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[Killer bees...the name is fitting](http://stayinggroundedontherun.blogspot.com/2010/01/killer-beesthe-name-is-fitting.html)

[](http://3.bp.blogspot.com/_OZM98aGeX9g/S0zpGapT6uI/AAAAAAAABNc/WlVfoZUfddI/s1600-h/IMG_2300.jpg)This morning I woke up in the twilight of quickly fading stars and a fingernail moon, seen through the twisted and mangled branches of two enormous twin baobab trees. I awoke in a twisted bunch, more or less the way I had fallen asleep a few hours before, with backpacks and other possessions strewn about me and countless bees still stuck in my tangled mass of hair, an insistent pain in my hip and ribs and a nagging thirst in my throat. I wasn’t alone, however, and the none-too-distant howling of baboons and the rustling in the forest around me reminded me of the wild presence all around. I couldn’t dally too long, for I didn’t want a repeat experience of the harrowing dash down the mountain I had 24 hours earlier, so I begrudgingly urged my body into movement, threw all items into three packs on my back and one on my stomach, and set off into the maze of bamboo forest down the mountain in front of me.[](http://2.bp.blogspot.com/_OZM98aGeX9g/S0zn5EpzIlI/AAAAAAAABNU/cni9efcGGwU/s1600-h/IMG_2299.jpg)

This isn’t really the beginning of the story, nor is it the end, but it was quite an awakening. The proper beginning of this story sounds like many others, the start of an adventurous camping trip on the top of distant rock formations known only as “The Spires.” 48 hours before that moment I set off on bicycle with my good friends Sheila and David, packs heavy with camp food, sleeping bags and pads, water, and enough snacks to last a month for what we knew would be a memorable experience in the Senegalese bush. Along the way we spent the night in the home village of another PCV, KC Crocker, and convinced her that she needed to be in on the camping trip as well. Although she had a full to-do list to get through in the village, we convinced her to join our crew and the following morning we all set off together, 4 strong, to climb to the top of these distant peaks about 40 kilometers from Kedougou.

The day had all the beginnings of a fantastic adventure, with clear skies and beautiful weather ushering us along, and many a photo-op along the route. We laughed and sang as we rode, and eventually made it to the base of the mountain in the early afternoon, where we chained our bikes in the shadow of the massive spires above us, jutting out of the hillside like big orange teeth piercing the sky. We were hungry and ready for lunch, but decided to push our way through burnt-out scrubland and a thick bamboo forest, scramble over boulders and scale the steep walls of the spires themselves so we could enjoy the reward of eating on the summit. Our decision paid off, and we basked in the view from the top as we took down sandwiches of sardines and onion, lazed away the afternoon napping and clambering around on this high rocky outcrop, feeling at the top of the world. [](http://4.bp.blogspot.com/_OZM98aGeX9g/S0zmRs3T2DI/AAAAAAAABNM/HnQaUy0vZic/s1600-h/IMG_2289.jpg)

We were thrilled with our campsite among the clouds except for one pesky detail- some persistent and rather aggressive bees that were unwilling to leave us alone. Sheila and KC mostly avoided the problem by napping under sheets, while David and I were off exploring the further reaches of the spires, and nightfall came with only a sting or two to show for their presence- but what camping trip is complete without something to show for it? After a hearty dinner of corned beef fry-up and a desert of M&Ms, we whiled away the evening with a stargazing session and “if you could…” hypotheses, with a brief commentary on the risk of sleepwalking in such environs before heading off to bed. The night was peaceful. [](http://2.bp.blogspot.com/_OZM98aGeX9g/S0zw25rkLfI/AAAAAAAABN8/0LSqbFZMsi4/s1600-h/1-12-09+029rs.jpg)

This is not a story about sleepwalking, it is a story about bees, and they were determined to make it a story to remember.So at the break of dawn, with that beautiful fingernail moon hanging in the sky and the first light of dawn on the horizon, they decided to make their move. The morning wasn’t silent, and in the air hung the sound of a collective machine, a reverberating buzz that filled the air and reminded us of the other guests on the mountain.

The four of us slowly started creeping out of our sleeping bags, going about the morning stretching ritual, tying on shoes and snapping a couple photos of the coming dawn when a lone, daring bee materialized out of nowhere and made a dive-bomb for my nose, inflicting the first sting of the day. I swung out and killed it off for good, cursing the darn thing for its flagrant and unprovoked attack on my tranquility. Moments later, in apparent bad luck, another struck David, standing no more than 10 feet from me on the ridge. He swore and brushed it off, as we climbed the few feet back down to our camping spot to pack up our belongings. These were the last moments of the day that seemed like reality.

Within moments the apparent bad luck revealed itself as an all-out offensive on our position and as the buzz around my head grew louder and more concentrated, I glanced at Sheila and Casey to see a swarm of bees intensifying around us all.At first our reaction[](http://2.bp.blogspot.com/_OZM98aGeX9g/S0zqo1OQRcI/AAAAAAAABNk/FuvynqUL34o/s1600-h/IMG_2302.jpg)s were mixed and confused, with Sheila still putting on protective clothing and Casey frantically stuffing objects in her backpack as I dove and tried to cover myself with my sleeping bag, unsure if we could simply wait out the onslaught. Waiting was simply no option, and every time I lifted a small hole to look out of a handful of bees would fly into the opening and viciously attack my face and head. Even as David tried in vain to start a fire to drive them away, we knew the only option was to get off of the mountain, and as I threw off the sleeping bag and emerged into a massive swarm of crazed and stinging insects, we all made a headlong dash in every direction off the spires, thinking of nothing but escape from the unrelenting and endless hoard.

