



Climbing Mount Tianshan in Xinjiang Scott Menscher, Summer 2009

Scott Menscher, a teacher at Edward R. Murrow High School, Brooklyn, NY, spent the 2000-2001 school year teaching at the Beijing No. 15 Middle School.



Scott Menscher and members of the local Xinjiang hiking club at Mount Tianshan

adventure because Xiumin's friend was a member of a local Xinjiang hiking club, which comprised mostly college professors and adventure seekers. They were all Chinese, and no one spoke English except for one Chinese dude named Potato. Xiumin's friend didn't speak English.

I also had no equipment, and I had no idea what I was getting myself into; the only thing I had were jogging shoes. Xiumin's friend had everything: a jacket, hat and backpack and she supplied the tent and food.

So we left on a Friday early evening with about 30 adventure seekers... and it took us about two hours to reach the winding dirt path to our base camp. From there we took a dusty, bumpy dirt road -- got lost on the way -- and passed some very steep passes in dark of the night. We were supposed to start our hike that night, but we didn't get to camp until 11 p.m.

When I got off the bus it was cold. I had a little flashlight and I couldn't see anything in front of me. Man, it was dark out there. Xiumin's friend set the tent up; I dutifully held the spikes as she set it up, and watched as she started her little Coleman grill and made us noodles. I went to bed under the big dipper and was ready for the 15 mile hike ahead of me.

We had an amazing 12 days [in Xinjiang]. A very fascinating place with a lot of outdoor adventure activities...

The day before my birthday I climbed Mount Tianshan which is 12,800 feet up. And as I reached that height, I wondered to myself: what in god's creation am I doing up here? It was one of the craziest, scariest and most wonderful accomplishments I ever made.

I was lucky enough to go on this three day, two night

The next day was an early one, and we started our hike around 7 a.m. It was a beautiful morning and one that made me so happy to be out there. The sunlight coming over the mountains on a clear, crisp morning made the morning hike with a 35 pound bag on my back an extremely enjoyable one. I felt good; I felt strong; I felt happy for those first five miles. That's when I hit the first river crossing. The river was quite beautiful; it was a glacial fast moving river that originated high above the Tianshan Mountains. Crystal blue water that looked just like a post card. However, there was a problem. The only bridge was a log and four or five small rocks that you had to hop over in order to get to the other side. The river was fast moving and I was scared of falling in. I got through the log... no problem, but then I started losing my balance and splash -- my foot fell in the river. Oh man, it was completely soaked. I luckily had another sock and put it on and some guy gave me a maxi pad to put in my shoe to soak up the water. Great idea. Only three more of those river crossings to go before lunch.



Scott crosses a river on the way to Mount Tianshan

I continued the hike through the rocky river, and if you have ever walked over rocks in jogging shoes [you know] it is tough. By this time I was starting to tire, but I still had another eight hours of climbing to go -- most of it going up. And that's when it got tough. Slowly I ascended a 13,000 foot mountain. Every turn left me with breathtaking views of the vistas. But I was scared to look down, because the horse path that we followed narrowed from five feet to about two feet and the only thing I could look at was my feet. I clung to that damn mountain praying that I would not fall to my death. But I chugged on and made it to the top and what a beautiful view I had. Green lush mountains, clean air and goats grazing and perched high and below me. I also saw the occasional yurt that dotted the landscapes; and they housed the local Kazakh people. It was simply beautiful.



Mount Tianshan

But I had a lot more sweating to do. I had another 2,000 foot ascent to go. Before going on the hike, Xiumin told me that this was going to be a level six hike, which is above average in difficulty. The highest is level nine. Indeed this was above average. For another 1 1/2 hours I climbed higher and higher until the mountain gradually graded right, and over the final hill I saw the snowcapped mountain dominating the skyline. It was simply awe inspiring. I walked and felt pretty good about myself because finally we were on flat land -- more than 12,000 feet up. But I was wondering where we were going to camp. I saw these tents about 500 feet below and I was

saying to myself this can't be us.

For me going up is no problem, but going down is a big one. I said to the guys in front of me, Wo Bu Zou -- I won't go. They said come and again I said, Wo Bu Zou. One of the guys, Da Chen, realized that I was scared of heights and to his credit he slowly walked me down that mountain.

This was certainly an exciting climb, something that I could never imagine doing, especially six months ago when I weighed so much. But it was truly a special event, certainly with more to come.