volcan Baru 11,398ft

Author: Matthew

March 30, 2013

BOQUETE, PANAMA, 11:54am

"So, how did these bikes work out for you guys?" the hostel manager asked (we'll refer to him as Rusty). We were just returning our rental mountain bikes after a successful bike-ascent and descent of Volcan Barú, the highest point in Panama. But Rusty didn't know where the bikes had been; he probably thought we had just ridden around town, so we were trying to keep the truth on the DL.

"Oh, they did just fine," I said. "Well, the back brake on this bike is rubbing a little bit," Eric added innocently, "but it was like that when we started. Oh, and the rear tube popped, but we bought another one in town to replace it." "Awesome, I really appreciate it," Rusty said,

“Some people ride these bikes and don’t have a clue how to fix them. Thanks for taking good care of them.”

He handed us back the credit cards and drivers’ licenses we had left as collateral. And with that, we were officially off the hook. We had beaten our noon rental return deadline by a mere five minutes.

“Thanks again!” we said to him. As we left, I turned around and took one final, fleeting glance at the two poor mechanical beasts who had served us today. It’s a good thing those bikes can’t talk, I thought to myself. If they could, they would tell Rusty about the cracked rear axle, the worn brake pads, the countless adjustments we had tried to make without the proper tools, all the telltale dust that had just been wiped off, the thorough cursing they had received. They would relate the story of how they had borne their riders up (and down) 8,000 vertical feet, had simultaneously seen the Pacific and Atlantic, and had for a moment been the highest bikes in all of Panama…

THE HEXAFECTA

For the purposes of trip reports, it’s sometimes difficult to define exactly where the trip begins. Does it begin at the trailhead? The airport? Or when the trip was first envisaged?

Our interest in highpointing began with a simple fascination for mountains. The most noteworthy part of the trip, at that point, was the hike itself. We showed up at the trailhead, did battle with the mountain, and made it to the top. How we got to the trailhead wasn’t epic or worthy of more than just a passing mention; the real meat of the story was how we got from the trailhead to the summit. Take, for example, the Pinnacle, our favorite mountain at home in Kentucky. In less than fifteen minutes, we could ride with our dad from home to the trailhead. The real adventure was the afternoon hike to the top. A story about “the Pinnacle” was thus a story about the hike.

But over the years, as we started to reach farther and farther for more mountains, just getting to the trailhead began to warrant more thought and planning and began to become noteworthy. Take a winter trip to Katahdin, for example. Six hours of driving from Boston, ten miles of cross-country skiing, and then you were finally at the base of the mountain, where the real climbing began. A story about “Katahdin” might then include some mention of how we got all the way from Boston to the Hunt Trailhead.

Over the previous action-packed week of highpointing in Central America, we had pushed that driving/hiking ratio to the extreme. Five days earlier, we had rented car in Guatemala and had driven through four countries, climbing the highest points in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala along the way. After heavily-potholed roads, numerous bribes to the police, car troubles, and taxi roadblocks, over the course of four days, we had spent more time in the car than we had climbing the actual mountains.

After returning the rental car without a scratch in Guatemala, and a good night’s sleep, we flew to Costa Rica and rendezvoused with Amanda and her mom. Later on that night, Eric and I successfully summited Cerro Chirripó, bringing our score to five country high points in six

days. The next, and final objective, was Panama's Volcan Barú, which would complete the "hexafecta" of Central American country high points.

As we waited for our flight to David, Panama, we took a nap in the San Jose, Costa Rica airport and looked forward to our second "simple" mountain of the trip. With 24 miles of hiking and 7,700ft of elevation gain the previous evening, Costa Rica's Chirripó had been a good old-fashioned mountain. Getting to the trailhead had been easy, and the mountain had been hard, just the way it should be. By our forecast, Panama's Volcan Barú would be the second "straightforward" mountain of the trip – a mountain that would require mostly physical exertion and minimal mental effort.

BOQUETE, PANAMA

We boarded our Air Panama flight around noon for the one-hour flight to David ('da-BEED'). This was one of only three flights a week between the two cities, so we breathed a huge sigh of relief once we settled on board. There were only about ten passengers on the 100-person capacity plane, so we had plenty of room to spread out.

By 1:30pm we were in David and passed through the small customs area. The officer thoroughly searched mine and Eric's wallets, looking for illegally-large amounts of currency, I suppose, but let Amanda and her mom through without any hassle. We exited the sliding doors and breathed in the hot, dry air of country #44 (for me; #54 for Eric).

To keep things simple, we hired a taxi to take us the next thirty miles to Boquete (bo-KEH-tay), the town located at the eastern base of Volcan Barú. It worked out to eight dollars per person, and was probably our only option due to the limited availability of public transportation on this Good Friday, the holiest day of the year for Latin American countries. Thankfully, the driving (well, riding) here in Panama was far simpler than it had been in any of the other five Central American countries. The roads were straight, smooth, and well-signed, almost as nice as the USA.

The taxi driver dropped us off at Hostal Music Boutique, where we would be staying tonight. Fortunately, Amanda's mom had been able to reserve a few rooms for us; almost every other place in town was mysteriously sold out. We later learned that this night was probably the busiest night of the year for the small town – people from all over Panama flock to Boquete for Holy Week and Good Friday celebrations.

There was a minor glitch, however, because the hostel had somehow overbooked, leaving us without a room. But, after some negotiations, the kind hostel staff of Haydee and Brad managed to squeeze us in. Getting to Boquete? Check. Hotel room? Check. Next on the agenda was rounding up some mountain bikes.

THE KONA & THE SCHWINN

In preparing for the trip, we had come across this intriguing report of a fellow adventurer named Mike who had biked and hiked from Boquete to the summit in just six hours (roundtrip)! It was an impressive feat, and especially caught our attention because he had used a rental

mountain bike. Google Maps shows a road leading to the summit, but we had read that it was extremely rough and only drivable by the toughest of 4x4s. However, mountain bikes are even more all-terrain than jeeps, and can make it up almost anything that a person can hike up. If nothing else, it would at least speed up our descent.

In his report, Mike mentioned that he ditched his bike halfway up because the road became so rough that it was be faster to hike than bike. But how could that be faster, we wondered; whatever time you lost by walking your bike up, couldn't you make that up on the way down? Was the road really that rough? Even if you go half of walking speed on the way up, we reasoned, you'll go five times walking speed on the way down, so overall it'll be faster if you take the bike the whole way, right? In any case, we figured it'd be funner and more interesting to involve a mountain bike, so went in search of two around town.

Hostel manager Brad called up a few possible bike rental locations, but alas, it was Good Friday and they were all closed. Then Mrs. Morris remembered a hostel in town that she had encountered in her online searches that had mentioned mountain bike rentals. We finally found the hostel and I asked the woman at the front desk if they rented mountain bikes. "No, sorry," was her answer. I began to walk away in disappointment, but Amanda decided to give it a second try, this time in Spanish. "Hola, ¿te alquilan bicicletas de montaña?" she asked. "Si," the woman answered with a smile, "tenemos dos."

She brought us around to the back and showed us the fleet. Our eyes lit up. Two bikes. Both front suspension. One Kona with disc brakes. One Schwinn with, well, duct tape on the shifter, but at least it was shiny and looked new-ish. Perfect.

Initially the woman asked for our passports as collateral, but Amanda negotiated for driver's licenses + credit cards instead. You need your passport to get out of the country, we reasoned, so we weren't leaving those behind. I arbitrarily grabbed the Kona, Eric grabbed the Schwinn, and we started to test them out. Upon closer inspection, we discovered a few problems with Eric's bike: the rear brakes were rubbing against the rim, and the freewheel's smallest two cogs weren't quite compatible with the rear derailleur, but we figured we could fix it up back at the hostel.

Next came a critical move: obtaining the ability to fix a flat tire. The bikes looked to be in good shape, and we had every intention to treat them gently on the downhill to avoid popping any tubes. But over the years, we had been on enough rides to the Fells and back home in Kentucky to know that the times when you don't bring a pump or spare tire are the times when you're going to need one. Bringing a pump and spare doesn't ensure that your tubes will survive, but a lack of a pump or spare *does* guarantee that you're going to get a flat. Luckily, the hostel had a bike pump and some spare tubes that we borrowed from a few other 26" wheels laying around. On the trip we would discover an extension of tube/pump theory which states that "if you don't bring tools, you'll wish you had."

Fortunately, Amanda and her mom had been nice enough to bring two bike helmets with them from the States; Eric and I had guessed correctly that there wouldn't be any bike helmets down in Panama. From what we had read, an 8,000-vertical-foot descent of Volcan Barú would

be a ride in which helmets would be absolutely critical. If there was one ride of our lives that necessitated a helmet, it would be Barú.

THE PHYSICAL EXAM

Beaming with excitement and anticipation, we made our way back to the hotel and began to prepare for the big ride. I flipped my Kona over to give it a quick physical exam. Brakes? Yep. Shifting? Yep, all twenty-one gears. Tires? Yep, brand new. The Kona passed the physical with flying colors and was cleared for usage. Now what about the Schwinn? I borrowed a screwdriver from Brad and worked on the rear brakes in an attempt to adjust the left-right bias. But the wheel was so loose on the axle and wobbly that it was no use; it seemed like the bearings were out. "Well, you'll have to disconnect the brake on the uphill," I said to Eric. "Just remember to reconnect it when you go down."

The drive train could not be fixed so easily. It was only content in a few of the twenty-one possible gear combinations, and with the front grip shifter duct-taped into place by an earlier user, things weren't looking too promising. Unfortunately, Brad did not have any tools, so we were out of luck. But, I had a precious little bit of the world's most important and versatile tool: duct tape. I duct-taped the shifter cable into place against the bike's top tube. "OK, you're in 2:1 right now," I said to Eric. "When you get to a hill, just rip off this piece of duct tape and you'll be in 1:1. Now you've got a two-speed bike that can't up-shift."

"Well, we'll probably be walking it most of the way uphill anyway," Eric said, "and then we'll be coasting downhill, so actually, we don't need any gears. All we really need is brakes."

"True, but it'd at least be nice to have some tools," I said. "Let's just hope we don't have any problems that can't be solved with duct tape."

THE NOT-SO-RESTFUL SLEEP

We packed up some food and prepared for the night's journey. Our plan was to wake up at 2am and be riding by 2:30am. That'd put us on the summit by 8am, then after an easy, no-pedaling descent, we'd be back in Boquete by 10am, right? There'd be plenty of time before our noon bike return deadline to the hostel, and Eric would have plenty of time to get to Boquete before his 6:30pm flight to Panama Ciudad.

After a very nice home-cooked dinner with Amanda and her mom, Eric and I headed to bed. We hadn't gotten a decent night's sleep for the past week. The night before we left Boston, I had had a night exam in my Power Electronics class (6.334) and had only gotten a few hours of sleep. Eric, meanwhile, had had to submit a conference paper and didn't get any sleep. Then we averaged six hours of sleep or less per night in Guatemala/El Salvador/Honduras/Nicaragua. Then we had climbed Cerro Chirripó and gotten two hours of sleep after a marathon's worth of hiking and trail running. By this point, we were running on fumes, but still had one final challenge. Tonight was one night that we absolutely needed a solid couple hours of sleep.

But we didn't get it. A large Panamanian family was staying in the bunkroom with us, and were bursting with excitement after an evening of Good Friday festivities. That night, I got

to sleep at 10pm and was woken up twice by the family: once at midnight and once at 1am, before our own alarm finally woke us up at 2am. Eric and I rubbed the sleep from our eyes and quietly tried to scarf down some food. I've gotta say, dry granola and plain water aren't super-appealing at 2am. But we knew that, for a proper alpine start, you've got to start out with a full gas tank. The toughest hours are always those in the darkness. Once the sun rises, it imparts you with energy.

THE CLIMB BEGINS

The road assumed a steep and sustained, though bikeable grade, and Eric ripped off the piece of duct tape to access first gear. In the darkness, the road didn't look all that steep, but we were still struggling to stay on our bikes and keep from walking. I figured that we were just too dang tired and just generally feeling wimpy due to fatigue. To ease the ascent, we tried a skill that we had discovered years earlier on a bike ride up to the Mount Whitney trailhead in California: artificial switchbacks. If you weave from one side of the road to the other and make your own mini-switchbacks (there weren't any cars to worry about) you can increase the distance that you travel, and thereby reduce the steepness a little.

We continued the switchback method until we heard a car behind us. A tough-looking jeep, similar to the super jeeps used on glaciers in Iceland, roared by us. Good, we thought, we're on the right route and probably headed to the same place as that jeep. We started walking the bikes and soon felt gravel beneath our feet. Two large, rugged mounds of dirt marked the transition from asphalt to gravel – their purpose seemed to be to discourage unsuitable vehicles from continuing farther. It was like "hey, car, if you can't make it over this stuff, don't even think about it. This is merely a taste of what's to come."

We quickly and clandestinely tip-toed past a ranger station, hoping that we wouldn't be spotted and asked to pay some kind of admission fee. Then again, it was 4am and it wasn't too likely that the ranger was at his post, but you never know. We turned off our headlamps, hurried past the lonely streetlight and slinked back into the darkness on the other side.

At this point the road was steep and the gravel loose, so we continued pushing the bikes. Once in a while the steepness eased up a bit and we could get some riding in. "Man, this isn't too bad," I said to Eric, "these bikes aren't slowing us down at all, and we'll be able to tear down this stuff during the descent." "Yeah, this isn't too bad," Eric said, "but I'm sure it's going to get a lot worse."

ERGONOMICS OPTIMIZATION

We didn't have extensive experience pushing bikes uphill, so it took some time to explore the entire ergonomics space. I'll quickly summarize our conclusions. There are four options for pushing a bike uphill: 1) both hands on the handlebars, bike on your left; 2) left hand on seat, right hand on handlebars, bike on your left; 3) & 4): mirror 1) and 2) with the bike on your right. We'd rotate between configurations 1, 2, 3, and 4. No configuration was sustainable for more than five minutes, so I began to think about other solutions.

Could I dismantle my bike and strap the whole thing to my backpack? No, that wouldn't be a good idea, because occasionally the path was rideable, and it made sense to briefly hop on the bike. What about carrying it? That was even less comfortable. What about towing it behind me? I brainstormed some ideas and grabbed a big piece of bamboo. I duct-taped the bamboo solidly to the bike's handlebar stem and tried to pull it uphill.

The bike quickly leaned to one side and fell over. It was all a matter of stability, the old inverted pendulum problem that was working against me. To stabilize it, I could tape a bamboo outrigger to the side of the bike to prop it up, and let it drag against the ground, but that would probably be harder work than just pushing it up.

"What if you attach the two bikes together, side by side?" Eric suggested. We thought for a while, but couldn't come up with a good solution. "I think that it'll be over constrained," I said.

No amount of engineering could quickly fix this problem, we would just have to bite the bullet and push the bikes uphill the old-fashioned way, the way that cavemen had done it for eons.

BATTLE WITH BARU

Progress seemed agonizingly slow, but we kept reminding ourselves how much fun it would be to ride down, rather than walk. The road distances were marked every kilometer or so. From a motivation standpoint, it's nice when things are marked in kilometers instead of miles, because that means you get see to signs of progress 60% more frequently!

At about km 3, we noticed a bunch of trucks parked curiously on the side of the road. "Hmm, I wonder what's going on here?" Eric said. "Why'd they park here? There's still nine kilometers to the top."

We turned the corner and found out. The road transitioned from rough gravel to a seemingly impassible creek bed. "How can any vehicle possibly make it over that?" I said. There were loose rocks the size of basketballs scattered all over the place, boulders protruding as high as your knee, and loose dirt and gravel scattered over everything. I mean, cars have come a long way since the Model T, but it was still hard to imagine any vehicle besides an army tank or the Mars Curiosity rover being able to climb up that field of talus. I think Henry Ford would just shake his head.

But some vehicles must be able to make it, we concluded, as evidenced by the deep gouges and scars on the boulders, which must have come in intimate contact with the undercarriage of super-jeeps and super-trucks, no doubt. Occasionally, we had to carry our bikes over the roughest stuff, but we held out hope that the promised land of easy biking would be just around the corner. The ratio of impassable stuff to manageable stuff was still low enough that we figured the bikes would result in a net time/funness benefit, so we kept on schlepping. We knew that each vertical foot of agony on the ascent would translate into a vertical foot of adrenaline on the descent.

By 5:30am, twilight began to replace darkness and soon we could begin to appreciate the view we had just earned. We still had a few kilometers to go, but the summit felt within reach. We could see the clouds drift through the lowlands and rainforest spread out beneath us, with the twinkling lights of David and Boquete far below. By 6:30am, the sun popped over the horizon and cast a blanket of orange over the rugged landscape. The temperature was a little chilly, but comfortable, and the air was dry. We knew that in a just few hours the true Panamanian heat would start to set in, and it'd be great to be on the descent by that time.

LA CIMA DE PANAMA

We rounded a corner and caught our first good glimpse of the summit. A long line of about twenty communication towers dotted the summit ridge, and we spotted a few people standing atop what looked like the summit. "They must have been in that super jeep that passed us," I said to Eric.

We could taste the summit now. Over the next hour, Barú tried to dish out its last few obstacles for us, in the form of some ultra-mega-steep, rugged uphills and downhills, but it was no use. The summit, a super-massive black hole, was pulling us in. We had passed the event horizon and at this point, nothing could prevent us from reaching the top.

At 7:24am, we staggered over one final dusty hill and, at last, the summit ridge spread out before us. There were people and tents scattered everywhere – probably between 100 and 200 people on the summit; we guessed that it must be tradition in Panama to see sunrise from Barú on the Saturday of Holy Week. They had indeed picked one spectacular day to be on the roof of Panama. The communication towers were surrounded by chain link fences, but the optimal flat, wind-free spots were located inside the fenced areas so people had found ways to get through.

We looked over to the north and noticed that we weren't actually on the high point, just the highest point that cars could drive to. The true summit was located on a rocky, rugged-looking hill a few hundred feet away. It looked tricky enough just to hike it, let alone mountain bike it, and we briefly thought about ditching the bikes. But that wouldn't be fair to the bikes. "We told these bikes we'd take them to the summit," I said to Eric, "so let's take them to the summit. I'm not ditching mine here, when we're so close."

PACIFIC AND ATLANTIC

As we approached the final trail to the summit, people descending gave us some puzzled looks. How'd these guys get their bikes up here? How and why are these guys bringing their bikes any farther?

The path turned from hiking to third-class scrambling, and it became a bit tricky to traverse with twenty-five pounds of mountain bike on one shoulder while the other arm worked to maintain balance. After some bouldering moves over no-fall zones and some final tiptoeing over sketchy ledges, at 7:36am Panama Time, on Saturday March 30, 2013, we touched the concrete summit cross and stepped onto the highest land in all of Panama. The great Central American six-day hexafecta of high points was now complete.

The weather was absolutely unbeatable. Sunny, no wind, temps in the 60Fs. The western half of the country spread out beneath us. But there was one final question to answer: could we see both oceans? We had read online that the summit of Volcan Barú is the only place on the surface of the earth where you can see both the Pacific and Atlantic at the same time. But trip reports were mixed; most people reported clouds or just the Pacific, while some called the two-ocean theory into doubt.

We scanned the southern horizon and easily spotted the Pacific, a long, smooth coastline thirty-five miles away. Now what about the Atlantic? The view to the north was a bit more obscured by clouds, but we noticed some glare from the low-angle sun, and as our eyes adjusted, we spotted some islands indisputably surrounded by seawater. There weren't any lakes that big to the north. It was the Bocas del Toro region, about forty miles to the north, in the Caribbean Sea. We could see both oceans!

A large, ten-foot tall, rebar-reinforced concrete cross proclaimed the summit, and of course we had to climb on top of it. Fortunately, the builders had constructed it to be Panama-tough, so it appeared that no amount of graffiti, vandalism, or extra weight could bring it down. We did some bouldering on the cross and posed for victory photos.

We consumed our fill of the scenery and breathed in a big sigh of relief. We had done all six mountains and accomplished all of our goals without any significant snafus. It had been tough, had involved bribes, and some driving that I shudder to recall, but we had done it. All we had to do now was get down this mountain and then we could close the book on six Central American country high points.

THE VALUE OF AN 8,000ft DESCENT

We carefully downclimbed the rocky summit outcropping and stopped for a brunch at the end of the road, next to the big super jeep. We tried to psych ourselves up for the 8,000ft descent ahead of us. I thought it would be important to document the descent for posterity and humanity, so I duct-taped my camera to my helmet. It wasn't exactly a GoPro, but it was the best we could do.

As we stood there with our bikes, on the threshold of an 8,000ft descent, Eric paused to ask an important question. "Let's say that someone comes up to you, right now, and says they'll pay you to take your bike away. You'll be walking down the mountain. How much would they have to pay you?" Eric asked as we suited up. "One million dollars is my price," he said.

"So, if you had walked up here, and someone offered you a bike right now, you'd pay them a million dollars?" I asked rhetorically. "I'd do it for a thousand." "I don't know," Eric said, "this bike is essentially priceless right now."

We packed up, donned some extra layers in preparation for a chilly, effortless descent, Eric connected his rear brake, we lowered the seats, took a deep breath, and took the plunge down the mountain. The helmet-cam was rolling.

MECANICAL SNAFU UNO

Soon it became apparent that the problem-bike would not be Eric's – it would actually be mine. After just a few hundred feet, my rear brake began to fade and became useless. Unfortunately, it was a hydraulic disc brake and I didn't have the tools to fix it. There was no cable to tighten up, and no amount of duct tape would help. "Dang it!" I said to Eric, "I'm never getting a bike with hydraulic brakes. Without the proper tools, there's no way to fix them."

Fortunately, bikes are designed to have a little bit of redundancy, so with one functional front brake, the game wasn't over just yet. As we descended the ultra-steep section, I rode the front brake hard. The road was so steep that much of my weight was actually on the front tire. I was worried about flipping over the handlebars so I leaned back as far as I could. As I approached a hard-packed section covered with sand, my front tire started to skid and I knew that I was in trouble.

Unable to slow the bike down, I started accelerating and began to lose my balance. This is not good, I said to myself. Bikes don't have an eject button, so I did the next best thing. I jumped off the bike, sending myself and the bike crashing into the steep dirt hillside. Over the years, Eric and I had discovered that, if you have a choice, it's a lot better to do a controlled crash at low speed than an uncontrolled one at high speed.

I dusted myself off, walked my bike down the steep section, restarted the helmet-cam, and kept on riding. This is going to be an agonizing descent, I said to myself. I've got to dissipate all of my 8,000ft of potential energy into just my two little front brake pads.

We took the steep parts slow, the not-so-steep parts fast, and made good progress. After fifteen minutes, we took a break to let the brakes cool down (no pun intended). Eric's aluminum rims were warm, but my front rotor (disc) was scorching. I could feel the heat from a few inches away. "Well at least this gives us a good excuse to stop and admire the view," Eric said.

We continued in the same fashion, pausing every fifteen minutes or so to let the brakes cool. This made the descent take longer than expected, but at least we weren't exerting ourselves. Some of the sections were so rough and steep that we actually had to walk our bikes *downhill*. It was the first time that we had encountered a "road" that was too steep to *descend* on a mountain bike, but we wanted to play it safe, considering that we still had plenty of time before our noon return deadline.

BOILING BRAKES

We stopped again to rest our brakes and I was beginning to get fed up. I licked my finger, and it sizzled as I touched it against the rotor – that sucker was hot enough to boil water! "If we're going to have to rest my brakes every fifteen minutes," I said to Eric, "it's going to take us forever.

I wonder if there's any way I could drag something behind my bike to slow me down? What if I took my shoelace and tied it to a big log and dragged that down the mountain? That'd definitely slow me down." "That'd probably just get caught in your back wheel," Eric said.

Fifteen minutes later, at about one-third of the way down the mountain, we were astonished to encounter another cyclist walking his bike up. He had a super-nice dual-suspension bike that I suspect was taken much better care of than either of our bikes. We started chatting; it was time for us to rest our brakes again and probably time for him to take a breather. It turned out that he was an Italian fellow living in Panama.

I told him about my brake problems and asked if, by chance, he happened to have any tools to fix it? "You've got hydraulic disc brakes?" he asked. "So do I! Yes, I've got the tool right here." "Perfect!" I said. He pulled out a tiny Allen key from his pack and tightened a small set screw on my brake lever. I grabbed the brake and it worked! "Thank you so much!" I said.

After chatting for a while, we gave him a hearty handshake, and wished him good luck with the rest of the climb. A moment later, we passed another fellow mountain biker schlepping his machine up the mountain. He was a Panamanian from the city of Volcan (on the west side of Barú) and the Italian dude was his friend. He told us that this was actually his *fifth* ascent of Barú by mountain bike!

"As you know," he said, "it gets pretty rough farther down the mountain. Just take it slow, and walk your bike over the tough stuff. There's nothing wrong with walking your bike over the hard parts; it's not worth risking injury." "That's right," we said to him, "thanks for the advice, and good luck!" We waved goodbye and continued our descent.

"Man, what were the chances that we'd meet other people biking this mountain today?" I asked Eric. "And what were the chances that we'd meet someone with the right tool for my brakes?" "Yeah, that's pretty lucky," Eric said.

With two working brakes, the descent became fun again. We respected the Panamanian dude's advice and took it easy on the roughest parts, walking our bikes over the big boulders. Now, I consider myself and Eric to be pretty competent mountain bikers, so the fact that we were walking our bikes *downhill* attests to the roughness of the road.

THE EASY WAY UP

Pretty soon we heard some rumbling coming up the mountain and we instinctively jumped out of the way to give room to the oncoming vehicle. After another few minutes an awesome-looking jeep came bouncing around the corner. It had been modified, with big balloon tires, wider axles, higher clearance, and big winch on the front bumper. To add to the ruggedness, mounted on the rear door was a shovel, full-sized spare tire, and an external fuel tank. A sunglassed, tough-looking Panamanian dude, with his elbow hanging casually outside the window, gave us a big thumbs up as he rumbled by, with a full load of tourists. It would have been a fun road to drive, but at this point, we wouldn't trade our mountain bikes for anything. They became more valuable with every mile we descended.

Soon another jeep and then another truck passed by. "Man, I wonder how two oncoming vehicles pass each other?" Eric asked. "I haven't seen a wide spot in the road for the past kilometer." "Maybe they all go up in the morning, and down in the afternoon?" I suggested.

We continued our descent, and by 10am we had reached the end of the rough stuff. Hooray! From now on, it was normal gravel, and then eventually asphalt. We still had another few thousand feet of vertical descent to savor. But Barú wasn't done with us yet. No mountain bike trip is complete without a flat tire, and Barú wasn't willing to let us off the hook that easily.

MECHANICAL SNAFU DOS

As we blasted down a steep hill, we heard a loud, violent hissing sound erupt from Eric's rear tire. He quickly slammed on the brakes and threw the bike on the ground. We had heard legends of people on long descents heating up their rims so much that their tubes melted, and we halfway expected that to be the case. But upon closer inspection, we discovered that the problem was actually with the valve stem; the tube had been inserted at an oblique angle, and the rim had sliced right into the stem. Patches would have been useless – thank goodness we had brought two spare tubes.

