

THE SPECIAL 'K' CLIMBING MOUNT KILIMANJARO

AMONG THE TOP ON MY LIST

Frequently friends and colleagues ask: If you took another trip where would you revisit? Having worked on four continents, in most instances, I have been privileged to have the extra time to absorb many historical and cultural underpinnings that enhance ones insights on the people, country and travels. After being actively engaged in Tanzania's rural regional economic development, my assignment was ending. What wonderful people in a magnificent country (close to the size of Texas).

I focused on farming and agricultural potential in several locales. Albeit I passed through Lake Manyara, The Serengeti and Ngorongoro driving from Kampala, Uganda to the work in Dar es Salaam, but the economics of tourism and specific sites were not on my 'beat'. With some leave time remaining in late February I drove north, from Dar es Salaam to Moshi, stayed with friends and booked at Marangu Hotel for the next week's five-day climb to Mount Kilimanjaro.

SIGNING UP FOR THE CLIMB

Marangu Hotel indeed is a truly great oasis. Run by two very British sisters to very high standards. It is not luxurious, though it conveyed the genuine warmth of the Tanzania and the first rate Tanzanian staff, surrounded in magnificent grounds in 12 acres. Clearly, the sisters were decades ahead of the curve in the transition from a Colonial past. With a progressive mindset they adopted a proactive transfer of knowledge and skills to strengthen Tanzanians and the tourism industry. The sitting rooms and library walls were adorned with classic large black and white pictures depicting the grander en route to, looking in and from Mount Kilimanjaro. These excited all juices one could muster. How lucky to participate in the trek. Hopefully I could see some of these sites and retain them in my mind's eye. This journey, after my bouts of malaria and hepatitis, had special meaning.

Fortunately there was one space opened for the next week's walking tour. Indeed, what a very small world. While enjoying the lovely gardens I met a friend of my aunt from The Apple who traveled half way around the world to view birds in Tanzania. The climate of the highland tropics in Usambara Mountains and Moshi is absolutely delightful. Dependably low humidity; crisp 50's in the morning to around 75 degrees F in the mid-afternoon. What a difference from the short travel to lower elevations and the 'steamy' tropics! Surely one has that rye smile listening to the 'development gurus' chiding local populations to 'work hard' so they can save and take tours to visit these, their wonderful locales. No wonder too that several international organizations headquarters have been based in Moshi and Arusha.

THE GROUP GATHERED & PREPARATION

By coincidence the 13 fellow climbers, a mixture of men and women expatriates, also worked in Dar es Salaam. As I recall, five were Brits teaching in the UK volunteer organization (VSO), two American couples both with USA businesses, Norwegian and Canadian couples both working in their foreign services. A grand group all looking fit and most had done some training.

One of the sisters introduced our Tanzanian climbing leader, Mr. Elias. I was delighted to be under Mr. Elias' guidance since he was Major General Sarakiki's personal guide and had climbed the mountain over 300 times! Major General Sarakiki, the head of the Tanzanian

People Defense Force generously allowed the University of Dar es Salaam staff to use the Army's squash facilities Sunday morning and Wednesday evening. Annually perhaps as part of physical training the Major General took his main officers up Mount Kilimanjaro. Listening to Mr. Elias' convincing presentation I knew the odds of success increased dramatically. We sorted out all the hotel's clothes - size and comfort, not fashion, were the selection criteria.

DAY ONE: FROM FARMS TO ABOVE THE TREE LINE

After a hearty breakfast we assembled in the garden and were introduced to the retune of porters and cooks. Only in my mind's eye can I see the preparation scene, perhaps describes as enthusiastic friendly chaos, perhaps resembling a Burgher's picture. Finally we were ready, duffel bags loaded and the porters carrying the clothes and food and pots and pans as tradition, on their heads. How they managed the loads and always were in great spirits remains a wonder to me. Perhaps it was just the weekly long trek to *their mountain* that gives the balance of life. Quite a site as the troop departs through the villages and hills of Moshi through the tropical forest onward to overnight in Mandara Hut (No. 1.).

As we had learned, the first day was a gentle walk on well-traveled trails through lush small coffee farms intermixed with traditional foods of beans and cassava, and through the rain forest. As the villagers greeted us and the children laughed their Good Luck in both Swahili and English, I remember the idyllic afternoon outing, and with new friends. Sure it would have been terrific to have knowledge of botany and wildlife as the week provided a full highland tropical laboratory. To do Day One justice one could take a couple of weeks accompanied by a local ecologist. We achieved our mission: to get to Mandara Hut at 9000 feet (2743 meters) by about 3 PM with enough time for the cooks to prepare dinner.

