

Caption head.
Nam volupta
eseque volorec
tibusci psantur,
cus sent



A FOOL'S FOLLY

A climb up Mount Fuji prior to the start of the climbing season will ensure you beat the crowds, but it will present some serious challenges, too.

WORDS AND PHOTOS **DAN SLATER**

IT'S NOT OFTEN one finds such a concise definition of folly. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a fool as 'a person who acts unwisely or imprudently; a silly person', a somewhat vague and prosaic description. More poetic is the well-known Japanese classification: "Anybody would be a fool not to climb Mount Fuji once – but a fool to do so twice".

In an attempt to be proven sage in the eyes of all Japan, I set off at 07:30 one fine morning from the Shinto shrine of Sengen Jinja (850m) on the outskirts of Fujiyoshida, the closest city to the north slope of Mount Fuji. Just off a sealed road behind the shrine buildings I find a narrow track through thick forest. It looks barely used, but then it has had all winter to grow over. The official climbing season starts on 1 July, four days hence, so only enthusiastic early birds, or crazy winter ascenders, will have passed this way in the last 10 months.

Cobwebs in my face are testament to the fact that I am first contender of the day, possibly even the season. After all, only a fraction of hikers start from the shrine nowadays; most get a bus up to the halfway point. These dense woods are part of Aokigahara Forest, a vast expanse of trees famous for hosting a large number of suicides every year. It is also said that locals used to practice *ubasute* here – the abandonment of one's elderly relatives to die after they have outlived their usefulness.

After an hour the nearby road terminates at Umageshi, or 'horse turn around', the traditional point at which horses, presumably, turned around. The ascent is divided into 10 chunks, separated by 'stations' at various elevations, with the 10th station being the summit. After two hours of walking I was expecting the first station (1520m) to be some sort of

'free rest area' similar to ones I had seen on other walks, but instead I am confronted with a boarded-up shack opposite a small shrine. How un-Japanese!

Denied a seat and top-up of chilled water, I continue up the forest track. As it gets steeper I see that the path has been reinforced with horizontal logs, and rock-filled pits. I am sweating freely but the continuous light drizzle is refreshing. I startle a deer, which crashes away through the bush, and a squirrel scampers across the path in front of me. Bears have been sighted along this trail as well, maybe drawn by the lush vegetation sprouting from the nutrient rich volcanic soil. Classified as active but very low risk, this famously symmetrical volcano last erupted in late 1707. As one of Japan's three holy mountains, it was first climbed in about 663 by anonymous monk and is now littered with small temples, shrines and signs of religious devotion.

SUBHEAD

For many hundreds of years pilgrims, who became known as Fujiko, arrived to purify themselves at Sengen Jinja and pay their respects to the Shinto goddess and protector of Mount Fuji. They were distinguished by their white clothes, sloping straw hats and traditional straw sandals with canvas mitten socks. While making the ascent, they often rang bells and chanted invocations. I am already thankful for my sturdy boots but suddenly the cooling Scotch mist takes a nasty turn, forcing me to don full waterproofs as well.

I continue up, the stations appearing with more regularity now but the associated buildings are just a series of dilapidated structures. The third is a pile of lumber and the fourth doesn't exist at all! 1700m, 1840m, 2010m, 2300m. I shelter from a



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heavy shower under the narrow eaves of the fifth station; I have been walking for three-and-a-half hours so far. I wait for half an hour for a particularly nasty squall to abate but instead it increases in ferocity. The rain is now suicidal, slamming into the ground with force enough to dent the mud. There’s no option but to rug up and continue. Half an hour later I reach the sixth station (2390m) where I join a wide, flat track from the west. At last I see some signs of human activity: workers carrying out path maintenance ahead of opening day.

If it was July or August this is where I’d meet the hordes coming up from the buses and car parks of Kawaguchi fifth station. Estimates of the number of pilgrims climbing Fuji-san in recent years vary between 200,000 and 400,000, and until 1832, women weren’t even allowed past the first station. The various accommodations up here can house more than 6500 per night and are usually full all season, and that doesn’t take into account the day walkers – those who arrive at 11pm and hike up to the summit for sunrise. Undoubtedly, the cacophony and claustrophobia of the high-season crowds is all part of the modern-day Fuji experience, but I for one am not sorry that the only people I’ve seen so far are a surprising amount of trail runners. Puffing up and down in the now horizontal lashing rain, they are obviously masochists training for the annual Fuji marathon, a 21km course from Fujiyoshida City Hall up to the summit.

Now the mountain really starts to look like a volcano. The trees have thinned down to bushes and begun to peter out altogether, and the zigzags begin in earnest up a crunchy grey surface of volcanic gravel. Soon the path is 3m wide and bolstered not just by logs but huge steel retaining walls and gabions. There are dedicated up and down paths to ease congestion, and I can just picture the busy highway choked with enthusiastic Japanese in retina-scorching, top-of-the-line clothing, their lethal trekking poles swinging, bored children lagging, elderly grandparents left for dead. For now though,

I’m still alone.