I switched out the tube, pumped it up, and it held air nicely. But as I put the wheel back on the bike, I noticed that something was amiss. The rear axle was extremely loose, which explained why the wheel had been rubbing against the brakes. I played around with each side of the axle and discovered that it was actually cracked in half! The only thing holding the two halves of the axle in place was some surface tension provided by the ball bearing grease. I had encountered this problem a few times before on my own bikes, and it only seems to happen with the quick-release axles, which are hollowed out in the middle and thus weaker than the solid axles.

But thinking back to the check-up I had performed on the bike the previous afternoon, the rear wheel had seemed loose, and in all likelihood, the axle was broken when we checked out the bike in the first place. Eric had successfully ridden a mountain bike with a broken axle up Barú and half way down.

Could we squeeze just a few more thousand feet, a few more miles from the crippled bike? Our experiences over the years including obliterated bike trailer bearings on the Alaska Highway and countless mechanical issues at the Fells suggested that we shouldn't give up on the bike just yet. At best, the bike would be fine. At worst, the rear wheel could lock, sending Eric to a skidding stop, or the wheel could come off altogether, which would be a little scary, but was very unlikely. As long as Eric took it slowly, we figured he would be OK.

I tried to replace the wheel exactly as I had taken it off the bike, but somehow the nuts had loosened up and I needed to fiddle with it slightly. As a result, when I tightened the quick release, the tire was rubbing against the bike frame. No good, I thought, the tire won't last too long like that. After about ten more minutes of finagling, I still couldn't come up with a workable solution. The brake pads would either rub against the tire or make no contact altogether; without any tools to speak of, it was hopeless.

"Well, I hate to say it, but you're going to have to make this descent without a rear brake," I said to Eric. "This is the last time that I'm going for a bike ride with someone else's

bike and no tools." "Well, as long as I've got the front brake and take it slow, I'll be OK," he said. "The road isn't too rough from here."

It wasn't the first time of the trip that we had had problems with brakes. A few days earlier in Guatemala, our rental car's primary brakes had worn out, so we had to slow down by using a combination of the handbrake and downshifting into first gear. Without any car repair experience, the problem was pretty mysterious to me and Eric. At least with Eric's bike, the problems were pretty transparent. They weren't really solvable without tools, but at least we knew what was going on.

FIXING THE BRAKES

As Eric limped his crippled bike down the mountain, the grade steepened. "Man, is this the same road we came up this morning?" I asked. "It seems a lot steeper now on the way down, especially in the daylight. I had just assumed that we were slow this morning during the climb because we were tired."

Ten minutes later, the finish line came into view with the transition from gravel back to glorious asphalt. Well, I guess I wouldn't call it a finish line, it was more like the twenty mile mark in a marathon, but it sure was nice to see a smooth road again. We passed in front of the ranger station and there was no hiding this time, it was broad daylight. We walked over to the booth and Eric asked the ranger if he had any kind of tools that we could use to fix the brake. An Allen key, pliers, wrench, anything. "No, sorry," the ranger said in Spanish. "And the park entrance fee is five dollars per person." We forked over the two Abe Lincolns. Jeez, thanks a lot dude.

We hopped back on the bikes, and as I released my brakes, I began to rapidly accelerate. It was liberating to be riding a bike with fully functional brakes on a smooth downhill, and I wanted to see how fast the bike could go. I broke 35mph and eased off a bit. The bike felt good, but I still didn't trust it at any higher speeds just yet. I pulled off onto a side road and waited for Eric to arrive.

A few minutes later, he came into view. "Man, I was grabbing the front brake as hard as possible back there and the bike wasn't slowing down, it was a little scary," Eric said, walking his bike down the road. "It's painful to have brought the bike up this far but I can't even ride it downhill. If I kept riding back there, the road is so steep and my brakes are so weak that my terminal velocity would have been a lot faster speed than I'm comfortable with."

"Bring it over here, I'll take another look at it," I said. My patience with that bike was rapidly waning. "If we can get these back brakes working it'll be a fun ride once again." I grabbed the two rear brakes, and as I somehow managed to summon some unknown reserve of strength, I twisted the brakes into place. Surprisingly, they now made perfect contact with the rim.

"Wow, they're fixed!" I said. "I guess you just need to get mad at it in order to fix it. We can trade bikes now, so you can feel what it's like to ride a good bike." I felt bad riding the good

bike the whole time, and the decision for me to get the Kona in the first place had been completely arbitrary. So I figured that, for fairness, I should get a few miles on the crappy bike.

I took it slow at first, and gripped the brakes with full force. But the brakes still weren't quite strong enough, and the bike began to accelerate. I took my feet off the pedals and applied pressure with my shoes to the asphalt in an attempt to dissipate energy. I continued like this for about five minutes and, even though I lost a couple of millimeters of Asics rubber to the Panamanian pavement, my speed stayed under control.

THE FINISH LINE

As the steepness lessened, I soon built up confidence that the bike would stay together and began to ease off the brakes. Mindful that I was riding with snapped rear axle, I kept it below 25mph. The road was so smooth, steep, and straight, that with a trustworthy bike, you could easily have gotten into the 40mphs, or probably even broken 50mph, if you dared. But in the interest of survival and self-preservation, we kept it slow.

By 11:30am, we were back in Boquete. The goal was to return the bikes to the hostel by noon, which meant we had another half hour to take care of some final business. Even though the bikes were actually in no worse shape than when we started, we still didn't want to arouse any speculation that we were the cause for any of the mechanical problems. As Eric bought a spare tube at a hardware store in town, I gave the bikes a thorough cleaning with some baby wipes. They were nice and shiny when we returned them to the hostel, and aroused no questions from the nice gentleman at the hostel whom we'll continue to refer to as Rusty.

As we walked back to the apartment, my primary feeling was one of disbelief. The bikes were returned. We had climbed Barú. We had completed the Central American "hexafecta" of country high points safely and with no major issues. Finally, for the first time on this Spring Break, we could relax.

Trip 6 – Hispaniola

Haiti
Pic la Selle 8,773ft

Author: Eric

August 23-24, 2013
28 miles biking, 20 miles hiking 10,000ft total elevation gain

"Bonjour, avez-vous l'eau? Nous sommes tres soif" [Hello, do you have any water? We're very thirsty], Matthew asked the Haitian woman in front of us, hoping she understood French. Somehow we'd already drunk a gallon of water each in the hot, dry Haitian mountains, and our bottles were now nearly empty. We'd passed the last stream hours ago and feared there would be no more water any higher up. The meager amount we still carried would certainly not be enough to get us to our objective – Pic la Selle – and back.

Luckily we'd stumbled across a small village nestled between two hills halfway up Pic la Selle, and spotted a woman squatting down outside one of the mud-walled huts sorting corn meal in a large wooden bowl. Surely she knew where to find some water, we reasoned. Unfortunately, we didn't speak Creole, but we hoped it was close enough to French that she might understand us.

The woman just stared quizzically back up at us, though, like we were some aliens from outer space. I got the impression she'd never seen white-skinned people before. This village was, after all, very remote – probably a 5-hour hike from the nearest road over very steep terrain, in a region of Haiti that rarely, if ever, sees a tourist. The village itself looked like something from the Stone Age, with huts made of mud walls, stick roofs, and no hint of new technology from the past 200 years.

Matthew repeated the question, this time pulling out a nearly-empty water bottle and shaking it, then acting like he was trying to drink from it. This time the woman got up and walked back into her hut. She soon returned with a smile on her face and a big pitcher of water.

"Oooh merci, merci!" [Thank you, thank you!] We both said.

We held out our water bottles and gratefully accepted everything she could pour in. When the pitcher was empty we dug through our backpacks and produced some bagels and granola bars, which we offered to the woman as payment. She gladly accepted, laughing as she took the food from us back into her hut. We could have offered money, but I doubt she would have known what to do with it. With enough water to get us up the mountain we left the village and continued our climb. When we were out of sight we popped in some iodine pills in order to sterilize the water. "I don't know what's in this water," Matthew said, "but it's getting a generous dose of iodine – we don't want any cholera here."

DRIVING THROUGH THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Our journey began at 2:30am that morning when our flight landed in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. We were on a mission to climb the country highpoints of Haiti and Dominican Republic, and determined a long weekend was just enough time to accomplish this goal.

We had reserved a rental car in advance through Alamo and had even called to confirm they would be open at this hour, but, as we'd come to expect in the Caribbean, Alamo had no cars available when we showed up at the counter. After some negotiations we determined one car rental agency – Moderno – in town had a car and was open at this hour, and a Hertz employee was nice enough to drive us there.

By 4am I finally got behind the wheel of a silver Chevy Aveo and we took off into the night. Our first order of business was to fill up on gas. The tank somehow read sub-E, but the rental dealer assured us a gas station was nearby and we could return the car with whatever amount of gas we wanted. Of course he would say that – whatever amount of gas we left in the car would be free gas for him. We suspected he must siphon out the gas after every rental car is returned, then drop just barely enough back in to get the car to the nearest gas station, ensuring that the customers will always return the car with more gas than it started with. We both vowed to return it as close to empty as possible.

We made it to an open gas station, filled up, and started driving west on highway 2 to the Haiti border. I quickly learned some important lessons about driving in the DR:

1. Red traffic lights at night effectively mean "slow down", not "stop". Watch out.

2. Always drive in the left lane of a multilane road, even if you're not passing or going fast. Motorbikes without lights, broken down trucks, and darkly-clad pedestrians roam in the right lane.

3. Be prepared to be blinded by every oncoming vehicle. Basically every car either drives with its brights on the whole time, or has specially-modified lights that have only one setting – blindingly bright.

By 6am the sun came out and the driving became considerably easier. We passed through the towns of Bani, Azua, and Neyba with Matthew expertly navigating. We cut across the north side of Lago Enriquillo -the lowest point in the Caribbean at -148ft – and then suddenly the road in front of us disappeared into the lake.

"Hmm, this could be a problem," Matthew said, looking at the GPS. "This road is supposed to be the only one into Jimani, the border town, from this side of the lake."

"It looks like the whole lake has risen 20ft, based on the half-submerged palm trees," I replied.

We turned around back to the nearest town, and noticed a spray-painted sign reading "Jimani" with an arrow pointing onto a rough dirt road. A new road was apparently being constructed around the lake, but hadn't been paved yet. We turned onto it nevertheless, and cruised into the border town of Jimani by 10am.

THE PLAN OF ATTACK

The driving component of our climb up Pic la Selle was now complete, and we would be relying purely on human power for the rest of the climb. Our plan was to bike across the border into Haiti until the roads were no longer bikeable, then hike the rest of the way to the summit.

We'd spent considerable effort formulating our plan of attack on Pic la Selle, and had thrown out many other options. We could have flown into Port-au-Prince and rented a car to drive close to the summit, but the US State Department had a strong warning against any travel near Port-au-Prince, and the mountain roads looked impassable except by foot or motorbike. We could have hired motorbike taxis when the road got rough, but it would be difficult finding a taxi for the return journey, or arranging a time to be picked up when we had no idea how long the hike would take. We could drive over from the DR border, but rental cars were prohibited from crossing into Haiti, and we'd heard stories of local drivers having trouble crossing the border as well.

We eventually settled on flying down with foldable bikes (that fit in normal checked luggage suitcases and thus didn't incur the usual $100 bike fee each way), biking across the border and roughly 14miles until the roads stopped, then hiking the remaining 10 miles up to the summit from the north. We'd only read a couple trip reports of anyone climbing Pic la Selle, and they all climbed from the west. However, satellite images appeared to show faint trails winding up close to the summit from the north, and this was the most convenient route for us approaching from the Jimani border crossing.

OUR FRIEND TOMMY

I pulled the car over at a small park in the middle of Jimani and we started assembling our bikes at a bench. Unfortunately, we'd had to disassemble them a little bit back in Boston to fit in the suitcases. After five minutes a group of three elementary-school-age kids walked over, stood right in front of me, and stared at the bike. I tried greeting them in Spanish, French, and English but they just stared blankly at me and then looked back at the bike. I went back to work, but then more kids started walking over. Pretty soon we were surrounded by 15 kids staring at us and our bikes. I think the kids were bored because school was out for the summer, they were curious about two white people who'd come into a town that rarely sees tourists, and they'd never seen bicycles quite like ours, with their little 20-inch wheels and collapsible seat and handlebars.

In an effort to break the break the ice a bit, Matthew decided to enlist the help of one little boy in inflating his tires. Matthew had removed his tires from the rims and had carried them on the flight, in order to make the bike's checked bag appear as small as possible. He connected his bike pump to one tire and pumped it a few times, then gestured to the little boy to follow suit. The boy, without hesitation, picked up the pump and started pumping. Everyone around the circle began to smile. We had come to realize that pumping up a bike's tires was a universal concept – the little boy knew exactly what to do even though not a single word had been exchanged. He pumped it up dutifully, pausing periodically to check the tire pressure with his thumb. Matthew continued assembling the rest of his bike while the boy – a welcome addition to our pit crew – inflated the other tire.

One guy about my age started asking me what I was up to (in Spanish), and offered to help us cross the border and to find a safe place to park our car at the local police station. We finished assembling the bikes, then tossed them in the trunk and drove over to the police station with our new friend Tommy. We saw five police officers sitting outside on the front steps killing time, and walked out to talk to the chief. He said we could park our car in front of the station overnight and it would be safe.

As we walked back to the car to pack up our bags all the police officers followed. They obviously were pretty bored and were curious what two gringos with weird-looking bikes were doing there in Jimani. Again we had a big audience as we packed up our bags. On Tommy's recommendation I slipped the chief of police a ten dollar bill as we left, in hopes that he might keep our car extra safe. We then got on our bikes and pedaled to the border, following Tommy on his motorcycle.

THE HAITI BORDER AT LAST

The Haiti/DR border is the roughest and most chaotic border I've ever seen. Matthew and I are used to the US-Canada border crossings where you simply drive up to a window, hand an agent your passport, he scans it, hands it back, and you're on your way. We've driven across some chaotic borders in Central America, but nothing compares to entering Haiti.

As we pedaled past the outskirts of Jimani the road quickly deteriorated to white gravel, with motorbikes zipping past us in each direction. Up ahead loomed dozens of tractor-trailer trucks parked on the side with a big cloud of white dust hanging in the air, and a bustling market with people selling food and trinkets.

Past all the commotion stood a large blue gate surrounded by armed border agents. One door of the gate we severely mangled, like a truck had driven into it, and the other side had no door at all but instead a large chain across.

Tommy waved us over to a cluster of buildings on the side, took our passports and some money, and emerged with official paperwork saying we could leave the DR. We'd learned from crossing borders in Central America that it'll save considerable time and hassle to have a "helper" person fill out the correct forms for you and cut to the front of the line to hand them to the correct border agents. In this case Tommy didn't immediately ask for any money, but instead said he would meet us here the next day on our return to the DR and help us again, then ask for ten dollars apiece. We thanked him and headed for the gate pushing our bikes.

THE "HELPERS"

The agents waved us through, and we were quickly approached by two Haitian men hoping to help us through the rest of the border. It turns out this was only the first of four gates we had to pass through. It's not completely clear, but I think the gates represented customs, then immigration for leaving DR, then customs then immigration for entering Haiti.

We accepted the new "helpers'" offer, and made it through the next gate after getting a new passport stamp. At gate number three they said we needed to register our bikes' serial

numbers with the officials. This seemed very suspicious, but we dutifully wrote down our bike serial numbers and paid the little fee to leave that gate. The final gate was the most difficult. We suspected the "helpers" were ripping us off on the last fee to enter Haiti, and argued for ten minutes until they relented and charged us only the real price for the final paperwork.

With all the paperwork in hand we approached the final gate. A tough man holding a chain across the gate blocked our path and would not let us through. He argued with our helpers, and then the helpers just ducked under the chain and motioned for us to follow. The chain-holder man was furious, but we ducked under as well and quickly jogged away. If we'd been in cars or on motorcycles he could have held us back and asked for money, but with our bikes we'd easily snuck by.

We were officially in Haiti! Now multiple other "helpers" approached, all wanting a piece of the gringo money pie. Our helpers demanded $40 for their services. I tried to negotiate, but they wouldn't budge. In the end I pulled out 1000-peso note (worth about $20), handed it to one of them, and we quickly took off on the bikes. They all were too busy yelling and arguing with each other about how to split up the money that they didn't bother to chase us and we made a clean getaway.

BIKING IN HAITI

"Why couldn't this border crossing just be simple, like on the US borders?" Matthew yelled back to me. "Because then ten different people couldn't each get money from tourists like us," I replied.

We'd hoped, based on the satellite images, that the road into Haiti would be paved, but that was unfortunately not true. We carefully navigated over the rough gravel road on our little foldable bikes, praying no sharp rock would puncture our tires. It was noon by now and we began to notice the sun glaring down on us in the dry 90-degree air.

Just outside the town of La Source we turned left onto an even rougher gravel road leading up into the mountains. This time we were forced to walk the bikes. After an hour we met up with a more major road. It was labeled Route 102 on the map, but the fancy name signified only a minor improvement in road quality. We took a water break under a tree and each chugged a liter of water. Motorbikes passed silently rolling downhill, their motors off to save fuel. Huge trucks rumbled uphill with dozens of Haitians hitching rides on the back. We wished we could catch a ride on one of those trucks, but agreed the bikes would be worth the effort today for the ride back down tomorrow.

On Route 102 we were able to ride the bikes again, and slowly made progress up the hill to the small village of Lastic Le Roche. Matthew had marked our planned route on the GPS, and here we turned down a side road and dropped into a big river valley where the road petered out. The river valley was filled with fist-size rocks, making it impossible to ride the bikes and we were forced to dismount and push them.

THE BLANCOS

There were many small villages on the side of the river valley, and we soon started hearing "Blan! Blanco!" yelled from above [white, in Creole and Spanish]. Little kids would run up to get a view of the strange new characters entering the valley, and for some reason each little kid felt compelled to yell "Blan" or "Blanco" at the top of his lungs. I thought it was kind of funny at first, but then some of the kids started throwing rocks at us. I wanted to throw rocks back, but we instead started jogging to get away.

Farther up the valley some older kids on Motorcycles spoke a little bit of Spanish and told us it was impossible to bike up the river and that we should pay them to take us up on their motorbikes. We were determined to climb under our own power, though, and told them no thanks.

Higher up the valley we passed people washing clothes in a small trickle of river, and without fail every person we passed stared at us or yelled "Blan!" or "Blanco!" Eventually we reached the section of our planned route where we needed to leave the river valley and start climbing. That meant we needed to ditch the bikes.

HIDING THE BIKES

"If anyone sees us hiding these bikes, they'll certainly steal them," Matthew warned.

We stumbled upon a bushy area with no people in sight, though, and quickly folded up the bikes. Matthew plunged into the bushes with bikes and lock while I stood guard outside. I soon heard some kids approaching and walked toward them before they could get to the bike location. I tried talking to them to distract them, but they kept walking towards the bikes. Just then Matthew emerged from the bushes.

Thinking quickly, Matthew acted like he was zipping up his pants and buckling his belt, as if he had just gone to the bathroom in the woods. The kids pointed towards the woods and shouted something. Matthew shouted back "toilette!" I think the kids believed his show, because they started following us up the hill instead of inspecting the bushes Matthew had just walked out of.

THE GUIDE

We walked on a trail through a small village, then dropped back down to the river and started walking up the valley again. A young man caught up to us in the river valley and asked where we were going. (At least, I think that's what he was saying in Creole, since it kind of sounded like French). "Pic la Selle," I replied, pointing up at the mountain.

Through a combination of French and hand gestures, he conveyed to us that the river valley was the wrong way, but that he could guide us up the mountain. "Let's follow him for a little while and see where he takes us," I suggested. We followed the young man back up out of the river bed and soon met up with a nice trail traversing the hillside. After ten minutes he abruptly turned around and asked for money. Matthew handed him the equivalent of one dollar in Haitian money, seeing if that would appease him, and it seemed to work. By now the river

below had narrowed into a deep gorge with cliffs on both sides, and we were relieved to have followed this man on the correct route.

We dropped back down to cross the river, and then began steeply climbing. Again the young man turned around to ask for money, but this time we hesitated. “He’s going to keep asking for money the whole way, and we don’t need him because we have the route already marked,” I said to Matthew, “Yeah, just tell him we don’t have any money,” Matthew replied.

I said we were out of money, but I offered him a granola bar instead. He smiled and waved goodbye and started walking back to his village, without even accepting the granola bar. I was happy to be rid of this guy, but soon other villagers caught up to us on the trail and stopped and stared. There were little kids with bags of clothes balanced on their heads, and a couple of men carrying loads. They acted like they’d never seen white people before. We began to realize that all the trails we’d seen on satellite images were the routes between villages. There were no roads up in the mountains – people just walked everywhere.

We stopped to rest and let the villagers pass, then continued uphill. Surprisingly the trail had quite a few switchbacks, though it was still steep. I suppose since people take the trail every day they’ll invest some time to make it a follow a good route. As we wound up the mountain we noticed there were hardly any trees anywhere, compared to just across the border in DR where forests covered everything. The problem was that Haitians are so poor they rely on wood fires for all cooking, and most of the land has been deforested as a result. At least the lack of trees let us have a good view all day.

FOOD FOR WATER

As we climbed higher we came to the realization that we had already drunk most of our water. We’d each started with five liters, hoping that would be enough to last us through the next day, but the air had been so hot and dry that we’d drunk much more than we’d expected. We were unfortunately much higher than any river valleys, but soon stumbled across a village at the top of the hill. Luckily the villagers were nice enough to trade us water for some of our food, and we continued hiking.

We climbed steeply up more trails, and topped out on a large plateau with cornfields in the middle and several huts on the edges. Cows and goats roamed in the grass on the edge of the fields, and a few men walked by us towards the huts, probably heading home for dinner after a day in the field. This village looked completely self-sufficient. They probably lived off the corn they grew and the animals they raised. It would certainly be difficult for any food or supplies from the nearest road to reach this village, given how long it took us to hike up.

We could see Pic la Selle tantalizingly close, but unfortunately we had to drop a thousand feet into another valley before starting our final climb. At the bottom of the valley we stopped to rest and eat a little food.

THE FINAL PUSH

"I sure hope we don't have any more than two thousand feet of climbing left," I said to Matthew. "Well, actually we're at 5,000ft now," Matthew said, consulting the GPS, "and the summit is at almost 9,000ft, so we have 4,000ft left to climb." "Dang! That's like we're climbing Mt. Washington!" I exclaimed.

We'd hoped to see sunset from the summit, but with another 4,000ft to climb and only an hour of daylight it didn't look likely. We kept climbing, eventually leveling out in some cow pastures before climbing into some genuine forests. "Well, we must have passed all the villages," Matthew observed, "the only reason there would be trees here is that it's too far away from the nearest village for people to walk to get firewood."

By now the sun had already set and we had to hike by headlamp. We wound up the steep, gravelly trail for another hour until we reached a saddle between two peaks. The trail continued down the other side, but we turned off to the left and began bushwhacking the final leg to the summit.

At 8:30pm I spied a small concrete block in the woods, and there was no more mountain to climb. We were on the summit of Pic la Selle, the tallest mountain in Haiti and our 52nd country highpoint! There was no sunset view, but I could see some lights of Port-au-Prince through the trees in the distance. There was actually a small summit register on top, and the last person to climb had been three months ago in May.

We had brought all our overnight gear with the hope of sleeping on the summit, but unfortunately we were both nearly out of water again. We decided it would be best to make it as far down tonight as we could to avoid hiking in the heat of the sun, and then try to find a village the next morning that could give us water. Matthew led the way down the summit, following the same way route we'd climbed.

UNEXPECTED WATER

"Wait a minute," I said, "these plants have puddles of water on their leaves. I'm going to drink some." "How is there water here?" Matthew asked, "It didn't rain today." "Must have been clouds passing through, but I don't care," I replied after slurping up some water.

We were now on the lookout for the special agave-type plant that had the perfectly-shaped leaves for collecting water. There were actually quite a few in the forest, and we managed to fill a Nalgene halfway full of water. That would have to be enough to get us through the night. We soon reached the trail and descended until we reached the first flat spot on the grassy hillside. It was pretty late now, so we set up the tent and quickly went to sleep.

THE BUCKET KIDS

I expected to sleep in late the next morning after having essentially not slept the night before, but we both rose at sunrise and started packing up. Before we were done two little kids popped up from the side of the hill, each carrying a big bucket. We reasoned they had to be fetching water, so Matthew approached them and asked "avez-vous l'eau?" [Do you have any water?]

They said “Oui,” so Matthew quickly grabbed a big water jug and followed them around the mountain. Pretty soon, though, they just stopped and stared at Matthew. Matthew repeated his question about water, but this time they just said “no.” Maybe they were nervous with this weird white-skinned person following them, or maybe they had some other use for the buckets. Either way Matthew returned water-less and we quickly started hiking back down the mountain.

MORE FOOD FOR WATER

We soon reached the dry valley and climbed back up a thousand feet to the village on the plateau. By now we were one hundred percent out of water. We walked toward some huts and began asking people for water, holding out our empty jugs. They gladly poured a liter into each jug, and we handed over the last of our bagels as payment. I’m not sure if we needed to pay them, but we knew it had probably taken them a lot of effort to get that water to the village, and they might be reluctant to give it out for free. When we were out of sight we stopped to throw in some more iodine tablets. The water was crystal clear, but we gave it twice the recommended dosage of iodine because we didn’t want to take any chances.

Several kids followed us to the edge of the plateau as we hiked away, but then we were on our own. The descent went fast, and soon we were back in the river valley.

A REFRESHING SWIM

“I know Haiti’s about the last place you should swim in the water, but that water looks so fresh and it’s so hot outside I just have to jump in,” Matthew said. “The benefit of a cool dip outweighs the risk of schistosomiasis.” We both agreed, and had a very refreshing dip in the water. I bet plenty of other tourists would enjoy the trails we hiked on, especially after seeing the awesome river gorge that we swam in. But the area is just so hard to get to and has no tourism infrastructure that I doubt many hikers will visit it any time soon.

Refreshed and back at capacity on water, we continued hiking down the trail until we reached the village near our bikes. We were greeted by the familiar chorus of “Blanco!”, but Matthew also heard one little kid yell “velo!” [French for ‘bicycle’].

“Uh oh, I bet they found the bikes,” Matthew said. “We didn’t pass through this village with bikes, so why else would that kid mention ‘velo’? Hopefully they didn’t break them and we can just buy them back, or trade for them. I’d give it a 50% chance that the bikes are still there.”

We rounded the corner to the bushes and Matthew plunged in. In a minute he came back out with both bikes! Those kids must have really thought he’d gone to the bathroom in the bushes, and that must have kept them away.

