

Date 28 June 2007
Time 21 30 pm
Altitude 1300 m
Location: Marangu Hotel

Today we arrived at the base of Mt Kilimanjaro.

At 6pm, for the very first time the full group of 20 assembled in the briefing room, a musty but charming space filled with old photos and detailed maps of the mountain. It's all very close and there is a serious bout of pre match nerves spreading through the group

Seamus, one of the owners of the hotel then talked us through what we should expect. We spoke for over an hour but we clinged to every word. As he explained the details of the trip, the route we would take and what we would see, the reality of what lay ahead hit us.

He reminded us of what we already knew; our biggest adversary is the thin air. The training, the equipment, the energy gels: none of that will help us against mountain sickness.

It also looks as though there will be some nasty stretches of climbing. The day of the ascent sounds arduous. We begin at midnight and climb for six hours in the freezing cold before we reach the first summit. We then continue for two hours to the peak, take photos feel great, before turning back for a 45 minute walk and a two hour descent to camp, a brief rest and another three hour trek to reach the next camp.

He said there would be parts of the climb, where we would be asking ourselves what the hell we were thinking. This was the first part.

At this point I, and i think the entire group, realised how much mental strength we will need to make it up the mountain, Many people succeed but it doesn't mean this will be easy. I've been joking that I'm not going to make it but I am convinced I will get there. Failure would be horrible, even if I know it's out of my control.

Seamus acknowledged that we would forget most of what we told us but we should remember four things - go slowly, eat plenty, drink plenty, and enjoy yourself.

I'm determined to enjoy myself but also to do everything I can to make it to the top. It will not be easy but like the old cliché - nothing in life worth doing is easy.

Date 29 June 2007
Time 21 30 pm
Altitude 2300 m
Location: Hotel to Simba campsite

The day has finally arrived and we're ready to go. There's a huge team of 57 support staff accompanying us and we were introduced to Steve, our heard porter, and Reggie, the number two, the cook, the campsite manager and the rest of the gang. We also met our individual porters. Mine is Balthazaar, what a top name. He's a quiet but polite guy. Its his 30th climb.

We then boarded the trucks that would drive us to the gates. The road was dirty and bumpy and those of us at the bag were thrown around like popcorn seeds. Our asses were aching when we stopped for lunch at a peculiar village pub run by a stumpy little woman who had a crush on Michael.

When we got back on the bus we were hounded by the village kids, who really wanted handouts - they kept calling for chocolates or a pen. When someone did hand out a candy bar a vicious scrap ensued with kicking punching and biting...And then the white man came! It turned out that the kids knew a few colourful English words.

At about 14h30 we arrived at the gate to sign the visitor's book. While we were waiting I kicked a flimsy soccer ball around with some of the local kids, but with very little exertion I was completely out of breathe. I think that was my first taste of the thin air.

Then the walk began. It was at a very slow pace - One leg then the next. It was not very tiring and it gave us all a chance to begin to get to know each other. I spoke to Paul about world history and to Ed about his fashion business, and Michael about how crazy my uncle really is.

The walk was interrupted by a lot of toilet stops. Diamox - the diuretic that is supposed to help us with the altitude is making us all need to pee, all the time. I'm sure I'll be up in the middle of the night to empty water the rocks.

Disposing of human waste is a favourite topic on the mountain. I've yet to brave a number two, but I'm sure nature will get the better of me soon.

We arrived at the campsite just after 18 30. When we saw it I think we were all pleasantly surprised. The tents are small but comfortable and the meal served in the dining room was excellent. I almost feel like I'm not roughing it at all.

When night fell, we could see a big and bright full moon. With such a light evening some of the stars were drowned out but it did allow us a first glimpse of the mountain, deep in the distance.

Tomorrow we hike for eight hours to Kikelewa caves- Time to switch off my headlamp and get my first nights sleep on the mountain, but not before using up some of my carbon credits.

Date 30 June 2007

Time 20 05 pm

Highest Altitude 3700 m

Locations:Simba to Kikelewa campsite

The day was long and arduous. It started early enough at 1 am when nature made a booty call. I was so snug in my below zero sleeping bag and the thought of unzipping myself, and the two tent zips, putting on clothes and heavy hiking boots and dashing into the freezing cold, was all too much. After a while I deduced that the alternative was worse.

At 7 am Baltazaar came with a cup of tea. Breakfast was hearty, porridge, fruit and eggs.

