



# Sociales

## ALIYYA SWABY:

### MY EXPERIENCE CLIMBING THE HIGHEST MOUNTAIN IN PANAMA: VOLCAN BARU

For my first Carnaval in Panama, I bypassed the *culecos* and crowds in favor of a more painful brand



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of fun. On March 1, I hopped in a rental car with three (athletic, male) friends and headed to Boquete, where we intended to climb six hours and 13.5 kilometers up Volcan Barú, the highest mountain in Panama. In theory, I was ready for the challenge: I regularly exercise, I never smoke, I eat more or less healthfully. But in reality, I'm a walking disaster. I suffer from numerous autoimmune ailments, including food allergies, eczema and asthma.



Aliyya Swaby on the peak of Volcan Barú.  
Photo Francois Poilly

On my last hike, in November (a mere 800 meters up the India Dormida in El Valle de Anton), I managed to twist my ankle and since then had been too stubborn to fully let it recover. I found myself at 7 a.m. at the base of a volcano with nowhere to go but up. The four of us had realized the night before that we were woefully underprepared for our adventure. On arriving in Boquete, we rushed around various stores buying last minute supplies. It seemed every stranger had *consejos*. One man whipped out his camera and showed us photos of himself at the bottom and at the peak of the volcano. "See how cold it is? I didn't believe it before I got there," he warned, gesturing toward his bright red nose in the "after" photos. Yet when we finally started off, the weather was brisk but comfortable. Each of us carried 30 to 40 pounds of supplies in a hiking pack, including three liters of drinking water. I actively gave thanks for my strong childbearing hips, which almost singularly held up the weight. We had chosen the "easy" route, over rocky asphalt instead of through dense foliage — but still at a steep and unforgiving incline. The air seemed thinner immediately. I was breathing too hard, partly due to no oxygen and partly due to nerves. Each of us had different hiking styles. Ben's long legs carried him swiftly up the trail until he got tired enough to rest and wait. François and Colin hiked a bit slower but strong and steady. I plodded along behind, in turns praising and critiquing my own performance aloud. Sometimes, one of the guys would casually stop to tie a shoelace or take a long swig of water, waiting for me to catch up. People of all kinds attempt Barú. We walked for a while among a group of 20 family members of different ages and abilities. My confidence increased every time I passed someone slower than I was. Time passed surprisingly quickly: five kilometers, seven, then 10; two hours, three hours, four. Around 1:30 p.m., just as I was about to collapse, we arrived at the campsite, a kilometer below the peak. Everyone cheered, hugged and traded high fives. We set up camp languorously, took a nap, made a fire to buffer oncoming cold. The stars were brighter than I'd ever seen them, having spent my life bouncing through various cities. It was a welcome break, but we'd achieved less than half of the full length. After a night of no sleep, ragged breaths and violent shivers, we stumbled out of our tents at 5 a.m. to make the last leg of the hike in pitch-blackness. The rocks were jagged and unkind. I couldn't breathe. I stumbled often. Once, I dropped my flashlight. "No, no, no!" my brain insisted. But I'd come too far. One last push over a misshapen formation, and I was up. We stood next to a giant white cross and looked down at the volcano crater, at the oceans hugging the mountains on either side, at people in scattered tents beginning to stir. For a few minutes, the four of us sat silent in the stillness of the *amanecer* — cold, tired, but serenely confident that the way back down would be a breeze.