

Up the Mountain Slowly, Very Slowly

By TOM BISSELL

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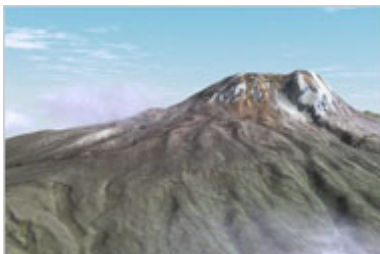
Full story with interactive media can be found at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/28/sports/playmagazine/28kilimanjaro.html?pagewanted=1&r=2&hp>

A few days after coming to terms with Thomson Safari, whose guides would escort me to the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro, I received an e-mail detailing the items I might want to bring along. The suggestions ranged from the sensible (hiking boots) to the unprecedented (battery-heated socks) to the alarming (personal urinal system). At the time I received this list, I was living in Rome, a city uncelebrated for its camping stores, and so I eventually landed in Tanzania with much less than was recommended. At a ranch a few miles from where I would begin my climb, I watched my bags being weighed. My conundrum was mathematically unfathomable: I had nowhere near what I was supposed to have, yet both my bags were overweight.



HIGH-ALTITUDE LABOR FORCE A Kilimanjaro porter carries all of the big loads up the mountain, everything from food and tents to porta-potties and folding chairs. Preceding pages: crossing the lava fields at 14,900 feet, by which point many climbers feel the dizzying effect of thin air.





THE CLOUDS OF KILIMANJARO The Karanga Camp, at 13,200 feet, in the shadow of the summit.

I had briefly intended to carry my own gear up the mountain, but a Thomson representative sternly disabused me of this delusion. All trekkers were required to allow a porter to carry his or her second, heavier duffel, while the trekker was responsible for a day pack. My day pack, at 32 pounds, was much heftier than recommended, and my duffel, at 38 pounds, was heavier than the 33-pound limit Thomson set for its Tanzanian porters, who have other equipment to carry as well. While I transferred eight of my duffel's forbidden pounds to my day pack, my fellow trekkers offered to mule some of my gear themselves. To incredulous head shakes, I announced my intention to carry my 40-pound pack to Kilimanjaro's Uhuru Peak. Forty pounds. How difficult could it possibly be?

To travel from a nation in the industrialized West to a nation like Tanzania is to marvel at many obvious divergences. But between such places there also exist far subtler divergences of what might be called extra-religious spirituality: how people think about life, and what they believe it means; how people look upon landscape, and what they believe they see — and these are exceedingly hard to parse when you have paid a great sum to come to Tanzania to do something virtually no Tanzanian of sound mind would contemplate doing for free.

Most of my fellow trekkers had spent upwards of \$10,000 for the privilege of climbing Kilimanjaro. Dana Story, for instance, was a boyish and “Simpsons”-quoting 33-year-old Boston-based accountant with reddish-blond hair, enjoying what he called his “first vacation in 10 years.”

Bernie Yeung was a tall 24-year-old Chinese-Canadian who had left his birthplace of Hong Kong at the age of 7, shortly after Great Britain announced that it would be returning the city to the Chinese government when its lease expired. Hong Kongers “are the most practical, forward-thinking people on earth,” Bernie said, in explaining his parents' decision to leave. Yet here their son was, impractically, climbing a mountain. Bernie, an accountant for an international firm, unleashed a face-spanning grin. “I like mountains,” he said. “You don't feel as alone anywhere else as on a mountain.”

Bernie was climbing with his friend Rob Stelzer, a 26-year-old accountant (naturally) for a Toronto-based Internet television company who made sure to bring an electric shaver and hair gel, so he would not “look terrible” in the photos from the trip. But Rob’s essentially stalwart nature was made clear early, when KLM lost his bags between Amsterdam and Tanzania, forcing him to begin the climb with virtually none of his own gear. He never once complained.

Andy Canizares, 28, said he was climbing Kilimanjaro “to take a long break from working.” The quietest member of our group, Andy was a slimly built Colombian-American who was about to begin his M.B.A. at Cornell. He had lived all around the world — South Korea, Hong Kong, Colombia, the United States — and the mountain appeared incapable of flummoxing him.

Nat Turner and his daughter Beth saw the Kilimanjaro Imax film together in 2003, which left Beth with a spellbound determination to climb the mountain. “After her freshman year,” Nat told me, “I said, ‘Let’s go for it.’ ” Nat has worked as a petroleum-industry geophysicist for 26 years and launched his own consulting company in 1996. Thin and sharply featured — he resembled a handsomer, less viper-faced [James Carville](#) — Nat was a man of obvious though not ostentatious intelligence. Beth, a round-faced, luminously blond 19-year-old entering her sophomore year at [M.I.T.](#), was thinking about the [Peace Corps](#) as a possible postgraduate option.