DESCENDING IN STYLE

Now we got our reward for the grueling hours spent pushing the bikes up the valley. Despite the fist-sized rocks in the path, the valley was steep enough that we could actually ride down the entire way without walking the bikes. The foldable bikes were certainly not meant for such abuse, and I think we pushed them to the limit on what they were capable of. It was certainly a lot of fun blasting down the river valley so fast. This time nobody even had a chance

to yell “Blanco!” We were just passing by too quickly. People only had time to turn and stare. I imagine we were quite the sight: two white guys riding weird-looking bicycles over big rocks in the middle of rural Haiti.

Soon we reached Route 102, and had a much easier time biking. We didn’t want to gain too much speed, though, because there were still plenty of sharp rocks in the road that could pop our tires. Somehow we made it all the way down to the main road with no bike issues, and continued biking up to the border.

BORDER CROSSING NUMBER TWO

“Ok, this time I ain’t paying a single dollar in bribes or helper fees,” I said to Matthew as we approached gate number one. “We already know where everything needs to be paid and what paperwork to get, so we should be able to do this all by ourselves.” “Agreed, let’s save some money this time,” Matthew replied.

We got to the gate and a Haitian man asked for our passports and twenty dollars each. I refused and tried to bargain for five minutes, but he wouldn’t bargain. He even showed me an official ID card for the border, so I finally trusted him and gave him the money and passports. We made it through the gate with the official paperwork, then easily passed by gate number two (without needing to register our bikes again – that must have all been for show the first time).

At gate number three I went into the customs office, paid twenty dollars for each of us, and got both passports stamped. Finally we passed through the last gate, and saw Tommy waiting for us. He was surprised to see us so cut up from the bushwhacking, but happy that we’d made it back. He walked us over to the immigration booth and took our passports for the final paperwork. In all, we each paid about $85 total in the form of fees and bribes to cross the border and return.

When Tommy returned we followed him on our bikes back to the police station in Jimani. Our car was exactly where we’d left it, unscathed and unbroken-into. We breathed two huge sighs of relief. We had successfully bagged the Pic la Selle and were finally back safe with all our belongings in the Dominican Republic. Twenty-four hours was all the time we’d needed on the ground in Haiti. We got in the car, turned up the victory Rock-n-Roll music, and started heading toward our next objective – Pico Duarte, the highest mountain in the Dominican Republic.

Dominican Republic
Pico Duarte 10,164ft

Author: Matthew

August 25, 2013

"Halfway there," Eric said as we raced through the desert, just outside of Jimaní, Dominican Republic. "One mountain down, one to go." But with the windows down, pedal to the metal, and "Born to Be Wild" blasting through the speakers in our little Chevy Aveo, it felt like we were finished. It felt like we were already on our victory lap. As the cacti zoomed past, the artificial breeze made the dry, sunny 100F air feel downright pleasant. We hugged the shoreline of Lago Enriquillo, a palm tree-ringed, turquoise-green lake 90 feet below sea level, and I contemplated the map.

The previous evening, we had summited Pic La Selle, the highest point in Haiti, and had passed a parched, thirsty night at 7,500ft on the mountain. We had run out of water earlier that day and had been forced to barter with villagers in French for water, and later, to drain rainwater from concave agave leaves. Today, after a long descent by foot and foldable bike, and more than an hour of hassle filled with corruption and bribery at the DR/Haiti border, we had finally arrived back in Jimaní at midday.

When we crossed back into the DR from Haiti, it felt like we had entered the land of milk and honey. The road was paved instead of the rough, dusty limestone gravel we had biked through in Haiti, the buildings were well-maintained, children weren't shouting "blanco" wherever we turned, and there were no United Nations Humvees rumbling by. We stopped by the Jimaní police station, where we had parked our rental car for the last 25 hours, hopped in the car, and stocked up on food and water at the supermercado with the help of Tommy, a Dominicano whom we had befriended yesterday, before leaving town. Next on the hit list was Pico Duarte, highest point in the Dominican Republic.

"Well, Daniel said 6 hours from Jimaní to Jarabacoa, so we ought to be there by 8pm," said Eric. To save a few dollars on the car rental, for this trip Eric was the single designated driver and I was the designated navigator.

"The hike up Pico Duarte tomorrow is going to be longer than Pic La Selle," I said to Eric, "but I feel like it's going to be much easier. First of all, we'll be taking a trail, so we know that it's actually possible to get to the top, unlike Pic La Selle, where we followed a route that we had planned just from satellite photos. And we're going with someone who's been there before and who has the second-fastest speed record. And in terms of tourism, it's a much more trodden path up Pico Duarte than Pic La Selle. So even though the hiking portion of Duarte will be more difficult, there are a lot fewer variables."

"Yeah, it's a good thing we did our homework for this trip," Eric said. "We don't want a repeat of South Korea here."

THREE INGREDIENTS

Eric and I have come to realize that the recipe for every successful trip requires a few key ingredients: thorough background research, physical stamina, and luck. Proper background research gets you to the trailhead and informs you what you're up against. Physical stamina gets you from the trailhead to the top. And luck is the great catalyst, helping the trip go smoothly and safely. For Pico Duarte, we would need all three elements.

A few months earlier, on Jeju Island in South Korea, I had learned the hard way the consequences of not doing your homework. On that trip, my friend Jake and I had attempted to climb Hallasan, the highest point in the country. But when we reached the point on the trail that all of the maps had designated as "the summit," we discovered that we were actually standing on the second highest point in South Korea. The true summit, we discovered, is located a tantalizing 0.75 miles away along a crater rim, is officially off-limits, and trespassers face a $500 fine. Although more thorough prior research would have neither reduced the fine nor made summiting any less illegal, at least it would have given us a Plan B and some ideas for how to find a "backdoor route" to the top. In the end, Jake and I were forced to turn back, summit-less, to catch an afternoon flight.

Keen to avoid a repeat of the defeat on Hallasan, I vowed to research Pico Duarte thoroughly in order to maximize our chances of success. A month before our trip, the first surprise came when Eric discovered a webpage stating that you are required to hire a guide for Pico Duarte. "Well we've heard that before on plenty of other mountains," I said to Eric skeptically. "Do they mean 'to make your life easier, you should hire a guide so you don't have to figure out any logistics yourself, and so someone can hold your hand and lead you to the top' or 'you'll get arrested and fined if you don't hire a guide'? Those are the two opposite ends of the 'you must hire a guide' spectrum."

"Unfortunately, it's the latter," Eric said. "SummitPost says it's a park service requirement, and a book at the COOP said it's against the law to hike it unguided. Sounds like

it's the government's attempt to help boost the local economy. So I guess it's hard to argue with that." "Ok, so let's find the cheapest guide," I said.

More research uncovered several tour companies who will pick you up at the airport in Santo Domingo, give you a place to sleep, drive you to the trailhead, provide a guide, mules, and food, and bring you to the summit and back down in 2 or 3 days. Total prices ranged from USD$300-$900/person.

"$300 per person? 2 or 3 days? That's just crazy," I said to Eric. "Yeah, that's got to be a lot of money for the Dominican Republic, I'd expect things to be much cheaper than that down there." "Yeah, and the hike is 26 miles roundtrip. That's a decent hike, but I'm sure we could easily do it in one day. It certainly won't take three days."

We emailed the four guiding companies for whom we could find an email address, and asked them if they'd be willing to run a less all-inclusive trip (we provide food and carry our own gear) in one or two days for less money. Both of the companies that responded said that the price was not negotiable.

"Well, there's always the option to just show up at the trailhead and see if we can connect with a guide directly," Eric said. "Some websites say that you can save a lot of money if you deal directly with a guide, and not through a tour group."

"Yeah, that's a possibility," I said, "but finding a guide could cost us an entire day. Since our timing for this trip is so tight, it'd be great if we could have things figured out beforehand."

Originally, we had budgeted just one full day for Pico Duarte. We'd (hopefully) arrive at the Duarte trailhead on a Saturday evening after climbing Pic La Selle (the highest point in Haiti), climb Duarte on Sunday, and then fly out Monday afternoon. But it sounded prudent to give ourselves an extra day, so we booked a flight that'd leave Santo Domingo Tuesday afternoon, giving us two full days for Pico Duarte. The timing still seemed tight. What if we couldn't find a guide on Saturday night? What if no guide would let us hike it in fewer than two days? Has it ever even been hiked in one day?

I googled "Pico Duarte one day" and came across a report of two guys who had attempted to climb it in 14 hours' roundtrip back in November 2009. Bingo, I thought, so it can be done in a day. Unfortunately, as I read on, I learned the pair was unable to complete the hike in one day, and ended up spending the night in a hut near the summit, finishing in 1.5 days.

Ok, what about googling "Pico Duarte speed record"? Enter. And with that search, I hit the jackpot.

THE GOLD NUGGET

"I, David Bean, climbed Pico Duarte today (May 4th, 2013)," the trip report said, "and did it in 7:36:35, Daniel Gutierrez did it in 8:26. Weather was cloudy and cool until the last hour or so and the trail was terrible like always. I definitely plan on getting back there and taking it under 7, but I am also sure that people could take it down a lot farther than that."

Until now, in our quest for information, Eric and I had been panning for gold, finding a few small flakes here and there. But now, we had just unearthed a big gold nugget. The game had changed. In his report, David said that his guide Radhames had tagged along behind him and Daniel with a mule, and that his presence was more of a formality than anything else.

Encouraged by this golden nugget of information, I posted on David's blog and forum asking for the contact info of his guide Radhames or if we knew of other guides who would also permit a single-day climb. David responded almost immediately, giving me Daniel's contact info. It turned out that Daniel still works in Jarabacoa, not far from the trailhead!

Daniel said that, indeed, you are required by law to hire a guide. He knew someone who had successfully hiked it without a guide several years ago but, upon returning to the trailhead, was shot at and later detained by police. The individual escaped unharmed and un-arrested, but Daniel advised us not to repeat this incident.

Daniel gave us three awesome nuggets of information: 1) he was interested in joining us for the hike, 2) he would coordinate the trip for one day with the same guide, Radhames, and 3) the trip fee would be $75 total – just $25/person! This was absolutely ideal, because, first of all, we knew that Daniel would set a good pace since he had the second-fastest speed record – we might have to run to keep up with him. And Daniel, a native Spanish speaker, would be able to communicate with Radhames more effectively than us, especially because Radhames spoke Campesino – "Country Spanish." And of course the price was an order of magnitude less than we had anticipated. Getting in contact with David and Daniel had been a miraculous stroke of good luck.

So, we had set a date of Sunday, August 25, 2013. We'd rendezvous with Daniel in Jarabacoa around 8pm on Saturday, drive to the trailhead, camp there, then start hiking in the morning. We'd finish around sunset, drive back to Jarabacoa to drop Daniel off, then we'd be on our way. This itinerary would give us Monday as a buffer day just in case things didn't go according to plan.

NUEVOS AMIGOS

And so far, the plan had been executed flawlessly. We had summited Pic La Selle with no significant incidents. And we ended up leaving Jimaní at 1:58pm, just two minutes earlier than we had planned a few weeks ago. In a few hours, we reached Santo Domingo and the traffic density began to increase. Eric and I had had considerable experience driving in nine Caribbean and five Central American countries so far, so Santo Domingo wasn't all that scary. But still, we breathed a sigh of relief when we began to leave town. We celebrated with a quick pit stop for some fried chicken.

As the sun set, a new danger began to emerge: it seemed that every car had its high beams permanently on. It was as if, long ago, all cars in the country had gotten into an arms race for headlight brightness. Carlos, for example, turns on his high beams. "Wow, I can see much better, I should always drive like this," he says. Then oncoming driver Juan, blinded by Carlos's high beams, flicks on his own high beams so that he can see the center line. "Wow, now I can

see much better," Juan says. Carlos and Juan go their separate ways but leave their high beams on, oblivious to the fact that they're blinding everyone else. In order to see, all oncoming drivers flick their high beams on, and in just a few days everyone in the DR is driving with permanent high beams. Eventually, Carlos decides to switch out his high beams for even brighter ones so that he can see even better, and the escalation continues. It therefore comes as no surprise that the US State Department strongly discourages driving at night in the DR.

By 9pm, we finally arrived in Jarabacoa, and as our pupils began to reopen, proceeded to the designated rendezvous point with Daniel. "We'll be meeting Daniel and his friend Kate outside of the Doulos Discovery School," I said to Eric, "that's where Daniel works." As we would later learn, Doulos is a "Christian, college-preparatory, Expeditionary Learning, English-immersion school" which sponsors "PK-12 education to students of varying socioeconomic classes in the Dominican Republic" and has more than 200 students. As we waited for Daniel and Kate, we caught a glimpse of the school's magnificent campus. We would cross paths with Doulos again after the climb.

Right on time, Daniel and Kate appeared, ready for action. We introduced ourselves and all hopped our small car. As Daniel directed us to the gas station and then towards the La Ciénaga trailhead, we learned that he had climbed Pico Duarte numerous times and often mountain bikes in the area. The previous week, he had actually mountain biked all the way from Jarabacoa to Radhames' house to speak with him in person and discuss logistics. Meanwhile, this would be Kate's fourth climb and first attempt in a single day; in fact, with a successful ascent tomorrow, she would set the new women's speed record. Both Kate and Daniel were in top physical shape and together we formed a great team.

One hour later, after a long, windy drive up a gravelly mountain road, we reached the trailhead at a village called La Ciénaga.

"This is where we'll sleep tonight," Daniel said, pointing to concrete-floored the open-air ground floor of a large building. "We'd normally sleep inside this building, but there are some park officials there tonight so we'll have to sleep underneath."

By 11pm, we were finally in bed. Unfortunately, I had forgotten my air mattress, so I laid on the cushiony part of my backpack, and pulled on the sleeping bag liner, shivering to stay warm. But, fatigue overpowered discomfort, and I was asleep in minutes.

THE CLIMB

6.5 hours later, our alarms jolted us awake and we prepared for battle with the mountain. As Eric and I scarfed down some cereal and powdered milk, Daniel and Kate prepared their ultralight backpacks. Soon, Radhames appeared with his mule, and was surprised that we hadn't started hiking earlier. I think that he thought we were hoping to set a new speed record for Pico Duarte. Eric's and my goal was simply to make it to the summit and back in less than a day – Daniel's and David's records sounded hard to beat.

We crossed the starting bridge at 6:00am and the clock began ticking. Thankfully, we had started just late enough not to need the headlamps and hoped that wouldn't need them at the end

of the day either. David's GPS track indicated 9,279 feet of net elevation gain over 13.4 miles, for an average grade of about 700 feet/mile. It would be a long, sustained climb.

Eric and I have discovered that the best way to make a long hike seem shorter is to talk. So talk we did. We learned more about Doulos, Kate's aspirations to climb higher mountains like Kilimanjaro and the seven summits, and Daniel's mountain biking and running adventures around the Dominican Republic. After 7.5 miles, we reached a quasi-peaklet and descended a short ways to a nice cool spring, appropriately called Aguitas Frías. Kate and Daniel, accustomed to the local water, sipped directly, while Eric and I popped in some iodine pills to ensure that the water was gringo-friendly.

A few miles later, we reached a magnificent complex of buildings called La Compartición. This is where most people spend the night, Daniel said. Those climbing the mountain in two days hike up to La Compartición on the first day, spend the night, then get up early the second day to hike up to the summit for sunrise. The complex consisted of a ranger cabin, sleeping cabin with space for a hundred people, and cooking cabin with two dozen concrete fire rings for preparing meals. As we walked through the cooking cabin, the wonderful collective aroma from thousands of delicious meals wafted from the woodwork and into the air.

We hung around La Compartición for about ten minutes, preparing for the final push to the summit. The cool interior of the cabins provided welcome shade from the hot, dry August sun. The pleasant smell and quietude of the pine forest beckoned us to linger but, eager to complete the hike before nightfall, we quickly scarfed down a few granola bars and headed out.

When we stepped out the door, we were surprised to see Radhames with his mule. He was the first other person we had seen since 6 am. Turns out he was close behind us the whole time and had caught up while we were taking a break. His role was to stay at the back and act as a sweeper; if anyone got hurt, he would give them a ride down on the mule. Daniel, Kate, and Radhames chatted for a moment, and then we continued hiking.

"If we reach the summit and cover the thirteen miles back down the trailhead within the next hour," I said to Daniel, "then we'll break your record."

"When David and I set the record," Daniel said with a smile, "we took our first rest here at La Compartición at about the three hour mark. Then we dropped our packs and ran to the summit."

"Something tells me we're probably not going to break the record today," Eric said, "but we weren't trying to break the record today. Our goal was just to finish in one day." We all nodded in agreement and continued hiking.

LA CIMA

The trail wound upwards through the thin pine forest and began to level out in a plateau. "Almost to the summit," Daniel said. Soon, a large rock outcropping appeared and, after a little scrambling, we ran out of mountain to climb. We were on top of the Dominican Republic!

We were rewarded with a spectacular view of the countryside. Forests spread out for miles in every direction and few cities were visible. Near the mountaintops, the forest was generally thin, dry, and piney, while lower down it was dense, wet, and jungley. Over the past thirteen miles, we had really traversed the full spectrum of ecosystems. Daniel pointed out his favorite mountain biking locales far below.

There was no mistaking that we were at the top. The summit's precarious rock pile is christened by an 8ft wooden cross, a large Dominican Republic flag, and a 1.5x scale bronze bust of the honorable Juan Pablo Duarte, a founding father of the country, and the mountain's namesake.

From the summit, we spotted another mountain of seemingly similar height about a mile away. "Which mountain is that one," Eric asked, "it looks just as tall?"

"That one," Daniel answered, "is called 'La Pelona.' A few years ago, it was surveyed and found to be just four meters shorter than Pico Duarte, but I'm not sure how accurate that survey was. Since there are trees on the summit of La Pelona, nobody every hikes there. Pico Duarte has the best views anyhow."

For a fleeting moment, I was tempted to suggest that we go ahead and tag the summit of La Pelona on the way down. Only four meters shorter? That's just barely greater than the resolution of a handheld GPS. What if it's surveyed a few years from now and found to be taller? Does that mean we'll have to come back to the DR so that we can officially climb the actual high point?

I thought back to our bike tour in Europe and the story of the Denmark high point. For years, people thought the highest point in continental Denmark was a hill called Ejer Bavnehøj, so a really nice monument was built on top of that hill. Then, recently, it was found that a nearby hill called Møllehøj was actually a few centimeters taller. So the second highest point in the country has a magnificent monument, while the actual high point is christened with hay and cow pies. And there's a similar story for Knieff, the highest point in Luxembourg.

But, eager to start the long hike back down to the trailhead, I quickly dismissed the idea of adding one unnecessary mountain. The five of us – Eric, Kate, Daniel, me, and Radhames – gathered around the bust of old Señor Duarte and snapped a triumphant summit photo. Radhames's mule, parked a hundred feet down the trail and busy munching grass, missed out on the photo.

"Vámanos!" I said. We activated our descent muscles, lengthened our trekking poles, and mentally engaged downhill mode. The time was 1:23pm, and we had about 4.5 hours of daylight remaining.

LOS CAÑONES DEL DUARTE / THE CANYONS

"Man, it's hard to believe we climbed all of this," I said. Pico Duarte produced a mysterious effect called "time dilation" in which a mile of descent at the end of the day seemed to take longer than a mile of ascent at the beginning.

We hopped over fist-sized rocks and skidded down gravelly boulders while Kate, in the front, set a blistering pace. Around 3:30pm, Kate turned on her turbo-boosters and started running.

"Now that's a pace that I don't think I should keep up," I said. A few years ago, I had injured my knee on a long, hard run down a rugged trail and wanted to avoid a replay of that injury.

"Yeah," Eric replied, "I'm OK with not running."

Soon we entered what an area that I'll call "the Duarte Canyonlands," also in honor of old Señor Duarte. In this section, we passed through the most deeply-rutted sections of trail that I've ever seen. At times, the trail was a few feet wide and fifteen feet deep! Daniel said it was caused by a combination of erosion – the area received a lot of rainfall during the wet season – and also trail maintenance by the guides. For example, a big rainstorm would come and cut a deep new V-shape in the middle of the trail. The guides then shovel out enough sand from the trail to make it wide enough for the mules to walk. Then a big rainstorm comes again, cutting the trail even deeper. On this trail, the whole situation had gotten out of control. We'd be walking on sand at the bottom of a narrow mini-canyon, with the bushes hanging ten feet above us.

"I don't think I'd want to be here during a hurricane," Eric said.

SOUTHERN HOSPITALITY

Daylight began to wane as we exited the Duarte Canyonlands and entered the homestretch – a.k.a. the "Duarte Mudflats." The dense jungle canopy did an effective job of capturing all the daylight, which perhaps explained why the trail stayed so wet. Keen to finish the hike sans headlamps, we started jogging again and reached the finish line at 6:15pm – 12 hours, 15 minutes since we had started. Kate, meanwhile, had finished in just under twelve hours, setting the new women's record!

Her parents were there to greet us all at the other end of the final bridge. We chatted for a while about the hike. It turns out that they had first come down to the DR from the States more than a decade ago and had fallen in love with it. They had started the Doulos Discovery School down in Jarabacoa to give back to the community.

"You guys ought to take a quick swim in the river!" they said. Eric and I jumped into the cold mountain stream. Swimming in the nice cold jungle brook was a far cry from the dry, dusty, Haitian desert we had biked through 30 hours ago.

As we dried off, Kate's parents invited us to spend the night at their house and celebrate with a home-cooked dinner. At first, thanking them for the invitation, I said that we didn't want to impose, and that we could just camp here at the trailhead.

"Are you sure?" Kate's mom asked.

"Matthew, what about dinner?" Eric said turning to me. "We don't have anything good to eat."

"We can always scrounge something together," I offered.

"All we've got is some cereal and powdered milk," Eric replied.

I began to realize that a nice non-cereal dinner and a real bed actually sounded pretty good. We decided to take Kate's parents up on their extremely generous offer.

"Ok," said Kate's dad, "follow us."

Eric and I hopped in our little sedan and followed behind their high-clearance Nissan truck. "Now that's the vehicle you'd want to have if you lived around here," Eric said as we inched cautiously through a giant mud puddle.

A few miles down the road, an annoying scraping sound began to emanate from the front of the car. "Great, it's probably the brakes," I said. "Just like that rental car in Guatemala."

Ignoring the sound, we continued following Kate's family for more than an hour, until, at last, we rounded a corner and reached a magnificent house perched on the hillside. The villa, which was actually designed by Kate's dad, and his company, Colorado Designs, reminded us of a western-style ranch house, with numerous stone fireplaces, wall-mounted antlers mounted, with plenty of timber and wrought iron. A beautiful porch offered spectacular daylight views of Jarabacoa, the jungle, and the mountains.

Kate's parents prepared a superb appetizer of tortilla chips and homemade salsa, followed by an outstanding pasta feast, which we dined on as we chatted around the cozy porch campfire. Their hospitality was incredible. Now I was glad that Eric had suggested we take them up on their offer.

After dinner, they led us to a cozy guestroom downstairs, equipped with a plush bed and a large shower. Now, I had been fully prepared to call the plunge in the river sufficient, and to sleep in my sleeping bag on the porch; but, a warm bed and a nice shower were infinitely better that I had ever imagined.

Eric and I had a great sleep and woke up in the morning well-rested, just as Kate's parents were headed to work. We thanked Kate's parents profusely for their unbeatable southern hospitality and bid them farewell. It was hard to imagine that this whole connection with Kate, her parents, Daniel, as well as yesterday's one-day hike up Pico Duarte had all be initiated by a simple Google search: "pico duarte speed record."

CABARETE

"Well, what do we do next?" I said to Eric as we drove away from Kate's place and back towards Jarabacoa. "Besides that annoying scraping sound coming from the front of the car, things have gone 100% perfectly so far. We made it up the highest point in Haiti, made up Pico Duarte in one day – much faster and cheaper than most people – we got to meet Daniel, Kate, and her parents, and had an awesome dinner and a great sleep last night. Now we've got an extra day and a half in the Dominican Republic to burn."

“Yeah I don’t think things could have gone any better,” Eric said. “Turns out we didn’t even need the buffer day.”

Before we had left, Kate’s dad had given us some suggestions. We told him that we ought to spend a little bit of time at a beach. He suggested checking out Cabarete, on the north coast of the DR, which is world-renowned for kite- and windsurfing, and is great for body surfing too. He suggested a place to rent mountain bikes and also a good hostel in town. That sounded good to us, so we headed north and made it to Cabarete a few hours later.

We body surfed in the turquoise-blue water for a few hours, checked out town, bought a whole bunch of food, then relaxed underneath some palm trees, munching on some ice cream bars and sipping some orange juice. “I guess this is what people are supposed to do while on vacation in the Dominican Republic,” Eric said.

THE ZERO-STAR HOTEL

After a few more hours of exceptional body surfing, we grabbed our camping gear and headed into the bushes to find a suitable stealth campsite. So far, on the island of Hispañola, the only money that we had spent had been on the car rental, bribes at the Haiti border, food at the grocery store, as well as $25 each for the Pico Duarte guide, and we didn’t want to spend one additional cent on sleeping. “Stealth camping is always more fun that sleeping inside anyhow,” I said to Eric. “It’s always a lot more memorable too.” The night would turn out to be much more memorable than we had expected.

“Let’s set up in those bushes over there,” Eric said.

“Yeah, it looks like it’s going to be clear tonight, so there’s no reason to set up the tent,” I said, looking up at the cloudless, starry, twilit sky. “We can cowboy camp tonight.”

After a little bit of gardening, we spread our tarp over the ground and crawled into our thin liner sleeping bags. Waves crashed in the distance. I tossed and turned for an hour, unable to sleep because it was only about 8pm.

Then, suddenly, we heard a single loud TWAP against the leaves. We both perked up, listening, straining intently to figure out what had made that sound. TWAP! TWAP! Two more solitary, mysterious impacts. Then, in the distance, we could hear a low roar, which began to grow louder and louder. We now knew the source of the sound. It was a sound that we had heard from the inside of our tent countless times on the Appalachian Trail.

“Oh crap,” I said.

WHOOSH! It was as if we had just been engulfed by a tidal wave. One of the most intense deluges that we had ever experienced began to fall in earnest. In the five seconds it took to extricate ourselves from our liner sleeping bags, we were completely drenched; all of our clothes were sopping wet.

“Get the tent!” Eric yelled over the cacophony of the downpour.

We were now an automated machine set in motion. Unroll the tent. Assemble the poles. Insert the poles. Clip on the rainfly. Unzip the door, throw in the wet gear. Look for sticks. Stake out the corners. Dash inside. Zip it up. While we had missed the speed record on Pico Duarte the previous day, we set a new tent pitching speed record on the shore this evening. But it was mostly all in vain, because in the 90 seconds it had taken to set up the tent, all of our gear was 100% saturated.

As the torrent continued outside, we attempted to create a comfortable sleeping area. We threw trash bags on the tent floor, hoping to float above the pool of water, but it was no use. "Well I'm glad that I left most of my clothes in the car," Eric said. Unfortunately, I hadn't been so lucky. Mercifully, it wasn't too cold; despite being soaked, we managed to get a few hours of sleep. It was just another memorable night of stealth camping.

