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Paths

Author Conner Gorry wrote the third edition of *Lonely Planet's Cuba Guide* (available worldwide in January 2004); she hopes to someday do the *Alto del Naranjo-Las Cuevas* through-hike, thereby summiting *Pico Turquino* twice in her lifetime.

Pico Turquino

Climbing the Sierra Maestra

By Conner Gorry



Cubanow.- We still hadn't decided about 'the big hike' as I scrambled over the tusks of woolly mammoths and Joel and his son roamed among the caveman at *Valle de la Prehistoria* in *Parque Baconao* near Santiago de Cuba.

We weren't even thinking about conquering mountains at the moment, instead delighting in this funky attraction, where concrete creatures like ferocious saber-toothed tigers mingle with pterodactyls picking at imaginary carrion. No, what I was thinking right then was how my husband looked kind of like Barney Rubble, (with Fred's belly).

That night, with our own bellies full of a delicious \$3 chicken dinner, we decided to summit *Pico Turquino*.

At 1,972 meters (or 1974, depending on which measurement you favor), *Pico Turquino* is Cuba's highest peak, superlative in more than meters, for it sits in the heart of the *Gran Parque Nacional Sierra Maestra*, stronghold of the rebel army that successfully ousted dictator Fulgencio Batista in 1959.

I wanted to scale those same mountains, smell those pine trees and trod that terrain. It wasn't easy convincing my guy to accede to the ascent however: he had already summited once in the 80's for Silvio Rodriguez's legendary mountain top concert, and wasn't looking forward to repeating the muscle-quaking experience.

Were it not for my genuine admiration that he was actually agreeing to climb *Turquino* twice in his life -most Cubans torture themselves just once with this uphill slog, thereby securing lifelong bragging rights- I would have scoffed, 'it's not even 2,000 meters. Bring it on! I've climbed higher mountains with Alpha Granny.'

Though I was confident about my hiking abilities, I was secretly concerned for Joel. A two pack-a-day smoker (filtered *Populares*, but still), he had been sore after climbing the 459 steps that run to the top of nearby *Gran Piedra*. That great, big rock is only 1,234 meters and most of that is covered by car; a cake walk comparatively.

Exploratory questions regarding his physical condition revealed nothing but his commitment. Anything I could do, he could do too and we'd do it together. I was less apprehensive about his son who was a teenage boy strong and refreshingly open-minded.

Only after we set out did Joel remind me that he had recently had knee surgery, pointing out the seriousness of the undertaking every time he asked his young ballet dancer, 'are you okay? Your legs are your future. Tell me if you're having problems.'

There are two routes for this summit hike, one beginning at *Alto del Naranjo* in *Granma* Province, the other beginning at *Las Cuevas* on the southern coast of *Santiago de Cuba* province.

The former has some distinct advantages as it allows hikers to take in *Comandancia de la Plata* (mountain headquarters to Fidel, Che, Camilo and the rest of the M-26-7 rebels) and is spread over two or three days, permitting a more gradual elevation gain and better vistas.

Since our goal was to get up, revel, and get down, we opted for the *Las Cuevas* option, which would have us summiting *Turquino*, theoretically, in six hours and descending in four.

The sun was dipping below the horizon and the moon already on the rise as we arranged for our guides and pitched camp at the *Las Cuevas* trailhead. This stretch of southern coast between *Santiago de Cuba* and *Pilón* is one of Cuba's most majestic and I was elated to be sharing such a beautiful scene with people I loved.

As we dined on barbecued pork and guacamole, fueling expectations for the next day's hike, we decided it would be folly to go up and come down in a day, leaving us little time to enjoy the journey.

Instead, we took the alternative suggested by the friendly rangers, to summit *Turquino* and sleep at the ranger hut at *Pico Cuba* (1,872 meters) rather than descending the same day. With the promise of a 5am wakeup shake, we shimmied into our tent and snuggled into our sleeping bags, dreaming on the flanks of Cuba's highest mountain.

