

## The day the donkey won

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It seemed like a good idea at the time. The mountain didn't really look that high.

It seemed manly to ride a horse up a mountain to visit a group of kids and talk about building a school. Visions of heroism danced in my head.

When I got to the bottom of the mountain to meet the Haitian pastor I'd made arrangements with, I saw our rented animals tied up near a mango tree. I realized that I didn't know anything about horses.

I did know enough to discern that these weren't horses. They were pack donkeys.

I inspected their teeth, because everyone knows that's how you judge a good horse, or donkey. I picked the donkey with the prettiest teeth. I wasn't totally sure how this was going to help me, but I was feeling pretty confident. I had a donkey-whisperer moment with my new friend, in which I established my dominance.

My tripmates came out and we mounted up. There was no saddle, just a woven grass saddlebag and an old smelly blanket. Parts of me were going to regret this trip.

The donkey had made the trip many times and would supposedly just follow the trail and the other donkeys. No one told my donkey. Before we even got onto the mountain he saw a herd of feral goats grazing, and he decided to abandon the restraints of his formal donkey training and leave the trail for greener pastures.

My cowboy instincts told me I had to let the beast know I was boss. It was at that moment I realized that the rope my guide had given me was not connected to one of those thingies that go in the donkey's mouth. It was simply tied around his head; it just came off one side. Now, I had ridden those little horse rides at the fair, and they always had a rope on each side of the animal's head so you could steer and stop. (I could still hear the dude at the fair with the leather pants and torn Zeppelin shirt explaining how to drive a horse.)

But what do you do if there is just one rope? I was tugging more than gently, but I could only turn left. My donkey went faster, headed straight toward a thorn bush—not a place to find blackberries in the spring, I mean huge thorns like they made Jesus' crown out of. He ran straight into the bush and started screeching. I started screaming. Our Haitian guides started dying laughing.

My arms had cuts from hands to elbows. My donkey's face was bleeding. Forget the kids and the school—it wasn't worth it. I didn't want to be a hero anymore. Do you know how badly sweat burns when it runs into thorn gashes?

My guide convinced me we could still make it and that neither I nor the donkey was going to bleed to death, so we got back on the trail. I had been doing it for the kids, but now it was mainly to teach that donkey a lesson.

Things only got worse. After my donkey got back into line a woman came and loaded his saddlebags down with pots and rice and anything else she could cram in there. She said something in Creole and smiled. I shook my head and wiped the blood off my elbow.

As we started moving, my donkey just looked down and walked. Since he was not watching where he was going, he would get too close to the woman in front of us. Each time she stopped, my donkey would run into her and she would turn around and pop him in the head with a switch. Then he would stop, and the woman behind us would whip him on the back. For three hours it was like a bad Carol Burnett episode.

Then finally, with my total understanding and condolences, my donkey quit. Halfway up the mountain he got tired of the crazy American and the two-end beating he was getting, and he would not move. I had no choice but to dismount and walk.

Walking would have been easier if I had not just spent three hours on a skinny donkey without a saddle. I did the John Wayne chafed walk all the way up the mountain, arriving right before darkness fell. With the help of some baby powder I was able to visit the kids.

The school was a shack made from mud and rocks with a dirt floor and a palm-branch roof. Small trees were split to make little benches. A green painted board served as a chalkboard. Sticks of chalk were long gone; students dipped their fingers in the chalk dust that remained.

The half-clothed children stood as we entered. In their proudest voices they sang a traditional Creole welcome chorus. They thanked us for coming and said they had a gift for us. The smallest of the group, a big-eyed girl of about four, proudly brought a bag to where we were sitting. The teacher came over and ceremoniously took out a bundle of small bananas and four green coconuts.

Then a young boy came in with a large, rusty machete. He masterfully created a small hole in the end of each coconut. As we were each given a coconut to drink and a banana to eat, my donkey woes and self-pity melted away. I was glad I made the trip. I did not feel heroic in the least.

The next morning, I walked down the mountain, holding the lead rope of my donkey friend. He had won.