

WATCHING THE SUN RISE ATOP MASADA

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Somewhere above the Dead Sea and below the heavens stands Masada. And atop Masada, a little before 6 o'clock in the morning, stands a young Hungarian.

His name is Igor, uncommon even for someone of his nationality, and he is eating a lollipop at the summit of the great rock where nearly 2,000 years ago a band of Jewish rebels made their last stand against the Romans.

On this, a summer's day before the most recent fighting broke out in the Middle East, Igor is 450 meters above the lowest point on earth. Here, even standing a healthy six feet tall, he just squeaks above sea level.

I am with him, expectant, exhausted. We have spent the last 37 predawn minutes climbing this natural monument, following the same steep, winding path that took the Romans five months to build.

It is called the Snake Path and for good reason. It is a constrictor, slowly squeezing the breath out of you with every step. It is a sidewinder, dribbling upwards in a series of switchbacks. It is a viper, sinking its fangs into your legs and back, drawing a clear, salty sweat.

That is over now. The gasping breaths, the agonizing steps of the steep incline with no rails, the brief stops for a little water and a lot of air, and the darkness. It could have been a lot worse. I am young, pumped full of adrenaline and energy and ... not much else since we left Jerusalem for this remote outpost more than two hours ago.

Now I sit and wait and watch a few stragglers stumble up the serpentine path, struggling to beat the sun to the top. One is a pudgy, young man, wearing his skullcap and some black jeans. His friends encourage him, laughing, singing. He makes it, then collapses on a rock and smokes a cigarette.

I wander over to some stone ruins, remnants of the walls built by Herod when he constructed two palaces on Masada, and I stare through the pale sky at the mountains along the horizon in Jordan. By now, nearly two dozen visitors of assorted nationalities have congregated on the mountaintop. As the intensity of the light increases, I fear we may be robbed of our prize, that the sun won't rise but just light the sky in a dull, fiery haze.

Then my wristwatch beeps, signaling the turn of the hour, and a silence envelops the mountaintop. No one speaks and everyone is drawn to the rock's edge. The minutes pass as a sense of great, wonderful expectation fills the air. It is almost palpable and alive, as if it, not our restless feet, scratches the loose rocks on the ground. A solitary bird, just out of sight and far from any kin, begins to warble the most beautiful, peaceful tune.

Then, at 6:07 a.m., as if on cue from the divine, a shaft of light shoots out from beyond a distant mountaintop to christen the world. The pumpkin orange globe ascends steadily on an invisible string pulled from heaven. We stand awestruck, dumbstruck, except for Igor, who vocalizes what we all are thinking.

"This is so cool. This is so cool."

And then, just like that, the moment is over and we stand silent no more. We take photographs and chat. We move about and smile.

We have 45 minutes to explore Masada's peak before we must begin our descent to our minibus. We tramp around the ruins and examine the remnants of ancient structures. This was where 1,000 religious zealots with years' worth of supplies died at their own hands rather than be conquered by the Romans, Jews who inspired generations of members of the Israel Defense Forces to visit and swear, "Masada shall not fall again."

As Igor and I retrace our steps down Masada, we travel slowly against the steep grade. Others pass us in the opposite direction, latecomers facing a hot sun already risen.

From a cheerful American,

resting before continuing his climb, comes a question: What is the meaning of Masada? I pause and prepare to tell him about ancient Jewish rebels and Romans, the sun rising, and life-changing natural beauty.

Then Igor answers for me: "Take the cable car up."

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[< previous](#)

[next >](#)