



Medicine on Greater Heights

By Kumaran Rasappan

Inspiration

Inspiration struck in Year Three when I was juggling my clinical workload, pharmacology and COFM pros, which was to take place in a few days time. I decided to take a breather and clear some emails. One of my friends, Claudia, from the National University of Singapore (NUS) Rock Climbing Club had posted a link to her photo blog of her recent climbing trip to South America. That one click and view of photos changed my life.

My eyes grew wider as I scrolled through picture after picture. I forgot where I was and became captivated by the mountains. I began to picture myself climbing through the thick snow and ice using harnesses, ropes, crampons (spiked boots) and ice axes. Reaching above the clouds and peering over the other smaller peaks with the sun rising behind my shoulder. Taking in the most beautiful views with sweet deafening silence and the company of solitude was an experience I knew I wanted to be part of. If someone similar to me could do something so extraordinary, something I had till then only seen or read about, I thought to myself – so could I.

Mt Kilimanjaro (5895m) – Tanzania, Africa

All my searches for the “easiest” highest mountain to climb brought me again and again to Mt Kilimanjaro, Tanzania. Looking back, gathering like-minded people and planning everything from scratch in the midst of exams and postings was an extremely tedious but memorable process. My teammates and I dedicated the only three-week break we had in June for this trip.

The environment we faced was of the extremes and also the most breathtaking I had ever seen. It was amazing to walk in the driest desert terrain with the sun shining so brightly that you could get sun burnt and yet the temperature so cold that the stream nearby was frozen. During the sunrise on our summit day, as the first rays broke through the cold dark night, I could see the curvature of the earth. The multitude of colours painted the horizon in the brightest lustres and hues. That was the day I concluded that mountains were the most beautiful things on earth.

However, that beauty came with a price. I had underestimated the world’s “easiest” highest peak. On summit night, the



Kim Boon showing us how it's done

wind chill made the temperature dip to -20 degree Celcius and the air was getting thinner with each step we ascended. I felt worse each time we stopped for a break as I would get colder. I had an intense fear of frostbite as I could not feel my fingers and toes throughout the night. The harder I climbed, the more breathless I felt and the more stops I had to take. I really

wanted it to end. I am a relatively fit individual and we had trained intensively for this trip but somehow, mountains require a different sort of fitness that I was unprepared for.

Without crampons for grip, I would slip and crumble to the icy floor in exhaustion only to get back up again as it was too cold to lie on the ground for long. Each effort to regain a step without falling was like finishing a 2.4km race under gold timing. I was breathing so hard I could not think straight. A bad headache, nausea and a cough so harsh that I felt my throat might bleed, struck me. It was altitude sickness and I felt terrible.

When we reached Stella Point, the crater of the volcano, the guide recommended for me to head down as he felt that I was showing early signs of High Altitude Pulmonary Edema (HAPE). I was convinced otherwise from the lack of pink frothy sputum and stubbornly wanted to continue – I didn't come halfway across the world to turn back so close to the summit. I looked at my fingers and they had a bluish tinge. Cyanosis! I'll never forget what the guide told me that moment: "The mountain will always be there. Your life is more important than a rock."

In mountaineering, you are at battle with your own mind constantly. You are not competing with anyone nor is there much to gain from reaching the top. Instead, you must find your own reason from within to climb and it must be strong enough to follow you



The team with Siguniang mountains in the background

medical students' mailbox

through. There is a thin line between pushing forward and letting go, and this determines life and death on a mountain. If you don't push yourself hard enough, you will later regret it and "what ifs" will linger in your mind all your life. If you push yourself over, you might never attempt another summit again. I was feeling really bad and yet I was pushing on. Looking back, it wasn't the wisest of decisions.

We pushed on and in the end we did reach the summit! Uhuru Peak – at 5895m, it is also referred to as the roof top of Africa, and the highest point in the continent. Surprisingly, I didn't feel a sense of accomplishment as I thought I would. Instead, I felt a sense of humility and awe beyond any experience.

I was very humbled by the whole journey. I truly had underestimated the mountain. That day, I found out how small I was. Even though I summited, my ego was suppressed. When people congratulate me on conquering Kilimanjaro, I tell them instead that Kili conquered me in every way that day. I merely managed to reach its summit. When I returned back home, I felt an immense urge to climb once more – to discover myself and drown in nature's beauty all over again. I started making plans for my next trip.

Ice Climbing and Mt Da Fong (5335m) – Sichuan, China

Nita, my batch mate in our Kili team didn't want her mountaineering experience to end there as well. Even with new academic work in Year Four, we blindly took the first step and joined the NUS Make-It-Real (MIR) Mountaineering Club. Time was even tighter and we could not go for many training sessions. The club was very understanding and excused us. We hooked up with one of the MIR founders, Mr Lim Kim Boon, who organised ice climbing courses in China during winter. Planning was a headache but we squeezed in two weeks to ice climb. We left the day after our pathology pros ended and returned just in time for electives.

The coolest (literally) and most exciting thing I've ever done has to be ice climbing on the frozen waterfalls of the earthquake-stricken Shuangqiaogou Valley in Sichuan, China. Everyday, we would look for random frozen waterfalls and after a quick risk assessment by Kim Boon, we would start climbing. Imagine using ice axes and crampons to scale massive blocks of ice towering hundreds of metres above, with starting altitudes higher than the Alps; trusting your life to a screw manually driven into the ice and praying that it wouldn't shatter when you slipped. The freedom and adrenaline rush when all your weight is supported on a single metal spike from your crampon thrust into the ice while you look behind and survey an amazing view from above is a privilege few have had. If you think I'm crazy, I think so too.

