

Trip Review

Kilimanjaro: Rongai Route

By Will Weber

After I first climbed Kilimanjaro via the Shira/Lemosho Route in July 1997, I vowed I would never do a hike this difficult again. As I again struggled up the final ascent by the light of the full moon on February 15, 2003, now older, but not wiser at 55, there were no excuses for my agonized exhaustion.

There are so many wonderful things about climbing Kilimanjaro that you forget the discomfort of altitude, cold, lack of sleep and lack of oxygen soon after you heal from the climb and descent. It is a great feeling to stand at 19,340' on the top of Africa and realize what a special experience the entire adventure represents. It hurts so good.

The Kilimanjaro Moonlight Climb

This time I climbed with a group of 13 JOURNEYS clients aged 23-69. Every one was quite fit for their age. Several had run marathons, most had traveled, camped and hiked extensively in remote parts of the world. There were gym rats, a tri-athlete and a mountaineer among us. Youth discounts experience and vice versa. However, our beloved, though rather autocratic, Tanzanian leaders kept insisting in a Swahili phrase we all came to understand “po-le, po-le” (go slowly) and enforced a pace that restrained the fastest and preserved the dignity of the older and (instinctively) slower among us.

We all agreed the goal of our trip was not speed, but getting the largest possible number of us to the summit. According to Obote, our senior leader and veteran of more than 60 Kili climbs, ascending very slowly from the first day is a key to standing on the summit. The other key is drinking plenty of water, at least 5 liters per day. Some of us had more trouble drinking that much water than climbing to the top. The slow pace seemed to work. Some of us never developed an altitude headache during the entire trip. Headaches are one of the first indications of altitude sickness (along with nausea, loss of appetite, disorientation, dizziness, water retention and hallucinations). Some people took the diuretic, Diamox, as a way to combat swelling and water retention, but others of us never felt it necessary.

It also helped to have good food. We ate well every day. Our fantastic cook, Milton, prepared a variety of soups, pastas, salads, deserts and drinks offering a tasty array of choices to combat diminished appetite. His meals were served on time, hot and in ample quantity making each meal a very pleasant experience. A couple of people were battling respiratory infections from the start of the trip, which was perhaps the biggest medical problem we encountered. Coughs and colds don't heal themselves on Kilimanjaro. Ultimately, these conditions did not prevent the afflicted from reaching the summit, but they made it more difficult.



There are lots of good things to say about hiking the Rongai Route. Because it is a long and difficult 4X4 drive to reach the trailhead, not many climbers go this way. The route is not on many maps and not even mentioned in the official National Park information book about the park. Some years ago, there were problems with bandits on the route, but these have long since been remedied. I liked this route because there were few other hikers for the first four days. The route also provided an almost continuous view of Kibo and Mawenzi Peaks. The itinerary offered good high altitude acclimatization before the ascent. Photography was great and we did not face any difficult logistics in finding campsites, water, or shelter for staff. Toilet facilities were surprisingly well-maintained, though along the trail you always have to expect that the bushes may be the best choice for comfort. This and all the routes are patrolled by rangers and maintenance staff, and we saw very little litter or debris along the trail. At a few locations we had to climb up through rocks, but there was no point where the hiking was difficult due to a lack of path or route.



The Daily Climb

Our daily routine began with tea or coffee that Milo served in the tents at 6 am. Breakfast was served in the dining tent at 6:30 and we were off hiking by a bit after 7am. We tended to hike until about noon, when we stopped for lunch along the trail. By 2 or 3 pm we were in camp where there might be an option to hike a little higher and come back before dinner at 7PM. I was impressed that, even with our group of 14, meals were always on time. We did not see much of Milton the cook, but we praised the wonderful meals he produced on the gas burners. Food was ample and generally healthy. The easiest way to prepare food at altitude is to fry it and I was impressed that food was not fried or greasy. We slept in spacious tents with heavyweight floors, rain flies and center poles. I like an exterior frame or A-frame style mountain tent, but the guides argued that their center pole models are sturdier against the wind, snow, ants, sharp lava and dampness that can plague some treks (though not ours.)

February was a good time to make the climb. We had no rain, mud or dust. It hailed and snowed briefly on the third day at Mawenzi Tarn and snowed lightly as the full moon rose on the night of our ascent to the summit. The snow provided especially beautiful hiking and photography conditions and possibly reduced the coldness of the night.



The Final Ascent

Climbing to the summit during the full moon was quite convenient. The moon rose as we went to bed around 7 PM. When we awoke at 11 PM it was nearly overhead. While we had all obsessed over the quality and dependability of our headlamps prior to the climb, for most of the night they were not necessary.

We began THE FINAL CLIMB just after midnight. Once I started the mechanistic plodding up the steep slopes above Kibo Hut, I noticed little other than the desperation of my own breathing. I don't remember seeing the moonlit cloudscapes that turned up in my photographs. I didn't process the innumerable switchbacks across loose scree. I felt no wonder or fascination with the play of moonbeams on lava cliffs. I retreated to my own thoughts which screamed at me that I was crazy for doing this. I argued with myself about the virtue or necessity of going on knowing the air would get thinner still and I cursed my need for more rest stops than were offered by the guide. I was often the last in the pod of JOURNEYS climbers and, as I got to the point where everyone was taking a rest, they were off again before I came close to stifling my thunderous heavy breathing. Our leader, Obote, decided to split the group and the fitter climbers disappeared into the moon shadows not to be seen again until they met us on their way down long after dawn. I remember the moon setting over the crater rim around 5 AM and I still had more than an hour of the very steepest part of the trail, now in full darkness. I remember confusion as the trail disappeared onto steep solid rock and thanked the assistant guide who waited to be sure I did not miss a turn and end up lost.



