

Cayambe / Cotopaxi

Jan 8-18, 2013



It had always been a dream in my life to climb a big mountain. When I was a kid I remember wondering if I would ever be able to climb a 10,000 ft mountain - growing up in the east coast, even a 3000 ft mountain was quite large! I would have never imagined in my lifetime I would be going to a 19,000 ft mountain! There's something innate about the challenge of climbing a big mountain - for centuries various cultures believed the "gods" lived in the mountains, and going there was an act of worship to be closer to them.

After a wonderfully successful trip to Mt Rainier last August and hearing about how RMI does similar trips all around the world, I decided to take the next step and try one of the international trips. Ecuador came to mind - I had been there on a church missions trip just a couple years back and I knew it to be a beautiful area. I looked forward to returning and facing a new challenge. Although I had a greater sense of confidence after the experience on Rainier, I still approached Ecuador with a bit of trepidation - there were always so many uncertainties and nothing could be taken for granted.

Being back home in PA for the holidays, I had the trip in the back of my mind the whole time. I knew January to be about the best time to go so I knew it was going to right after I got back. Checking the weather reports from back at home, Cayambe and Cotopaxi came back with different forecasts - sometimes "A heavy fall of snow", sometimes "mostly clear" but then back to snow. Hmmm - it wasn't

anything very consistent. I knew there wasn't much I could do in PA except wait and mentally start gearing up for the climb. It was hard to tell family members and friends that I was excited and looking forward to it - I was more just nervous and didn't care to really talk about it much at the time. And to add to my nervousness, a work emergency even cropped up about a week before the trip, and supposedly one of the managers was going to offer me \$3,000 to postpone or cancel this trip at the last minute! I knew this experience wasn't about the money, and if I took the \$3,000 I would probably regret it for a long time. (The work emergency ended up resolving itself 2 days before the trip after all - I was glad to keep everything as planned!)

January 8

The trip was finally upon me and it was time to pack up and get going. My rental gear had arrived and everything fit well. Nisha helped me go through the final bits of packing and preparations for the trip, as well as giving me a bit of a mental boost that I needed. I knew most likely I would be traveling by myself and not seeing anyone else that I knew until I landed in Quito. I had received a beautiful sweatshirt with Cayambe / Cotopaxi on the front a couple weeks earlier but couldn't find it to take on the trip – bummer. I hoped the lost sweatshirt wouldn't be a bad omen, that the flight would be smooth, no delays and that my luggage was going to make it safely! I didn't have much margin since I had already been away for the holidays and didn't want to be out from work more than I needed to.

Luck was with me (or should I say God's grace was with me) as most of the entire country was pretty clear (no winter storms or high winds, unusual in January), and all the flights were on time. Taking off under clear skies we had great views of the snow-capped sierra with a misty shroud over Mono Lake - beautiful! Landing in Atlanta ahead of schedule I got to relax a bit and make a few last minute phone calls - my phone would go into airplane mode for the next 10 days (otherwise I could unknowingly accumulate \$400 in international roaming data charges as various apps downloaded automatic updates during the middle of the night). I would be able to remain in touch throughout the trip, however through wi-fi and the RMI blog - I already missed my fiancée Nisha. The abundance of God's mercy was shown when I got bumped up to 1st class for the flight to Quito! Being served champagne, wine and enjoying coq au vin and dessert, I was able to fly in style! Most importantly though I was able to catch up on sleep, which would be much needed to start off the trip fresh.

Our guides Billy and Katie were at the airport already to meet me, and 2 others from our team were coming in at the same time - Todd and Meredith. Another person was supposed to join us, but unfortunately 2 days before the trip, there was a death in the family, causing him to have to cancel the whole thing - bummer! Our group would be 8 people - the 3 of us, Bill from the Washington DC area, a Canadian couple Dawn and Leonard, and a dating couple from Boston

area Mike and Kendra. Seeing the names in the email was one thing, but I was scrambling to associate names to faces and get to know my new teammates for the next 10 days.

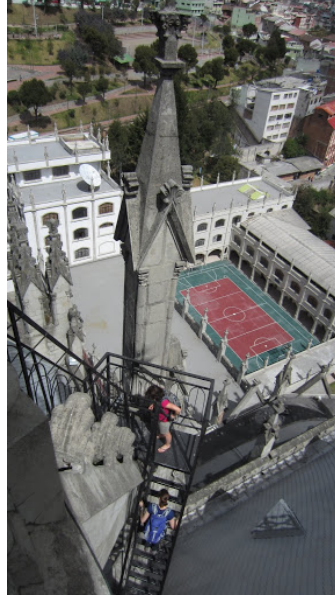
The Hotel Mercure was nearby the airport and we were soon checking into our rooms. I was asleep about the moment my head hit the pillow - although we were over 9,000 feet that didn't bother me much - I was plenty tired!

January 9

We had our first "official" team meeting at 8:00 at breakfast at the hotel. Our guides Billy and Katie introduced themselves and started talking a bit about what to expect. I wasn't sure how I was going to "measure up" - was I in shape enough? Was I going to slow the group down? Were all the other people "super mountain climbers" and I was going to be just getting in the way? My fears were allayed when we started getting to know each other and found we all had similar experiences, fears, and expectations. I felt an instant bond of fellowship forming that would last for the whole trip - they would turn out to be one of the best groups I had traveled with, and this would be key to our success.

We had a little free time after breakfast to stroll around. Although they said the tap water was pretty safe, I didn't want to take a chance - how safe was "pretty safe"? Down the street in Quito we passed a farmacia - a drug store where we went to pick up a couple jugs of bottled water, snacks and Kinder eggs (which I've never found in the US). Practicing a little bit of Spanish we got what we needed and were soon on our way. Just then I noticed just under the glass counter were packs of Viagra, Cialis and several other over-the-counter drugs that would be prescription here in the US. After seeing how regulated these drugs are back in the US, I forgot that in many countries, they are quite easy to get! I hadn't bothered with getting a prescription for Diamox for the altitude (I was fine on a previous trip to Peru), but I guess if I needed some I could get it there!

We got to do a city tour when we got back, taking in several of the local sights in Quito. I had caught glimpses of the La Compañía cathedral, a grand basilica and El Panecillo with the giant angel on top during our missions trip, but this time we were going to get to see them properly. Most of Ecuador was Catholic so I was expecting ornate churches and cathedrals, but I would be surprised at their splendor up close. I guess since they say you're not a true Ecuadorian if you're not Catholic, that might be expected. Our 9:00 bus showed up on "Ecuadorian time" - 10:00, one hour late. Oh well - just had to roll with it and enjoy what we could. I actually liked how most of the trip was on a fairly relaxed pace without much rushing from one place to another - it would turn out we would need the relaxation time later in the trip and it would be vital to our success.



Basilica del Voto Nacional in Quito

Our first stop was the marvelous Basilica del Voto Nacional. Constructed in 1892, it is the largest neo-Gothic cathedral in the Americas. With spires over 100 meters high, it is one of the most prominent structures in the whole city. The interior and hall of arches inside was comparable to the Notre Dame cathedral, but with nowhere near the crowds! We even got to do a tour up the tower for \$1 with no wait (unlike 20 euros and a 90 minute wait for Notre Dame). And my favorite part was instead of the grotesque gargoyles surrounding the Gothic spires of Notre Dame, this basilica had beautiful local animals, condors and turtles! Climbing the 15-20 flights of steps we huffed and puffed our way up the tower (our first acclimatization hike since we were over 9,000 feet). Downclimbing a steep ladder and traversing a narrow catwalk just above the sculpted arched ceiling below us, we came to a series of steep ladders taking us to the tower. I'm not sure if these would have been legal back in the US - I was clutching both railings and stepping gingerly to avoid a slip and fall down the dizzying heights. The reward was a fantastic view of sprawling Quito all around us. We could see most of Pichincha our peak for the next day and I could glimpse a peek of a snowy peak far in the distance - on a clear day we would have been able to see it as snow-clad Cotopaxi our final goal for this trip!

Nearby La Compañía was truly magnificent - an amazing masterpiece of Spanish Baroque architecture, taking 160 years to be completed. Started in 1605, it wasn't finished until 1765 - in our fast-paced society these days, I can't imagine any project on that time scale! Supposedly adorned with 7 tons of gold on the ceiling, walls and altars, the church is called Quito's Sistine Chapel. After an extensive 12-year renovation after a large earthquake and fire, the church was only recently reopened to the public. In fact, some sections were still being meticulously worked on - several people were painstakingly working with tools the size of

small toothbrushes to restore the former glory of the Arabic-inspired geometrical shapes, Spanish sculptures and Inca chacana crosses. A big sun (Inti was the Inca sun god) filled the dome overhead - a syncretism of ancient beliefs with the Catholic beliefs brought in from the Spanish conquerors in the 15th century. Properly contextualized, these images can be a great way to bring Jesus to an interesting blend of cultures from around the world. What an amazing way to worship God through these marvelous works!

A large painting on one side depicted heaven with the angels dancing around the throne of Jesus but on the other side was hell - sinners were being condemned for many different sins depicted in the work. Although I knew I was guilty of so many of those sins and deserved hell, I was reminded of the saving grace of Jesus and that only through that could I have fellowship with Him in heaven. That knowledge along with the sheer beauty of the magnificent nave and altar and dome above us made me really appreciate the glory of God. No photos allowed in the church - bummer, but I knew once I was in the real heaven, no cameras would be needed since I would be surrounded by such beauty all the time!

We made our way up north toward the Equator - something probably most tourists have to do in Ecuador (the country is named after "equator" after all). On our way we went up and over El Panecillo getting a nice view from a bright silver angel statue watching over the city. As I remembered from 2 years ago Ecuador is a rapidly developing country - road construction was everywhere! Bumper to bumper traffic was pretty common all the way until we reached the final traffic circle at the northern boundary of the 20-mile long sprawling metropolis. The new airport was about to open just outside the city (though you'd have to sit in 1.5 hrs of traffic to get to the city!)

I was nodding off when one of our guides indicated we were close. Looking out the window I saw the familiar large tower with the sphere of the earth on top from our last trip - Mitad del Mundo (center of the world). But instead of turning and going in, we passed it and visited a different site - the Intiñan Solar Museum a little ways to the north. I had already a "been there done that" mentality of Mitad del Mundo - it was one of those tourist traps, so I was surprised that there was a different one right nearby. It turns out the "equator line" at Mitad del Mundo is 240 meters too far south (you can even verify with your hand-held GPS). After fritadas and some local Pilsener beer for lunch and a Salcedo 4-layered ice cream cone for dessert, we visited the "real equator line".



At the equator

I think Intiñan was even more of a tourist trap - you could have a unique ability to balance eggs only right on the equator line, witness water flowing clockwise / counterclockwise with it changing direction in just a few feet on either side of the line, and that your muscles would somehow spontaneously weaken if you stand right on the line. This was probably as cheesy as the "Mystery Spot" near Santa Cruz! Of course the Coriolis effect really only affects objects on a large scale far from the equator, and people have balanced eggs far from the equator (I remembered the myth being you could do it on the equinox and being January we were far from the equinox). I managed the balancing act and got rewarded with a certificate! They did have a small but interesting museum, exhibiting Waodani spears and weapons and Shuar shrunken heads, artifacts of the bellicose societies before the missionaries arrived and brought the love of Jesus to them.

Dinner was back in Quito, walking distance from the hotel - we got to enjoy burgers and cervezas - not exactly Ecuadorian cuisine, but at this point of our trip, we were happy to have food that was tasty and yet "safe" and not too unusual. None of us were willing to risk GI uneasiness in the upcoming days!

January 10

Today was to be our first acclimatization hike to the summit of Rucu Pichincha. For some people the previous day's city tour felt like a distraction and only today were we getting to the "real part" of the trip. For me the tour was very interesting and gave a bit of cultural context to the country we were visiting. And being at 9,000 feet, we were acclimatizing at the same time. We would be taking a gondola from the edge of town to about 3800 m and from there hike to the summit at 4696 m. I knew 4696 m to be about 15,400 feet, higher than my record in Peru at about 15,200 feet. The whole hike would be just a few hours and we'd be back in the afternoon so it was hard to believe we would be going to the

highest point I've ever been to in a short time! Our 3rd guide Topo was from Quito - he met us and would be staying with us the rest of the trip.



Teleferico to Rucu Pichincha

Being foreigners we got dinged with the "you are an outsider" tax, bumping the fare from \$4.90 to \$8.50 - it was discrimination but what could you do? I guess it would be hard for many locals to afford the same price as wealthy foreigners who already spent thousands of dollars in airfare to even get to Ecuador. The teleferico ride was beautiful and speedy - the French-made Poma gondolas were surprisingly efficient as we got whisked up several thousands of feet. A few clouds were enveloping the higher peaks above - being in the occidental (western) range of the Andes, the prevailing Pacific weather keeps the peaks enshrouded in clouds almost every day of the year even though the rest of the surrounding country may be under clear skies.



