

KILIMANJARO, hakuna matata

The mountains have always beckoned the adventurous since antiquity. While aiming for the summit, I was there to prove to myself that 'I can'. Kilimanjaro has always fascinated me since this has the proud distinction of being the world's highest free standing mountain. This majestic dormant volcano is the tallest mountain in the African continent and is 5895m/19.340 ft tall. It has been popularly called the 'Common Man's Everest.' In Swahili, 'Kilima' means mountain and 'Njaro' means greatness. The best time for the trek is June to October or from January to February since these are the dry months. There are three volcanic cones - Kibo, Mawenzi and Shira . Uhuru peak at 5895 m is the highest point of Kibo crater rim. The different routes to ascend the summit include Umbwe, Shira, Lemosho, Rongai, Machame, Marangu and Arrow Glacier. We chose the Rongai route. The average duration of the trek is 5-7 days. Hans Meyer and Ludwig Purtscheller were the first to climb the summit in 1889 after multiple failed attempts. Time maybe running out for the Kilimanjaro climb since the ice-fields at the summit are melting and retreating. The ice glacier may disappear by 2040.

Climbing the summit involved intensive physical and mental training in the past one year. Yellow fever vaccine had to be administered from an authorised centre. Family support and collecting the appropriate gear for the climb played a vital role. Age was no limitation, the mindset had to be right. I know the hardship of ascending to temperatures of -20°C at the top since I had experienced the same during the Chaddar trek the previous year. Acclimatisation, stamina, ability to carry a back pack till the top, light weight woollens and determination were essential to make this a success story. Good quality trekking-poles, down jacket, thermal socks and underwear, balaclava , UV sunglasses, ear plugs, nasal decongestant, wet wipes, energy bars , sunscreen and lip balm were all part of my gear. Hiking boots had to be broken in before the start of the trek. More importantly, the Weather Gods had to be benevolent since many a traveller had been deterred by blizzards in the past.

I arrived at Moshi, a lazy town around 30kms from Kilimanjaro airport in the middle of July. The evening was spent fruitfully in getting introduced to my fellow climbers from India, Singapore and USA . The trek leaders who were all native Tanzanians familiarised us with the route and the ground-rules of the climb. Since the main rucksack was to be carried by the local porters, it was important to restrict the weight to the bags to the permissible limit of 15 kg. So the bags needed to be repacked in such a way that the non-essential items were left at the hotel. During the steep



ascent, every extra gram of weight drags you backwards, slows you down and causes breathing difficulty.

Our trek began through the Rongai Gate of Kilimanjaro National Park. It had myriad hues of the flora but we could not manage to spot any wildlife as we walked through the forest. The target for the trek on day 1 was Simba camp located at a height of 2671m. It was important to set the right pace from the beginning. If you are over-enthusiastic and walk too fast, high altitude mountain sickness is sure to hit you as you ascend higher. The local guides walked in front and kept reminding us to maintain a leisurely pace. When we heard the words 'poley-poley' in Swahili being uttered every few minutes, it was just to tell us to walk slow. We arrived at our first base camp around evening and pitched our tents. After an early dinner, our oxygen levels were measured with a pulse oximeter and this ritual was to continue twice daily on each day of the trek. It was a safety measure to detect AMS early since 75% trekkers in any trek to Kilimanjaro experience mild to severe high altitude symptoms of headache, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, anorexia and severe breathing difficulty. It became a sort of a competition

between us as the person with the best saturation levels would win some home made sweets/pinnis which we had managed to smuggle in my rucksack. It was important to consult 3-4 litres of water per day. Tent



'5' was cosy and as comfortable as can be with a sleeping bag and the basic necessities provided. It served as my home for the next six days wherever it was pitched. I was skeptical whether i would manage to catch some sleep in a tent or not but finally exhaustion and sleep took over.

Day 2 of the trek was a climb to the Kikelewa cave camp situated at 3600m. It took us almost 8 hours to gain an altitude of a 1000m from our previous camp. Initially we climbed towards Kibo on a steady ascent to the second cave (3450m) where we stopped for a mid-way lunch . Thereafter, we turned eastwards away from Kibo towards the jagged peaks of Mawenzi. Sleep came easily that night as it was a long and tiring day



We woke up the next day to the beautiful sight of Mt Kilimanjaro at a distance and a valley of clouds below our campsite . We began our trek to our next campsite - Mawenzi Tarn camp (4300m) . 'Tarn' is a Scottish word for mountain lake and the campsite was located next to the lake. During our ascent, we saw alpine grasses and shrubs replacing the moorland scrub we had seen in the earlier days of our trek . The location of the campsite was picturesque with Tarn lake on one side and rocky hills of Mawenzi on the other side

This was supposed to be our home for the next 2 days, to help us to acclimatise at high altitude. We woke up late and prepared for a practise climb on the slopes of Mawenzi till around 4600m altitude . This was done in the same formation and on scree and dust similar to what we would encounter during our summit night. Falls and rock slides can be a disaster and this trial climb boosted our confidence tremendously.



