



UIAA
Global Youth Summit 2004



Cleanup on Cotopaxi and the TOP of the Highest Active Volcano in the World

On the 21st of June, the longest day of the year, my friend Eleanor and I, Fiona, arrived in Ecuador from Ireland to join Dario and Sabine on the TOPtoTOP Global Climate Expedition. I have been working with TOPtoTOP for about one and a half years and this week Dario asked me to write the expedition report of our experience in Ecuador so far.

We stayed at Villa Nancy and enjoyed the first evening catching up on things. I brought with me 50 new t-shirts, sponsored by Peter and Brigitte, colouring pencils sponsored by Caran d'Ache, and flags from the Swiss Cruising Club (CCS).

On Tuesday, Dario and I went to the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and met Miguel Pellerano, the Regional Director for South America, who helped us with contacts for Chile. Veronique Moreno very kindly helped us again with official letters to organise the expedition in the Galapagos and that evening Dario and Sabine did an interview with the newspaper El Comercio.



So, with the work done we headed off to the mountains in the Cotopaxi National Park. Eduardo was our guide and I was very glad he knew the route because the roads around Quito are really crazy with buses, trucks and cars driving like maniacs. There are old cars everywhere and the air is filled with pollution particularly from the buses. We headed down the Pan American highway to Machachi where we met the students of the school Pachamama in their big yellow school bus. We headed to the south entrance of the park and up the rocky road to the refuge at Cara Sur.

Although Cotopaxi is a National Park, the area has been significantly deforested and there are few animals or birds to be seen in the area. Soil erosion is a problem and is not helped by the planting of non-native trees for commercial purposes and eucalyptus trees for building houses. The Cotopaxi volcano towers over the landscape and is a beautiful mountain when it can be seen through the clouds.



Dario and Sabine gave the students a lesson on the formation of glaciers and then showed how climbers use ropes to pull themselves out of a crevasse. The weather was cold and very windy, but the refuge was comfortable and we warmed up in front of the open fire under the stars.

On Thursday, Dario guided a small group to the glacier on Cotopaxi while Eduardo took the other students to the waterfalls in the area. After a four hour trek, the boys were delighted to see the snow and one of them even brought a small wooden snowboard to try out on the slopes.

On Friday, we headed over to the north of the park to the main refuge to do a clean up of the valley at the foot of Cotopaxi. The valley is littered with hundreds of plastic bottles and rubbish that the tourists throw away. I was very surprised that such a beautiful place could be

polluted so badly with waste. The students were very motivated and collected at least one full black sack each, although we would have needed an army to clean the whole valley. These kids from the school Pachamama were fantastic and give me some hope for the future of this land. They departed for Quito and we went to Tambopaxi to prepare for our climb of Cotopaxi.

The next few days were spent acclimatising and trekking around the area. The landscape is very dramatic with volcanic features, hidden lagoons and Inca ruins. We met a friendly American from Boise, Idaho called Chris Duva, a Professor of Psychology and he offered to help us with the coordination of the expedition on the West Coast of the USA next year.

On Saturday night, Dario woke myself and Sabine at 11.30pm and we headed up to the refuge on Cotopaxi in the dark. I was very nervous facing this challenge, as I have never attempted to climb such a huge mountain before. For the next 6 hours we climbed very slowly step by step in strong winds and snow until we reached the crater. Several times I thought I would not make it but with the support of Dario and Sabine I managed to keep a rhythm and at about 7am we reached the summit. I had an overwhelming mixture of emotions - relief, happiness and fear. Unfortunately, there was no view from the top due to the clouds although the ice features in the crater were spectacular. We were completely covered in ice and had about 2 minutes to take a classic TOPTO TOP picture before we began our descent. Going down was just as difficult as going up and by the time we reached the bottom my legs were like jelly and I was absolutely exhausted.

I didn't really realise how fantastic it was that I reached the top until we got back to Tambopaxi and I was greeted by several amazed friends who were full of congratulations and awe. The Swiss Ambassador His Excellency Robert Reich joined us for dinner and we opened a bottle of Chilean wine to celebrate. Dario, Sabine and Mr. Reich attempted the climb again on Sunday night but had to turn back due to bad weather conditions.

Now, myself and Eleanor are back in Quito trying to organise a jungle trip to the Amazon without being ripped off or kidnapped by Colombian rebels. Dario and Sabine are gone to Chimborazo to give the colouring pencils they promised to the school children there and to visit an Indian family related to Angel who works here at Villa Nancy. We will meet them in La Libertad on the 9th of July, then go back up to Chimborazo to do some filming, then to Esmeraldas to see the mangroves. We plan to set sail for the Galapagos Islands around July 25th. There are still places available for the trip to Easter Island and Santiago in Chile, as well as the climb of Aconcagua in Chile in November.

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