Rucu Pichincha hike

The trail was straightforward, 5.5 km to the summit (so 11 round-trip, about 7 miles). The altitude was noticeable from the start, however, keeping our steps slow and methodical. We needed to build up our red-blood counts to prepare us for the upcoming days. The hike was beautiful - being above the tree line we wandered through the bunchgrass of the high altitude paramo, the brilliant orange flor del Andinista plants, and the coral-like cushion plants forming an amazing ground cover at around 14,000 feet. The volcanic rock was sandy and barren higher up as we reached the cloud layer just under 15,000 feet, enshrouding the landscape in swirling mist. We remained in the clouds the rest of the hike as we scaled the final class-3 rocky stretches to the 4696 m summit. The rocks were a bit trickier than I expected, and for a couple people, it was the hardest "hike" they had ever done! A wind-broken sign marked our summit - supposedly around 6 months ago they had some heavy winds roll through. Today, there was hardly a breath of wind - surprising given the bleak, wind-scoured landscape around us.

Occasionally visible through peeks in the clouds were the slopes of slightly higher Guagua Pichinca - that summit was about 100 m higher than us. We could see the evidence of the 1999 eruption that covered a good part of Quito in ash - the mountain was still active under our feet and could unleash another eruption at any time! There was no summit register - supposedly Ecuadorians don't believe in registers - oh well. We were 1000 feet higher than the summit of Mt. Rainier after all! I felt good, only nursing a slight headache and not feeling nausea or anything more serious that I feared.

Emerging below the clouds on the way down, we saw the sprawling city of Quito below us - 20 miles long and about 2 miles wide looking like a sea of civilization. On the other side of a mountain ridge to our south was another sea - an ocean of clouds from the Pacific filling in the valley. My ears popped several times as we cruised downward on the teleferico back into town. Cotopaxi to the south made a brief appearance through the clouds, looking impossibly high and snowy - I felt we still had much work to do to prepare for that challenge.

Back at the hotel, Katie and Billy went to our rooms to do final gear checks - making sure our crampons and boots were fitted properly, our base layers and poufy winter jackets were thick enough, and that we weren't missing anything. My gear checked out, giving me a much needed bit of confidence for the upcoming days. Billy just gave us the information we needed for one day at a time, as to not overwhelm us with too much information and stress us out. I knew that putting one foot in front of the other, trusting God and following instructions, I would have a good chance of success. And if we didn't summit, I wouldn't have anything to be ashamed or embarrassed of.

January 11

We would be doing another acclimatization hike today, to the summit of Fuya Fuya near Lake Mojando a bit to our north. Supposedly on a clear day you have a great view of Cayambe and maybe even Antisana from the summit. Most of the drive was clear and we had some peeks of the 19,000 ft mountain occasionally on our drive. Fuya Fuya was just a hair under 14,000 feet - an "easy" one. I had never considered a 14er "easy" until coming to Ecuador! The hike was 1.92 km each way - measured quite precisely (though "precise" and "accurate" are often far apart in South America).

After what seemed an eternity (the 1.5 hr drive turned out to be more like 3 hours!), we were heading through the town of Otovalo (known for their unique culture and large street markets on the weekends). Finally we turned off on what seemed a random side street into a corner of town, and soon we started heading up a bumpy road up into the mountains. Either there was a sign and I didn't see it or the driver knew a "short-cut", or it's one of those things that just the locals know. The pavement went from smooth asphalt to tiled bricks peppered with large speed bumps at random intervals, to rough gravel to dirt. The road was petering out too rapidly - looks like it would be a rough drive. A few minutes later though I was dismayed to see Topo's truck in front of us turning around - shoot the whole way was wrong. Ha - even the "locals" couldn't figure it out!

Heading all the way back down, I wasn't sure if the road was closed or if there was a change of plans. Clouds were swirling around the summit - the only real clouds in the area. Back on the main road, we proceeded to take the very next left - hmmm, looked like we missed the turn by 1 street. Back up we went - again changing from smooth pavement to tile brick and cobbles. Then a sign "Laguna Mojanda this way" showed up - whew, looked like finally on the right track! Small cinder block houses and stray dogs and children running about passed by as we headed uphill.

Into the clouds we went as the vegetation changed from eucalyptus forests to smaller trees and finally to the bunch-grass in the paramo as we neared the lake. Laguna Mojanda was mysterious, partly enshrouded in mist. The remains of an old building stood in the lake maybe 25 feet from the shore - it looks like at one time they had built a dam in the lake and it broke, flooding the building. Or the water level in the lake rose? The lake looked like it was in the middle of the "lost world" - I felt we were far from any civilization now.



Laguna Mojanda on Cerro Fuya Fuya

There wasn't much of a trail heading up the steep slopes on the volcanic remnant, but the grass of the Paramo was easy to walk straight up - the bunch grass almost formed steps that you could cross-country pretty easily. The "trail" was just 1.92 km each way - barely over a mile. So the whole way should be about 2.5 miles - about 1 hour, right? Nope - we moved at about 1/2 mile / hour on the way up, probably taking 2 hours! Clouds were passing both above and below us as we came to a saddle to enjoy lunch. The views of the lake and surrounding grasslands reminded me of the moorlands in the Scottish highlands. We passed through fields of "ecuadorian pineapples" - achupallas, which are succulents like century plants. Like the silverswords on Haleakala in Maui, these unique indigenous plants could survive in remote "sky islands" on peaks of mountains.

I was surprised at the vegetation near the summit - patches of "coral" ground cover, bright orange flor del Andinistas, and delicate blue blossoms joined the achupallas on the final slopes. The summit area mostly socked in with clouds, providing abundant moisture on most days of the year. Fuya Fuya was also in the occidental range of the Andes, so like yesterday's hike, the weather and vegetation was similar. Although the clouds didn't break to give us views of Antisana and Cayambe, they did part occasionally, giving us patches of sun and views through holes in the clouds into the deep blue crater lake below. The final ridge to the summit seemed to part the clouds, scouring them away on the windward side and collecting them on the lee side.

At this point, I felt we were on a real part of an adventure - I recalled Bilbo Baggins in the Hobbit as he set out - "I'm going on an adventure!", leaving behind his comfortable life in his warm hobbit-hole back home. I thought of the comforts, friends and food back home as well, but I would be coming back with a renewed perspective on many things. Descending back into the clouds, we were able to walk more at a "normal" pace - the altitude wasn't quite so noticeable. I felt we were replaying the story of the climb but backwards and in fast motion, and soon we were almost back to the lake.



Fuya Fuya

Afterwards, we had lunch (burgers and sodas again!) and headed to the Refugio San Luis where we would be spending the night. The refugio was several thousand feet lower where the air seemed "thick" again and the vegetation lush and green. The lower slopes of Cayambe could be seen under the clouds, occasionally revealing a bit of icy gleam on the edges. Checking into our rooms, I felt we were in luxury honeymoon suites in Hawaii, surrounded by gardens, flowers and sweeping views, far from the hustle and bustle of Quito. Logging in with the free wi-fi, I was able to give everyone status updates - Nisha and my family were eager and hung on to every word! Wandering around the grounds on my own helped me de-stress a bit and relax and process my thoughts - I hadn't really had any time alone on the trip as of yet.



Refugio San Luis

Before dinner we were lounging and watching Karate Kid in Spanish on TV (my first TV since leaving the US!). A few minutes later, checking online, I hesitatingly pulled up the Cayambe weather forecast site. A few days ago, it had showed a string of clear weather with very little wind. I didn't expect it to change much but I had my doubts. It came back as a "moderate fall of snow heaviest on Sunday afternoon", 10 cm and then another 4 cm around then - hmmm, bummer. It didn't sound like a lot, but I started to mentally brace for a cold, snowy slog up to the summit socked in clouds early Monday morning. A peek outside showed the gloomy clouds darkening with the upcoming dusk - the mountain remaining hidden. And a bit to the left was an ominous sight - a fire had kicked off, burning an orange ring through the grasslands - almost in the shape of the fiery eye of Sauron indicating impending doom ahead.

Dinner was a bit hushed as we waited what seemed an eternity for our food - our trip was about to take on a more serious tone shortly - we were going to be heading up to the Cayambe hut at over 15,000 feet the next day. I expected to soon be out of my element. I felt like Bilbo coming over the Misty mountains catching his first view of the Lonely Mountain and dreading the perilous approach and fight with a deadly dragon. But I knew if I persisted I could gain a great treasure - an experience of a lifetime on a great mountain.

January 12

I had a distinct dream about a volcanic eruption throwing ash all the way down the mountain right to the base of the stairs below our rooms - in the dream I was relieved that "due to an act of God" that we were off the hook for having to climb the mountain. Maybe the stress and uncertainty of the upcoming climb along with images of the fire last night mixed together into an unusual dream concoction. Other than the dream, it was a good nights sleep at the lodge - dropping several thousand feet definitely made a difference after all. The 6-inch thick covers on the bed were like heaven - the rest would be important in the upcoming days. My hopes immediately perked up when I looked outside in the morning to see the dazzling 19,000-foot summit through a break in a lower altostratus cloud deck. The mountain was tearing apart the clouds, creating a "shadow" of clear blue sky - the clouds were thin and evenly spaced indicating stable weather. The weather report online for Monday in two days looked promising - "wind will be generally light" (I was actually more worried about high winds than the snow).

Our first stop was the Otovalo market a little ways into town. The Otovalo people are an indigenous tribe, noted for their beautiful clothing, jewelry and handicrafts made in the traditional style as they had been for hundreds of years. I was looking forward to seeing a bit of the local culture. I feared it might be a distraction since I had so much to think about for Cayambe coming up. And it was hard to think about gifts for people back home when we hadn't even attempted our main objectives yet! I knew this would probably be my only chance

for nice gifts, however. With my upcoming wedding, I felt some obligation to treat several people to nice gifts.



Otovalo Market

Upon entering the market, however, I was enthralled by the beauty of the scarves and tapestries, baskets, musical instruments and jewelry. We got to bargain and haggle for items, reminding me of my fun days bargaining for baseball cards when I was a kid. My mind got a needed break from the mountain climbing. I enjoy patronizing local cultures - for many people who may appear "poor" and in need of financial relief, they were actually doing well in their crafts, and I wanted to affirm their talents. The scarves were beautiful, in vivid blues and reds - I couldn't wait to bring a few home. A little way down the street, the fruit market looked like a kaleidoscope of colors - red tomatoes, yellow and orange tropical fruits, purple eggplants and so many others. I think for some people however, passing through the meat market would make them want to be vegetarian for a while! Large hunks of bloody red meat hung from a row of stalls as flies and stray dogs wandered around. Incense sticks near the fish kept some of the bugs and smell away. Anybody up for a pig head? The market was quite crowded and few people seemed discouraged to haggle for a slab of meat. It was a wonderful cultural experience and our 2 hours passed faster than I expected - time to get back in the van!

Just before heading back though, I noticed a crippled man in need of a wheelchair crawling on one of the streets - he seems to have been disabled for many years, and I felt bad since there wasn't much I could do. I have a friend who works in the "Wheels for the World" ministry in Thailand, providing wheelchairs to needy people around the world - I'll have to remember to give a donation when I got home. Certain things we take for granted back in the US were not available everywhere. I was reminded of how thankful I should be for my health and good legs to get me up a 19,000-foot mountain.



At the Cafe de la Vaca

On our way to Cayambe, we had lunch at an interesting local restaurant - "Cafe de la Vaca", enjoying burgers and tropical fruit juices and sodas (so much better without the high-fructose corn syrup!). It reminded me of "happy California cows" with festive bovine decor. Soon afterward we headed through a surprisingly dry desert stretch on the lee side of the great mountain. Roadcuts revealed centuries of layers of multicolored ash deposited from past eruptions of the nearby volcanoes. A thick layer of white ash that was sandwiched between 2 darker and harder layers was riddled with interconnected caves and tunnels, beckoning exploration. Brick kilns lined both sides of the road – the soil and clay must have been right to be baked into building bricks. Century plants and cacti grew along parts of the barren slopes. It was hard to believe just a few miles away hidden in the clouds was a great glaciated peak. We crossed the line of the equator on the way up - we were soon going to be visiting the only place where both the latitude and temperature could register 0 degrees. The occasional sign indicating "Nevado Cayambe" with an arrow renewed my confidence we were going the right way!