ONE LAST SWIM

We drove the 2.5 hours back to Santo Domingo in the morning and miraculously the mysterious scraping noise quit only about 30 minutes before we returned the rental car. "Maybe it was just a rock?" Eric said. "Maybe it just got dislodged?" "Or maybe the scraping sound meant our brakes were almost worn out," I answered. "And now that the sound has stopped, the brakes are done. Let's hope that it continues to keep quiet when we return the car."

We pulled into the finish line at the car rental agency and breathed a huge sigh of relief. We had done it. Two country high points, one thousand kilometers of driving, and no major incidents.

"How was the car?" the manager asked. "Oh, it was great," Eric said.

As we packed up our stuff and moved it out from the trunk, the manager said to us "you can leave your backpacks in the trunk, I'll drive you to the airport."

Oh great, I thought, that scraping sound is sure to come back while he's driving. Thankfully, however, the car stayed quiet all the way to the airport. The manager dropped us off and bid us farewell.

"The one thing that we didn't get to do in the DR," I said to Eric as we approached the terminal, "is to do some cliff jumping. Let's take a walk over to the shore and see if we can sneak in one last swim before our flight."

We walked for five minutes toward the coast and were delighted to discover a few ten-foot-tall limestone cliffs over crystal clear blue water. For just a five minute walk from the airport, it was impossible to beat. We jumped off the rocks and into the perfect 30ft deep lagoon a few times before packing up.

"Well, I think we can call that a job well done," Eric said as we slumped into our seats outside our gate, awaiting our flight.

Trip 7 – Belize

Belize
Doyle's Delight 3,852ft

Author: Matthew

September 17-25, 2014

Schedule:

Day 1: Fly Boston – ATL – Belize City (BZE) [6 hrs]; Bus Belize City – San Ignacio [3 hrs]. Overnight in San Ignacio
Day 2: 4×4 truck from San Ignacio – Tapir Camp [3 hrs]; Tractor from Tapir Camp to Ceibo Chico camp [8 hrs]
Day 3: Hike from Ceibo Chico to ridge near Fork Camp [12 hrs]
Day 4: Hike from Day 3 camp to Doyle's Delight summit [7 hrs], camp on summit. Eve of Belize Independence Day!
Day 5: Hike from Doyle's Delight to Fork Camp [5 hrs] (Belize Independence Day!)
Day 6: Hike from Fork Camp to Ceibo Chico [10 hrs], tractor ride Ceibo Chico – Tapir Camp [8 hrs]. Overnight at Tapir Camp.
Day 7: Tour around Maya ruins at Caracol, 4×4 truck to San Ignacio, overnight in San Ignacio.
Day 8: Bus San Ignacio – Belize Zoo – Belize City.
Day 9: Fly BZE – ATL- BOS.

THE ENCOUNTER

Something was amiss. The Río Ceibo Grande was murky.

The pristine jungle river – located deep within the Belizean rainforest in the heart of Chiquibul National Park – had been running crystal clear. As we had labored up the steep hillside the previous day, laden with heavy overnight packs, covered with mud, and sweating profusely in the humid tropical air, the cool aqua blue water tricking down from the Maya Mountain highlands into the in the deep broad pool had absolutely beckoned us to go for a swim. "On our way back tomorrow, we're definitely jumping in," I had said to Eric and Josh.

But something had changed, something had caused the water to cloud up over the past twenty four hours – it was the illegal gold panners. Derric and Boris had warned us about those guys. They said they would sneak into Belize from across the porous Guatemala border, scour the streams, dredge the riverbanks, gouge the hillsides, and ravage the virgin Chiquibul in search of a few flakes of gold. The silt dislodged from their pillaging and plundering would wash into the streams and would cause them to turn murky; cloudy stream water was therefore telltale sign of their presence and proximity.

They would arrive clandestinely in hordes, armed with prospecting gold pans, shovels, and machetes. And occasionally guns. Derric had told us about an incident last year involving a Belizean military sting operation to round up and capture illegal Guatemalan gold panners, not far from our current location. As the military encircled the gold panners and closed in to make the arrest, one of the gold panners raised a gun. Before he could fire it, he was shot and killed by the soldiers. The incident soured relations between Belize and Guatemala and helped bring the illegal gold panning crisis to the public's attention.

Illegal gold panners were the reason that we needed an armed escort on this expedition. It was the reason that Derric and Marvin had guns, and was another good reason to carry along a few extra (and multi-purpose) machetes. Although Derric said that most gold panners would try to flee if they saw us and didn't want to bother anyone, we needed to be careful and particularly alert as we traversed the danger zone – "ISIS territory," Derric joked.

And that meant no swimming for us today. We had just camped the night on the summit of Doyle's Delight – the highest point in Belize – and were on our triumphant descent back to civilization. We were likely the eighth expedition in history to reach the remote summit by foot. After the past three and a half days in the jungle, we were yearning for a victory swim, but today was not the day for it. A silent threat was lurking somewhere in the jungle nearby. "Sorry guys, but I don't think it'd be a good idea to swim here," Derric Chan—manager of Chiquibul National Park—said to us. "Let's get to Fork Camp first and then think about swimming."

Marvin, our scout, led the way up the steep hillside with his handgun in one hand and a machete in the other. After whacking through a few more palm trees, we finally arrived back at Fork Camp by 2pm. It was still early in the day, but Derric said that it was probably too late to proceed any farther. Our next destination was Ceibo Chico; a small Belizean military outpost we had camped at three days ago. Between us and Ceibo Chico lay 10 miles of challenging terrain. To reach the outpost, we could either 1) backtrack through extremely rugged, tangled dense jungle, or 2) traverse straight through the gold panning stronghold and hope for no encounters. It

was a tough decision which needed some thought and a full day's effort, so we elected to spend the rest of the day lounging around Fork Camp, a pleasant little area of flat land in the middle of the jungle at the confluence of two streams, to prepare for an early start tomorrow.

Suddenly, nearly simultaneously, we all noticed something moving on the hillside, about 100 feet from camp on the opposite side of the stream. Three guys and a dog suddenly emerged from behind the trees and started approaching us. For just a moment, I wasn't sure what I was looking at. We hadn't seen anyone else for the past two and a half days. Were these other tourists? Were there other people headed up Doyle's Delight? No, it didn't make any sense. All three guys looked like locals – they looked to be ethnic Mayan, wearing t-shirts and jeans. Then I noticed that one of the guys was carrying a giant backpack; strapped to the backpack was a big plastic Tupperware bowl, which could only mean one thing: gold panners.

As they continued to approach our camp, Derric immediately stood up and started shouting to them in Spanish. Marvin stealthily pulled out his gun but kept it hidden. We could only imagine what was going to happen next.

THE CONNECTION

We owed much of the success that we had had so far to a single connection that had been facilitated through none other than Google Earth. We had been planning to visit the highest point in Belize for a couple of years, ever since we had started our quest for all 23 North American Country High Points, but we knew it would be challenging. The precious few trip reports that we could find about climbs or attempts of Doyle's Delight either reached the summit by helicopter or, if by foot, had required a weeklong bushwhack through the jungle—or longer.

And more recent reports mentioned security concerns due to ongoing illegal activities in the area. In other words, this was going to be an expedition rather than a quick one-day outing, and due to the security issues would probably require a guide. For those reasons, we had decided to put Doyle's Delight on the shelf for a little while. Better to pick the lower hanging fruit on the country high point's tree, such as the Caribbean islands and the rest of Central America, and come back to Belize when the time was right.

By late August 2013, after we just returned from a successful trip to Hispañola to climb the Haiti and Dominican Republic high points, we had picked the last of the lowest hanging high point fruit and it was time to begin detailed planning for the expedition to Belize. As we dug a little deeper, it became clear that Doyle's Delight was not exactly a "mainstream" mountain. People go to Belize to visit the beach, not slog through the jungle for a week to the top of a viewless hill.

There was very little information online or in print. From what we could tell, the first summit had been by foot in 1970; since 1987, there had been a couple of other trips on foot, and a few by helicopter by the military and biologists. (When we later traveled to Belize, we learned from Derric of a few other undocumented expeditions by foot; we put together a timeline in Appendix A, at the end of this report.) Climbing activity had "intensified" by 2008, with an average of one expedition per year, including summits by fellow highpointers Christian

Rodriguez (2008) and Jonathan Wunrow (2009). Jon wrote a great book titled "High Points: A Climber's Guide to Central America," which served as a great planning resource for us. In the book, he details his successful trip to Doyle's Delight in 2009, a trip that took six days and started in the village of San Jose, on the south side of the mountain.

That report served as the starting point for our planning. Christian Rodriguez had taken the same route the previous year, and also provided a brief trip report on Summitpost.org. His trip had taken eight days. Another fellow high pointer named Petter Kragset attempted to reach the summit by the same route in March 2013 and started from the same village, but was turned around near the beginning after hearing warning gunshots, presumably from illegal loggers. For a more complete timeline, refer to Appendix A.

We turned to our trusted friend, Google Earth, to learn a little more about the geography of the mountain to explore possible alternative routes. Belize is a relatively small country, about the same size as New Jersey, but it has the lowest population density in Central America (ref Wikipedia), and nearly 60% of the land area is forested, much of it in a vast expanse of virgin jungle in the southern half of the country called Chiquibul National Park. Doyle's Delight, situated in the heart of the Chiquibul Forest, is located in the Maya Mountains, a divide that runs southwest-northeast from Guatemala through Belize. The difficulty in climbing Doyle's Delight has little to do with its elevation (only 3,852ft) and everything to do with its remoteness.

As we poured over satellite imagery, from what we could tell, the summit was about 14 miles line-of-sight (LOS) – a synonym for "as the crow flies" – from the nearest paved road at Jimmy Cut, to the southeast. It was hard to draw any conclusions about the bushwhackability from satellite images alone, but if the fact that it was located in a dense jungle meant anything, that could explain why the previous trips had all taken at least six days.

"Well, we don't want to take the same route as Petter did," I had said to Eric. "We wouldn't want to get all the way down there to Belize, then be turned around one day in after hearing some gunshots. There's got to be another way." "Yeah, let's see if there are any other roads that get us close to the mountain," Eric said. "It'd be especially cool if we could somehow involve packrafts and/or mountain bikes."

We scrutinized the satellite photos, struggling to find ones that had been captured when the mountain was not shrouded in clouds. We even got some help from a friend named Jake Osterberg, an expert in aerial imagery. Decades-old cloudless but grainy images appeared to suggest another gravel/dirt road within 10 miles of the summit, but we were unsure how trustworthy such old imagery could be – if the road were abandoned, it would have long since been consumed by the jungle. With respect to packrafting, a river was visible about 12 miles due east of the summit.

A river is a much more stable and trustworthy geographic feature than a road; somehow or another, water is going to keep flowing down it year after year. Perhaps we could paddle up or hike along the side of the river, climb the mountain, and then packraft out? It sounded like a tantalizingly awesome expedition, but there was way too much uncertainty. Would it even be

possible to go up the river? What about any red tape? None of the routes that started on the southern side of the mountain seemed very robust.

What about coming from the north? All of the reports that we had come across originated on the southern side of the mountain, in the Toledo district. Why did none come from the north? As I flew through Google Earth, I suddenly had a breakthrough. There was a tenuous jungle path that approached from the north and came within 12 miles LOS of the summit. While that by itself isn't terribly exciting, as I examined to see where the road came from, I noticed a tight clustering of geo-tagged Panoramio Photos at a location called "Las Cuevas Research Station," about five miles before the end of the road. Bingo. That means that the road is still in use, and is in fact quite accessible, at least to that point.

I found the website for Las Cuevas (http://www.lascuevas.org/), and learned about its mission, which is "to document and make known the biodiversity of the Maya Forest and contribute practical knowledge to the sustainable development and conservation of the Chiquibul-Maya Mountains Key Biodiversity Area." There were plenty of photos of the facility and of American college students doing research. So, we concluded, it's certainly possible to get to Las Cuevas. The question is, how close can you get to the mountain by road? Are there any access restrictions? I sent an email to fcd.lcrs@gmail.com for more information.

That email turned out to be a game changer. Within 90 minutes, I received a reply from Boris Arevalo, Lead Biologist and Station Manager at Las Cuevas. He gave us a few key pieces of information: 1) he himself had climbed Doyle's Delight from the north, 2) a guide is required, due to its remoteness and security concerns, 3) his organization can provide a guide, 4) the trip takes about six days' roundtrip. Voila. We were in business. It was this single email that made the trip possible. It reminded us of the "golden nugget" of information we had uncovered when planning the trip to Pico Duarte, highest point in Dominican Republic, earlier that year.

We negotiated the details over email, including the guide fees. Eric and I are loathe to pay any kind of fees to be guided up a mountain, but it sounded like this was our only option, so we had to bite the bullet. After some negotiation, Boris gave us a great deal on the fee because he said that several personnel from Friends for Conservation and Development (FCD, co-managers of Chiquibul National Park) would be joining us. He said that the FCD would provide all of the transportation from San Ignacio (easily accessible by bus) to the trailhead, involving several hours in a 4×4 truck and eight hours on a tractor. They would also provide security, because "sometimes people conducting illegal activities may be encountered."

We initially targeted January 2014, then March 2014, but crunch time for thesis writing set in, and we had to postpone to September 2014, smack in the middle of the rainy season and at the peak of hurricane season. We kept our fingers crossed that the rains would be merciful and mindful of our quest.

BOSTON TO BELIZE

By early September, the flights were booked and the team was solidified. From Belize, it would be Boris Arevalo (biologist), Derric Chan (our guide, and manager of Chiquibul National

Park), and Marvin Diaz (scout). As for gringos, it would be me, Eric, and Josh Spitzberg – a friend we had met through the MIT Outing Club.

On August 17, 2014, we hopped on a plane in Boston and, seven hours later, after a quick layover in Atlanta, we were in Belize. While it had been warm in Boston, stepping out into the humid, tropical Belizean air was like putting on a warm, wet towel. Temps were in the 80s with probably 100% humidity, but at least it wasn't raining. We took a cab from the airport into Belize City, then hopped on a bus heading west to Belmopan. The bus was actually an old school bus, probably from the US. It was fixed up to almost like new, and proudly painted yellow, red, and green, with colorful decals nearly covering the windshield. Just Google-image-search "Belize bus" and you'll see what I'm talking about. We raced across the countryside at breakneck speed while Johnny Cash's "Folsom Prison Blues" played through the intercom.

Three hours, one connection, and five dollars later, we pulled into the town of San Ignacio, which you might call the adventure capital of Belize. As we strolled through town on our way to Hotel Mallorca, we saw billboards all over the place offering jungle tours, whitewater rafting, tours of the Maya ruins at Caracol, and, best of all, cave tubing. We had planned a single buffer day into our trip, in case the schedule somehow slipped, and we knew there would be plenty of fun options in case it didn't.

We checked into our hotel, grabbed some burritos and groceries across the street, and dumped out our gear, which completely covered the floor in our 3-bed room. We spent about an hour repackaging food into Ziploc freezer bags (quart-size, mind you), a ritual that we had practiced and honed before countless trips over the years. Although we knew what food to pack, we had never been backpacking in the rainforest before, so we weren't completely sure what gear to bring. It was something that we'd discuss with Derric.

Derric arrived at about 7pm and we had a little powwow in our room. He and Rafael Manzanero (executive director of the Friends for Conservation and Development) had just returned from a radio interview in Belize City, in which they had discussed the challenges facing Chiquibul National Park (more on this later). We all introduced ourselves and went over the details of the expedition. In terms of transportation, he'd pick us up early in the morning and we'd drive three hours in a 4×4 truck to Tapir Camp. At that point, the road would be too rough for the truck and we'd ride in a tractor for another eight hours. In all, it'd be 11 hours of travel to get to a military outpost called Ceibo Chico, where we'd spend the night, leave the tractor, and continue towards the summit on foot.

Derric would be the leader of the team, Marvin would be our scout, and Boris would be there to provide support. If, at any time, Derric deemed the conditions to be unsafe, we would turn around. Derric and Marvin would be carrying firearms in case of any encounters. The terrain would be difficult, the packs would be heavy, and it would be no cakewalk.

Derric is a man who earns your immediate respect. In my experience as a trip leader, at the beginning of every trip, when you meet someone for the first time, especially someone with whom you'll be spending the next six days in this case, there is an inevitable and subconscious

size-up that you perform. Can this person handle the trip? Will I need to worry about them? Will they be fun to hike with?

As a trip participant, you perform the same size-up of your leader. In any assessment of Derric, one could tell that this wasn't going to be his first rodeo. He had a mental checklist of standard things that he goes over with clients for expeditions like this, from waivers and collection of the fee to planning, logistics, and discussion of what conditions to expect. Derric had the right combination of a deep knowledge of the jungle, practice coordinating complex logistics, and experience in communicating with clients that instilled immediate confidence. While Derric delivered the necessarily stern message that any trip leader should deliver during the first meeting, he did so professionally and amiably. You knew that Derric was going to be a good leader and, at the same time, fun to hang out with around the campfire. I hoped that Derric would have a similarly favorable assessment of us.

One of our first questions pertained to the weather. A week before the trip, in an email, Derric had said to us that the summer had been dry, but the rainy season was likely to begin soon. "We will just be wet all the time," he said. "We would be anyway with sweat if it would be hot. I think it is better with some rain." Accordingly, we had packed plenty of rain gear and trash bags to keep everything waterproof. But Derric was optimistic that the rain would hold off for the duration of our trip.

We went over our gear with Derric. Hiking boots or trail running shoes? Hiking boots. Sunscreen? Bring it for the tractor ride, but you won't need it in the jungle. Sunglasses? Bring them for eye protection during the bushwhacking. Tent? Ok, but it would have been better if you had brought a hammock. Long sleeves and long pants? Absolutely. Soon, we had pared down our pile to essentially what we would bring along for a regular summer backpacking trip, plus a couple of small dry bags for moisture-sensitive electronics.

"All right, gentlemen," Derric said. "Get some sleep, and I'll see you at 6am."

Despite our excitement for the journey ahead, the blasting cold air from the air conditioner and the fatigue of a long day of travel that had originated in Boston coaxed us to sleep almost immediately.

INTO THE JUNGLE

At 6am sharp, we met Derric and his jungle warrior. The jungle warrior was a circa 2000 silver Toyota Hilux, with four doors and four giant balloon tires that looked like it could get through just about anything. This wasn't the type of "toy" truck that you might see in Boston, which looks capable but never leaves the pavement. No, the jungle warrior had the scars to prove it had waged many epic battles against the jungle during its rough life. Although it was in excellent working condition, the windshield was cracked, bumpers were dented in, and it had just the amount of mud that suggested that it had probably gone just a couple of days since its last shower.

The mangled, rusted rear license plate was barely legible. It would be the perfect traveling companion for the first portion of our foray in to the bush. We threw our packs in the back, alongside a big barrel of fuel that would be used for the tractor in the next phase of the journey, hopped into the cab, and headed out of town.

Along the way, we stopped at a village to pick up Boris, who would be accompanying us on the journey. Boris was a biologist who worked for Las Cuevas, and was the person who had originally connected us with Derric. He grew up in Belize and had studied biology in Costa Rica. At first, Boris looked as if he was a soldier – he was dressed in camo with a green external-frame backpack. But he explained to us that military surplus gear is the cheapest reliable gear in Belize. And it would help to intimidate any illegal gold panners that we encountered. We were very excited that Boris could join us for the trip, because we knew that he could give us the inside story behind any flora and fauna that we encountered.

Soon the road turned to gravel and we began our plunge into the wilderness. Although it was gravel, for the most part the road was in excellent condition, and only occasionally did Derric, who was at the wheel, have to swerve around obstacles. We passed through a dry pine plateau, and eventually came to an abandoned town. On the side of the road we saw a small parking lot, and big sign indicating that this was the location at which private vehicles visiting the ancient Maya ruins of Caracol should wait for a military escort. We had read that the ruins of Caracol were comparable to those of the legendary Tikal in Guatemala, but saw far fewer tourists, which was partly due to the difficulty of getting there and partly due to security concerns.

"Why do private vehicles need an escort to Caracol?" I asked Derric. "Well, a couple of years ago a few tourists were driving down the road to Caracol," Derric answered, gesturing to the road that we were on, "and they were stopped by a group of armed Guatemalans. They robbed the tourists and forced them to turn around. Nobody got hurt, but it was a dangerous encounter. Nowadays, for extra security, and to reassure tourists that the route is safe, we require military escorts for private vehicles.

"The risk is lower nowadays, but there are still Guatemalans sneaking over the border here into Belize to cause trouble. They come for illegal logging and gold panning, and you'll see what kind of damage that the gold panning can cause. They're poor and desperate and it's very hard to make a living in some parts of Guatemala.

"In recent years we've tried to establish a stronger presence in this area to deter these illegal activities. We have more rangers in the park. The Ceibo Chico conservation post was started a couple of years ago, which you'll see tonight. They go on patrols and raids to disrupt the gold panning and logging. But we're severely understaffed."

"Do many tourists go to other areas of the park, besides Caracol?" I asked.

"Not many," Derric answered. "In this area, we have one of the largest cave systems in Central America – the Chiquibul Cave – and occasionally a few tourists go there; recently we even had a National Geographic expedition. The cave system is highly protected, so it doesn't

see many tourists. Where we're going, very few tourists ever visit. Chiquibul National Park is actually considered to be a "closed" park – no independent tourism is allowed, and there is no trail network. All tours are guided and escorted.

"But we are hoping to change that. With more trips like this one to Doyle's Delight, we're hoping to start building up the momentum for tourism. When you're done with your trip, people will see your photos and read your report and see how cool The Chiquibul is. They'll see that this place is worth visiting. I think that by improving the safety of the area and cracking down on these illegal activities, we can improve tourism and better protect the Chiquibul overall.

"Tourism is sort of a chicken and egg problem. If the government can be convinced that they can make money off of tourism, they would be willing to invest more money into it, and provide more protection for tourists. But currently, tourism infrastructure is lacking, so it's hard to convince the government that there's enough money to be had and hard to convince tourists that it's safe to visit. Currently, about 97% of park's effort (and budget) goes toward law enforcement and the other 3% goes to research. We only have 17 full time staff for this huge park, and most of what we do is resource protection. In the future, our goal is to move towards more tourism."

Things were starting to make more sense to me now. It seemed that the goal of our trip aligned well with those of the park management. The benefit to the park wasn't merely our trip fee (that wouldn't go particularly far), it was that our trip would 1) help to promote eco-tourism and 2) help the park management to assert its presence and control over the area. I was beginning to realize that this expedition would be far more enriching that simply reaching the top of another country high point – it would enable us to learn first-hand (from a biologist and the director of the park!) the real conservation issues behind trying to protect a vast and pristine rainforest, while also supporting the goals of the park. It would turn out that this conversation was just the tip of the iceberg.

Soon, we came upon a large river – the Macal – over which spanned a long concrete bridge, called the Guacamallo. We were downstream from the large (and controversial) Chalillo Dam. But this wasn't the normal type of bridge that is designed to always be high and dry, this one was designed to survive submersion during high water. During a big rainstorm, it's impassible, and you're stuck on one side. You just have to wait until the water goes down to pass. Fortunately for us, the water level was low, so we passed without issue, and on the other side arrived at a sign welcoming us to Chiquibul National Park, established in 1991. We were in Derric's and Boris' turf now.

Two bumpy miles later, we reached a small clearing in the jungle and spotted a few buildings and tractors. Tapir Camp. This is where the next phase of the journey would begin. Derric parked the truck and said with a smile, "next, you'll get to ride the Jumping Viper."

THE JUMPING VIPER

We spotted two giant John Deere tractors parked in the driveway, painted with their iconic green and yellow, along with a generous smattering of jungle mud. These were no mere

lawn tractors, nor were they the kind you'd simply drive off the dealer's lot in Belmopan. These ones were hardened and armored for combat with the jungle. They had two big deeply-treaded wheels in the back which were about five feet in diameter and more than a foot wide. The front wheels had the same aggressive treads and had a diameter of about three feet. These things were built for driving over and through some serious mud.

The most impressive thing about the tractors was the modifications and adornments. Winches were mounted to the front of the tractors, and were attached by custom brackets that were clearly fabricated by a skilled welder. Ladders were welded to the sides, and a heavy-duty equipment canopy was welded over the driver's seat. Custom benches mounted next to the driver's seat allowed it to accommodate extra passengers – they just had to be careful not to let their legs get caught up in the wheels. Perhaps not all of the modifications would have been approved by John Deere, but they certainly made the tractors far more capable.

Seeing these John Deeres reminded me of my Grandpa's restored Model B John Deere tractor that his family bought in 1938. I had ridden in (and driven) it with him a few years ago around the streets of Montevideo, Minnesota, and wondered how different the experience would be in this one (model 6125D) in the jungles of Belize. I learned from grandpa that John Deere was the best tractor that money can buy. At about 125 horsepower and 8,500 lbs., this tractor was about ten times more powerful and 2.5 times heavier than Grandpa's Model B.

Derric said that the money to buy the tractors (probably between $100k-$150k apiece) was actually donated by the US Government, in a program to help the Belizean military and park service in their efforts to protect their resources and curb illegal activities. (The program also funded new police trucks in Belize City.) He said that there is a significant amount of farming in Belize, and the tractors were purchased at a dealership in Belmopan. "Beyond this point, the road is too rough for the truck, so that's why we have the tractors and the Jumping Viper."

Let's talk about that Jumping Viper. First, I'll explain its construction, then I'll outline how it got its name. "Jumping Viper" is the name given to the trailer used to transport people and supplies through the jungle. It's a big steel box that rides on two wheels about three feet off the ground. Why so much clearance, you ask? Well as it turns out, that's how deep the mud can get. It hitches to the back of the tractor, and has a few slots through which you can insert wooden boards for people to sit on. The craftsmanship and quality were remarkable. Derric said that he and his colleagues had welded it themselves, and had cannibalized the wheels and suspension system from an old truck. It looked so professional that I could believe that it was an accessory that they'd bought at the John Deere dealership.

Now I'll talk about how it got its name. Derric explained that the Jumping Viper is used to bring soldiers to and from the Ceibo Chico outpost, and sometimes carries as many as 20 people. Because the suspension system was borrowed from the back of a truck, it's stiff enough to support a relatively heavy load. Think for a moment about a vehicle going over a bump at a moderate speed. If the vehicle's suspension system is tuned properly, the wheel moves over the bump, compressing the springs, while the body of the car ideally does not move up or down. A suspension system is supposed to absorb the impact of a bump and keep the passengers (or cargo) safe and comfortable. Now picture a truck going over a bump. The leaf springs in a

truck's suspension are stiff enough that if the truck is carrying a heavy load and goes over a bump, the load doesn't get jostled around too much. The heavier the load, the less it will move and the smoother ride it will have (provided that it doesn't fully compress the suspension's springs).

What if the truck isn't carrying any weight? In fact, what if you remove the bed of the truck completely, replace it with a cargo box that is much lighter, but keep the same stiff suspension system? You get the Jumping Viper.

