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## Africa Mountain Journal 1971–2015

Douglass Teschner

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# Africa Mountain Journal

*1971–2015*

**Douglass Teschner**



*Editor's note: New England native Douglass Teschner's career in the Peace Corps and as a United States Agency for International Development contractor has sent him to fifteen African countries since the early 1970s. He reflects on his love of the continent gained through the many climbs on its varied hills and mountains he's managed to fit in around his work over four decades. It all started in Morocco. He has worked on this diary for a long time and polished up the sixth version in winter 2016 from his latest post, in Guinea.*

The old doctor felt my pulse, evidently thinking of something else the while. . . .  
“I always ask leave, in the interests of science, to measure the crania of those going out there,” he said. “And when they come back too?” I asked. “Oh, I never see them,” he remarked; “and, moreover, the changes take place inside, you know.”

—Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

### **Jbel Toubkal, Morocco: August 29, 1971**

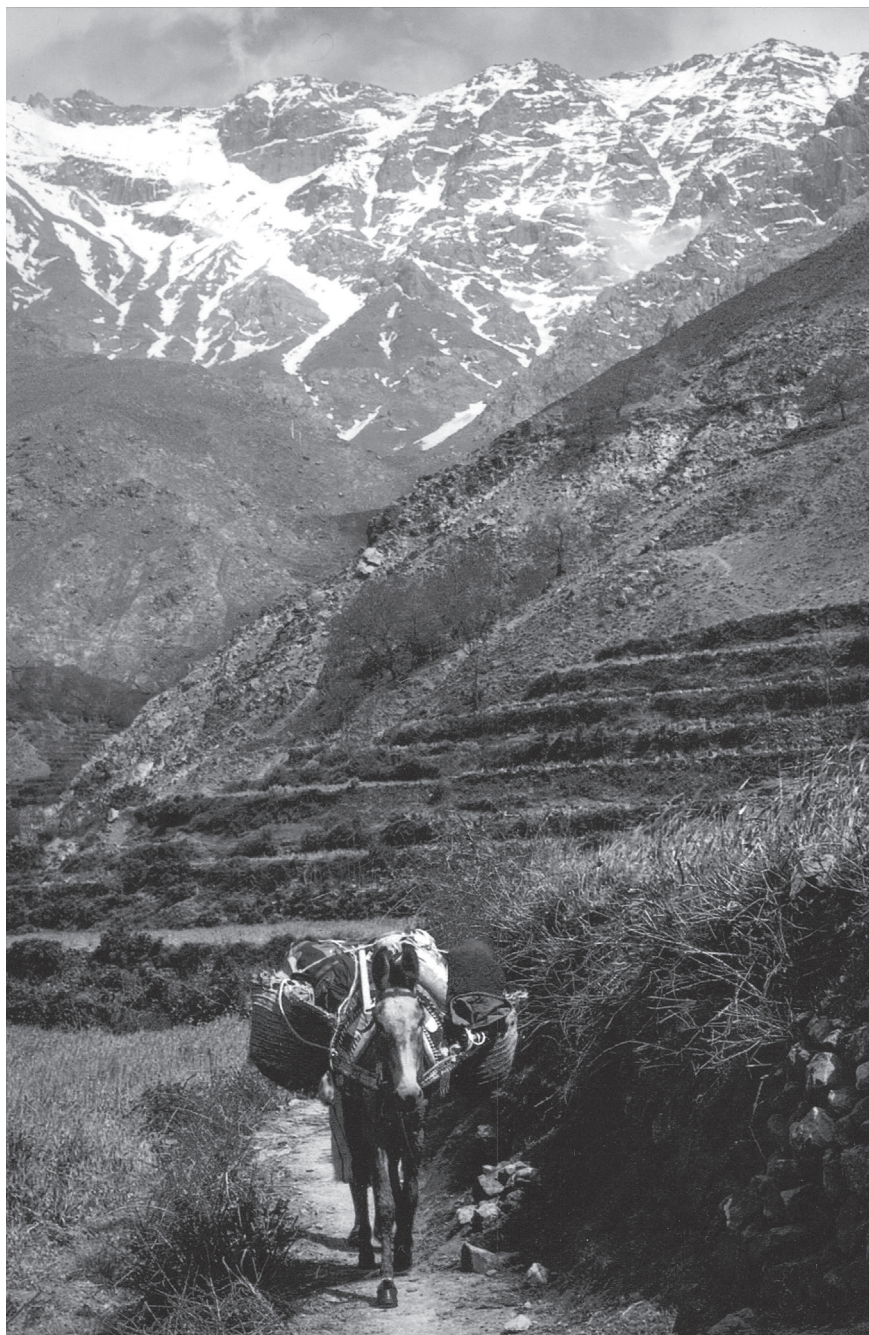
I knew nothing but stereotypes of Africa when I joined the Peace Corps and went to Morocco as a forestry volunteer. Sure, I wanted to help the world, but I was also looking for adventure, to test my character, even if I had only the vaguest idea of what that meant and where it might lead me. It had seemed like a pretty good idea until I was awaiting takeoff from JFK airport, when two years suddenly felt like such a long time that I might as well be going to the moon.