Winding our way up on a bumpy cobblestone mountain road, our diesel van worked its way higher. We were soon stopped by a large herd of cows in the middle of the road – that was the only way through! They looked like happy cows like those in the restaurant! My ears popped several times as the vegetation went from desert to eucalyptus forest to stunted trees and shrubs to paramo grassland. Most of the land above 14,000 feet was enshrouded in mist though I could occasionally glimpse a peek of icy slopes above in bright sunlight through breaks in the clouds. We parked shortly before a steep set of switch-backs as the road climbed the lower slopes of the mountain itself. Topo in his 4x4 and all our gear continued onward to the refuge where we would be spending the night.



Getting through the cow herd

Walking the remainder of the way - it was about a mile along an increasingly bumpy road. At first I wondered why we didn't just drive the whole way - the road looked fine, and Billy even commented he was surprised how good condition it had been so far (on his trip last June the road was quite washed out and people had to walk several miles). The road wended its way to the refuge at around 15,100 feet. The last of the flowers and mosses and vegetation disappeared as we passed a mineral-laden travertine waterfall and entered the dusty white volcanic ash. The road progressively got worse and in a couple sections I'm not sure how any vehicle could make it through - so I no longer felt bad that we didn't try to drive all the way! In fact, a land cruiser was stuck on some rocks about 1/2 way up. It was somebody else - it wasn't Topo - whew! Using picks and shovels, we helped them negotiate their predicament and jimmy the front wheels past the obstacle. Operating tools at 15,000 feet was exhausting but I was glad to see that they made it through OK in the end!

A blurry figure of a hut slowly came into view through the dense mist - the 3-story lodge was quite a masterpiece! Our duffels were waiting for us - thanks Topo! Plunking down our gear by our beds, we started to prepare for the next 2 days. I noticed the light brightening and dimming out of the windows hoping for a break in the clouds - but looking outside it was getting wet instead. The rain wasn't heavy, but enough to make everything soggy and damp - I'm just glad it wasn't raining on our walk up - we had just missed it. Hot chocolate, tea and biscuits made a welcome snack as we relaxed, played cards and chatted about Billy's former days as a fisherman in Alaska and numerous trips to Rainier and the Cascades. It was fun to hear other's stories about their trips - Bill's trips up the Kautz glacier on Rainier and Dawn & Leonard's trip to the Mexican volcanoes under perfect clear skies (I envied them since our weather looked anything but clear).



Hut on Cayambe

Dinner was make-your-own pizza! A welcome feast indeed! The guides had actually gone a bit over budget in providing food - instead of ramen and soup like they were supposed to get for us, we were living it up! I guess they would eat the cost, but they didn't mind - they would deserve a good tip in the end.

January 13

I slept decently well last night - a bit of surprise considering this was by far the highest I had slept before. Apparently some people thought I had slept a little bit too well, rattling the windows with heavy snoring - I must have been quite tired since I'm not normally one to snore much. Earlier I thought the windows were frosted glass since I never saw anything clearly through them, but this morning, looking out the window revealed a dazzling glacier-clad mountain outside! I sprang out of the bed and grabbed my camera to have a look around. I didn't care I was still in my pajamas - when I went outside it was surprisingly not cold, maybe 50 degrees. A layer of clouds was spread out just below, revealing the entire upper mountain in clear detail. A rainbow stretched through a break in the clouds to the west, and a section of rainbow was visible in the ice crystals in some high passing clouds. Climbing up to a nearby high point just above the roof level of the 3-story refuge gave a view of at least half a dozen volcanic peaks showing through the cloud layer below. Without a map of Ecuador I could only guess some of these peaks - I knew Cotopaxi had to be there as well as Antisana and Chimborazo. I took pictures of the peaks and showed them to Topo after he woke up - he confirmed they were indeed those peaks and he gave me names of other peaks I hadn't heard of - I had to take notes! I took advantage of the nice break in weather to assess our route up Cayambe itself. The mountain looked like smooth whipped cream for many thousands of feet - doing the math, it should be around 3,700 feet to climb (about the height of Mt Diablo back home). The

guides said the path was rather long, but not too steep or technical, and the weather looked good, so I had my hopes up.



Morning view on Cayambe

After breakfast, we headed out to the glacier for a bit of crampon / ice axe practice. I figured this would be similar to the mountaineering day school on Rainier. Kendra hadn't been on a big mountain like this before so it would be new and intimidating for her. I wasn't too worried about the day school, but was quite worried about summit day the next day. After about a 40-minute hike, we approached the toe of the glacier. They said 40 years ago, the glacier actually passed by on the slopes right beneath the cabin, and it had retreated significantly since then. I was surprised how warm it was (actually quite comfortable), but was dismayed how the glaciers were dying.



Mountaineering day school on the glacier

The ice was bare and had gone through a significant bit of melting. Unlike the Rainier glaciers that are moving fast, heavily crevassed and unstable (though still melting), the glaciers on Cayambe were old and pretty stable. Ecuador has considerably less precipitation, but the temperatures were far more consistent. Rainier has pretty warm summers and cold winters causing the ice to build up fast but then flow downward fast as well. The toe of the glacier had solid hard ice at about a 30 degree angle straight up - pretty steep and intimidating after all. After duck-walking about 20 feet up I had a peek down and felt a bit of trembling.

Both my crampons were wiggling a little - I tightened the straps further, but they still moved around slightly but not enough to worry about. I jabbed in my ice axe for security. The ice was a bit dirty, speckled with lines of bits of debris, making it look like granite. It actually reminded me a lot of the granite slopes of Fairview dome in Yosemite - I had a lot of fun there a few years ago, and thinking of those times helped me to cope with the fear of being on the glacier on Cayambe.

We focused on stepping techniques - trusting the crampons, duck-walking, French stepping and cross-over stepping. Saving our calves would be of utmost importance on a sustained climb. Rest-stepping, where you put your weight on your back foot allows the bones to support more of your weight, saving your muscles - that would also be a key to our success on the mountain. Pressure breathing, like the brief hard exhales you do when lifting weights at the gym, would give us a little extra oxygen for each step, also very much needed at 19,000 feet (we weren't going to be using supplemental oxygen). I felt each of these techniques were small things I could handle, which gave me a lot more confidence for our big climb the next day. Now we just needed the weather to cooperate.

Billy noticed my slight trouble with my crampons, so back at the lodge, I was glad to have him double-check the straps. It turns out when I bought the crampons (they were still pretty new), they had mis-wrapped the straps and put them backwards! On Mt Rainier last summer, I managed to cope with the straps by just putting them extra tight, but I had to be careful to keep checking them since they wiggled there as well. Billy quickly set the straps the other way and the crampons fit much better and more secure! It was a small thing, but it boosted my confidence greatly.

The clouds were getting thicker around the summit - I was hoping for the good weather they had promised, but worried a little about the "moderate fall of snow" from the forecast. As I lay in my bunk, it was around 4:00 and I started hearing a rattling sound outside - I thought it might have been people shuffling gear around, but the rattling got louder and sounded like it was coming from overhead. I peeked outside and noticed it was hailing! And then hailing harder - the ground was covered in probably 1/2 inch of icy pellets soon afterward. I still had my fingers crossed - knowing the weather in the Andes seemed to be better in the mornings in general and the afternoons to have the worst weather.

Dinner was spaghetti again - time to carbo-load for the climb! My gear was ready and I was about as ready as I could be for the big climb the next morning. Billy had a box of red wine out - I wasn't ready to have wine (needed to save it to celebrate - hopefully!), but couldn't resist a sip. Even a small bit caused a short buzz, a reminder of how altitude can make a big effect with alcohol. I reviewed in my head each part of the summit day, from waking up, putting on boots, roping up, putting on layers, breaking through the clouds and summiting!



Group at mealtime at the hut

After dinner I peeked out the window to see it getting lighter - interesting, I thought with the dusk it would just get dark and gloomy again. And then whoosh! The whole mountain was lit up in dazzling sun - the clouds had parted, revealing the whole mountain. My sunglasses were already put away, but I went out anyway for a couple minutes, squinting out the bright sun. Pockets of hail (actually styrofoam-like graupel snow) covered the ground - my spirits were immediately lifted in that it looked like we'd have a wonderful break in the weather for summit day! I gave a little prayer of thanks before bedding down for the night around 6:00. Sleeping at 6:00 was far easier in Ecuador than Rainier where it didn't get dark until 9:30 there, and in Ecuador it was already dusk.

January 14

I was awoken by some rattlings of climbers getting gear together, the jingling of pickets and carabiners, and the thump of heavy double mountain boots on the plank floor. I figure it was going to be time to wake up soon. Checking my watch, it was still well before midnight - hmmm, that seemed a bit early. The guides said we'd be up around midnight if the weather was good, but later if it was raining (they would hold out a couple hours for a break in the weather before waking us up). So I was hopeful that the weather was good, since they were waking us up early! However, it turned out to be another group - a small group of 3 German climbers was stirring. I did my best to go back to sleep, but the anticipation was far too intense.

About an hour later, I opened my eyes to see a few headlights waving about and "RISE AND SHINE" - we have a mountain to climb! My watch indicated about 12:15, an on-time departure. I stepped outside briefly in hopes of a clear starry sky, but instead it was all misty and damp. At least it wasn't raining and the wind wasn't blowing. I had known the clouds to settle around the 15-16,000 foot level

when the weather was stable based on my observations the last few days, so I kept my hopes up that we'd be above the clouds and there would be clear skies just a few hundred feet above us. Topo had been up this mountain countless times so I trusted his judgment.

The weather was warm enough that we would be starting the climb with just a base layer and a fleece - I had expected it to be cold and breezy. As a precaution, even though we would probably not need them, we put on our avalanche transceivers over our base layers - in case of an avalanche it would add an extra bit of protection so that we could be found quickly if buried. With the snow last night I wondered how much more had fallen higher up, and if there would be a hazard - but we weren't about to take any shortcuts to the top! Graupel snow often forms a weak and slippery layer which can be embedded between 2 harder layers of snow, causing avalanche-prone slopes. One of my biggest fears high on the mountain would be having to turn back due to avalanche danger (even though it could be bright and sunny with the summit just ahead!). Even with the extra bit of protection with the transceivers, it wasn't worth the risk.

We were finally geared up and ready to hit the mountain - it was pitch dark, no stars or moon were out at about 1:15 when we switched on our headlamps and hit the trail. I felt we were ready to embark on a long journey. The slow haunting intro to Bach's St Matthew Passion started playing in my head - we had just had our first rehearsal with my choir the night before leaving for this trip. The music would be a long journey as well, difficult but intensely rewarding - the slowly ascending notes and inexorable rhythm of the first movement mirrored our first movement on the mountain. Our steps were slow and deliberate, making steady progress forward.

The first section was over rocky and sandy slopes leading to the terminal moraine of the glacier. We were told we'd be at the glacier in about 1 to 1.5 hrs, so it would make a fitting first break at the toe of the glacier. White patches of graupel snow still lingered from the previous afternoon's storm, mixing with the slippery volcanic sand to make the trail a slog in many places. Moving slowly to conserve energy, we continued through the misty clouds. Most of the path was class 2 with an occasional rocky class 3 section. On occasion I thought I got a peek of stars ahead signaling clear skies ahead but was dismayed to see the stars moving and disappearing. I remembered there were several climbers a ways ahead of us - it was just their headlamps.

I was feeling rather spent by the time we reached our first break - we were gaining altitude quickly but were still socked in the clouds with a slight misty drizzle coming down. The glacier was nowhere in sight as we stopped for a snack, refill of water and a clothing layer check. Topo indicated the glaciers had been receding as they have in most places around the world. I wasn't at all

hungry, but knew I had to try to eat about 200-250 calories of carbs on each break. At this high elevation, and with much exertion, carbohydrates at 4 calories / gram were the most effective (even though fat has 9 and protein also has 4, with the level of exertion we were sustaining, the body would only be able to extract out maybe 1-2 calories / gram of those foods and the rest would be wasted - I'd have to save my beef jerky for later). I was rather disoriented as well since the terrain was mostly just rolling in several directions. Many rocks were loose, like they were very recently melted out of the ice, so I figured the glacier had to be nearby, but I still had my doubts.



Climbing in the dark

Just a little further up the mountain, I thought we were still on bare ground when my foot slipped. I wondered how the mud could be so slippery when I looked closer and found that I actually slipped on some ice - ice that was hidden under a couple inches of mud and dirt. We were actually already on the glacier and I didn't realize it! Stopping to put on crampons (which was much easier this time since the straps were fixed!), and grabbing our ice axes, we were soon making our way upward on what appeared like frozen mud. Crossing a small gap in the mud, I realized there was actually much ice below us and the gap was actually a crevasse in the glacier that went down maybe 8 feet - our first crevasse!

