

The Journey to Climbing Mt Kilimanjaro

There is something to say about getting the instructions right. On the day in question I managed to mix up the adventure companies presentation nights. As fate would have it, both adventure companies had presentation evenings on the same night. Instead of the high Arctic cruise evening I ended up at the mountain climbing adventures night. Not to be discouraged I ventured in and listened to the high energy presentation. I don't know what happened; maybe it was the hot evening, poor ventilation or free wine but I ended up booking myself and my wife (that's another story) on the Mt Kilimanjaro climbing tour. Being so easily led I also paid the \$800 deposit on the night!

I can't say I experienced buyers remorse the next day- that came on the cross trainer at gym some months later. Having my BMI definitely in the bad zone by a couple of categories and my waist to hip ratio completely wrong it was time to step up the training. I had been coming to the gym with a trainer a couple of times a week for quite a while and the weight just stayed the same. Brad saw this as a perfect opportunity to put his skill and knowledge to the test. We or should I say Brad sat down planned an exercise and nutrition plan to give me the weight loss I needed whilst dramatically improving my fitness and endurance.

My time frame was a bit tight and included Christmas and the New Year. By sticking to my food and exercise plan I dropped a massive 20 plus kilos in 5 weeks. By the time I left for Kilimanjaro I had lost close to 30 kilos. I trained hard averaging 1-2 hours per day. I know all the walks in both Kings and Bold Parks and of course left plenty of sweat on Jacobs Ladder and the Kokoda track in Kings Park.



Brad and Jason taught me to love the cross trainer, rowing machine and stationary bike. Although I'm sure some days my fellow gym patrons may have had a different view. They both kept the variety in the training to avoid boring both of us. My daily hour of "joy" seemed to slip by. It definitely got easier towards the end.

Our flight took us from Perth to Johannesburg, Nairobi and onto Kilimanjaro airport in Tanzania. Mt Kilimanjaro is the highest free standing mountain in the world. It gets that title because it has no supporting mountain ranges like the Himalayas. The flight from Nairobi to Kilimanjaro was interesting in that the Mt Kilimanjaro was higher than our plane could fly-but I think that had more to do with our plane than the height of the mountain. The seat in front of me was so close I was permanently in the "brace position". Fortunately the flight was only 50 minutes.

After a day in the local town of Arusha we had our briefing and equipment check. Some last minute adjustments and clothing deletions to make weight. We had joined a tour of 12 people and each person had a porter willing to carry 15 kilos of luggage. Our whole entourage comprised 47 porters for 12 paying passengers. The porters carried the tents, chairs, cooking equipment, food etc. Despite camping every night we had a cosy meals tent with table and chairs. We even had a toilet tent but with a very flimsy seat. Despite my weight loss I still felt this seat was not constructed for my “Adonis frame”.

Day 1 began at 3000 metres, the mountain looked so far away and quite daunting. We were on the Shira trek reportedly a less travelled route. We walked for 3-4 hours to our first camp where we met a number of other hiking groups- so much for less travelled route. The vegetation was mainly low scrub and we gained very little altitude. Even at this altitude you notice the lack of breath. The head guide encourages you to walk slowly and he sets the pace.

This was to be our routine for the next 7 days. Wake up at 6.30am and greeted with a warm cup of tea or coffee in your tent. 7.00am “washy washy” (translation) bowl of warm water to wash your face, hands and clean your teeth. 7.30am breakfast, which comprised porridge, sometimes bacon and/or egg dish and plenty of fruit. 8.30am we would hit the track and walk for between 4-8 hours. On the longer days we would be given a food box for the lunch stop. One of the porters would carry soup and hot water for a cup of tea or coffee on the break.

We would gain between 300-400 metres of altitude each day. On the shorter days the afternoon would include an acclimatisation walk to a higher altitude, sometimes an additional 500 metres. But we would only stay at that height for 15 minutes and then retreat to the lower camp to sleep.