Less than a month in Morocco, a group of us traveled up out of the dry plains into the Atlas Mountains. At the village of Imlil, we declined the option to have a mule carry our gear to the Neltner Hut, something I regretted later in the day as the beautiful, but long, approach wore on under the hot sun.

Once you see the hardscrabble life up close, the idea that people thrive scratching a living from nature is quickly challenged. And, yet, I admired the proud Berbers tending their flocks of sheep amid stunning alpine grandeur. Arising before dawn on the second day, we endured the long scree slog to the

*The author and his Outward Bound students on the summit of Kilimanjaro in 1973.*

DOUGLASS TESCHNER'S COLLECTION



*Terraced crops rise above the village of Imlil, Morocco, in 1973, with the Atlas Mountains in the background.* DOUGLASS TESCHNER



roof of North Africa at 13,665 feet.<sup>1</sup> Tired but happy we continued down to Imlil then faced a long ride back to Rabat.

### **Iferouane, Morocco: September 30, 1973**

My Peace Corps service was complete, the first year's roller coaster ride of exhilaration and loneliness followed by a second year of harmony and integration. I easily navigated the markets and alleyways, spoke enough Arabic to communicate in most situations, and had reached a certain inner peace. It was time to move on.

Before leaving, I convinced a climbing friend, Ulrike Gassner of Liechtenstein, to join me on one last trek, a circular route I had plotted. Today, some 40 years later, I am amused, but not surprised, to see this circuit has developed a reputation as a favored trekking route, but back then, it had taken some serious negotiation to hire a mule (and the boy who tended it) for the ten-day itinerary. We navigated over steep passes and down through the various valleys where villages cling to the dry, rocky slopes above green terraces of corn and walnut trees.

Iferouane is the most remote of the 4,000-meter (13,123 feet) peaks in that region with a special wild character. From the top, we could see many peaks I had climbed during the past two years. There was a pleasant familiarity, not unlike the way I feel naming various peaks from any White Mountain summit. I was at home, an ironic observation as I prepared to exit this country that had touched me in so many ways.

### **Kilimanjaro, Tanzania: December 20, 1973**

I took my readjustment allowance from the Peace Corps and journeyed alone to Kenya and Tanzania to explore the game parks, the Swahili coast, and, of course, to climb.

I connected with the East Africa Outward Bound School in Loitokitok, Kenya, and had the incredible chance to lead a group of Kenyan, Tanzanian, and Ugandan students, culminating in a three-day round-trip Kilimanjaro ascent—crossing the unmarked border into Tanzania, sleeping in a lava cave,

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1. The author's two articles on climbing in Morocco, "To the Summit of Ifni Dome" and "The Mountains of Morocco" appear, respectively, in the June 1973 (39 no. 3) and December 1974 (40 no. 2) issues of *Appalachia*.

reveling in the Afro-alpine vegetation, ascending the endless lava scree in darkness, and traversing the crater rim to the top of the continent at 19,340 feet.

### **Mount Kenya,<sup>2</sup> Kenya: December 28, 1973**

My Outward Bound colleague Peter Calder invited me to join a holiday trip to Mount Kenya. I would have thought climbing Kili the week before would have put me in good shape, but I suffered that first day under the load of 70 pounds. But, wow, what a mountain! So spectacular, much more so than Kili, and a close-up look found me reinvigorated. Christmas Day, we reached Kami Hut, situated next to a scenic tarn amid exotic giant groundsel, where Peter's two British friends were waiting. The third day, we climbed Point Lenana, the high point for nontechnical climbers.

