



Trip Review

Kilimanjaro Climb: Shira Lemosho Route

*By Will Weber
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Many accounts of climbing Kilimanjaro center around suffering and deprivation in pursuit of exhilaration. In order to stand at the highest point of Africa, Uhuru Peak (19,340') above the plains of Tanzania and Kenya, some climbers on all approach routes test the limits of their being.

Over the past 12 years of selling this trip and advising JOURNEYS travelers headed for Kili, I have felt a bit guilty about not having made the climb myself. I had my doubts about my stamina for the climb and my willingness to endure the extremes of altitude, cold, wind, dryness, mud, rain and other environmental obstacles. I felt a more professional obligation than genuine enthusiasm for what lay ahead.

July 7, Day 0 Arusha, Tanzania

Our group of 11 hikers gathers the night before the climb in the lobby of the Mt. Meru Hotel in Arusha, Tanzania. All are very enthusiastic, well-conditioned and highly-motivated. Keith Adams, 38, had previous mountaineering experience in North and South America. As a jet and helicopter pilot for the US Customs Service based in Florida, he brings a sharp focus on mission, equipment and logistics to our group as well as lots of great stories about his personal and professional experiences.

Cliff Bartow, a 45 year-old executive from Lenscrafters from Atlanta, is here with his 13-year-old nephew, James Alfonso. The two traveled with us on a Tanzania wildlife safari preceding the climb and I am impressed by Cliff's serious preparation for the climb and his orientation to the trip as a personal challenge very different from anything he has done before. James is a quiet, but physically, very competent youth who is missing the baseball tournament of his Tennessee high school championship team.

Richard Snead, 45, an executive of TGI Friday's restaurants, is on the trip with his two sons Eric, 14, and Adam, 17. All three are fit and experienced world travelers who are very pleased to be tackling this serious physical challenge as a family undertaking. Adam, a very competitive distance runner, insists on carrying a pack with all of his own gear rather than let the local porters carry his kit as the rest of us opt to do.

At age 49, I feel less physically prepared than the rest of the climbers. After two weeks on an inactive wildlife safari and more than a month since I have jogged or exercised seriously, I know I should be in better shape for climbing this mountain. I trekked in Nepal about five weeks ago and I felt strong effects of the Himalayan thin air at 13,000-14,000'. I was with a very fit group on that trek, but Kili adds 5,000' of elevation above where I had gasped and winced with a headache in Nepal. I am prepared to enjoy this climb without claiming the summit if it gets too difficult.

In addition to the seven potential climbers, the other members of my family: wife Joan, daughter Robin, 15, and son Noah, 9, plan to accompany the expedition for four days of hiking. They are joining us for two days across the Shira Plateau and then descending via the Machame Route. Our regular Tanzania safari driver - guide, Eugene Mrosso, also plans to accompany them on the same route. Mrosso is a native of the Kili area of Tanzania, but has never climbed or hiked on the mountain. Very few Tanzanians would ever choose to hike on Kilimanjaro for recreational pleasure, so Mrosso is both the most and least at home as a "client" on the Kili trek. He adds a great cross-cultural perspective to the experience.

We meet our guides Frederick, Colman and Focas, Tanzanians of the Chagga tribe. They give us a detailed picture and advice for the week ahead. Each has climbed the mountain more than 100 times. They speak good English. They have taken many JOURNEYS trekkers up the peak and have a very high rate of success. Mia Bengston, JOURNEYS Tanzania representative introduces the guides and adds her advice to the assembled group of 10 hikers. She repeats the climbers' mantra: "pole pole", the Swahili phrase for take it slowly.

We all listen intently to Mia and our guides as they outline concerns and expectations. "Be ready for the cold. Consider taking a hiking stick. Drink enough water. Consider taking diamox. Don't get wet before the summit attempt."

This latter concern is on our minds. Although it is the "dry season" by the calendar, it has been cool and rainy across northern Tanzania for the past two weeks. A drizzle is falling outside as we convene. Our guides seem to think rain will not be a big problem, but one of our fellow participants reminds us that "every account of the climb I have ever read talks about rain and mud and wet trails." I go to sleep worrying I don't have adequate rain protection.

