

Climbing Africa's Roof

by

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In my life, I've done extensive travelling throughout Europe, Central and South America and Asia and I've seen poverty many times. Yet, upon my arrival at the Kilimanjaro International airport I quickly witnessed even lower levels of poverty. Although I was seeing only a small part of the country yet I felt certain that the entire country was facing infrastructure and socio-economic problems, and that everything was broken down to the most basic level of human existence.

Mt. Kilimanjaro's first morning views were breath taking from my hotel's balcony. I sat excitedly on the veranda's sofa anticipating my upcoming adventure and the challenge to conquer the Roof of Africa.

Fifty minutes out of Moshi and at elevation of 1,800 metres a minibus took me towards Machame gate. Immediately, porters, cooks and guides began unloading our equipment. I signed the guest register book while all of our guides, porters and cooks filled out the necessary paper work.

Around 12 PM we finally started hiking. The whole way to the first campsite is rain forest. Everywhere you look, it's green. The lush, rich forest grows everywhere on everything. Even the brown, grey bark is covered with green moss. Ferns grow on fallen old trees, while vines snake their way up their host's trunks and limbs. Every leaf aims for the little spot of sunlight that pokes through the swirling mist. The forest is alive and yet it is decaying at the same time. Everywhere, water drips from the higher leaves of the trees and ferns. Molecules of water collect into a single drop at the end of a stringy piece of moss clinging to a vine. Cobwebs glisten with droplets of water, outlining their magnificent angular shape.

I had no problem in the next five days reaching Machame Camp (3,000 m), Shira Camp (3,800 m), Barranco camp (3,950 m), and Barafu Camp (4,500 m) respectively. During my ascent I didn't feel any fatigue or nausea from the altitude yet, I had a big problem to sleep because of my high level of adrenaline.

I completely enjoy on one side the valleys that spilled into the clouds below, and the ridges dotted with rocks. And on the other side, a mountain of a

crater that went straight up into the sky with glistening glaciers on top. Those views would change with the clouds passing by. Now you see it, now you don't.

The significance of the fact that current estimates of the glaciers that rest on the tallest mountain in Africa would be gone in about twenty years due to global warming was not lost on me.

On summit day the strong wind blew all the time against my face chilling me to the bone. Some other times the strong wind was mixed with a frozen rain making the ascent more exciting. With all the clothing needed and the minimal amount necessary to carry for the summit, I donned my headlamp and gazed towards the crater rim where Uhuru peak lay beyond. There was a long line of bobbing fluorescent blue lights leading the way up the crater rim. The other groups had left earlier and were already making their attempt. I checked my gear, pray, took a deep breath and walked out of camp at 12am October 28, 2008.

Much of the ground in and surrounding my campsite was made of millions of thin flat pieces of rock, resembling slate that made tinkling sounds as if we were walking on a massive pile of tiles. I really couldn't see much except for the stars, a sliver of moon looking like a white bowl in the sky and the dark shadow of the mountain looming above me with a faint string of lights demarking other trekkers that had passed before me. With the exception of the one-hour rock ledge climbing we had done the day before, this was the steepest part of the trail. It would be 15km of slogging my way up the crater to an elevation of 5,732 m at Stella's point, the second highest point of Kilimanjaro and 5,895m at Uhuru peak, the highest point in all of Africa!

At last the sky began turning lighter and lighter and I neared Stella's point. During my walk along the crater rim to Stella's point, I noticed that I wouldn't be going anywhere near the glaciers as I had hoped. Though I was in fact above the glaciers now, there wasn't any snow on the ground. At least I can say I saw snow in Africa, right near the equator! Not such a hard thing to believe nowadays.

I summited Uhuru peak at 6.30am. At the end I felt so strong that I decided to do 20 push-ups. My guide congratulated me while my emotions ran high since the first summit of the 7 summit project was successful.

The scenery was spectacular and I stood and ogled it for a while. As the sun rose in the West, Mt. Kilimanjaro's shadow was cast to the West and at one point completely blocked Mt. Meru from the sun. The shadow was

