

CLIMBING KILIMANJARO

A PICTORIAL

Mount Whitney in California is the highest peak in the contiguous United States at 14,505 feet above sea level. Mount Kilimanjaro is the highest mountain in Africa at 19,341 feet. This is almost a mile higher in elevation!

Kilimanjaro is located in east Africa in the country of Tanzania, just south of Kenyan border. It is a massive massif, 36 miles long by 48 miles wide that rises majestically from the plains of Tanzania. It stands alone, the largest freestanding mountain in the world.

Kilimanjaro is so massive that to climb it is to pass through five distinct climatic zones. The rainforests of the lower reaches gives way to the heath, which consists of tall grasses, wispy trees, and large shrubs. Next come the windswept moorland which is mostly rocks and small grasses. On the upper slopes is the alpine desert. The arctic wastes of the summit are lifeless and contain remnants of once large glaciers.

Over 30,000 trekkers attempt to climb Kilimanjaro each year. It's not a difficult mountain to climb; you can literally hike to the top. No technical climbing skills are required. However not everyone makes it to the summit. While being fit

certainly helps, what it really matters is how well your body adjusts to the altitude.

I climbed Kilimanjaro in September of 2014 with two other local hikers. It took 5 ½ days to reach the summit. We hiked very slowly, or as the natives like to say in their native tongue, “Pole, Pole.” We lingered several days at the 12,000 – 14,000 foot elevation, working our way around the mountain. This allowed our bodies to “acclimate” to the lower oxygen pressure at high elevations.

Acute altitude sickness initially causes lack of appetite, nausea and vomiting. Headache, dizziness, drowsiness, shortness of breath, nose bleed, and flatulence can also occur. Chronic altitude sickness can include pulmonary edema (signs are persistent cough and shortness of breath, even at rest) and cerebral edema (stabbing headache which is unresponsive to medication, unsteady gait, and even unconsciousness). These symptoms indicate a life threatening condition.

We took Diamox as a preventative for altitude sickness. A mild diuretic, it works by acidifying the blood. This change in pH stimulates the respiratory center to increase depth and frequency of respiration, thus speeding the natural acclimation process. Other preventative measures included staying well hydrated (we drank a minimum of 3 liters of water/day), eating even if we didn’t feel hungry, plenty of rest, and not hiking to exhaustion. I was fortunate...I didn’t get altitude sickness.



Figs 1 and 2 Everyone who hikes Kilimanjaro must make a reservation through a tour company. We used a local company called Ahsante...which means "thank you" in Swahili. This is a staging area at the base of the mountain. I had no idea that so many people would be starting their hike on the same day as us. There were about 250 paid trekkers. "Machame" was the name of the route we took. The elevation at the "Gate", where the trail began, was 5900 feet.



Fig 3 and 4 There were only three in our group; Coleman, Ed, and myself. Ten locals accompanied us. Six porters carried most of the gear and set up camp, two cooks prepared and served the food, and two guides set the pace and monitored our progress.



Fig 5 and 6 The trail commenced in a cloud forest. We carried day packs which weighed about 10 pounds. The jungle was mostly empty but we did hear lots of strange bird calls. We did see a Black and White Colobus monkey in the canopy.



Fig 7 and 8 Each day we hiked to the next designated campsite. The first one was called Machame camp. Elevation was 9280 feet. We had two tents for the three of us. A third tent served as our dining room...it was cramped. Three meals a day were served. Items included broth soup, eggs, bread, fruit, chicken, potatoes, rice, and pasta. We drank lots of tea.



Fig 9 and 10 Day 2 We are now in the zone known as the Heath, climbing steadily uphill. It was another day of fog and drizzle. Notice the porter carrying the heavy basket of supplies on his head.



Figs 11 and 12 Day 2 The fog lifted overnight and we had a gorgeous view of the base of the mountain. This was Shira Camp, elevation 12,500 feet. Noisy, scavenging White-necked Ravens were a constant presence in camp. No food could be left unattended.



