Magic Moments on Mount Mulanje

The idea of hiking up Mt. Mulanje, the second highest mountain in Africa at nearly 7,000 feet, came to me one day in February, 1992, while sitting on my khonde in Balaka. I decided to plan a trip to Mt. Mulanje with my two Malawian friends, Foster and Austin. None of us had ever been there and I thought it would be a good adventure to experience. On February 28, 1992, we set off for the long ride from Balaka to the mountain. The initial three hour bus ride from Balaka took us through Zomba to our first stop in the City of Blantyre. This is the commercial capital of Malawi and is a very modern city with several multi-story buildings. We got off the bus in Blantyre and proceeded to walk to the "matola" pick-up truck stand. A pick-up truck would take us for the next leg of our journey.

We found a pick-up truck that was heading for the town of Mulanje. This is the closest town to the mountain and so we jumped into the back of the pick-up truck already full of people. Everyone was packed in, sticking out of the truck bed like quills of a porcupine. We hopped into the bed of the truck and we were off. Good timing is important or else you can find yourself waiting hours for the next vehicle to depart. The pick-up went rolling along the narrow two lane M1 highway weaving through the lush green tea fields of Thyolo. The rush of fresh air blowing across my face and the constant chatter from the passengers made the ride a glorious experience. Of course it was not a straight shot. The truck made numerous stops, letting people off and gathering more, always room for one more on a *matola* ride in Malawi.

After a nearly two hour journey from Blantyre, we arrived in the town of Mulanje. We took another *matola* ride from Mulanje to the Likabula Forestry camp. This is the

headquarters for people who want to hike up the mountain. It was a short walk from the roadway to the base camp office. Once there we made a booking for a room to spend the night as the hike up would be about a 4 hour journey and by now it was too late to start our hike.

In the morning, we got a map and some information from the people at the base camp, and started on our way. The hike up was a challenge. We encountered extremely steep paths filled with large rocks, and then there were dense forests with paths covered with beautiful green moss. Every step up brought us into a new and tranquil calm, inching our way to the summit of Mt. Mulanje. Foster and Austin were good strong hikers, carrying all our supplies in their backpacks. They effortlessly trekked up the mountain trails and I was glad for their energy, making my hike that much easier.

We made our way to the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) hut on the Lichnya Plateau at approximately 7,000 ft altitude. The sweet fresh air and cool winds on the plateau made our arrival a delight. We were on top of the world, a moment that I would have loved to stay frozen in time, yet we were there for just three short yet magnificent days. The open fields expanding out in front of the CCAP hut were breath taking. I gazed out over the giant plateau, imagining the days gone by when small airplanes would have landed at the now abandoned aerodrome high on the mountain plateau. Remains of an airstrip could still be imagined in the now golden grass fields, bending gently with the breeze. The sun flickered off the buzzing insects; small birds chirped and silently flew. The Plateau was a mystical experience. The natural sounds and watching the wind blow through the grass fields helped me appreciate the beauty of this heavenly place. I thought how fortunate I was to have discovered such an isolated

magical creation. We hiked to various areas of the plateau which were highlights of our stay: no people, no bothers, just the clouds floating along and the world below.

We hiked to the Linge pools, not all that large in size, yet they glimmered with crystal clear water on the mountain's edge. We slipped into the pool of crisp and shockingly cold water, I couldn't have imagined being on top of the world in my own natural spa. I found the water much colder than expected, and although enjoyable, it was a real challenge to stay immersed. The rocks surrounding the pools were steep and rocketed to the sky. I wondered how such magical places were created. The small stream feeding Linge pools also fed several more swirling pools - very refreshing in the high altitude and light air.

> *The three days we spent on top of the mountain, where the cool breeze calmed the hot noonday sun, made hiking most enjoyable high up in the heavens. Off in the distance I watched the world as though it stood still. From the top of Mt. Mulanje, I sensed the solitary place as I stood and reflected on my surroundings. Indeed I knew that this place had been created with magical proportions. Being here made me believe in natural miracles.*

The faint sounds of rushing water from the streams, or the wind gently whispering, are soothing reminders of the serenity on Mt. Mulanje. It seemed as though I was at the top of the world and without any cares. As I looked out over the vastness beyond the horizon, it came to me that I had risen up into a new magical world. The only hurdle remaining was how to get back down the mountain.

Back at the CCAP hut, I cooked our meals on an open fire and we consumed all the food we brought.