Blue Mountain Peak

DAVID CHARITY

The road ahead looked awfully steep, and was deeply rutted. 'You've got to take it fast.' A friendly voice belonging to a native of Hagley's Gap volunteered, from over his garden fence – 'Take a good run at it, and you'll be OK.'

I considered his advice. Two Americans in an Opel had got stuck after only a few metres and were already deep in negotiation with representatives of the local youth about the cost of a push. I decided to give them 10 minutes to get well ahead, and retired for a smoke and a think.

I had left Ocho Rios at 10.15 in the morning of 27 August 1986, destination the summit of Blue Mountain Peak, at 2256m the high point of the Blue Mountain range and of all Jamaica, although only some 24km from downtown Kingston.

The road had so far taken me along the coast to Port Maria and Port Amolto, past the island homes of Noel Coward and Ian Fleming, then inland over the mountain divide to the pass at Hardwar Gap, forking left to Silverhill Gap. I had picked up a solitary pedestrian who claimed to have an aunt in Peterborough, and who claimed to have been to the top of Blue Mountain Peak many times. 'The road goes almost the whole way to the top these days', he assured me. This seemed disappointing if true, for it would deny me a decent mountain walk.

He left me at the fork where I turned left for Silverhill gap. A long descent down the hairpin bends of an atrocious track took me at last to the main road, where a left turn led through many pot-holes to Mavis Bank, and so on to the valley of the Yallah River, where the road either climbed impossibly through several large boulders to a rickety narrow bridge, or even less promisingly straight through the river.

A youth resting on a boulder assured me the correct way was through the river. I waded through first to check the depth. The water came midway up my calves; not as high as the exhaust pipe, I concluded. First gear, and through we went. No trouble at all. Then steeply and roughly up to Hagley's Gap, the settlement closest to the mountain.

The local youth appeared not to have come to terms with the Americans. A face poked itself through the car window.

'You goin' to the Peak Mistah?'

I indicated assent.

'You wanna guide?'

'No thanks, I'll just follow my nose.'

'You give us sometin' for the offer?'

I indicated dissent, and with a cry of 'stand-by' took off with racing rear wheels. The car careered up the track; not daring to slow down I raced round

bends, past startled onlookers, madly dashing from rut to rut, avoiding boulders and dogs. I eventually ground to a halt behind the Americans who had stopped for a view just at the point where the road levelled out.

I manoeuvred round them with a wave. The guidebook recommended parking at Whitfield Hall, a sort of Youth Hostel where overnight lodging could be had; but the road still seemed passable, and every half-kilometre of driving would be a half-kilometre less to walk. So on I bumped; hairpins, more ruts and boulders. Thank heaven this was only a rented car. The little Toyota Starlet seemed to revel in the bumps and bends, and ground upwards slowly but surely. One particularly steep section was almost too much for its miniscule cubic capacity, about 1000 at the most. It got up at the second attempt, but only just.

The road levelled a little and came at last to a hairpin bend which was clearly the limit of its capability. I parked. It was 2.30pm. The sun stared from a fine cloudless sky, but up here with a gentle breeze the temperature was a modest 70F. The track led off rightwards, in the direction of the summit, or alternatively leftwards. The right-hand track led to a dead-end, where a pipe, remnant of some irrigation scheme, dripped forlornly. Back to the car, feeling that perhaps I was not destined to make it to the top. Oh well, may as well try the other track. It's only 3pm. I strolled casually up the other track, the sound of some mechanical agricultural contraption gradually getting louder.

It proved to be a spraying machine, manned by a Jamaican character called Joe. He introduced himself. I reciprocated.

'Where you goin'?'

'I'm going for a walk. Does this track lead anywhere?'

'It goes to the Peak. But it's a seven mile walk. You won't make it today.'

He indicated the position of the sun in the afternoon sky. 'Seven miles?' I gave a long low whistle. I suspected he was exaggerating. The guide book said it was only five miles from Whitfield Hall, and I reckoned my bumpy drive had disposed of at least two of those.

'Oh well, I'll just go a little further.'

'Come down soon, David, and then you can give me a ride back to the village in your car, when I finish work.'

