

On Friday 8th February 2008, I was one of twelve intrepid climbers who left Heathrow heading for Nairobi. From here we went to the smallest airport ever made to catch the smallest plane ever made to Kilimanjaro International Airport. As they weighed all of our luggage we looked out onto the tarmac trying to determine which rusting plane was ours. We had too many bags and despite our best negotiations we had to leave some behind to be flown out the next day. And I'm glad we did leave them behind.

As we barrelled down the runway we could see how much distance we had left to take off out of the front window, as well as being able to watch the pilots. The pilots used all their combined strength to make sure the throttle was fully open and not a second too soon we finally lifted off the runway. Thinking the worst of it was over we tried to relax in our cramped seats. However then the plane started to dip, swerve and bounce in the turbulent air feeling as though at any moment we could drop out of the sky. It's not that I am being over dramatic, this was one ropey flight!

After a 2 hour bus journey, where overtaking on blind corners and when a car is coming the other way is a matter of course, we arrived at Kibo Hotel which nestles in the forest at the foot of the mountain.

Day One

Our climb started on Monday the 11th February. Three Landrovers were loaded with our bags and we set off down the bumpy and dusty roads. Five minutes later, one of the cars had a puncture. We were starting to learn that every journey that you make in Africa is an epic voyage. By the time we arrived at the start point of the Rongai route, we were completely covered in a very fine dust, which two weeks later I am still finding on my clothes.

We met our head guide Happyson (Hap-son), Jonas, Henry and Heaven, our other guides. We set on our way at a slow and comfortable pace walking through small farms. Children were scattered along the way asking for food and money, and one "mugged" a member of our group for his biscuit.

We walked for about four hours through dense forest before making camp in heath land that is over head height. From here we could not see the summit, so the scale of our undertaking was still a mystery.

The food we were served with was amazing. To start we had tea and popcorn, then vegetable soup, then roast potatoes, chicken stew and spinach, and we had a pudding too! All cooked in a camp kitchen, not forgetting that everything had been carried up the mountain – the gas bottles, cooking equipment and food. These guys are amazing. After eating we went straight to bed ready for a long day.

Day 2

The guides woke us up with a cup of tea! After breakfast we set off at a tortoise pace, meanwhile porters were flying past us carrying 25-30kg on their heads. Still walking through scrub that is about 8 feet tall, we rounded a corner to get our first view of Kilimanjaro. The peak was shrouded in cloud. For the first time we got a feeling for what lay ahead of us. We walked for five hours before we stopped for lunch,

meanwhile the porters had set up tables, chairs, a toilet and the kitchen. Within 20 minutes of resting in the warm sunshine they were serving us again with top notch food. We ate at about 3100m up with views of the vast plains of Kenya.



After lunch we walked for a further 4 hours before our camp came into view. Some of our group were using the fact that passing wind is a sign of acclimatising to the altitude to proudly let rip, whilst others would silently release their toxic brew. For most of these 4 hours we had been walking through an area that had recently been set on fire by a single cigarette butt dropped carelessly. Huge swathes of the mountain had been burnt, and only the grasses had started to grow again.

Again we had a 4 course meal for dinner at 3,600m (11,500ft).

Day 3

We had a later start because it was going to be a shorter day; however it was steep all the way. Four hours of walking brought us to our campsite. By this stage most of the group was starting to feel some of the effects of the altitude. Headaches, dizziness and feeling generally hung over. The campsite had cliffs around two sides and steep slopes downwards on the other sides, and in one corner a small lake. Above was Mawenzi, the smaller sister of the main peak called Kibo. It had just been dusted with a fresh covering of snow.



We went on an acclimatization walk up one of the steep escarpments. The clouds cleared for long enough to get some fantastic views of the summit.



That night I went to bed in my thermal sleeping bag with a thumping headache, wearing 3 fleeces, a thermal and a woolly hat.

Day 4

Our target for day 4 was Kibo Hut. A permanent hut which is the place where most people launch their summit assaults from. For all of the 6 hours we walked we could see our target that never seemed to get any closer across the barren and featureless landscape. The air is getting thin up here, an example is that if you roll over in your sleeping bag you have to catch your breath afterwards.