We set off at 8 30. The walk was long and after two hours I was already tired, and after four I was exhausted and ready for lunch. A soggy egg sandwich fused with orange was not a highlight but it seemed to do the job.

The walk continued up the rocks slowly slowly. At 3 o'clock we had reached a point where we were high in the sky.

It was a magnificent site to see a rolling blanket of clouds pushing against the mountain below us. Ahead of us was the mountain, which was now starting to look intimidating. On and on we went. It seemed endless. A few of us got slight headaches, a reminder of how high we were and another early dose of the effects of altitude.

At 15 30 we finally caught a glimpse of the campsite nestled on the slopes of the valley. It must be one of the world's most spectacular locations. Casting a shadow over us is the smaller but more menacing Mawenzi peak, and further to the west waiting for us was the ice tipped mass of Kilimanjaro.

As darkness fell we could see deep into the valley and as the full moon rose the lights of the villages hundreds of miles below us became visible.

Tomorrow we walk to Mawenzi. We should have a better idea of how our bodies will cope with the mountain.

Date 1 July 2007

Time 19 20 pm

Altitude 4300 m

Location: Kikelewa to Mawenzi campsite

Once again I'm tucked deep in my sleeping bag ready to call it a night. It's freezing, colder than before and I'm not looking forward to starlight express - the midnight dash to the bushes to empty the bladder. About 1 am is peak time for the express. No one wants to encounter another express runner so it's a matter of making your dash during the small window after the previous runner has zipped up and before the next runner has zipped down. If you miss out you have to wait your turn and sometimes you have to compete with your own tent partner. It's pretty ugly but not as ugly as running into another express runner.

The third day was a standard start. A 7 am rise, a hearty breakfast and a briefing from Steve. Steve is softly spoken with poor English and he has chosen Wombie and his translator. Wombie's command of the local language is impressive, he must have dated a Swahili or watched the Lion King a hundred times.

Today's hike is only four hours long. It was all uphill but at a manageable pace. We were hardly out of breath even though we were climbing steadily. There were some spectacular views of the clouds which seemed to be part of the land below.

The weather was good but after about two hours we walked into a cloud and felt the bite.

Just after 13:00 we rounded a rocky ridge and caught sight of the Mawenzi campsite. It sits on a rocky patch beside a small and misty lake. It's hard to

believe we are at 4,300 meters. It's close to freezing and we are all in our warmest gear.

Once we'd settled in lunch was served. The chef made a terrible mistake. He went for energy, but the baked beans he served would fuel a farting frenzy that would continue late into the night.

After lunch we went on a short hike to help us acclimatise to the altitude and the loose gravel of the slopes. The rocks were steep but the pace was slow and manageable.

The effects of altitude still await us. The group has not had any problems expect for Joel who has had a bad reaction to the Diamox. It's not essential to take Diamox but I would rather do everything I can to increase my chances of making the summit.

Dinner was once again top class. I'm eating and sleeping way better than I would be at home. Hygiene is another matter altogether. I must smell like a miners armpit or worse. I feel sorry for whoever hugs me at the top of the mountain.

The day was not too demanding but still draining by the end of the day. Yesterday was long but the truth is we haven't even begun to tap our reserves.

Tomorrow is where it all counts - a seven hour day hike and an eight hour midnight summit. That's not easy for anybody and incredibly tough for some. I'm sure its where the holiday ends and the cracks will appear. We had better rest up because from now on we are going to need every bit of strength we have.

Date 2 July 2007

Time 19 00 pm

Altitude 4700 m

Location: Mawenzi to Kibo Hut ("the Saddle")

It was a brutal day. We saw our first casualty with Jeremy succumbing to mountain sickness. Joel too is suffering but soldiering on.

It was heartbreaking to lose Jezza as part of the team of five and of twenty. We were really close on the climb and seeing the disappointment on his face was tough. It must be a lonely and difficult night for him.

He took the news like the trooper that he is, but you could see he was broken. We gathered around him and told him that the climb was the icing on the cake, the real achievement is the contribution he made leading up to the climb.

Overweight people, smokers and many others have succeeded on Kilimanjaro but few have managed to come up with a plan to help a friend commit to a selfless cause, work as a team and realise a vision. For this my friends, Wombie, Jeremy, Danny and Matt can be immensely proud. Few have the ability, commitment and desire to do what they have done. 'The climb is the victory parade, the game has already been won' I said. Not sure if anyone heard or cared at the time.

