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Fuji-ko

On Japan's Mountain Day, Americans experience Fuji faith

Dianne Fallon



OUTSIDE, THE WIND SHRIEKED, AS IF A MASSIVE GALE HAD TAKEN hold of the mountain. Inside the hut, the sounds of other hikers waking up—soft voices, the rustle of sleeping bags, the ripping of Velcro—rose around me in the darkness. On the sleeping platform, zipped into my bag and nestled in between my 15-year-old daughter, Jen, and a petite Japanese woman, I tried to rest a bit longer in my 16 inches of space.

The hutmaster had suggested rising at 1 A.M., but I thought we needed more rest, so I had planned on a 2:30 A.M. wake-up. But now I couldn't sleep. Although I didn't want to wake Jen just yet, I squeezed out of my bag to get up for the bathroom.

I stepped into my hut slippers and outside into a thick mist and a dense crowd of humanity shuffling past the hut. Where had all these people come from? The wind had died down to a quiet whistle. Except for the crunch-crunch of boot-clad footsteps, the hikers moved quietly.

Looking above the hut, I could see a line of white lights zigzagging up the switchbacks of Mount Fuji's cone. The line was continuous and unbroken, as if someone had strung a length of holiday lights up and across the dark mountain. The lights bobbed and shifted as invisible hikers climbed up the trail.

For several minutes, I waited to use the all-gender bathroom, where men urinated in the urinals while women, eyes averted, waited to use the stalls. In one stall, a hiker was vomiting, probably from the 11,000-foot altitude.

After returning to our sleeping nest, I tried to rest but soon realized our host was right. With so many people crowding the trail, we had to start hiking if we wanted to reach the Mount Fuji summit in time for the sunrise. I woke up Jen. After dressing in the dark, we went downstairs to drink coffee and hot chocolate and eat a foil-packaged breakfast of rice and sardines. Not very appetizing, especially on a few hours rest, but we needed nourishment to power us up the mountain.

When we set out at 2:30 A.M., the air was still damp with mist, but the winds had dissipated. We stepped into the line of hikers with our small flashlights, although we didn't need them because so many others had lights, creating a constant wave of low-level illumination. We began to hike with small steps, in sync with the others, a slow shuffle forward, the way the crowd moves as it exits Fenway Park after a ball game.

The rising sun lightens the horizon above a thick bank of clouds, high on Fuji.

DIANNE FALLON

The Big Dipper hung above us in the clear black sky. The temperature, by our New England standards, was mild, about 40 degrees Fahrenheit, perfect for hiking. Most hikers were clad in heavy coats, head-to-toe wind gear, hats and gloves, but we were comfortable in our long pants, a couple of light layers, and windbreakers, and we warmed up as we moved along.

We didn't have to hike very far to the summit, just 2 kilometers, but the going was slow, partly because of the throngs of people on the trail and partly because of the altitude—especially the rapid change from the day before, from Tokyo's sea level to the hut. I didn't mind the slow shuffle because the pace matched my fatigue. In the darkness, no one spoke. The only sound was the crunch-crunch of boots on volcanic scree. Moving with the crowd, I began to feel like we were part of something bigger than a hike.

When I planned this sunrise hike to Mount Fuji, I knew it would not be a wilderness experience. I knew we would encounter many people and numerous food stalls on the trail and that I would have to bring a hefty collection of 100-yen coins to use the bathroom (200 yen for each stop). But I accepted these conditions without complaining because resenting the crowds could ruin the experience of climbing Mount Fuji.

What I didn't know was that climbing a mountain with hordes of people offers its own rewards.

A DORMANT VOLCANO SINCE ITS LAST ERUPTION IN 1707, MOUNT FUJI has been the object of veneration and worship since ancient times, with written records of religious practice dating to the ninth century, when a major eruption caused catastrophic destruction. Mountain worship is not unique to Japan but was especially well established in the Mount Fuji region and at other sacred mountains in Japan. Fuji worship involves a mixture of Shinto, Buddhist, and Shugendo (or mountain-dwelling) practices that have evolved over centuries of political, religious, social, and economic change, many of which can be traced to specific historical individuals. Due to Mount Fuji's rich cultural history, in 2013 UNESCO recognized it as a World Heritage Site, deemed as having "outstanding universal value" that transcends national boundaries and requires protection and preservation. For Mount Fuji, the push to become a World Heritage Site generated efforts to clean up long-standing problems with garbage and human waste disposal. On the mountain today, hikers find scarcely a speck of garbage, and it appears the problems with human waste are largely eliminated.

