

Cathy's Kilimanjaro diary

Day 1 – Long day, flying from Leeds to Kilimanjaro. Airport very sultry, finally set off for Moshi in a shabby minibus which rattles along through the warm dusk with the windows open. Excited to be in Africa, but nervous as well.



Photo courtesy of Leeds Taxi Club



Photo courtesy Arusha Times

Day 2 – at leisure - Hotel full of groups either setting off or returning. Lots of exuberant Americans. We visit downtown Moshi, get unexpected tour of Tanzanian Coffee Company facilities with self appointed guide Oscar, local children also attach themselves cheerfully to us on the walk back to hotel. Pre-trek briefing at 5, we meet our guide, Felix, and our 7 other trek companions, seem like a nice bunch.



Photo courtesy of businessfacilities.com

Day 3 – Raining! Check out and pile into another minibus for 30 minute drive to Machame Gate, where we register with Park authorities, and don our anoraks. Lots of other trekking groups there, crowd of locals outside the gate are all selling rain capes. Hope the weather improves. Set off through the forest, “pole pole” (Swahili for “slowly”), pleased I am keeping up. It takes us 5 hours to climb to Machame Camp at 3,000 metres. Feels like walking through an English wood, particularly because it drizzles all afternoon!



Photo courtesy of Into East Africa

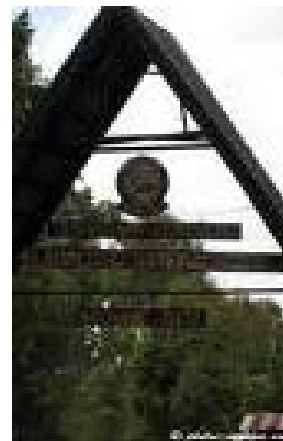


Photo courtesy of Travel Photos



Day 4 – Breakfast at 7am in the mess tent, eggs, sausage, bread, fruit and lots of hot water for tea and coffee: certainly won't go hungry on this trip. Start off in sunshine, climbing over rocky path through shrubby trees. Gradients are steep, and by lunch stop I have headache and feel distinctly under par. Mike still fine. Pass the Americans after lunch, two of their group already casualties taken off the mountain by road. Arrive at Shira Camp around 5, first clear view of the snowy summit. Worried about altitude sickness, dose up with aspirin and Diamox, and share some with Ed from our group who is also feeling bad. Disturbed night, high winds and very cold.



Day 5 – Early start for 7 hour trek to Lava Tower, 4,600 metres, and down again to Barranco. Weave our way slowly up the dusty stone-strewn gradient for what seems like hours before lunch. Sunny but chilly in the wind, everyone getting tired. Photos at Lava Tower – the highest most of us have ever been – then start dramatic descent down dry ravine dotted with fleshy Senesia trees, on shale. Fall over twice. Someone is sick. At Barranco Camp we get chicken and chips for dinner, lovely! Sleep like a log.



Day 6 – The Barranco Wall. Very steep rocky climb, need hands and feet, some scary moments. Simon from the group has a dizzy turn. Descent is quite scenic after barren Lava Tower, across snow-melt streams, we take it very slowly. It is important to avoid getting breathless: am reminded of Geoff, but feeling stronger now so must have acclimatised. Mike cracking jokes, clearly in his element. Arrive in camp in time for late lunch. Nice to relax and write up the diary, remove some of the dust with wet wipes (only one member of the group braves a stand-up outdoor wash).



Picture courtesy of Audley Travel

Day 7 – Climb to summit camp, at Barafu, 4,650m. Walking over reddish lava now, not a plant in sight. Reminded of Peter Jackson's "Lord of the Rings" –feels like climbing to Mount Doom. Barafu Camp teeters on a ridge, lots of groups there getting ready for their summit attempt. The routine, explained by Felix, is to rest after dinner and wake up at 11.30 pm to start climbing. We should arrive at Stella Point on the crater edge (5,750m) at dawn, with a further short climb to Uhuru (5,850m). We will get a "silver" certificate if we get to Stella Point and a "gold" at Uhuru (everyone obviously silently resolves to get to Uhuru). Back in the tent, get head torches and ski wear ready, worry about contact lenses; will we manage to apply them in the pitch dark?

11.45, slightly delayed start but we are soon climbing. It is freezing. Only visibility is small pool of light from the head torch, and stars overhead. Simon is unable to continue, and is taken back down after an hour. Tell myself each step is the equivalent of £1 in the fundraising kitty. Breathing is really difficult, a reminder of the cause we are supporting. Mike keeps going by reciting entire England world cup squad lists from the 1950's to present day under his breath. Climb seems endless, keep putting one foot in front of the other, on automatic pilot now.

Day 8 – Dawn breaks, we are just below Stella Point! Stop for warm sweet tea and vigorous hand-rubbing to get feeling back in numb fingers.



Climb to Uhuru in orange dawn light, everyone smiling now for our summit photos, even though we feel like

crying with relief and elation. The glacier glitters beside us, below us the crater, all around a sea of white cloud.



As Mike and I start down hand in hand, meet the Americans coming up, they left several at Stella Point.

Descent is hard, slipping and sliding in blazing sun on steep shingle for almost 3 hours. Our guide is fantastic, takes my backpack and steers Mike down by the elbow. Stagger into Barafu, 2 hours rest then 4 hours down to Mweka at 3,000m. Cold beer and coke half way down helps, but tired legs make walking on the rocky dry stream bed very difficult. Hope my "made it" texts have reached home. As Felix promised, at Mweka we "sleep like baby".

Day 9 – 3 hours back through the forest to Mweka Gate. Besieged by vendors of carvings, bracelets and paintings - Marianne from our group only saved from bankruptcy by bus arriving, and we return to Moshi for the most welcome shower of our lives. Later that evening, get our certificates and toast our success with Kilimanjaro beers - an incredible, rewarding and unforgettable experience.