July 8, Day 1 Arusha-Shira Gate

I awake at 5 AM with the same thought. It is raining hard with thunder and lightning outside the hotel. The CNN Africa weather forecast map shows a smiling sun beaming across the entire continent except northern and eastern Tanzania including Kilimanjaro which the forecaster notes are under the influence of a persistent stationery Low Pressure area and subject to heavy showers. We depart through the rivulets and puddles of Arusha for the trailhead of the Shira Route. We chose this route, to both enjoy the less-traveled path and avoid the hut-to-hut routine of the Marangu Route. I try to repress visions of tents pitched in deep mud and pouring rain.

Quite dramatically the rain diminishes and small patches of blue appear overhead and quickly disappear again as we near the start point of our trek at the Londrosi Gate checkpost. We feel fortunate to depart in heavy overcast and light mist after the morning deluge. At the checkpost we sign on to the mountain, noting that the last hikers to come this way were JOURNEYS' clients of five days previous. Our 20 porters assemble their loads of food, tents, utensils and our duffels.

The first part of the trek is easy. We follow a diminishing jeep track on a gradual incline through farm country. I find it interesting to observe the local people tending crops that thrive in the rich volcanic soil and moist climate. Plantation forestry is going on as inter cropping with beans, potatoes and maize.

After about two hours, we enter the park and pass through a narrow band of rain forest (where it is raining). We have lunch of fresh fruits and vegetables, bread, jam, peanut butter and cookies. After another half hour we enter the moorland and the rain stops. We steadily gain elevation to our campsite at the Shira Gate on the Shira Plateau. The rain stops and we enjoy brief glimpses of the Kibo Peak, our destination.

Our mountain tents are being erected as we arrive and the porters build a nice warming fire. There seems to be no shortage of firewood in this area and no regulations against burning it. All of us have a few items to dry out by the fire. As soon as the sun sets, it becomes quite cold. We are just about at the cloud top level and at times when we stand in the fog while looking up at a gloriously radiant and expansive Milky Way above us. We enjoy an excellent and ample dinner of soup, spaghetti and meat sauce with fresh salad and a choice of hot beverages. At the end of the first day of hiking, I feel much better than I did at the start. Our pace was slow by design, but we did not encounter the heavy rain, deep mud or unbridged creeks I had envisioned as we left Arusha. We are well up on the mountain in what looks and even smells like eastern Wyoming or Colorado high plains desert.



July 9, Day 2 Shira Gate-Shira Camp

If you take diamox, a diuretic, as an aid to altitude adjustment, you are never likely to linger in your tent much past dawn. I get up while it is still dark and note that the mist had formed an ice coat on the tents, but the sky is clear between us and Kibo. By the time others arise, the clouds obscure the view. We breakfast in the clouds.

We spend the day trekking across the Shira Plateau on generally level trails, we gradually gain elevation to 12,500' but it is pretty painless uphill hiking. The clouds part, revealing Kibo as we draw closer. We delight in the views and take many pictures of the hikers against the beautiful backdrop of the peak. Our lunch stop was beautifully sunny. Though the clouds did close in around our campsite near Shira Hut, we feel a sense of being between the wet of the lowlands and the frozen cold of the upper slopes. The desert flowers are blooming everywhere. We had some blasts of intense sunshine that forced us to lather up with #30 sun block, put on shorts and t-shirts and don the glacier glasses. Running shoes are fine for this trail. In all, this has been a fantastic hiking day!

We camp at the point where Mrosso, Robin, Joan and Noah will continue the next morning across the mountain to descend via the Machame Route. The rest of the seven climbers will continue higher on the mountain via the Baranco and Barafu Huts. There is a single octagonal metal hut the porters and staff use for cooking and sleeping. The camp site is quite clean and there is a well-maintained latrine. We have encountered no other trekkers on the mountain so far and have the campsites to ourselves. At dusk the clouds close in again and we eat a good hot meal in the porter's hut before retreating to our tents. Everyone is healthy. No one has strong symptoms of altitude sickness. I was pleased to have hiked in running shoes the past two days. I could have done the hikes in Texas.

July 10, Day 3 Shira Camp to Baranco Camp

Dawn is wet and windy. Our guides warn us to keep warm and dry, a mandate that contradicted our destiny in the blowing drizzle. I say good bye to Mrosso and family members while thinking I now have to keep up with the climbers as we march higher on the mountain over more difficult trails than the previous two days. I stay with running shoes, but note boots might have been more appropriate. I wish I had waterproof pants. We enter much drier, harsher terrain as the plants diminish in density, size and variety. At what should be the lunch stop, we decide the rain is too heavy to remain exposed during the stop. We gobble a few crackers, down some Gatorade and amble on.