The following morning, three of us set off in darkness across the Lewis Glacier for the 20-pitch rock climb on Mount Kenya, to the top of the mountain's 17,022-foot Nelion peak. Atop the peak at noon, we decided it was too late for the traverse to the slightly higher Batian peak, and rappelled and climbed back down. Back at the Austrian Hut, the joy of the climb was replaced with a bittersweet uncertainty hanging in the air. With this climb, I had achieved my last goal in Africa and would soon be leaving for a new and uncertain way of life back in the United States.

### **Bintimani, Sierra Leone: March 23, 1987**

By the mid-1980s, I had married and settled with my wife and our first son, Ben, in the western White Mountains of New Hampshire. My mother was surely influenced by my stories. She and my stepfather moved to Sierra Leone when he took a job as a Peace Corps medical officer. Although not on the payroll, Mom cheered up homesick American volunteers (my stepbrother George among them) with chocolate chip cookies.

I couldn't pass up the chance for a two-week visit, mostly spent on the coast, but the mountains drew me inland. When the village chief at the end of a two-day drive asked why we had chosen the hottest season to climb, our answer about busy schedules back home left him shaking his head in dismay. Ignoring the chief's concerns, we found someone to guide us to a

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2. For more on the author's Mount Kenya climb see "Of Kami and Klarwill and Kikuyu and Kirinyaga," *Appalachia*, December 1974 (40 no. 2).

village of mud huts with tin roofs where we spent the first night in a gazebo. After dark, villagers mulled about, dancing and singing, invisible to us on this moonless night. I was drawn out into the crowded darkness to be among them, avoiding collisions as best I could.

The topographic map I brought from Freetown was of little use, and that first village was the limit of our first guide's geographical knowledge so we found a new one to take us farther. We saw very few people along the obscure trails. A feeling of vulnerable isolation hung heavy in the heat, with the wish to go deeper, to know more, conflicting with the desire to flee back to the comforts and perceived security of civilization.

The last village was a handful of mud huts with thatched roofs. Nearby mountains had dramatic cliffs, but I could not imagine climbing a rock face in such unbearable heat. Dinner was cooked over a three-stone fire: rice in palm oil and wild pig, shot by our guide's ancient firearm. We were allocated a hut, but it was so hot that we slept outside sweating in our sheets. At dawn, the village women rose to pound rice, getting some work done before the temperature became even more oppressive. I had an eerie feeling that the guy with the machete—leading us up through the thick forest of spectacular tropical hardwoods with ribbon-like fluted roots, some taller than a human—was taking us to our demise. Or maybe I was headed there all on my own.

After several hours, we emerged above treeline and up the summit cone where the 75-degree temperature atop the 6,200-foot peak seemed almost arctic. After another hot night outside our hut, we pushed back down, avoiding fires set to ostensibly improve soil productivity, mitigating hyperthermia by a swim at the sole river crossing. Back at the start, I think the chief was impressed by our persistence, or maybe our luck. It felt like the latter when a Peace Corps volunteer, Will, unexpectedly produced cold beers from a gas-powered fridge in a back corner of his hut. When we got back to Freetown, my wife, Marte, suggested that maybe we should move overseas and live the expat life.

### **Domboshawa Rock Dome, Zimbabwe: October 25, 1999**

Memories of Africa, the images and smells, lose their edge over time. It had been twelve years since Bintimani, so my excitement riding a taxi from the airport, past colorfully dressed women with vegetables in baskets atop their heads, should have been no surprise. Harare, Zimbabwe, was (at least back then) a pretty, prosperous city with real sidewalks, parks, and other niceties.

However settled I had become in New Hampshire, I had a notion, a kind of itching thought, to move away from established comfort. I had suppressed my wife's earlier suggestion for a while but it had come back to the fore. It was time for a new adventure, to expose my growing family to a different way of life. I traveled to Zimbabwe for an interview to lead a U.S. government project promoting democracy and supporting Zimbabwe's parliament. It was a quick visit, but I found time to escape to the countryside, an hour's taxi ride to a rock dome with ancient carvings. It was hardly a mountain—I climbed to the top in street clothes—but it had a commanding view over the harsh communal landscape where people scratched a living from dry infertile soil.

