



## TREKKING UP MAUNA KEA



DOUG ARNOTT/Courtesy photos

The 'SCUBAnauts' pauses just before summiting Mauna Kea after three days, 21 miles and almost 14,000 feet of hiking.

# Lowest to the highest

## 'SCUBAnauts' climb to the top of the white mountain

By BRET YAGER

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**T**oday, Collin Olson and Anna Moran are back in Florida, where the ground is flat, flat, flat.

Last week, though, the teenagers were looking down from the red soil of Mauna Kea's summit, watching the sunset, marking a high point in their young lives.

The youths and a team of six other "SCUBAnauts" had just completed an arduous, three-day hike of the mountain from sea level last Tuesday, putting to use three weeks of survival training with an Air Force survivalist, and weeks of charging up stadium steps with a loaded backpack. Later in the mission, they would employ months worth of scuba training.

Dubbed Operation Deep Climb, the expedition was designed to bring kids from the sea floor to the top of the world's tallest mountain (as measured from the sea floor) — and even beyond.

The hike followed an obscure, rarely-used trail on the mountain's northeast side. Passing first through jungle,



Local guide Kahealani Wailani Nihipali of Hilo High led the group on the tough exploration.

hikers ascended into the red, Mars-like landscape of the upper mountain. Mark Fowler, son of Jim Fowler of past "Wild Kingdom" fame, filmed

the ascent as a Wild Life Productions documentary.

"It was the first time this has been done in a long time, especially by a group of young peo-

ple," said Doug Arnott, owner of Arnott's Hiking Adventures. Arnott donated time to scout the route for the expedition

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and also sent 16-year-old Kahealani Wailani Nihipali to guide the group.

"It was very difficult, different terrain. It was hard on kids from Florida, where it's all flat," said Olson, the project leader. "I felt like I really accomplished something. We were looking down at the cloud line, to where we had started. The sun was setting. It was a really cool experience."

Expedition members unfurled their Explorer's Club flag on the summit. They did the same deep in the waters off Oahu. The flag will be unfurled again aboard the space shuttle Endeavour by astronaut Dom Gorie on his way to the space station in February. Only then will the mission be complete.

The Mauna Kea portion of the expedition had to be approved by multiple agencies whose jurisdictions it would cross, including the Department of Land and Natural Resources, the Department of Hawaiian Home Lands, the Office of Mauna Kea Management and private ranches.

The Hawaii Undersea Research Laboratory, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, NASA, the Explorer's Club and the U.S. Air Force also supported the venture.

Hiking 10 hours a day, battling altitude sickness and hot days and frigid nights, the kids had some of their own demons to face.

"Sometimes it was a struggle to get along. I think people were just getting tired," said Moran, 16, of Tampa.

Nihipali introduced the hikers to strawberry guava and local berries. It was also her first time along the entire trail to the summit. They had trouble breathing sometimes, especially towards the top. But they made, she said. And it was worth it.

"Mauna Kea is the most beautiful place on earth," Nihipali said.

Olson's dad, Dave Olson, a Navy SEAL reservist, was the chief mentor on the trip. He founded SCUBAnauts International in 2001. Today, it has about 60 members, all youths.

"It's about getting kids away from the computer and out where they can experience the world," Olson said.

The group originally intended to make a seamless trek up the mountain — from the ocean floor to the summit. The kids were scheduled to dive in a Pisces submersible to study hydrothermal vents deep in the ocean on the flanks of Mauna Kea, and the developing undersea island Loihi, then ascend to the summit on foot, where they would gaze deep into space from the mountain's observatories.

It was a cool idea — except a fuel problem with the research vessel carrying the submersibles caused the order of the diving and climbing to be reversed, and the kids ended up taking the hike first, then dove to see a World War II Japanese midget submarine off Oahu because they didn't have enough time to explore the waters off the Big Island.

Kids may not have set the record they wanted with a trip from the ocean floor to the top of Mauna Kea, but they are believed to be the youngest people ever to go down in Pisces submersibles. They also reached some personal goals.

"After this, everything is going to be a lot easier," said Moran. "After climbing a mountain, homework is no problem."

The group worked with the Office of Mauna Kea Management at the University of Hawaii at Hilo to avoid culturally sensitive areas. And while stories of strength and endurance often inspire similar feats, copy-cattin' this particular hike is discouraged. The mountain is extremely sensitive from a cultural standpoint, and blundering off into the mountain's unknown is not only frowned upon; it can be dangerous as well.

"If you do it improperly and people don't know you're up there, you can get in trouble," said Bill Stormont, director of OMKM. "And cell phone service up there isn't as great as some people think."

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