The mud disappeared, giving way to steady white snow - I was happy to be off the mud as the snow was hard and crunchy making good purchase with the crampons. I felt we were finally on the proper part of the mountain - this is more what I had expected climbing the snowy mountain! I looked ahead and saw again a couple points of light, this time they were fainter but held steady - they were stars! I wondered if we were finally getting above the clouds, and upon looking back, I could see fuzzy dark shapes behind me filtering some yellowish city lights far below. The snow was sparkling like a million stars in my headlamp, and millions of stars were sparkling overhead - the southern Milky Way was stretched

overhead in a glittering band of light. The Big Dipper was ahead of us, upside down in the southern sky. A shooting star streaked downward through the handle. A satellite catching the pre-dawn glint of sunlight wandered to the northeast.

Snaking our way higher on the glacier, we soon came to a point where Topo made an abrupt stop - I thought he had to check something or fix his crampons. He was looking around as if we had lost the trail. Apparently recently, a crevasse had opened across the trail and we had to find a way around. Checking to our left at first and seeing the crevasse didn't seem to get any easier in that direction, we veered to the right to find a suitable bypass. Stepping across the crack, which was about 6 inches wide at that point, we were soon across where we could veer back to the trail and continue our journey higher. The ice is always moving and the trail conditions always changing - we had to be flexible on our route.

Most of the trail was straightforward - except for a few small crevasses to step over, it felt like just moving up a regular hiking trail (though it was on ice). The crampons held nicely, making each step secure and uneventful. The path was rolling hills, sometimes steep, sometimes a bit flatter, never anything too tough. The guides said on Cotopaxi there was possibly a 70-degree steep section and a section where fixed ropes would be used. Nowhere on Cayambe did it look that difficult or steep. But the altitude was tough and I felt it a struggle to move forward even though the route looked easy. I wondered how I would do when it got more technical. I was thankful for each step I could accomplish higher on the mountain, knowing with each step I was setting a new altitude record!

The sky was starting to brighten to the east. Although the mountain blocked the sunrise itself, we could see the hues of the sky changing all around us. The Southern Cross was still shining behind us in the dusky sky. The mountain was lighting up all around us and I could see we were truly in a fairly land of snowy slopes, crevasses and towering cliffs. We were well above the clouds at this point and could see the tips of several snowy mountains in the distance peeking through the clouds as well. I recognized Antisana and Cotopaxi from the previous day, but now several others were poking through as well. I started grabbing photos knowing I could identify them later! Although we had been climbing for many hours at this point, the summit didn't seem a whole lot closer than it did the previous day - all sense of scale was lost! I knew that by just remaining faithful one step at a time, we would eventually be standing on top! I was reminded of the man who was faithfully pushing against a rock that wasn't moving, but God rewarded his faithfulness by moving the rock for him.



Our shadow at sunrise

About 1/2 hour later we stopped for a break when I looked back and saw the immense triangular shadow of the mountain behind us. The golden rays of the sun were hitting the tops of the clouds. Iliniza Norte and Sur were dazzling in a pink alpenglow of the sunrise - their summits rising several thousand feet above the clouds. I could see the edge of the golden sunlight on the summit of Cayambe above us, wishing we could have been there to catch the sunrise. I remember on Rainier we were climbing on the eastern side of the mountain and had a vivid view of the rising sun. Although we were on the opposite side here, seeing the line of the shadow caused by the curvature of the earth was striking indeed. The belt of Venus was lowering as the sun was rising, splitting the sky in a sharp line from orange hues above to dusky blue hues below. The starkness had an otherworldly beauty that few people witness.

On the upper mountain, Billy emphasized we should be putting at least as much effort into breathing as stepping! Rest-stepping and pressure-breathing were critical above 18,000 feet. Although the terrain looked easy and the path straightforward, it was hard work! We had one more steep slope to negotiate and we'd be right under the summit! Without a sense of scale, it looked reachable in 15-20 minutes. When Topo assured us we were close (just 300m, 20 min after the rest break), I was feeling good. But my altitude-slowed brain was working far below 100%, and only several minutes later did I realize 300m was a lot more than it looked - it was more like 1000 feet of elevation. I had understood his comment as 300 ft to walk, just a few hundred steps and we'd be done. And we still had about an hour until our next break, so it would be yet 20 min further after that!



Upper stretch on Cayambe

That was the toughest stretch of Cayambe, realizing how much further and more difficult the final stretch would be. The rope kept moving slowly and inexorably forward and I did my best to try to stay in line. I think the most difficulty was mental rather than physical (I actually had very little soreness the next day), since our progress seemed to be at a snail's pace! Just ahead of us, we could see 3 climbers down-climbing the steep headwall - they must have been the climbers who woke up an hour before us and whose lights we had seen earlier. Seeing their struggle on the steep wall made me wonder if we were going to be going up the same way. The snow had a white evenness to it making the angle difficult to judge.

When we got to where the climbers had been, we saw a steep headwall, probably 45-50 degrees. Supposedly a few years back, the slope wasn't quite so steep - apparently with the glaciers warming a bit, they are flowing faster, causing a steeper headwall. Maybe in 30-40 years, there could be a rock face like that of Yanasacha on Cotopaxi, making Cayambe far more technical. Cross-over stepping and duck-walking like we did during yesterday's practice proved invaluable for the sustained steep climb. Occasionally I jabbed my axe in dagger-style with both hands for extra security - although we were roped, I felt safer with my axe dug in.

Fortunately the steep section was pretty short and we were soon on easier terrain. The summit ridge was directly in front of us and didn't look more than a few hundred yards away. I was excited and started to gain a second wind since we were so close! Topo went up and to the left to check on one final snow bridge to make sure it was safe. I saw a long trail to the right and was delighted to be able to bypass it and be on the summit in just a few minutes! The sun was gleaming brightly just behind the summit ridge - there was not a breath of wind,

and the cloud layer was low and flat below us indicating we were in a stable layer of the atmosphere.

Unfortunately this time, luck was not with us - the snow bridge had melted out and the crevasse was not safe to cross (unless we had a 40-foot long ladder and we were clipped securely to a rope!) That long trail to the right was there for a reason - bummer. The summit would end up being another 20-minute slog yet further. I felt truly exhausted at this news and just wanted to sit down for a few minutes. Sitting down was not an option, however - Topo was soon on the trail and the rope was moving forward again. My spirits were soon lifted, however as we came to the edge of the shadow-line cast by the summit ridge. Putting on my glacier goggles and gooping on several layers of sunscreen we made our way into the dazzling sunlight.

Just around the corner, we could see the final slope to the summit. The terrain changed to deep rime-ice penitentes, caused by high winds and freezing fog from many seasons. Without a trail through, the terrain reminded me of Devil's Golf Course in Death Valley - a virtually impenetrable field of alien salt-encrusted shapes about waist-high for many acres. The terrain at the highest place I've ever been looked very similar to the terrain at the lowest place in the US - but with ice instead of salt. Fortunately, enough climbers had ventured through this inhospitable terrain to create a path. We stepped slowly, huffing and puffing with every breath, and soon we were coming to the summit!



Group on the summit of Cayambe

We had finally done it - I felt we were on the roof of the world! Cayambe at 18,997 feet was the highest by far I had ever been (Rucu Pinchincha from a few days ago was the previous record!) If I had the energy I could have stacked up some blocks of ice 3 feet high to make the mountain 19,000 feet! Or I could get on Topo's shoulders - if he boosted me up 3 feet, that would be enough. But I

knew if I was 6 feet tall with my boots and crampons, my head would be above 19,000 feet, so that counts, right? I actually wondered how much ice we were standing on - maybe there was 50 feet of ice below us and the height of the mountain varies seasonally? I had heard many figures of the "true height" of Cayambe, but that seemed to be true of almost every summit in South America. Maybe with global warming, the height would be 18,957 feet in a few decades. 18,997 was the "official" number on the T-shirt and the SummitPost website had 18,996 feet (maybe 1 foot of snow/ice had melted in between?), but even if it was 1 foot shorter my head would still be above 19,000!

It felt like being on the roof of the world - the texture of the snow blended in with the tops of the clouds far below us. The sky was a deep brilliant blue above us - and with polarizing sunglasses, it would appear almost pitch-black. We were above more than 50% of the earth's atmosphere so it would take 2 breaths at the summit to match 1 at sea level. The tops of countless volcanoes all around could be seen. I recognized Antisana and Cotopaxi, the Ilinizas and made guesses at some others. I knew Chimborazo had to be visible somewhere - Topo pointed it out as a smallish looking peak far behind Cotopaxi - it was probably 100 miles away but its outline was crisp as if it were much closer. The Chiles in Colombia to the north were visible, poking through the clouds. I wondered if we could see every peak in Ecuador high enough to be above the clouds. The Pichinchas and Fuya Fuya from the last several days were partly visible, mostly shrouded in clouds.



On the roof of the world

I couldn't believe we were at the only place in the world where it snows on the equator! We got to take many "hero" shots and congratulate the guides and thank them for getting us safely up the mountain. We got to fly the RMI banner with pride and they could chalk up another success. For the group photo I joked if we

said "QUESOOO" in Spanish instead of "CHEEEESE" in English for the photo, our lips would have looked a little funny!

I gave a silent thanks to God for allowing me to reach the summit as well - I can never say I've "conquered" a mountain - I just had to accept that by God's grace, the mountain let me climb it that day! I felt through the difficulties, that's where God could be honored the most - if the climb was easy, it seems like His grace wouldn't be all that necessary. The weather was remarkably calm - hardly a lick of wind, bright blue skies and pretty warm. We were down to just base layers and 1-2 outer layers. I remembered on Rainier having to wear every layer I had - the summit was cold and a bit windy. I heard Cayambe had a roughly 30% success ratio - many climbs get stymied by foul weather. Being further east, weather systems from both the Amazon and Pacific can foil a summit bid. Billy was talking about his previous attempt on Cayambe - they didn't even make it to the glacier. They were already soaked with heavy rain in the first hour after leaving the hut at 1 am on summit morning - going higher would have just caused them to get colder, risk slipping on verglas ice and develop hypothermia. Of that 30% success ratio, I knew that figure already had filtered out many of the less serious climbers wouldn't even bother to attempt the mountain which was slightly lower, more remote and less famous than Cotopaxi, so I felt even more proud to stand on the snowy summit.

We got to enjoy a good 1/2 hour on the summit - we got pictures that could be beamed down via satellite phone to the office where they could be uploaded on the blog. My fiancée would be proud to hear of our success, and I couldn't wait to get back to tell her in person! I went back to retake a bunch of photos that I thought I had already taken, just in case I forgot one or something happened to the memory card or some came out blurry! I couldn't let this moment be forgotten. I had a back-up camera with back-up memory card and battery that were all interchangeable in case anything happened. I feel I've gotten so obsessed with photos over the last couple years - I've had to buy multiple spare hard drives to store them and keep a safe backup.

It was 9:00 and time to start heading down. The guides said we'd be down about 3 times faster than the way up. Since it was about 8 hours up, it would be less than 3 hours down - we should be back down at noon. Back on the ropes, we started plodding our way down the trail. The gleaming views we had missed in the pre-dawn darkness came into full view - white whipped-cream layers of deep snow and deep blue sky. We soon came back to the 50-degree slope we had climbed on the way up - the angle looked far more menacing on the way down, pitching steeply downward into the sea of clouds below. It was hot with the blazing sun beating down on us - the slope seemed to focus the sunlight right on us.



On the way down

The guides decided to set up a belay for getting us down safely - RMI is known for an impeccable track record of safety. They are known to turn back on trips when other guide services might try to press on, even if the summit was very close - I had great respect for them. And here there was no need to scrimp on safety at 18,000 feet on the mountain. I'm glad we all summited, but they say many more accidents happen on the way down off of mountains than on the way up, when people are tired, feet can slip more easily, and the snow is softer, increasing the objective hazards. Sitting on the upper belay station, it felt like a long wait to get the others down safely. We were the last rope down and in all, it probably took about 45 minutes to get down the slope which we climbed in probably less than 10 minutes! At least the belay seat had a heavenly view of the sea of clouds below, with the climbers at the bottom of the slope looking like tiny ants.

Once off the slope, I was happy to get moving again - it felt like an oven in the blazing sun and bright snow. I ended up getting a sunburn on the back of my neck that would peel for a week! A small price to pay though to ensure we got off the mountain in one piece! Navigating the rolling slopes lower on the mountain, we were soon coming back into the clouds - a wonderful relief from the bright sun. I briefly took off my glacier glasses in the shade and fog of the dense clouds - but had to put them right back on! We were still above 16,000 feet and the sun was still dazzlingly bright even though it was filtered through the clouds!

