

Thanks to the generous support of Alister Sutherland High Mountains grant, I was able to complete an unforgettable hike up Tajumulco, standing at 4222m, the highest peak in Central America. As a sixth-year medical student undertaking my elective in Central America, this grant enabled me to travel to Guatemala and hire a local guide to help me safely summit this incredible volcano.

We began early on the first day, catching a chicken bus at 6 a.m. for a bumpy three-hour journey to the trailhead. Despite bags being precariously strapped to the roof, none were lost, and we made it just before 9 a.m. Conditions were ideal: not too hot, not too windy, and with decent visibility. With packs on, we started our ascent.



*Left: start of the trailhead, Right: pointing to the summit on the first half of the path.*

The trailhead, located near San Marcos in the town of Tajumulco, sits at around 2,900m, and we had roughly 10km to hike with an elevation gain of over 1,300m to the summit. The first half of the trail was fairly straightforward—well-marked and relatively smooth, with only the occasional loose foothold. The second half was more challenging, crossing rugged volcanic terrain where you had to watch your feet carefully to make sure you didn't roll an ankle!

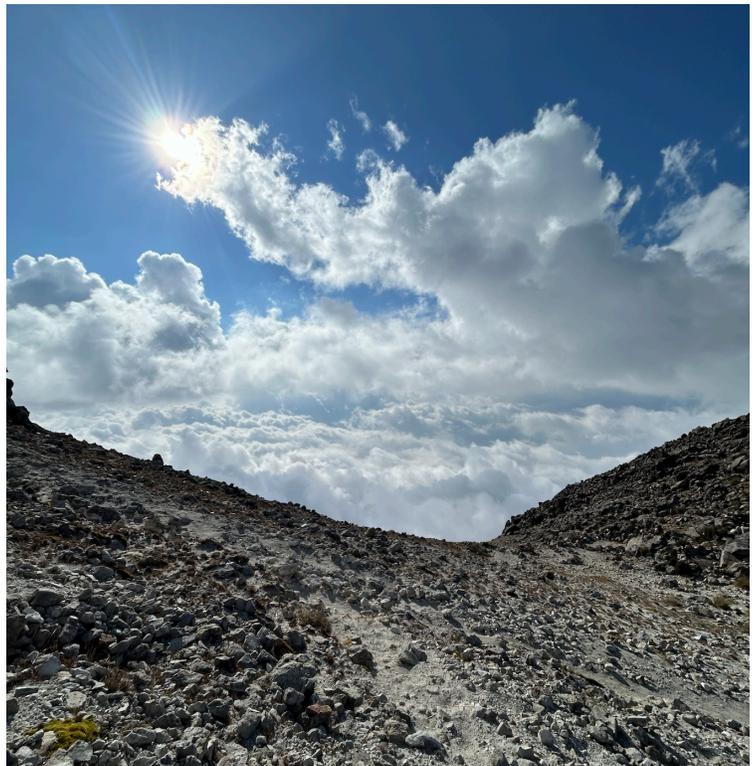
We made good time and arrived at base camp on the western side of the mountain (about 4,000m elevation) around 3:30 p.m. After setting up our tents and organizing gear, we rehydrated, packed light packs and pushed on toward the summit while there was still daylight. The final kilometre was tough: uneven, rocky, and slow-going. But it was all worth it when we reached the summit.



*Left: standing on the crater by the summit. Right: made it!*

Standing alone at the highest point in Central America, with the clouds parting to reveal incredible views, was truly awe-inspiring. We descended back to base camp before dark, made pasta and hot chocolate, and turned in early for a cold but cozy night.

We were up again at 3:45 a.m. for a second summit to catch the sunrise. It felt like I had only just closed my eyes! In the dark, hiking with headlamps felt tougher than the previous day, but we made it just as dawn broke. The horizon lit up in unbelievable colors—photos couldn't do it justice. We curled up in our sleeping bags to watch the sun rise over the vast landscape, spotting Guatemala's other iconic volcanoes in the distance: Santa María (which we had climbed the day before), Zunil, Acatenango, Fuego (which was actively erupting!), and Atitlán. As the sun rose further, we could see the shadow of Tajumulco over the ridge. Truly unforgettable.



*Clockwise from left: starting the ascent in the dark, views from the summit, finding my gloves at the summit, the rocky terrain on the descent*

As more hikers arrived, we packed up and returned to base camp for breakfast. After a thick slice of banana bread, we broke camp and began our descent. With lighter packs (having drunk most of our water), the going was easier. The upper rocky section still required care, but the lower half flew by—I definitely prefer descending to ascending!

We reached the trailhead in good time, found a restaurant nearby, and devoured a well-earned meal of tortillas, beans, and rice before catching the bus back to Xela.



*The shadow of Tajumulco, view from the top!*

I am very grateful that I was able to hike this stunning volcano thank you to the help of the Alister Sutherland High Mountains grant and I thank Dr Gillian Sutherland, the President and St Johns college for this opportunity!