

## Climbing Kilimanjaro – August 2010

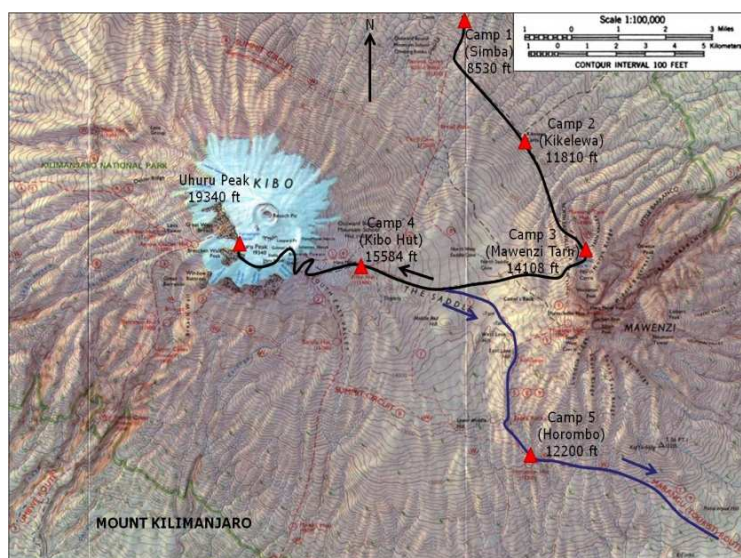
- Sunil Nehru

Kilimanjaro (Africa's highest mountain at 19,340 ft) has long held a personal fascination for me and the chance to climb it finally came in 2010. Avilash, our trip leader from one of India's leading adventure companies organized the trip, and Zara Tours, Tanzania, provided local ground support services. Our group of 21 climbers assembled at the Springlands Hotel in Moshi, Tanzania on Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> August 2010. The first view we had of our objective, was a ghostly vision floating in the haze, high above us. Were we really going to climb that? It seemed impossible!



Our group had five women, one married couple and two father and son pairs. Ages ranged from 66 years to 25 years, and members of the group hailed from India, Italy, the Czech Republic, Malaysia, USA, the UK and Switzerland. The group got on well together and there was much fun and banter. None of us, except for Avilash, our expedition leader, had climbed so high before. We knew that only 60% made it to Uhuru Peak, the highest point. Had we bitten off more than we could chew? The tension and excitement became palpable as we set off on Monday 16<sup>th</sup> August.

Our route had been chosen to optimize acclimatization time and climb difficulty. We would enter from the north on the gentle Rongai route and then exit southwards by the steeper Marangu route. An extra acclimatization day at Mawenzi Tarn (14,000 ft) would improve our chances of avoiding Acute Mountain Sickness that can strike anyone above 10,000 ft. From Kibo Hut camp at 15,500 ft we would make the final push for the summit. A series of switchbacks would take us up to the crater rim, but a further two hours would be needed to reach Uhuru Peak, the highest point.





Our chief guide, Chombo, led a team of five assistant guides, a kitchen crew and sixty-three porters – three per climber! Everything was carried by the porters – tents, personal luggage, food, fresh fruit and vegetables, cooking utensils, stoves, fuel and the all important chemical toilets! The porters would strike camp after we had left each morning, but were so strong and fit they rapidly overtook us so that when we arrived at the next camp everything had been set up and we were welcomed with hot tea and biscuits! They were quite amazing!

The trek began at about 3 pm along a gently rising dusty path which wound through maize fields and timber plantations. We met several little children from the nearby villages and gave them sweets. The people were very poor but unfailingly polite and friendly. We took about three and a half hours to reach Simba Camp at 8500 ft, our first night halt. The first day's hike had been an easy warm up for the days to follow. Sleep did not come easily that first night as everything was unfamiliar and uncomfortable! And the temperature dipped below freezing during the night.



The second day's hike to Kikelewa camp (11,000 ft) was seven hours long. The trail now became quite rocky and rugged and woodland gave way to open moorland with tall, coarse shrubs and grasses, dotted with pretty wildflowers. We were given a wonderful hot lunch en route, complete with tables and chairs, out in the open. After a much needed rest, we continued the hike, crossing a series of dry river valleys, with steep ups and downs. All the while we had stunning views of Mawenzi before us and Kilimanjaro off to our right.