Our route zigzagged repeatedly as we made our way down the slopes - the switchbacks lessened the slope while weaving around the crevasses at the same time. I guess I hadn't noticed the switchbacks on the way up, but seeing the maze of crevasses that had to be navigated, I was glad we had a good path! Going down didn't seem nearly as steep as our way up - the walk felt like a pleasant stroll after all and we were making good time. Using a GPS as "virtual

wands" ensured us that we went down the same way as we went up and didn't get lost in the clouds! The glaciers were getting thinner as we got lower, with the bottom slopes strewn with debris that had melted out of the ice. We could never let down our guard while roped up - even right near the bottom several crevasses were lurking and had to be crossed. Even the small ones appeared a deep ominous blue when peeking down!

Crampons off, ice axes put away as we got to the bare dirt below the ice (and I checked this time to make sure there wasn't ice hidden underneath!) Navigating the rocky slopes was a bit slow and tedious through the swirling mists around us - occasionally we could get a peek through the clouds of the upper mountain, revealing patches of crevassed ice appearing as ghostly apparitions hovering in the sky. Just as we were emerging below the clouds a turquoise lake lay at the base of the glacier off to the right - a mysterious blue hiding under the low ceiling.



Blue lake

At last, the first sight of civilization became visible far away - our hut! It looked so close, maybe 10 minutes away. But 10 minutes turned into more like 45 minutes as we carefully descended the sandy and slippery rocks of various glacial moraines deposited through the centuries. The first grasses and moss appeared - I was more keenly aware of vegetation again after being in such a stark and austere desolation for many hours. Tiny flowers were blooming, giving an imperceptible scent that welcomed us back down the mountain. The entire climb ended up being almost 12 hours to the minute!

Back at the hut, we quickly packed up the rest of our stuff, changed back into normal shoes (wow they felt so light!), and walked the mile or so down the road back to the waiting van. It all felt surreal, like a dream. I had to go back through my camera repeatedly, revisiting the photos to convince my mind that it was indeed real. I was very happy to be back down safely in what was probably one

of the hardest climbs I had ever done (and by many thousand feet, the highest!) Few people were privileged to have this opportunity and I looked forward to sharing it with friends and family (and my fiancée!) back at home.

We stopped back at the same Cafe de la Vaca place on the way down - the guides must really like it! Or maybe they don't know of any other place? I didn't mind though - we had burgers and Pilsener beers this time - since we were done with the mountain, we could enjoy a little alcohol to celebrate! I think Ecuadorians know how to have fun in a way that transcends cultures - kinds had put up a bunch of drawings of happy cows, one even dancing "gangnam style"! And on our way back, we passed the biggest playground I had ever seen - monkey bars 80 feet wide, complexes of dozens of slides and enormous swing sets - I wish we could have stopped for a bit there! And the weather had cleared, even giving us glimpses of the mountain from town that we hadn't seen before. We were told it was about 1.5 hours to the Eco lodge where we would be able to relax, clean up, have a nice dinner (if we were still hungry!), and have a couple days to rest before tackling the big objective of the trip - Cotopaxi!

Unfortunately, not all things in South America go as planned - the journey would end up being more like 3.5 hours through bumpy windy roads, lasting past 9:00 in the evening. Heavy rain and hail hit us several times on the road - most of our luggage was strapped on the roof of the van, surely getting soaked. And my stomach was trying to hang tight as the van rocked and pitched on the cobbled roads nearing Cotopaxi. At last we finally got to what appeared like a lodge, but when Topo had a close look, it wasn't where we were going! We had made a wrong turn, didn't have a detailed map, had no cell signal, no GPS and were in a deserted part of Ecuador at night - how could things get worse? Billy our main guide was not feeling well. One of our ladies was about to call her husband to book her on an earlier flight to get home - after an exhausting climb on Cayambe, she no longer had any interest in climbing another one! I put my head down to try to nap, but whispering a silent prayer at the same time to find our way. They say the darkest part of the night is the moment before dawn, and just a mile or so ahead on the road was the welcoming warm lights of the Chilcobamba lodge, our home for the next couple days.

I was so glad to be there - I was beyond tired! I didn't care if half my gear was soaking wet with the rain on the way - I was just relieved to have a warm bed and a nice hot shower! Luck with with me though - both my bags were totally dry, and when I put them in my room, I found out they were serving potato soup in the dining area. I instantly perked up and my tiredness left me at that moment - the soup was soothing and warm on a cold wet night. And to make things better, we got news back about the 49'ers game the previous night - they won over the Packers (Todd from Wisconsin was bummed!) and would be going to the NFC championship next Sunday! I took that as a good omen for the rest of our trip.

January 15

Today was our rest day at the Eco Lodge. I slept wonderfully after the exhausting day on Cayambe! The morning dawned bright and clear - not a cloud in the sky! I knew Cotopaxi had to be nearby, so I stepped outside and there it was, dazzling in all its glory at 19,348 feet! I couldn't believe it was so close. 3 other volcanoes were around us as well, Rumiñahui, Pasachoa, and Sincholagua. The snowy tip of Cayambe could be seen far in the distance as well - the guides said the weather around Cotopaxi was generally better than around Cayambe, but I was surprised that it was near perfect!



Chilcobamba lodge and Cotopaxi

We didn't really do much on the rest day except enjoy the wonderful mountains all around us, take many photos and let our bodies rest. One of my recent devotionals was about rest and how it is truly a gift from God - we can't repair our bodies actively. We just have to let go of our own strivings and let God's restorative energy take effect in our bodies. If we summited Cotopaxi I would have to give full credit back to God - I knew I couldn't do it on my own. It was supposedly harder and more technical than Cayambe, but not as long, and we would be well acclimatized for the climb.

Perusing coffee-table books, writing postcards and wandering the grounds was a great way to relax. The entire route up the mountain, including the parking lot, our refugio, Yanasacha (the large headwall near the summit), and the winding path were all visible. Peering through a telescope courtesy of the Eco Lodge, we had even closer views. Flowers were blooming all around the agrarian landscape - cows were mooing (they looked like happy cows), and hummingbirds were fluttering about. Checking the weather forecast for Cotopaxi, I saw at 16,000 it was partly cloudy, but at the summit, it was to be clear with generally light winds.

Cool - the summit must be above the clouds - how else could it be partly cloudy at a lower elevation and sunny higher up?

After lunch, I went out with Mike and Kendra to walk around - they had walked in the morning as well and said it was one of the prettiest walks they had ever done! They were eager to go out again, so I got to join them. Cameras in hand, we enjoyed photographing the flowers, mountains, cows, a waterfall and our wonderful canine companions who joined us - Goldie (a golden retriever) and Perro Negro (a black lab). The dogs were wonderful, loved to swim and run free - they probably covered 6 miles where we probably walked 2! A gaucho passed by on a horse - dressed in local garb with a big sombrero hat. Seeing numerous horseshoe prints on the road, I knew probably as many people pass by on horses as cars.

A good omen appeared on the trail just ahead of us - Mike spotted it first - a lucky horseshoe! How could things get any better now? Summiting a wonderful mountain, having beautiful weather, walking with wonderful friends and dogs, seeing a local man on a horse, and now collecting a perfect souvenir! I was cautiously optimistic - I knew I couldn't take anything for granted. Although Billy had said his last 7 summits on Cotopaxi were successful, that is no indicator that the 8th would be successful as well - the weather could turn at any moment. I didn't profess to believe in fetishes or idols (such as a "lucky horseshoe") - God alone would determine our success. I found it easy, however to easily become very superstitious in the back of my mind following successes - what did I do "right" to be so successful on Cayambe? What did I do "right" before Rainier last summer to make that a success? Maybe it was the "lucky shirt" I wore or the song going through my head? I felt I had to do the same thing to ensure a "lucky" ascent on Cotopaxi. The horseshoe seemed to work for Mike, though - he had lost his camera a couple days earlier coming back from Cayambe, and he got it back the next morning! But was it really the horseshoe? What relevance would it have to make a camera come back? It's easy to say it was "luck", trusting in an object that can be seen instead of God who is unseen. I said a silent prayer to dispel any such superstition lest it mar any aspect of God's glory.

Having the rest day was good from a spiritual standpoint as well as mental and physical. We were all feeling good, and even people who weren't as excited about Cotopaxi came around after all and were eager to go for it. Although the afternoon clouds rolled in and even rained a bit when we got back from our walk, it didn't seem as bad as the previous afternoon. I was keeping my fingers crossed (superstition again?) for a clear morning the next day. Unfortunately Billy was still not feeling well and was unable to join us for dinner, but he did say he was feeling better than in the morning - I hoped it was just a 24 hour stomach bug to be flushed through, and it wouldn't jeopardize our success on the mountain the next couple days.



Dark skies in the afternoon

January 16

I awoke just a little after sunrise and peeked cautiously out of the window. After the clouds had rolled in the previous day, darkening the skies and obscuring the peaks, I was worried that the weather was turning and jeopardizing our summit bid on the big mountain. My eyes were met with dazzling blue sunlight out of the window, however - I almost couldn't believe the clouds had parted almost completely, revealing the dazzling glaciated summit of Cotopaxi just outside our lodge! We could make out the glint of sun reflecting off the windows of vehicles in the parking lot and we could clearly see the large yellow lodge a few hundred feet above the parking lot.

Mike and Kendra had gotten up before sunrise, setting up his time-exposure camera by the deck of the main lodge, pointed toward the mountain, taking photos every 30 seconds. The sky had been full of stars, slowly rotating around the mountain and pinpricks of light could be seen high on the mountain - the headlights of climbers going for their summit attempt that morning by sunrise. I went outside for a little while, again reveling in the beauty of the mountains all around us. Our lodge was located in a central plain surrounded by 4 volcanoes - Sincholagua at 15,988 ft, Rumiñahui at 15,459 ft, Pasachoa at 13,779 ft and finally crowned by glorious Cotopaxi at 19348 ft (7 feet higher than Kilimanjaro!). All of the peaks were clear except for a few low clouds in front of Sincholagua.

Feeling a bit relieved about the weather (that would be the primary thing that would stop us on Cotopaxi), I went back to bed and slept for another couple hours, hoping to tank up on the sleep - we were going to need it! We were planning on going up to the Cotopaxi lodge to get to bed early (but could anyone really sleep?), so we could wake up around midnight for our summit attempt.

Thankfully most of the gear that had gotten wet on the top of the van through the previous night's rainstorm had dried!

I was very much relieved to see Billy at breakfast, back to his usual self. But he wasn't quite totally the same - he had shaved! His "mountain beard" was gone - all clean shaven! We savored our simple breakfast of coffee, toast and fruit, knowing that soon we were going to be in "survival mode" high on the mountain, focusing on the nutrition it would take to get us up the mountain. During breakfast, we watched the low clouds starting to enshroud the peaks around us - knowing we had one more weather cycle to wait out. The guides reassured us the weather pattern was pretty normal - and being on the equator, the weather is quite stable and consistent day to day, instead of being punctuated by fronts and high-pressure ridges every couple days we are used to back at home. It would probably cloud up and maybe even rain / hail / graupel snow later in the day, but after seeing the clouds all clear in the morning, I had faith the cycle would repeat at least for 1 more day... At least Mike and Kendra would be getting some great time-exposures of the clouds coming in!

The waiting seemed to be the hardest aspect of this trip - I knew we needed the time to acclimatize, and rest was so important. But with all the anticipation of the climb and seeing the mountain clearly in front of us with good weather, I was eager to start hiking up it now! I didn't know for sure the weather tomorrow, if I would fall sick, or nerves would get to me and I would lose my drive to move forward up the mountain. After breakfast we had time to get our packs ready one final time - with all the stuff we'd need for the climb, as well as sleeping bags and overnight stuff. I hadn't bothered to totally unpack my stuff from Cayambe so packing was pretty straightforward. But I took everything out and re-packed it anyway to occupy my mind, give me reassurance I was ready, and to take my mind off the waiting!

The clouds had come in pretty thick by the time we were having lunch, and the first few drops were even starting to sprinkle as we loaded our stuff in Topo's truck to start heading up the mountain. I was wishing to leave after breakfast instead of waiting around until the afternoon showers would start!. I think the most difficult few hours were on the way getting up to the Cotopaxi hut - at least mentally for me. The clouds had thickened to a dark leaden sky over the mountains and light rain was falling. At least our gear was covered well in Topo's truck and shouldn't be getting wet a second time. In about 20 minutes we reached the entrance gate of Cotopaxi national park - Bienvenidos a Cotopaxi! But a chain was blocking the road where we had to pay at the entrance gate. I hoped with all the rain there wasn't a road washed out or closed or something. Topo and Billy our guides seemed to be at the entrance station for a while - what was taking them so long?



Bienvenidos ?

