

I would like to start by personally thanking you for your donation! Your kindness is greatly appreciated and will help the charity enormously.

I would like to give you an overview of my experience whilst climbing Kilimanjaro, my preference would have been to do this face to face but unfortunately due to personal circumstance and time constraints I am unable to do that, for this, I sincerely apologise.

Well... Where to start? I will never be able to 100% explain this trip to anyone as there is so much involved and not enough words but I guess reality truly set in just before we landed at Kilimanjaro airport, the Pilot kindly announced that if we looked to the left we would see the summit of Mt Kilimanjaro, so of course, eager to see, we looked across. There she was in all her glory, rising above the clouds... and that's when it hit me... I was going to be stood right there on top in around a weeks' time!!

Fast forward a day and we met our Head Guide Yesse, and a couple of our assistant guides who explained to us how it was going to work, when and where our first meeting points would be and helped us organise our kit. My group had 8 people in it including myself, and what a fantastic group of people they were. There were also 32 people within our team consisting of Guides, Porters and other workers who worked immensely hard to make sure we had everything we needed, from the most basic areas of toileting, to setting up the tents ready for us, providing medical care and nutritious food.

One of the things I was looking forward to most was meeting new people and finding out their stories, their reasons for doing the climb and what led them there. We spent the next 7 days finding all this out about each other and have continued to stay in contact since.

We were trekking the 'Long way round' route, we started at 2300m elevation and we walked to Mt Mkuba [big tree] campsite which is 2650m elevation. We went via the Lemosho Gate which took us through the rainforest where we saw lots of monkeys and began our ascent. Whilst walking the route you're passed by many porters who are supporting different groups, every single one of them is carrying some form of equipment or multiple amounts on their heads and back, and they all have a smile on their face! These porters are both men and women. The terrain is mostly dirt track with some loose stones from foot traffic, but it's mostly even so this helped a lot. There's lots of steps though and we climbed up high then dropped down low multiple times until we reached our destination for the night. This took us three hours and was a nice introduction. Once we arrived at our camp the chef had made us up tilapia with a vegetable sauce, roast potatoes and pancakes for pudding which we ate in our dining tent – the designated waiter sets this out every night complete with a table cloth and flasks of hot drinks then serves you up, usually with a flavoured soup for a starter... we never expected food like this, and little did we know this was the beginning of a beautiful friendship with both our chef and waiter. Chef would go on to create some incredible food for the rest of the trip, even baking a birthday cake for one of the guys, how he managed this I'll never know!

After dinner each night the guides come and brief you about what's going to happen the following day, they do a medical check including your oxygen levels, pulse and symptom checks, after all of this they sing us a traditional Swahili lullaby and then we're free to go to

bed. It's dark around 7pm and we're getting woken up at 6am. Spirits remained high throughout the trip and I was constantly feeling so grateful for being there.

I don't think any of us realised how cold it was going to be on a night, it was freezing!

We walked to Shira Camp 1 which was 6 hours of walking and it was mostly steep inclines, and walking over boulders. We walked through the rainforest at the beginning then most of the terrain changed to dry bushland, but there was still spots of beautiful flowers. There were days we were very tired as most of us didn't sleep well. There were many laughs along the way today, and everybody within the group supports each other and is very encouraging. Lunch and tea were always big meals, sometimes too big! As the days went on we were sleeping in more layers as it can freeze overnight.

We had the most amazing views along the way, when it got dark, we could see the outline of the summit as the cloud had cleared. All the stars were out and the moon was so bright it was absolutely incredible!! Unfortunately, no cameras could take good enough photos of this so it will just have to remain a perfect memory.

Shira 2 Camp was the next big destination, to get there we did six hours of walking another boulder filled, steep incline. At some points we would finish meals then climb up for another hour to acclimatise, we'd take in the views and look in awe at the Mountains around us. Then we'd head back down to camp just in time for the most incredible sunsets. Morale remained high even when it was hard going. Our group shared songs as we walked and shared stories within the dining tent.

