

Fujisan, Here We Come!



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Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.

With my head lamp lighting the way, I scrambled up the jagged slope of black lava rock, panting heavily. It was 2.30 in the morning and the air was cold but crisp and bearable. I was with my youngest brother, his wife and his two daughters, deep in the process of conquering Mount Fuji, Japan's iconic and highest mountain which was admitted to UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites in 2013, not so much for its natural beauty as for its cultural value.

We had flown to Tokyo two days earlier, travelled by express bus from Shinjuku Station to Kawaguchiko in 1½ hours and stayed the night there. The following morning, we arrived at Station 5 (2,305m above sea level) after a slow, hour-long bus ride. We could see many other climbers had already gathered there.

After an early lunch, we started our climb at 12.30 p.m. It was an exceptionally beautiful, sunny day. Both Mt. Fuji and the Fuji Five Lake area at its foot were clearly visible.

Mt. Fuji, 3,776m asl, is a dormant volcano which last erupted in 1707. Those contemplating a hike up this mountain can choose from 4 routes but the most popular is Yoshida Trail. Each route is divided into 10 stations with the first at the foot and station 10 on the summit.

The official Mt. Fuji climbing season for 2016 was from 1 July to 10 September. You can still go up the mountain outside of the official climbing season, but most facilities along the routes will be closed and weather conditions will be unpredictable and less conducive for climbing.

We chose to begin our climb on Merdeka Day as we felt the crowd would be thinner towards the end of the climbing season. It turned out to be a very lucky decision.

In Kawaguchiko, shortly before our departure for Station 5, we met a Taiwanese girl just down from Mt. Fuji. She told us she did not reach the summit because it was closed due to the typhoon. So you can imagine how blessed and jubilant we felt when we were

making our way slowly but steadily towards Station 8, with the afternoon sun shining in warm encouragement and we had a full view of Fujisan as our guiding beacon. The zigzag trail is quite well maintained and distinct, so a guide is utterly unnecessary and no one would go astray.

It took me 40 mins to reach Station 6 (2,390m) and another hour to reach Station 7 (2,700m). The slope was becoming steeper and parts of the trail were very rocky. An hour and 35 mins later, I reached Taishikan, the half-way refuge at Station 8 (3,100m).

Dinner was served at 5.15 p.m. and by 6 p.m., we went to bed. But I could hardly get any sleep as the guy next to me in the dormitory made some irritating nasal and throat noise every so often through the night.

When we got up at 2 a.m., I had no appetite for food. It was clear that I was suffering from mild altitude sickness. Unlike the previous afternoon, I was feeling very lethargic. Every step became a drudgery.

Instead of reaching the summit to catch the sunrise, I was still at Station 8.5 (3,450m) when the sun rose above the horizon at 5.10 a.m. Pushing on hard, I walked past the wooden torii (traditional gateway) at Station 9 (3,600m) 40 mins later and finally, after another gruelling 45 mins, a pair of stone lions and a wooden torii welcomed me to the summit.

The highest point on the summit, Kengamine Peak (3,776m), was still 1.4km away and it took us greater effort to reach this at the crater rim. But in the end, all five of us made it. Hooray! ■