Alexandra Hauspurg, with Beth the youngest of the trekkers, was going into her sophomore year at [Duke University](#). Her mother, Daun, worked in New York City commercial real estate. Daun was a long-striding, brown-haired woman who often fiddled with her eyeglasses (they were new) and possessed a finely honed sense of pessimism: fully anticipating that her luggage would be lost, she packed as much into her carry-on as she could and wore several layers on the plane. Her luggage was, of course, lost.

As a certain kind of wealthy Westerner, we dealt mainly in abstraction, in the manipulation of numbers and words, and our daily existences were almost ridiculously comfortable. Here we were attempting to insert a 19,340-foot mountain into some perceived ontological hole in our lives. Helping us would be a small army of Tanzanians. For us, the mountain was a challenge. For them, the mountain was a daily, unmysterious fact of life, pictured on their beer bottles and laundry detergent boxes. It was, indeed, one of their largest employers. But the frustrations and ambiguities of employment were what we sought to abandon. Rob spoke for many of us when he said: “At work, the results of the decisions I make are always hard to gauge. This situation is clear — either you make it or you don’t.”



Simon Norfolk for The New York Times

TRAIL-WORN The boots of Kilimanjaro guides and porters, many of whom have reached the top more than 200 times — that's some four million feet of climbing.



Photos by Simon Norfolk for The New York Times

MR. VERSATILE Part guide, part professor, part nursemaid, Kaen Kapange wears many hats.

The route we would be taking to the summit is known as the Lemosho Route, currently the third most popular. The most popular is known as the Marangu Route or (more unkindly) the Coca-Cola Trail. Many of those who climb Kilimanjaro select Marangu, despite its relatively large percentage of summit failures. (It is estimated that a quarter of those who seek Kilimanjaro's summit, no matter their route, ultimately do not make it.) The Marangu Route failures are usually the result of having just five days to complete the climb, which is not always enough time to acclimate to the altitude. Why one of the most popular routes is known for its high percentage of unsuccessful ascents can be explained by the fact that many treks are booked by per-day costs. The decision to save five or six hundred dollars on a slightly riskier route becomes, when contemplating the climb through the windless world of a computer screen, as easy as a mouse

click. Lemosho, which one book calls “the easiest and in many ways the most satisfying” route to Uhuru Peak, gives trekkers seven days to get up and two days to get down. None of us, before we began, much worried about altitude sickness. Who was susceptible to it and who was not were virtually impossible to predict. The only way to find out was to climb.

In a pair of Land Cruisers, we passed beneath the handsome arches of the Londorossi Gate into Kilimanjaro National Park. Kaen Kapange, our 32-year-old head guide, was already there and greeted us with news that the night before he’d had a dream of the mountain: “It was snowing and beautiful and so very nice. Everyone was behind me coming, and no one was separated.” In bearing, voice, facial structure, personal charisma and surname, Kaen was a dead ringer for Captain Katanga, the African tanker captain who hides Indy and Marion from the Nazis in “Raiders of the Lost Ark.” Kaen had been to the summit of Kilimanjaro, which he referred to as his “head office,” 120 times. His assistant guides were Jonas Rutta, without question the most experienced of our guides (he had summited Kilimanjaro more than 250 times); Jackson John, a thin, dreadlocked, reggae-loving sweetheart who seemed about half of his 33 years; and Willison Mchome, a short, mustachioed, soft-spoken man of 49 who came off like a stylish melanin-inflected mountain gnome. From the little time we had so far spent with these men it was clear they teemed with a blinking, indulgent patience likely borne of their awareness of how lucky they were to have relatively remunerative jobs in a nation with a per capita income equal to the cost of two Arc’Teryx backpacks.

Idling Land Cruisers from other trekking companies were everywhere at the gate. Kaen squired us through the diesel air to a small building where he paid our park fees and we entered our names, ages, occupations, passport numbers and nationalities in a ledger. There were a lot of white people here. I had come to designate the places where the white outnumbered the black as North Face Africa, a place seen only in the Kilimanjaro International Airport, the better hotels and restaurants, and any other mountain-related holding station. The whites of North Face Africa, always slouchily relaxed in these surroundings designed to appease them, wore clothing that ran toward expensive safari themes, floral prints, sari-type garments and, now that we were on the mountain, the bright clean synthetic rainbows of trademarked names that carried simultaneous promises of danger and fortification: Mountain Hardwear, Patagonia, Outdoor Research and, of course, the North Face. In our bandannas and drug-smuggler sunglasses and huge Frankensteinian boots, with our faces war-painted in zinc sunblock and our bare arms glistening with insect repellent, with our digital watches designed to withstand napalm and our heavy fleece sweaters tied collegiately around our waists, many of us looked ridiculous.

