

**matt jones**

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## **Mount Fuji – Treat Her With Respect**

By **Matt Jones**

1.30am: Lightning dances on Tokyo Bay as the breathless European takes off his backpack and slumps down on the wooden bench. With tired, dusty eyes he blinks into the darkness and sees far below the shimmering lights of a city blink back. High in the night sky a line of stars points to where the eastern capital will emerge at dawn.

“Pretty isn’t it?” says a woman offering cookies. “Take a couple. The more you eat, the less I carry.”

A jangle of bells announces the arrival of another party at the 6th Station. “Gee,” says their leader, “So many foreigners. It’s kinda like Roppongi up here.” He takes off a walking boot and empties it of ash and cinders. “I got Fuji in my ears, Fuji in my eyes and Fuji in my boots.”

Most of the 180,000 people who climb Mount Fuji between July 1 and August 1, the annual climbing season, are surprised to find the dormant volcano a barren, windswept legacy of another age.

Although few can deny its power – it has erupted 18 times since records began – many have contested its beauty. Sacred mountain, national emblem, symbol of stability in a fast-developing society, Fuji-san is rather like a moody old lady who has entertained, inspired and reassured millions over the years. Written of, painted, photographed and filmed, she looks her best from the distant auditorium of Fuji Five Lakes, from where her smooth shoulders taper up to an elegant neck.

Up close, however, you notice that her skin is dirty, blotchy and pitted – smeared, even in summer, with tears of stubborn white snow.

Climbers have been shaking Fuji’s sacred dust from their clothes for more than 1,000 years but until the mid-19th century, scaling the 3,776-metre mountain was a privilege granted only to priests and male pilgrims who wished to pray at Fuji’s isolated stone shrines.

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Today's visitors – men, women and children of all ages and nationalities – approach the summit with less pious intentions. Most climb for pleasure, though at 3am on an exposed, rugged slope, few have the energy to smile.

“We thought we'd have an adventure together,” whispers Jean from New Jersey, resting with her grandson Clayton. She catches her breath in the thin air. Around us, people are slurping hot noodles bought at a mountainside hut. A man with ski poles shuffles by, taking care not to step on the sleeping bodies that litter the path.

“We started from Lake Kawaguchi 5th Station at 10, intending to sleep at the 7th, but it was too noisy and we were packed in like sardines,” explains Jean. “We'll carry on and see how far we can get before dawn.”

Like many, Jean and Clayton want to see sunrise from Japan's tallest mountain – “Viewing one symbol of Japan from the top of another,” as one writer put it. If the weather is agreeable, this is the highlight of any visit to the country. Night sheds its black skin gradually to reveal first a layer of dark blue, then a layer of purple and finally a fresh golden fleece, as the sun peeps over the horizon and a new day crawls forth. The spectacle is greeted with cries of ‘Banzai!’ from an appreciative audience and is preceded by calls from the guides: “If you have no film, I sell it here. Fuji Film, of course!”

A unique experience for most, sunrise from Fuji is an everyday occurrence for Yoko, one of about 160 people employed on the mountain. “No, it never gets boring,” says the Fukuoka University student. “Already this year we've had three suicides and I've been on TV twice. Twice.”

She smiles and hands me a 400 yen cup of coffee. “I live here during the season but time passes quickly. My shift begins at 3pm and ends at 3am, so I'm very busy. If I'm not working I talk to my friends or sleep.”

To the surprise of many, the top of Fuji-san has the feel of a thriving Tibetan village, with a few ramshackle huts selling food and souvenirs, a shrine and a steady stream of people coming and going – their heads bowed and eyes shielded against a fierce dust storm. When I was there, those most at home were a friendly group of Iranians. “We have sandstorms worse than this,” shouted one as we posed for his camera. “And higher mountains, too.”

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There are many peaks taller than Fuji, though few have its popular appeal. From a distance, Mt Fuji is every child's idea of how a mountain should look. But don't be deceived into thinking that it is an easy hike. Climbers should be prepared for a range of weather conditions. It is advisable to wear stout walking shoes and warm, waterproof clothing, and to have with you a flashlight, aspirin and sunscreen for the daylight descent.

If you treat her with respect, the moody old lady will furnish you with many wonderful memories.

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