I reflected on the capacity of the rural Jamaican to imagine that visitors from 5000 miles away would so easily be persuaded to rearrange their afternoons just to give them a lift back to the village. But perhaps that was unkind. I also reflected on the misinformation the locals dole out. On the one hand, the road goes almost to the top, these days. On the other, it was still seven miles on foot. Maybe it came to the same thing.

The track soon narrowed into a footpath, and led from the open scrub into the afforested peaks of the Great Ridge of the Blue Mountain Range. The path was shaded by the trees and displayed an abundance of wild flowers, particularly orchids. I passed a donkey tethered to a tree. There was no sign of its owner. After about a mile the path emerged at a prominent col, Portland Gap. The view northwards through the trees was extensive; mile upon mile of wooded peaks and ridges.

The summit was away to the east. The path led off again through the trees, level at first, then steeply rising through many zig-zags. It rose on and on,

at first pleasantly, then interminably, then tediously, then both tedious and interminable. Once I felt morally convinced that, having come so far, I would get to the top today, and without risk of being benighted. Then from a subsidiary peak I saw how far away the real top still was, and I became uncertain of reaching my goal, at any rate with enough time to get back to the car before nightfall. From the subsidiary peak the path wound round to the north side of the ridge, crossed another col, and so finally up the slopes of the real peak emerging suddenly at the summit plateau, bald of trees, but graced with two rough mountain huts, for those with time to sleep on the summit, I supposed. Dawn from up there must be wonderful.

The time was 5.20pm. One hour and ten minutes until dusk. I spent five minutes working on a photographic record of the impressive surroundings, and then, mindful of the bottle of Red Stripe in the car, dashed back down the path.

After only 10 minutes I encountered the two Americans. One sportingly offered me a much-needed swig from their water bottle. I asked if they were going to the top, and reminded them that dusk fell at 6.30. The descent was easy. The many zig-zags of the ascent could all be avoided by a very steep short-cut, through trees and down an incipient gully. It went down so far that I wondered if it would not take me to the valley and bypass Portland Gap and the car as well. Fortunately it rejoined the main path, which soon emerged at Portland Gap. Down past the donkey and its absent owner. My only other encounter of the day was a strapping lad, hiking up the hill with a huge rucksack, sleeping bag, cooking equipment, the lot. 'You bin to the top?' he asked. And then in astonishment, 'Where's yo' gear?', indicating my lack of encumbrances, clad, as I was, in shorts and T-shirt and carrying only a camera and a car-key.

'Oh, it was just an afternoon walk', I replied.

'You're very brave', he volunteered. He was no doubt thinking that foolhardy would be a more appropriate epithet.

I got to the car just as darkness fell, waited 20 minutes just in case the Americans showed up, drank my Red Stripe and smoked two cigarettes. There was no sign of them. Noting the position in the evening sky of Mars to the south and Venus to the east, I bumped off down the mountain track. I noted that the car made much better progress with the hand-brake off. I only took one wrong turning on the way back to Hagley's Gap, and bumped depressingly around Hanford's Coffee Plantation for about 30 minutes, when the need to ford another stream convinced me that I was off route. More desperate first gear work, up impossibly steep inclines, with whizzing wheels and clouds of dust or smoke coming from beneath the unprotesting little car, finally returned me to the proper road.

Seeing two figures a little way ahead, I stopped for confirmation that this was the road to Hagley's Gap.

'Why sure. It's me, you remember Joe. We was comin' to rescue you, 'cos we saw you turned into the plantation. You kin easy get lost round here at night. Many foreigners git lost and spend the night in the wilds. We was comin' for you, you come and have a drink wit' us, now we found you.'

I reflected that, since they had confirmed that I was on the way to

Hagley's Gap, and was therefore not lost, there hardly seemed just cause for a celebratory drink. I excused myself on the grounds of the lateness of the hour and the many miles to Ocho Rios.

'Sure, we unnerstan' man, you no got the time fo' drink, so just give us the money instead.'

I was not sure that I followed the convoluted logic of this, but thought it politic to hand over two 20 dollar notes, in feigned gratitude for such a timely rescue.

The long drive through Mavis Bank, Gardentown, Industry, Papine, Kingston, Castleton, Port Maria and Orocabessa to Ocho Rios took until midnight, but was, apart from boulders in the road and a major tropical storm, more or less uneventful.