

Troy Waters

Finding the Reward

That's the tallest mountain in Ghana? To me it looked more like a big green pimple on the African horizon. I could conquer that molehill in ten minutes. Just watch! It was no bigger than the mediocre little hill I hiked up back home in California—a small little hump in the Verdugo hills proving to be no more challenging than a walk on the beach.

Mount Afadjato. That's its name and it's the tallest mountain in Ghana according to my handy Bradt travel guide, the only guide exclusively covering Ghana.

For the weekend, a couple friends and I decided it would be fun to get away from the capital of Ghana, Accra, and head for the lush rainforest region known as the Volta region. We were on the breaking point of our study abroad experience. The language barrier, the culture shock, the lack of good food: it was all getting to us. Just a few days earlier, I almost had a violent breakdown when I tried to buy some water at the gas station. When I snatched up the last few bags of pure water, the man at the counter, an old African stiff, looked me in the eyes. He told me to put some of the water back. He was serious. I asked him why. A logical question posed by a typical American. He said I should save some of the water for my brothers, my friends, who might be thirsty and in need. So, I thought, he's a businessman and he's telling me, a customer, to put something back because he doesn't want me to buy it. Sounds like pure Communism to me. Last time I checked, Bradt said that Ghana was a Capitalist country. The whole situation seemed like pure nonsense to me. No wonder why Ghana, and all of Africa,

lives in such poverty! They don't let customers buy anything! Apparently, "the customer is always wrong" happens to be the motto here. Angrily, I put half the water back and vowed to never return to that gas station. I never went back to that place the rest of my time in Ghana—harder than it sounds since that gas station served as my convenient local grocery store. By that time, however, I think it was either the second or third place I had vowed to never return. The first place to go was the restaurant on the campus of the University of Ghana. I decided I didn't want to get yelled at every time I tried to place an order, especially since the "chicken nuggets" I asked for every time were on the menu for absolutely no reason. Not that the misnomer surprised me. After all, the place was called "Taco Bell" and you can rest assured that there was nothing remotely resembling a taco in the place, which is probably good since any lettuce (and all other African produce) would do all kinds of unpleasant things to me. In short (without even mentioning Ghanaian taxis), I had my share of Ghana and I was only halfway through the semester.

Afadjato became our weekend getaway—a chance to escape the boredom that comes from having no TV. My friends and I looked at the mountain with the excitement that comes with the anticipation of challenging yourself, of doing something you've never done before. It was an opportunity to conquer Ghana's most worthy challenger. Before we would ever crumble to the African soil, we held up our hands and volunteered for the challenge wholeheartedly. Now that we were finally there, having followed Bradt's beautiful directions (and believe me, travel and transportation is the hardest part of Ghanaian life) we stood before Afadjato and wondered how this petit little mound could possibly be the highest mountain in Ghana. We spent at least three hours in a hot crowded bus—the Ghanaian trotro—to get here and find that we've come to challenge ourselves with a dainty little hump in the rainforest. But, so be it. If

that's Ghana's tallest mountain, then it's Ghana's tallest mountain. We came here to conquer and we wouldn't leave until we did.

Twenty minutes into the hike, before we had even reached the base of the mountain, I thought I would die. In my anticipation to dominate the mountain, I forgot about the intense heat and palpable humidity. Without consuming any water the entire day, I began to feel the air suck out all my body's moisture. My handy safari pants and shirt were both entirely soaked in sweat. But, I zipped off the pant legs and instantly transformed the pants into a more refreshing pair of shorts. Also, the Singaporean girl who had joined us on our hike offered me a sip of water and I felt ready to push on. Of course, that's when I saw the first spider web.

Dizzy and on the verge of collapse, I now had to look down to watch my step on the steep muddy trail and to look up to keep an eye out for spider webs. My efforts failed, however, and every time I felt a gentle little tug on my hair, I imagined a deadly African spider poised and ready to send his poison into my skull. There were two types of spiders that greeted us on our death march. The first was a typical looking spider—the type of thing that pops into your mind when someone says “spider”. Legs and all, it was probably about the size of a McDonald's pancake. In short, this beast looked like something that could kill us. The second spider was a little more eccentric in its design. It was small—that's good. But, it had some kind of a spiky looking armor on it. Weeks later, I came upon a photograph of this spider in a magazine. It was the type of photograph that suggests that this is the kind of alien beast creature that you'll never really see in your real life—only in your nightmares. Even better, the beast liked to construct its death webs in such a way as to cross from one side of the trail to the other at eye level. For the most part, this spider looked like something that could kill us. It wasn't long before I picked up a stick and waved it in front of me like a psychotic symphony composer. My friends thought I

was insane. But it was better than ducking every two seconds. Needless to say, the already steep hike—I'd say a 45 degree angle at best—was now made worse by the extra effort required to dodge these vicious spiders. At times I had to get on all fours like a dog to support myself. I could hear my heartbeat inside of my head.

Out of breath, I tripped and cut my hand. Not a bad cut, but there was blood. I may be mistaken but I think the Ebola virus got started this way. Luckily, my friend, the certified EMT who was at least a dozen yards ahead of me, regarded the cut without much concern. This made me feel better. If she didn't care it must not be very serious. That or she hates me. I like to think it was the prior, even though there's still a little mark on my hand as I go about my business today.

Finally we made it to the top! No. Sorry. There's still more to go.

Three more steps. Two more steps. One more step. Hurray! It's done. I conquered Ghana! At the top, we could see everything: the surrounding villages, the nearby waterfalls, and even the mountains of Togo. We sat in wonder as we enjoyed the feeling of being alone on the top. After we took a few pictures, we quickly left the top because of a massive swarm of what appeared to be large flying ants. Our best guess was Tsetse flies. Typical Ghana—just when you think you have everything figured out, there's something new to overcome. We took a fifteen minute rest a few feet from the summit before we made our way down. Our legs shook under our weight and we had to make every step with extreme caution so that we would not fall. At the bottom, we had a coke and rested before we took another shorter, and flatter, hike to the local waterfall.

Crossing small streams with our shoes off and disrupting small flocks of little fluttering butterflies, we came upon a misty waterfall in the corner of the rainforest. It was one of the

small gems of the world that you only discover when you least expect it. Along with our smiling African guide and his posse of female admirers, we all stood and watched the water come rushing down. Against the strong heat, the water seemed refreshingly cool. The powerful mist cooled us. We felt new again. We rested in a nearby cave and watched. We knew that this is why we came to Ghana. We wanted to challenge ourselves, to take ourselves to the limit, to test ourselves as human beings. We wanted to do all of this for one simple reason. We wanted to find the secret treasure that would be ours—something that exists only for those who have the courage to seek it. In a world far apart from our own, we forgot all the hardships we went through before: the bad food, the language barrier, the culture shock, everything. We forgot it all. We found our reward.