

Venezuela

Roraima Trip. February, 2000

Part Four

The sleeping bag Donald rented me is so thin that if you tried to make a jacket out of it, you'd pretty much have a double-weight windbreaker. Each of the last two nights have been exercises in endurance. I fall asleep as soon as I tuck myself in, but wake at intervals all through the night, shivering. I lie awake until I warm up enough to fall asleep again, and then repeat the cycle until my brain has run out of melatonin and all I can do is lie on the ground and think about things until it's time to get up.

At breakfast, I ask Donald how he slept and he says it's pretty much the same for him all the time on a trip, mainly because he doesn't sleep well on the ground. Over the camp stove Donald makes us some sort of porridge, which he tops with chocolate corn flakes.

Donald takes some things out of our packs that we can cache away and pick up on the way back out; a few cans of sardines and tuna, a few cans of peas, a cucumber, some rice and pasta. What he leaves in my pack will be needed on the mountain; a bottle of catsup, a bottle of hot sauce, a bottle of oil, a few cans of sardines and tuna, a couple cans of peas, a box of salt, cucumbers, onions -- I guess I don't need to go thru the whole list to make it clear that we aren't exactly using freeze-dried backpacker rations. And yes, all

the bottles except the oil bottle are glass. This is some sort of gonzo hiking system. I feel like maybe we should be carrying a six pack of beer, too.

After two days on the trail, we're so close to Roraima that almost 180 degrees of our view is nothing but the rock wall of it. The rock is reddish pink and black, but where the trail is, the mountain is green and fluffy. You can't even see the trail itself, just a green swath of jungle flowing from bottom right to top left. We are high up on the apron that rises around the mountain. It's a clear day and we have a view of the Gran Sabana for miles around, but the top of Roraima is hidden in clouds that she generates herself.

By all accounts, this is the most challenging day of the climb, the third day. But yesterday was already about eighty percent as tough a day as I can handle. Since we got a late start on day one, entering the park just before the daily 2:00 deadline, Donald and I didn't make it to the usual first camp at Rio Tek. Consequently, our day two, which was almost entirely uphill, was extra long. I slogged into camp yesterday with only about enough energy left to fall down.

I keep turning from the camp duties to look up at the trail. It's probably not such a good idea to do that, because the trail disappears into the fog, at which point the imagination takes over and makes it seem interminable. It looks like a stairway to heaven.

I know I can make it. I've done steep and long climbs like this before, probably with less tuna fish and ketchup in my pack, but steep and long enough. All kinds of regular folks have made this climb.

In my experience, the trick with a trail climb is to find your sustainable pace. For a given hiker, this pace might be fast, it might be extremely slow; that doesn't matter, just find your own pace and don't worry about how fast or slow anyone else is. The important thing is to be able to keep going almost indefinitely, because you never really know how long it's going to take you to get to the summit. You can't be constantly dredging up your energy reserves for the "last part."

I have two completely different climbing paces. One is faster than an ordinary walking pace. I can't keep it up for more than a few hours, but when I use it, it feels great. I feel like I'm burning high octane or something, I breathe heavily but smoothly and just chug on steadily up the slope. It's faster than anyone's climbing pace I know of and I can usually leave my fellow hikers in the dust, which of course feels great, too.

But for a day-long climb like this, or when I don't have the energy to hit that high-octane pace, I have to pick the slow-but-steady one. It's about a third as fast as a normal walking pace, but I can keep it up for about twelve hours and I can climb very steep grades with it, just putting one foot in front of the other, like an elephant.

As soon as we're packed up, Donald shoots off ahead of me, probably to make sure my pace isn't too slow. But once he's about two hundred yards ahead, he slows down and doesn't advance any faster than I do. About an hour after we've started, we reach the wall itself. Dark rosy stone with a texture like broken cheddar cheese. Somewhat harder, tho.

We stop and take a break. The cliff blocks off exactly half of the world, zenith to nadir, left to right. Pieces of it, ranging in size from pebbles to garages are all around at our

feet. In fact, we've been climbing over them for miles. Here, closer to the mountain, they are freshly fallen, perhaps only days old, but of course more likely hundreds of years old.

Donald points to the tree I'm holding on to. "That's a fern," he says. I look at it more closely. It's got a trunk about ten inches in diameter, geometrically rough bark patterned with the stumps of earlier leaves the way a California palm is. I follow the trunk up with my eyes. At the top the fronds spread and I see that it really is a fern. Like a fern on a pole. The thing silhouetted against the mist and the mountain looks bizarre in a prehistoric way, like the drawings in my elementary school text books of what the world looked like before the dinosaurs. Names of eras come to mind, Cambrian, pre-Cambrian, Jurassic, Mesozoic.