Derric warned us that, over the course of the next eight hours on the drive to Ceibo Chico in the Jumping Viper, we would be in for one wild and bumpy ride. He said that the Jumping Viper bounced around a lot, and we would need to hold onto something. Once or twice, he said, guys had fallen out on particularly dramatic bumps when they were not paying attention. "We'll take plenty of breaks to rest," he reassured us.

While we were loading the Jumping Viper, we met the sixth and final member of our expedition – Marvin Diaz. Marvin was about the same age as us and had grown up near San Ignacio. He would be the scout on our expedition. His job would be to walk ahead of the rest of us, looking for any signs of danger (gold panners or any other armed bandits) and make sure that we didn't walk into any ambushes. He would be armed with a machete and a handgun, and would also act as our navigator. With this role and in this jungle, we could tell that Marvin was in his element, and we knew we would be in good hands.

At Tapir Camp, Derric, Boris, and Marvin suited up for battle. In the building, which served as a ranger station, cache, and sleeping quarters for rangers, they loaded up food, radio equipment, machetes, backpacks, maps, stoves, and a big chainsaw.

"What's the chainsaw for?" Eric asked. "That's in case we encounter any trees down over the road," Derric said. "You know; this is actually a saw that we confiscated from an illegal logger a couple of years ago. We call these loggers 'chateros.' As soon as we spotted the chatero, he dropped the saw and ran away, back into Guatemala. This saw probably cost almost a thousand dollars. And the chateros themselves don't own the saws, you know, they're just poor guys who work for some manager in Guatemala who pays them next to nothing. You should see the poor horses and mules that carry out the wood. They're starving, malnourished, and extremely overworked. When the guy who lost the saw got back into Guatemala, he probably got in some big trouble."

Derric loaded a radio and a telescoping antenna into his pack. "One time, we actually lost a radio in the woods," he said. "We don't know if any of the gold panners or chateros ever found it. If they did, they could be listening to all of our conversations." He chuckled. "In a few weeks, we're planning to conduct a string operation against the gold panners in one area. It will be a joint operation between the Friends for Conservation and Development and the Belize Military. But don't tell anyone," he said, smiling. We swore to protect the secret.

TAPIR CAMP TO MILIONARIO

We loaded our packs onto the tractor's cargo rack and prepared for what Derric had warned us would be an eight hour ride (approx. 25-30 miles) to Ceibo Chico camp. He instructed me to fill up a big white bucket with gas from one of the fuel drums, which Marvin poured into the tractor. Eric and I, Josh, and Boris hopped into the Jumping Viper, while Marvin rode on the tractor with Derric, ready to spring into action in case danger popped up. The tractor lurched forward, and we continued down a gated gravel side road toward the southeast.

Although, for now at least, the condition of the road was no different than the road we had driven on so far, we soon recognized the aptness of the name "Jumping Viper." As we proceeded at a moderate pace – probably 10 mph – the Viper sprang into the air with every rock that it ran over. "Grab onto the hand rail!" Boris yelled above the roar of the engine.

We clutched onto the sides of the trailer for dear life as the Viper bounced mercilessly up and down, left and right. At first, the journey proceeded as follows: we would encounter a smooth patch of road, let down our guard, loosen our grip on the handrail and try to take a picture, unconsciously locking our knees. Then, all of a sudden – WHAM! We'd go airborne, our feet momentarily losing contact with the floor due to the impulse of what was probably nothing more than a first-sized rock, and in the fleeting moment of micro-freefall, we'd grab onto anything we could, and brace for impact.

We quickly learned that the key to staying alive in the belly of the Jumping Viper was to use your legs to act as a sort of mini suspension system. If you bent your knees, you could use your quads and butt muscles to absorb the impulse energy from the floor while keeping the rest of your body stationary. With this technique, you could essentially compensate for the Viper's stiff suspension by adding some soft suspension in the form of your legs. We guessed that if the trailer had been filled with twenty military dudes, as it often was, the ride would probably be a lot less bumpy. The transplanted truck suspension system was not optimized for such little weight at such a slow speed.

I spotted a small gray stowaway tree frog that was clinging onto the steel wall of the trailer for dear life. It must have climbed into the Viper before we started. Its sticky hands and feet must be giving it a lot firmer grasp than we could get, I thought. Boris picked him up and gently tossed him into the bushes. The belly of a steel viper was no place for a tree frog.

"Wow, this ride is crazy," I said to Boris, after a particularly severe bump. "It's going to be an interesting eight hours!" "This is nothing!" Boris yelled over the loud drone of the engine. "Wait to see what it's like when the road actually gets rough!"

After about eight miles of driving, we reached a crossroads. "This is Millionaro," Boris said. "How did it get that name?" Josh asked, smiling. "Probably a long time ago some gold panner or logger thought he was going to get rich so he called it that," Boris said laughing. "Down that road, in a couple of miles, is Las Cuevas," he said, pointing to the left. "But we'll go to the right."

Derric stopped the little convoy and hopped down from the cab. "We'll take a short break here to unload some gear," he said. "This is where it starts getting muddy."

As Derric and Marvin unloaded some supplies to give to a few guys also dressed in camouflage pants (presumably park rangers) Boris explained the history of this road to us. The road that we would be taking from here to Ceibo Chico had been constructed many years ago (it shows up in satellite photos from 1980), and up until 2013 had been used by a Canadian company doing some gold mining in the area. The company had of course obtained the proper permits and was conducting the mining sustainably, under the auspices of the Belizean government. At that time, the road was kept in good condition.

The company employed a Guatemalan gentleman, who was fired in 2011 (reasons unclear). A few months after he was fired, illegal gold panners began coming over from Guatemala to pan for gold and the floodgates opened. By 2013, the Canadian company was no longer profitable (perhaps due to competition with the Guatemalans?), and pulled out of the area. They abandoned their operations, their buildings, and the road, which rapidly fell into disrepair.

Presumably, it was simpler to buy a good tractor that can drive through anything, rather than trying to maintain the entire road. He said that in the dry season, the road can actually be quite passable. In fact, during a particularly dry month, it is rumored that a Land Rover made it all the way to Ceibo Chico, which was about 25 miles away. Boris said that one time he had even hiked the entire distance from Las Cuevas to Ceibo Chico, and that it had taken him a full 12 hours.

As the sun beat down on us through the clearing, we slathered on the sunscreen. “Wow, I thought we’d have to worry more about rain than sunburn,” Josh said. Although we were in the rainforest and expected rain, we of course preferred dry weather. We hopped in the Jumping Viper and continue into the jungle.

MILIONARIO TO CEIBO CHICO

Soon after Milionario, we realized the true reason for the tractor. Up until Milionario, the road had still been passable by a 4×4 truck. But after rounding a corner, we discovered the first big obstacle that meant the end of the line for wimpy vehicles – a giant pond in the middle of the road. We could tell by the ruts that previous drivers had tried to go around it, but the deep ruts they created merely served to widen the pond to perhaps 30 feet wide. It was hard to gauge the depth of the water by eye, but Derric didn’t hesitate for a moment and steered the caravan straight into the middle. As the water came higher and higher on the wheels, a big wave formed around the tractor and propagated across the pond. The wave caused a few panicked frogs and turtles to hop and scoot into the water, and we hoped that they would steer clear of the tractor. At the deepest point, the water made it nearly all the way up to the tractor’s rear axle – a depth of probably 18 inches – but the John Deere was unfazed. It just kept rumbling along with the Jumping Viper in tow.

That was only the beginning. Throughout the next few hours, we came to realize and appreciate what the tractor was truly capable of. At some points, it seemed like the “road” was just one giant puddle after another. Every time we crossed another pond, it seemed like we bested our previous high water mark. At some points the Jumping Viper’s wheels were completely submerged. We’d pass through a pond, emerge on the other side and plow through

knee deep mud. Then we'd hit a patch of dry ground, speed up, and the mud and rocks stuck in the tires would go flying, forcing us to duck for cover.

Every once in a while we'd encounter a large fallen tree. Many could be removed with enough manpower, but some required the chainsaw. Derric said that the last time he had driven the road was after he dropped about fifteen military guys off at Ceibo Chico, which had been about ten days ago. So, all of the trees that we saw had fallen in the last ten days. I guess it's not too unexpected for trees to fall in the jungle, but we were nevertheless surprised with how frequently we had to stop to help clear out trees. The largest tree was nearly 18" in diameter, but Marvin expertly sliced through it with the Guatemalan chainsaw. Without a saw or an axe, you could easily be stranded.

Overall, I'd say that the 25 mile stretch of road from Tapir Camp to Ceibo Chico was 50% dry dirt, 25% soft mud (< 6" of tire sinkage), 15% deep mud (> 6" of tire sinkage), and 10% water. But it was far from drudgery. Once we grew accustomed to the temperament of the Jumping Viper, it was an exhilarating ride through the jungle. We didn't see much wildlife – the roar of the engine scared away every living creature – but the lushness of the jungle was amazing. There were vines hanging from everything, giant ferns everywhere, and plenty of palm trees.

There we also some curious attractions along the way. In one clearing we stopped for a short break and Derric showed us some edible fruit called oro ciruela (golden plum). I spotted some bright red berries, which Boris said were also edible (with the vulgar local name of pelotas del perro, ie dog balls). It was great having Boris – a biologist – along because he was an expert on edible jungle plants. Boris also pointed out some chicle trees that had extensive scars on them from sap harvesters called "chicleros." The sap is apparently used to make natural rubber. About half way we stopped by an awesome natural arch over the Ceibo Chico River. The arch was so gigantic that it actually served as the bridge over the river. As we drove across the arch, it was so wide and forested that you couldn't even see the river below.

Finally, after about eight hours, we arrived at a large clearing in the woods and, in the fading twilight, spotted a small house upon a little hill. We had made it to Ceibo Chico, where we would spend the night.

CEIBO CHICO

If you zoom into western Belize on Google Earth, you will see a landmark labeled "Ceibo Chico." The icon that Google Earth uses for Ceibo Chico is the same as the one used for cities, but Ceibo Chico is little more than one small building at the end of the road in the middle of the jungle. Derric told us that the area had served as a camp of sorts for many years, and several years ago a new building had been constructed to house military troops. The purpose of the camp was to serve as a Conservation Post so that the Belizean military could maintain a permanent presence in the area and defend the Chiquibul from illegal loggers and gold panners.

The park management was trying to secur funding for more Conservation Posts to provide better control of the area. There are always about 10-15 troops at the camp, and the

soldiers conducted daily patrols and occasional raids. Boris said that one of their roles would be to help protect us on our expedition. As we approached the building, we spotted a couple of big guns sitting on the porch, which the soldiers quickly put away, probably in an effort not to scare us.

As we cooked dinner, we got to meet some of the soldiers. They were all super-friendly and curious, and were all about our age. We told them about our mission to climb Doyle's Delight which, even though it was only about 10 miles away, many of them had never even heard of because it is so seldom visited. They had been in the jungle for the last 10 days, and would be leaving in a few more days, after which they would get a couple of days off. Most of them spoke good English. Some were from the eastern side of Belize, where English is widely spoken, and others were from the western side, where there is more Spanish.

We were all tired from a long day of travel, so soon after dinner Boris, Marvin, Derric, and Josh all set up their hammocks on the porch, suspended between some of the beams. Unaccustomed to sleeping in hammocks, Eric and I had brought our tent, which we set up on the lawn next to the hut. We staked out one side of our tent using a clever weightlifting setup that the soldiers had made. They had cut two trees in a Y-shape and pounded those into the ground. The barbell consisted of a straight branch with one heavy steel hub from an old truck on each side. It looked like they could use it for squats and bench press.

We fell asleep to the peaceful sound of tree frogs interspersed with the quiet rustling of the palm trees.

INTO ISIS TERRITORY

We awoke slightly before dawn to a magnificent scene. From our perch on the hillside, we watched as fog drifted through the clearing, wafting through the palm trees in the distance. The John Deere and Jumping Viper rested majestically on the front lawn. As we ate breakfast we watched the sun cast its first rays of light into the valley while five of the soldiers headed out on patrol. If our level of safety was proportional to the size of the guns they carried, we knew that we wouldn't have any problems on our expedition.

Forty five minutes later, we packed up our stuff and started hiking. It had basically taken us two full days to get from Boston to the "trailhead" here at Ceibo Chico and we were eager to finally start walking. With heavy packs carrying four days of food, we proceeded in the direction that the soldiers had gone, up an old road. Soon we passed by the remains of the Canadian mining camp that had been abandoned a few years ago, and shortly after that the road began to deteriorate. As soon as the road had been abandoned a few years ago, the jungle had been working hard to reclaim it. Machete in hand, Marvin took the lead, slashing though vines and low hanging branches.

After a couple of river crossings, any remaining vestige of a roadbed that we had been following disappeared, and it was now a hiking trail. The frequent patrols by soldiers kept the trail quite clear and passable. The terrain was rugged, but the trail was in good condition and group was strong so we maintained a good pace.

After a few hours of hiking, we reached a crossroads. “Down there is ISIS territory,” Derric said with a smile, gesturing to the valley. “That is where the gold panners have their camps. We probably won’t have any problems if we go through there since the military patrol just went through, but you never know. Just to be safe, I think we should avoid that area completely. Generally, with the gold panners, as long as you don’t bother them, then they don’t bother you, but let’s play it safe this time. I think we should stay up on this ridge and go around the valley,” he said, gesturing with his machete up the hill. “The last time I was here, which was a couple of years ago, I was here with Boris to climb Doyle’s Delight. There had just been a forest fire and a lot of the ridge tops had been burned. It was very easy to walk; you could almost run in fact.”

That sounded like a good plan to us so we departed the trail, proceeding up the hill behind Derric and Marvin. Soon we neared the top of the ridge, which appeared to be devoid of large trees. “Awesome,” I said, “it should be smooth sailing once we get up there.”

But alas, that was not the case. Six-foot-tall jungle grass of impenetrable density carpeted the ridge. Derric began to hack a path through the grass, in the hope that it would open up on the other side, but unfortunately it did not. The hiking had rapidly changed from easy bushwhacking through an open shaded forest to basically swimming through a wall of wet grass under the scorching sun. Our speed dropped by probably a factor of four and our rate of sweating doubled. We plowed along the grassy, unrelenting ridge for about an hour then stopped to reassess.

“If we keep walking along the ridge it will be very slow,” Derric said. “But if we go down there into the trees we run the risk of an encounter.” “Can we walk along the edge of the ridge, in the trees?” Boris asked.

Derric thought about it and we were all in agreement. We picked an elevation that kept us above the perils of valley but below the impenetrable fortress of the grassy ridge. It was still very difficult, traversing along such a steep slope, and the risk of slipping was constant. After another hour of slow progress, Derric, Marvin, and Boris came to the reluctant conclusion that the only way to make it to our destination (Fork Camp) by sunset would be to descend the hillside into gold panner territory – or “ISIS territory,” as Derric like to call it – where we could walk along the well-worn trails that the gold panners had created. “They’ll probably hear us coming and flee anyhow, Derric said, “So I doubt that we’ll see them.”

Eric, Josh and I welcomed the decision. We were eager for easier hiking terrain and of course secretly wanted to catch a glimpse of the elusive gold panners.

We made rapid progress down to the bottom of the valley and soon realized with dismay the havoc and destruction that the gold panners had wrought. The pristine jungle had been hacked down, and there were campfire ashes all over the place. In the creek bed, trees had been uprooted and big pools had been excavated for gold panning. From trash bags to food wrappers to soda cans, trash was strewn everywhere. The once pristine jungle creek was choked with scraps of plastic, murky with silt, and a black sheen of oil covered the surface. It was incredible that this level of destruction could be caused by people who had hiked 20 miles from Guatemala and only had hand tools.

On the one hand, we felt sorry for the jungle. But on the other, we couldn't help but feel sorry for the gold panners themselves as well. Derric said that many of the gold panners typically have families of five kids or more back in Guatemala. The area is extremely poor and there are almost no sources of income. The men hike all the way in here and pan for gold for days at a time. They carry out their gold in small vials, and only make about $10 a day. "To improve the situation, the most effective thing to do is of course to improve the economic conditions in Guatemala. There are organizations who are investing in towns just across the border in Guatemala in an effort to help make the economy better, so that people won't have to turn to gold panning to support their family. But we have a long way to go."

"Do gold panners who get caught go to jail?" Eric asked. "People captured doing illegal stuff like gold panning or logging will usually get a few months in jail and have to pay some fines, before being sent back to Guatemala, unless they're armed, in which case they get about five years in jail. Belizeans are starting to get outraged that foreigners (the Guatemalans) are coming in and stealing their resources – taking gold and lumber and destroying the environment. The public is starting to pay more attention to the situation, so hopefully things will continue to improve."

Although the destruction was appalling, the walking became much easier, as we could hike along the trails that the gold panners used. We didn't spot any gold panners, but Derric said that they had probably heard us coming and fled just out of sight. We proceeded swiftly up the stream in an effort to minimize our time in "ISIS territory."

CAMP 1

Eventually we reached the source of the stream and the gold panning activity began to disappear. Unfortunately, that also meant that the trail vanished. As we climbed to the top of a ridge, we once again took the plunge into a sea of dense grass, and swam our way up to the top. When we reached the crest of the ridge, we finally got our first view of the summit. Derric pointed to a ridge just a few miles away and indicated that one of the humps on the ridge was the summit. It wasn't an awful lot higher than our current elevation – perhaps only 500ft – and didn't look very prominent. It also didn't look too far line-of-sight-wise, but as we had discovered, covering any distance in the jungle can be much harder than expected.

We had hoped to make it to a place called Fork Camp for the night, but Derric said that we probably wouldn't make it there by nightfall, so we'd have to camp somewhere in between. We squeezed as much hiking as we could out of the fading twilight before darkness finally caught up with us. We picked a spot next to a creek to set up camp.

"Is that enough space for you to set up your tent?" Derric asked. "Probably," Eric said, "we'll make it work." Because we were on the hillside we didn't have too many options for camping, and we knew we would have to do some excavating. While I excavated some dirt on the uphill side, Eric built up a small terrace on the downhill side. Meanwhile, Marvin chopped off some small tree branches that we could use to cover up the mud and help to smooth out our little site. By the time we were finished we had an awesome tent pad. We even spotted a small land crab as we were clearing our site.

SUMMIT DAY

After another dry night in the jungle, we pack up our gear and proceeded downhill, towards Fork Camp. At the bottom of the valley we encountered the Ceibo Chico River and realized that we would soon be entering the Wet Foot Club. The hillsides on each side of the river were steep and would be very difficult to traverse. The river, meanwhile, was nice and open, with a slow flow and sandy, shallow bottom. Derric, Marvin, and Boris took the plunge into the river and walked right up it. We gringos stuck to the bank, trying to hop from one rock to another in an effort to keep our feet dry. But it was no use. Soon we all got wet and ended up hiking in the river together.

It was interesting to compare the different types of gear that we had brought on the expedition. Me, Eric, and Josh all had American-standard Gore-Tex hiking boots, which were good as long as the water didn't go higher than the top of the boot. Derric had shin-high rubber galoshes, while Marvin and Boris had boots that didn't even attempt to be waterproof but dried quickly. Our footwear represented the spectrum of the different schools of thought on footwear.

As for backpacks, Eric, Josh and I had our fancy internal frame Gregory and Osprey packs while Marvin and Boris had green military-style external frame packs. "By the way," I asked Derric, "why is it that most of your gear looks like military gear? Is it from the Belize military?"

"Most of our gear is surplus gear from the US military," Derric said. "My jacket is actually surplus from Operation Desert Storm," he said pointing to his brown coat. "This gear is affordable, but for the most part, it is very expensive to get equipment down to Belize. You have to either fly it in and know an insider in customs, or put it on a truck in Texas and drive it down through Mexico. It can take more than a month to get anything from the US. But the nice thing about military gear is that it makes you look more intimidating to the Guatemalans. When the Guatemalans see our camouflage pants and jackets they think we are in the military, even though we're actually park rangers instead. The intimidation factor is important."

After another half hour of hiking we finally reached the elusive Fork Camp. It's funny that, like Ceibo Chico, Fork Camp also shows up on Google Earth, just like a town. But calling it any more than a clearing in the woods is generous. It's situated at the confluence of two streams, and provides one of the only level areas around. We could tell that people had camped there before, probably gold panners, but there was no evidence of their activities in the stream, which ran cold and clear.

It was still early in the day, so after a quick break at Fork Camp we continued up the mountain. This would be our last water source for the next day or so, so we filled up all of our bottles. Just beyond Fork Camp, we passed by a magnificent clear pool in the stream. It was perhaps 20 feet wide and well over our heads in the middle. A large rock nearby looked to be the ideal rock for jumping off. "Wow, that's gotta be the most appealing swimming hole that I've ever seen," I said to Eric. "It's just asking for us to swim in it. Think how awesome it would be to jump in there." Others echoed that sentiment, but ultimately we decided to keep moving, in favor of reaching the summit before sunset. We decided that we would jump in the following

day, during our decent, when we probably would have more time. It would be a decision that we'd later regret.

After Fork Camp, the hike became surprisingly easier. We had expected for the forest to grow denser as we climbed (as it does in the White Mountains of New Hampshire), but here in the Chiquibul the virgin trees were relatively sparse with little undergrowth and it was easy to pass through without the help of a machete. There were even orange ribbons on some of the trees, which Derric had placed on his trip with Boris two years ago. The only things that you had to watch out for were the trees that were covered in two-inch-long thorns, or the tarantulas, or the pit vipers (one of which we almost stepped on!)

After a few more hours of climbing we stopped for a break on the ridge. "This is the last possible location where we can get water," Derric said. "The creek is about 300ft below us and about a half a mile away." Eric and I volunteered to go down and top off water for the group, just to be sure that we'd have enough. After a steep descent and grueling climb back to camp, our mini-mission was accomplished.

We continued hiking along the ridge and soon we could taste the summit. As fate would have it, the next day was Belize's Independence Day, and this evening was the evening that people traditionally set off fireworks, so it would be an especially fitting day to reach the summit. It was basically the equivalent of July 4th evening in the US. We continued plowing through the trees and at about 4pm on September 20, 2014, we triumphantly emerged into a small clearing in the trees that marked the highest point in Belize!

But we weren't quite celebrating yet. Even though Derric said that we were at the top and our GPS's corroborated it, we couldn't be absolutely sure until we saw the summit marker. Derric had told us earlier that the last time he was here, he and Boris discovered a small metal summit marker embedded in concrete, flush with the ground. He said it had probably been placed during the first expedition in the 1970s. We knew it wouldn't be easy to find because, as far as we knew, we were the first people to reach the top in the past two years, and the grass had grown quite high in the meantime.

Marvin and Derric hacked away the knee-high grass with their machetes, while Eric, I, Josh, and Boris carefully combed through the brush and moved away the fallen branches. After a full 30 minutes of searching, Derric exclaimed, "I found it!" We ran over to investigate, and sure enough, there it was.

An overwhelming sense of relief came over me. After countless hours of planning and months of research, after all the emails and phone calls, and after days of sweat and toil, we had at last accomplished our goal of standing on the highest ground in Belize. Our hard work had finally paid off. I felt that from this point on, basically anything could happen and we'd still be ahead. We could be captured by Guatemalan bandits, robbed of our passports, bitten by a viper, and/or miss our flight and it wouldn't be a big deal. All of those things would of course be very unpleasant, but none of them could take away the fact that we had stood on top of Doyle's Delight.

The summit marker was plain and boring – just a 2" diameter metal disc that read "LEGAL SURVEY MARKER 354." One would think that there would at least be a sign that exultantly exclaimed that this was the highest point in Belize, but perhaps it more in keeping with the wilderness spirit that this small marker was the extent of the human footprint on the area.

As we high-fived each other and took countless victory photos, Derric assembled his radio's antenna to notify the outside world of our success. "Maya Quest 3 expedition to base, over," Derric said. ("Maya Quest 3" was our expedition's call sign; Maya Quest 1 and 2 had been Derric's call signs on his previous two expeditions.)

"Maya Quest 3, this is base, we read you loud and clear," a voice responded. We guessed that it was probably soldiers on the radio back at Ceibo Chico. "Base, we are happy to report that we are standing on the top of Doyle's Delight." "Nice work, Maya Quest 3, we'll pass that information along. Any encounters?" "Negative, base, but we'll keep our eyes out." "Copy that, over and out."

A NIGHT ON THE SUMMIT

We set up our tents and hammocks and Marvin started a big campfire. We didn't have any fireworks to celebrate, but as the sky grew darker, we noticed some flashes in the distance. "Cool, that must be other people celebrating Independence Day," I said.

"Uh, I think that's actually lightning," Eric replied. His suspicions were quickly confirmed – the flashes seemed to be coming from behind the clouds rather than below them. But we couldn't hear any thunder, so we knew the storms were pretty far away.

As we roasted some marshmallows that Derric had brought, the jungle started to come to life. Marvin spotted a few small colorful snakes slithering around and we noticed a giant stick bug walking over the map. We had never expected the summit to be so pleasant. It was nice and dry, with no flies or mosquitoes, and the temperature was comfortable. We had a pleasant sleep as the highest people in Belize.

SUMMIT TO FORK CAMP

When we woke up the next morning, we had a couple of mini-missions to accomplish before heading back. The first was to make a cairn next to the metal summit marker so that it would be easier for the next people to find it. The problem was, it was a jungle and undergrowth covered everything. After a half an hour we managed to scrounge up a couple of rocks, which we submerged a few inches into the ground, pointy side up, so that even after a few years of jungle growth an intrepid hiker might still be able to find it.

The next mission was to look for a view. The summit itself is relatively broad with tall trees all around, which meant that there wasn't much of a view. Eric and I hiked around and finally found a climbable tree. I climbed about 25 feet up and from the top of the tree I could finally start to see some nearby hills. I looked to the southeast and spotted a large body of water

in the distance. The Caribbean Sea! According to our map, the Caribbean was only about 25 miles away, but through the haze it seemed much farther.

Back in the summit clearing, we packed up our stuff and prepared to leave. Boris and Marvin took down the big blue Belize flag that they had been flying since yesterday evening, and Derric presided as they ceremoniously folded it up. As an offering to the Mayan gods (or so he didn't have to carry it down the mountain), Marvin left behind his machete next to the summit cairn. We hoped that the next hiker would be able to make good use of it.

Finally, we shouldered our packs, bid farewell to the summit, and took the plunge back into the jungle. The descent was far easier than the ascent for a number of reasons. First of all, the trail was well-cut, so we could follow it without needing to consult the map and compass frequently. Second, it was downhill, so gravity was helping us. And third, it was psychologically easier; filled with the relief of having accomplished our goal, we lightheartedly marched downward.

THE ENCOUNTER

In a few hours we were back at the stream near Fork Camp, and spotted the glorious swimming hole that we had identified the previous day. "All right, time for a swim!" I exclaimed.