I walked over to one of several large wooden signs planted around the perimeter, just inside the fences wreathed in barbed wire to keep out wildlife. The sign said, “Hikers attempting to reach the summit should be physically fit.” It was Day 1 of the climb, and I felt pale, grub-like, physically decrepit. This, like everything else inadequate about my current life, I blamed on the city in which I had been living for the last year. Two weeks after my arrival in Rome, one of my closest friends died unexpectedly, and I was not able to attend the funeral. Established work habits correspondingly atomized. I did little but play the appropriately titled Oblivion on my Xbox 360, surf up and down the Krakatoa of the Internet, and swig whiskey like a Welsh versifier. What put me in Rome was a generous literary prize, and yet the longer I spent there the less deserving of this gift I felt. When, after six months, my relationship with my girlfriend fell

apart, I blamed the city for that, too. The 20 pounds I gained: Rome. The loss of my novel, which I threw away in disgust after months of work: Rome. Yet it was easily the most beautiful city I had ever seen. To fall apart in that place, I realized one day, was to hate life. A realization that should have presented a fork in the road of my depression only blackened the skies above it. The chance to climb Kilimanjaro — which is perhaps the world’s most literary mountain, forever identified with Hemingway, but also climbed by [Michael Crichton](#) (who was encouraged by the fact that it looked more “like a breast than a mountain” and who considered his climb “the hardest thing I had ever done”), [Dave Eggers](#) (who used the experience to write “Up the Mountain Coming Down Slowly,” among the finest short stories of the last decade) and the science-fiction writer Douglas Adams (who reached the summit in a rubber rhinoceros costume) — felt less like an assignment than a salvage operation.

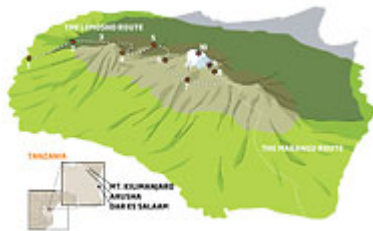


Illustration by Jason Lee

THE BEST TIME TO GO is January and February, or August and September, when the weather is most favorable. As a rule, the longer the trip, and the more time given for altitude acclimation, the better a hiker’s chances of reaching the summit. There are several routes up the mountain, though the Lemosho Route, which Tom Bissell took, is one of the most scenic. Outfitters supply some equipment, but expect to bring the essentials, including a sleeping bag with a 0-degree Fahrenheit rating, a headlamp and a method for purifying water. Ask your doctor about a prescription for Diamox, which helps prevent and treat altitude sickness.

The writer [Jon Krakauer](#) once referred to the impulse to climb a mountain like, say, Everest as “a triumph of desire over sensibility.” Those who give in to this desire are “almost by definition beyond the sway of reasoned argument.” I was beyond no such sway. To me, climbing a mountain seemed pointless at best, suicidal at worst. Kilimanjaro, however, was different. Unlike the rest of the world’s so-called Big Seven peaks, Kilimanjaro required (as almost every promotional broadside reminds) “no technical skill.” Thousands of people reached its summit every year. But it was not considered easy, and ominous talk of how well one had prepared begins as soon as the customs line at Kilimanjaro International Airport.

How had I prepared? The day before I left Rome, I stuffed my backpack with everything I had bought and climbed up and down the Janiculum, central Rome’s highest hill, twice. By the time I finished, I looked and felt as if I had fallen into the Trevi Fountain, swallowed gallons of its microbial water and then sprinted home.

While a pair of black-and-white colobus monkeys, which looked like tree skunks, watched from a pendulous branch, we shouldered our packs and walked to a nearby clearing. Our 39 porters were already here, dressed in [Salvation Army](#) attire: cutoff blue jeans, Planet Hollywood and U.S.M.C. T-shirts, knit hats from the 1998 Nagano Olympics. A few waved. We made our way

to the utterly surreal sight of a tableclothed fold-out picnic table in the middle of a jungle; upon this table, quite a repast had been set. We had already received some inkling of North Face Africa's luxuriousness when we pulled up for a pre-climb stay at Ndarakwai Ranch, where Tanzanian youths came toward us bearing trays of flower-scented washcloths and passion-juice cocktails. We had assumed such treatment would end on the mountain but now took our seats to find juice boxes, coffee, hard-boiled eggs and pizza. It then occurred to me that this table, and the nine chairs around it, would be following us up the mountain and that the nearby gentlemen would be carrying them.

Andy brought up how he was not comfortable asking people to carry something that was so supererogatory to the task at hand. "You need the table," Kaen said. Andy countered that, no, actually, eating on boulders was more than fine with him. He looked around for the concordance our timid nods provided. "You need the table," Kaen said again. "You paid for the table."

As I ate, I considered the porters. Representing every size, age and shape, these men worked in a field that thousands of Tanzanians attempted to break into every year despite the often distressing fates of the porters who accompany outsiders up the mountain. Porters routinely suffer from altitude sickness, and many travel with inadequate gear and clothing; shortly after our trip, two porters working for another trekking company died from hypothermia.

Most of my fellow trekkers had selected the expensive services of Thomson Safari because of its salutary reputation for how it treats its porters. Thomson's porters are paid a salary of \$8 a day, and they are not charged for food, unlike the porters of many other trekking operations. The Tanzanian minimum wage is a government-mandated \$35 a month, but a regularly employed Thomson porter can clear nearly seven times that, even before tips. A Thomson guide, meanwhile, earns about \$35 a day.