We arrived in the middle of a snow storm tired and hungry. From here on in we were preparing for our attack on the summit. We had lunch at 3.30pm and then went to bed for 2 hours. Dinner was at 6.30pm which was followed by our briefing for the next day. We were back in bed about 8 o'clock desperately trying to get some sleep. All I could think about was the next day and hearing people getting out of bed to be sick was doing nothing to make me feel better. We got up again at 11.30pm to make final preparations.

Day 5

At midnight we started walking with a fantastic light show going on. To the left and right were dark storm clouds that every 5 seconds lit up the sky with a flash of lightning. Ahead was a trail of snaking headlamps that went steeply upwards and merged with the stars. Above was a perfect canopy of bright twinkling stars and the stripe of the milky way. Behind were more headlamps snaking down to Kibo Hut.

For hours we walked in silence only looking at the heels of the person in front. Altitude slows you down, at this height each step you take your heel is level with your toes of the other foot. Snaking our way slowly, very slowly up the mountain. At times the darkness swallows you and all that matters is taking one more step. Some of our group were really starting to struggle, being sick and having to rest every 10 steps. Finally the sun started to peep through the clouds, and within minutes we were bathed in warm light. This lifted everyone's spirits and we could see how far we had come in the darkness and even better, we could see the top.

Hearts pounding and breathing fast we arrived at Gilman's Point. This is on the crater rim at the top of the mountain but it is not the highest point. All 12 of us made it here which is no mean feat considering the official success rate is about 60%. Our entire group aged 17-56 had made it. Up here there is about 30% of the oxygen that there is at sea level and you feel it. Walking a few steps feels like you have just been sprinting.

From Gilman's it is another 2 hours around the crater to Uhuru Peak, the highest point in Africa. Five of us set off walking on snow; we had vertical drops at times on both sides, down into the crater, and back down the mountain. We trudged on intent on reaching the summit. Each time we reached the top of a small incline we were expecting to find it, but many times we were disappointed. Finally it came into view. The famous sign sitting proud on top of a fantastic mountain. We had done it. The five youngest members of the group aged 17, 18 and three 19 year olds.

As we turned to head back down we saw four people coming up towards us. Three more people from our group and a guide! So eight of the twelve had made it to Uhuru. A fantastic achievement and a testament to our guides and support team of porters. We continued down proud of our achievement but in the back of our minds the knowledge of how far we still had to go.



We scree ran back down the mountain towards Kibo for well over an hour. After the slow walking this was a welcome change. Twelve hours after leaving Kibo camp, we were back for a bite to eat and a quick nap. From here we still had 10km to walk down the mountain to our camp for the night. Physically exhausted we pushed ourselves on willing the camp to appear out of the cloud. For another three and a half hours we walked before we even caught sight of it. Collapsing into our tents we fell asleep within seconds of getting the wet clothes off.

Day 6

On the final morning it is traditional to tip the porters and guides and for them to sing the Kilimanjaro song to the climbers. A porter will earn a wage of about £2.50 a day for all his hard work so the tips make up a large proportion of their earnings.

We came down a different route to the way we went up. We passed hopeful climbers who were on their way up offering words of encouragement whilst trying to look like it had been enjoyable! For over six hours we walked back down the mountain to Marangu gate. It couldn't come soon enough as we were all exhausted, ready for a cold beer and a warm shower.

This has been the single hardest thing I have ever done and also one of the things that I am the most proud of.



Would I do it again?

After visiting the day care centre in western Kenya and seeing the amazing work that is being done by the charity I would do it all again in an instant. The memories of the pain and the hard times fade by the day. But the legacy of what we have achieved will hopefully live on for generations. As a group we raised over £16,000 from the climb – more than half of the £30,000 target towards the new day care centre. Once again, thank you so much to everybody who helped me achieve this dream, and you can be assured that your money will be put to good use.

Pain is temporary. Pride is forever.



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