### **Karisimbi, Rwanda: September 15, 2002**

I didn't get the Zimbabwe job, but a few weeks after the Twin Towers fell, I was asked to come help Rwanda's parliament. Our two boys were older then, the timing not as good. And yet, the seed had been planted and wanted to grow. In April 2002, we moved to Kigali, Rwanda, and Marte and the boys stayed for four months before returning to the United States. For the first time in more than 20 years, I was living alone, and I made the best of it by exploring. Rwanda's Virunga Mountains are among the most beautiful on the continent, but they had been largely unclimbed since the 1994 genocide when the deep forest provided cover for incursions by the killers who had fled to nearby Democratic Republic of the Congo.

When national park officials reopened the trails, I took quick advantage—first, with a day climb up 12,175-foot Mount Bisoke and its beautiful summit crater lake. A week later, I was back to attempt the highest summit. Our first day, we trekked five hours to the campsite, four of us *muzungu* (white people) accompanied by the mandatory ranger guides and soldiers toting AK-47s. Porters with cardboard boxes on their heads traversed the deep forest that is home to rare mountain gorillas.

That night, we huddled around fires on the steep slopes; it was 40 degrees and breezy, bone-chilling for the locals who knew nothing but the consistently warm temperatures of the lowlands. The next day, we joyfully ascended to the rime-ice-covered summit of 14,787-foot Karisimbi, its dramatic view of the 14,557-foot Mount Mikenso in nearby Congo.



### **Mount Stanley, Uganda: August 4, 2003**

I had long held a romantic urge to visit Uganda's exotic Mountains of the Moon and, living in nearby Rwanda, I now had the chance. I convinced my longtime friends Ralph Baldwin and John Skirving, the latter a Peace Corps Morocco buddy, to make the journey from Alaska and Seattle, respectively. The trails on this nine-day trek were the toughest I have ever seen, with constant mud, wet rocks, and slippery roots and ladders. But the hardest part was more emotional than physical, especially the cold twelve-hour nights when I lay awake thinking about my family back in the United States. When I was younger, I only wanted to be in the mountains, so hardships never mattered. But in my 50s, on this long trip, I found myself struggling to stay in the moment.

On the third day, we emerged from the endless, calf-deep Bigo Bog to the magical, sun-drenched landscape of giant groundsel and lobelia, with Mount Stanley (16,763 feet) glistening above. On the fourth day, we reached the Stanley Plateau, with rock peaks sandwiched between the bright blue sky and the white ice of the rapidly retreating glacier. On the fifth day, we summited, and on the sixth, I led our required guide, a grizzled Ruwenzori veteran, up a four-pitch rock climb, wondering about the strength of the groundsel plant wedged in the crack that I used as an anchor.

### **Nyiragongo, Democratic Republic of Congo: October 18, 2003**

DRC is a huge and sprawling country with a tumultuous history that included forced slavery and prolonged warfare with 3 million deaths in the 1990s alone. So when I heard of the January 2002 volcanic eruption that overran the city of Goma, I thought about injustice. Why did these people, who had suffered so much, have to deal with this now?

Goma is an amazing place to visit: roads built right over the lava and rusted SUVs stick up out of the encrusted lava like works of art—yet people seem oblivious to the destruction. They need to maintain focus on day-to-day survival.

Although still grumbling, 11,384-foot Nyiragongo is a worthy destination, at least when both guerilla and volcanic activity is at bay, so I was really looking forward to the climb, until I realized I had left my passport back in Kigali. Sadly, I left my friends and took a crowded minivan the three hours home, swerving far too fast around ubiquitous potholes, bicycles overloaded

with sacks of charcoal, and women with babies on their backs and baskets of vegetables atop their heads. That evening I made a call to my friends camped near the top of Nyiragongo. They were drinking wine and listening to the volcano rumble. Purple lava glowed in the darkness below the crater rim. Or so they told me.

### **Bigogwe, Rwanda: May 23, 2004**

Solitude is one of the great attractions of mountaineering, yet here we experienced none of it. Rwanda is the most densely populated country in Africa, no region more so than in the verdant valley below the impressive dome of Bigogwe, where many refugees had been resettled. We parked next to a small genocide memorial, one of hundreds dotting the Rwanda countryside. My companions, American Erin, Irishwoman Sive, and I quickly attracted an entourage, mostly children, who crowded around as we hiked to the cliff.