After lunch, the men began to pack up the table and chairs. Many of them had already gone ahead with our second, heavier bags. I threaded my arms through my day pack's straps and felt every one of its 40 pounds. Kaen told me, again, that he would be happy to help lessen my load by spreading out what I would not need during the day to other porters. I refused. His collapsed expression moved me to say that I would let him know how I was doing at all times. His eyes, their altitude-wrecked sclera as red as merlot, narrowed. "And you'll tell me the truth?" he asked. I told him I would, then wondered, Would I?

Willison set the pace by stepping forward, pausing, planting his other foot and pausing again. Designed to preserve our energy, this speed was roughly akin to a finishing-school exercise of walking with a book balanced atop one's head. The indignity was heightened by the fact that, every 30 seconds or so, someone shouted, "Coming through!" and groups of porters carrying chairs, tents, eggs, water, sleeping bags, our duffles, their own meager satchels and our two chem toilets hurried past. The chem toilets were ottoman-size plastic boxes that reeked of bleach, and it was unanimously agreed that the man charged with carrying these aromatic receptacles to the next campsite had one of the least enviable jobs on the mountain, if not the planet.

Then up into green-aired silence. At a stopping point, we looked back into a valley concealed by treetops and realized how high we had climbed in the last two hours. The sky opened and closed

and opened as the trees slowly became more coniferous. This forest, hypnotically full of sound, by turns cool and hot, was unlike any I had ever been in. The bees were so large and loud they floated past our faces like tiny flying outboard motors. Willison then pulled me aside, rubbed the white flowers of two bushes together and invited me to smell the sweet, cough-droppy result. Then he grinned and walked on down the path.

We arrived at our campsite to find the setting sun launching spears of light across the forest clearing. We were directed to our tents, inside of which our duffles had been stashed. Within an hour, teatime was announced, and we repaired to the Thomson dining tent. While Nat and I silently sipped our tea with Kaen, Bernie stuck his head through the door. "Daun's throwing up," he said. Kaen rose, saying, "I have something to do."

Throughout that night I heard Daun leave her tent and stumble toward the chem toilet, and then the quick, gushy sounds of internal stomach lavage. I awoke in the morning and rolled my sleeping bag into a nylon log and deflated my air mattress, which I had blown up myself, instantly developing a D-flat headache that had grown only worse with sleep.

Daun and Alexandra, we learned, would be going down. Daun partly blamed the vertiginous effects of her new glasses. As we said goodbye, she told us, "My nature is to push through. But the older you get, the more you realize pushing through hurts your body rather than strengthens it. If I feel like this now . . ." The thought was not completed, and she and Alex, accompanied by our assistant guide Jackson, walked off in the opposite direction.

How much one enjoys climbing Kilimanjaro will be at least partially determined by how one feels about flora. Botanically, Kilimanjaro is not that diverse; fewer than 60 species of plant life grow above 13,000 feet.

While climbing I was content to note in passing the shapes and colors of plants and flowers. Alpine naifs like me are regarded as the minority by Kilimanjaro's guides, who often stop midtrail, gather everyone around and reverently cite the names of the species under appraisal. That big tree? An East African camphorwood, or *Ocotea usambarensis*. The stand-alone tree in a field of ferns that looks like a bundle of pencils? The African pencil cedar, or *Juniperus procera*. These tiny, pink tuba-shaped flowers? *Impatiens Kilimanjari*. We had to enjoy this now, because as we climbed we lost one degree of vegetation-nourishing temperature for every 650 feet.

To climb Kilimanjaro was to experience four distinct ecosystems: the forest zone, the heather zone, the alpine desert and the ice cap. In 2001 an Italian reached the summit and descended in an astonishing 8 hours and 30 minutes. Three years later a Tanzanian beat the Italian's time by three minutes. Both of them, incredibly, ran the entire way. In terms of ecosystems and meteorology, this would have been akin to beginning one's morning jog in the central highlands of Vietnam, reaching northern Scotland by the late morning, wandering upper Norway around lunchtime and arriving at the high point of Ellesmere Island by late afternoon. The inevitable temperature shifts can be, to say the least, extreme. There is a story of a temperature drop near the summit so savage and sudden it is said to have left one luckless man frozen solid while peeling an orange.

All around us the forest had the pleasantly dense balms-and-aloe smell of a medieval apothecary. “Red-hot poker!” Willison announced, pointing to a thin red flower growing along the path. Joseph Thomson, the Scotsman after whom the plant (*Kniphofia thomsonii*) had been named (and who has no relation to Thomson Safari), tried for the summit in 1883. According to Willison, he gave up before making it out of the forest zone.