But something wasn't right. The river, which had been crystal clear the previous day, was now a cloudy light blue color. We knew what that meant. "There must be gold panners upstream," Derric said. "They dislodge the silt and it makes the water murky. I'm sorry to say it, but I don't think it would be a good idea to swim here. We may have some company."

We continued on, dejectedly, and hoped that the conditions would be safer for swimming at Fork Camp. When we made it to Fork Camp, it was still early in the day, but Derric decided that it would be best to stay here. If we continued, we'd have trouble finding campable terrain with water before we entered "ISIS territory." We went to work clearing a spot for our tent. We grabbed dozens of giant fallen palmetto fronds which we laid out on the ground to smooth out the bumpy spots. Afterwards, we lounged about and started eating lunch.

Suddenly, I noticed something moving in the trees up on the hillside. Boris, Marvin, and Derric noticed it too. "Wow, are those other hikers?" I wondered for a moment. Soon we spotted three guys and a dog, and they were quite clearly not recreational gringo hikers like us. As they approached us, we observed that two of the guys were carrying nothing, but one had a giant backpack with a large Tupperware pan. Gold panners.

Derric immediately hopped up and started to approach them. Although we had been warned about the dangers they posed, we weren't particularly concerned. There were six of us and only three of them (well, only three of them were visible, at least). None of them seemed be carrying a machete, and there was a fast-flowing stream that separated us from them. They just seemed to be curious about us. "What are those three gringos doing down there?" they probably wondered.

Initially, Derric began yelling at them in Spanish and it appeared that they were starting to walk away. We figured that Derric was telling them to get the %$#@ out of here. But after a bit of shouting back and forth, they came closer and began to talk with Derric for a while. Marvin stealthily withdrew his gun from his belt in case things got dicey, and I noted the location of the nearest machete. After a minute or two of discussion, they slowly turned around and began to walk away, back up the hillside from which they had descended. Derric walked back to us with a faint smirk on his face as the three guys and dog disappeared back into the jungle.

"They're definitely gold panners," Derric said. "What did you tell them?" Eric asked. "They asked about you guys, and I told them you were potential investors in gold panning operations in this area, and I was your guide," he said with a smile. "I think they trusted me, because they saw that I was wearing the same boots as them, and dressed similarly, and spoke with the same accent. Luckily, they didn't see my gun or my camouflage, or they would have gotten suspicious. There isn't really much else we could do. I didn't want to tell them to get out of here or they might have become suspicious that I was park management and that might have caused them to become hostile. Darn, if I would have been thinking, I would have told you guys to get some photos and videos of them."

"We did get a couple of photos," Josh said. In a couple of the photos you could make out their faces. "These are great," Derric said. "We can compare these photos with the photos that we've taken of the people who've gotten caught, and see if any of them are repeat offenders."

We sat there for a few minutes, ultra-alert, scanning the hillside frequently to see if the gold panners would come back. But soon we began to relax, and sensed that the danger was over. After about an hour, Derric gave us the long-awaited go-ahead to swim in the creek right next to camp. It wasn't exactly the magnificent swimming hole that we had passed earlier, but it would be a welcome opportunity to cool down and wash off some of the dirt we had accumulated over the past couple of days. "I don't think they'll come back, but try to stay within view of camp."

Eric, Josh, and I swam around for a good half hour in the refreshing stream. It was the perfect temperature – not the icy chill you get in alpine streams in the US, but the much more pleasant and tolerable jungle coolness that you can enjoy indefinitely.

The gold panners left us alone for the rest of the day, and we had another relaxing evening around the campfire and a quiet sleep beneath the palm trees of Fork Camp.

FORK CAMP TO CEIBO CHICO

The next day, the plan was to take a more direct route to Ceibo Chico, where we would spend the night. We wanted to avoid the agonizing ridgetop bushwhacks that had slowed us down a few days earlier. Derric radioed to Ceibo Chico to tell them about our plans and relay the encounter the previous day. They said that they would send a patrol to rendezvous with us and escort us back to Ceibo Chico.

After climbing up and over a few hills, we dropped down into a creek bed and spotted some more signs of gold panning activity. “This is really the center of the gold panning operations,” Derric said. “The gold panners probably heard us coming and fled.”

We walked past one pit after another through nearly a mile of devastation. It was incredible just how much of a mess that the gold panners could make. They had to walk about 20 miles to get here – just think how much of a mess they’d cause if they could drive trucks all the way in, we thought to ourselves.

By about noon we reached the top of a ridge, the point at which we had chosen to deviate from the trail a couple of days ago. By traveling through the gold panner territory, we had gone about twice the speed. When we arrived, we were greeted by our escort – approximately eight soldiers from Ceibo Chico, each of which had a large gun. A couple of the guys had been laying on the ground with guns pointed into gold panner territory, ready to cover us in case anyone attacked. We thanked them for coming, and continued back towards Ceibo Chico, with four soldiers in front and four in the back. It felt like we had our own bodyguards, and we knew nobody would mess with us. By 3:30pm, we were back at Ceibo Chico. The soldiers quickly changed into civilian clothes and offered us some Kool aid, which we drank ravenously.

ONE MORE RIDE IN THE JUMPING VIPER

We were prepared to camp out, but because it was still relatively early in the day, Derric proposed that we try to push all the way back to Tapir Camp that day. It would be eight more hours in the Jumping Viper, and we wouldn’t arrive at Tapir Camp until probably close to midnight, but it sounded good to us because it’d give us extra time in Belize. We had given ourselves one full buffer day in Belize in case things didn’t go according to plan, and now this opened up the possibility of two full extra days in Belize. We were keen to check out the nearby Mayan ruins of Caracol, and Derric said that he could arrange a visit for us the next day.

As we packed up our stuff, Boris pointed to a tall tree behind camp. “Check those out, those are scarlet macaws,” Boris said. “There are only about 200 in the wild in Belize, and you are looking at 1% of them right there.” Although they were relatively far away, we could still make out their magnificent red, blue, and yellow feathers.

We hopped back into the Jumping Viper and waved goodbye to the soldiers at Ceibo Chico. The tractor lurched forward and we began the arduous journey back to Tapir Camp. Due to the lateness of the day, we made fewer stops, except to cut out the occasional tree, which had fallen in the past couple of days, and arrived around 11:30pm. It had been a long day of hiking and standing in the Jumping Viper, and we were exhausted. We set up our tent below the ranger station and promptly fell asleep.

EXTRA CREDIT: CARACOL

By the time we woke up the next morning, Derric had already left. He had driven back to San Ignacio to take care of business in town. Another ranger offered to give us a ride to Caracol, so we hopped in his truck and 30 minutes later we were at the ancient Mayan ruins.

In the interest of keeping this already long trip report from getting even longer, I'll spare the reader the details of our day at Caracol, but I will note a few highlights.

First, since this was the off-season for tourism, we had the entire complex almost completely to ourselves. We climbed up thousand-year-old temples, walked through subterranean passageways, and admired intricate stone carvings like the kind you see in history books. From the highest temple, we could even see Doyle's Delight, nearly 45 miles away. Imagine having a place like Machu Picchu completely to yourself!

Second, we spotted a number of noteworthy jungle creatures at Caracol. As we entered one of the caves, I glanced over my left shoulder and nearly hit my head on the ceiling as I jumped away from a giant arachnid that we later learned was called a "whip scorpion." The critter looked like a gigantic spider, with legs wide enough to spread across a large dinner plate.

We later learned from Boris that, luckily, it isn't poisonous. We encountered another interesting specimen in the bathroom sink at the visitor's center. Except this wasn't a whip scorpion but rather a regular old fashioned scorpion about two inches long, ready to sting if I got too close. We also saw a bunch of foot-long skinks sunning themselves and, coolest of all, numerous colonies of leafcutter ants. You could tell where the leafcutter ants were located if you found a miniature 3" wide trail through running through the woods.

It was incredible to watch these tiny ants carrying twigs and leaves about three times as heavy as they were. Once, we introduced an obstruction into their path – a leaf. The ants began to pile up on one side before a few adventurous ants found the path around the leaf. The other ants began to follow and a new path was formed. We amused ourselves for much of the afternoon observing the ants.

Our ride was scheduled to arrive around 3pm to pick us up, but one of the guards at Caracol told us that he had gotten a call over the radio that our ride would be a few hours late. That was just fine with us, we thought, it's not every day that you find yourselves in the most spectacular complex of Mayan ruins in the world with a few extra hours to kill.

We walked around for a few more hours but our ride still didn't show up. It was getting late in the day and we were anxious to get back to San Ignacio so we could be on schedule for the next day. It just so happened that a couple of other gringos were finishing up their tour of Caracol and had some extra space in the back of their pickup truck, so we hopped in and got an exhilarating ride back to Tapir Camp.

A RIDE WITH RAFAEL

At Tapir Camp, we met Rafael Manzanero, the executive director of the Friends for Conservation and Development, the organization that had helped organize our trip. Rafael and Derric worked together to keep Chiquibul National Park running smoothly. Rafael reminded me a lot of Derric – he also spoke great English, with the same slight Belizean/Mayan accent. We hopped in his truck and began the three hour ride back to San Ignacio.

"How was your trip?" he asked us. "Fantastic!" I said. "It's too bad you couldn't join us." (Rafael had been planning to join but had to cancel at the last minute.) "Yeah it's too bad I missed out this time. I heard about your little encounter with the gold panners." "It added a little bit of spice to the trip," I said. "It was nice to have the escort, it felt very safe to me."

"That's good to hear," Rafael said. "You know, things are progressing in the right direction here, but slowly. We would like to help promote more tourism in the Chiquibul, like your trip for example, while at the same time also promoting conservation. I think that tourism and conservation are closely related, and in fact the two actually help each other. If we can start having more tourists in the Chiquibul, that will help to deter the Guatemalans. A couple of years ago, we had a big adventure race called the Maya Mountain Adventure race, and there were teams from all over – Belize, US, Denmark, and Ecuador. It was very popular. We plan to have another one in 2016, and the hiking route will probably involve mountain biking to Ceibo Chico and then hiking to top of Doyle's Delight. Hopefully that will help to open up the door to more tourism in the Chiquibul."

"That would be awesome!" I said. "How about security for the previous race? Did any teams have problems?"

"No teams had problems with security, although a couple did get a little bit lost," he said smiling. "In addition to tourism, if we can also improve our military presence in the Chiquibul, then that will also help to scare off people doing illegal activities. The prime minister of Belize has verbally pledged funding for three more conservation posts like the one you saw at Ceibo Chico, but so far no funding has come. This is all very frustrating for Chiquibul National Park staff. In fact, Chiquibul was mentioned by name by both people running for prime minister during the Independence Day speeches a few days ago, so it is on everyone's radar. Hopefully the prime minister will visit the Chiquibul sometime, because I think that will help him to feel more of a personal connection to it. The British air force has said that they would do Chiquibul a favor and fly the prime minister in on a chopper for a short visit, but so far he hasn't taken them up on the offer."

"So how did Doyle's Delight get its name, anyhow?" Eric asked. "That's a good question," Rafael said, "The name was coined by Sharon Matola, director of the Belize Zoo in 1989. It was based on the author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who in the early 1900s was flying to the area to climb the mountain but died in a plane crash while en route from Panama. It is also a reference to Doyle's Book 'The Lost World,' because of the great biodiversity in the area. But there has been a push in the past few years to give it a name that fits better with its Mayan heritage. Some people have suggested renaming it 'Kaan Witz,' which is Mayan for 'Sky Mountain.' After all, it's located in the Maya Mountains. But we'd like to rename it something inspirational or motivating. Do you have any ideas?"

I realized at this moment that Rafael had presented us a very unique opportunity, one that modern day mountaineers almost never get. At this moment, we had the opportunity to rename the highest mountain in the country. "How about asking the people of Belize for suggestions, and having them vote for their favorite?"

"Yes, we are planning to do that, and we're trying to come up with a few suggestions for now to get started." "How do you go about changing the name of a mountain?" Eric asked. "Once we choose a new name, it should be pretty straightforward to change it, we just need to submit the appropriate paperwork to the appropriate agencies and get the name on the map changed. Once the name is changed on the map, it'll be official." "We'll let you know if we come up with anything," Josh said.

Engaged in almost continuous conversation with Rafael, the three hour ride had sped by in the blink of an eye, and before long Rafael had pulled up in front of our hotel in San Ignacio. As we bid farewell to Rafael, I realized that our expedition had been much more than just another country high point, another peak bagged. It had been a fabulous learning experience. We learned about conservation and park management from Derric and Rafael – the directors of Chiquibul National Park, we had learned about jungle flora and fauna from Boris – a professional biologist, and we had learned how to hike and survive in the jungle. It had been an immensely enriching experience, as evidenced by the fact this is the longest trip report that I have ever written.

As I sit here finishing this report, I realize that it has taken me a year and a half and countless sittings to finish this write-up. I wanted to tell the story in full and not leave out any important details.

"Good night," Rafael said, "and please tell your friends to come visit the Chiquibul!"

EPILOGUE

With the air conditioner blasting full force, we had an excellent sleep back in our beds at the Hotel Mallorca. In the morning we hopped on the bus towards Belize City, and got off at the half way point to visit the Belize Zoo. Boris had advised us that the zoo was not to be missed, and it did not disappoint. We got to see more scarlet macaws, tapirs, ocelots, jaguars, and panthers. All of the animals in the zoo had either been rescued from captivity as pets or injured during encounters with people. After a few hours we hopped on the bus and were back in Belize City by sunset. We toured around town for a couple of hours and enjoyed our final night in Belize.

In the morning, we caught a Delta flight back to Atlanta. As we lifted off, and Belize City disappeared in the distance, we got one last view of the rainforest in between the clouds. Forest stretched for miles in every direction, with no visible trace of civilization. I let out a big sigh of relief that everything had gone according to plan, and the trip had been such a great success. I leaned against the window and rapidly fell asleep

Trip 8 - Canada

Canada

Mount Logan 19,541ft

Author: Eric

May 4-18, 2015

Schedule:

Day 0: Sat May 2: Fly to Whitehorse, Yukon, buy and repackage a bunch of food, stay in cheap hotel.
Day 1: Wait for late luggage to arrive at Whitehorse, shuttle to Kluane Lake Icefields Discovery landing strip, wait for other group ahead to be flown in (only one 2-seater plane). Sleep in hangar overnight.
Day 2: Flight onto glacier, camp at 9,300'.
Day 3: Move camp to 10,900', drop cache at 12,100'.
Day 4: Move camp to King Col (13,500'), retrieving cache on way.
Day 5: Storm, rest at camp.
Day 6: Storm, rest at camp.
Day 7: Storm, rest at camp.
Day 8: Short breakup of storm, drop cache at 14,500'.
Day 9: Storm resumes, rest at camp.
Day 10: Move camp to Football Field, 16,000'.
Day 11: Pick up cache from 14,500'.
Day 12: Move camp with 4-days of food/fuel to Windy Camp 17,200'.
Day 13: Move to Plateau Camp 16,600'.
Day 14: Saturday May 16: Summit day, return to Plateau Camp.
Day 15: Hike/sled all the way back to base camp.
Day 16: 8am flight back to Kluane Lake, repack and redeploy on 9-day packrafting trip down Jarvis/Kaskawulsh/Alsek Rivers with extra time.

We gave ourselves a month to climb Mt Logan, the highest mountain in Canada, and were lucky enough to finish the climb with almost 2 extra weeks to spare. We made good use of this time, pack rafting the Jarvis, Kaskawulsh, and Alsek rivers in Kluane National Park for 9

days, getting a helicopter ride out, then renting a car and driving the remote Dempster Highway to the Arctic Circle and into Northwest Territories.

"Can we stop for another breather?" I yelled up to Matthew. I was exhausted after wading through deep snow for the last three hours while making seemingly no progress up the steep slope. We were each hauling about 60 pounds of gear to cache higher up on the mountain, and it was tough work. We split the gear up between backpacks and sleds, but had to strike a balance – too much gear on our backs made us sink deeper into the snow, but too much in the sleds pulled us back down the slope. In the end we endured both sinking in and getting pulled down the slope by our sleds.

"Yeah, but now it's your turn to break trail," Matthew shouted back. It was Day 8 of our expedition on Mt Logan, and we had just ridden out a three-day storm at King Col at 13,500 ft. We were taking advantage of a brief clearing to try to haul some gear up and over the headwall, the steepest part of the King Trench route. But the storm had dumped a lot of fresh snow, and progress was painfully slow. "At this rate it'll be another two weeks before we reach the top!" I said.

Day 0

Matthew and I converged on Whitehorse, Yukon at 2pm Saturday May 2, after the culmination of over a year of planning. We were trying to climb the highest mountain in all 23 countries in North America, and had saved Canada for our second to last country. This trip had been on the verge of fruition in the spring of 2014 – we were days away from buying our plane tickets – but alas, my PhD thesis committee decided I needed a little bit more work before I could graduate, and the post-graduation mountaineering would have to wait.

We postponed the trip until 2015, and some major logistical changes occurred in the meantime. Prior to Spring 2015, parties launched Mt Logan expeditions from one of four places – Ultima Thule Lodge, AK, Yakutat, AK, Haines, AK, and Kluane Lake, Yukon. All expeditions launching from Alaska needed, and customarily received, permission from US and Canadian customs officials to cross the border at an un-patrolled location (the middle of a glacier). Generally, mountaineers were dropped off by ski plane just on the US side of the border on the Quintino-Sella glacier and walked across into Canada. Launching from the US side had the advantage that the weather was generally more stable than from the Kluane Lake side, meaning you could fly onto the glacier on day one instead of waiting a week for clear skies.

That all changed sometime in the winter of 2015. In February I got an email from another party planning to attempt Logan (not sure how they found out about me) that they'd heard rumors that border crossing permits might no longer be issued. We contacted Parks Canada, who said that CBSA (Canadian Border Services Agency) "no longer has the authority to permit anyone to enter Canada anywhere other than an official port of entry."

Matthew made many phone calls and emails to CBSA, even filing an official Remote Service Request form. He eventually got an official letter from Ottawa stating, in part, that "as you are aware, the King's Trench route on Mt Logan from Alaska to Kluane National Park in the

Yukon is in a remote location that is not listed in the CBSA directory of offices," and that we couldn't cross there. Really?! Obviously there was no border crossing office in the middle of a glacier 100 miles from the nearest road, but that hadn't stopped Canada from granting permission for mountaineers to cross for the past 90 years. Something had changed, and we had no power to stop it, so we would just have to enter from the Yukon.

I had been in contact with Ultima Thule to fly in, and they were pretty disappointed to learn they would be losing a lot of business starting this year. Our grand plan of flying in from Ultima Thule, climbing Logan, and pack rafting out the Chitina back to Alaska was not going to work. This year every single mountaineer attempting Mt Logan would be funneled through Icefields Discovery flights at Kluane Lake, which operated just one 2-passenger ski plane. We hoped that plane would be in good working condition when we got there.

We had originally planned on a group of five for our expedition, but with the other three people dropping out for various reasons, we decided to climb Mt Logan as a team of two. Soon after getting off the plane in Whitehorse Saturday we had our first setback – my checked luggage had not arrived, and would not arrive for another 24 hours on the next flight. A full day delay right off the bat! Luckily we'd budgeted four weeks for the mountain so could absorb some delays.

We took a taxi the 5-minute drive to our hotel, dropped off the subset of gear that had made it, and then walked across the street to the Real Canadian Superstore to buy supplies. We'd brought some freeze-dried meals, but would have to buy most of our food in Whitehorse for the following month on the mountain. At two pounds per person per day, for 28 days on the mountain, we needed to buy over 100 pounds of food! Luckily we were used to purchasing expedition food, and quickly ended up with two overflowing carts full of pasta, cheese, cous cous, salty trail mix components, sweet trail mix components, and other goodies.

It actually started snowing outside as we were checking out, and the first-nation woman in the check-out lane told us, "the elders always say to watch out for May. It could be sunny and warm one day, then a blizzard the next." She said she was from Carmacks, a small town north of Whitehorse, and that it was always a little colder in Carmacks.

Back at the Days Inn we spent the next few hours unpacking and repacking food into efficient Ziploc bag modules of breakfast, dinner, and snacks. It's amazing how much less space 100 pounds of food takes up when it's removed from all the cardboard packaging.

We celebrated our successful repacking operation by picking up and polishing off a few Dominoes pizzas, and went to bed around 11pm as twilight was setting in.

Day 1

On Sunday morning we finished up packing, spent our last few hours on email for the next month, and counted down the minutes until my luggage would arrive. Shortly before 2pm Tina from Who's Who shuttle arrived and drove us to the airport where we picked up the remaining pieces of luggage and started the drive to Kluane Lake.

Tina had probably transported every independent Mt Logan team in the past few years between Whitehorse and Kluane Lake, and was an expert about everything in the Yukon. “I’ve seen guys come off that mountain and eat five hamburgers at once in Haines Junction,” she said. “That’ll be you guys in a few more weeks.” “Hopefully,” we replied. “What’s it like here in the winter?”

“Well, I do drive this stretch of road sometimes in the winter, and there isn’t a single other person out here. You really don’t want to have your car break down in such a remote spot when it’s 50 below zero outside, so most people just stay home.”

We learned so much about the Yukon on that 3-hour ride, from the gold-rush-like dash to harvest wild mushrooms every summer to the fear of every Yukoner that a dog musher might someday move in next door and disrupt the peace. By 6pm we rolled in to the Icefield Discovery landing strip at Kluane Lake and bid Tina farewell.

Sian, Andy, and Lance have been flying climbers into the Mt Logan area for years based out of Kluane Lake, and were just starting the spring season, having flown in a French ski-touring group a few days earlier. Their operation, Icefields Discovery, is based out of the old mining town of Silver City on the edge of Kluane Lake. It’s no longer any more than a hangar and a few residential buildings now, though, with the mining town having long-since disappeared.

Sian and Lance came out to greet us, and let us know that we might have to wait another day for our flight. A big guided group of 11 from Canada West Mountain School had arrived before us and were just starting to be flown in. Each flight could only take two climbers with gear, and was a two-hour round trip to Logan Base Camp and back. They weren’t technically allowed to fly past twilight, which was around 10pm, so only a couple more flights would happen that evening.

We dropped our gear off in the hangar and walked down to the shore of Kluane Lake to take in the view. “I’m glad we’re not in a guided group,” Matthew said. “They’d charge us all kinds of money and not even let us make our own decisions on the mountain.” “Yeah, I read clients pay around $7,000 for those trips!” I replied. We had enough experience from MITOC Winter Schools over the years and climbing other big snowy mountains like Denali and Mt. Cook that we could save the money and have more fun on this trip by going independently.

Kluane Lake was still frozen, with fresh snowmobile tracks along the edge, though spring was fast approaching. Huge snowy mountains loomed to the west – the foothills of the Icefield Ranges and the edge of Kluane National Park. Back in 2008 we had bicycled past this edge of the park on a summer-long 3,500-mile tour from Prudhoe Bay, Alaska to Great Falls, Montana. I remember doing a short hike in the park up to the base of Vulcan Peak and wondering if we’d ever come back some day to climb Mt. Logan. At that point we hadn’t climbed any mountain harder than Mt. Rainier, and Mt. Logan sounded intimidating.

We built a small fire on the beach – the air was pretty chilly – and gradually a few of the clients from the guided group wandered down to join us. We exchanged some stories, and the

two clients sounded like pretty experienced mountaineers. One guy had climbed Denali, and another had been the team doctor on an attempted expedition up the Northwest Ridge of K2. He said they rode in on camels from China, climbed up to 26,000ft, but then an avalanche wiped out their camp and they had to abort the trip.

"Do you want to hear a funny story though?" the doctor asked. "I work at a hospital in British Columbia, and one day this old fellow came in with a bloody head like he'd taken a fall. The whole time in the hospital he was trying to flirt with all the young nurses. He said he was American, and didn't have health insurance. We treated him anyways. You know who he was?" "No, who?" we asked. "Fred Beckey!"

We all had a good laugh. Fred Beckey is one of the most famous mountaineers in the world, widely regarded as having the most first ascents of any climber. He's an infamous cheapskate climber, known for standing on the side of roads in the mountains holding a sign reading "Will Belay for Food."

As the fire died down we walked back to the landing strip to watch the ski plane land for the last time that evening. Then we rolled out our sleeping bags and pads in the hangar to sleep.

Day 2

A rustling of bags and a whirring plane engine woke us up at 6am, and we watched as the next load of clients was flown out to the glacier. We spent the morning talking to the remaining members of the guided team, two guides with several years of experience climbing Logan. One guide, Clint, had some impressive stories to share.

One year he said they were pinned down in their tents for days in -40F temperatures, even peeing through socks, it was so cold. At one point the winds in a storm picked up so much he swung his ice ax through the floor of the tent, while he was in it, to prevent the tent from blowing away.

In 2013 the team barely even made it on the mountain. They were waiting a full two weeks in Whitehorse for good enough weather to just fly from Kluane Lake to base camp! Apparently a lot of hockey was watched. Once they finally got on the glacier, more weather delays made them abort the trip after just a week.

We had read that the conditions can be extreme on Mt Logan – an automated weather station has recorded an air temperature of -107F in May 1991, and many teams give themselves a month to climb and still get turned back by weather – but hearing stories from someone who had experienced the weather on Mt. Logan made it much more real. We hoped we would be more fortunate with the weather than Clint had been.

Luckily the weather was still holding out sunny at Kluane Lake. Gradually a small black speck in the western sky grew larger and we recognized the Helios ski plane returning for another trip. Clint and Rob loaded in, and soon they took off for Logan. We were now the next ones in line.

Two hours later the plane returned, but the pilot, Tom, had a concerned look on his face when he stepped out. There was a mechanical issue with the engine, and no more flights would go until it got fixed.

Some people may have gotten frustrated at all these extra delays, but Matthew and Istill felt pretty fortunate. We had only waited an extra day up until now, a far cry from the two-week delay Clint had endured, so we were content hanging out at Kluane Lake a few more days if need be.

Lance and a mechanic came over with some tools and popped open the engine while Matthew and I watched curiously. I'm not completely sure what the fixed, but a few hours later they gave the thumbs up that the plane was back in action. Now it was our turn!

We loaded a big duffle bag and big backpack each into the plane, along with two sleds we'd found in the hangar. It was a lot of stuff – 4 weeks of food and fuel, roughly 130lbs each – but it just barely fit. Matthew took the front with the pilot, Tom, I took the back, and soon we were off!

We crossed the Al-Can highway, past the front-range mountains, and continued west, roughly following the Slims River drainage. Soon we were over the Kaskawulsh glacier, and a sea of ice spread out around us in all directions. This area is actually the largest non-polar ice field in the world, and I believe it.

Tom was an excellent tour guide pointing out all the mountains we were seeing, like Queen Mary, King George, Steele, and Luciana. It turns out Tom had recently moved to the Yukon from New Zealand, and had just started flying for Icefields Discovery. Interestingly, a lot of pilots in the Yukon come from New Zealand. That way they can work the summer season in the Yukon and when it's winter in the Yukon they go work a summer season in New Zealand.