With aching limbs and parched throats, we made it into Kikelewa Camp late in the afternoon, quite exhausted. The rough track had taken its toll and the boots of one of our lady members had completely fallen apart. Makeshift repairs had to be made on the spot. Now, at 11,000 ft, small shrubs and grasses dominated the vegetation. Looming over us in the distance was beautiful Mawenzi, Kilimanjaro's second volcanic peak. The next day we would hike to its base, about four hours away. But for now we were grateful to be able to rest and recuperate.

Kikelewa was just another staging post on the long march to the base of Kilimanjaro, but it gave us a memorable sunrise. The effects of altitude had begun to appear – loss of appetite, fitful sleep, nausea and headaches. I had started out with a nagging chesty cough, and as we ascended it became worse. Others had been having stomach cramps and vomiting. Our next objective was Mawenzi Tarn at the very foot of Mawenzi where we would take a day off to rest and acclimatize. Everyone looked forward eagerly to catching up on some much needed sleep.



Mawenzi Tarn, a small pond at the very foot of Mawenzi was a picturesque campsite. All our water was drawn from the tarn, but it had to be boiled and treated before we could drink it. It was a cold spot with chilly winds and fog and most of us preferred to stay tucked up in our cosy sleeping bags! At 14,000 ft our bodies were gradually adjusting to the low level of oxygen in the atmosphere. On our day off, we did a two hour hike up the steep face of Mawenzi to learn how to deal with the loose scree which we were going to encounter on Kilimanjaro. It was exhausting but filled us with confidence.



Next, we crossed the vast stretch lying between Mawenzi and the dome of Kilimanjaro – the saddle. The hike across the saddle took over six hours. This windswept, lava-strewn plain had only a few grasses and lichens. We ate our lunch packets crouched behind some boulders to avoid the wind. Kilimanjaro lay before us in all her majesty, looking regal and forbidding. We would commence our summit bid that same evening at about 11 pm after just 4 hours of rest! The ascent would be made in pitch darkness! The butterflies in our stomachs were coming alive!

By the time we reached the Kibo Hut Camp it was mid afternoon and the weather had turned nasty. Icy winds and mist swept the campsite and we stayed inside our sleeping bags trying to snatch some sleep. Finally, after a light dinner at 10 pm, we put on all our heavy winter wear and waterproofs, switched on our headlamps and set off up the steep scree slope to the crater rim in total darkness. All that was visible was a winding procession of lights up the flank of the mountain, merging with stars above, each climber focused on the pool of light just in front of him.



After what seemed an absolutely never-ending climb, with the constant encouragement of our guides, we crested the crater rim at Gilman's Point (18,500 ft) at 6.30 am, totally exhausted. We were greeted by a stunning sunrise over Mawenzi. To our dismay we found our bottles of water frozen solid so the much needed drink would have to wait. Uhuru Peak, the highest point was still two hours further away around the crater rim. It seemed beyond our grasp! But somehow, after a short rest we summoned all our will power and reserves of strength and plodded on...



The final two hour hike around the crater rim to Uhuru Peak was relatively easy – we ascended only a further 1000 ft. It was freezing at around -15 deg C, there was a stiff wind, the level of oxygen was just 50% of that at sea level. Though every step was hard to take, we walked slowly and steadily, resting frequently, knowing that the summit was almost in our grasp. To our right the crater rim fell away sharply several hundred feet to the rock strewn crater floor below us. It was a stark lunar landscape – bare and devoid of life.

We found ourselves walking in bright sunshine on a path covered in fine volcanic rubble and dust. In front of us loomed one of Kilimanjaro's mighty glaciers. As one came closer it was apparent that the ice was over a hundred feet thick and extended for some kilometers. Bright blue and dark layers were visible within its structure. The sunshine thawed our frozen water supplies and we were able to take a much needed drink. As we rounded the final bend we could see the famous wooden sign that marks the highest point in the distance and were filled with relief that we had actually made it!



Seventeen of us reached the Roof of Africa around 8.30 am local time! We spent about thirty minutes relaxing and taking photographs of our triumph! CanSupport's banner was unfurled for its moment in the sun. Our guides remained ever watchful, mindful of the fact that we still had about six hours of descent to accomplish before our next rest stop for lunch, and a further five hours to the next camp for the night. But at that moment we felt like kings and the challenges that still lay ahead would be a piece of cake! Kilimanjaro had graciously allowed us to conquer her!