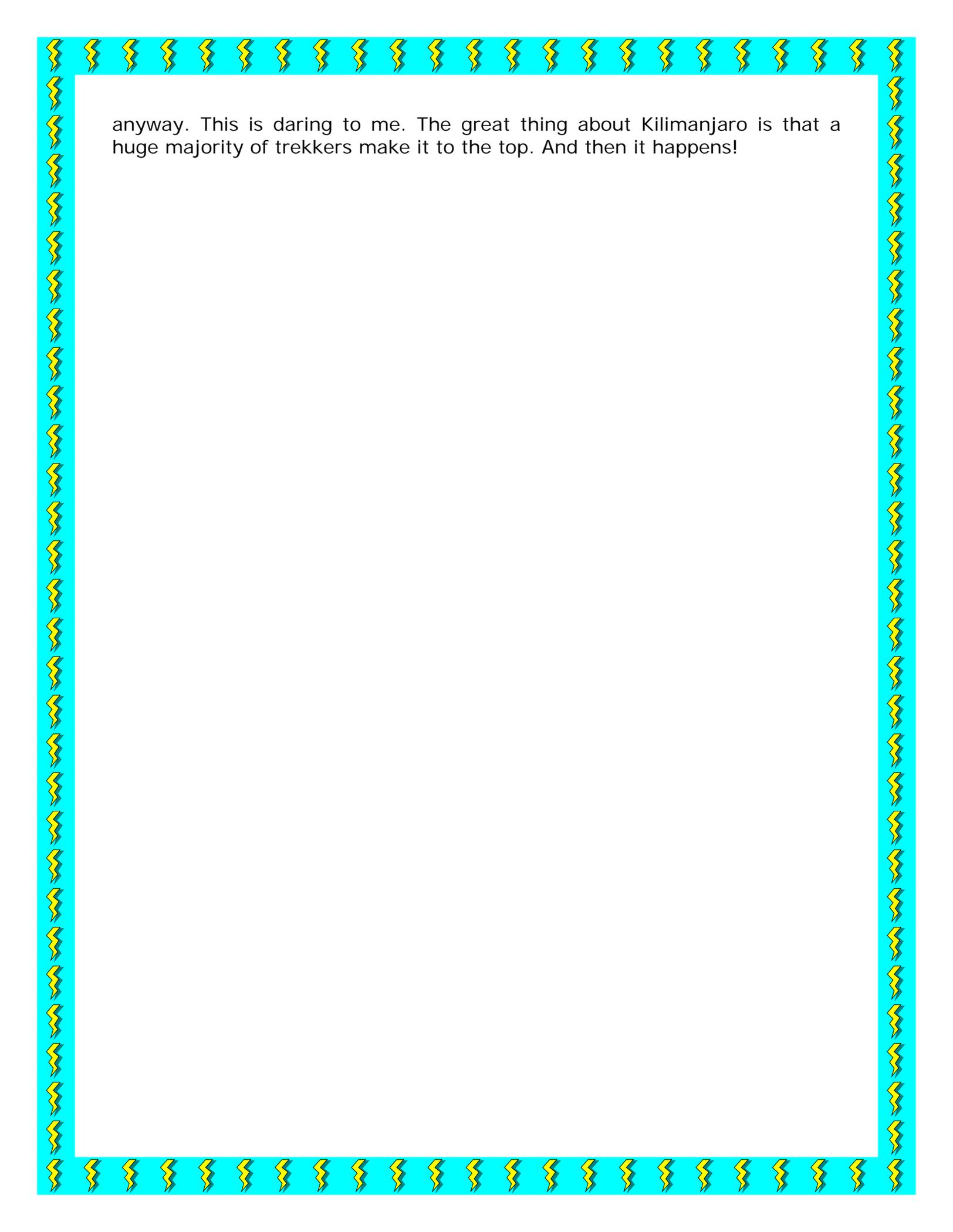
a perfect triangle. It was brilliant seeing a mountain's shadow from the peak and I was right on top of that shadow.

My return it was cruel since I decided to descent from summit (5,895 m) to Mweka Camp (2,850 m) without any rest and without water. Once more I wanted to test my limits. The trail was mainly loose volcanic gravel and made going down quick like quasi skiing but unsteady. Down and down and down the mountain I descended into the clouds again. By the time I reached the last campsite, Mweka camp, I was back in the rain forest again. Next morning I descended to Mweka Gate (1,750 m) where that was the finish line.

Having climbed Ama Dablam in Himalayas in 2006, I'm not sure what I expected to be like the ascent of Mt. Kilimanjaro. I knew that I was there for the challenge and putting under my belt the first summit of the 7 Summit project. Any article I read on Kilimanjaro it was warning you that you must be physically fit and ready to walk uphill for 6-8 hours a day. They weren't kidding. In fact, the first day I walked only about 5 hours but the rest of the time was at least 8 hours or more.

Yet the greatest challenge I faced was not headaches, fatigue, and altitude sickness or weather issues. I was well trained and prepared to face any hostile condition. But, there was a cluster bomb of emotion thrust upon me in the last few weeks when I learned that a good friend and co-climber from Ama Dablam, Guy Leveille from Canada was killed on Cho Oyu on September 16, 2008. Because the thoughts and emotions make you think that you may lose your love ones during difficult times that has as a result to turn you back. That's why I try to isolate myself from his thought and my emotions by using successfully a command technique. So, whenever my mind was taking off I was commanded it into isolation by using the expression "Seal the Room". Seal the room means that I have to walk into a dark black room without windows and access to the outside world.

The truth about mountaineering high mountains is that you must dare and take risks. Mt. Kilimanjaro does strange things to people. Symbolically, anywhere in the world, climbing an enormous mountain like Kilimanjaro represents a Herculean task, creating many skeptics that the human body can climb to the highest point in Africa. Before my summit I read in the internet that many Kilimanjaro climbers say that when they told their friends they were climbing Africa's highest mountain, they were told they were crazy, going to die of malaria, tribal wars, or altitude sickness. This type of energy from friends and family builds up mental and physical obstacles for climbing the mountain. But people go after the mountain and climb it



anyway. This is daring to me. The great thing about Kilimanjaro is that a huge majority of trekkers make it to the top. And then it happens!