As a testimony to forward thinking in developing tourism it must have taken extremely astute vision and yeoman service to establish just this physical infrastructure system up to Mount Kilimanjaro. All huts on the climb were made of corrugated tin with a cement floor. Each had a few small windows, a common sleeping area with combinations of single and bunk beds. Basic stuff, what else do you need after a day's walk? The energy was kerosene, head carried. Certainly no telecommunication then, but now there must be cell phones. *You leave your watch and cares at home when you climb Mount Kilimanjaro.* Since all cooking was done out side no kitchen was obvious and I wondered what the cooks did in stormy weather. I do recall small toilet huts, but none on the trail.

After the refreshing walk all in our group were feeling well but were aghast to learn that another groups of 'Europeans' got to the Mandara Hut before us. They had taken all the beds! Clearly, this other group had broken the 'rules of the game'. They came from 'the other hotel'; not registered as required, since the registering party has the rights to use all the huts in the sequence over the four nights (as the last day walk returns to the hotel).

The cooks prepared a fine dinner and somehow, no doubt due to the lengthy first day walk, we all managed to get some sleep on the floor. We awoke to breakfast; there were no adverse comments about 'blisters'. We had to move out as the 'other Europeans' carrying their own rucksacks were an hour in front of us.

DAY TWO: ABOVE THE TREE LINE

Although Elias had firmly instructed us that 'slow pace' is the best strategy to acclimate ones body to the height, he and others in our group moved forward quickly with the hope to arrive at Horombo Hut (No. 2) first to reserve our beds before the 'other Europeans' arrived.

Experiencing the walk through the forest, above the tree line and over the 'alpine meadow' brings inner calm, if you let it flow. As advertised, there were no more trees above the tree line. All along the seven hours trek, again, you wish you had reviewed those botany books. There is much to observe in the stillness of the day and wonder what happens here in the night. I recall seeing a snippet of our target, Mount Kilimanjaro, which began to look both closer and formidable.

Again, I arrived about 3 in the afternoon at Horombo Hut (12335 feet, 3760 meters). I was the slowest walker of the group. This leg of the journey is very important to get acclimatized to the altitude. Fortunately the quick pace of Elias and our Brits VSOs secured Horombo Hut for our group. I never saw the 'other Europeans' nor spend time thinking about them. Indeed, we had our walking work cut out for ourselves.

DAY THREE: THE DESERT

The haunting elegance of walking slowly for about seven hours through a highland desert is an absolutely exhilarating experience. Again, I took the Elias' acclimation lecture seriously, more to the point; I was unable to walk quickly. The scenery was nearly devoid of vegetation. Yet, with magnificent hues of reds, yellow and brown sands the desert was marvelously refreshing and diametrically different from the lush volcanic tropics from the day before. May we say it was a tropical Ying-Yang compliment? As the day worn on walking up the 'Saddle' (15000 feet, 4572 meters) between the peaks of Kibo (19442 feet, 5925 meters) and Mawenzi (17000 feet, 5188 meters) I became more removed from the group and the pure isolation became ever more captivating.

Most fortunately another guide walks behind the last straggler - so as long as my legs moved forward the rest of my senses were left to wander for several hours in this highly unique corner of the earth. I have experienced few such days of bliss. We arrived at the 15520 feet (4370 meters) level to Kibo Hut (No. 3) about 4 PM. The rear guard guide later kindly inquired whether I was 'sleep' walking. I was allocated a lower berth and enjoyed an update with fellow climbers. Smiles around and all enjoyed more of the local Chagga peoples' cuisine before early 'taps', as Elias announced we had a 1 AM wake up call to reach the top of Mount Kilimanjaro!

I clearly recall going out to relieve myself before turning in. The clarity of the stars mirrored against the 'twinkling' of the lights in far away Moshi is forever indelible etched in my brain. I come from the Northern climes where on some crisp winter evenings we can 'touch' the Milky Way, but this scene was totally unique.

During the deep sleep there was rustling and confusion. People were coming in and going. My body just rolled over and I vaguely remembered the person above vomiting, at least, their dinner. Fortunately local kapok mattresses do not leak, so I merely continuing sleeping until the 1 AM when it was 'lights and boots on', since we slept in our traveling gear.

