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Hiking in Africa: Mines and Mountains, Trekking Through Angola

The Highest Challenge Project is an ongoing expedition to climb the highest mountain in as many of the 193 countries of the world as possible. Already holding the world record for being the first person to climb the highest mountain in every country in Europe (47 countries) and 51 out of the 53 countries in Africa, Ginge Fullen also holds the record for scaling the highest mountain in more countries than anyone else to date, presently 118 countries. The following article from Fullen describes his difficulties in scaling Serra Moco, the highest mountain in Angola, because of landmines.

by Ginge Fullen with contribution from Kam Dhaliwal, *MAG*

Background

Trekking in Africa for a year or more has added considerably to my mountaineering skills. I have experienced desert mountains and lived in jungles and African bush. However, for the places I have been in Africa and the mountains that I have wanted to climb, I needed more knowledge and skills. I needed to know about landmines. I had a fair knowledge of explosives and demolitions before coming to Africa after 16 years as a Clearance Diver in the Royal Navy. The Diving Branch carries out Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) below the high-water mark around UK waters and has the capabilities for Improvised Explosive Device Disposal (IEDD), which is designed to deter any threat against UK bases, ships and offshore interests. Ordnance on land was something new and interesting for me, so I began learning about landmines. With nearly 1000 different types of landmines and an estimated five to seven million landmines in Angola alone, there was a lot to learn.

Getting information on many of the mountains was not easy, especially for the highest mountains in some countries where the mountains were miles away from their indicated locations shown on the maps. Every mountain seemed to have its own problems and difficulties. Angola was no exception, being one of a dozen or so countries on my "problem" list. I had tried to climb in Angola before but arrived just as two United Nations' aircrafts had been hit by Sam Missiles by the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), the opposition or rebel force, who was still very active in Angola. Therefore, I had to put Angola on hold because of the conflict.

The Quest to Climb in Angola

I entered Angola through Namibia and then flew from Lubango in the south to Huambo right in the centre of the country and also only 50 miles from the mountain. I passed through a town in the south that had just been attacked by UNITA who left landmines as they withdrew. An army truck had hit an AT mine; normally, this might only kill the driver or passenger. However, this particular mine blew the truck onto another landmine and nine people were killed.

Climbing Serra Moco looked easy—well, easy on a map maybe. The mountain was no more than six km from the nearest road, so accessing it should not have been a problem. But Huambo had been a UNITA stronghold and campaigns had been fought in the surrounding area and now Huambo was literally destroyed. The city had seen heavy fighting during the early 1990s and had been controlled by UNITA for several years. The government forces retook it again in the mid-1990s. It is hard to find a two-sq-ft piece of wall, side of a house, tree, road or pavement that has not been hit by gunfire, mortars or airdrop bombs.

Travelling around Angola is tightly controlled by government troops and it becomes even more dangerous with the threat of landmines. I heard a story of two Portuguese aid workers who were advised by demining teams not to travel on a road that was thought to be mined. Five minutes later, there was a big explosion and the Portuguese aid workers had been hit in their small car. They had more than likely hit a stack of two AT mines, one laid on top of the other. The incidents were getting less prevalent while I was there, but even so, the people and the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) alike were very wary of venturing far from the places they knew to be free of UNITA troops and clear of landmines. The UNITA troops were known to operate in the area of Serra Moco, so as a white guy with a short haircut wandering around the countryside, I knew I had to be cautious. I had learned that lesson only a couple of months earlier when I was arrested in Liberia and advised to leave the country.

More Troubles in the Quest to Climb in Angola

I had a long wait in order to get permission from Angola's army to climb Serra Moco. The bureaucracy that existed in Angola continued to cause delays. In addition, Angola's government and army were busy with the peace accord, so Angola's first tourist mountain climber would have to wait. Even with continued peace, trekking in Angola will never be as ideal as the climbing and outdoor magazines make it seem because of the landmines that rest within the beautiful hills and countryside. There are unclimbed rock faces and rock pinnacles towering 300-500 m high and climbing them may turn out to be relatively easy by today's modern standards, but negotiating the minefields will not be so easy.

Of the 53 countries of Africa, over a quarter of these countries are threatened by landmines. Many of the mountains are witness to wars, conflicts and killings. It is a pity that I have to talk about detonating pressures of M15s and the numbers of amputees rather than describe the beauty and isolation of Chad's highest mountain, or the big green valleys of Eritrea's countryside, or the vast unclimbed areas of Angola. The plain fact is that the people who lay the landmines and the governments and powers that make such orders for landmines to be laid are committing murder. The landmines they place will continue to hurt for years, decades and centuries to come.

Update on the Highest Challenge Project from Kam Dhaliwal

Fullen completed his climb of Angola's highest mountain on his third attempt. He now has two countries left to do in Africa—Chad and Libya, and will return to climb those mountains soon. It should also be noted that Fullen has undertaken the Highest Challenge Project since 2000, despite suffering a broken neck in 1990 while playing rugby and a heart attack in 1996 on Mount Everest. Nothing has stifled Ginge Fullen's zest for life, nor stopped him from pursuing this amazing challenge.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Mines Advisory Group (MAG) and other demining organizations for helping me in Angola. I left Angola with one simple thought and fact—every mine out of the ground saves a limb or a life. Donations to MAG can be made by writing to MAG, 47 Newton Street, Manchester M1 1FT, by telephone on Freephone 0800 0723 999 or online at <http://www.mag.org.uk>. Africa's Highest Challenge Expedition has the Patronage of HRH The Prince of Wales. The Expedition charity is MAG, which is a British-based demining and mine awareness charity operating in eight countries in Africa and 18 countries worldwide.

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