We awoke late and groggy, alarmed that the sun was part way up, with a British couple already hitting the trail. '*Dale, dale! Corre, corre!*' Joel admonished us to get our asses in gear, pack up camp, and hit the bathroom and go.

Our guide was a desultory young man who talked only when asked a direct question and sometimes not even then. His once over glance at our ragtag trio in sneakers and jeans, with gray hairs (me), potbelly (Joel) and youthful exuberance (Joelito), said 'this won't be easy.'

As soon as we had one foot stepping rhythmically in front of the other, I realized my naiveté in disdaining the 1,972 meters ascent: it was short, but it was straight up. Only then did it hit me that we had to gain almost two kilometers in elevation over just 9.5 kilometers of trail: this was going to be six hours of up, up and more up.

The August heat was brutal and my expectations of vast vistas were ill conceived. In this heavily protected national park, the great stands of cloud forests rarely break for even a peak at the glorious coast below. Besides, after the second hour, I was looking at nothing but the sweaty back of my *compañero* in front of me, occasionally fixing a beggarly stare at the unmerciful trail above him.

A little farther along, I asked Joelito to dig out the energy-boosting *cucurucho*. The perfect trail snack, this local treat is made of shredded coconut, spiked with fresh fruit essence (orange or guava) and heaps of sugar.

I don't know which was worse: learning that we had left the *cucurucho* down at base camp in our early AM rush or coming upon the part of the trail called *Saca la lengua* ('Flops your tongue out.').

This steep stretch with its near vertical climb makes you pant like a Las Vegas dog in heat, leaving you begging for respite. The log steps helped only a little. Twenty years ago, Joel tells me, this was just vertical, muddy mountain; we were lucky to have the little logs to give us traction. We crested the final step, walked into a flat spot and greeted another uphill grind.

'Is it much farther?' I asked the guide, who assured me it was.

'Is it uphill like this the whole way?' I asked hopefully. Again, he assured me *que sí*, that it was.

By this point Joel was leveraging himself upwards with a sturdy walking stick and we were rationing our water. As any hiker knows, water is heavy and we ere not only hauling water for three, we were also carrying gear for the *Pico Cuba* overnight, plus food.

Even though there is potable water at both the beginning and end of this trail, we noticed our supply running low in the middle. Not good on a Cuban summit trek in August. I switched to baby sips. Our guide refused offers of water.

'How long have you been guiding this hike?' I asked him in an effort to break the ice.

'Four years,' he said.

'What's your record to the top?' I asked.

'Two hours, 43 minutes,' he responded.

'Wow.' I looked at my watch: we had been on the trail about four hours and still had a long way to go.

'Are we the slowest group you've ever led?' I asked, somehow already knowing the answer.

He politely refrained from saying 'by far'.

We We broke into the clearing leading to the *Pico Cuba* hut after about 6 hours. Graceful tangerine gladioli grew in carefully tended thickets; the ground by the far side of the hut was blanketed with wild strawberries.

We greeted the ranger, filled up on water and strawberries, and started out towards the final 100 meters to the top of *Turquino*. The fog was rolling in thick and the temperature dropping rapidly. As we plodded up through the fog, we were ushered along by giant tree ferns and the odd wild orchid, more gladioli and strawberries.

After an hour moving forward simply because we knew we had to, that we'd come this far and were going to make it, Joelito made it

to the top. The fog swallowed him up.

As it cleared, a bronze bust of José Martí atop a huge stone pedestal was mystically revealed and our team stood in awe for a second. We had just enough energy to read the dedicating plaque, to learn that in 1952, revolutionary Celia Sánchez, her father and compatriots, did this same climb. Except they hauled up that massive bust.

We collapsed at the foot of it. We could have stayed there all day, had the sky not opened up and rained hailstones the size of marbles down upon us.

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Programming; Ing. Indira Izquierdo Rodríguez
Desing by:D.I. Alain López González