

The Rhino Expedition 27 – 29 June 2009

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Fourteen brave or foolhardy souls from the Church of Ascension arrived at base camp (Pillar Cave), beguiled by Andy Kruger's assurance that "no more than moderate fitness" was required to reach the summit. Ages ranged from teenagers, who possessed a lot more than moderate fitness, to five middle aged or senior citizens including the Rector, who should all have known better.

After a difficult night on the hard rock floor of the cave, with various complaints about the sleeping arrangements and the raucous poker game of the youth, the motley band set out for the summit via the Mashai Pass. Lara was posted at the cave to guard the food and Steven's honour, using Andy's kurki – beloved of the Ghurka's, from Nepal

Unfortunately for Andy, his assertion that no more than moderate fitness was needed couldn't be proved, as waist high snow and ice on the steep slopes of the Mashai Pass complicated the ascent enormously. Altitude sickness and inadequate attire took its toll and four members of the merry band were forced to return to base. The rest eventually got to the top of the pass, had lunch and hobbled off to the Rhino's summit, from which some breathtaking photographs were taken. Significantly the youngest of the summiteers Jack Perritt is in his final year at Prep School while the oldest retired two years ago.

With the snow and ice on the south slope of the pass, Andy warned that the descent would be treacherous. After a prayer at the head of the pass, the band set off with one of the seniors citizens in the lead – unfortunately, said senior, the clumsiest of the crew, missed his footing sending him plummeting 20m down the steep slope. The snow spray which was spectacular ended abruptly when he came to rest feet first against a well positioned rock. When he stood up injury free, the author of his deliverance was obvious to all. The youngsters soon labelled any subsequent stumble along the precarious downhill path, as doing a "Graeme".

Andy's organisation was excellent and the cave provided rugged shelter, which was very liveable, rather than comfortable. Apart from sparing the effort of carrying tents, the cave also engendered a wonderful sense of community, even if the noisy poker games of the younger set kept the "oldies" from their beauty sleep. Only once did a senior citizen suggest that the players to "put a sock in it", when Andy's repeated re-interpretation of the rules provoked yet another round of vigorous protest. Most of the time, the senior citizens enjoyed the enthusiasm and cheerful banter of the youngsters, as they recalled their own days long gone.

Fortunately Pillar Cave is spacious and with the subdued lighting at night, even the shyest of the wiser gender discovered that changing on top of her sleeping bag (rather than inside it) was far more practical. If nothing was announced, no-one noticed anything'

Food and equipment was freely shared in the cave and only once did a real complaint surface. The aggrieved party claimed that her "white gold" (aka bog roll) had been purloined and this led to one of the most appalling miscarriages of justice yet

witnessed in South Africa. Despite the obvious innocence and community spirit of the accused, judge who admitted his liking for the red wine supplied by the prosecutor found for the accuser. The accused was sentenced to making warm beverages for the party the following morning. Given the sensitive nature of the case, the names of the parties and the judicial officers can't be revealed.

Spiritually the Rhino Expedition followed the theme chosen by Andy, which drew on the San tradition of Xkoagu, God who "fills the hungry". Being Anglican's the offices of morning and evening prayer were observed, together with a Eucharist on the day we left. Andy and Nic adapted the liturgy imaginatively and familiar sections were blended to fit the theme and setting. Everyone contributed, in some way at one time or another with Penny compiling a poem which expressed the emotional and spiritual journey travelled by the explorers.

At 3051 metres above sea level, Rhino Horn is a shade higher than Sterkhorn. As with last year's trip, this year's excursion left the participants with a special sense of awe at the splendour of God's creation, while giving all a deeper appreciation of each other.