I had wanted to climb this prominent Rwandan landmark for a long time and was not disappointed. The six-pitch rock climb was excellent, despite some scary runouts, including a potential 80-foot ground fall on the first pitch. By the top, I was physically and emotionally exhausted.

Meanwhile, hundreds gathered to watch—enjoying, I suppose, a break from the monotony of rural subsistence living. At the top, we were packed in like sardines among local faces ten deep. The walk down in beautiful fading light was short but tedious, my arthritic knees complaining as I concentrated on avoiding stabbing the bare feet all around me with my trekking poles.

### **Jbel M’Goun, Morocco: May 2, 2005**

I was back home in Morocco, where it all began, leading a United States Agency for International Development (USAID) democracy project, with weekend opportunities to revisit the mountain haunts of my youth. My son Ben and I did one of my bucket list rock routes up the west-southwest ridge of Mount Toubkal that included a scary rappel off a dubious block. I then planned a visit to a more remote and new-to-me part of the Atlas Mountains and convinced another of my Peace Corps Morocco buddies, Doug Burnell, to come from New Hampshire for the five-day trek.

The highlight was a traverse of the Tessaout Gorge, including wading through fast-moving water, climbing exposed rock to bypass waterfalls, and

complex route-finding that left us wandering in the dark. The muleteers carrying our camping gear, who had taken an easier trail, were seriously worried then delighted to see us when we staggered into camp near midnight. The next day we tried for the M’Goun summit (13,356 feet), the fourth highest of the Atlas Mountains, but brutal winds turned us back before the summit. A storm that night left us fighting our way back to the road in blowing, drifting snow. An all-around classic adventure.

### **Mount Agou, Togo: September 28, 2008**

In 2008 I was back in Africa, this time in Burkina Faso as the country director for the Peace Corps. A conference with fellow directors in nearby Lomé, Togo, was a wonderful opportunity to eat some seafood and enjoy cool ocean breezes (Burkina is landlocked). When the talking was over, I set off for nearby Mount Agou, the highest in Togo and more impressive than its 3,234-foot elevation would suggest.

A steep trail through lush vegetation bisected two large villages perched high on the mountainside, where well-designed rock steps led past houses on the steep terraced hillside back into dark forest. People in Sunday best walked to church while I followed in much grubbier attire. After a glorious, steady climb, the wooded top was a disappointment—a lightly guarded military camp, but I talked my way in to visit the highest point.

### **Nahouri Peak, Burkina Faso: January 5, 2009**

Burkina is mostly flat, with relatively minuscule topography, and it is often too hot to even think about climbing. But I was living there, so I was going to explore, and there is more to this landscape than first meets the eye. Sindou Peaks and the Domes of Fabledougou are impressive rock pinnacles, and we did some rock climbing with family at the latter. Burkina’s high point, Mount Tenakourou, at 2,277 feet, is a nine-hour drive from the capital of Ouagadougou; sketchy roads with obscure route finding led to a remote village where a local teacher led me on an anticlimactic twenty-minute hike to the well-marked summit.

Much more impressive (and a mere two-hour drive from Ouaga) is Nahouri Peak, which, despite its mere 1,407-foot height, is surrounded on all sides by cliffs, sort of a mini-version of Wyoming’s Devils Tower. On a prior

visit, I had found a scrambling route to the top, but this time my younger son, Luke, was visiting, and I talked him into attempting a real rock climb. We walked two hours through the semi-arid landscape, passing occasional curious children on donkey carts. Four pitches of easy but pleasant rock were followed by a very hot two-hour walk back to the car (hey! this is supposed to be the “cold” season). Success, nonetheless!

### **Drakensberg Mountains, South Africa: November 2, 2009**

After a Peace Corps conference in Johannesburg (where I celebrated my 60th birthday), I invited colleague Hank Weiss to join me on a visit to Royal Natal National Park—as beautiful a place as any I have visited, with majestically located cabins and a superb network of hiking trails. I saw signs warning of baboons and, sure enough, when I briefly left the cabin door open as we packed the car for an early morning departure, one went in and stole our food!

