

# Mauled by Bees

Samosir Island, Sumatra, Indonesia

by Nick Mistretta

Seamus decided to wear flip-flops on the trek, and we were thus doomed from the start. It looked to be a 20-mile hike up and over the island, but our map was hand drawn in crayon, so we had little faith in it. The over was no problem, it was the *up* that nearly killed us. According to the map the trail began next to the side of a church in a small village three miles down the coastal road, and sure enough it was there. Too bad we couldn't stick to it.

Off the trail we were afflicted with Guys Disease, that strange illness that prevents men from turning around even though we know we should. We knew where we had lost our way, finding the trail would have been easy. Guys Disease is also responsible for men not asking directions. It's a horrible affliction. Seamus was in front of me. Above me, actually. His sandals kept slipping off and hitting me in the face. I grabbed hold of some roots, and the whole bunch came out of the ground. I was carrying all our gear and climbing straight up the side of a cliff with a left hand that wasn't ready for this level of physical abuse. I looked down and wondered how my lifeless corpse would look mashed against the rocks below. Church bells in the distance began to ring.

The fall would have sent us tumbling at least a couple hundred feet. My mind was strenuously focused on footing and grabbing things that looked sturdy. Moving quickly to the side if Seamus fell. The pack pulled me backwards, and I hugged the cliff, climbing through sideways-growing bushes with razor-sharp thorns chewing on my sunburned skin. I looked down again and could barely make out the once close rocks. Seamus encountered some footwear problems and stopped. I climbed past him. Finally on top, with both feet firmly planted on flat ground, I could see the entire northeastern coast of the island. We had climbed higher than I thought. I turned to my left for another view and saw something strange in the sky. Like little speckles of dirt, but flying dirt. Thousands of tiny things moving as one dark patch against a baby blue sky. It looked like a huge net come to sweep me up. Then I heard a strange buzzing. They were getting closer now and it became impossible to ignore. BEES! I was feeling a bit crazed now. Absolutely bursting with disbelief. Not as in, oh, that must be a flashback. No. This was more like, you've got to be fucking kidding me. Because I, a person with a strong height phobia, had just survived climbing straight up a cliff some three hundred feet with one hand and many obstacles. Not even safe and sound 10 god damn seconds. And now I was about to be mauled by bees.

But the bees harmlessly passed a few feet above my head and couldn't have cared less about me. I leaned over the cliff to look for Seamus but couldn't see him anywhere. I yelled and got no response. I hadn't heard any screams, though with the wind blowing loudly and those damn bees ... but then he answered my second call and was soon up where I was.

"Oh my gentle Jesus," he huffed.

"I know," I said. "We're lucky to be alive. We're city boys, basketball freaks, not fuckin' mountain climbers. I am genuinely amazed one of us didn't die."

"It's these damn sandals."

"I will admit they add a degree of difficulty."

“I don't know why I wore these.”

“Yep, I wondered the same thing myself.”

“That climb fuckin' killed me. I feel like I just came shooting out the birth canal.”

“I always think of birth as more like a water slide. Albeit, one with a bit of a bottle neck.” He gave me a strange look, perhaps the same one I was giving myself. “Uh, anyway ... I'm gonna go look for the trail, so get some rest. If you see a swarm of bees, no worries. Their friendlies.”

The trail was close by, easy to spot and steep in parts. We still had a long way to go, this I realized as soon as I got off the cliff and looked up. Seamus saw it, too, and from the look on his face it had discouraged him. I came back and we tumbled off, happy to be walking rather than climbing. My pace was faster than his and it got to the point where I would stop for a rest and wait 15 minutes or so for Seamus, who eventually stopped catching up to me. I went on without him. I was pretty certain he was still behind me. Where else would he be? After a couple of hours moving up the trail I came upon three hikers coming down. The only people I saw on the trail all day.

“How much farther before I come to a town or guesthouse?” I asked.

“Keep goin' straight, and Jenny's guesthouse is about ... oh ... about another hour from here. We looked at another place first, but when we decided to stay at Jenny's, people from the first place came over with machetes. Some kind of long running feud.”

Jesus, I thought. That's a hell of a thing to tell me just before I walk into town.

“Say, if you see a big, hairy goon coming up the trail can you tell him you just saw an enormous grizzly that chased you down and tried to eat you? He loves animals.”

Seamus was like my little brother. So fucking with him in this way was absolutely necessary. Hell, it was critical. And it was *his* fault we almost died. Trekking across the island in flip-flops ... what kind of a moron ... “Ooohhh. Hey there.” A suspicious herd of water buffalo crashed out of the brush and began to cross the trail about 20 feet in front of me. There were baby buffalos, too, which made me extremely nervous. I thought about my fake grizzly story and the irony was too much. “No threat here,” I said to them. “Just your average terrified loser.” I wondered if they could understand me. Maybe I shouldn't be talking to them, I thought. What if their adrenal glands are voice activated? The big mama buffalo stared me down as she was the last to cross by. I stood still as can be. Smiling like a retarded infant who had just shit himself and couldn't be more pleased about it. And after a brief staring contest, the big buffalo followed the others back into the forest. I continued up the trail. Wondering, what next?

The map showed a town about midway across the island, after reaching the top of the plateau. But once I found it, the word “town” seemed much too generous. There were only six houses and no electricity, no plumbing ... nothing. The villagers walk over a mile for water. They grow their own food, raise a few animals, cook over a fire, and the children play in the dirt. Chickens and goats and cows and dogs, everything underfed. Jenny's guesthouse is one of these six and looks just like the others. Jenny is a nice old woman, but it's not really a guesthouse. Just some lady who rents out rooms in her home. And after I walked a mile back down the trail to retrieve Seamus, we rented two from her. We never met the mad machete people.

We ate lunch, but now what? It was only mid afternoon, and the entertainment options were sorely lacking. Nonexistent, really. I walked to the edge

of the village and watched four wild horses playing in a clearing a few hundred yards away. I squatted on a dirt mound and smoked a Marlboro Light and dug into the slow, unhurried pace of the plateau. Dogs were chasing children who were chasing chickens that yelled in protest at all the commotion and the dust storm that chased them all. Villagers wandered around carrying water jugs, some had kindling on their heads. Seamus came over, his head completely empty.

“I was just sitting on the porch watching live coverage of the Indonesian food chain.”

We walked down to the clearing, the horses gone now, and built a huge campfire for when it got dark. It took us over two hours, but we had nothing else to do, and it was fun. It felt like we were kids on a camping trip, climbing around in trees, foraging for firewood. After dinner Jenny gave us some pot, enough for a nice spliff. Seamus and I enthusiastically thanked her. Marijuana was everywhere on the island, and we saw cannabis farms of all sizes. The developing world is dependent upon a cash-crop economy, and drugs are a vital part of its success. It's a matter of survival. And we were more than happy to do our part.

I rolled a large joint, and we waited for it to get dark. Just before we left for the clearing, a herd of water buffalo wandered into the village. They were quickly chased away by dogs and villagers waving long sticks, and from the look of things they were headed toward our campfire.

“Hell, we survived that mountain,” I said. “We're invincible.”

Sure enough, the buffalo were gone, but we couldn't get the fire started so it mattered little. We climbed back up to Jenny's in the black night and smoked the joint on the porch. We ate French-fried potatoes by candlelight and drank Coca-Cola. Purely American but definitely not America.