It is difficult to become a Kilimanjaro guide. Kaen told us that a licensed guide needs communication skills (“one or more international languages”), encyclopedic knowledge of the wilderness’s flora and fauna (“which means we have to know geography, history and science”), medical skills (“I attended a National Outdoor Leadership School and became a wilderness first responder”) and punctuality (“a problem in Tanzania”). None of this guaranteed a job. Kaen, for instance, went to guide school in Arusha with the intention of becoming a safari guide. Slowly he became interested in mountain guiding but learned he would have to work as a porter first. So he gave it a try. At that time, he told me, there was no weight limit; the operating principle was “If you could lift it, you could carry it.” Luckily, on his next climb he was assigned waiter duty and so charmed his trekkers that he was invited to try for the summit with them, but the head guide forbade it. On his third time portering, Kaen found a guide “who liked me, and I made him take me to the summit.” Afterward, the guide wrote Kaen a recommendation, and a tour operator arranged for him to take the necessary mountain-guiding classes with the National Park Agency. Kaen’s case is unusual, as he admitted. “Some people are porters for three years, five years or their whole lives, waiting to be guides,” he says. Willison, too, was once a porter. When I asked what that had been like for him, he made a pinched face and shook his head.

It became clear, halfway through our second day, that my day pack was indeed far too heavy. An aching, silvery swirl sloshed around my skull as we passed 12,000 feet, and by the time we stopped for lunch, the pounding inside my head was so unfamiliarly forceful that I dry heaved. After lunch we received our first glimpse of Kibo, the striking, molar-shaped part of Kilimanjaro that holds the summit and its famed and imperiled snows. The first non-Africans to see Kilimanjaro were probably Arabs who traveled the continent’s caravan route in the sixth century C.E. But legends of the mountain existed prior to this. Ptolemy wrote of a “snow mountain” around 100 C.E. The next known references to Kilimanjaro come courtesy of a 13th-century Arab geographer and a Chinese writer who, at the turn of the 15th century, wrote of a “great mountain” west of Zanzibar. In the early 16th century, a Portuguese geographer noted the existence of an “Ethiopian Mount Olympus” that he judged “very high.” These are, amazingly, the only four known references to the mountain over a 1,400-year period. No one in the West was aware that a giant, snow-crowned mountain existed so close to the equator until 1848.

A wreath of gauzy cloud separated Kibo’s base from its snowier upper reaches. We could not yet make out its hilly, ruffled face, its forbidding tonsure of scree or how granular and salty its snow often appeared from certain angles. All we could tell was that it stood at a distance best described as interplanetary. The cloud traffic endemic to the mountain’s microclimate — actually, microclimates — was astonishing; it looked as though the summit itself were gushing white smoke. None of us said anything. When he first saw the Grand Canyon, Teddy Roosevelt wrote that he found it “beautiful and terrible and unearthly.” Kilimanjaro, I thought, was these things as well. Then the clouds moved in and covered Kibo as suddenly as it had appeared.

Soon we stopped again. The day was as perfectly and coldly silent as a meat locker. I asked the others how they were feeling.

“Hakuna matata,” Dana said listlessly.

“One of those moments where you find yourself speechless,” Rob said.

Andy shook his head and smiled.

“One thing,” Bernie said. “I’ve got really bad gas.” This was actually normal and, our guides told us, welcome. It meant our bodies were adjusting to the pressure changes.

“Use it as propulsion,” Dana suggested.

Around 750,000 years ago, an apocalyptic explosion along one of East Africa’s many fault lines, which had been vomiting up lava and fire for thousands of years, gave birth to the first of Kilimanjaro’s three separate but closely aligned peaks — an event likely witnessed by some of our prognathous and duly astonished human ancestors. Shira, the mountain’s first volcanic cone, eventually collapsed. Mawenzi arose soon after, then went dormant. Forty thousand years later came the last and most famous cone, Kibo. The evidence of its volcanic past was everywhere around Kilimanjaro. Before the climb, out on the savanna, Nat had pointed out the many small rocks whose pocked, crumbly edges showed clear evidence of having once been superheated during their miles-long volcanic launch. The closer we drew to the mountain, the bigger, blacker and smoother the rocks became. We had made it to the Shira Plateau, the caldera into which Shira Peak had collapsed and onto which its successors Meru and Kibo had spilled so much molten rock.

Our camp was straight ahead, across four evenly rolling miles of grassland. Pain had colonized my sinuses; my skull felt as if it were trying to give birth. The Shira Plateau begins at about 12,500 feet — the height at which many climbers begin to feel the effects of altitude sickness — and likely served as the point at which many an inquiring party of Chagga turned back in fear of the alpine poltergeists attacking them from the inside out.

Once in camp, I threw my gear in my tent, walked gingerly to the chem toilet and, after some vigorous vomiting and diarrhea, staggered out. Nat, whose tent was nearby, rushed over and helped me to the mess tent.

“Don’t tell Kaen,” I said, like a child.

He responded with a fatherly frown. “I’ll get you some water.”

Beth, sitting nearby, was greeted by two trekkers who had walked from their campsite just to say hello. One was short, slovenly bearded and wearing an orange jumpsuit. The other was wearing a thin blue jacket and small prog-rock sunglasses. “Don’t sit on the ground,” one said to Beth.