We drove to a guarded car park dramatically perched on a steep mountainside, but what started as a perfect day deteriorated into dense mist for which these peaks on the Lesotho border are famous. I had hoped for either an easy rock route or to persevere up one of the classic chain ladders to a summit, but my less experienced friend was uncomfortable in the dense fog. Alas, no summits, but we did a magnificent hike early the next morning into a deep gorge, the high peaks visible above against a perfect blue sky.

### **Bandiagara Escarpment, Mali: December 28, 2009**

Dogon country (Mali’s central plateau region, where the Dogon people live) has to be one of the most interesting places on this earth, offering world-class trekking where culture and nature intersect in a powerful way. Its heart is the Bandiagara Escarpment, a 100-mile-long sandstone cliff with villages scattered along its top and bottom, and ancient Tellem houses perched on tiny ledges on the sheer 300-foot face.

I loved passing farmers working their small fields by hand, women pounding millet, old men gathered in the low-roofed meeting places, the lively and colorful markets, women carrying large pots on their heads as they negotiated ladders and narrow ledges. Navigating the impressive escarpment, I marveled at the ladders carved from logs, airy ledges, rock clefts, spectacular rock formations, and even caves.



*The rock pinnacles of the Sindou Peaks in Burkina Faso.* DOUGLASS TESCHNER

The searing heat required crack-of-dawn starts and four-hour midday layovers in the primitive huts in nearly every village. The late-afternoon light was stunning. While I prefer going guideless and finding my own way on any trip, this is one place where language, culture, and unmarked trails necessitate a guide, and Oumar Guindo evolved into a special friend and partner.

On my first trip, I quickly realized how much this place touched my soul, and I came back three more times over the next two years from nearby Burkina Faso, trekking a total of 155 miles (250 kilometers). The last trip was special because my whole family went, too, and we even arranged to rendezvous with two other groups of family and friends in a little village called Yaba-Talu.

Our last full day, Oumar proposed an afternoon hike to visit Abraham Kene, who strummed a guitar made from a cooking oil can while his vivacious wife watered the flowers and cooked on a nearby stone fire. The trail to his place led into a massive rock cleft and up a ladder which then doubled back on a steep ledge. It doubled back again along an open spine of rock with





*Dogon women gathering wood in Mali, a place Doug Teschner loved so much he returned there three times.* DOUGLASS TESCHNER

spectacular drop-offs on both sides. Atop the spine, the trail turned left, crossing the original deep cleft via crude ladders to easier ground.

From there, it was several miles along the beautiful cliff top, passing several villages, to Abraham's place. When I said that this would be my last trip to the escarpments for a while, Abraham smiled and gave me a classic Dogon hat.

We took an easier route back along the cliff base in the dark. The moisture on my cheeks was more than just sweat.

### **Nouakchott, Mauritania: May 4, 2014**

There are mountains in this desert country, but they lie in the interior, where members of Al Qaeda sometimes roam, so I took a pass. But I was more than happy when my son Luke, now a teacher at the TLC International School, led me to some magnificent dunes a mere 30-minute walk from his apartment. (Although both of my sons had struggled when uprooted from New Hampshire to Rwanda in 2002, they both later went back to Africa for jobs.)

I previously had visited Sahara dunes in both Morocco and Burkina Faso, and they are always special—these Nouakchott ones uniquely so, given their proximity to a city of nearly 1 million. We made four late-afternoon outings there and always saw men in their flowing boubous wandering about, feeling, as we thought they must, a strong connection to the past. One time Luke and I picked what seemed to be the highest dune in the vicinity and called it our summit, sliding down the side in a mini-avalanche of rose-colored sand further enhanced by the beautiful pre-sunset light.

My last day, some locals called us to the top of a dune where they were trying to dig out a stuck SUV without much apparent success. Each shovelful removed was quickly replaced, as walls of fine sand caved in around the tires. Our efforts at pushing did little to budge the car. They weren't worried and seemed happy to be there in that special place. A wonderful banter ensued, along with photographs, including shots of me in one of their boubous. Eventually Luke and I headed back in the golden light, our footprints from a few moments earlier filled in by the rippling wind. Absolutely magic.

