

## A Cool Summer in Japan

By Bernie Davis

### Yesterday I DID IT! Climbed Mt. Fuji.

We're lodging in a nice hotel across the street from the "Shonan Village Center". We had reserved spaces in a hostel (you couldn't call it a hotel.) in a small town near the mountain for Tuesday night. A friend, Dr. Kenji Ito, who has his Ph.D. from Harvard and is a professor of the history of physics at the University of Tokyo, is to climb with me. We picked up Kenji at the Haneda airport (not Narita) during our drive to the hostel. Kenji is perhaps 38 or 40 years young, not overweight, but not particularly fit or athletic looking either. It was the first time on Mt. Fuji for Kenji as well as for me. He has, he said, done other high altitude mountain climbing. As you know, I've done a lot of endurance stuff, and I've hiked in the hills, but never at altitudes over a mile high.

We got up at 4 a.m. and got started on our hike/climb at 7 a.m. Although there's nothing technical about it (no ropes, pitons, etc.), Mt. Fuji is a climb, not just a hike. **MT. FUJI IS NOT EASY.** It was really tough for me. You might say I just barely made it. It really tired me out. But as I write this, the day after, I feel fine. Invigorated in fact. Great! Just a tiny bit stiff in the quads from all that "braking" coming down. Pretty much as predicted, it took us six hours up, one hour at the top, and three hours down.

We started at the "5th step," elevation 2,305 meters (7,560 feet). The summit is 3,776 meters (12,385 feet), so we climbed 4,820 feet, a little less than a mile. But, I think we only advanced 7 or 7-1/2 miles round trip. It is a rare climber who does the whole mountain, 12,385 feet. It's really steep, unrelentingly steep everywhere once you really get on the mountain proper (after the first 45 minutes or so). The trail generally zigzags, but is extremely steep nonetheless. There are places where the trail seems to go straight up (no zig zag). These are in the lava flows.

What's really hard about the ascent is the thinness of the air. There was an occasional athletic fellow who moved up the mountain fairly easy. Most climbers were like Kenji and I, moving with very slow, short steps and frequently stopping to rest for several seconds. I decided it was working best for me to go several slow, short steps, varying from half a dozen to two dozen, and stop and rest. I was leading Kenji. His steps seemed even slower than mine and he stopped for rests also. I would do my several steps, find myself ahead of him, then let him catch up as I rested, leaning hard on my stick to keep my "balance." I was not short of breath, not puffing. I did experience a rapid heart rate, more so, I'm pretty sure, than in my endurance events at home.

When I first began to experience this altitude effect, I was a little worried. Of course, this was new to me. But I soon gained confidence and went on for several hours feeling confident. I wasn't getting stronger, but I wasn't getting weaker either. I felt, in some sense, that I was adapting to it.

Once up on top, Kenji remarked that he was a little dizzy. I had a little emergency oxygen canister in my pack. He declined to use it and said he would adapt. We did see such canisters being used a couple times near the top. Some of the trail up was zigzag over loose dirt and gravel which would roll some under your feet, but not too bad. I got along fairly well with that. Some of the trail up was sort of like stair steps of rocks. Again, not too bad. Some of the trail up was over what I call a lava flow. Very rocky, hard, black boulders, seemingly almost straight up. **VERY HARD FOR ME.** In these areas there were chains alongside you could use to pull yourself up and/or keep balanced. I made good use of them.

We each had a hiking stick which we borrowed from the attendant at the hostel. Almost everybody had a hiking stick. It was both very helpful and really essential. I have poor balance and am rather unstable. It's a problem which has grown on me over the last ten years or so which manifests itself especially when I get real tired. It manifested itself in spades on Mt. Fuji. But with my walking stick, I was able to manage. When we went up through the lava flows, I was on all fours most of the time. Not on my knees, but using my hands on the rocks when not pulling on a chain.

Coming down was not easy either. It's a separate trail for coming down, **zigzag and VERY STEEP.** All

of it on loose dirt and gravel which slips under your boots. "**Slippery.**" With my bad balance, I was like a drunken sailor. I fell on my rear end and also sideways a few times. But this was because of the "slipperiness" not my bad balance.

I used my hiking boots, not my running shoes and was glad I did so. Most climbers had boots. A few had running shoes. I must say the terrain, up and down, was unlike anything I've experienced before. It was not an ideal day, weather wise, for sight-seeing. It was cloudy all day. Couldn't see much of the lands below. Sometimes there was mist or light rain. On top it was like a blizzard, but without snow -- wind, cold, and fog. One **can** walk all the way around the top of the crater, but that was out of the question. We wanted to at least look into the crater. We walked over to the edge of it. We were facing a strong, cold wind and could see nothing but white, so we gave up that idea quickly.

The peak climbing season is yet to come in August, and it was a week day. So I have to imagine the hordes who might be on the mountain on a peak day. I thought there were a lot of climbers as it was. The Japanese have obviously spent a tremendous amount of labor and money building the trail and maintaining it. They've really gone to extremes to make it possible for people to climb the mountain.

The trail and mountain are remarkably clean and free of litter. There are no receptacles to place your litter. You have to pack it back down with you. The Japanese seem very good and well disciplined about following the rules. Not everywhere, but every so often as you go up the mountain you pass by buildings. You could say there are several relatively substantial villages clinging to the mountainside along the ascending trail. They sell the things climbers need -- water, food, climbing sticks -- at very high prices. They have outside benches where you can take a break. Restaurant-like places post signs letting you know you are not to come in and just lounge around. There is even lodging. You can sleep up there on the mountainside. There are restrooms. You need to give a tip of 100 or 200 yen (\$1 or \$2), depending on the place, just to urinate. And on the very top there are such buildings -- a tiny little village. We didn't just stand out in the cold for an hour at the top. We went into a building. Kenji bought something hot. The offerings were all Japanese and not appealing to me, so I ate from my copious supplies of cold foods in my pack. There is a separate trail for supplies -- like our down trail. It is traversed by a tracked vehicle. I doubt that a four-wheel drive vehicle could handle the supply trail.

A couple places, at the top and very near the top, are tiny little Shinto shrines. On the very top as we started down, put on everything I had in my pack - windbreaker, running jacket, sweater-jacket, ski gloves, ski stocking hat. As we started down we got more and more protection by the mountain against the wind, and I gradually removed almost all these things one by one. I was really tired afterwards. Kenji gave the appearance of not having been phased by it.

The trails are about the width of a single-lane road. Most of the day we were at an altitude where no plants grow. I had to give climbing my full attention. This was not like a casual walk where you can let your mind wander or direct it off to various other things. The first 45 minutes or so might be considered an exception. The very last of the downward trek likewise, except I was too tired to think then.

**It was a goal, and this was my only chance. I'm glad to have achieved it.**