“O.K.,” she said gamely.

“You’ll get hemorrhoids.”

Beth’s open mouth issued a single, shocked laugh.

“But don’t worry,” the other said. “He’s a surgeon, and he’d be happy to check you out.”

“And he is a dentist,” the first one said. “He would also like to give you a checkup. He’d like to investigate your mouth.”

Given this verbal date rape, Beth’s inquiry as to where they were from struck me as generous. They had arrived in Tanzania from Austria yesterday morning and spent last night in an Arusha nightclub, where they were “the best-looking white men” in the place. They had just been dropped off at the Shira Plateau by car. “We’re not happy with the women we’re climbing with,” the first one told Beth. “You’re our last option on this deserted island.”

Nat returned with my water. “Dude,” I said, “forget about me. Go rescue your daughter.”

Nat, it appeared, had ratted me out, for now Kaen was approaching. “I think you can’t carry your pack anymore.”

“It’s fine.”

“Give me some of your things. I’ll carry them. And put more in your duffle. I spoke to Augustin. He can manage.”

Augustin Minja was the small, beaming man charged with carrying my duffle. He was, I very much regret to report, 61 years old, his face as interestingly creased as the bed of a dried-up wadi. When we met, I had asked him how many times he’d climbed the mountain. “Many, many times,” he said. “I’m a guide, too.” (Some guides work as porters when they are unable to secure guide work.) I asked if all the traffic on Kilimanjaro — close to 30,000 climbers a year — was good or bad. He laughed in a way I took to mean, Good for me, maybe not so good for the mountain.

By the morning I was still incubating a pulverizing headache, but the clean, cool air outside my tent, which had become a museum of odor, seemed to vent some of its pressure. Far in the distance, at the other end of the Shira Plateau, was a flocculent pasture of fresh snow. I blinked. This was not snow at all but yet another cloud mirage.

Before we left camp, Kaen took me aside and said he had been informed that I had not been allowing Augustin to blow up my air mattress, which was true. I had been either inflating it myself or forgoing it altogether. Augustin was now standing behind Kaen with a grieved smile. I explained I was not allowing Augustin to blow up my mattress because . . . I had no good answer beyond indistinct ideas of what constituted human decency.

“Please,” Kaen said. “It makes him sad.” Augustin nodded.

Now it was my turn to take Kaen aside: “Don’t make me ask a 61-year-old man to blow up my air mattress. Please.”

Augustin stepped forward and patted me gently on the back: “It’s no problem.”

When we entered the tree-impooverished arctic zone on Day 4, I noted that my fingernails were black with dirt, that my beard and mustache tasted of things I did not remember eating and that my body was serving up a buffet of odors I had never encountered before: ground-corpse tacos and sweat lasagna with a side of blue-cheese iodine. I ruled out this mountain as a honeymoon possibility.

We were approaching Lava Tower, a weirdly isolated bantam peak south of Kibo. We moved wordlessly through the alpine desert, eventually passing a sun-bleached metal sign that said, “Do not litter trails. Keep all litter with you.” Beneath this someone had scrawled, “And carry it back to France!” No one laughed. I looked at my notes as I walked and marveled at the last few pages: the dropped letters (“evertime”), weird misspellings (“reception”) and now baffling abbreviations (“A and N tk abt ice ax t yrs ago: rmberr”) were clear proof that my mind was no longer burning its cleanest fuel. Beth began to walk with a slightly shambling gait and quickly whipped out her iPod. “I think some Pink Floyd will help,” she said, and shortly went off to find a ladies’ rock. Nat was soon digging in her pack. “Some clandestine reallocation,” he said. “She’s not feeling well, and if she knew I was doing this she’d be pissed.” He took some things from his daughter’s pack and put them in his own.

At 14,500 feet, I was walking behind Willison, with Nat and Beth behind me. We had been told to preserve our energy and try not to talk. Nat, suddenly, began giggling. I tried to ask him what was so funny, but my brain was mining various zircons of nonsense, and I started giggling too. Soon we were both doubled over with brain-ruining laughter. Rob, who, like everyone else, was not laughing, pointed out that we were currently at half the height of Mount Everest. At this, Nat and I howled. Willison tried to rein us in by pointing at a gray jug sitting on a rock. “That’s a rain gauge,” he said. This did not work. Nat and I sat down, our arms around each other’s shoulders like a pair of old rummies. Beth finally said, “I feel like I just got high in a tanning bed.”

Hours later, I was beside my tent at Lava Tower, staring up at Kibo, when Nat came over to point out an area known as the Western Breach, where something now known as the Western Breach Tragedy occurred in January 2006. While approaching Kibo’s Arrow Glacier, three Americans were killed by a rockslide estimated to have been traveling at more than 125 feet per second. The cause of the slide was linked to Kibo’s receding ice, which causes rocks previously frozen to the mountain’s face to loosen and slip. The Western Breach route to the summit, once one of the most popular, has since been closed and may never open again.

