

## Climbing High

It was the day we got high. That we got breathless. That we were escorted as troublemakers off a mountain by a Ranger.

We're on the island of Hawai'i. You may know it as the Big Island, so named because it is big. Very big, with limited paved roads that are often single lane, speed restricted and/or winding making the distances even longer.

And that means you need time on the Big Island to do most things, a factor that is key to my story because for people like us, an early start to a day typically means some time after what others call the early afternoon as they head for their siestas following a long and fruitful morning.

So you guessed it. It's early afternoon on a warm clear day in June by the time we set out to start our day.

The aim? A "must do" on the island. To see the sunset from the peak of a dormant volcano - Maunakea - at almost 14000ft above sea level. I should also tell you it's apparently the tallest mountain in the world.

All sounds good so far huh? And it is until you factor in a few more things. First, sunset is at 7.00pm. Next, the drive to reach the visitor centre at 9200 ft takes around two hours. Third, we plan to hike from there to the summit.

Let me put that last revelation into some perspective for you. There is a roaring (and pricey) tour trade to ferry people to the summit because there is no public transport and car hire companies ban driving the road that winds up the mountain another 4000 ft or so, concerned their cars won't last the distance at such altitudes.

What then does that tell you about hiking? Quite simply, hiking at altitudes like these is at best - well - foolish, which the Ranger calls us as we register our hiking intention with him at around 4.00pm.

Why since we are pretty fit and the hike is a mere six miles? Well, because those six miles begin at an altitude where the air is already thin and you are meant to acclimatise at the visitor centre before heading up further. We don't have time to do that. We need to get a move on if we want to reach the summit. The steep upwards only hike through the sandy desert like terrain can easily take four hours as the air gets thinner and thinner. It is, we can now say from experience, a case of two increasingly air deprived incredibly difficult steps up and one easy but unwelcome slide back.

The Ranger - validly it turns out - has expressed his concerns and so, resigned to our stubborn misguided optimism, bids us farewell with a wry smile.

"Head towards the road and hitch a ride when you run outa time."

Notice the use of "when" not "if".

"I am not allowed to give lifts. I'll be on the summit later though making sure no troublemakers are left up there" he says with a wink.

Away we go, whistling away, cocksure we would prove him wrong.

But of course we didn't.

Two hours later and we are by the side of the road making awkward attempts to hitchhike, something we have never done before having grown up in an era and area when and where hitchhiking usually meant dismemberment and a shallow grave.

The traffic was by then thinner than the air. Most people were already perched (un)comfortably on the very exposed and cold summit; we were prepping for a long wait and the post sunset downward

traffic. By then exceedingly light headed we were beginning to hallucinate too. Is that a bus I can see coming our way? Or a boat? No, no it's a superhero here to fly us to safety...

And then it happened to pass by, the coolest most colourful most beautiful campervan we'd ever seen. At least that's how we remember it. Memories are often romanticised in the tales we live to tell.

It stopped just ahead of us. We struggled in gratefully, closed the door and took in a much needed deep breath of the warm air. And choked. The air was "fragrant". Oh boy. Light headedness on speed. Literally.

And that's how we ended up high on the summit. Again literally. A harrowing journey, bongo drums at our feet, on winding roads with two aged and very relaxed happy throwback hippies, heads darting and bobbing, remarking on how everything is "so cool man".

"Get in the back of the van" the Ranger orders after the sun had set and everyone had left.

"Josh" he radios to base "I've got a coupla troublemakers here with no way off. I'm bringing 'em down".