The paradox that is Mt. Fuji

From CFAY MWR Marketing

Both the seasoned mountaineer and novice climber agree that Mt. Fuji is a unique place. Snaking up the face of the mountain are well-worn, switchback trails lined with mountain huts hawking food, stamps, water and souvenirs. With enough yen, one can practically summit without bringing any supplies. Because of this, most self-respecting mountaineers sneer at Mt Fuji with a certain distain. Some may scoff, "what challenge awaits you on a mountain with man-made steps and sit down toilets?" However, these same reasons send thousands of tourists flocking daily to Fuji in July and August making the mountain one of the most enduring symbols of Japan. Roughly a quarter of a million people attempt to climb Fuji each year; unfortunately, the majority of them have no experience dealing with mountains. It is in this fact, which the paradox of Mt Fuji lies.

Mt. Fuji, a technically active volcano, stands at 12,388 feet, (3776 m.,) At 7,560 ft lies the fifth station, which is the highest point with vehicle access. Visitors usually start here as most can climb to the summit and back before sunset. Without the need of technical rope work and with bilingual signs to guide you, the climb basically becomes a steep, intermediate hike accessible to those with moderately good health and a sense of adventure. But at 12,000 ft, Fuji may become dangerous for the ill prepared, inexperienced or simply unlucky.

After all, mountains, oceans–even deserts–are living entities with moods that can change in a heartbeat. Mountains can be the most ornery because they create their own weather and redirect winds, clouds, rain–even sunlight. They spit ice and snow and hurl down stones. Volcanoes particularly, will sink a climber's boots in loose gravel weighing down him or her.

So what to make of the Mt. Fuji experience? Is it a crowded, touristy hike or an unpredictable, moody creature pitching rocks at you? Both. Fuji is a real mountain; visitors should not approach it like a trip to Disneyland. It is not a US park either. Vendors along the trails are private business owners that are not responsible for climbers' safety and wellbeing. Few of them are bilingual or medically trained. If you are not an experienced alpinist, it is strongly advised to not climb Fuji solo. Although many climb alone without incident, others encounter trouble.

Over the years, the Outdoor Recreation Center staff has observed many hikers, both part of and not part of our group, in trouble on Fuji. What makes climbing potentially dangerous is that everyday problems may become life threating exceptionally fast when they occur on a mountain. Here's an example of that:

Paul, age 20, is in excellent physical condition and plays ball daily. Despite warnings, he had 4-5 beers the night before so he could "sleep" on the bus a few hours. It's a humid, sunny, seventy-degree, August day when the bus arrives at the fifth station at 0530. Paul chugs a water bottle and packs another in his pack along with an I pod, camera, two candy bars, jeans and sweatshirt. He was told that it's cold at the top. He's wearing a cotton t-shirt, rayon basketball shorts and high-top sneakers. No rain is in the forecast.

He begins the hike with his young, fit friends who are determined to get their souvenir hiking sticks stamped at each station along the trail. Because of this, they begin pushing themselves in a race to the top; at the 8th station and 10,000 feet, Paul is exhausted.

He's out of water with no extra money to buy more. His friends begin to pull ahead of him and he tells them "I'll catch you at the top."

Hiking alone, Paul's head begins to pound from dehydration and altitude. His body never recovered from the previous night's alcohol. The weather has shifted and it's below 50 degrees as the sun tucks behind clouds and the fog rolls in. At 11,000 feet, a light rain shower starts to fall, soaking his navy sweatshirt and jeans that he swapped earlier for his sweaty t-shirt and shorts. Although shivering, a fatigued and soaked Paul sees the top and continues to push on.

USS Blue Ridge **(LCC 19) steams within sight of Mount Fuji near Shimizu, Japan. U.S. Navy photo by MC3 Heidi McCormick**

Suddenly, he slips on a rock, scrapes his knee and turns his ankle. In seconds, Paul becomes immobile and can only watch as the rain is chased away by 25-knot winds and below–freezing temps. Some Japanese hikers offer help but Paul insists he is fine and ushers them to go on. Luckily, the good Samaritans catch an MWR trip leader and tell him that a *gaijin* is in trouble. By the time he's reached, Paul has a first-hand understanding of the AFN hypothermia commercials! The next hours are unpleasant for everyone. Paul is admitted in the hospital overnight and then on bed rest.

Paul's situation was completely avoidable had he heeded warnings, giving the mountain the respect it deserves. Here are a few tips to avoid being "a Paul."

Don't drink alcoholic beverages the day before you go: If you can't refrain from booze for 24 hours prior to climbing–seek counseling, not Fuji. Alcohol is a diuretic causing a person to lose fluids that the body immediately seeks to replace. Remember that an individual whom can function without incident the day after a few drinks is operating at sea level. At 10,000 feet, our bodies are operating in a seriously different environment. Put simply: Begin your hike hydrated–never dehydrated.

If you have Sickle Cell Anemia, Sickle Cell Trait or a family history of these diseases, see a physician before you go: Although Sickle Cell Anemia isn't the only disease to be cautious of when climbing, in recent years it has proven to be the most devastating one. Because altitude and dehydration can affect the symptoms of this disease, see your physician before climbing.

Never hike alone: Anything and everything can happen on that mountain and there is no way of calling for help. Mobile or cellular phones don't have guaranteed coverage, if any at all. Don't rely on them and never hike alone.

Wear appropriate clothing: Cotton, believe it or not, is one of the worst things you could wear. Instead, your clothes and stored-away rain gear and cold weather clothing should be made of non-absorbent, manmade materials. Wrap them first in a garbage bag if your backpack isn't waterproof. If you don't need them, you're lucky. If you do, you'll be thankful that you properly prepared for the hike.

Eat and drink: Hydrate often and eat small amounts frequently. Climbers roughly burn an amazing 7,000 calories! It is not a day to diet—be sure to bring snacks.

Be in shape: An inactive couch potato with hiking experience limited to the fridge and back should not climb Mt Fuji–at least not yet. A climber should be able to comfortably walk or jog two to three miles without a break before taking on Fuji. A person who gets winded easily needs to build up his or her cardiovascular endurance before being exposed to higher altitudes.

Have some common sense and respect: Climbers don't determine when they summit mountains; mountains allow climbers to summit them. Hikers that find themselves over their heads should stop, take shelter and try again another day if needed. Mt Fuji isn't going anywhere.

The points covered in this article are just the beginning. On Yokosuka base, there will be a Mt. Fuji brief at 5:30 p.m. every Tuesday from June until the end of August at the Area Orientation Brief/Inter-Cultural Relations room 442 on the 4th floor of the Community Readiness Center. These free briefs are mandatory for all MWR trip participants, but are open to everyone. Standing on that summit with a spectacular view of below is a great feeling of accomplishing a feat most will never attempt. But to stand on that summit, those considering climbing Fuji should prepare properly. A saying goes: "There are old climbers, there are bold climbers; but there are no old, bold climbers."