Hans Meyer, who, along with Ludwig Purtscheller, made the first known ascent of Kilimanjaro in 1889, predicted that all of the mountain’s ice would disappear within three decades. In 2001, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicted that Kilimanjaro’s ice cap would be gone by 2020. The latter prediction has proved more accurate than the first. More than a third of the ice has disappeared since 1990. Meyer, however, was not entirely wrong:

more than 80 percent of the glaciers have melted since Meyer's time, and it is thought that as recently as the 15th century the snows of Kilimanjaro began at the upper edge of what is now the forest zone.

I asked Nat what, as a scientist, he made of all this. "One thing we know," he said, "is that a large amount of the glacial retreat is due to sublimation and not a warming of the atmosphere. . . . Several recent studies say this is due to the thermal gradient from the residual heat inside the volcano. It's not an extinct volcano; it's a dormant volcano. There still appears to be molten magma inside of it." Nat was not, by his own forceful admission, "a right-wing nut," and accepted that [global warming](#) was a reality, a deadly serious one. He did not, however, like seeing things unconnected to global warming attached to it for political convenience. "This," he said, motioning toward Kibo, "has been going on for hundreds of years. Global warming may have accelerated it, sure, but it's not the smoking gun."

That night was Kaen's 33rd birthday. At dinner we all sang "Happy Birthday" to him in Swahili, after which he said, very quietly, "Thank you." We then learned of Kaen's daughter, whose name was Jackline. She was 3, and he missed her very much. Kaen hoped the money he made as a guide would one day send her to college.

Finally, we arrived at the trail to Stella Point, a gravel plateau on the edge of Kibo's crater, from which we would make our summit climb. Hikers who had left for the summit the night before now began to meet us on their way down. Two blank-faced young men carrying their oven-mitt winter gloves were followed by their equally expressionless guide. Dana asked one of the men if he had made it.

"Yeah," he said tonelessly.

"Congratulations," we all said.

"It was cold," the second one said.

The descenders kept coming. Many wore jeans despite what I understood as a widely recommended avoidance of denim at elevations above 12,000 feet. The women all seemed to wear their hair in girlish pigtails, and almost all of the men had ragged beards. Every single one of these people had dead, exhausted eyes and blotchy pink faces — until we met the Austrians. One of them, bounding down the mountain and still wearing his phenomenally stupid orange jumpsuit, skidded to a stop in front of our party, obviously waiting for us to inquire into the vectors of his travail. Beth did not even look at him, and the rest of us passed by without a word.

We reached 17,000 feet and stopped for lunch, during which I sat apart from everyone else and rested my skull against my knee. Jonas handed out Mars bars that had been melted and then refrozen, which was not unlike how I felt. Nat clamped a small plastic device onto my index finger that measured the concentration of oxygen in my blood. When one's blood dipped below 80 percent of its normal oxygen level, it was generally viewed as trouble. I was down to 73, and my heart rate was at 125. Nat gave me a hard, level look, then whispered something about Dexamethasone. "It's a steroid," he said. "What it does, I guess, is shrink your brain a little."

“That sounds awesome.”

He tore open a small packet and shook two pills into my glove. “Remember,” he said, “this is a steroid, so don’t compete in any Olympic events.”

“There goes my gold medal in Ping-Pong.” I gobbled the pills. Considering the aspirin, Diamox and Imodium I had already consumed that morning, I now had more drugs circulating through my system than [Andy Warhol](#) on a busy weekend.

We walked now without any purpose but ascent. Our legs were no longer legs but barely functioning flesh pistons. I heard Andy say something in a small, weak voice. When I turned, he was giving Willison his pack, his face a lunar color and his footing fawnishly unsteady. Dana patted Andy on the back. He nodded with no shame or embarrassment and carried on.

One by one we made our way onto Stella Point’s plateau. I fell to my knees and wondered how I would find the strength to make the last push up to the summit. All of us switched our digital cameras to video mode and narrated. Here we were, at last: the snows of Kilimanjaro. Of course, in Hemingway’s story, the action takes place far below the snows, which merit only a few, if significant, mentions. This snow all around us was not fresh snowfall snow but instead formed of millions of tiny triangles of ice. The ice field’s adjacent glaciers were hundreds of feet tall and a beautiful magnesia color. It was this whiteness that allowed the glaciers their survival against the equatorial sun. The light, after its rude reflection, sought the first absorbent dark surface it could find: the black volcanic rock upon which the glaciers had formed 12,000 years ago.