Some nights you were sleeping in three top layers including a summit jacket the size of a skiing jacket, two pairs of bottoms, two pairs of socks, a woolly hat and ski gloves, and we began to wonder what summit night would be like!

We stopped at Lava tower for lunch on the following day, five hours after we began, elevation is 4600M at this point which is equal to what base camp would be!! We stayed here for one hour to acclimatise before descending to Baranco Camp which took another three hours. You're constantly looking at your feet as, it's all shale and big rocks so a high risk of slips and falls. Climbing the Baranco Wall was an experience, it's a 1000m vertical climb and at times you're literally clinging onto the rocks with a large drop beneath you if you slip.

Summit day came and we started by walking 4hrs from Karanga Camp to Barafu Camp which is Base Camp in the early morning. At every camp you sign in at a checkpoint so they can keep track of how far you reach. When we got there we had 2 hrs to sort everything out before lunch then had some time to rest and prepare until tea. After tea we had a pre summit briefing and then at 10pm that evening you completed final preparations. When 11pm came we were given a porter each to support us plus our Head Guide to lead and we set off to summit.. This was the most physically, mentally and emotionally tasking thing I have ever done but it taught me so much about myself! You walk slowly, lead by the head guide, if you look behind you there are trails of head torches from your own group and others, and in the distance you can see the lights of Moshi town. Its pitch black and at times

you become easily disorientated. You can't deviate from the path though as you can't really see your footing and the terrain is markedly changing as you ascend, it's a mixture of large rock faces with no grip and slippery loose stones in a heavy dusty surrounding. As you ascend you break regularly for rehydration... until your water freezes that is! When you finally reach Stella point you have breath-taking views and a stunning sunrise to greet you. This is mostly where the celebrations start, it begins to level out and there's only 45 minutes' walk from here to the summit, it doesn't feel it though, after the tough climb up, this level area in addition to the adrenaline and complete overwhelming feeling of the fact you've nearly done it, time begins to pass fairly quickly. As you proceed to the end summit sign you pass gigantic glaciers which are something to admire in their own right. Then after 7 hrs of climbing in the dark and emerging in the new day ... There it is - the summit Sign! You've done it!! You have a slight feeling of disbelief still within you at the fact that the past 7 days have been building up to this very moment and its now here. After celebrations, songs and pictures you quickly descend and 4 hrs later you return to Base camp, have 1 hr to rest, 1 hr to eat and pack then you're off again. Still revelling in the glory of what you've just achieved which at this point feels so surreal and knowing the reality of what you still have to complete, you begin to make your way down to the next camp which is the final camp. This was another 5 hrs of a rocky decent, at this point you haven't slept in nearly 36 hrs, you've walked for 19 out of 24 hrs and you are so tired but still so elated. It's a quick meal and bed by the time you've completed this. Ready to complete the final 4 hrs in the morning and get back to the beginning to be picked up and taken back to the Hotel.

At the end the porters and guides sing and dance in celebration and award you with a traditional necklace. Then back at the hotel you are presented with a certificate to show you have summited and what time you are recorded as.

Overall, it was the most incredible trip! It was certainly tough in places, and I learnt a lot about myself and my abilities, but I also couldn't have done it without the support of the Porters and Guides and the morale from the rest of the group. The Porters/Guides complete this trip multiple times throughout each month a sometimes have to go up again the day after they get down. They are incredible and their knowledge is endless when it comes to the mountain, its surroundings and even the nature that lives on it. Many of them have young families and they spend copious amounts of time up on there with people like myself, to make us have the best experience we can, whilst working so hard in a physically demanding job to provide the best they can for their families. Our tips are the bulk of their wages and my goodness did they earn it!!

I hope this gave you a good insight into the trip and once again, thankyou very much!

Aimie Edwards