Just when it looked like they were done, I saw them coming out. But instead of Topo going back to his truck, he walked in the middle of the road, madly trying to explain something on his cell phone - shoot, something was going on, enough to warrant an emergency call on his phone. Being in South America I started to suspect that maybe they wanted money or bribes to let us pass. A group of motorcyclists had been detained as well at the entrance - they had been waiting in the rain for some time. It was already after 2:00 and the park entrance closes at 3:00, so we had less than an hour to figure this out. Otherwise we couldn't get into the park and we would have to scrub our Cotopaxi summit bid - the climax of our trip! So much for "bienvenidos" - for us the sign was "mal-venidos"!

This is when the lyrics to Casting Crown's "Praise You in the Storm" started going through my head - part of the verse goes:

*But as the thunder rolls
I barely hear You whisper through the rain
"I'm with you"
And as Your mercy falls
I raise my hands and praise the God who gives
And takes away*

"And takes away" was ringing through my head when Billy came back to our van, explaining that there was a new law passed a couple months ago that required every group heading up the mountain to have a certified guide. Apparently there were some deaths of a couple German tourists recently when they had fallen on the mountain. I knew there was a local man from Aptos near Santa Cruz who had died on the mountain just a couple weeks ago (but he was elderly, didn't have a guide, and he died of a heart attack), so I knew he was in very different circumstances. But the folks at the park entrance probably counted every death

as a reason to not let anyone into the park. Shortly afterward the motorcyclists gave up, turning around like dogs with their tails between their legs.

Topo in his frustration whipped his truck around as fast as he could (even banging into our van causing a nice dent in the bumper), to try to get back to the Chilcobamba lodge to retrieve some paperwork to prove we had "valid" mountain guides. We joked that beard-less Billy didn't look quite as imposing without his mountain beard - maybe that's why they questioned us - ha ha! The rain fell steadily for the next half hour as we tried to pass the time, hoping we wouldn't be getting turned around as well. I glimpsed through my daily devotional and noticed the title of the section for Jan 17 (for summit day on Cotopaxi) - the title was "Trouble!" - I knew God would be with us no matter what the circumstance, but again felt this was a bad omen. However God is always seated on His throne, and nothing comes as a surprise to cause any sort of panic in His eyes - all these matters would work out for His good purpose.

A glimmer of hope came as the diesel engine of Topo's truck started rumbling in the distance - he came back with a binder and a stack of business cards. After another 10 minutes or so, the guides must have managed to sweet-talk the park rangers to let us through. Soon after the chain was taken down and we made our way through the gate. I wonder in the upcoming years as more adventure travel companies and guiding services are taking paying customers up these big mountains, how the management structure will continue to adapt. Are the days of the "wild west" and self-reliance going to be shut down with tighter controls being imposed on everything considered "interesting and fun"?

The road up the mountain led from wide alpine prairies up the lower hills of the towering volcano. A herd of wild horses was grazing on the wind-swept high altitude grasslands. Judging by the angle on the lower slopes that we could still see below the clouds I tried to judge how high the summit was. All sense of scale was lost in the vast wilderness. Heading up over 13,000 feet, the lichen covered rocks gave way to barren layers of ash deposited from centuries of eruptions. I knew there seemed to be road construction almost everywhere in Ecuador, but amazingly crews were out grading and even paving parts of the main park road that headed toward the Cotopaxi hut. Workers were driving bulldozers and backhoes at 14,000 feet, paving the way for the masses of tourists to come - hopefully they would be treated with "bienvenidos" in the future!

Once we got buried in the clouds we started navigating the countless switchbacks up the mountain - these seemed to go on forever as the air kept getting thinner and the clouds more dense. But thankfully soon after I caught sight of the parking lot in the fog - we were about to start our short walk to the hut just above. At the parking lot we were able to catch a glimpse of the snowy summit gleaming in bright sunlight above the clouds. Our final objective on our trip was finally in sight! This was the last major hurdle to be overcome. I had been

looking forward to being back home with my fiancée, seeing friends and getting back to normal for a while now. I was able to imagine that in just about 16 hours we would be starting to head back down from the summit (if we made it) and I would be able to start thinking about "real life" again - wedding planning, work, friends and family!

For the next 16 hours I would be in a survival mode - just thinking about what to eat, what to wear and what to pack to make it up and down safely from the mountain. My mind had to be focused. This is the highest I had been in a vehicle, above 15,000 feet. It was hard to believe we were far higher than the highest mountain in the continental US, just sitting in the parking lot! We had about a 1/2 mile walk to the Jose Ribas hut a few hundred feet above us where we would have dinner and try to sleep before our alpine start the next morning.

The short walk to the hut took probably an hour of panting and puffing as we slogged up the sandy trail. Unlike on Cayambe, we had to carry our packs up the hill since no vehicles could make the last stretch. Small patches of snow lingered on one side - we were going to be seeing plenty more in the next few hours! The sand was very light and dusty - the pumice rocks would even float in water. The clouds had thickened again into a pea soup - at least it was dry and not raining. We were worried about getting soaked on the hike up and not being able to get warm again easily. Just as we were getting up to the hut I did notice a little precipitation - but instead of rain, they were again small balls of ice - graupel snow.



Cotopaxi and hut close by

Several other groups of climbers were in the hut but fortunately it wasn't too crowded - maybe more people had gotten turned away at the entrance gate? At least for us, it meant we got to have an entire bunk room to ourselves! Plunking down our packs and unrolling sleeping bags, we started to get our stuff organized

for the climb the next morning. Tea and hot chocolate and biscuits were waiting for us in the dining hall upstairs - nice! At this point, I had to be thankful for even these small blessings.

I could tell we were definitely at high altitude at the hut - even just sitting and sipping hot tea, I felt a bit out of breath! A sign by the front door gave warnings that we were at 4800 m (incorrectly translated to 21,068 ft which I knew was wrong but it felt like it!) 4800m is actually around 15,748 ft (the guides said 16,000 feet) - it seems like the elevations were always quite inaccurate in South America - we had the same problems in Peru on our trek to Machu Picchu. Of course 4800 is a round figure and may have been closer to 4877, which would have been 16,000 ft. The reality was probably somewhere in between. One thing I knew was that the summit of Cotopaxi was 19,347 ft since it was supposedly 7 feet higher than Kilimanjaro at 19,340 ft. I was just trying to gauge how much elevation we would be climbing the next day - I'm sure the extra 200 feet or so would feel like much more!



Dinner at the Cotopaxi hut

After tea I went back to get horizontal even if just for a short while. I knew I would probably hardly sleep a wink overnight, but any time I could be relaxing should help. I didn't have much residual soreness from Cayambe - I felt that climb was more taxing mentally than physically, so it was my mind that needed the most rest. I anticipated the same for Cotopaxi.

Dinner was a treat - steaks, spaghetti and salad. We'd need the energy the next day! I was thankful that even at our most anticipated part of the trip my stomach was still feeling good and I felt 100% physically. I was a bit worried since on my Peru trip, it wasn't until near the end that my stomach was getting tired of the new and unfamiliar food and decided it didn't want to digest anything for a while. I knew the hardest part of the trip would be at the end. I took some comfort in

knowing that Cayambe was supposedly a longer climb (12 hrs) - supposedly Cotopaxi would be more like 10 hrs. The generator kicked on just as we got back to our rooms to fall asleep at 6:30. Of course we wouldn't be needing it, and I was waiting for it to get dark to try to get some proper shut-eye before our summit bid in just a few hours.

I probably slept in fits and starts, not really sure if I slept at all. I awoke once still hearing the generator running. They said it went off at 9:00, so I must have not slept that much. Thoughts raced through my mind as I tried my hardest to relax. I must have slept a little though since the next time I woke up, it was quiet and the generator had gone to sleep for the night. A brilliant crescent moon shone through the window, showing the clouds breaking up. My hopes heightened that we'd have good summit day weather after all.

January 17

It was still technically the previous day - probably 11:15 pm when I heard some shuffling around in the cabin. Mike and Kendra had gone outside to use the bathroom and look at the stars, when unbeknownst to them and the rest of us, we found out the door of the cabin can lock from the outside locking the rest of us in! The next thing I heard was some cursing from Billy that he couldn't get out! He was threatening to break down the door using an ice axe if required when I started to awake and figure out what was going on. Next thing I saw a blurry figure taking a picture down from the wall, exposing an opening to the outside, and crawling through it! Apparently we weren't the first ones to be locked out of the cabin - others before us must have busted through and hung the picture to cover the hole. Next thing I heard was the deadbolt on the front door opening - whew!

RISE and SHINE - time to GET UP! I remember from Cayambe we got up just after midnight. I looked at my watch and noticed the glowing hands reading before midnight - hmmm, they seemed to have bumped up the start time. I didn't have much to do to get ready - my pack was already ready, and the clothes they said we'd be starting in (climbing pants, base layer and fleece), I already had on. I just had to put on my climbing harness, turn on the avalanche transceiver and shoulder my pack and I was ready.

Breakfast was ready upstairs - hot coffee, tea and hot chocolate. It was a well needed and deserved treat to get us started. Toast with jam and breakfast bars got us some carbs to jump-start our bodies for the long climb about to start. I was nervous but excited. I finished a half a small water bottle to get some hydration - at high altitude it's easy to lose hydration, and lack of water is one of the main causes of altitude sickness. I still was fine without having to take any Diamox or even an Advil - I hoped to keep it that way.

After breakfast, I noticed Mike and Kendra still lying down - apparently Mike had developed some GI uneasiness overnight - he wasn't sure if it was something in the food, or if it was the altitude, or just a bunch of nerves. Although the guides did their best to encourage him to be on board with the rest of the team, his body was just saying no. He felt trying to move forward when the body was not willing would make him too much of a liability of the team. Kendra didn't have any reservations about not going if Mike wasn't going to go - she didn't need to explain anything. It appeared that the "good luck" of Mike's horseshoe that he found earlier had run out. I was reminded again that it was only by God's providence that I would have a chance to climb the mountain - the superstition of a "good-luck charm" had no power. Instead of the horseshoe giving good luck, it created a sense of volatility, reminding me that only God was really in control.

I looked outside and an inch of fresh snow had fallen since dinner - it was the graupel variety of snow, kind of like a bunch of styrofoam balls instead of powder or slushy snow. I wondered how much more had fallen higher up - even just a few days before the trip, one of the weather forecasts was indicating a "heavy fall of snow..." hmmm - maybe there was more than just GI issues for Mike - maybe they were concerned about the weather and conditions as well? I started to worry a little as well - my enthusiasm was losing some momentum.

But the train was leaving - the guides indicated "5 more minutes" and we were going to get started! I needed this motivation to get going - the guides were coiling rope and packing pickets as I did a last minute bathroom break and topped off my water bottles. We were ready! It was misting lightly outside, slightly above freezing when we started out. I looked up - no stars, bummer, I was hopeful the last night when seeing the moon out of the window, but the weather still appeared unsettled. It was just a bunch of fog and haze - my headlight beam extended maybe 20 feet through the misty air. The fog and mist started freezing on my pack and outer jacket as we got higher - I was mostly focused on just putting one foot in front of the other, hoping in the back of my mind the weather was going to clear. There was no wind and the atmosphere seemed quite stable so I remained hopeful. Our headlight beams swooshed back and forth as we navigated the switchbacking sandy trail higher up the mountain, occasionally sliding in the slippery volcanic ash mixed with the styrofoam pellet snow.

We were plodding along slowly, less than 1 mph up the trail although we were breathing hard. The guides reminded us about pressure breathing - we needed to practice right away to get it engrained in our muscle memory and set our rhythm. We didn't want to get burned out early on our summit day. A couple people had already developed a high altitude cough from Cayambe - I knew with the cold air and high elevation I would be susceptible to it as well. I just wanted to take it slow and deliberate. Even Topo our experienced guide moved his feet very slowly and methodically - that was our best way to success high on the mountain.

After about 1/2 hour we were in icier terrain - the snow had formed a harder crust and permanent snow patches lay on both sides of the trail. Time to put on crampons. Strapping on the crampons was rather routine at this point, and having our ice axes at the ready, we were continuing uphill with one pole and our ice axes. I felt the mist getting a little lighter now (my pack was already glazed with ice though) and my hopes increased again of good weather higher up. Just a little way higher on the mountain Jupiter gleamed through the remaining thin clouds and I moved forward with revitalized energy.



Ghostly forms in the dark

At the toe of the glacier, I knew we were in for something quite a bit more serious. The guides had talked about a "short section with fixed rope" and a possible 70 degree top-rope section where we would be belayed. I thought the climbing was hard enough already - and it sounded like it was going to get quite a bit harder. hmmm - I hadn't thought of turning back at any point, but I was afraid I would get to a point where I would feel discretion was the better part of valor. I tried to not think about it, but instead just follow instructions and keep one foot in front of the other to press on.