The Buzz was: The guide of group who climbed the mountain the day before summoned Elias. They went in the wee hours to carry down no less than The Bulgarian Ambassador who apparently fell and broke one of his legs! It seems the diplomat did the most undiplomatic deed. He tried to get the extra 200 meters/yards to the absolute summit of the African continent. In so doing he risked and indeed put him self, all in his party and Elias in grave danger for his egotistical act.

DAY FOUR: THE ASCENT

There he was after at most three hours sleep and perhaps a four hours rescue mission. Our Mr. Elias, at his the peak of motivational prowess conveying confidence to his charges - at the helm of our column after a nutritious breakfast before 2 AM. What a truly marvelous leader and mentor. The early predawn start is essential to arrive to the top by about 7 AM, when the crater is clearest and hopefully the clouds have not yet collected. Such is the probability; reality frequently provides a surprise.

Off we trooped in the crisp clear invigorating night mountain air. Underfoot has changed dramatically to a loose scree material that your foot sinks into, to the top of your boots. The first time I experience such composition of the earth's surface. As the pictures of the cone show, it is indeed a very steep climb. Moonless we can just about see the outline of fellow climbers. The scree texture provides a truly weird sensation going forward, presumably to a higher elevation, but slipping and sliding backwards. Within an hour ones breath and energy level seems disjointed.

Elias kindly volunteered to carry my Pentax camera. With the altitude it's one pound felt at least 10 pounds lifted! I have only to lift one foot in front of the other, for about six hours to the rim of the crater at Gillman's Point - 18635 feet (5680 meters)!

What to focus upon to make the grade? In reality, it is the height of simplicity: merely walking, but with the physical and mental obstacles. Subsequently I have heard on expeditions to Mount Everest mental energies surmount physical difficulties even for professional climbers. I adopted the same 'bloody mindedness' of persistence that I exhibited in the previous day's crossing of The Desert. Very much just a step-by-step approach, as it were.

Dawn was breaking as 'coach' Elias came by. He must have been all over the mountain helping and encouraging each in our group 'be the best you can be'. What a motivator. He asked how I was doing and walked with me for about 15 minutes. Our conversation was basic focusing on breath, steps, the texture of the 'scree'; and 'how much more' to the top?

Slow but sure and then, there it was I had made it and joined eight from our group at Gillman's Point! Elias was smiling; seemingly as if it was his first time on to climb the top of Mount Kilimanjaro. He drew a book from his pocket and made notations, no doubt his mid-300th climb.

We had made it, Wow! There we were on the edge of the famous crater. There was some snow on the edge of the rim but alas, no Lana Turner. Grasping for air I did not feel ill or dizzy but fatigued! Sure enough on cue, the windy climate sent the clouds in before their expected arrival. Life can be like that. I saw the edge of the rim and a snippet of the crater's floor, perhaps 2500 feet below. The inward racing cloud pattern unfortunately interrupted our view over the broader African vistas below. How far one could see from the rim on a clear day? Perhaps 200+ miles and it would have been grand coup de grace. No need to try to take photos as the fingers would likely have not proper dexterity to focus. Best at these times we keep the photos complete with all imagery of the vista and our small group in our mind's eye, referring to it at will.

This was definitely not a walk in the park on a summer's afternoon. Maybe we were there for a one-half hour and perhaps it was 9:30 AM. It was bitter cold with the winds intensifying by the minute. Elias asked who wanted to go the extra 705 feet (a mere two football fields!) to the Uhuru (Freedom) Peak of 19340 feet (5895 meters). It would take another two hours! Not unsurprisingly, no one accepted his generous offer. Funny, eh, after all the hype and effort. The unanimous decision was the 'Tourist Top' of Gillman's Point was Absolutely Terrific, thank you!

After all, with the energy drained we still had to get off the hill, traverse The Desert returning to Horombo Hut (No. 2) by the end of the long day. Some in the group understandably wanted to join their partners who unfortunately were unable to reach their dream. Clearly moments like these: meeting the challenge is the 'true reward' we can put in our Memory Bank forever.

DAY FOUR CONTINUED: THE DESCENT

Returning down the volcanic slope in the daylight, with ever increasing breath and the elation of success not surprisingly catalyzed a new reservoir of energy. Some in the group descended together. Others like myself met up, chatted a bit, and came down at our own pace. No one showed signs of illness the discussion topics were virtually electric, expressing satisfaction and positive emotions. Nonetheless one had to be aware to lift their boots from the stones and simultaneously sliding down the cone. I do not know why but it was at this time that I placed myself of those pictures we all have seen of Mount Kilimanjaro.