From here we could see Uhuru Peak, the last and highest protuberance on Kibo’s rim. It was a journey of 45 minutes up a thin, snow-covered ridge through a force field of utter silence. The footsore decision to go for the peak now rather than wait until morning was unanimous, though I do not remember voting to do so. After setting off for Uhuru, much of my memory ends. I do not remember passing by what Dana later recalled as “a perfect rest stop” and having a few bitterly clandestine words with him about how we both wished we had stopped. I do not remember Willison’s calm, watchful presence beside me. It was morning and had been morning for some time and he heard the plane. I do not remember repeatedly stumbling, Willison’s steadying hand always hovering above my shoulder. I do not remember turning to him and asking him, please, to take my pack. I do not remember telling him, “I think I’m dying.” It was difficult getting him in, but once in he lay back in the leather seat, and the leg was stuck straight out to one side of the seat where Compton sat. I do not remember the cirrus wisps swirling above us, as though reconfiguring themselves in deference to the mountain to which they belonged. Then there were other mountains dark ahead. I do not remember what my notes describe as “an unusual number of bowel movements” on the path to the peak. And I do not remember writing in my notes: “My life is in the hands of a stranger, whom I suddenly love. So there’s one compelling reason to climb a mountain, then: to ascend into a strange, airless heaven with a person whose existence is foreign to you and to feel fundamentally altered because of it.” But all of this was confirmed by my fellow trekkers. And then he knew that there was where he was going.

As if in a most curious dream I came to and gently touched the sign on Uhuru Peak (“Congratulations! You are now at Uhuru Peak, Tanzania. . . . Africa’s highest point. . . .

World's highest free-standing mountain"), thinking how strange it was that climbers had draped the sign with bunting and covered it with stickers from their high schools, their places of work, their hobby organizations, but then recognizing that this was not strange in the least. People were proud of having made it here.

The clouds had all drifted away as though on divine pulleys, revealing a view so broad and clear that the horizon's global curve was discernible. Everyone was smiling, hugging one another. I tried to join them, even going so far as posing for a few photographs, but soon I sat down again. I was too tired. Now that we were done climbing, it was an agreeable rather than a pestilent tiredness, and I felt glad for my fellow trekkers. I thought of what they had all told me climbing this mountain would mean to them: "I'd like Beth to make it more than me. I don't know why. I could probably come up with some . . . mumbo, but I don't know." "It'll be success, a goal, it will be something to cross off the checklist." "Personal satisfaction. That's all. Nothing big." One writer speaks of the view from the summit of Kilimanjaro as being "deserved" by those hearty enough to have made it. The day before, in a low moment, I had written in my notebook, "Basically, this 'achievement' means nothing." Thousands of people climbed this mountain every year, and had been doing so for decades, since the 1930s. Other than a six-day-long headache, it was difficult to know what I had achieved, much less what to take from an experience threaded with so many reminders of the world's essential inequality.

In one of the first recorded mountain climbs, in 181 B.C.E., Philip of Macedonia scaled Mount Haemus in the Balkans to use the perch as a military observation post. Eight decades later, a rock-climbing Ligurian legionnaire in search of snails stumbled upon an overlook above his Berber enemies' camp. A precedent was set. For much of recorded history, to climb a mountain was to spy on or attack whatever was on the other side. Until the age of European mountaineering in the late 18th century and the aesthetics of exploration that accompanied it, the act of climbing was rarely seen as something potentially transcendent. The first person known to climb a mountain for purely aesthetic purposes was the poet Petrarch, but his torch remained unpassed for centuries. To which tradition did the paramilitary rituals of modern climbing harken? Was it Petrarchan, or surrogate warfare? Or was it simply some price-controlled back door into extremities of human behavior that were once freely, if painfully, available? We had done violence to our brains and bodies getting here, and we had almost certainly done some violence to this mountain. To learn . . . what? That we could?

A few days before, I had asked Kaen Kapange if Kilimanjaro meant anything to him, or it was simply his job. "It's just my job," he had answered. "It doesn't mean anything to me." Looking at him now, posing for yet another photo, draped with the arms of the people he had led here, his smile unfakeably joyful, I was not sure I believed him. The most compelling reason to stand atop Africa, I realized, was that it would help send people like Kaen's daughter, Jackline, to college and beyond. This was, no doubt, the source of his joy, just as it was the source of my sadness.

SO YOU WANT TO CLIMB KILIMANJARO...

1. Forest Camp, 9,280 ft. 2. Shira 1 Camp, 11,500 ft. 3. Shira Plateau, 12,500 ft. 4. Shira Cathedral, 12,700 ft. 5. Shira 2 Camp, 12,800 ft. 6. Lava Tower Camp, 15,210 ft. 7. Karanga Camp, 13,200 ft. 8. Barafu Camp, 15,330 ft. 9. Stella Point, 18,870 ft. 10. Uhuru Peak, 19,340 ft.

THE BEST TIME TO GO is January and February, or August and September, when the weather is most favorable. As a rule, the longer the trip, and the more time given for altitude acclimation, the better a hiker's chances of reaching the summit. There are several routes up the mountain, though the Lemosho Route, which Tom Bissell took, is one of the most scenic. Outfitters supply some equipment, but expect to bring the essentials, including a sleeping bag with a 0-degree Fahrenheit rating, a headlamp and a method for purifying water. Ask your doctor about a prescription for Diamox, which helps prevent and treat altitude sickness.

Tom Bissell is the author of "The Father of All Things," "God Lives in St. Petersburg" and "Chasing the Sea."