Tom said he'd recently flown one of the nephews of John F Kennedy to attempt to climb Mt. Kennedy, a peak in the park named for JFK. It was "only" about 14,000ft tall, so not really one of the big ones, he said.

Soon we rounded a corner and got our first glimpse of the biggest one – Mt. Logan – at over 19,000ft tall. It was an enormous massif, like a huge ridge 20 miles wide, with a high point on the left edge.

"That side is the east ridge, about the only other route that gets climbed on Logan than the King Trench," Tom said. (We were climbing the King Trench route) "Though, last year I did fly in a team trying to climb the Hummingbird Ridge."

"Wow, I thought that was about the hardest way up!" I said. The Hummingbird Ridge had been climbed once back in the 1960s, and never repeated. It was supposedly very difficult and subject to dangerous double cornice formations, but had somehow made it onto a mountaineers list of the "50 Classic Climbs in North America."

"The Smileys were their names," Tom said. "They didn't end up making it, but I had quite a time getting them out of there afterwards. The weather kept being good at Kluane Lake,

and they'd call us on the satellite phone saying the weather was good there, but when I flew in it was socked in with clouds and I had to turn back. 'We were just hoping it might clear up as you were coming in' they would say."

"At one point the weather looked to be bad for the next week, and we suggested they just hike out, but they were perfectly content to wait and rest in camp for that week. Eventually I did fly them all out."

Tom turned the plane to hook around the west side of Mt. Logan, and then we gradually started descending toward the Quintino-Sella. Below I could make out a group of five or so skiers slowly marching up the glacier – it was the guided group dropping a cache off at Camp 1.

The glacier was extremely wide and flat, with no crevasses visible. Tom picked a smooth place to land and we gracefully slid onto the snow. "Is this spot Ok?" Tom asked (half joking I think). "It's perfect!" we replied.

Tom left the plane running as we hopped out and pulled all of our gear out. He didn't want to risk the plane not starting again out here if he were to turn off the engine. Tom took a quick picture of us in front of the plane and then got back in and took off. I bet he was looking forward to a little break after shuttling climbers in for a solid two days. As far as we knew we were the last climbers scheduled to come in that week.

It was 4pm now, but there was plenty of daylight left to start making some progress on the mountain. At our latitude, at this time of May, there were really only a few hours of solid darkness at night, so the time of day didn't make much difference to us. We did need to worry a little about acclimation though.

We had carefully planned out at what elevation we would place each camp, based on a few trip reports we'd read about the mountain and our experience climbing Denali. Even though we were feeling strong and the weather was good, it was important to ascend slowly and not risk altitude sickness.

We had landed at around 8,500ft, and quickly attached our duffle bags to our sleds, put on our big backpacks, strapped on our snowshoes, and started moving up the glacier toward the King Trench following the ski tracks of the guided party.

The choice between skis and snowshoes is very important on Mt. Logan. If you're a good backcountry skier it makes a lot of sense to use skis here. Probably 80% of the terrain on the King Trench route is like a green or blue run at a resort, making skis a very fast travel mode. However, there are a few steep tricky parts. The headwall above King Col is quite steep and riddled with crevasses, making a ski descent while pulling a loaded sled particularly difficult. There are also steep sections on either side of Prospector col that can get very icy.

Matthew and I aren't the greatest skiers, and don't own our own skis. Snowshoes worked well for us on Denali, and we trusted our La Sportiva Baruntse double boots to keep us warm and be comfortable to hike in for weeks. (We weren't sure how ski boots would perform). We

also reasoned that we could ride our sleds down some of the terrain to speed up the progress, so in the end we decided to use snowshoes for the trip.

After a few hours of plodding up the glacier we started getting hungry for dinner and stopped to make camp. We were at 9,300ft, about the elevation we'd hoped to be at, and wanted to stay on a normal daily climbing schedule instead of pushing on too far into the night.

Unlike Denali, there aren't really any established camps on Mt. Logan. So many people climb Denali that the standard locations for Camp I, Camp II, etc. are always occupied by a handful of parties, and you just pitch your tent somewhere in that area. You might even get lucky and be able to take over an abandoned snow wall around someone's old camp.

On Mt. Logan there were only two groups on the whole mountain – our team and the guided group – so we just camped wherever we wanted. I bet if Mt. Logan were a few hundred feet taller (making it the highest mountain in North America instead of Denali), then there would be hundreds of people climbing Mt. Logan each year. Luckily, though, it's a little shorter and any mountaineer hardy enough to attempt it is treated to a real wilderness experience.

We probed a 15-ft-radius area for crevasses, then set up our new Trango-2 tent and started cooking some pasta. "Well I'm relieved we've finally reached the stage of the trip where it's just us versus the mountain," Matthew said. "We don't have to worry about airlines losing our stuff or airplane engines not working or waiting in line behind some other people."

"Exactly," I said, looking up the valley. "We just have to compete against Mt Logan now."

After dinner we dug a big hole in the snow and buried five days-worth of food and fuel. This would be for waiting out bad weather when we were trying to fly out, and it didn't need to come all the way to the highest camp with us. I duct-taped two 3ft bamboo wands together and stuck it in the snow to mark the cache. We were careful to bring plenty of wands for this trip. One friend who'd attempted Logan said he marked a cache with just one 3ft wand and when he returned to dig up the cache weeks later only a few inches of the wand were sticking out of the snow! It had snowed and drifted almost enough to cover the whole thing. I didn't want to make the same mistake, and I hoped it wouldn't snow 6ft before we came back to retrieve this cache.

As we finished digging the guided group began skiing back down, passing us on the way back to base camp. They were double carrying, and had just dropped a cache of gear at 10,000ft and were returning to sleep lower. We had by this point gotten to know just about everyone in the group, so said hello as they were passing.

Matthew and I were employing a slightly different strategy on the mountain. As long as the slopes weren't too steep we planned to do single carries as much as possible. It was tough with over 100lbs of gear each, but as long as a lot of it was in the sled it was manageable. Double carries are definitely easier, which is a big reason why a lot of parties do them, but the take a lot more time, and we wanted to make as much progress as possible while the weather was good.

By 8pm we finally climbed into the tent for our first night on the mountain. Just before turning in I sent an update with my Delorme InReach satellite text messaging device. It automatically updated a map online with a point for our location and my message. That way our family could know how we were doing every day. Matthew gave Amanda a quick call on the satellite phone and then we went to bed.

Day 3

The next morning we got up around 7am, after a solid 11 hours of sleep, and began moving higher up the mountain. At this time of year – early May – navigating on the glacier was like following a super highway. This was about the highest snow time of year, so almost all the crevasses were filled in and we could walk wherever we wanted. We were still always roped up, of course, but weren't too concerned about falling into a crevasse.

From talking to the rangers we'd heard that by mid-June the crevasses in this area low on the mountain can open up so wide that mountaineers can be forced to give up trying to find a way around them. So there's a pretty short optimal climbing season on Mt. Logan. If you come too early, like April or March, it's likely to be brutally cold. Temperatures of -40F or -50F aren't unheard of. Come too late, like mid-June, and the crevasses on the lower mountain are impassable. The sweet spot appears to be the month of May, so it probably wasn't a coincidence that the guided group decided to start the same day we did.

We roughly followed the guided group's tracks to a cache at a large plateau around 10,500ft. I then continued in the lead, walking on very level terrain for another hour to near the base of a big icefall. We dropped our gear at 10,900ft at an area referred to as King Trench camp. As before we probed out a radius to verify we weren't camping on any crevasses, then marked the radius with glacier wands and set up the tent. Clouds were starting to roll in but it was still the middle of the day and not too cold.

"It seems kind of unfortunate to just hang out here the rest of the afternoon," Matthew said. "What if we give ourselves a break tomorrow by hauling a load up to the top of this snow ramp this afternoon?" "Sure, that sounds like a reasonable plan," I replied. "It fits with the idea of climbing high and sleeping low, so will probably help us acclimate. And we can even sled down that hill back to camp!"

We packed up all the gear we wouldn't need that night, threw everything else in the tent, and continued up the mountain. This time, since we knew we were returning that day, we put wands along the route every 100ft or so.

The snow ramp was crevasse-free right up the middle, so we went straight up. It was nice not hauling the full 100+lbs of gear on this steep slope. After an hour the slope started leveling out at about 12,100ft, just as the cloud layer dropped and it started to snow. We dug a hole there, buried our gear, and marked it with several wands.

Now it was time for some fun. We took off the rope, got in our sleds, and started scooting toward the steep part. We had already verified our route was safe on the way up, so sledding back on the same route didn't require the rope.

I went first, ice ax in one hand, with my feet dangling off the front to steer and slow me down. I blasted down the slope, weaving through the wands like a slalom course, all the way back down to the level part. Matthew followed in good form as well, catching a few short videos of the descent. It would have certainly been fun to ski down, but sledding was hard to beat.

Now the visibility was getting pretty bad with the snow and clouds, and we appreciated the wands we had placed. We navigated from wand to wand until we finally got back to camp. In addition to our main sleeping tent we had also brought a cook tent – a floorless pyramid tent supported by one pole in the middle. It's perfect for cooking and eating in when it's snowing, cold, or a little windy outside when you'd prefer a little shelter while you operate the stove. The general strategy is to stake out the tent then dig down into the snow on the inside so you can stand up, sit on a bench, and have a little table to cook on.

We sort of set up this tent this time, but were a little impatient and merely draped half of it over our vestibule and staked out the rest in the snow. We then cooked in an enlarged vestibule, having already dug out a few feet of snow so we could stand up.

The guided group presumably made it up to their cache sometime that afternoon, but the visibility was bad enough that we couldn't tell. We were tired from our first full day on the mountain so soon crawled into our sleeping bags to go to sleep.

Day 4

May 6th dawned sunny, and we quickly ate our breakfast of powdered milk and cereal in the tent and packed up. We got a satellite text weather forecast from our meteorologist friend Garrett that predicted a big storm to move in that night, so we wanted to make as much progress as possible while the weather was good.

We loaded up all the gear in our packs and in the sleds, roped up, and retraced our steps back up the snow slope. The guided group had started about the same time as us, and we saw them arrive at the base of the slope as we reached our cache.

We took a short break, then dug up the cache, redistributed our gear, and continued. The temperature was actually pretty pleasant – probably 15F, sunny, and no wind. Not warm enough to walk in shorts and a t-shirt like we had low on Denali, but much better than the -40F it could be. Luckily the terrain leveled out above our cache, but it was still noticeably more difficult than before to haul the now-full sled and backpack.

I led the way, walking beneath the towering face of King Peak to my right and the icefall of Queen Peak to the left. Eventually the slope increased as we neared King Col, and we started to really feel the effects of doing a single carry above 13,000ft. I had to rest every five minutes, fighting against the sled pulling me down the slope and against the lack of oxygen in the air. Matthew was struggling as well, and we finally decided to split up the remaining distance into two carries.

We dropped off our packs, clipped our sleds to our harnesses, and walked up the slopes, this time without needing to take any breaks. Within 20 minutes we reached a flat area at the top of King Col and stopped for a break.

Below us the first three-person rope team of the guided group had also reached a flat area near the col, and were stopping to cache their gear. They had moved fast, having opted for another double carry, though they would have to descend the slope today and re-ascend it again tomorrow, possibly in bad weather. I was satisfied with our decision to move all our supplies to King Col today.

We soon descended back to our packs and brought them back to our campsite. Our schedule had us resting here at King Col for the next few days to acclimate, and Matthew and I were both looking forward to some rest.

We commenced the usual routine of probing for crevasses, marking the boundaries of camp, setting up the tent, and digging out the snow from under the vestibule. This time, since we knew some bad weather was coming, I spent an extra hour making a solid waist-high snow wall on the windward side of the tent to offer us a little protection. Meanwhile, Matthew set up the cook tent next to one of the vestibule openings to give us some extra cooking space.

For dinner we broke into our supply of freeze-dried meals for the first time. Normally we avoid freeze dried meals since they're kind of expensive and create a lot of trash, but they make a lot of sense on a mountain like Mt. Logan. They don't require as much fuel as pasta, since they only require bringing water to a boil, not maintaining it at a boil for 10 minutes. That can make quite a difference over the course of a month. They also are, for some reason, one of the few foods I can stand to eat at higher altitude, when my appetite tends to wane.

I had a delicious bag of chili mac and beef, with a personal addition of powdered mashed potatoes and lots of cheese to increase the calorie count. Soon afterwards we crawled into our sleeping bags for the night.

Day 5

I was awakened the next morning, as usual, by a strong need to go to the bathroom. While still mostly in my sleeping bag I carefully unzipped the top six inches of the vestibule zipper to peek outside, and was immediately met with a blast of wind and snow. Everything outside was white. The storm had begun. "Arghh, looks like I'll have to suit up to go the bathroom," I said. "Me too," Matthew replied. I got out of my sleeping bag, pulled on my snow pants, jacket, balaclava, and gloves, and carefully crawled outside. I didn't want to walk too far, lest I lost sight of the tent, so went just a few feet from the entrance. King Peak and Queen Peak were no longer visible, nor were any other features more than 20ft away.

"Good thing we planned to rest today anyways," I said to Matthew as I crawled back in the tent, "because we wouldn't be getting too far." Matthew briefly went outside too, and quickly came back in. We came prepared for such a day being stuck in the tent: we had brought the Count of Monte Cristo (1,000 pages), Cardinal of the Kremlin (1,000 pages), and a handful of

other novels to pass the time. Matthew had tried to download some movies on his phone, but unfortunately couldn't get it working in time for the trip.

After a few hours of reading we peeked outside again, but the whiteout still persisted. "I need to get outside and do something," Matthew said. "I'm tired of just sitting around." "Well, it could be kind of nice to have a snow shelter to cook in…" I suggested. "Yeah, that would be a good boondoggle," Matthew said. A boondoggle is something you do that isn't really necessary but could be kind of fun.

Matthew suited up, went outside, and started piling a big mound of snow next to the vestibule in place of the cook tent. As soon as the pile was as high as the tent he started digging in from the outside. We've become experts at creating snow shelters over the years. Starting in Kentucky in middle school we would harvest snow from our entire yard and neighbor's yard after a 2-inch snowfall, pile it in garbage cans and transport it by sled into one location, then make a big pile and dig out the middle.

We later perfected our skills in the MIT Outing Club winter school, building elaborate shelters to spend the night up in New Hampshire, where we had feet of snow to work with instead of just inches. Here on Logan there was basically an unlimited depth of snow to work with, and the main challenge wasn't piling up snow but just digging it out.

As Matthew finished the snow shelter I piled more snow on the snow wall. Overnight snow had piled up against the wall, but had not accumulated against the tent. I hoped the wall would continue with such good performance. The completed snow shelter had a small entrance on the outside, descending to a room large enough for both of us to stand, with a small entrance on the other side where we could crawl into the vestibule opening. It would be perfect for our purposes.

We took a break to do some more reading in the tent, then cooked dinner in the snow shelter that night. The outside entrance was high enough above the ground that any exhaust from the stove would funnel outside as we were cooking. When we turned off the stove we simply moved a large snow block over that entrance to shield from the snow and cold. That evening I sent my usual satellite text update from my Delorme InReach before going to sleep.

Day 6

The next morning the weather was as bad as before. The wind had been shaking the tent all night, but miraculously the snow wall had kept any snow from drifting up against the tent. We had carefully piled up snow around the bottom of the tent as well to prevent wind from blowing any snow inside the gap between the rain fly and the tent body. This can be a big problem if you don't remember to seal up the gap. On a practice trip in February up Mt. Shuksan in the Washington Cascades we had forgotten to seal the gap around the tent with snow and woke up to 6 inches of snow inside the tent! The wind had funneled it up between the rain fly and tent body, and it had come inside through our half-unzipped tent doors and ceiling ventilation. Luckily on Logan we were more careful, and didn't have any problems.

All morning and afternoon the wind and snow continued to batter our tent, and we only ventured outside briefly to go to the bathroom, or take a few pictures. We would later learn that this storm was raging even stronger down in the King Trench at 10,000ft where the big guided group and another Austrian team that had just started their trip were hunkered down.

An automated weather station at 9,000ft on Mt Logan that day recorded wind up to 100 mph, and we later heard the Austrian team's tent was literally ripped open and many of their supplies blown away. They ended up digging a snow cave to ride out the storm, and evacuated as soon as the weather cleared. The guided group had built strong snow wall fortifications and managed to ride out the storm relatively unscathed. We were oblivious to all this at the time, though, and luckily the wind wasn't quite as ferocious at King Col. It may have been 50mph wind, but not enough to do our tent any damage at least.

We spent the day mostly reading, playing cards, and eating. As a mountaineer, though, we can get by telling people we were busy "acclimating." Unfortunately for me, though, it was becoming more difficult to acclimate. I started getting a sore throat, runny nose, and slight headache that morning. These seemed like symptoms of the flu, though I hadn't been sick in years and am usually very healthy.

In hindsight what I think was happening was that I'd been exposed to another sick person on the flight over to Whitehorse, but at lower elevation my body was strong enough to fight it and I wasn't sick. But there must have been something lingering in my system and once I got to the higher altitude, coupled with cold and exertion, my body was no longer strong enough to fight it. I figured drinking lots of water, resting, and eating would help it out, and with the storm showing no signs of letting up we would be certain to get more of all of those for a while.

Day 7

The next morning was as stormy as before, with the wind and snow continuing to batter our tent. Our snow fortifications outside were still holding strong, and we spent most of the day in the tent again. By our schedule we had rested sufficiently at this elevation to continue to climb higher, but it would be very unwise with only 20ft of visibility outside.

Matthew finished his first book, Longitude, and moved on to book number two, *The Cardinal of the Kremlin*. I was still busy working my way through *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Frustratingly, my sickness had not gotten any better, and I was beginning to lose hope that merely resting would make me improve. Nasty stuff was coming out of my throat and nose, and I was starting to have very annoying headaches. I took some Ibuprofen several times, which made the pain go away for an hour or so, but it didn't really cure anything.

I did have one last resort – an altitude medication called Diamox. This is a common medication mountaineers take to help with acclimation, and I'd taken it in the past. The unfortunate side effects, though, are that it makes you pee more (making you dehydrated) and can cut off some blood flow to your extremities. I'd held off as long as possible from taking the Diamox because those side effects can be pretty dangerous in a really cold place like Mt. Logan. It's already hard enough to stay hydrated and keep your fingers and toes warm without battling

those side effects. But I was getting desperate, so I reluctantly took a Diamox pill, swallowed some water, and hoped for the best.

Matthew checked the satellite phone that evening and got a text message from our friend Garrett. “Looks like the storm might let up for a brief window tomorrow,” Matthew said. “Well we’d better take advantage of that,” I replied. “I’ve spent enough time sitting in this tent, and who knows when we’ll get the chance to move again.”

Day 8

Garrett’s forecast held true, and the next morning the wind had died down and the skies were nearly cloud free. The temperature was hovering around 0F, which was pretty warm by Mt. Logan standards. We quickly ate our cereal and powdered milk and started packing up. Our plan was to bring a cache of supplies over the headwall and as far up the mountain as possible before dropping back to camp. The headwall was one of the steepest parts of the King Trench route, and given our difficulty with the single carry to King Col, we knew it would be very tough to single carry over the headwall. Plus, it would help our acclimation to climb high up to 15,000ft or so, then sleep back at 13,500ft again.

We threw all but 5 days’ worth of food and fuel into our duffel bags on our sleds, packed our emergency and day equipment, and headed off. For the first time on the mountain we were now breaking trail through deep snow. Lower on the mountain the snow had been firm from either melt/thaw cycles in the sun or from wind scouring, but now progress was more difficult.

I led the way at first, traversing a flat section to the edge of King Col, before meeting the headwall and traversing left. The headwall was way too steep to go straight up with all our gear, but we had scouted out a potential route through the crevasses by cutting up left and then moving back to the middle.

Every step had to be earned clambering up this steep deep snow. The sled was constantly pulling me back, and each time I planted my snowshoe it would slide backwards in the powder. Luckily there were two of us, and we took turns breaking trail. A slight breeze had picked up midway up the headwall, and it soon covered up the tracks below us with fresh snow.

“Dang, all this work to break a trail and it probably will be wiped out and filled in by the end of the day,” Matthew complained, stopping to stick a wand in the snow to mark our route. “At least we only have to climb up this face one more time,” I replied. “Maybe the snow will be firmer then.”

We at last passed the inflection point of the slope and reached a more gradual grade by mid-day. Matthew led the way as we now switched back to the right, having passed beneath a large ice cliff. The snow was now scoured almost down to the ice, and we were grateful our snowshoes had aggressive teeth along the perimeter to dig into the icy crust.

We traversed along the ice, then found a relatively level spot on a wide snow step to stop and rest. Way below us in the King Trench we could make out the guided party making their

way towards King Col. They were nearly 4,000ft below us but stood out remarkably well, the dark bodies contrasting sharply with the white surroundings.

Now the terrain was getting a little more treacherous for us, with monster gaping crevasses on all sides, and we started using our wands more liberally. I took the lead now, aiming for a small snow ramp cutting directly up through the ice wall above us. The snow turned deep again, and before long we switched out to put Matthew in the lead.

It was slow going up the ramp. It was only about 15ft wide, with cliffs on each side, so we basically had to go straight up, sometimes digging the snow out with our hands to make progress. We finally staggered over this last obstacle, and had surmounted the headwall. Now a gently-rising glacier unfolded in front of us, possibly all the way to the next camp at the football field.

"I'm wiped out after that," Matthew said. "It took us 7 hours to get up that thing, and we've only gained 1,000ft!""Yeah, I don't think I can make it to the football field today." I replied. "Why don't we just get out of this little crevasse field and drop our load there?"

We agreed to go for another 30 minutes, then dropped our gear, buried it in snow, and marked it with our remaining wands. The descent was much easier. Now the deep powdery snow acted like a cushion on the steep sections, and we had no trouble following our wands back to the top of the headwall and down to camp. Our tracks had blown over, but as long as we followed the wands we realized the snow was still firmer where we had walked before, so we still had a sort of invisible packed trail created.

Back at King Col the guided group had arrived and was starting to set up camp. There were only seven people this time, though, and we learned that three clients had decided to fly back home after their battle with the storm the past three days. One guide had accompanied them out, leaving three guides and four clients up at King Col.

The clear weather was quickly deteriorating, as clouds pushed in from the coast. It looked like we may end up tent bound again. Back in the tent we cooked dinner in the snow cave and retreated into the warmth of our sleeping bags, tired after a day of hard work.

Day 9

The incoming weather built up overnight and by morning it had returned to near white-out. Poking my head outside the vestibule in the morning I could just barely make out the tents of the guided group getting buffeted in the wind 50 feet away from us. Otherwise it was white in all directions.

My flu symptoms had luckily started to go away, but I'd paid for it with the side effects of the Diamox yesterday. My toes had been having trouble warming up all day, and this morning one big toe was still cold, and looked a little discolored. I never have problems with my toes being cold, so this was a little worrying. It had been cold yesterday by normal standards – probably just a little below zero – and my feet were basically in the snow all day with all the

fresh powder. I had unfortunately not worn my overboots, thinking my double boots would be warm enough for that temperature, and that was probably not a wise decision.

I spent much of the morning holding my toes in my hands warming them up, and resolved to wear my summit socks (my warmest, thickest pair) and overboots for the remainder of the trip. The storm continued all day as ferocious as ever, and we were again stuck in the tent all day. In fact, in our reluctance to venture out into the storm we officially converted the cooking snow shelter into an outhouse, so we literally didn't have to go into the storm at all.

That night we cooked in the vestibule, eating a delicious meal of mountain-house freeze-dried chicken and rice, mixed with mashed potatoes and cheese.

Day 10

The storm had died down overnight, and it was luckily clear and sunny in the morning. We packed up as much gear as possible inside the tent, before moving outside, taking it down, and packing up our backpacks. We carefully covered up the openings to the snow shelter and marked it with a wand in case we needed it on the way back. The undesirable contents of the inside had been carefully buried, so it would still serve as a good emergency shelter.

We managed to remove a few items of gear that didn't absolutely need to go higher up the mountain with us – trash, books we'd finished, and a few other things – and cached these near the snow shelter, marking it with wands to pick up on the return.

This time was much easier climbing the headwall. All our gear was in our backpacks now, so sleds weren't pulling us backwards. And as long as we followed our wands we stayed on the firmer snow of our broken track from two days earlier and the going was not that difficult.

We removed our wands as we climbed, so we could use them higher up on the mountain. As we got halfway up we could see the first group of three from the guided group start to leave camp. They started following our tracks, but unfortunately with skis they couldn't climb as steeply as we could with snowshoes, so they soon had to diverge and break their own more gradual trail.

After about three hours we reached our cache, halving our previous time in the better conditions now. The terrain was still too steep ahead of us to reasonably do a single carry, so we left the cache there, planning to retrieve it the next day.

Above the cache we continued straight up the mountain, and surprisingly we saw the skiers approaching from our left. Somehow they had caught up to us. Instead of zig-zagging through the crevasse field straight up the headwall, they had traversed farther left and then followed a nice, crevasse-free route up. We kept this in mind for the descent in the future.

We waved to the guided group and continued straight up as the traversed way to the right now. I figured they were doing large switchbacks because they were on skis, but we later learned that, having been up the mountain many times before, the guides had found the best way up to the football field by traversing right.

We didn't know this at the time, so continued our route. We had to weave through a lot of crevasses higher up, briefly passing through an icefall below Queen Peak that was a little scary. Eventually we intersected the guided group's path, and decided to follow them to the football field rather then get lost in the crevasse maze above us.

By now the views were spectacular. We could see Mount St. Elias – the second tallest mountain in the United States at over 18,000ft – just to the west, and beyond was the Pacific Ocean 80 miles away. It was amazing to see so many enormous snowy mountains, many probably never climbed. We continued following the ski tracks of the guided group through the crevasses, until the terrain in front of us leveled out and was crevasse free. We had finally reached the Football Field.

The guided group was busy digging a cache for their gear and we thanked them for showing us a good way through the crevasses. We found a nice flat spot about 100ft away from their site and began to set up camp. I stomped down a big flat area with my snowshoes as Matthew got the tent out. We then set up the sleeping tent and officially put up the cooking tent nearby. We were planning to spend a few nights here to acclimate, and with the weather supposed to be nice for a few days the cook tent would make a nice place to eat.

I dug out an official toilet next to camp and built up an enviable privacy snow wall around it. The guided group soon left camp, skiing back down to King Col and planning to bring the rest of their gear up the next day. For the first time now we could actually see what we thought was the summit of Mount Logan. A huge ridge started above our camp, extending far off to the east with what appeared to be the highest point right near the end. This would be consistent with the location of the summit.

"I thought Garrett's forecast called for a slight chance of a snow shower today," Matthew said. "But it's been 100% sunny all day." "Garrett hasn't been wrong yet," I replied. "What about that cloud over there?" There was one cloud over towards the summit moving our way, but it was sunny everywhere else. Within 10 minutes the cloud had come directly over us and visibility dropped to 50 ft. Light snow started falling, but within five more minutes the cloud moved away and it was again sunny. "Ha, Garrett was right indeed," Matthew laughed.