David and I crashed off one side, sliding and bouncing off boulders and tumbling over ledges, all the while swatting wildly at out our heads and faces, trying to ward off the bees. Eventually down from the spires, we found ourselves pushing through head-high grass, with no true direction to go, only “away!” and the crashing sound of grass and broken bamboo shoots as the only means of locating one another. We had no idea if or how Sheila and KC had made it out, and only the sound of tumbling masses making their way in my general direction gave me assurance that they had made it off the top. At this distance the hive had stopped sending out new attackers, but the only way to make the ones surrounding us relent was to kill every last one of them individually.

After echo-locating one another and yelling to rendezvous at the bottom of the mountain, KC and David headed off together as Sheila and I killed off the last of the bees still caught in her hair, up her nose and sticking out of her ear. We now only had to get down through the bamboo forest and find one another to assess how bad the situation really was.We had all sustained between 30 and 100 stings apiece, with Sheila certainly the worst for wear. Her face was completely swollen with her eyes nearly shut, and David was having trouble breathing and a rash was breaking out over his entire body, his face nearly unrecognizable. Casey, although generally allergic, wasn’t experiencing terrible affects aside from some minor swelling and I was almost completely unaffected.[](http://2.bp.blogspot.com/_OZM98aGeX9g/S0zte3_MVsI/AAAAAAAABN0/2vCbTmQekTw/s1600-h/IMG_2312.jpg)

We rushed everyone to the village at the base of the mountain where we received an outpouring of empathy and kindness (as well as strange and bewildered stares) from the local villagers, who welcomed us into their huts and brought water to soothe the stings. Thanks to the wonder of cell phones, even in smallest and most distant African villages, we were able to summon a doctor from the medical post 12 kilometers away who sped over on a motorcycle carrying anti-inflammatory medication to give both Sheila and David shots to calm their allergic reactions within less than an hour. He said that he had personally seen many deaths from bee stings in his short time in the region, which made me all the more grateful that all of us were still breathing and well.

David and Sheila were transported back to the health post on moto, and as KC and I pulled up on bikes an hour later another volunteer had made it out from Kedougou in a 4X4 to transport us all back to the regional house. With the immediate danger over, we could breathe easy again, but the story was far from over. In our haste to get off the spires, we left everything in our wake. Bags, sleeping pads, wallets, passports, phones- nearly everything had been left on top of the mountain and had to be retrieved. Thus a hard decision had to be made.

Because I was really the only one who didn’t react severely to the stings, I refused to hear any of the others talk of returning to the mountain, and in the end stubbornly decided to return on my own to gather our lost items and bring everything back. As such, I only spent about an hour in Kedougou before turning right around and heading back to the spires. We decided that I could only go back up under the cover of night, when the bees would be dormant and I could climb to the top in safety, so I had to stage myself just beneath the spires at sunset and had little time to spare. As it turned out I arrived there just in time, at sunset, but without a flashlight it would be impossible to make it up in total darkness, so I decided I must venture up for at least this crucial item.

Almost immediately as I made it to the top the stomach-churning buzzing returned, and as I jumped about the spires throwing backpacks on my back and sleeping bags under my arms, the intensity of the swarm gathered around my head until I could take the stings no longer, and again dashed off the mountain, with perhaps even less regard for safety.Unbalanced with so much gear, my descent was haphazard and awkward, and I seemed to pick myself up only to fall again and again, all the while beating at my head to kill off a few of my attackers. At one point, in one calamitous moment, I stumbled over a short ledge, bounced off a rock and performed a sideways summersault in mid air, then free-fell until I crashed onto a boulder down below in a thudding blow to my ribs and thigh. The bees would not relent. I could only pick myself up and scramble on, until I was far enough away to throw down my encumbering load and smash the rest, my hair a tangled mass of bee carcasses. Their smell still lingers.[](http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_OZM98aGeX9g/S0zrwlScjhI/AAAAAAAABNs/qpbdSLRBceo/s1600-h/IMG_2310.jpg)

Exhausted and burning from all the fresh stings, I collapsed in the pile of bags and fell asleep with the sounds of the forest around me, if not unaware then uncaring of the bugs crawling over me. At 10:30 I awoke from my sleep, convinced myself that the evil hive must now be calm and made my way back up to the top yet again to retrieve the remaining items scattered about the top. In trepidation I made it to the peak unchallenged and made off with the rest of the gear, slinked down to my stash under two towering baobabs where I could finally rest, knowing my mission was complete. All I had to do now was make it through the night(baboons howling and rustling in the distance), hike 4 people’s gear down the mountain in the morning, and make it back to Kedougou. Ahh, sleep never came so fast. I was sore in the morning and Kedougou never looked so nice.