

ASSAULT ON MOUNT KAKOULIMA

Mount Kakoulima (from the Sousou word for *hungry child*) is the first big mountain you see when you leave Conakry by road. Imagine the views from the summit: to the southeast lie mangrove forests all the way to Sierra Leone. To the southwest, the Conakry peninsula and the Iles de Loos. To the east, the Fouta Djallon mountains. To be honest, I've never been to the summit, but it's not from lack of trying.

THE 1992 EXPEDITION

I first tried to climb Kakoulima in 1992. I was the leader of an American-Franco-Guinean team made up of me, my daughter Caity (then ten) and her friends Aurelia (11) and Mickael (8).

I had heard that there was a path to the top that started at the Chien Qui Fume restaurant in Dubreka. We set out to find it on a clear Saturday morning. I had planned to leave the house at six, be at the mountain by seven, and climb up and down in time for lunch at the restaurant. I had also planned to be independently wealthy by the time I was thirty. In fact, it was already nine o'clock when we left home. After venturing through the Hamdalaye-Taouyah traffic jam to pick up Caity's friends in Kipé, I made a tactical error that put the whole mission in jeopardy: I took a mysterious road which someone had described to me as a "shortcut", telling me, erroneously, that it was "not too bad". In fact, it was awful; worse, our car has about a two-inch clearance and slides along rough roads on whatever metal parts are still attached to the bottom, sort of like a dog sled but much slower. I knew the expedition was in trouble when, as I scattered pieces of exhaust pipe and transmission throughout some remote neighborhood, a voice from the back seat asked, "Are we there yet?" Columbus is said to have had similar problems with his crew ("El Capitain, como mucho farther esta?") but that was after he had been at sea for weeks, not while he was still in his car driving to the Santa Maria.

It was close to noon when we pulled into the restaurant parking lot, where we had planned to park and start the hike. The kids ran ahead to look at the menu while I talked over our plans with a guy in the restaurant, just to confirm that we were in the right place. We weren't. The foot of the mountain was another six kilometers further, he told us, over a rocky road.

At this point, the other team members proposed a radical modification to the plans: they suggested that we forego the climbing component of the expedition altogether and move directly to the lunch component. It was easy for me to persuade them to abandon that idea since I was the only one who had any money, so we set off again. The road to the foot of the mountain involves crossing a couple of Indiana Jones bridges, where a few planks were all that stood between us and significant repair bills. We made it to the foot of the mountain, parked, and started walking.

The trail up Kakoulima is an old road that cuts through sometimes dense forest, and mostly it is easy walking, unless you are constantly being reminded that every step is taking you farther from the restaurant. We hiked for an hour or so, and we were nowhere near the summit when I surrendered to a mutinous, though polite, three-to-one majority ("Mr. Rippey, we're too hungry to walk any more. But, please, sir, you keep hiking if you want to. We'll just wait here and find some berries or something to eat."). We headed back down and after an eternity sat down to lunch at the Chien

Qui Fume. We ate bread slices with mustard while we were waiting for our meals, which we consumed in approximately four minutes.

The frustrations of the day made me want to do things right the next time, so even as I was driving back home I started to plan...

THE 1993 EXPEDITION

A few months ago I tried again. This time the team consisted of me, Caity, and my son Piers, not quite three.

In retrospect, I think it was a mistake to include Piers. His age was a factor: at two, he just didn't have the stamina he needed to climb a thousand meter mountain. In fact, he did most of the trip on my back in our aluminum infant carrier. For me it was a lot like hiking with a thirty-pound backpack, the main difference being that you don't have to take a regular backpack off every half hour so it can pee.

Years ago, I used to hike all day with a heavy pack, but years ago I used to do all sorts of things that seem like bad ideas now. For instance, years ago, I would have included the following line in this article: "Our feet were so sore by the time we got back to the Chien Qui Fume that our dogs were smoking".

Even with Piers on my back, we made it farther up Kakoulima in '93 than in '92. I've already started to plan The 1994 Expedition, which will have a strictly enforced age limit.

UPDATE: THE 1994 EXPEDITION

Since the above was written, I'm happy to report that I was part of team of six – all thirteen or older – who made it to the top. We were able to do that because of Improved Mountaineering Techniques, of which the most important was driving two thirds of the way up the mountain.

Once we got out of the car and started hiking, our friend Jeff Page breathed deeply and said how wonderful it was to get away from the noise and pollution of Conakry. When we got to the top, we discovered a diesel generator belching out black smoke powering the microwave relay station whose presence is the reason that there is now a road going up the mountain, which is what enabled us to use the Improved Mountaineering Techniques in the first place. Anyway, in spite of the generator, it's worth the trip.

Paul Rippey