I could make out some large hulking white shapes in front of us as we paused for a break. I felt I was in a large cavern deep underground - all dark but with large alien limestone sculptures covered with stalactites and flowstone formed through the centuries. These sculptures were large seracs covered with icicles and flowing ice. I felt so much out of my element, but I knew what I needed to do to keep going - we were going to rope up and I just had to move forward, following the footsteps of Topo the guide right in front of me. After about a 15-minute break of hydrating and snacking on a power bar, we were ready to go... onward and upward!

Topo was on the lead rope, with me and Bill behind. Billy had Meredith and Todd, and Katie had the Canadians Dawn and Leonard. Slowly but surely our 3 ropes moved up the mountain, weaving around large crevasses, seracs and drop-offs. We started to negotiate an icefall - like a small version of the Khumbu icefall. At night, I just saw blurry shapes in the distance from the beam of my headlamp, but they seemed surreal and alien - I thought about what it would look like on the way down in the daylight. And then before I realized it we were at the base of the fixed rope. Topo scampered up with ease, and soon afterward, he had me clipped in to a safety line. A couple lunge steps with him holding me and I was up. And then Bill was up. Before I realized what we did, we were done. I'm glad I didn't see it coming - it would look quite formidable in the daylight on the way down!

Shortly afterward we had to go down into a crevasse to navigate around a ragged section of icefalls - I stole a quick peek to the sides to grab a glance of several deep ice chasms around us full of glistening icicles and clear columns of ice. How they found a path through this, I was amazed. I guess this is part of why we paid \$2800 to be guided through these mountains! Apparently some groups before us had painstakingly cut paths and steps with their ice axes to allow us to pass through. The ice is always shifting and changing - at least at night without the warming sun, the ice was most stable. The path zigzagged several times, leading us sometimes uphill and sometimes downhill - I was rather disoriented and wondering if we were even still making progress up the mountain. We traversed around a huge crevasse, maybe 30 feet across and 150 feet deep - although the guide said to keep moving, I proceeded slowly, stabbing my axe dagger-like again into the steep slope to the right of the path and clutching it with both hands on each swing before cautiously moving forward. I'm glad that in the dark I couldn't see the full danger that loomed right next to us.

Negotiating a steep staircase of ice-cut steps we came to a slightly flatter section - just when I was wondering when it was going to end, I could glimpse further ahead into what appeared like smooth sailing for a while - whew! The clouds had parted by now, revealing a sky full of stars. Orion shone brightly overhead in the moon-less sky, the Big Dipper was again upside-down behind us and snatches of the milky way could be seen in fuzzy clumps. Lightning was dancing around in some cumulonimbus clouds over the jungle to the NE - a reminder that the humid rainforest was not far away. A glance at my watch revealed still many hours until first light - we would have to continue plodding along for a while. I was relieved when we got to a flat section ahead and was happy to see Topo tossing down his ice axe, sticking it down in the snow - yay another break! I really needed this one. I was happy to just sit for a while and relax. But I was quickly reminded that I needed to put on another layer, get something to drink and eat since I would get chilled quickly and nutrition and hydration were vitally important. I was starting to develop a slight headache - my first Advil for the day was in order.

I really only had a minute or 2 to finally relax during the break before it was time to get moving again. Putting away our parkas and picking up our ice axes we were ready to get moving again. This time, the path seemed to be more like rolling smooth hills - easy traveling. But actually not so easy - the glaciers were still riddled with crevasses, and what appeared to be level was still quite uphill. And at 17,000 feet! Nothing was easy. My headlamp started blinking off - my batteries were almost out. Fortunately we were on a relatively level stretch where I could do a quick change of batteries. Back on the trail, a glance to my right revealed what seemed to be a small hole, maybe 6 inches in diameter. But a quick peek into the hole revealed a bottomless chasm that belled out just below the surface - a hidden crevasse! I clung tighter to the rope and pressed forward.

Higher on the mountain, the objective hazards seemed to reduce - not as many crevasses, seracs or blocks of ice about to fall on us. We just had to keep moving steadily. I was glad the team was strong and nobody seemed to be slowing us down or having trouble. My headache was gone and I was feeling good. I was just anticipating the warm glow of the eastern sky - another glance at my watch indicated 4:00 am, sunrise still 2 hours away. Shoot - we still had a long way to go. Headlights danced on the mountain far above us as well as below, reminding me of the long journey that still lay ahead. I thought about my warm bed at home and knew on that very night I would be flying out thousands of miles back home.

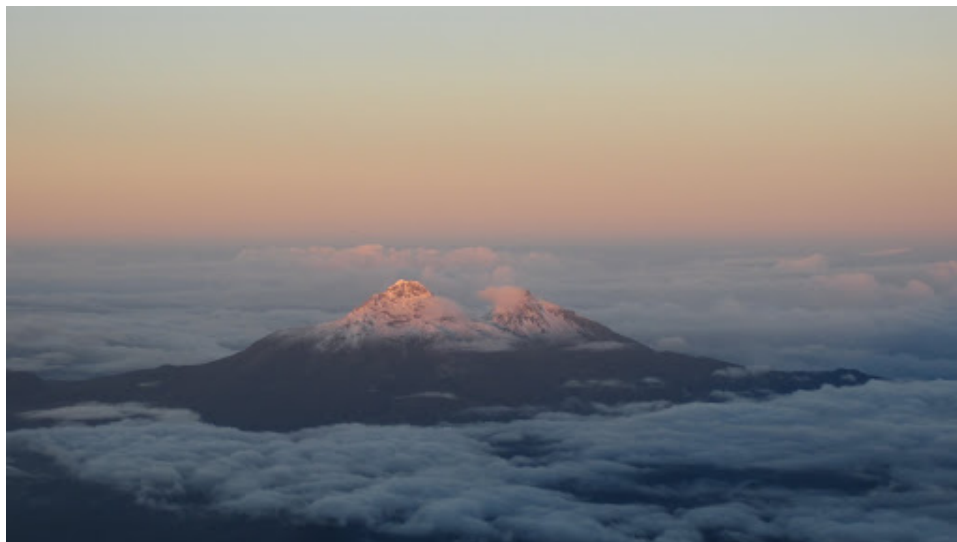
After the next break we found ourselves climbing through a cresting wave of ice - icicles over our heads, a wall on one side and a steep drop-off on the other. The crest appeared frozen in time, as if an ocean wave got flash-frozen in place. I felt like we were traversing a path in a cavern - I suddenly realized my experience of going through Onyx cave in AZ a few years back where we had to negotiate a similar piece of terrain. Using ropes and traverse lines for safety, we had navigated similar frozen waves of limestone deep underground. I felt the confidence I had gained on those cave trips proved very valuable at 17,000 feet on Cotopaxi. I moved slowly but confidently forward.

Soon the wave finished its course and we were on a steep traverse, the path took us along a 45-degree slope, slowly climbing along the way. Just down the slope appeared to be a gaping crevasse. I didn't quite feel compelled to have to grab my axe with both hands this time, but I was very glad to be roped with a dependable guide (who did us very well on Cayambe). I mentally practiced my self-arrest techniques we had learned a few days ago as well just in case. Moving slowly and deliberately was the key - this was not the place for any "macho" behavior. I had been on a couple trips in the past with "macho" leaders who liked to show-off their abilities, but I had far more respect for our guides who moved methodically and safely on the mountain. I had heard from a trip report a couple years back from some friends in the Sierra Club where they got stymied around this section and had to turn back due to unstable snow (supposedly called a "reactive windslab") which could cause an avalanche sending them

tumbling right into a crevasse! Even if the weather is perfectly sunny, avalanche danger is always a concern, and discretion is always the better part of valor. Luckily for us, the snow was stable and we continued forward. I just hoped it would still be stable on the way down after having warmed in the sun for several hours.

My mind and body were already quite tired when I thought I could glimpse a peek of color in the eastern sky. Although the sunrise was still blocked by the upper part of the mountain, I could perceive the change in the light from a deep purple to blue hue. My tiredness faded to excitement - we had been on the mountain for over 5 hours and knew we only had about an hour to go - we were close indeed! The guides indicated we were on schedule and making good time. The tops of the clouds below us were bathed in a faint bluish tinge - lights from the towns below peeked through breaks in the clouds. One by one we were able to turn off our headlamps.

Pressure-breathing along the way, we inched our way forward on a steepening slope - maybe 40-45 degrees. A nice set of steps had been cut by many pairs of boots tromping through, making the going straightforward. But not easy - each step was a huff and puff to ascend. Just ahead I thought I caught a glimpse of the summit ridge - we were close! A hint of sulfur filled the air, reminding us that Cotopaxi was not dormant and could spring to life at any time. Large sections of the snow had melted, revealing bare ground and rock, tinged with white and yellow mineral deposits. I wondered if parts of Cotopaxi contained mazes of steam caves like those in the summit crater of Rainier. I wasn't about to go wandering and exploring looking for caves - it took so much effort just to continue on the trail!



Illinizas at sunrise

A striking pyramidal shadow shone on the atmosphere and clouds behind and below us as the sun finally crested the horizon on the far side of the mountain. The belt of Venus was starkly beautiful - even though we had seen similar shadows on Cayambe, they were just as dramatic here. Much of the land was in shadow and below the clouds, oblivious and unaware of these unseen wonders in the heavens above. Iliniza Norte and Sur caught the first warming rays of the sun, their summits bathed in a warming pink alpenglow. Behind us to the left, Cayambe's and Antisana's snowy summits were enjoying the sunrise as well. I wondered how many climbers were on those mountains at this very moment - the weather was beautiful and clear above the cloud tops at 16,000 feet with hardly a breath of wind.



Our shadow

We were near what was considered the crux of the climb - Yanasacha, also known as the dark band (Yanasacha means "black rock" in Quechua - this is a remnant of a previous eruption). This is where I was thinking the 70-degree slope with the belay section was going to start. As we continued higher though, I never saw any rope section - just steep slopes and many kicked steps. Apparently some guides had cut a canal through part of the slope, lessening the angle to no longer necessitate running belays - that must have been a lot of work near 19,000 feet! I wish I had a way to express my gratitude! The climb was steep and pretty tough and we moved slowly. I was slightly concerned with my health at the high elevation - occasionally I could see star patterns in the sky, probably caused by dilated blood vessels in my eyes. I had the same patterns high on Cayambe as well and they disappeared when we headed back down.

A peek ahead revealed a climber in the distance raising his arms in glory - the summit was near! Only 5 more minutes, right? It looked so close! A couple parties of climbers were already heading down, passing us as we were still going up. It turned out to be more like 1/2 hour though before we were taking the final

steps uphill on Cotopaxi - all sense of scale was off. Perhaps a dozen other climbers were on the summit with us as one by one we joined them in celebration. I was a bit knackered and nursing a bit of a headache again on the summit - I was ready to just plunk down my pack and ice axe and take a nap. I had kept my parka on since the last break - it was chilly and unlike on Cayambe the slight breeze kept things a bit colder than they looked, even though the sun shone brightly.



Summit panorama

After another Advil and putting on my glacier goggles I got back up with unmitigated enthusiasm! I was elated to have made it all the way - it was beautiful and we had made the climb in good time, so we could enjoy ourselves for a while, celebrate with "hero" shots in front of the vast gaping crater in front of us, and see how many other volcanoes we could identify around us. I think we could glimpse every major summit in all of Ecuador - Chimborazo to the south is the highest. Snow-capped Iliniza Norte and Sur shone above the clouds to the west with Corazon just north. Cayambe and Antisana were in the north, Sincholagua was also visible to the north with a large lake near its base. Rumiñahui, Paschocha, and Fuya Fuya were there, as well as the Pichinchas just to the west of Quito - yet again buried in clouds as usual. The steep summit of Quilindaña was just on the far side of the crater. The tip of the cone of Sangay could be seen, throwing an ash plume into the air. Tungarahua was almost directly in front of El Altar to the south. I remembered those peaks on my previous trip with my church to Ecuador - it was quite a bit different perspective this time! Thick banks of clouds lay to the east - thankfully the thunder clouds we had seen earlier didn't start migrating and shooting lightning over us! I thought of Shell from that missions trip 2 years earlier and the time we were in a shelter during a hailstorm singing songs and playing games with the kids - of course the locals were used to it and some were even playing soccer in the rain - they didn't mind.

I felt so fortunate to be able to come to Ecuador and summit both these great peaks on my first attempt - I thought about what Billy was saying on his last trip in

June with all the wind and heavy snow. I had considered doing this trip in June but decided to move it up to January when a spot opened up - we couldn't have asked for better conditions! The summit crater was stunning - a mile wide and 1200 feet deep, steaming with volcanic fumaroles and ringed with ice like smoothly spread ice cream. Clouds blanketed the ground all around us - we were at least 3000 feet above the cloud tops and anything above around 16,000 feet looked like ice cream castles floating in the heavens.

