Hi, my name is Morgan and I am a teacher at Sydney Children's Hospital School. Last month, I scaled Iraq’s highest mountain to raise funds for the kids I work with at SCHS. I also brought with me, almost a hundred lightweight books to donate to a local school in Kurdistan for the slowly returning Kurdish Diaspora from decades of civil war.

It was an independent project which was completely self researched, risk-assessed, planned and funded. I spent months establishing my own local contacts in the Kurdistan Autonomous Region of Iraq. Kurdistan is a semi-autonomous region in Northern Iraq which is relatively more stable and safe than the rest of federal Iraq. More countries are beginning to show a slight distinction between both territories, although many foreign travel advisories still generally advise against travelling. For this reason, it was incredibly difficult to find any travel insurance company that was willing to cover me for travel, let alone a mountaineering activity.

Mount Halgurd (3607 m), Iraq’s highest accessible mountain, lies in the Zagros Mountain range along a disputed region between Iraq and Iran. It is an area that very few outsiders have glimpsed at, and our expedition was an exploratory ascent of a mountain with no established routes. Mount Cheekah-Dar just to the North of Halgurd, stands at (3611 m), but is forbidden to be climbed because of political reasons - it sits right on the disputed border with Iran. (The mountains behind me in the summit photo are all in Iran, Cheekah-Dar is the one directly behind me which lies half in Iraq and half in Iran). The Kurds have always historically considered Halgurd to be their highest peak, and it is sacred to them.

I was part of a British Expedition party to be the first people to summit the mountain in snow and ice conditions, it has never been done prior to this. Our
seven man team consisted of 5 UK citizens, myself, and a Kurdish team member who was our local translator.

This roller coaster of a journey started with me being denied from boarding my flight in transit in Dubai for bureaucratic reasons, and having to spend the most stressful, sleep-deprived 48 hours of my life dealing with airport authorities. I only narrowly managed to make it on to the last flight into Kurdistan for the week, with only 30 minutes until take off when I got the all clear to board.

This was followed by one of our first nights in Kurdistan sleeping on the floor of the local police station, where local guards casually pointed to the mangled remains of a car bomb partially wrapped in weatherproof sheets next to the compound, as they laughed and smoked their cigarettes.

It was also during this time that we got to experience the incredible hospitality of the Kurdish people in a little mountainous village called Choman. Visitors are rare in this part of the world, and everyone was genuinely curious to know where we were from and why we were there. When we told them that we were attempting to climb Halgurd buried under snow, they simply could not get their heads around the idea (as did the president's nephew whom we had dinner with a few nights before - he was in charge of the Kurdistan-UK Friendship Association, and was overseeing our security).

Forging a route up the mountain was a slow process, as we had to delicately negotiate active minefields left behind from the Iraq-Iran war in the 1980s. Much of the mountain side is littered with mines, shells, and other ordnance, some spent and others clearly still live - a sign of once fierce fighting. To make things more challenging, we only had Soviet-era maps of the very porous border regions and mountains, all of which were detailed in Russian. We sometimes found ourselves having to take our cue from whether we found goat poo (safe) or goat bones (risky) in fields.
The fact that three American hikers were also kidnapped and imprisoned by Iran in 2009 was not lost on us, as we noticed tiny Iranian outposts dotting the mountain side across deep valleys.

Our first summit bid after two days of scouting possible routes was a failure. We set off too late in the morning and as the day warmed up, the snow started melting and turning into slush. Lots of rain overnight also made conditions on rocks very slippery. At times, we found ourselves in knee to waist deep snow.
Being almost swept away in two successive avalanches within seconds of each other forced our retreat back to base camp. Helicopter evacuations off Halgurd were non-existent, and it was a sobering experience for us all, highlighting the dangers of the mountain.

We decided to spend a few more days doing short treks and conducting recces of new routes, while we sat out the constant rain. During this time, we also had concerns over wolf paw prints we found near our base camp, as well as sporadic rifle fire which erupted one night near where we were sleeping.

Our second summit bid was a success with 6 of our 7 members reaching the summit. We were up in the cold at 3 in the morning and set off at 4 in the dark with head-torches. We climbed through the morning and as the day warmed up, our concerns about dangerous melting snow was renewed. One of our team members turned back about 30 minutes from the summit while the rest of us pushed on. We finally got to the peak at 0920h local time where we spent 15 minutes on the top, before making our very tense 3 hour descend down Mount Halgurd’s South Face back to base camp.
Coming back to the village of Choman was a surreal experience. We were given a heroes welcome by many villagers who had come to greet us. We were also interviewed by Kurdistan and Zagros TV, and saw ourselves on the tele that night!

The entire seven-month journey for me from start to end was but a thread that hung from a knife’s edge and filled with many uncertainties. However, it is a truly rare and humbling experience to have had the encouragement and support of so many people around me for the Expedition and Fundraiser. Having parents come up to me at work and ask me about the climb has also certainly become one of my more unique hospital-teaching experiences.
Morgan Victor

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