



TANZANIA

THE CALL OF *Kilimanjaro*

Africa's highest mountain is unlike any other—with one of the most versatile ecosystems: a rainforest, a desert, planes and a glaciated summit. It's a tough climb—but then again to attempt the hardest thing was the idea. BY PARINA GUJRAL

ART PROJECTS IN college were hard. So were the mighty IB exams. But when someone asks you “What is the hardest thing you’ve ever done?” suddenly these achievements seem of little consequence and you begin thinking of Hemingway and the *Old man and the sea*. You want an answer. And as is the case with life, if you have a question—life helps you find an answer. My answer—a climb to Africa’s highest mountain for the Nasio Trust, raising money for AIDS victims.

The climb to Kilimanjaro (at a height of 5,895m) has one of the most versatile ecosystems: a rainforest, a desert, planes and the Arctic. Approaching the trail into the rainforest, our guide paused and said, “I want to take a picture of you all. I will take one everyday. My boss wants to see how soon your smiles will die out.” We all just stared at each other as he giggled at that frightening joke. Epa, was his name—short, heavy built, dark and

Pack these points

- ✓ You have to have good stamina and mental determination to complete the trek.
- ✓ Strong-grip trekking shoes are a must as the slopes can get very slippery.
- ✓ Do not hesitate when packing woollens; you can never have enough layers!
- ✓ Wet wipes are a must because you won't be showering.
- ✓ Eat a lot. Do not care about weight gain. Carbs are a life saver on the trek.
- ✓ Whether you're a single mother, a business man, an artist, a house wife, an electrician or simply bored, if you are reasonably fit—this trek is for you.
- ✓ Most importantly, let go of your inhibitions while climbing and you will have the most memorable experience and meet the most exciting people.

content. He talked about the mountain as his woman and how the freedom he received as a guide would beat any million dollar pay. He climbed the mountain three times a month, eight days each, a day's break and he would go back to his *girl*.

It's difficult to describe the anticipation when you begin the trek because you cannot help but wonder how much harder the climb would get or how much longer this flat path would last. We began at 1,700m so the altitude would not affect us. Hence today was labelled as the 'easy day'. The paths were uneven, muddy flatgrounds with sudden 160 degree slopes which required scrambling. Every time a slope arrived, Epa said one phrase that stuck until the end of the trek, 'pole pole', which translated means 'slowly slowly'. He warned us that there would be days when our pace would frustrate us but in the end that's what would get us to the top.

Along the way, the first problem I faced was when drinking three litres of water in a span of four hours out of my camel bag in the middle of a rainforest with rash-causing plants and let's just say you would often feel the urgent need to 'relieve' yourself. My trek mate, calling her Alex, and I would constantly be scouting for an appropriate spot, looking at each other in desperation.

Continuing with walking sticks in our hands, a step at a time, I was silly enough to ask how much longer we had to go for the day and the entire group got anxious. My second trek mate, lets call him Ben, was a man with high blood pressure, weak knees and weight problems, and being an average healthy 18-year-old, I frankly had little right to complain.

Time began to go very slowly and the aching pain in my legs was a sign of what was to come in the next seven days. But then, we were soon *home* for the day. We almost ran towards our tents with Epa yelling 'pole pole'. Alex and I exchanged a painful high five as we reached our tents. Dinner was soup and carbs and more carbs. Epa glared at us, ensuring that we ate every bit from our plate to be ready for the next day. We jumped inside our sleeping bags without changing clothes and fell asleep almost immediately.

Next morning we were up by 6 am. I lay in bed for 10 minutes dreading how much harder it would get from the 'easy day' we had yesterday. Carbs for breakfast with the same glares from Epa and we resumed the trek. Over the next few days that was the cycle. There were great many walks uphill. We shared our trail with other trekkers, whom we labelled as the American group and the German group. There were too many of them to label by name, but we all fought for the lead.

After a while, the climbing began to get monotonous, and when that happened, I would gaze into the horizon at the beauty around and for that moment I would forget about the climb. We arrived at the alpine planes and the freedom was incomparable. If we stopped walking, there was no sound. Not of a bird, a car, a river, a television, of nothing.