We had begun our hike the previous afternoon from Mount Fuji's 7,500-foot Fifth Station, after a long, traffic-clogged bus ride from Tokyo. On the final stretch, the bus traveled up a forested mountain road that ends in a bustling enclave of commerce and contemplation: a lodge, several restaurants, many souvenir shops, and the Komitake Shrine. The large parking lot was empty because cars are banned from the Subaru Line road during the climbing season, when almost all visitors arrive by bus.

We fueled up on a lunch of ramen and dumplings, and then set off. The trail began as a narrow road filled with hikers, most of them Japanese. Some groups numbered 35 to 40 people. At first, the hike had an almost carnival-like atmosphere. Two mascot-like figures waved at us as rangers handed out safety brochures. Farther on, a candy company representative distributed free chocolate bars.

Skies were overcast, keeping the blazing subtropical sun at bay. The road evolved into a trail of packed-dirt switchbacks, with the occasional short, rocky, uphill scramble to keep it interesting. Jen and I didn't talk much, but I enjoyed the sense of being present with her through the experience of hiking.

Mount Fuji's summit, at 12,388 feet (3,776 meters), is not technically difficult. The hike from the Fifth Station to the peak is only 6 kilometers, but it is challenging, with an elevation gain of 4,500 feet. On the trail, my legs and lungs could feel the elevation. My feet moved slower than I was used to, but they kept moving, and Jen's faster pace helped to pull me forward. The hike to the Mount Fujisan hut, where I had reserved two beds, was 4 kilometers—less than 3 miles—but these felt like long kilometers.

Still, Jen and I hiked at a faster pace than the large groups did. We soon learned to take advantage of group rest stops to move ahead. "Group alert," I whispered to her, and we scurried past a crowd sitting on benches at a food stall, waiting for others to use the restroom or to get their eight-sided walking sticks impressed with special stamps. The walking stick, originally a Buddhist ritual object, is now a prized souvenir.

On Yoshida Trail, shed-like food stalls dot the landscape at the various mountain stations and at places in between. (Mount Fuji is divided into ten stations, or zones, from its base to the summit.) The stalls sell just about everything a hiker would need or want, including gloves and hats, water, noodles, beer, Snickers bars and other sweets, and small cans of oxygen that some carry to periodically inhale. Although our packs were heavy with water, I was glad Jen and I each carried two 2-liter bottles. On the mountain, a

12-ounce bottle of water costs 500 yen (about \$5), the same price as a can of beer.

