

Mountains Hold Physical and Cultural Challenges

Mountains are there to be climbed. Beyond the amazing scenery, there are cross-cultural experiences and challenges awaiting the daring among us.

The first time I took an interest in mountain climbing was after reading the 1953 book "Seven Years in Tibet," the experiences of noted Austrian mountain climber and skier Heinrich Harrer.

Harrer could have titled his book "From Hitler to the Dalai Lama." In 1933, he enlisted with Hitler's storm troopers and ended up in Tibet tutoring the Dalai Lama. In his memoir, he made no mention of his Nazi ties. When the movie version starring Brad Pitt came out in 1997, he admitted his Nazi membership was "an ideological error."

Before Hitler began World War II, Harrer was on a German expedition to climb Nanga Parbat, a 26,000-foot peak in what is now Pakistan. The area was under British military control. The British colonial forces immediately arrested the Germans and detained them in a prison camp.

It was five years before he and a companion escaped. The war was all but over and they slipped away from the camp, deciding to make their way to Tibet. The next months were the most grueling of all Harrer's climbing experiences. In Richard Graves' English translation of Harrer's book, the two men posed as Indians, dyed their beards black and stained their skin to look more the part. Without papers or money, and only sporadic help from villagers, they staggered into the forbidden city of Lhasa, ragged, starved and blistered. Their hike had taken 21 months.

Gradually the two vagabonds were accepted. They began an irrigation canal, built a fountain and introduced ice-skating. In time, Harrer became a tutor to the young Dalai Lama, teaching him about Western customs and science. Tibet knew nothing of World War II but was soon to be invaded by the PLA (People's Liberation Army) of the Communist Chinese.

A much more recent mountain climber's story has been widely shared.

Greg Mortenson has a mission to promote peace, one school at a time. He made a wrong turn coming down the K2, the world's second-highest mountain, in 1993. He ended up in the Karakoram mountains in an impoverished Pakistan village - a wrong turn that changed his life.

Son of missionaries to Africa, Mortenson was at home in the wild. The secluded village he stumbled upon was weeks away from civilization of any kind. His heart was moved upon learning there was no school for the children. He promised to return and build them a school.

With no money for such an undertaking but knowing the importance of an education, he set out on his personal mission. He not only built a school there, but over the next decade he built 55 schools, primarily for girls. More are now building all along the Pakistan-Afghanistan northeast border regions.

He recorded his story in "Three Cups of Tea." He writes that in Pakistan and Afghanistan, "we drink three cups of tea to do business; the first you are a stranger, the second you become a friend, and the third, you join our family, and for our family we are prepared to do anything - even die."

It is a way to peace in the dangerous Taliban homeland. Mortenson has proven that making friends and increasing learning is a much better way to peace than military expeditions.

There is more than beautiful scenery high up in the mountains of the world. There are also challenges and opportunities - sharing the world with the Dalai Lama or building one school at a time.

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