Day 11

The next morning we loaded our packs up with a little bit of food and emergency gear, roped up, and descended back down to our cache. This time we followed the guided group's tracks most of the way, diverting only when we could clearly see our wands at the cache. This route was considerably better, avoiding the scary parts we'd walked through beneath the icefall of Queen's Peak. There were some stretches of deep snow, but it worked out this time that we were breaking trail on the descent without packs, and could hike back up the broken trail on the return journey.

We soon reached the cache and dug it out of the snow. We put most of the gear into our packs, leaving just a little bit in the sleds. The climb back up to the football field was relatively easy with a broken trail and a clear route through the crevasses.

We made it back to camp in the early afternoon, and spent the rest of the day acclimating, reading books, and melting snow. The view was hard to beat, and with the sun, no wind, and wearing down jackets, down pants, and down booties it didn't actually feel that cold out.

By the evening the guided group made it into camp, obviously a bit more tired out than we were, having come all the way from King Col. We went over to talk to the head guides about the weather, and they confirmed the good reports we'd heard that the next five days would likely be clear.

Our original plan had been to spend one more day acclimating at the football field before bringing ten days of food with us up to the higher camps. The route goes over a pass at 18,000ft before dropping back down to 16,000ft at the Plateau Camp, the last camp before the summit. Traditionally teams bring at least a week of food to Plateau Camp in case they get trapped in bad weather. It's very difficult to retreat from that camp because retreat involves climbing back up to 18,000ft at Prospector Col before descending back down again. The guides, though, were planning to go with minimal gear – just four days of supplies – to try to move fast and take advantage of the good weather. Their plan was to leave tomorrow.

Matthew and I talked it over and it seemed like a good idea for us too. We were feeling pretty good acclimation-wise, and Plateau Camp was about the same elevation as the Football Field. We also liked the idea of not hauling 10 days of food and fuel up and over the 18,000ft pass. So our plan was set – a potential summit day May 16, we could stretch our food an extra day if needed, but would have to retreat after that.

As we were eating dinner we noticed two more skiers roll into camp. They definitely weren't with the guided group, and I hadn't seen them on the mountain before. They quickly dropped a cache off about 100ft from our camp, buried it, and turned back down the mountain. It appeared they must be camping at King Col and had caught up to our groups. We would see more of them later in the trip.

Day 12

Our next objective was Windy Camp, a small shoulder at 17,000ft on a snow ramp between the Football Field and Prospector Col. It wasn't that far away, but it's where climbers usually make their next camp to help with acclimation.

We packed up our tent and supplies for four days and buried the rest of our gear near our tent site. Everything fit in our backpacks, but the snow ramp above us looked so sledable that we towed our empty sleds behind us to use on the descent.

In general Matthew and I move pretty fast in the morning, in part because we don't have to melt any snow. Each evening we melt enough so that we each have three liters. Through the night and during breakfast we usually drink another liter each, leaving us two liters for the next day. For breakfast we just eat cereal and powdered milk, which doesn't require melting snow to get hot water like oatmeal does. This ends up saving a lot of time and a lot of fuel. I still don't quite understand why most other mountaineers are willing to invest so much extra time and fuel for breakfast, but I guess people really like oatmeal.

We donned our snowshoes and headed up the mountain, this time breaking trail again. The snow here hadn't been wind scoured like it had between the Football Field and the top of the Headwall, but at least there weren't any obvious crevasses to avoid. We basically just had to keep marching straight up the gentle slope.

Eventually the guided group suited up and started following in our broken trail. I was happy to be able to pay them back for showing us the best way through the crevasse maze the previous day.

After a few hours we reached a mostly-level spot around 17,000ft and dropped our packs. This was Windy Camp, but luckily there was almost no wind at all. I broke out some snacks and water and sat on my pack to admire the view. The ocean was still clearly visible in the distance, with uncountably many snowy mountains in between.

It was so sunny that we decided to do a little experiment. I tilted my black sled to face the sun, and sprinkled a thin layer of snow over the inner face. Within about ten minutes I could see a small pool of meltwater collecting in the bottom of the sled. This was actually a very effective way of making drinking water without using fuel! This trick also works with a black trash bag draped over the sled, but not as well as just a big black sled.

Soon the guided group arrived and claimed a nice spot next to us. "Are you guys low on fuel?" the head guide asked, seeing our snow-melting trick. "No, no," I replied, "just having a little fun testing our snow-melting skills." He laughed and went back to setting up camp.

We spent most of the afternoon snacking and enjoying the view, with a little time spent making a nice privy. Some of the clients and guides came over to join us for dinner and some conversation. It turned out one of the clients was trying to climb the highest mountain in all the Canadian provinces and territories, and just had Yukon, British Columbia, and Nova Scotia left.

"Wow, when did you do the Northwest Territories?" I asked. I was also trying to climb all these mountains, and the Northwest Territories one is arguably the hardest of them all, having only been climbed a handful of times. "I went up in the summer of 2013, helicoptering in and out of Watson Lake," he replied.

Now I realized I had actually heard about his trip. One of my other friends had hiked in to the Northwest Territories highpoint that summer, and had seen a helicopter leaving just as he arrived at the base of the standard East Face route. A week of rain and snow pinned my friend down and made him abort the climb, but that must have been the same trip that we were now talking about.

We talked about the Northwest Territories a bit, and I told him of my plan that summer, actually, to attempt a new route on the southwest face of the highpoint, then hike and raft out the Nahanni River over two months. He was pretty interested to run into some fellow highpointers on Logan, and we exchanged stories about our adventures as the sun set over the icefields below us.

Day 13

Matthew and I were the first ones up and out of camp again the next morning, and after burying our sleds at our site we continued up the mountain with all our gear. The snow was firm and icy above Windy Camp, perhaps a testament to the namesake winds that scour the area. Lucky for us the air was again calm and the skies clear.

We ascended steeply up to Prospector Col, stopping often to catch our breath in the decreasing oxygen. As we got to the col we saw a huge plateau open up before us on the other side, with another endless sea of mountains poking out of the icefields beyond. Somewhere down there was the location of Plateau Camp, the normal last camp before summit day.

At the col we saw an ancient bamboo wand stub sticking out of the ice. We had heard stories of parties incorrectly ascending the wrong pass in bad weather trying to retreat from Logan, and ending up lost. With this in mind I placed a few strategic wands at the col and along our route down, so we would have a good chance of finding it. Of course, as a backup we also had a GPS track of the route given to us by a mountaineering friend (Luc Mehl) who'd climbed the mountain before.

After dropping down the opposite side of the pass we started traversing right, thinking that we didn't want to lose any elevation unnecessarily. In hind sight, it would have been best to descend all the way to the plateau and traverse there. As it was, we ended up traversing some steep snowfields, weaving down through some steep ice cliffs, and then meeting up with the plateau anyways.

By now the first team of three of the guided group had passed us, easily coasting down the gradually-sloping plateau on their skis. This was perhaps fortuitous for us, though, because we could see where the normal spot for plateau camp would be.

We reached the area where the guides were setting up camp and put up our tent not too far away. I immediately got to work excavating a privy and constructing another large privacy wall. The snow blocks were incredibly easy to make in these compacted snow conditions. I simply chopped the snow beneath me three times with my shovel and out popped a perfect block! I've struggled for hours in the White Mountains of New Hampshire trying to make powdery snow into blocks for an igloo, but this was infinitely easier.

When we finished with camp we tried to scout out our route for our summit bid the next day. We couldn't actually see the true summit from here, but could make out the East summit and the West summit. I've read quite a few accounts of climbers just reaching the West summit and having to retreat. It's almost as high as the true summit, and one route to the summit goes over the West summit first. But from there one has to descend to a col and then climb steeply up to the true summit, adding several hours at least. If the weather isn't great, I guess I could see why people call the slightly shorter summit good enough.

But it wouldn't be good enough for me and Matthew. We had to stand on the highest ground in the country to be completely satisfied. We planned to aim directly for the col between the true summit and west summit, to not add any unnecessary climbing along the way.

That evening as we were cooking dinner two more skiers rolled into camp that we didn't recognize as part of the guided group. They must have been the ones we saw drop a cache at the Football Field a few days ago, and apparently they had skipped Windy Camp and come all the way here in one push.

Matthew and I went over to talk to them, and they seemed pretty friendly. One guy was from Anchorage and the other from Winnipeg. They said they had given themselves a mere two weeks to climb the Logan, had been delayed one day flying in but had made it onto the glacier in the calm day before our last stormy day. They had ascended through the storm, camping at King Col the day we left and making it here to plateau camp on day 6 on the mountain. Somehow they weren't experiencing any acclimation problems, and it looked like they might actually finish the entire trip in a little over a week! They were getting incredibly lucky with the weather, given that it's not uncommon for a group to spend a month on the mountain without even summiting, and there have even been two-week delays just flying onto the glacier!

The weather was still holding clear, and we went to sleep that night with high hopes of standing on the summit the next day.

Day 14

I woke up in the morning, popped my head out the vestibule, and exclaimed, "Looks like summit day! Perfectly sunny outside!" "Excellent," Matthew replied. We had actually set our alarms this morning to get up at 7am, hoping to be moving by 8am. It wasn't exactly an alpine start, but at this altitude and this far north, it's so cold all day and the days are so long that there's really no good reason to be climbing at night when it's even colder. As it was, the temperature was about -5F at camp, and supposed to be about -10F on the summit that afternoon. That's about the warmest it ever gets on the summit, so we considered ourselves pretty lucky.

We weren't the first ones up, though. Today the guided group had woken up a little earlier than we did, and were already suiting up to go. "Wouldn't it be kind of cool to be the first ones to the summit this year?" I said quietly to Matthew. "Well, we should just go our own pace and I bet we'll pass everyone else soon enough. I'm feeling pretty strong this morning," Matthew replied.

We soon suited up, roped up, and got moving. Within about 30 minutes we caught up to the three-person team of the guided group and passed them while they were taking a break. They wished us good luck, and we wished them the same.

Soon we rounded a corner and could finally see the summit. It looked like a big rounded double-humped peak of snow and ice, with a col to the right. A valley extended down from the col to about our elevation, and below us was a huge icefall. We were on the edge of a ridge that dropped steeply down into the valley, and the ridge extended up directly to the west summit.

We wanted to drop into that valley to gain the col, but the drop-off was too steep. I led up the ridge for a ways, eventually finding a potential route traversing and descending a steep slope to gain the valley. Luckily our snowshoes had teeth along the perimeter to dig into the icy slope as we traversed.

Eventually we reached more gradual terrain that led us to the col. Now we just had one final climb to reach the summit. I actually had a friend who rode out a storm for a week here in this col, hunkered down inside a snow cave. It's hard to believe he was so close to the summit then, but the weather was just so bad that he couldn't even venture outside. I think it was something like -30F and very windy and snowy with poor visibility. He did finally get enough of a break in the weather to reach the summit and safely return, on day 32 of the expedition, no less.

Luckily for us the weather was much better. It was still sunny, with very little wind, and the temperature a relatively balmy -10F. We soon started up the steep slope to the summit, switchbacking occasionally to make our way up the icy slope. I expected to have trouble with the altitude, but both of us felt fine continuing without breaks, despite being over 19,000ft by now. Clearly our acclimation schedule must have worked.

I reached the small mini-pass below the summit, and turned right to follow the ridge the rest of the way. The ridge started out ascending gradually, but soon got quite steep, with large drop-offs to the right and left. One would have to self-arrest very quickly in the event of a fall here, and I've heard some groups belay this section. Matthew and I were confident enough in our footing though to not need a belay. Soon the ridge tapered off, and there was no more mountain left to climb. I was on the roof of Canada!

I waved for Matthew to take a picture, but it was actually pretty precarious on the summit with a huge drop-off on the south side. I leaned on one hiking pole so the light wind wouldn't knock me over, and waved my other arm in the air.

I then descended to a small shoulder next to the top and let Matthew stand on the summit. It was spectacular up there, seeing an endless sea of icy mountains poking out of the glaciers in every direction. We could make out the Pacific Ocean to the west, but other than that the view was all icy mountains. There's definitely no place in the lower 48 states that comes anywhere close to the remoteness you feel on Mt Logan.

Back on the shoulder we took some more pictures, and I briefly contemplated a shirts-off summit picture like the one Matthew took of me on the summit of Denali. It felt much colder here though, and we'd been hiking in our down jackets all day. I decided to keep all my layers on and be satisfied with some normal pictures.

Then I remembered it would be neat to send a text message from the top saying we'd made it. I dug out the Delorme, took off my big mittens, and tried to quickly type out the message "on the summit." I clicked send, waited for a few seconds, and then put the Delorme in my pack, eager to rewarm my numb fingers. But the Delorme has an auto-complete feature to make typing faster and had auto completed "on the" to "only", so my message was "only summit." I bet that was pretty confusing to everyone at home reading that we had told we would be summiting today.

We spent about 20 minutes on the top before we started getting cold and decided to go down. It was actually cold enough that little icicles were forming on the stubble of a small mustache I was growing. The exhale of my breath must have been freezing soon after it left my

mouth. Luckily we were both still feeling ok with the altitude, even now at 19,551ft. We switched into crampons for the dicey decent, and made it off the steep ridge and back down to the col without issue.

At the col we met back up with the guided group and the independent group of two. They all looked like they were feeling strong and would soon be on the summit. We wished them good luck again and continued descending, mindful that the weather could still change quickly and we might as well get back to camp soon.

This time instead of exactly retracing our tracks we followed the guided group's route. As before, they knew the best route and had found an easier ramp connecting the ridge and our valley. We exited the valley, descended the ridge a little lower, and then traversed back to our camp on the plateau. It was mid-afternoon and we were exhausted and dehydrated, but we had made it. The first to summit in 2015!

We took off our showshoes and boots, changed into down booties, and relaxed in the tent reading our books. By the evening everyone else returned to camp, and we exchanged high-fives all around. The clients all looked exhausted and very quickly retreated to their tents, as did we.

That day 13 people summited Logan, which is probably close to the record for ascents in one day. And that was almost the entire season packed into one day! As far as I've heard, only two more groups summited the rest of the year – one more group that ascended the King Trench, and one that climbed the East Ridge. And this was an excellent success rate. Some years nobody summits.

[The East Ridge group, incidentally, was caught in a nasty cycle of bad weather just after summiting two weeks after us on June 2, and needed rescued by helicopter from Plateau Camp. They had ridden out a storm for three days in a snow cave on the plateau, having received 2 meters of fresh snow.]

Day 15

The next morning we packed up all our gear, and were the first ones out of camp. We headed back west along the plateau, and turned left to reach Prospector Col. It was tough climbing back up to 18,000ft on the descent, and we took a long break at the pass to eat and rehydrate. Our plan was to make it back to our cache at the football field and camp there that night, but we were making good time and decided we might be able to push on farther to King Col.

Below Prospector Col we reached our old camp at 17,000ft and excavated out the sleds. Now came the fun part – sledding back to the Football Field. We knew the route was safe from crevasses on the snow ramp down, so we unroped, hopped in the sleds, and pushed off. We had our feet hanging out the front for steering and speed control, and ice axes ready to stop if needed. It was amazing blasting down that slope, with snow flying into the air from our heels as we controlled our direction. I bet anyone who saw us would be jealous, though there was unfortunately nobody else in sight.

I made it down first, coming within about 200ft of our cache before the level terrain and deep snow stopped my progress. Matthew came next, and I managed to get a short video of his descent.

We soon reached our old camp at the Football Field and dug up the cache, snacking on the best food we could find. We were both still feeling strong, and it was only noon so there was plenty of daylight left. The previous evening we had overheard the group of two saying they planned to ski all the way back to basecamp today to be the first ones out the next day if the plane could make it in.

` "It would be a shame if they made it out and then we got stuck in base camp for a week waiting for the next weather window," Matthew said. "Yeah," I replied. "Why don't we just get down there first then? Those guys haven't even reached Prospector Col yet, and we move pretty fast when we're sledding, so we could probably get all the way down first this evening and earn the rights to the first flight out." "I like the sound of that," Matthew said. "Let's do it."

We quickly put our extra gear in the sleds, clipped them to our packs, roped up, and continued down the mountain. This section descending down to King Col would turn out to be the trickiest part of the whole descent. The only real way to descend a steep slope with a loaded sled it to either flip it upside down so it has enough resistance that you drag it down the slope, or let it slide in front of you as you walk down. We employed both of these tactics, but it got even trickier when we needed to do a descending traverse. The sled keeps wanting to flip over and pull you down the mountain, and the descent is extremely frustrating.

I think we tried about every possible orientation of sled, and eventually made it down to the top of the headwall. Here we followed the guided group's tracks, which involved only crossing one minor crevassed area. But here we saw something a little unnerving. A set of ski tracks went close to the edge of a crevasse, then boot tracks led to a human-sized hole at the edge of the crevasse where the two crevasse edges pinched together. I didn't get too close, but it looked really, really deep. Hopefully nobody was down there. We could see down in King Col there were a couple tents. Maybe it was related to one of those groups?

We would later learn, after coincidentally meeting up with a mountaineer on the flight out of Whitehorse, that one group had dropped a cache at the football field and skied back toward King Col. At the edge of the crevasse they had stopped to take off their skis and rope up, but one of the guys got too close to the edge and fell through. Apparently he fell down 15m head first without a helmet but somehow survived. His buddies dropped a rope to him and pulled him out, but he had a bad concussion. The group aborted their summit bid after that and turned around to get off the mountain.

We didn't know this at the time, so continued carefully down the steep headwall to King Col. We talked to one mountaineer walking around at camp, who happened to be a guy from Colorado we had been corresponding with by email earlier in the season about logistics for Logan. We gave him advice based on our trip, and wished him luck. [I later heard he did indeed end up summiting.]

Past his tent we found our old campsite, but the wand marking our cache had obviously been moved. It was now sticking out of the snow shelter, but that wasn't where our cache was. There was a lot of black trash particles on the ground, like someone had been smoking and dumped out the remains. We had seen this type of trash near the camp of the guys from Anchorage and Winnipeg, and it looked like they had camped at our old spot and moved our wand. That's not only rude but potentially dangerous. Moving another party's cache marker could prevent them from recovering precious food or fuel they need to survive on the mountain. And it's not like we had the only place to camp – it was a huge flat snow plateau and one spot is as good as another.

We were really angry, and tried digging around randomly, hoping to find our cache. Eventually Matthew found it, and we resolved that we definitely had to beat those guys to base camp now.

From King Col the route was a moderate slope almost all the way to 10,000ft, so perfect for sledding. This time, after seeing the evidence of the crevasse fall higher up, we decided to stay roped up. It's a little difficult sledding while roped up, but as long as the first person goes a little slower than maximum speed the second person can adjust his speed to match, keeping the rope taught in between.

We soon mastered this strategy, cruising down the slopes and making excellent time all the way down to 10,00ft. Here we got back off the sleds, put on our snowshoes, and started walking. Lower on the glacier here the past two weeks had made a big difference in the conditions. When we started our trip the glacier was flat and smooth, but now snow bridges were obviously sagging over crevasses we had unknowingly walked over on the way in.

There had indeed been quite a few sunny days over the past two weeks, and this was having a big effect on the snow bridges down here. We could see now why the rangers had recommended against starting in June. Here it was mid-May and it looked like within a few weeks this lower section of the route could get extremely difficult to walk through or maybe even become impassable.

Luckily, though, we still had a clear and safe route back to basecamp. We got in a final small sledding run before arriving back at basecamp by 8pm, 12 hours after we'd started that morning at Plateau Camp. We had beaten the other two-person team and earned the first seats on the next flight out.

Matthew called up Sian on the satellite phone to schedule a pickup, but Sian said another group had already called her and said they were at base camp ready for a pickup the next morning. "Um, Eric and I are definitely the only ones here…" Matthew said. "They probably called you from higher up on the mountain and lied about where they were."

"Well you guys definitely will get on the first flight since you're the first ones there. It's too late today to come in, so Tom will call you at 6am tomorrow for a weather check, and if it's good he'll come pick you up." Sian said. "Great, thanks!" Matthew replied.

We would later learn that Matthew had been on speaker phone at the hangar, and everyone there was quite pleased that we had beaten the other two guys to basecamp. Those guys had apparently been pretty rude to the Icefields Discovery team about being delayed a day from bad weather flying in.

There was a large snow wall built up at basecamp now, perhaps by one of the later parties to fly in, and we set up our tent right in the middle. We soon saw the other two guys in the distance skiing down toward us.

While we were annoyed at them for moving our cache wand, we were still nice to them when they arrived, offering them the space next to our tent inside the snow-walled area, and some of our leftover dinner.

They weren't too happy that they weren't the first ones to fly out, but there was nothing they could do about it at this point. It looked like the weather was supposed to stay sunny all day tomorrow anyways, so there would likely be no major delays for either of us.

Day 16

The satellite phone rang at 6am, and we gave Tom the good news that the weather was indeed clear over our camp. We packed up our gear, and about an hour later Tom arrived to pick us up. Our flight out was as spectacular as it had been on the way in, and we were back on solid ground at the edge of Kluane Lake by 9am.

We now had an extra two full weeks in the Yukon, with plenty of fuel and camping food already packed. With excellent weather overhead we decided to skip any rest days and immediately embarked on another adventure – a nine-day pack rafting trip down the Jarvis and Alsek rivers back into Kluane National Park.

Trip 9 – Cuba

Cuba
Pico Turquino 6,476ft

Author: Matthew

June 11, 2015

With our ascent of Pico Turquino (elevation 6,476′) on June 11, 2015, we became the first people to climb the tallest mountain in all 23 of the North American Countries ("country" defined as a U.N. Member Nation). We began our quest on the summit of 20,310′ Denali (Mt. McKinley) in Alaska in May 2010. After that, we made eight other climbing trips to other corners of the continent: three to Central America, three to the Caribbean, one to Yukon of Canada, and finally to Cuba. Reaching the summit of Cuba's Pico Turquino marked the culmination of a challenging 5 year and 16-day quest.

The challenge associated with climbing Pico Turquino was not so much due to difficulty of the route (Denali in the US and Mt Logan in Canada both required about two weeks of highly demanding, Arctic high-altitude mountaineering, whereas Pico Turquino required only 10 hours), but rather the extent of the red tape. As we know, although some Cuba-related travel regulations have been recently relaxed, it is still not permissible for Americans to travel to Cuba for the purpose of tourism. But it is OK to travel as part of a People-to-People cultural exchange. We worked with Paul Prewitt from Hot Cuba Travel, who put together a custom tour for us that included an ascent of Pico Turquino (a mountain that very few Americans ever climb), and also interwove a number of enriching cultural activities including homestays, speaking with locals, tours of Havana and Santiago, visits to churches, listening to local music, and sampling local cuisine.

Paul, along with Cuban guides named Jesus and Juan, gave us an excellent sampling of life in Cuba. The trip was much more enriching than simply the ascent of one more mountain; although the trip was only six days long, it gave us a much closer glimpse of life in Cuba than we had even gotten before.

First, we flew from Miami to Havana, and our guide Jesus led us on a walking tour of the city. In the evening, we rode in a pristine 1957 Buick convertible along the coast. We spent the first night at the casa of a gentleman named Gustavo, who used to be a professional singer. The next day, we flew to Holguin via Cubana Airlines, and had a tour of the countryside by bus. After a self-paced tour of the city while running, we spent the night in Santiago at a casa. Next day, we drove to the Pico Turquino trailhead and set up the next day's climb with the park service.

The climb itself was challenging. We started hiking at about 4:15am with our guide Yordi (all climbs of Pico Turquino require you to hire one of five park-licensed guides) near the village of La Mula, situated on the southern shore of Cuba, about 3 hours east of Santiago. Joining us for the hike was our friend Jake. Our Dad, Keith Gilbertson, along with our guides Paul Prewitt and Juan stayed at the trailhead. To go for the gold, we started the hike by dipping our hands in the warm, Caribbean, so that we could traverse the entire elevation of the country during the hike. Although it was dark, the hike started out hot and humid, and we had to take frequent breaks for water. For three gringos from up north, the heat and humidity were stifling.

The trail is quite steep; with a total ascent of about 6,500 feet over 6.2 miles – nearly a 20% average grade – it rivals or exceeds most American trails in terms of steepness. But the staff of Turquino National Park do an excellent job of maintaining the popular trail. Although the area sees abundant rainfall, and there are quite a few muddy areas, there are frequent wooden steps which help to prevent erosion, and occasional hand rails in the particularly steep sections.

Just after sunrise, we stopped for a break in a nice clearing with benches. Our guide Yordi reached in his pack and dug out three gigantic and delicious mangoes, which he handed to us. They were about twice the size and twice the tastiness of any mango we'd ever seen in the US! They were the perfect food – full of water and sugar. The mangos and our excitement propelled us onward, and we reached the summit around 10:15 am!

A large bronze bust of Jose Marti – the Abraham Lincoln of Cuba – adorns the center of the large clearing at the summit. Legend has it that the 56 kg bust was hauled up by two intrepid hikers in the 1950s. We paused for our traditional summit photos: one with our arms raised, one with both of us jumping, and one juggling rocks. The trees surrounding the summit were a little too high to afford a view, but we had caught several glimpses of the turquoise Caribbean during the ascent. (Pico Turquino was aptly named for "turquesa" – the Spanish word for "turquoise" in reference to the color of the Caribbean.)

We basked in the warm summit sunshine for about an hour before heading down. During the descent, we realized just how far we had climbed that day. We triumphantly reached the trailhead at about 2:15pm, for a round-trip time of 10 hours. We jumped in a natural freshwater pool nearby to cool off and celebrate.

We will keep working on country high points. There are 195 countries in the world, and together we have climbed the highest point in over 100 of them. Nobody has ever climbed all of them.

The importance of the cultural exchange:

The cultural exchange nature of the trip was essential and definitely two-way. All of the Cubans we talked to expressed happiness in the recent improvements in American-Cuban relations, and hopefulness that things would continue to improve. We were surprised to see many American flags; we saw flags waving from cars, American flag bumper stickers, and even clothing patterned with Old Glory. People often asked where we were from, usually asking if we were from Canada or Germany. When we told people that we were from Los Estados, everyone was universally surprised and excited. We got the sense that they don't see many Americans.

We asked many of them if they had ever been to the USA, and they all said that they hadn't, but would really like to. "Hopefully in a few years," they said. They like the direction that things are moving, but "it's still slow," one man said in English. "It's like a turtle – one step forward, one step back." I think that through the cultural exchange, we Americans can act as ambassadors, giving Cubans a favorable impression of America. Meanwhile, we gained an excellent and positive impression of Cuba from meeting with the locals. We can only hope that the turtle continues its steady pace forwards on the way better relations.

References

[1] Composition of macro geographical (continental) regions, geographical sub-regions, and selected economic and other groupings, *United Nations Statistics Division*, http://unstats.un.org/unsd/methods/m49/m49regin.htm#ftnb, retrieval date 3/11/2010.

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