It seemed to take at least a couple of hours to get off the cone. We acknowledge our 'home' of Kibo Hut (No. 3) as we continued returning through the long stretch of The Desert. Elias and all the porters, cooks and others from our group who did not make the rim were well in front of us. I was very sorry to learn that two of the British VSOs who 'raced' to assure our beds in Horombo Hut had to turn back from the ascent. Clearly, all we hear about acclimatizing for altitude is indeed true. Equally unfortunate one member of each of three couples did not reach the top. I overheard each pair and the volunteers say they were signing up for next year's climb. Terrific to have that spirit and I too wished them all Full Success to reach for their dreams.

We were walking along or in small groups. As before there was no Coke Cola sign or anyone within view. We were on to regroup with our party and sleep in the beds of the infamous Horombo Hut. Somehow I found the journey through The Desert seemed an excessively long journey. The magic I saw before was there, but we just had to keep moving downhill to reach the hut. Maybe it was the excitement still of reaching the top and I was unable to process all the wonderment. After all it was a long day and indeed I had miles to go. How the feet managed and not complain surely was also a mystery to me. Not surprisingly after the climb I remember the descending period strained the legs and feet but the head and heart were light.

DAY FIVE: EVERLASTING FLOWERS

At breakfast we were to learn that many villagers had been working for us during the night. Our mentor and guide Elias made a heartfelt short speech and presented each of us who had made it to the top a crown of Everlasting Flowers. These flowers are from over 10000 feet (304 meters) and creatively intertwined with their stems. Indeed what an endearing Surprise! We all were overjoyed with their generosity. As we walked retraced the trail through the coffee farms, the villagers waved and greeted the climbers. The children surely knew the 'winners' of this trek and shouted their joyous multilingual remarks. Indeed we all were winners. The remainder of the walk to the Marangu Hotel was equally joyous. We pose for picture and had a wonderful group dinner.

To this day my Everlasting Flowers replete with a picture of those 'earlier days' in the grounds of the Marangu Hotel. It is in a boxed frame on the wall near my bed. While we learn that every day may not turn out as the best day, I have only to glance at the frame - to remember a very Happy Memory and to be energized.

A MEMORABLE RETURN FLIGHT

Within three weeks of walking up Mount Kilimanjaro I was completing my assignment and leaving Tanzania. I had the occasion to meet and thank Major General Sarakiki for his courtesies allowing me to play squash on the Barracks's court and with such congenial officers and gentlemen. Naturally, I took the opportunity to relate my experiences climbing Mount Kilimanjaro and conveyed best regards from Elias. We enjoyed the short conversation.

Ironically en route Nairobi, I was the only passenger on the KLM flight. I mentioned to the attendant that, if the conditions would permit and the sky were clear I would be most obliged if I could take a few pictures of Mount Kilimanjaro, for my Memory Bank. She kindly asked the Captain. Can you believe it: in the late morning Mount Kilimanjaro was crystal clear with nary a cloud in the sky - and on cue the Captain indeed did a 360 degree circle over the crater allowing me to take a fantastic series of photos. I must dig out these pictures one of these days. These too can adorn on my walls.

Subsequently I have landed at the Kilimanjaro International Airport in Arusha. Never with enough time to get off. Still, standing on the steps and looking at the environs and Mount Kilimanjaro brings back the fondest of memories and all my working days in Tanzania.

KARIBU, YOU ARE WELCOME: MOUNT KILIMANJARO AWAITS YOU

We know there have been dramatic changes in our lives and the world, and changes will continue. Doubtless the cyber world (search on Kilimanjaro Trek) and Discovery Channel brings you armchair travels to an 'art form'. True, but I advocate one of the very best weeks in your life will be to take the challenge and opportunity enjoying every step of the way (34 km.) to climb Mount Kilimanjaro.

Reflecting on the whole week, the climb and reaching the top of Mount Kilimanjaro I honestly can say it was and remains a truly life changing and inspiring experience. The full complexity of the week's journey reaches one intermittently and only along our longer life's journey. Viewed holistically, with multiple benefits, it is far more than African's highest peak; it is indeed The Special K. The total experience, viewed from a longer-term perspective, can provide each of us Uhuru. It is up to you. Now, can you say that about your previous cruise and island tours, perhaps? I look forward to meet you on the trail, hopefully, in the not too distant future!

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