A mist is falling from the mountain. Water comes out of the rock high up and turns to mist before it reaches us. The wall fades into the mist in all directions. It's comforting to have the wall there for some reason. But looking up makes me dizzy. I hold on to the fern tree. It's comforting to hold on to something that's been around so long. It's probably a close relative of the first tree that ever was. How many millions of years ago would that have been? I wonder if the tree remembers.

We can look thru the trees and plants out over the Grand Sabana, which is now already a long way below us. It stretches out in all directions. The only sign of man anywhere is a couple of little fires, the trail, and a dirt road.

I put on my rain jacket and leave it open in front for ventilation. We start slogging up the path again, over boulders and around boulders; thru waterfalls and among dripping trees

and around water slick trunks. We're gaining altitude more quickly now and the plants are different. There are lilies, small white orchids and special green orchids now. It's mossy everywhere, and there are little streams every fifty yards. The footing is rocky and slick. I'm especially careful. If I twist an ankle here, not only will I not make it to the top, but I'll have to make my own way back to Nueva Jork like that. I'm stronger than I was when I was a Boy Scout, but I'm more cautious, too.

The altitude is affecting my climbing, but I've found my pace and I just remind myself that eventually it will bring me to the top, and with me will be all of the cans of food and the bottles of sauce and my Paulo Coelho book and my little tape recorder and my camera and my extra film and the tent poles and the almond butter and the Indian bread and my notebooks and the flask of whiskey and everything else.

When we stop for lunch the Grand Sabana is even wider and farther away, but the wall of Roraima still fades up into the mist. By the time the afternoon is half over, we're in the clouds that gather around the top.

I forgot what a metaphysical and psychological experience climbing a mountain can be. All day long, or all week long, or all month long you climb and climb. And the more you climb, the more you realize that you're battling your own mind at least as much as you're battling the mountain.

Trying to reach the summit of any peak or ridge can be frustrating because when you're on a mountain you can't normally see the peak and especially not the entire route to the peak. What you see is just what seems to be the summit, and when you reach that, you realize that there is another, higher point just ahead of you, and so on and so on.

The fog and clouds on the top of Roraima spare me from this frustration, but they add a new frustration of the exact opposite kind. I have no way of knowing whether I'm ninety-five percent of the way to the top or twenty-five percent of the way to the top. This leaves my mind free to play all kinds of games with itself.

Part of me is saying, "You're almost there, you're doing just fine." And part of me is saying, "You've got a long ways to go, and you're tired already. You're going to be hiking all evening and all night, so you'd better slow down and preserve your strength."

The climb starts to play with my mind in other ways, too. I don't really want to be hiking all evening, and the suspicion that I'm falling behind the "correct" pace make me tend to hurry and climb faster than what is comfortable, which makes me more exhausted than I would be at any given point if I had followed my own pace. All afternoon, Donald manages to stay just far enough ahead of me that I almost never catch up with him, so I don't get to ask him how much farther it is, which is perhaps a good thing.

I stop a couple times and take breaks on my own, always reminding myself that "real" mountain climbers would have been on the top by now and this is all really just a "strenuous" tourist climb. My friend Drew and the Lonely Planet guidebook said it didn't take any particular skills to climb the mountain and pretty much anyone who's in good shape can handle it. But now I'm starting to wonder what shape I am in. I do yoga, but I don't get much chance to climb mountains.

When the elevator isn't working, and sometimes when I come back from a run, I climb the stairs to my apartment on the seventh floor. But that's in New York City,

approximately 0 feet in altitude. The highest point on Roraima is over 9,000 feet in altitude, no big whoop if you're climbing Mount Everest next month, but I can definitely feel how much extra I'm huffing and puffing in the thinner air.

By Donald's estimate, my pack weighs over 20 kilos -- about 44 pounds. He tells me there was a scale in the ranger's hut at the trailhead but he forgot to weigh our packs. At first I was sorry I didn't weigh mine, but now I'm glad. If it's really 44 pounds, that's way too heavy a pack for me to be climbing a mountain with. If I'd have known that yesterday, I would have had a much harder time making it to the base camp, having psyched myself out.

Even though we're in the clouds, I can tell that the light is beginning to fade. The trail comes to a steeper section and the rocks change color slightly. My pack has become less of an inanimate object and more of an obnoxious overweight ape. Until today I'd forgotten how unpleasant a long climb can be; especially when you don't know where the hell you are on the mountain. As far as I know, I'm still only two-thirds of the way to the top, so all I can really do is put my head down and continue up.