Nonetheless, if it was me I would be inconsolable, and it could have been. The mountain is indiscriminate.

Last night was frosty again. I slept in a tight ball at the bottom of my sleeping bag but the beans I had for lunch nearly gassed me. Tony and Michael continued their fart wars well into the night and their lungs had far more harmful things to worry about than the altitude.

After breakfast we set off. After a short while we stopped for a short break. Jeremy was resting on a rock and popped open one of those vile tasting energy gels- toxic snot - and then wretched his guts out. He got up and carried on but was literally dragging himself along the path. He looked like Moses leading his people through the dessert, slouched over with his hood covering his head leaning against his long wooden pole as he dragged himself forward. We all clustered around him following him onwards.

We could see Kibo Hut our destination from the moment we began walking. The terrain was remarkably desolate - nothing but gravel and rocks.

The saddle of the valley lowered and then rose so that we had a sight of the relatively straight pathway to Kibo, which did not seem to get any closer. The land became more barren as we neared the mountain. Poor Jo was busting for the loo but there really was nowhere to hide.

There was nowhere to hide from the wind as the temperature plummeted. All the while Kibo seemed to be closer than it actually was.

With Kibo only an hour away, We stopped for a break. Jim, a doctor, and Steven decided it was the end of the road for Jeremy. We broke the news to him and it was time to say goodbye. Not an easy moment. We realised then that we would not all be there together at the top. The whole time however I was worried about Joel, who had terrible luck on the trip. He was really feeling the altitude and was sick along the way.

The last hour to Kibo, he looked like a dead man walking, swaying and stumbling. I tried to make him feel better by telling him bad jokes but the truth is I had heard most of them from him.

He made it though and of that he should be proud. He's going to have a crack at the summit and whether he makes it or not he's won everyone's respect. When we did arrive at Kibo it was close to 16 00. We had tea and a short break, where I used the basic facilities with great success. We then had an early dinner and then went to our tents to prepare our packs, donned our multiple layers and tucked ourselves into bed.

We'll be woken up at 11 to commence the final ascent. I'm part anxious, part excited, part petrified, but I know I have done everything I could to be in a position to reach the summit. If I don't make it, it's out of my control. Time to turn of my headlamp and dream about being on the top of Africa!

Date 4 July 2007

Time 10 00 pm

Altitude 1300 m

Location: Marangu Hotel

This is my first entry since summit day. Sheer exhaustion prevented me from doing anything other than collapsing in a heap following a day of drama and joy.

Yesterday, 3 July 2007 will remain in my memory forever. It was the worst day of my life, and by far, the best.

We got up as planned at 11pm with tea and biscuits. I was excited that the ascent was finally beginning. It was enough of thinking and worrying and I was glad the moment had come. As expected it was incredibly cold. I was dressed in my climbing gear - two layers of thermals, a long sleeve shirt, a fleece, long johns, a fleece pants, wet weather pants, thermal socks, a gortex jacket, a beeny, a scarf and my trusty boots would still leave me feeling a little chilly. Joel was sluggish getting out of bed and didn't look well.

At midnight the ascent began. In the moonlight with our head torches we began to gradually work our way up the mountain. I was at the back of the pack with Joel but after ten or so minutes the last headlamp in the line was far behind. I knew then that Joel wouldn't make it. It was very disappointing but I was relieved. He pushed himself as far as his body would allow, any more would have been dangerous.

I kept on but was far behind. My pace was slow and I feared I would not make it to the summit. I picked up the pace and found a guide. I was immediately joined by Danny. I knew then that we would get each other up the mountain. We chatted to Radian, the guide who would set the pace. Pole Pole but with no stops. It was too cold to have long breaks. I remained focused on Radian's feet lit up by my head torch copying his every step as we wended up the mountain.

In the cold dark of night we trudged along slowly. The gravel slopes were difficult to grip and I was starting to tire. I tried not to focus on time and distance. Blissful ignorance had got me this far and I was going to need it to get all the way to the top. At about 3 am we reached Hans Meyer cave, the halfway point. Danny and I had set a good pace and had caught the main group. I tried to sip some water from my camel back but it has frozen so I now had to carry an ice cold silver water bottle in my jacket. I had some jungle bars handy but I didn't feel hungry in the cold.