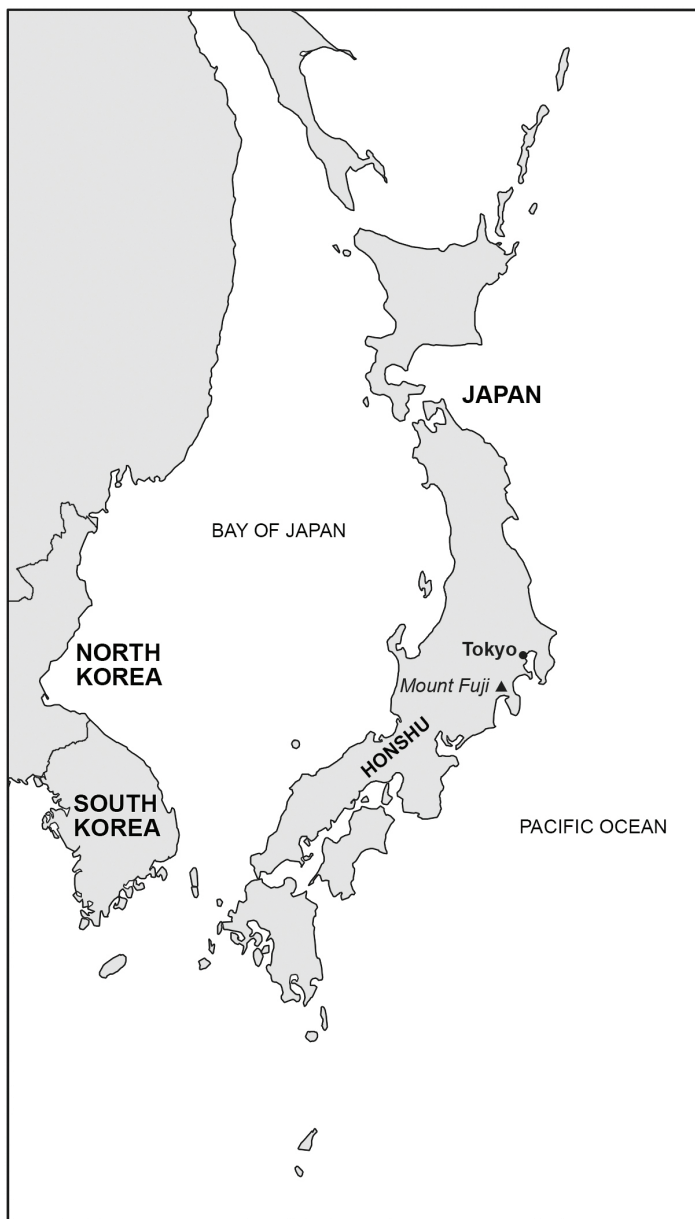
As we climbed higher, steep fields of volcanic scree surrounded us. On this part of Yoshida Trail, many berms have been built into the side of the mountain to stabilize the slopes and prevent the trail from slipping away—a danger due to the impact of the 300,000 or so hikers who climb Mount Fuji every summer. Yoshida Trail includes uphill and downhill routes—and everyone follows the rules—so we didn't have to navigate the congestion of hikers coming down the trail.

At about 10,600 feet, we discovered a strange phenomenon: public Wi-Fi at a food stall. The Wi-Fi demanded a selfie and a live update on Facebook, something we would never do on a mountain at home. By now, we had pulled on our windbreakers and long pants, as the wind was picking up, stirring the misty clouds surrounding us into a light drizzle.

Our pace slowed further as we climbed higher, and the crowds thinned as sunset drew nearer. Several times, we saw older hikers resting on the mountain, heads in between their knees, as if in extreme pain. “I think he’s OK,” I told Jen. “He’s with his friend.” Although the hike had become more challenging with increased elevation, it seemed to me that the hunched-over posture was a Japanese way of recovering and resting, rather than a signal of dire distress. Many hikers were older men and women. Having come this far, I sensed they would make it to the summit.

I wondered if any of these older hikers were practicing Fuji faith: “Fuji-ko.” In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, adherents of Fuji-ko joined in societies called “ko” to practice an especially intensive devotion to Mount Fuji. Most of these groups disintegrated after World War II, as the neighborhoods in which they were based were bombed and later rebuilt. Today, only a tiny percentage of the thousands of Japanese hikers who climb Mount Fuji follow any Fuji-specific religious practice. But the mountain still inspires many as a place of spiritual renewal, where one might become whole through the experience of hiking.

As we climbed higher, the mist thickened, the temperature dropped, and the wind picked up. By the time we arrived at the Eighth Station Mount Fujisan Hotel, the wind was roaring. We were chilled and eager to change out of our damp clothing. But the hutmaster had a system for managing hikers: We had to pay our bill and then eat dinner before we could change.



Fuji, a dormant basalt volcano, stands near the Pacific Coast in central Honshu, about 95 kilometers (59 miles) southwest of the Tokyo area.