There is a mountain saying “climb high, sleep low”. Despite this you always had a mild headache which sometimes would intensify. A few Panadol would do the trick for me but if not the head guide would monitor you. Altitude sickness does not discriminate and some people are genetically more susceptible. Very fit people or not so fit, old or young the only way you will know if you are affected is by climbing. The best acclimatisation method is to walk slow, drink plenty of water and ascend slowly.

Lunch in our cosy tent comprised soup followed by stew and dessert. Dinner was the same but sometimes they called the stew goulash and other day’s casserole. If we didn’t eat the pineapple for lunch we had pineapple fritters for dinner- we soon learnt the routine. Most nights

we would crash at 7.30pm and sleep quite soundly. The terrain from 3500metres to the summit is very sparse known as an alpine desert. Not that I've been to Mars but many of the guide books explain it that way. Our highest sleeping point was 4700metres and in the morning the tent flaps were frozen solid. Many of the days were spent above the cloud line which was a bit surreal.

About half an hour after we would leave the camp in the morning the porters would pass us with their 15-20 kilos of our gear plus their own kit precariously balanced on their heads. The Tanzanians we met on the trip were very welcoming, happy and accommodating.

Following our sleepover at 4700metres we descended some 1300 metres into the Barranco Valley. But only to climb the Barranco Wall a sheer faced 250 metre climb which in parts challenged the mind and heart. The rest of the day followed that theme of gaining a few hundred metres then down into another bloody valley. The day ended at 4000metres. Your lungs felt sensational in the valleys – you really get to appreciate the oxygen. This was the first time we could see the summiting side of the mountain-it looked quite easy-how wrong was I.

The next day is a short 3-4 hours walk unfortunately straight up hill and I mean up hill. The night was spent sleeping (or trying to) on a slope. After breakfast sitting on a slope we preceded up the hill 400metres followed by a short plateau then another 300metres to our final camp before the summit. That afternoon we rested, had an early dinner then attempted to sleep until 11pm when we were woken for the midnight departure to the summit.

Summit night, all your gear on, head torch blazing we set off for our 8-15 hour return trek. The first part was straight forward. We could see the line of head lamps from other climbers ahead. After a couple of hours we hit the main slope which is a series of short switchbacks zig zagging up the mountain. On the summit day I had taken some tablets designed to help mountain sickness. During the climb I felt quite nauseous but fearing the guides would send me down if I vomited I had the pleasure of no less than 5 regurgitations. I can assure you the only time the cup of tea and 2 biscuits tasted any good was the first time I consumed them.



Altitude is a great leveller and about 5 hours into the climb I asked the summit guide how much longer we had - he said "2 hours" my heart sunk I was sure we were closer. I said to my wife "I'm not sure I will make it". Within a flash one of the porters grab my pack to lighten the load-the pack was pretty much empty but I didn't resist. I then plodded on behind the main group and over the next hour I started to collect more members of the team as they fell off the back of the main pack. The guide with us said "look there's the summit" having only walked about 1 hour since my last fateful request I said "bulls**t there just waiting for us" but to my

surprise it was Stella Point the first summit. The main summit was a further 150metres which we all conquered. I felt great in the later part of the climb and enjoyed it.

The decent is just as hard. Your legs and more particular your toes get a pounding. It been 2 months since my return and my toe tips are yet to regain full sensation. Our return journey took 10.5 hours. We enjoyed a short 1 hour rest at the camp then descend a further 1000metrs to our last camp. Warm beer was available for purchase but at altitude inebriation comes cheaply.

The next morning we descended for another 5 hours to a local village were a bus returned us to the airport and onto other adventures. Mt Kilimanjaro is 5,895meters high (19,340 feet) we reportedly only walked about 55 lineal kilometres it felt further.

I would like to thank Brad, Jason and Peter for the great work they did in preparing me for this trip. For me the journey was about losing weight and gaining fitness – to summit was a bonus. I have signed up for 2 more mountains one in Russia and one in Argentina- see what a soft touch I am!