I now had a dull headache but otherwise felt strong and confident. Making the summit was the only option. It was as simple as that.

I continued along but my head started to pound and my legs felt weak. Each step was a struggle but I remained focused on Radian's feet. Every few steps I couldn't resist peering up to see how much mountain remained above me.

Now we did not have long to go but nor did my wobbly legs. I was stumbling like a beaten boxer. I knew these were early symptoms of cerebral oedema. Maybe it was my state of semi consciousness or my determination but I carried on. I was too high up to turn around anyway.

I knew we were very close. Radian stopped to tell us there were only a few more rocks to climb and he encouraged us along. Expect me, who he told to wait. He could see signs of sickness. It was his job to get us to the top but safely.

I respected that but there was no way I was going to stop so close to the top. I would never live it down. Despite the lack of clarity in my head I knew it was too close to give up and was prepared to take a risk.

Okay... but pole, pole, pole" said Radian, I slowed my pace to a virtual crawl, which was all I was capable of. I stepped over another big rock and realised it were no more above it. I saw the wooden sign and heard Radian say 'You have made it to Gilmans Point, congratulations'. Danny and Paul were right behind me. and when he stepped up I gave him a huge hug. We had made it.! My body was shattered but my mind was buzzing.

The adrenaline quickly wiped out my headache. Radian whipped out a flask from his day pack and poured us a cup of tea. Fantastic. It was still dark but we could see the sun creeping up from beneath the clouds thousands of miles below us. We were the first ones up there and our reward was a sunrise so unique and magnificent it took whatever breathe we had away.

As the sun lifted itself up it reflected a golden pool of light onto the sheet of clouds below. Behind us was the snow tipped slopes of the crater valley below the night sky.

At 6 am under the same African sky the full moon lowered behind us as the sun rose from the clouds below us. From that height the view of the world was magical - something I will be trying in vain to describe for many years. We wanted to wait for Wombie and Matt who we could see below us, before we carried on to Uhuhu peak. In the back of my mind I thought the wisest thing was to turn back but the thought of not reaching the peak was worse than any severe mental incapacitation ., I thought. Perhaps it was too late!

Just after 6 15 Wombie and Matt reached the crater rim. Seeing the sheer elation on their faces gave me tingles. They were followed shortly by Phil, Tony, Dean and the Bertouch's - troopers throughout. Ed was already man of the match for throwing up along the way but digging deep and carrying on to the top. Having his dad must have helped but I reckon mine would have told me to turn back.

At that point, 5,600 meters in the sky we were all on a high. The ascent was long, gruelling and painful and we all soaked in the glory.

Me and Danny had been up for a while and it was starting to get cold. For us it was time to push on to Uhuru.

We were all in good spirits and were expected a gentle walk to the top. The landscape was spectacular, a white fantasy land in the sky. The early part of the walk was straightforward and relatively flat but we soon reached the icy hills. and the gradually but seemingly endless slopes. The altitude was not helping, each step required concentration and effort.

I still managed to pluck my camera out my pocket and take some shots of the summit landscape. To our left was the massive slope and an in incredible wall of ice that seemed to stretch across the entire mountain.

As we conquered each slope another seemed to appear and my strength was running low. One more slope lay ahead which was all I could manage. We reached the top of a slope and in the distance we could see it - The signpost marking the highest point in Africa. It was only a few meters ahead but it seemed too much for me. I was walking in front of Ed. We were both struggling and we tried to encourage each other as much as we could.

I gathered the few thoughts my dizzy head would allow and carried on to the top. At 8 30 I finally got there. I reached out with my arm to touch the sign with what seemed like my last ounce of energy.

We'd done it. We made it all the way to the top of Africa.

My eyes misted up and when they caught the eyes of the others they swelled even more. I felt many things for myself and everyone.

The months, days, and the hardest hours before had got us there. Steven shook my hand and I embraced Matt, Wombie and Danny. We'd made it together. Also with us were the unstoppable Bertouchs. Tony was there with his son, a proud moment for him and Matt. Phil too had reached the top with seemingly little effort as had Paul.

We took a moment to savour the view above the clouds and as high as were ever likely to be. Then we took photos, lots of photos of various permutations. My favourite is of the four of us, with Jeremy's hat resting on the post, it doesn't get higher than that. We set out to climb for arthritis but we also did it for ourselves. We all had to dig deep but we'd done it as a team.

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