We got to celebrate with a grand summit photo, which could be sent over satellite phone to the base office, which could then be uploaded on the RMI blog website. I know my fiancée and my folks would be monitoring the site to see how we did - I couldn't wait to tell them and I knew they would already know by the time I got back to Quito and could check my email again. I had stressed quite a bit about this trip - especially since I had a wedding in just over a month and I had only been to a little over 15,000 feet.



Group on the summit of Cotopaxi

One of my favorite songs came to mind - Chris Tomlin's Indescribable, which starts:

*From the highest of heights to the depths of the sea
Creation's revealing Your majesty*

...

*Who has told every lightning bolt where it should go
Or seen heavenly storehouses laden with snow
Who imagined the sun and gives source to its light
Yet conceals it to bring us the coolness of night
None can fathom*

God's wonders were truly indescribable - even all the pictures I could take would just barely scratch the surface and my writings here would only offer a glimpse as well. I felt really privileged to see a glimmer of God's indescribable beauty through this experience and hoped to be able to share it when I got home.

Speaking of songs and music, we had been joking for most of the trip what I would need to sing something on the summit. I guess enough people knew I sung in a choir, and heard me humming on the bus and in the lodge - they were building up some sort of expectations for a bit of musical expression! On Cayambe a couple days earlier we were all so caught up with the climb and breathing that none of us even thought of it until we were all the way back down. But on the way up Cotopaxi when we got to view the beautiful sunrise, I was reminded of the opening scene of the Lion King with the sunrise and all the animals singing Circle of Life. We had been talking about the Lion King which I had seen with my fiancée for my birthday just a couple days before this trip, and when we all reached the summit and did a big group hug the song came to my mind "Can You Feel the Love Tonight" - I had to sing a few bars!

Just as we were about to wrap up and start heading down, I cycled through, re-taking pictures in every direction - just in case if somehow the pictures I had taken earlier got messed up or some part of my memory card got corrupted... I couldn't take a chance - really didn't want to miss anything! I felt bad for Mike and Kendra who weren't with us - at least they could experience our trip vicariously through the pictures! My guide Casey Grom from my Rainier trip was also in Ecuador on a mountaineering skills seminar and they were about to start on Cayambe - I wished them luck. The timing was almost perfect - supposedly on one of the previous trips, one group was on the summit of Cayambe and one was on Cotopaxi at the exact same time, and the guides could radio each other, as the summits were just 60 miles apart!



Looking toward Cayambe in the distance

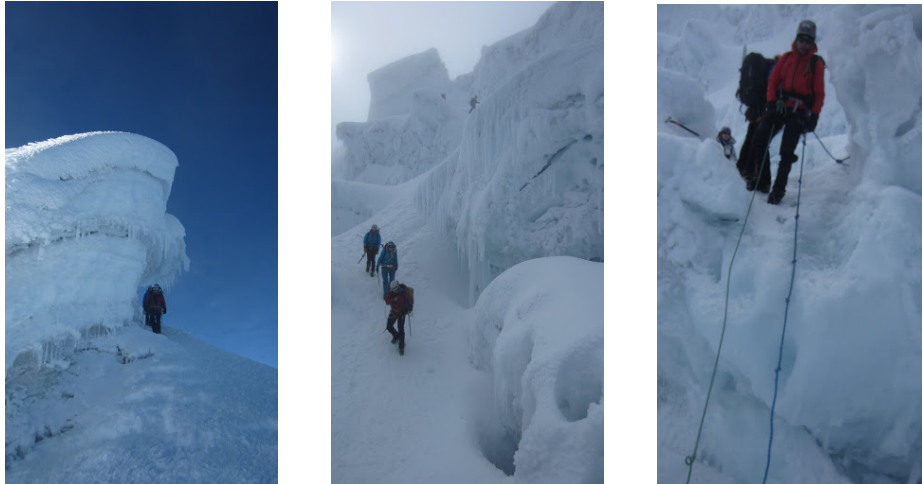
Heading back down was bittersweet - I knew the trip was all downhill from here, on a literal sense as well! I looked forward to getting back home to my fiancée, friends, family and church. Going down the mountain, I felt like I could walk normally again - without having to huff and puff to go up each step! I felt the path moving in fast-forward on the way down, going at least 3 times the speed as on the way up! We were soon on the steep slope where the guides had cut a canal for us, following the boot-cut steps on the way down.

In bright sunlight the mountain was like a heaping pile of whipped cream - I was mesmerized in the beauty and purity of the icy sculptures all around. A glimpse into a crevasse revealed glittering blue ice caves supported by gleaming columns of clear ice and decked with chandeliers of icicles all around. The clouds whooshed around below us in waves, slowly enveloping the lower slopes and peaks around us as the day started to warm up. I imagine in the next few hours, we would be socked in and it would be raining just like the last several days.

Back long the steep traverse and underneath the cresting wave of ice we made our way back down. It felt like an eternity ago we passed it on the way up, but now it was as if time was being sped up. Of course the spots I wished the most I could take pictures were probably the worst places to take pictures - next to crevasses, under ice blocks and steep slopes leading down to oblivion. I wished I had one of those GoPro helmet-cams rolling footage all the way down - maybe next time! The images would be etched in my mind for a long time though.

Proceeding along a flatter section just above the icefalls, I realized we had crossed many crevasses and snow-bridges I hadn't noticed earlier on the way up. Looking down I could see the route we had gone up, zigzagging around a menacing array of cracks and tumbling blocks of ice. Topo our over-achieving guide actually was walking off the trail on the uphill side, holding the rope taut to catch us quickly in the case of a slip or fall. I doubted my reaction time if any of us fell, how fast we could get into a team arrest position to catch the rest of the group before the whole rope team would fall. During practice is one thing when we are expecting it, but for real, when we are all tired and still at high altitude is another ball game.

Topo occasionally shortened the lengths of the ropes between us and with Bill, forming an upside-down "V" - that way he could catch either me or Bill if either of us slipped. He was a machine! I was happy to have his guidance - we soon came to a crevasse about 3 feet wide with an obvious but precarious snow-bridge with openings on both sides. I just put my head down, stepped gingerly across and got to the other side, half expecting something interesting. Luckily the crossing was uneventful - the softening snow still held our weight over the 100-foot deep blue chasm below us. The other step-across crevasses seemed easy, but even those I realized were far from child's play when a peek down revealed an endless void that seemed to stretch to the center of the earth.



Getting through the icefalls on the way down

We were soon back on the icefalls, weaving our way through seracs, crevasses and waves of ice. I had forgotten about the fixed rope until I saw it in the distance. Topo lowered both me and Bill in turn down the 8-foot wall of ice - my fears had mostly subsided at this point so I could start enjoying the moment. At the bottom on safer ground I managed to pull out my camera to capture some of the scenes - we were descending a giant layered wedding cake of ice, each slab probably 10-20 feet high with ramps connecting each slab. It was a fairy-land of gleaming pure ice. I had remembered as a kid visiting Swallow Falls in MD near our cabin in the dead of winter when it was all frozen and being fascinated by the 80-foot wall of ice flanked by icicles, caves and flowing ice formations. At the time I would have never imagined I would be in another icy world like this one.

The yellow cabin below was visible through peeks in the clouds - wow we were almost down already! Snow had fallen down to about the 15,000 foot level, ending somewhere between the cabin and parking lot visible further down. Although the end looked close we were still far from reaching it - we still had the lower glacier and snowfield to descend. At least I wasn't so physically tired - just mentally. We were in the clouds now and I was looking forward to just getting back down, getting to Quito, enjoying lunch and getting cleaned up before my flight. I had worried a little about timings with my flight that night. A glance at my watch only said about 9:00 though - wow, it was still early! Many mornings I'm not even awake at 9:00, and here we were having almost finished the whole climb by that time!

Descending the final stretch, saying bye to our crampons and ice axes, we were soon on the scree / ash slope just above the refuge. Some of the recent snow had melted making the trail a gloppy mix. I didn't really care at this point though - it was easy to plunge step our way down and soon we were stepping on the back porch of the refuge. Mike and Kendra were still in the room - they had gotten to sleep in, relax and wander around a little bit above the cabin. They seemed in

good spirits - I'm sure they were bummed about sitting out the climb, but didn't show it. It was about 7.5 hrs to get up the mountain and barely 2.5 hrs back down - a 3:1 ratio!



Back to the hut!

Packing up our sleeping bags and final things we had left in the cabin, it was just another short 20 minute tromp back to the parking lot. We were back at 11:00 getting on the bus back to town. Most of us hadn't bothered bringing sneakers so we were still clomping around in the heavy boots. Taking the boots off in the bus during the 2 hour drive back to town - my feet were so happy! I hoped people didn't mind my odoriferous socks - I think we were all just too tired to care! We decided to forgo our lunch stop and instead just headed back to the Mercure hotel in town. An ice cream break was greatly appreciated - the triple chocolate Magnum bar was heaven in my mouth!

We hit a wall of traffic on the highway soon after - so we knew we were on the edge of town. The barren slopes just an hour ago had been replaced with the multicolored "little boxes of ticky-tacky" of countless houses, the surreal street art, and many imaginative sculptures. The spires of the Basilica could be seen and soon I spotted the ruffled dome of one of the sports arenas which I knew wasn't far from the hotel. Yay - what a trip!

Although I didn't need a room in the hotel (I would be flying out the same night), one was already paid for and ready. I'm glad now I decided not to cancel the room to try to get my money back since the shower felt like heaven and the bed was all I could ask for! I could finally send my postcards in peace (I had bought them earlier before Cotopaxi), but I was reluctant to tell anyone my story until I was back off the mountain having summited! I wonder if I would have quietly discarded the postcards if we didn't make the summit. I suddenly felt quite bummed I lost the nice sweatshirt RMI had given us with Cayambe / Cotopaxi on

the front. At first I was ambivalent but now wished I had it. Down the street from the hotel was a souvenir shop though - as a consolation I picked up a nice T-shirt of Cotopaxi!

We got to celebrate in style - beer and piña coladas at the bar in the hotel before heading to a fancy restaurant. One of the guides knows the head chef and had them prepare their special selection – ceviche, octopus, steak, pork and arrays of hors d'oeuvres and other tasty bites I didn't recognize. At this point I wasn't worried about getting sick so I could finally let my guard down and enjoy a fancy meal! The rest of the trip, I was so nervous about GI I was willing to dumb-down my menu selections to items that were "safe".



Celebration dinner in Quito

Back at the hotel I had my bags already packed and ready - it was a short ride to the airport. It had only been 9 days but felt like an eternity - it was a life-changing experience. I was glad to do well at 19,000 feet - setting a new altitude record, and setting precedence for another high mountain trip. One of my biggest hopes in my life was to get to Everest base camp and maybe some of the nearby peaks (Kala Pattar, Gokyo Ri and Island peak). I now felt like that was within my reach. My luggage was one of the bags to be "randomly selected" for additional screening at the airport, requiring an escorted walk out on the tarmac to the baggage handler cart for them to go through my bag. I'm guessing with the level of grunginess and dirt accumulated from the last week of climbing, the bomb-sniffer dogs must have picked up an unusual scent or something! Fortunately the search was rather uneventful and I was soon on my way, about to drift off to sleep after being up for almost 24 hrs (with just a couple of snatches of sleep the previous night high on Cotopaxi).

Much of Quito was blanketed in low clouds as we ascended. My ears popped in the opposite direction as normal as we gained altitude as the air went from the

ambient 9300 ft elevation to the pressurized "elevation" of around 7000 feet. I can never sleep in planes but exhaustion finally took over - I must have napped for a couple hours since soon we were descending into Atlanta to my connection to SFO. Most of the country was clear - unusual for January. The Front Range of the Rockies in CO could be seen probably 250 miles away as we crossed the vast plains to the east. Snow blanketed much of the plains and Rockies through the Sierras before we touched down back in CA under crystal clear skies. I managed to make it to the office on a second wind for several hours - hoping to get a jump-start on reality.

It was one of the hardest experiences in my life but one of the most rewarding. I'm sure this will be eclipsed by my wedding coming up shortly - I look forward to my next life-changing experience! A "Congratulations" balloon was waiting for me in my living room back at home - a nice gift after a wonderful climb. Of course it was for our wedding coming up having come from a bridal shower last weekend. It made a fitting double-entendre for my welcome back!

P.S. We had a wonderful wedding just a few weeks after the trip!



My new wife Nisha and me

P.P.S. When my folks came out to CA for my wedding, they brought back a nice surprise – they had found my lost sweatshirt!