In mid-afternoon, we begin to descend into a zone of spectacular vegetation of *Senecio* and *Lobelia* plants, the two species that are the botanical icons of Kilimanjaro landscapes. The sun peeks through a boiling cloud mass as our steep descent to Baranco Camp becomes more interesting, scenic and muddy. The camp is, again, superb with a porter's hut, clean facilities and a wood fire. In the late afternoon, the tide of the cloud sea ebbs to 500 feet below our campsite and we enjoy great views. The area offers some of the best birding and botanizing of the trip. This area has the largest *Senecio* plants we see on the trip. We see no other hikers around. We dry out our clothing and shoes by the ample warming fire and enjoy another great hot meal. Somehow, the cooks have managed to preserve a good supply of fresh vegetables, fruit, eggs and meat and there is always more food than the trekkers finish. The porters cook separately for themselves, but may divide up what clients don't eat. Still no one is complaining of headaches, though we are over 12,800'. We believe the slow, methodical pace, diamox and good food are staving off the symptoms. We enjoy a beautiful starry sky, half-moon and the serene sea of clouds extending to and around the "island" of Meru Peak 30 miles to the west.

July 11, Day 4 Baranco to Barafu

We are getting serious about climbing this mountain. From our "heavenly" campsite above the clouds we can see our route ahead for the day and part of the route to the top for the first time. It really seems like we have not been ascending up to now. I almost worry that we are not having altitude symptoms because we have not really gone up from our start point. We have. The headaches and nausea must come. Kibo Peak is way above us in the clear sky. We have a long ways to go to be at the top (6,400' higher) in less than 24 hours. We all feel good and the guides advise me privately they think it very likely we will all make it up. This will be a long day with lots of ups and downs. "Don't get wet," they advise.

We set out in the morning frost in pursuit of the warming rays of the sun. We soon overtake the first other climbers we have encountered and get a positive reality check. They are gasping, limping and stumbling. With swollen faces and tentative strides, it is easy to see that two of the three in the party have both altitude sickness (edema) and stressed knees from improperly descending steep trails. Their guide speaks almost no English and seems to be of little help or comfort in assisting the clients who are really suffering.

At lunch in the sunny Karanga Valley, our party feels a bit of stress and fatigue. While the cook prepares lunch of fried chicken, french fries and vegetables, I take advantage of the first flowing water in days. In the icy trickle of a stream, I wash my hair and take half a bath to the astonishment of the other climbers who accuse me of having spent too much time in Tibet! It was a situation where you could feel colder dressed in heavy clothing, shivering against the thin air than you would naked, absorbing the full intensity of the mountain sunshine. Some people grumbled about heavy fried foods for lunch. Appetites seem suppressed. We are a bit confused by the guides count of how many times we have to go down up and down before the night stop at Barafu.

Focas leads us plodding across really bare, dry desert that seems to cough dust under each boot step. The landscape acquires an immensity that challenges our progress toward the distant rocky ridge where we will sleep. We must go slowly, but there is a tension between the advice of our guides, our adrenaline-charged desire to reach camp and our sense that this is now the ascent with a brief stop for dinner and a snooze before continuing up the snowy ridge ahead. The sun is setting as we gasp into Barafu Camp at 15,000'. A couple from Hawaii are already there, having arrived from another route. They seem fit and eager to climb. Our porters dump their loads at the hut and reveal an exhaustion like our own. The weather is clear. We nibble at a good meal of chicken soup, spaghetti, meat and vegetables, but only half of us eat very much. Guides remind and warn us that we are camped on a cliff and that if we leave the tents at night we should take a flashlight. A trekker inadvertently walked off the 300' cliff during a night time "pit stop" earlier this year! As we are going to sleep, the three groaning, ailing trekkers we passed earlier in the day arrive in the darkness. It is the last we will see of them. We expect our wake up call at 11:30PM. I can't sleep.

July 12, Day 5 Barafu-Uhuru-Shira

I am ready to go within 15 minutes of the wake up call, which comes early at 11 PM. I momentarily wonder if the guides have reassessed our strength and think we need the extra time. I did not sleep and still feel the fatigue of the long hike yesterday. I force myself to eat toast and porridge in the dark hut. I gulp six large cups of hot tea as I wait for the guides to give us the OK to start climbing.