On the final day, we began our slow and steady walk across the lunar landscape of the vast “saddle” between the spires of Mawenzi and dome of Kibo. We reached our Kibo huts campsite (4750m) situated right at the foot of the Kibo crater wall by late afternoon. Of all the places, this was where I got hit by a mild attack of gastroenteritis . I took some medication from my emergency medical kit and started hydrating myself. Fortunately, it worked out fine.



The moment of reckoning arrived. After an early dinner and a hot cup of tea, we started our summit climb at 11.30 pm. We were wearing multiple layers of clothing to beat the icy cold winds. With our headlamps on, we slowly began our demanding ascent on loose scree and dust-laden trail. For me, it was willpower and sheer determination to succeed which carried me on for the first few hours as I was feeling dizzy and weak because of stomach cramps and pain in my calf muscles.



“Your body can stand almost anything . It’s your mind that you have to convince”

This has been my motto in life and goaded me on. We walked slowly with brief halts to rest or drink water. On the way, we came across trekkers who were sick and some even going back midway as the climb become tougher and tougher. Fortunately for us, the July full moon and lunar eclipse fell on that day and our path was quite well lit. The first few rays of sunlight came around 5.30 am and was the most amazing sight. Finally, we reached the crater rim at Gilman’s point (5685m) at around 8.30 am. After taking a few pictures. we continued our climb to the summit- ‘Uhuru’ peak . After crossing Stella point(5756m), we stopped briefly to put on our crampons as the rest of the climb was through thick snow .

The last part of the climb to Uhuru peak passed through spectacular glaciers and ice cliffs .We finally reached the summit - Uhuru peak (5895m) at around 10am . We stopped at the summit for just 20-25 minutes, letting the feeling sink in, congratulating each other and taking pictures.



We began our descent at around 10.30 am . This was the time when some of our members were hit by mild symptoms of AMS. The descent was fast and slippery because of scree and we were literally skating down on our feet. To our delight, it started snowing and we could enjoy the beautiful snowflakes falling down as if the Heaven Gods were congratulating us. We finally reached our Kibo campsite by 3pm after the unending overnight trek. After a few handshakes and hugs with our local guides and porters, we had a quick lunch and started our descent to base camp - Horombo (3720 m) . It took us another 4hrs to reach there around 8.30 pm. We had trekked continuously for almost 22 hrs on this part of our adventure.

If I was to summarise the summit night, the feelings and gamut of emotions cannot be adequately described. There were questions about my own capabilities plaguing my mind as I tossed and turned in my sleeping bag. The headlamp and the gear reminded me where my ultimate destination was. The sound of the boots and the crampons on the dazzling snow pushed me to the limits of my stamina. The shimmering rays of the morning Sun promised me success in my endeavour. The Summit was calling me to carry on and not give up.

On the final morning, we began our long descent to Marangu gate . Moorland vegetation gave way to lush temperate forest and by late afternoon we reached National park gate at Marangu. After lunch, we are treated to some amazing music and dance by our local guides and porters. We joined them in singing Hakuna Matata which literally means 'no worries'.

Jambo, jambo Bwana (Hello, hello Sir)

Habari gani (How are you?)

Mzuri sana (Very fine)

Wageni, mwakaribishwa (Foreigners, you're welcome)

Kilimanjaro, hakuna matata (Kilimanjaro, there is no problem)

Tembea pole pole, hakuna matata (Walk slowly, slowly, no problem)

Utafika salama, hakuna matata (You'll get there safe, no problem)

Kunywa maji mengi, hakuna matata (Drink plenty of water, no problem)

We departed for our hotel by bus. After a much needed shower, we got together over dinner for more celebrations and were awarded our ascent certificates. Our Kilimanjaro adventure had come to an end with most of our group members flying back home next day . The climb may have ended but we had discovered our new physical and mental strengths. This trek was indeed memorable.

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