By now I've had a couple of peaceful days to think about what the hell I'm doing here. I could have gone to Isla Marguerita and hung around and relaxed by the beach, maybe written a new chapter on the new novel. I could have opted for a three-day river trip to Angel Falls (the tallest falls in the world). I could have gone to Merida and hung out with the Indians in the mountains. But no.

As I'm nearing the top of this new steep section, at what must be close to 5:00 p.m., I almost run straight into Donald's leg. Since I'm looking down, the first thing I see is his

boot. “I was waiting for you to show you this,” he says. He points to what looks like a rusty red wingless grasshopper. “These are endemic to Roraima.”

The bug looks to be about 4 in. long, and I watch it for a minute or two as it crawls across the surface of the wet black rock, across where the trail is and up across another rock. I look around and realize we’re in a sort of canyon. I can only see a section of the Gran Sabana that is right next to this side of the mountain. This is a really beautiful spot, and I’d like to rest for a moment, but Donald says that we’re just a few minutes from the top, and we should continue on. Then he turns and heads up the path.

I take a moment to pull out my camera to take a photo of the cricket, but I’m out of film. I set my pack down and begin to change film. I’m careful to shield the camera with my body and head to keep the mist from settling into the inside of the camera, but between changing the rolls, a big drop of water falls from the rim of my hat right smack into the middle of the camera with the shutter is. I dry it off as carefully as I can and load the new film in, but once I get the camera shut, the film won’t advance.

My friend, Drew, who has done this climb, warned me before I ever left New York City that I would need a lot of film. I even went out and bought a brand new Yashica “T4 Super” weatherproof auto-focus camera with the highly-recommended Carl Zeiss T-Star lens just for this trip. Now, when I’m right at the verge of when I need it most, it jams.

I usually travel with at least two cameras, but I knew when I left New York City that the climb up Roraima would be the most important time for me to have a camera, and I would not want to lug extra weight up the mountain, so I just brought the one. It is

insanely disturbing to be deprived of a camera, but all I can do right now is put my pack on and get my ass up to camp and pray that I can fix it later.

Usually, learning that you're just a few minutes from the top will give you a burst of energy that propels you up the last few hundred feet as though you're pulled by a rope. For some reason, this does not happen. It's as though my legs aren't getting the message. I have to instruct them individually to make their steps, and several times I have to threaten them with amputations. I think there's a certain point in one's curve of exhaustion where resting is counterproductive, because the tendency is to shut down all systems and begin reconstructing the muscle. What you really need is to keep the engines going until you get to camp.

After about five minutes, I get my legs into some sort of automatic mode and start to look around as the trail curves to the right and begins to wind through large black boulders and crevices. The plant life changes slowly away from mosses and ferns and more towards strange bromeliads and spiky plants and little orchids I've never seen before. The path becomes more sandy than rocky and the sand is a beautiful salmon pink.

I look for more of the red crickets, but I don't see any more. I do start to see, however, tiny black frogs, with bodies about the size of my thumbnail. They are very difficult to spot on the black rocks, but when they climb out onto the path, they look real snappy against the pink sand. I want to take a picture of a frog, perhaps to prove to myself later that they aren't a hallucination, but of course, I can't.

From just ahead of me up the trail, I hear Donald yell something. He has his arms outstretched and a big smile on his face and he says, "We are here!" I look around and

realize that although we have a lot of winding through the rocks left to do, there is no longer that sheer cliff on any side of us at all. Of course I am insanely pleased to know that I won't be slogging up the mountain the entire evening, but that damn ape is still hanging on my back and all I want to do in this world now is take it off and maybe burn it.

Donald tells me I have to follow close behind him because it's easy to get lost up here. We wind around on the pink path between all kinds of black boulders, some of which have been named by other hikers because they look like things. One is flying turtle; another is an eagle; (the Ford maverick is out of sight in the mist). The trail turns to black, gooey mud from time to time, but it's not uphill any more, not compared to before. And in about fifteen minutes, Donald and I scramble up a bank of brush to a narrow shelf under a rock overhang. This is what the guides call hotel number one.

I wrestle out of my pack and actually throw it to the ground. I don't think I've ever been this angry with my pack before, and I'm sure I've never anthropomorphized it to this extent. I'm really, really glad we'll be staying here tomorrow as well, because I think my pack and I need some time away from each other.