PHOTO: SUPPLIED

Mt Cameroon, the team's destination.

ABOVE: Looking forward to the climbing adventure are Tristan Jones (19) and Michael Wessels (22) with burn survivors Puseletso Maduna (17) and Mlungisi Khoza (14).

PHOTOS: THARUNA DEVCHAND

Msunduzi Firefighter Vusi Shabalala is to go with Children of Fire up Mt Cameroon.

Burn survivors set out to conquer Mount Cameroon

THARUNA DEVCHAND

EXCITED about the activity week ahead, burn survivors Mlungisi Khoza (14) and Puseletso Maduna (17) from Durban and Pietermaritzburg respectively, are travelling to Johannesburg to prepare for a climbing expedition to Mt Cameroon.

The expedition, organised by Children of Fire, will include teenage burn survivors from South Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Norway, Taiwan, Tunisia and Cameroon.

Mlungisi sustained serious burns on his legs after a braai stand fell on him on New Year's Eve 2008. This did not deter him from climbing the Drakensberg in 2009 and he is excited about the Mount Cameroon climb. Being the positive and high-spirited boy that he is, Mlungisi said, "I can handle [Mt Cameroon]. I get tired, but that's okay."

Puseletso was 13 years old when she accidentally spilt hot paraffin on herself, causing severe burns to her neck, chest and right hand. She was in hospital for many months and underwent intensive treatment. Much shyer than Mlungisi, Puseletso is also excited, and said of her hike up the Drakensberg mountains that she learnt how to be patient, how to interact with other people and how to help others.

These brave teenagers hope to show the world that, despite the hardships they have encountered, there is no obstacle too high or too difficult for them to overcome.

Tristan Jones, who is a member of the team joining the children for the Mt Cameroon climb, said, "Most of the kids come from bad situations; some are abused or have families that neglect them. Many of them also don't go to school because they get teased a lot about how they look. This climb is a big confidence boost for them; they can go back to school and brag about what they have done. And more importantly, they can achieve some self-fulfilment by knowing that they were capable of doing something as big as climbing one of Africa's largest mountains."

Jones climbed Mount Kilimanjaro with Children of Fire in 2007. He was the youngest volunteer firefighter in South Africa and was also the youngest-ever intern at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in 2007. He is now a qualified basic ambulance assistant.

Also on board for the strenuous climb are Michael Wessels, who runs the Children of Fire NGO, and Msunduzi firefighter Vusi Shabalala, who had also joined them for the Drakensberg outreach in June/July 2008.

The fun-filled activity week will include aerobic training, running and hiking, as well as some adrenalin-rush activities such as bungee jumping.

To find out more or to become involved in the Mt Cameroon trip, such as helping with funds, contact Children of Fire at 011 726 6529 or e-mail firechildren@icon.co.za

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