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Local men plan volcanic lake dive

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A Tucson team of adventurers plans to leave soon for Mexico and hopes to scale a snow-capped, 18,700-foot volcanic mountain and send a couple of its members on a record plunge into a lake.

The group of local divers and climbers said it has chosen Orizaba, the third-highest peak in North America, as its target and plans on launching its expedition by Sunday or next Monday.

Climbing the mountain will be no easy task. But simply reaching its top, officially 18,701 feet above sea level, is just a secondary goal.

Known in Aztec times by the name of Citlaltepetl, the mountain was first scaled in 1848. It last erupted in 1687.

What the young Tucsonians, all in their 20s, are really shooting for is the high altitude dive, which they believe would set a world record.

"Not even the Navy has ever dived that high up," said expedition business manager Lucian Spataro, 23.

Tucsonian Lane Larson, 26, who has been experimenting with high altitude diving, as has Spataro, will lead the effort. He will be joined by other Tucsonians, Scott Davis, 22, Doug Powell, 20, and parttime local resident and freelance writer Mike Stoklos, 29. Another Tucsonian may also join the climb, members said.

Besides the normal camping and climbing gear, the group will have to lug a variety of diving equipment and special respirators up the mountain. Members have trained for months by running with full packs on in the Santa Catalina Mountains, they said.

A base camp will have to be set up at about 13,000 feet, and at 14,000 feet and up, team members anticipate needing oxygen masks and sulphur-protective respirators.

Orizaba, Southeast of Mexico City and west of Veracruz, is one of a string of volcanic peaks along the Plateau of Mexico. Spataro said it is "semi-active and belching sulphur," thus the need for special respirators.

Group members are willing to endure that problem because it is a side effect to the volcanic heat that keeps the lake from freezing over despite its altitude. Most lakes so high above sea level probably never will be explored by divers because they are frozen year-round, team members pointed out.

Only three people are expected to make the dive and they will spend no more than four or five hours at the crest because of breathing problems. Members don't know what they will find at the lake — it could be five feet deep or hundreds of feet deep, they said. They will need a variety of diving gear because they will need to improvise at the scene.

Members said they hope to find out about the effects on divers of entering water at such an altitude. Diving is tricky at high altitude because the effects of nitrogen on divers' bodies at various high points is not what it is at sea level, Spataro said. The Navy's diving tables to help divers avoid the bends are based on dives at sea level, and the team hopes to "adjust" those tables for high altitude.