Of course, mountaineering has its dangers. When climbing Mt Da Fong, one of the peaks of the Siguniang (translated as "Four Sisters") range, we faced a huge scree (loose rocks) slope before the summit ridge. A light snowfall made the already unstable 45 degree slope even more slippery. I was on all fours, gripping a huge boulder that I thought was stable. However, the boulder slipped towards me when I loaded my weight on it. I was helpless as I hung partially from the same boulder that would crush me in moments. I shouted for help and luckily the guide was near enough to rush down and help. With one hand, he grabbed mine and using all his might, pushed and deflected the boulder away from its deadly path towards me. It was truly a narrow miss. There were also ferocious winds on the exposed narrow summit ridge that could blow people away – if one did not squat down immediately – which I never thought possible. Even though this peak was lower than Kili, it was only due to my new-found respect for any mountain after my first experience did I have the mental capacity to push to the top. It was tough.

Island Peak (6189m), Kala Patar (5545m), and Everest Base Camp (5360m) – Nepal

The NUS MIR Club members were nice enough to include me in their year-end expedition to Island Peak in the Everest region after I returned from my electives. It was an 18-day trek and my first 6000m mountain. Full of confidence after bagging the other



Dropping into a cravass



Deep cravasses all around



Me on top of Kilimanjaro



Everest Base Camp



Tengboche Monastery where all Everest climbers get their blessings



two summits, I was all acclimatised and ready for the summit day. It was going to be a 15-hour push, and the toughest challenge so far. We passed scree slopes, dangerously narrow ridges, the rope-up point, leaped across deep crevasses, and trudged in waist-deep snow. Suddenly without warning, a whiteout occurred and visibility dropped to less than 50m. We could not see where up or down was and the guides decided to turn back just 100m from the summit. Once again the mountain taught me something new: Nothing in life is totally under one's control. For many days after, I wanted to try the summit again. Others were happy with the fact that they knew that they could have done it if not for the weather. I couldn't do that but I learnt to accept, adapt and move on.

We eventually climbed other smaller peaks, went to Everest Base Camp and saw the mighty Mt Everest herself. The Everest climbing season had just ended and all the expedition groups were heading back. We managed to meet the Singapore Women's Everest Team (SWET) girls and congratulated them on their success. We also met Johnny Strange, a 17-year-old American who summited Everest. Upon returning home, we received news that he was featured on CNN as being the youngest person in the world to have conquered the seven summits (the highest peaks in all seven continents)!

Future plans

Each time I return, I have a ferocious appetite to study. Being away from medicine for so long made me see more purpose and instilled more zest in me; allowing me to reflect and realise why I was doing what I was doing and this made me extremely motivated.

I told myself on summit day of Kili that I'd never be able to climb mountains above 6000m without erythropoietin injections. I told myself that Kili was going to be the last mountain for me. I thought that I would not have time for any more of these adventures in my life as I was already in Year Four and had to concentrate on my studies. However my passion for the mountains proved otherwise. All these self-made boundaries and barriers crumble when you want something badly enough. Nowadays when people say they're busy, it is likely they do not want to do that particular thing badly enough to make time for it. Time can always be managed. Many sacrifices have to be made for your passion but it will all be worthwhile because you are doing what your heart desires and will truly be happy.

There is so much talent in the medical faculty; it is a pity that many people are still afraid to do things out of their comfort zone that makes them feel alive, be it playing a sport, doing community service, helping juniors out, learning something new or even going on a holiday. In the long run, fulfilling your heart's desire will give you more purpose and drive in medicine. I feel that it will also make you a better doctor in the future.

I encourage everyone to climb a mountain in their lives. It will teach a lot and change you for the better. Mountaineering is not everyone's cup of tea, I agree. Which sane person would spend precious holidays to suffer in the freezing cold; go days without bathing; toilet in the most uncomfortable and unhygienic conditions; carry a heavy backpack and get sick just so he or she can see a "rock", take photos and descend as quickly as he or she went up. If you can put up with all this; go try it. You'll never regret it.

I want to form a NUS YLLSoM team to bring our school flag to the summit of Mt Everest in the near future. Late March to early June is the popular climbing season for Mt Everest. It takes two months and the climbing permit and logistics cost around SGD\$60,000 per person. Around three years of commitment is needed to raise funds and do acclimatisation expeditions to mountains of increasing altitudes.

Most holidays will be spent climbing and juggling academics. If you have any inclination to climb, be it Everest or other peaks, do join the NUS MIR Club as it will give you insight into mountaineering and help you decide if mountains are your cup of tea. This massive project is open to anyone and everyone in medicine. If you have any interest, be it being part of the climbing team, the organising committee or just contributing in anyway, do email me at koolmaran@hotmail.com and we can engage in detailed discussion. One day I do hope to climb Mt Everest myself.

Hopefully when I reach its peak, I can say to myself, "It was all worth it." SMA



Like every M5 student, sweating under the stress of the final MBBS around the corner, I've somehow managed to keep myself busy with non-academic activities throughout my five years in medical school.

I feel this has helped me keep focused, stress-free and has instilled more drive in me with respect to the pursuit of medicine. I strongly feel that extra curricular activities aid in a medical students' holistic development and every student should pursue his/her passion whilst studying.