I’m desperate for a rest and a dry spot to eat, but there is no shelter at all. Despite this shoulder of Fuji being crowded with lodges, each is locked and barricaded. Even the walls offer no sanctuary, not with stinging rain pelting me from all directions at once. I finally reach a building that appears undefended, pull the slide door open and step inside. A group of staff is sitting around a low table slurping noodles. I smile, waterfalls dripping from my clothes and pack, and explain that I just want a little respite from the downpour outside. One chap smiles and says “sorry,” pointing to a notice that reads “1 hour rest – ¥1000”. That’s over \$12! “Just two minutes,” I plead. “Sorry, no, sorry,” he smiles. I step back out into maelstrom.

Soon after the seventh station I give up and sit in the rain, stealing random handfuls of rations from the top of my pack before any water can get in – a carrot, a bread roll, peanuts. I cool down rapidly and start to freeze but a lucky chocolate bar gives me energy enough to follow the painted arrows towards some steeper sections up which I scramble with the aid of chains and metal poles sunk into the rock. Always above me is another long, low wooden cabin, which I pray to be Tashikan, the eighth station lodge and my booked accommodation, and eventually, it is.

I step inside again, pure Fuji weather cascading in rivulets off my jacket. This isn’t weather; it’s some sort of punishment. I tell my host that I have a reservation and he asks my name. Oh come on! How many *gaijins* is he expecting in this weather? My booking checks out and now, all smiles, he towels down my shells as I peel them off, and holds a bag for my boots. It’s as I feared – my socks are damp, and in good boots too. I feel a battle between two slogans is being fought: the cheesy ad-man tagline – “There’s no such thing as bad weather, only bad equipment,” versus the world-weary bushwalker’s adage – “Nothing is waterproof”. Today’s winner is clear. This rain is beyond resistance. I’m shown up to a bunkroom – two

long, wooden shelves padded with giant mattress slabs and equipped with individual sleeping bags. I change into dry clothes (thank God for dry bags!) and snuggle down for a nap, the wind howling outside, whistling like a kettle, meowing like a wet cat. And what’s that chattering echo? Is it a loose windowpane or Fuji-San laughing at me?

When I wake it has stopped raining and the cloud cover is sparse enough that I can snatch glimpses of Fujiyoshida City in the valley below. And what’s this dark shape swirling around my feet? It looks like a shadow! So the sun does still exist! Despite a capacity of 350, there is only one other guest here tonight – Kimiko Ito, a lady in her 50s. She has been here twice already this month, acclimatisation for an upcoming trip to the European Alps where she intends to attempt both Mont Blanc and the Matterhorn. Whether she continues up for a third summit tomorrow depends on the weather. I know how she feels.

Naturally, come dinnertime, they seat my fellow guest and I at separate low tables, Japanese style. We kneel on the tatami mats without even cushions to shield our weary legs. Sparse isn’t the word. The lodge owners appear to have been inspired by the legendary ascetic and Buddhist Jikigyo Miroku, who fasted to death up here in 1733 and was responsible for launching the modern Fuji cult.

Accordingly, the portions are worryingly small: rice and a puddle of curry sauce, an anorexic sausage and some pickles. There is a small piece of smoked fish but considering the amount of radioactive coolant washing into the ocean up the coast at Fukushima, I’m loath to trust anything from the briny deep. At least I get a pot of green tea; no other liquid is included and a bottle of water costs three times the normal price. I’m glad I filled my spare bottle earlier with runoff

Xerum ratemoloris que necest volor sin explite proris aut acium quodi que

rainwater spewing from a corrugated roof. Without Blinky the radioactive fish I’m going to need to supplement this meal with my erstwhile lunch. Breakfast is served simultaneously, a takeaway for those wanting to catch sunrise at the summit. The morning sunshine is called *Go rei kou*, which means ‘spiritual light’, and is the ultimate goal for most climbers. Sod that!

After dinner I sit next to the fire pit – an ash-filled depression sheltering the glowing embers of three small twigs. Hanging from the ceiling is a fat copper kettle with a wooden fish bolted onto it. Having been in Japan for a week already I am unsurprised by the presence of this incongruous sea-dweller, and think no more about it until Yoshikage Inoue, 12 years the manager of Tashikan, tells me that the scaly watchman is set there to guard the fire at night because, as we all know, fish sleep with their eyes open! The eighth station lodge has been in Yoshikage’s family since the middle Edo period and, although the current building dates from only 1989, the copper kettle itself is over 200 years old!

I ask him about the weather – apparently it was nice yesterday (D’oh!) but it does generally rain until mid-July, and from that point on the lodge is fully booked until mid-August. I can’t imagine them all eating in this small room. Attached to the hut is a first aid station manned by four doctors who deal mostly with altitude sickness and a few cases per season of hypothermia and exhaustion. Yoshikage himself has been up top some 200 times and off-season he visits travel agents all over Japan securing bookings for these invaluable nine weeks per annum.

I sleep from 8pm to midnight and again from 2am to 6am, and I’m out the door by 06:15. The weather is much better

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today, cloudy but not raining. The scrambling continues up past the ‘real’ eighth station and station eight-and-a-half, before shorter and shorter switchbacks lead me to station nine. A classical Shinto torii gate looming out of the mist shortly afterwards welcomes me onto the crater rim after only 90 minutes.