Figs 13 and 14 Day 3 We were now in the third climatic zone known as the Moorland; lots of big rocks and little vegetation. The temperature was cold...40 degrees and very windy.



Figs 15 and 16 Day 3 We left camp each day by 8:30 AM. Then the porters broke camp, packed everything up, and rushed past us. Their goal was to get to the next campsite and have the tents set up and food preparation underway before we got there. There were hundreds of porters...it reminded me of the movie "Exodus". The weather worsened by late morning of the third day and it started snowing. Tents were set up for lunch because it was so cold and windy.



Figs 17 and 18 Day 3 We are standing next to a rock formation known as the "Lava Tower". Benson and John were our two guides. They were in their mid-twenties and spoke broken English. They had been to the summit countless times. They loved their umbrellas. One always walked in front of us, the other in the rear. They kept a slow, steady pace. The most unique plant in the moorland region of Kilimanjaro is the Giant Groundsel Tree. They looked like a cross between a palm and a cactus; some grew to over 16 feet.



Figs 19 and 20 Day 3 On the evening of the third day, the fog lifted just long enough for us to see the mountain's flattened top for the

first time. We were now at Barranco Camp, elevation 13,000, where about 100 tents were erected. The tall tents house portable, sit-down toilets. They were reserved for the "expensive" tours. We used the latrines in the permanent structure.



Fig 21 and 22 Day 3 The toilets were just holes in the ground. You squatted on the pedestals and hoped your aim was good! Hot water was supplied in bowels twice a day for hand washing. No showers!



Figs 23 and 24 Day 4 began with the ascent of the Barranco Wall, a 700 foot lava cliff. The trail zigzagged almost straight up. It was a little scary.



Figs 25 and 26 Day 4 Once we reached the top of the cliff, we were out of the fog for good. Looking down, we could see the colorful tents in Barranco Camp. Looking up, we could see the imposing summit of Kilimanjaro, the summit still a mile above us.



Figs 27 and 28 Day 4 We were now in the fourth zone, known as the Arctic Desert. Karanga Camp, elevation 13,200 feet, was our destination for this evening. The moon was full and the mountain top was beautiful at sunset.



Figs 29 and 30 On day 5 we continued our slow, gradual uphill climb, moving more laterally than vertically. The air was cold and the landscape bleak. Far in the distance the top of Mt Meru can be seen, the second highest mountain in Tanzania.



Fig 31 and 32 Day 5 Our final base camp was called Barafu Camp, elevation 15,300 feet. It was situated on a desolate rocky shelf. The final push to the summit consisted of four miles of uphill hiking, gaining 4000 feet in elevation. We went to bed early and our guides woke us up at 11 PM. We left around midnight with the hope of getting to the crater's rim seven hours later to see the sun rise over the "Roof of Africa". It was a night hike under a full moon. It was 20 degrees when we started off, near zero at the top. It was an

extremely difficult climb: I was exhausted, cold, and laboring to breath. But I made it! I saw a number of people couldn't do this final assault on the summit.



Figs 33 and 34 Day 6 My first picture from the rim. The peak in the distance is 17,000 feet high. The crater at the top was huge. Hundreds of years ago it was completely snow-covered with glaciers. Now it's 80% barren with only a few sections of glacier left.



Figs 35 Day 6

We had to walk around the rim for 1/2 mile to reach the actual summit. The chunk of glacier in the distance is 50 feet high.



Fig 36 Day 6

Finally...the reason I went...to have my picture taken by the sign at the top! Elevation 19,341 feet. This was the best day of 2014!



Fig 37 and 38 Days 6 and 7 Millennium Camp...on the way down. It only took 1 1/2 days to descent from the summit to the bottom of the mountain. Our Tanzanian companions sang us a celebration song. One of the traditions at this camp was for the trekkers to donate as much clothing and gear as they'd like, to the porters and guides. The next day I received my official certificate that I had climbed Kilimanjaro and reached Uhuru peak, the highest point.