1. The summit of Mt Meru seen from Arrow Glacier on the Lemosho Route 2. The team takes a welcome break



INDIA PICTURE

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY: PARINA GUJRAL



Climbers camping at the Barranco campsite underneath the stunning and snowed over Uhuru peak of Mount Kilimanjaro

INDIA PICTURE



On the summit of Uhuru peak along with the guide, Gaudie

As the trek progressed, we also got our share of entertainment. Epa taught us the *Kilimanjaro Song*. It was written to make the mountain seem friendly. And to be honest, Kilimanjaro herself was not to be feared but it had its obstacles. For instance scrambling the Branko Wall made us feel proud for a moment but we hadn't experienced the mountain's thunder yet.

The final day was the most dreaded and awaited. The day or shall I say night, began 10 pm. We slept from 2 to 6 pm, ate dinner, and packed our gears. We stood in line with our head torches on, moving extremely 'pole pole'. It was bitter cold, dark and our bodies were in pain from the week's climb. So far I hadn't experienced a challenge that could be deemed my *hardest*, but that was coming soon.

We walked upwards towards the mighty Kilimanjaro. I turned around for a minute to look down at the city of Moshi and watch other groups approach the mountain as well. As we moved closer, it got colder and my confidence died. This was the first time the altitude hit me. To go into a scientific tangent, as the oxygen decreases, the release of heat into your body drops down a significant amount. Now that is exactly what happened.

I began to realise that my minus 20 degree waterproof gloves, bought for ₹150 at Gulmarg, were not really all that

they claimed. My hands grew stiff and after a few minutes, there was no movement in them. The wind speed was 70m/hr and I struggled to stabilise my 158.4cm body frame. The lack of oxygen makes a step feel like a marathon, and that was when the climb became the hardest thing I had ever done. At every step I had a mental conversation with myself, telling myself that this climb simply had to be completed.

Epa comforted us, telling us that the sun would rise in two hours. We were divided into three groups and I went forward with my guide Gaudie. When we were approaching Stellar Point, I almost gave up. Suddenly Epa told me to turn around and there it was, what I had been longing for, the sun! That was the point when I was determined to push myself on. The Uhuru Peak, there it was. And that was it.

One would think that I might have experienced a sense of accomplishment or pride, but when the challenge was over, the feeling of excitement lasted a few minutes. It was strange, to think that I would remember the moments of silence, the absolute freedom, the screensaver like sceneries rather than the peak itself. It was no more about what I was able to do, the limit I could cross, but just about having the opportunity to have been here and met these people.

We reached camp, packed our bags and walked for another six hours to Mweka. I gulped down some food, slept and woke up at a lazy 8 am after an 18 hour day. Returning from the mountain was a bitter sweet goodbye to the lack of civilization, but when I saw signboard of a confectionery shop, I was quite happy to get a sip of Coca Cola.

Back at the hostel, we were congratulated for the climb and given some cold Kilimanjaro beer, a symbol of the conquest and to put it plainly—it was good beer.

At a Glance

GETTING THERE

There are direct flights from New Delhi to Dar es Salaam, the largest city of Tanzania. From there one can take either a bus or fly to Moshi.

WHEN TO GO

January, February and September are the best months to climb in terms of weather. However the mountain itself has temperamental weather. One can never really predict whether there will be snowfall, or absolute clarity.

DO Do the Lemosho route for both the scenery and acclimatisation. It's a slow route with a gradual rise so the

chances of altitude sickness decrease.

TIP To join an expedition to Kilimanjaro with the Nasio trust contact Nancy Hunt; tel: 01235 856290; email: nancy.hunt@thenasiotrust.org; www.thenasiotrust.org. You can either make a £295 payment to reserve your place or raise charity for the trust which will sponsor your expedition.

DID YOU KNOW?

Out of every 1,000 tonnes of water that trickles down the mountain, 400 are directly from ice caps.