I plan to circuit the crater (a move known as *ohachimeguri*) as the summit point is on the opposite side, so I set off in a counter-clockwise direction. The wind gusting up the side of the mountain is something fierce; I can imagine Kimiko being blown clean off her feet and over some precipice. Visibility is a handful of metres. Crossing a small patch of hard snow I lose the path but am guided for a while by the chains until even they diminish. All I can see is snow and fog; I feel like some lost soul bumbling blindly around Hoth or some arctic tundra.

I hack steps up a snow slope to an insurmountable rock wall. I’m pretty sure the summit is only 300m away along the top of this snow slope but it’s steep and slippery and vanishes into the swirling mists below. I’m not equipped with crampons and if I slip, unable to self-arrest, the slope might funnel me down into the snow-filled crater, more than 200m deep. The extent of my human contact this morning has been limited to two lone soldiers making their descents, the second of whom spoke just one word to me in English – “safety”. Could he have been referring to this traverse? I also recall my fiancée’s less succinct “Don’t do anything stupid!” With her warning ringing in my ears I sigh, and turn around. I’ll have to go the long way round.

An hour wasted, I down-climb the treacherous snow steps and cross back over Windy Ridge. A couple of kilometres

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of circumnavigation later I cross, like Kilimanjaro, the top of two routes from the south side of the peak, Fujinomiya and Gotemba, and looking up get a brief view of the cloud-wreathed summit. At the highest point perches a huge, concrete weather station – nice! Undeterred, I slog up the final slope. Among the walls, weather vanes and ladders, I pinpoint a couple of jutting rocks and an inscribed pillar. It’s 09:15 and I am alone at 3776m. There’s not even anyone to take my summit photo!

As I line up the self-timer I hear mechanical noises and down the slope I see a bulldozer tracking up and disgorging a team of men in hardhats and boiler suits. This isn’t quite how I imagined Japan’s highest point, but fortunately it gives me the opportunity to snag a helpful assistant to press the shutter button for me. Where else could this happen?

The decent is another story. The best part of volcano climbing is leaping headlong down the scree slop that has taken you hours to ascend, slipping and sliding through each zig and zag. Initially fun but soon a toe-bruising, calf-crunching, knee-splintering ordeal, I descend 3000m in six hours of scorching sunshine, and arrive at Sengen Jinja sore, blistered and way beyond thirsty... but at least I’m no fool.

THE ESSENTIALS

Getting there: Jetstar fly to Tokyo from Cairns, with prices starting at around \$600 for a return ticket. In trekking season there are daily buses from Shinjuku bus terminal in Tokyo direct to the 5th station (2½hrs), and this is the cheapest way of getting to the mountain. If you’d rather start at the bottom you’ll have to get to Fuji-Yoshida, best done by the cute mountain train from Otsuki, itself a shinkansen ride from Tokyo. Don’t forget to buy your rail pass before getting to Japan though as you’ll save a packet!

Staying there: There are plenty of places to stay in Fuji-Yoshida, including the friendly Youth Hostel only 600m from the station. For a more authentic Japanese experience try a ryokan, an elegant pilgrim’s inn with tatami mats and private garden. If you’re doing the sunrise hike you shouldn’t need to stay on the mountain but if you do, huts need to be booked in advance at the Information Centre in town, and all 3000 bunks can fill up so don’t delay.

Your ¥5000 gets you a sleeping bag on a communal mattress. Bring earplugs. There is no camping option.

Getting around: There is plenty of transport to the 5th station in-season. Taxis and buses run until late for trekkers wishing to time their summit for sunrise. Of course, for the traditional experience simply walk out of your accommodation and make your way to the Sengen-Jinja shrine in Fuji-Yoshida, where you can begin the Yoshidaguchi Trail. The less confident hiker can book a guided tour, although it is expensive. Try www.fujimountainguides.com/

Where to eat: The best selection of restaurants is in Fuji-Yoshida, an area famous for its teuchi udon, or white wheat noodles. I ate at the ramen joint across the road from the youth hostel, as I could barely walk any further. For the desperate there is Michael’s American pub not far from the station, serving pizzas and burgers. Take as much food and water as you can carry up the mountain as it’s extortionate once there.

When to go: The mountain is open to hikers from 1st July until the end of August. Outside of these dates most of the huts are closed and there are no facilities at all. Japanese hikers stick to the season and it can become very crowded during that time, especially during the long holiday week in the middle of August. It is theoretically possible to hike at other times but the weather is vicious and summit attempts can be extremely dangerous, even with all the right equipment. File a climbing plan with the police before you go.

Gear: You’ll need the same sort of gear as you’d take on any serious trek, although camping and cooking equipment is not necessary. Sturdy boots, trekking poles and full waterproof clothing certainly are. If you’re attempting a winter ascent then full mountaineering kit is essential. It’s best to be prepared before reaching Fuji-Yoshida where shopping options are limited.

More info: www.jnto.go.jp/eng/indepth/scenic/mtfuji/fuji_05.html