The half moon sets bright orange behind the mountain. The air is very still and it seems warm. I decide not to wear or carry an extra layer of pants. (In retrospect, this was a mistake. I think I was deceptively warmed by the hot tea. An hour into the climb I really wanted those pants.) We all test our head lamps against the darkness. The trail ahead is steep, black, ill-defined and frozen. We can't tell how far or how high the frozen blackness goes. Mostly, we think about how long it is until dawn when we hope to be on the rim. The calculus of our plodding pace, seemingly ever steeper grade and the unseen sun racing us to the rim seem to define an equation of success that approaches a limit of physical endurance. We are bunched tightly behind our leader, Focas. He is silent and occasionally hesitates searching for the best route. We know he could break into a sprint to the top if we were not behind him, but he gives us no sense of concern for our suffering or optimism about our progress. At one time we could see other head lamps far down in the darkness moving up toward us, but now the seven of us clients and three guides are alone on frozen snow in a vertical blackness. I sense it is better not to see how far it is up or down. There is no trail, just scattered foot prints frozen into icy basins tilted against the steep grade. We hold our close formation passing back each foothold as if it is a special gift of the guide ahead who is helping us avoid wasting energy on thinking about where our feet should go. I find that by emulating the placement, pace, length and rhythm of Focas's skillful gait, it is much easier to ascend without sliding back, needing to pause for breath or over reaching my stamina.

We just keep going up as it gets colder and windier. I regret leaving off the outer pants. My feet are warm in boots and double socks. My head is warm in a wool hat. I could use mittens over my gloves. I enjoy having the hiking stick. The wind seems to penetrate the five layers over my upper body. I am wearing contact lenses and feel my eyes tearing in the cold wind, though the lenses themselves are no trouble on the climb. One-by-one the head lamps expire and we bunch tighter to use the remaining glow collectively.



I had heard so many tales of horror about this pre-dawn climb, nothing that is going on in our group is surprising or unprecedented. If anything, we are doing better than I had expected. No one is talking about going back. We can hear each others' heavy breathing, but no overt moans or complaints about the pace. I do not want to stop and rest because I immediately feel the imbalance of atmospheric cold draining away the metabolic warmth of my body. Some in the group struggle with the slipperiness and steepness and we coach each other on strategies for moving forward without sliding backward.

The experience of the cold, wind, darkness and silent exhaustion easily separate your thoughts from your autonomic functioning. I trust the guide is on the right track. I tell my body to fit his pattern of slow, steady steps, regular breathing and passive acceptance of the steep grade. High in the thin air and deep into the pre-dawn, I feel like a thick gauze wraps my consciousness and pads my misery. Two more head lamps burn out and it seems our ten-segment organism must be dying even as the grade becomes more gradual.

A band of orange wraps the eastern horizon. We begin to see our feet and the texture of the snow and the ice and rocks. The vertical slope abruptly ends. We are on the crater rim, together, alive and once again able to talk and perceive beyond the limits of our bodies.

There are other voices of people who have come up via other routes. Everyone is cold. It is very windy. More than half of the people who reach the crater rim do not make it to Uhuru Peak, the actual summit of Kilimanjaro. Everyone in our group is ready to keep going the extra half mile and 1,000' of elevation to truly reach the top. It is clear and bright at the summit and we share the photo point at the sign with about 25-30 other people who arrive about the same time we do. I am surprised that there is deep snow all around the rim and filling the crater. The crater is quite deep and wide and open at the Western End. This Western Breech offers an alternative route up or down the mountain and our guides judge that we are strong and hearty enough to take that route back down.

We spend about 30 minutes at the peak and another 30 minutes in the crater. Though the sun is up and the scenery is beautiful, I feel a strong survival impulse telling me that exhilaration is not an antidote to death by hypothermia. I never felt so cold. I understand why people don't spend long on the top of a mountain.

The Western Breech Route is a serious challenge. We should have rope, ice axes and/or crampons for the steep descent down long tongues of frozen snow, ice and scree. We feel more sense of danger and risk during this descent than at any other point on the trip. The sun is already melting the snow, but in doing so it dislodges rocks and boulders that are hurtling down the 60 degree incline ending at the Shira Plateau 3,000' below.

We slip and inch and skid our way back down to the plateau safely, but totally exhausted. Several of our group confess they have never been so tired in their lives. We are hungry but too tired to eat. We are sleep-deprived but too sore and aching for even a nap. Our guides advise that it is some distance to camp and leave it to us to discover it is actually 7 1/2 miles.