The view on day three towards Mawenzi.

Finally, gasping, well after the dawn target time, I was standing on the rim, joining the already-arrived. There was a commemorative sign for Gilman's Point and a wonderful view of the dawn-pinked glaciers. We were well above the clouds. It was a bit hazy to see much detail in the plains of Kenya or Tanzania. There was a modest joy at reaching this point. Those who arrived before me were all determined to continue another 90 minutes to the true summit, Uhuru Peak. I did not have enough breath left to say "No."

In fact, the final climb to Uhuru was a bit easier, with even some level stretches. I passed the point where my last climb had reached the rim at Stella Point. I recalled feeling very short of breath at the very same place on that trip, too. At this point, the stronger climbers (and those who, perhaps, had started up at 11pm, were already starting down. The JOURNEYS A-team all had broad smiles of contentment about having observed the sunrise and the moonset at Uhuru Peak (and had pictures to prove it). By the time I reached Uhuru the issue was not photography in the time light of dawn, but rather getting out the sun screen and zipping up all the vented Gortex against a rising wind.

It was a beautifully clear morning. This was a special place from which you could look down at everything else. We took our requisite pictures in front of the sign marking our achievement. At this altitude it seemed the wind could muster a velocity exceeding the countering effects of friction and gravity that held us lightly to this high place. While everything about the view made us want to linger, a sense of unknown heavenly forces, the lack of other human beings resisting the rising wind, and an awareness of how far down we had to go helped us begin our descent.

The Descent

I realized how dulled I had been coming up when I was forced to confront the challenge of going back down. Looking down the full 3,500' mostly-scrree slope, our tents at Kibo were tiny specks of blue. Going down is most efficiently achieved by a locomotion resulting from giving into gravity as you break against loosely bound gravel scree. If you find just the right combination of bent knees, rhythm, foot placement and courage, each stride can carry you downward 2-3 meters. The braver and stronger you are, the bigger and faster your strides become. Then you realize your quadriceps are burning from lack of oxygen, and this is work, too. To keep your body in control and moving, you must breathe oxygen that still is not abundant at 17,000'. Then you realize it takes even more energy and muscle power to stop the downward momentum.



Our guide crew: Obote, James, Peter and Gerard.

I collapsed in my tent on re-arrival at Kibo, but a hearty lunch revived me. We continued much farther down the mountain to Horombo where some of us did not arrive until 7 pm, making for a 19 hour day. While there was much aching, sore feet and blisters, mostly we felt exhilaration. Thirteen of 14 of us made it to the Crater Rim and 12 all the way to Uhuru. Guides indicated that about half of all people who attempt the mountain do not make it to the Rim.

Our route back completed a traverse of the mountain by following the Marangu Route to the main park gate at Marangu. I was surprised by what a beautiful route this is. The path is improved and wide enough to handle the relatively large amount of foot traffic. Many hikers use this route and stay in the park huts along the way rather than tents. The huts are very cozy consisting of four bunks in an A-Frame cubicle with barely room for gear on the floor. There was more room in our tents. We saw Colobus and Syke's monkeys on the way down. Flowers were blooming on slopes that had recently burned in forest fires. We did see quite a few hikers going in both directions on the Marangu Route and realized they would not experience the wilderness feeling we had had our first four days on the Rongai Route. Still, if you have less time and prefer huts to tents and don't want to risk the mud and dust, the Marangu Route is a good way to hike.

Thoughts Upon Returning

In the end, no route is really easier or harder. Some people feel the Western Breach Route is a better choice because it avoids the long pre-dawn climb and offers camping in the crater. For environmental, health and safety reasons, I would disagree. The Western Breach Route can fill with snow making it both dangerous for climber and porters. Camping in the crater presents serious waste disposal problems and it is even harder to sleep here than at Kibo. You may not have to get up at midnight, but it is unlikely you will sleep anyway! Finally, if you arrive in the crater with altitude sickness problems, you are more at risk than you would be lower at Kibo, since you are forced to spend more time at this high altitude increasing your overall risk of serious AMS injury.

At Uhuru Peak at dawn.



When I first climbed Kili in 1997, I said I would never do it again. Now after a second climb that was more exhausting and difficult, I think I would consider climbing again. I would do it with the benefit of the full moon. I liked July and February, but might try it in October for variety. I would try to trim off more body weight before the climb. I did not suffer some of the adverse effects of altitude that afflicted other climbers. These included Camelback tubes freezing up, bad blisters, weight loss, bad sun burn and inflamed knees. It helped to have worked out at a health club on the inclined treadmill, stairmaster, cross-trainer and leg-press machines. Old boots with lots of miles, combined with double layered polypropylene socks, are a priceless defense against blisters.

If you are fit, aerobically-active, normal weight, like hiking and enjoy physical challenge you very possibly can climb this mountain. But it is not just about personal fitness and ability. I give the guides and staff credit for organizing the logistics flawlessly, monitoring our health and establishing a disciplined pace which brought all to the point of the final ascent in very good condition. Thank you, Obote, Peter, Charles and Gerard, our fantastic guides!



Finally, I felt it helped to have a good group of fellow climbers. I thank Mary Durand, Barbara Bailey, Carolyn Huestis, Ole Lorenzetti, RJ Cree, Terry Scamehorn, Mark and Kevin McVeigh, Richard Salisbury, Paul Mishkin, Enda Hu, Lynda Linker and Dietrich Geschke for the enduring optimism, predictable good cheer and unflagging flexibility necessary to make this a successful group effort.

JOURNEYS offers full arrangements for climbing Kilimanjaro by any of the major routes at any time of year. See our website or call for full details and planning assistance.