### **Kgale Hill, Botswana: May 29, 2014**

In a country not known for mountains, I spied an interesting mini-peak not far from the hotel in Gaborone hosting the Peace Corps country director conference. I learned that this was Kgale, elevation of 1,287 meters (4,222 feet), named in Setswana as “the Place That Dried Up,” a.k.a. “The Sleeping Giant.” Intrigued, I recruited some colleagues for a dawn ascent.

First light in the parking lot showed us we were not alone, as Kgale seems popular with urban Gaboronians. A nice trail climbed steeply as the magic



*The author takes a break from the stresses of teaching the public about the Ebola virus, on a hike in the Fouta Djallon, Guinea.* DOUGLASS TESCHNER'S COLLECTION



light of sunrise rose over the arid plains spread out below. The last part was scrambling up rocks past thorn bushes. An easier, if longer, way led us back down for a mandatory group photo.

### **Smoking Dog, Guinea: November 1, 2015**

Adventure has many meanings, and on this particular day, it seemed to call for a simple one. I left my home in the city of Conakry, Guinea's capital, to drive an hour or so to the base of this small peak, Smoking Dog, for a simple day hike. Yet climbing this mountain, like many I have climbed on the African continent, involved so much more than the climb itself. There was the driving to get there. We barely surpassed 20 MPH in dense traffic, avoiding charcoal-loaded minivans, motorcycles, and taxis passing on both the left and right.

Then there was the human interaction. I knew this hike would pass through a cluster of mud huts where I would communicate with a smile and a few words of Soussou, and where a desperately poor but graciously friendly woman once gave me a cucumber from her mountainside plot.

I have worked all over this continent for the challenge of building capacity for future generations. And to venture out to wild places has been a special gift.

The usual heart-pumping hike to the top left my clothes drenched in sweat. I sat on the rocky top. I knew that somewhere out there Ebola was still lurking, amid denial and equally irrational fears of Westerners that we will somehow become infected. What I chose to see instead is a succession of beautiful green peaks and cliffs that reached back into the interior where my staff had been working gallantly to educate everyone about the disease.

Human nature sends conflicting messages about travels to uncharted territory. On the one hand, there is the powerful urge to stay close to the well-lit comfort of the known. On the other hand is the desire to explore, to suppress ever-present fear and go as far as one can: "to suck out all the marrow of life," as Thoreau wrote, despite uncertainty of the outcome. Whether for reasons of genetics, upbringing, or simply by the grace of God, I landed in this second camp.

I often quote Edith Wharton, "Life is always a tightrope or a feather bed. Give me the tightrope," reminding my Peace Corps volunteers that they *chose* to come to Africa, that frustrations and difficult times need to be embraced

as part of the experience. As one of them wrote: "This road may not be silky smooth, but it can be more beautiful and fulfilling than you could ever imagine. Having the opportunity to come serve in a place like Guinea is really one of the sweetest gifts that you may never fully understand."

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DOUGLASS TESCHNER of Pike, New Hampshire is a longtime Appalachian Mountain Club member whose many contributions to this journal go back to "Percy Adventure" in June 1969. He is currently living in Conakry, Guinea, where he serves as the Peace Corps country director.



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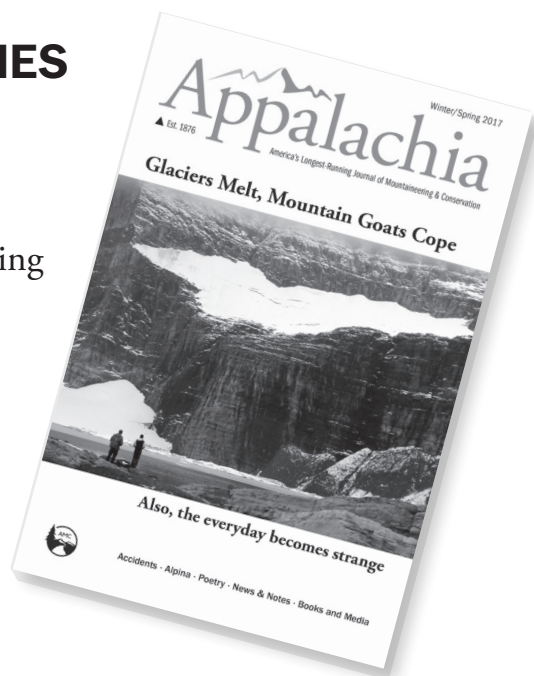
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