

MALAWI MOUNTAIN TREK

October 2009

Thank you so much for supporting **TEENAGE CANCER TRUST** by sponsoring my trek through the Mulanje Mountains in southern Malawi.

Unlike some previous treks, the conditions this time were warm (too hot at times) and dry, but in many other ways this was one of the most challenging experiences so far.

Here's a photo journal of the trip...



We flew overnight to the capital of Malawi, Lilongwe, and on arrival the next morning boarded buses for the 5-6 hour drive to Blantyre in the south – named after the Scottish village where David Livingstone was born.

The following day, it was a shorter drive to a large tea estate in the foothills of the mountains, where we met our porters and where the serious business of the week began.

The bright green of the tea leaves was beautifully offset by the purple blooms of the jacaranda trees on the estate.

Little did we know as we started walking mid-morning, in such pleasant surroundings, that we had to gain about 1,000 metres (3,280 feet) of altitude before sunset at 5.30pm. That's the equivalent of climbing Mount Snowdon from sea level.

The terrain was steep, rocky and difficult – but just a taster for what was to come....





Near the tea estate we passed through a village, drawing the attention of local children, but soon we were in the vast, uninhabited and deserted region of the Mulanje massif.

Each day we made for one of the walkers' huts which have been constructed over the years.



We camped around each hut, while in the huts themselves there was room for sitting and eating. Most of our food was prepared outside and cooked on open fires. The region is not used to big group treks and the team supporting us were learning how to do so, as we went along.



Every day the walking was pretty tough.

Between huts, there were ascents over rocky paths and slabs of rock – sometimes with makeshift ladders to help.





On the evening of the third day walking, it was decision time.

The trek had been billed as including the ascent of the highest peak in the Mulanje group, and the highest in central Africa. The peak, at 3,002 metres (9,849 feet) is known as Sapitwa. It is the peak near the middle of the photo (the one on the left only looks taller because it is closer).

Having been told about the nature of the climb, only 9 people out of our group of 24 decided to take it on – myself included.

I only found out afterwards that in the local ChiChewa language, Sapitwa means “unvisited”, “no go area”, or even “don’t go there”! There are local legends and myths about the peak, involving angry ancestral spirits and the like. Sadly, some might see these as being reinforced by the fact that two young people have in this decade gone missing on the mountain – a Dutch woman in 2003 and a French-Brazilian man as recently as July this year. However, we did things properly – sticking together and travelling with local guides.



We ascended steep sheets of rock, and had to squeeze between huge boulders, sometimes on our hands and knees – or sometimes leaping from one boulder to another. At one point we had to use climbing rope.

Although 2,500 to 3,000m is not high enough to have any real danger of altitude sickness, the air is certainly thinner – and there was plenty of huffing and puffing on the way up.



At last the summit was in sight and we soon had the exhilaration of being at the highest point in central Africa!



I was genuinely relieved and proud to have made it to the top. The descent and walk to the next hut were also exhausting: an 11-hour day in

total.

On our final day we had the long descent back to the plains below. After soaking our burning feet in some pools at the bottom, we met up with our vehicles and headed to Lake Malawi.



We found no malevolent spirits on Sapitwa, nor Mulanje generally. Quite the opposite in fact. There was a great sense of camaraderie and achievement amongst our whole group – and when the going got tough we only had to remind each other how much greater are the trials and tribulations of the 6 young people diagnosed each day as having cancer.

Your sponsorship means a lot to me, but much more to those whose lives are directly affected by teenage cancer. ***Thank you again for your continued support.***

NIGEL TURNER