We all make it and feel good in whatever part of our psyche that does not feel too pained or depleted for pleasure. The Shira Camp has lots of other people preparing for the climb. We discover that few people come down the Western Breech and Machame Routes, but many go up. We relate our success and our ordeal to the would-be climbers and marvel at their naiveté about what the climb would require of them. Perhaps their innocence is the same as ours was 24 hours earlier. We are all changed by the experience we have had.

July 13, Day 6 Shira-Machame Camp

Our trip is not over. We sleep late, enjoy a good breakfast and morning sunshine before packing up and dropping back down into the clouds that still lap at the edges of the Shira Plateau. In a descent of 300' we are suddenly in mist, mud and thickening rain forest. We are the first group of the day to reach Machame Camp and our crew chooses the best tent sites and sets up the kitchen in the cleanest hut.



At about 3 PM the hikers start coming up the trail we plan to walk down tomorrow. They are covered in mud. Up to this point we have not hiked in mud at all. Our boots or sneakers are as clean as the day we left Arusha. The strongest hikers are the first up the trail and to the campsite. We have a nice fire going so we attract and invite the shivering, wet, mud-caked French, Brits and South Africans to our hospitable location. The quiet Machame campsite becomes a boisterous village as more and more people in big groups stumbled up the slick trail. Different nationalities in groups sharing limited space inevitably assert their national identities and styles. We feel a certain sense of casual American nonchalance and familiarity as we stand around our friendly fire in clean, dry clothes, sipping hot beverages, sharing our unused energy bars, dried fruits and candy and relating how everyone in our group arrived at the rim, together at dawn. Several of the French sniff a bit at the fact that we had taken diamox but saw nothing impure or exceptional about the fact they have a porter carrying a portable hyperbaric chamber to deal with altitude sickness after it strikes.

July 14, Day 7 Machame-Arusha

We arise in the familiar fog and drizzle and hike down into the rain. The mud was ugly and ubiquitous. We skid and careen about 8 miles to the Machame Gate. In the mist we pose for the closing group photo and meet our Land Rovers for the ride back to Arusha.

1. Come prepared physically for the experience. You should be at your best weight, aerobically conditioned and accustomed to mountain hiking with a light pack.
2. Bring good equipment. Prepare for temperatures to zero F. Expect rain and wind at any time of year. Bring your own sleeping bag and sleeping pad.
3. Go slowly. We were constantly tempted to push the pace of the guide. It was always a mistake to do so. If you have to stop to catch your breath while hiking, you are going too fast.
4. Eat well. Don't settle for basic diet or bargain around the cost of meals for the trip. We ate well and came back healthy while maintaining nutritional reserves during the very long days and periods at high altitude when our appetites dulled.
5. Consider taking diamox for altitude. Some people now also recommend calcium blockers to further aid acclimatization.

At the gate we meet a hapless group of three climbers who are delayed in getting ready to start up. They are not sure where their porters are and they have not thought much about food. They are having trouble dealing with the park staff, guide and local people who only speak Swahili. If they start now, they will be spending much of their first day's hike struggling uphill through deep mud and rain in the dark. I think to myself that there are lots of ways to make this difficult climb harder. JOURNEYS' job is to make it easier.

Returning again to the Mt. Meru Hotel, it all was quite real. Seven days have passed during which we have been totally pre-occupied with a physical task and totally out of communication with the rest of the world. What a strange and wonderful thing we have done!

My final thoughts about the climb fall in several categories which I offer as an evaluation framework for anyone contemplating the same route or any route on Kili.

6. Take one of the less-traveled routes if you have the time and money. There is a distinct pleasure to hiking all day or for several days in this African wilderness and not encountering other groups or litter.
7. Plan your trip for July-October or January-March. Other months may be wetter and cloudier and you may see less of the beautiful terrain. We do offer the climb year-round on any day you choose to depart.
8. Combine your trip with a wildlife safari if you have the time. You are very close to the great wildlife areas of northern Tanzania. Even a day or two at Arusha National Park, is worth adding to your trip.



9. Even if you don't or can't climb the mountain, consider a hike of three to five days across the Shira Plateau as an alternative, less-physically demanding experience.

10. Don't wait too long to book your trip. The best guides are booked far in advance. The huts along the Marangu route are fully booked months before the busy seasons. Air reservations to both Kilimanjaro Airport and Nairobi are very difficult to obtain on short notice during peak travel seasons.



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