

JOURNEY INTO UNKNOWN

By Anja Bakowska

I had been offered a wonderful opportunity to join with the Myanmar Mountaineering Federation in this first attempted ascent of Mt. Madwe on the western border with India. At 15 177 ft, the 4th highest peak in Myanmar, and as yet, unscaled.

Our group included thirty students of Mandalay University, myself, and 46 porters. I have been the first Westerner walking on the unknown land.

The first night was spent in the local school near the river mouth of Malihaka river. I went together with my friend So Mo for hopping. A hospitable girl from tribe called Lisu took us to visit a few houses. Many doors were decorated with monkey's scalps as a symbol of hunter's skills. We bought eggs, oil, chicken and vegetables. We ate our dinner crowded together around fire. The cool night warned of the impending mountain range.

We walked long hours through wild, high grass alongside the river. Before we had crossed it for the first time my shoes were wet, and stayed that way until the last day of the journey. The river was wild and cold, but shallow enough to pass. Our porters rigged ropes to help us across it.

We were divided into three groups. Duties were shared, but gravitated into the women making food and fire, while the men set up the camps. Camp consisted of three large shelters erected as cover against the dew, and later snow. My

group had a clear cover to sleep under, allowing starlight to filter in.

The next morning we began four days of slow progress as the grasslands ceded the riverbanks to large, oval boulders. Many suffered bruised legs and swollen knees. Two girls suffered badly bruised heads in falls, and one brave female broke 2 teeth, which went through her cheek. These resolute souls patiently persisted despite their battering of bumps and bruises.

We kept on with as much pace as we could, stopping only at lunch. The sausage and dried beef, mixed with herbs, oil, and rice, were cravingly good. The pure river water we drank all day we scented with oranges and had with biscuits to finish.

After 5 days, we started to climb. There were two guides, hunters walking proudly with their cross bows, blanket and rice bowls. They never looked tired or hungry, when we stopped they always puffing their cheroot.

We walked through a labyrinth of sharp bamboos up the rapidly inclining hills. From time to time, through the thick screen of bamboos and bushes I could see glimpses of the Himalayas. It was a sight that is like a sober reality always in the back of ones mind. We reached our camp at night at the snow limit of 9000 feet. Our steps had become uncertain, and the cold very unpleasant. In the exuberance of this, my strongest day yet on trail, I realized that we had split into three groups, as the rising altitude and slope had splintered

our column. My bag had stayed behind with a slower group of porters. Of course, my Burmese team-mates rushed with help. I had spare clothes heaped upon me, and Pi Pi offered her sleeping bag to share. I was as thankful for that inadequate space on a bed of rocks as any bed I had ever been in. Everyone slept very close together that night – our first at real altitude, with our breathing constantly misting the air. Despite our exhaustion, it was a long, cold, and sleepless night.

The very next morning we bagged cooked rice, while others scoured the slopes in search of firewood for the teams tending the fires to melt snow.

Then, within a few hours, the weather started to change and the temperature dropped. The clouds revealed to us their ominous mood, darkening the sky, the mountain, and slightly, our mood.

It was the strong wind which blew the storm far from Philippines. Big cyclone decided upon our faith.

The plan was to go as far as the shelter was possible to get not too far away from the summit. Stay overnight and early morning before the fog fell do the final climb. The guide knew the steps till the end of vegetation. The rest were never reached by human step.

I took with me a tent but I haven't opened once as I want to experience the local way of handling the life. They can adopt to any condition being inventing and practical.

Resistance, strong and modest always loaded with smiles. I felt proud to be among them.

We were up before the sun making a fire. We started early climbing towards the unseen sun. Plastic bags between socks and rubber gloves meant to save from penetrate chillness. 15 porters come along with us the rest stayed by the fire melting the snow. Food rations were carefully divided.

There was a long walk and night of bitter cold in front of us. With every step we were sinking into the fresh snow.

We walked as far as the guide wasn't certain the path any more. We stoped and wait to clear up. But the fog and snow become denser and there was no hope to see the sun. Making a fire with wet wood cause only smoke which hurt our eyes. We were all waiting for decision to come but we all knew it would be risking of hypothermia and possible injuries on the slippery rocks.

After two hours deliberation, the decision was made and we turned back. It was still enough day light for return. The foot prints were already cover by a new layer of snow. We stayed close to each other. The fog was treacherous. Disappointment after the year of planning, getting funds and training was unspeakable. Mt. Madwe remained untouched.

We reached around 12000 feet, 300 feet away from the summit. It was my first 1200 feet. I got farther than I expected. I was happy where I was. But still without one photo of Mt. Madwe. However in the very next morning the

sun burst on the endless blue sky. To the west, the proud peaks of the Himalayas finally emerged from the clouds. Before the hopes started to rise the shadows arrived with heavy clouds. There was no return to this high, undiscovered ranges. None dare to speak we all know that it was the only right decision. We need to go down. Food supplies were shrinking fast.

Down was harder on tired knees and feet. But this time the jungle was closer. I notice more than going up. Lime tress, banyan, black an yellow raspberries, pine trees, wild peach, and various orchids. The forest was vivid with life. I walk happily accompanied by gibbons call. This land was once known to abound with tigers, panthers, deers, pythons, bears and many more.

We went down very fast. From 4 days on the river we made it two, we took shortcuts fallowing the streams and river, breaking through mud washed away by monsoon.

Supplies were closed to end and our porters were sat free light like butterflies jumping on the rocks with giggles.

Days were becoming very hot and we had to leave early in the morning. We had to cross the hanging bridge during the night. Locals were saying that under the bridge used to be a graveyard now there is a river and the angry spirits can shake the bridge and if someone will fall, would never be found. It gave us all shivers.

We arrived all safely home and our adventure will be still alive in each of us even after a years to pass.