LARRY GARLAND/APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB

Once we finished our ascetic meal of curry rice with bits of meat, the hutmaster gave us each a spotless tote bag for our hiking boots and directed us to the slipper collection, where we would choose slippers for the dining room and the bathroom. Unlike the usual custom in Japan, we did not have separate bathroom slippers, but these slippers had to stay downstairs. Upstairs, where everyone slept, it was socks only. There, we hung up our boot bags and packs before getting comfortable on the ultraclean sleeping bags laid out on the futon-covered sleeping platform.

The hut was full, and we were packed like sardines onto the platform, but the space felt cozy rather than claustrophobic. The holiday, the hutmaster explained, meant the mountain was even busier than usual.

Unbeknownst to me, Japan was celebrating its first-ever Mountain Day. Japan's Diet (its legislature) had recently established August 11 as a new holiday aimed at encouraging people to get out of the office and into the mountains. The intense devotion to a mountain was a common practice as recently my mother's childhood. Now, Mountain Day is a way of recalling and honoring these traditions, at Mount Fuji and throughout Japan.

BEFORE THE DAWN OF THIS FIRST MOUNTAIN DAY, IN THE DARKNESS ABOVE the Eighth Station, we hiked into the area of the Okumiya shrine. This shrine encompasses the upper slopes of Mount Fuji and is a part of the Fujisan Sengen Shrine, established in the ninth century to pacify the mountain gods after the catastrophic Mount Fuji eruption. The shrine's main temple and buildings are located in Fujiyoshida, 12 kilometers from the summit and the traditional starting place for the pilgrimage to Mount Fuji. (Ninety percent of hikers today start at the Fifth Station, but beginning the hike at Fujiyoshida, the First Station, remains a viable option.)

After 45 minutes of steady hiking in the dark, a light began to glow on the eastern horizon, above the bank of thick clouds shrouding the mountain's midsection. Everything was clouds and barren mountain, with no sign of anything else existing. We were trudging above the clouds, almost as if in another world, a halfway place between the sky and the Earth. I could understand why pilgrims to Mount Fuji believed that, in the rising sun, they might see the forms of the three Buddhist divinities: the loving and merciful Buddha of the Pure Land, Amida; and his bodhisattvas, Kannon and Seishi.

Aware of the pending sunrise, Jen and I pressed forward, trying to slip past larger groups when openings presented themselves. Having come this



A lion-dog statue signals the summit is near. A ranger with a megaphone commands that everyone “please go”; the sun is about to rise. DIANNE FALLON

far, we wanted to be on the summit when the sun peeked over the thick layer of clouds.

As white light began to take over the sky, the crowd jammed up for about fifteen minutes. We inched forward, stopping and starting, waiting to squeeze through a bottleneck created by an intersecting trail junction.

Around 5 A.M., we approached a torii gate guarded by two stone lion-dogs. There, on a rocky outcropping, a park ranger holding a megaphone admonished the crowd in English: “Please go! Continue! No stopping here! The summit is five minutes away!”

Although a megaphone on a mountain venerated as a spiritual icon seemed out of place, I was glad to hear the ranger bark out his orders. If he didn’t push the crowd along, many would stop for selfies and other photos, and thus deprive others of the opportunity to witness the sunrise. The megaphone was a not-subtle reminder that the welfare of the group was more important than individual desires.

The sky glowed pale orange. At the torii gate, I snapped some quick photos. All around us, hikers had taken up positions on rocky outcroppings,

flat spots, and other viewpoints. On this Mountain Day, thousands of people were sprinkled all over the Fuji summit.

As we passed through a warren of noodle shops and souvenir stalls, Jen surged forward to climb up to a high point with a good view. I followed, and we settled among some rocks and volcanic sand, leaned in close together, and watched the sky. I knew she and I were sharing an experience together that we'd always remember.

The curved edge of the sun peeked over the horizon of clouds. The crowd emitted a collective sound of appreciation, a chorus of "ahhs" and "oohs." Cameras clicked and snapped as the sun became a half-circle. When the full sun appeared above the clouds, a large cheer arose.

The sun had risen—a wondrous event! Together, we worshipped the dawn of a new day.

DIANNE FALLON writes about adventure and travel from Kittery Point, Maine, where she lives with her husband and daughter.