

TO THE ROOF OF AFRICA

GETTING TO THE TOP OF **MOUNT KILIMANJARO** IN TANZANIA IS AN EXTREMELY CHALLENGING TREK THAT EVEN THE MOST PHYSICALLY FIT FAIL TO FINISH. **CECILY MABASA** SHARES HOW HER TRAINING, CAREFUL PLANNING, AND LUXURIOUS AMENITIES HELPED HER SUMMIT THE HIGHEST MOUNTAIN IN AFRICA

PHOTOGRAPHED BY CECILY MABASA

SITTING IN A 12-SEATER BUSH PLANE FLYING OVER TANZANIA IN AFRICA, I LOOKED OUT THE WINDOW AND INTO THE HORIZON. The altimeter by the plane's dashboard read 9000 feet, and with a grin I looked back out at **Mount Kilimanjaro's** peak rising above the clouds. Considered as the Roof of Africa, Mount Kilimanjaro is the continent's highest point, standing at more than double the height we were flying (19,341 feet, to be exact). The dormant volcano is on most trekkers' bucket lists, but it's definitely not an easy, no-fuss trek. Underestimating the height of Mount Kilimanjaro has been the greatest folly of most climbers. Less than half of the people who have attempted to climb it have made it to the top.

Adventurers who attempt to summit Kilimanjaro do months (and even years) of physical training to climb it and yet a good percentage fail. The simple truth is that the high altitude can affect anyone, no matter how fit or experienced. Take myself, for example. I'm an avid long-distance walker, and I've trekked to several challenging heights. I've walked the entire length of France, Spain and England; traversed through Torres del Paine, the

Fitz Roy mountain ranges, the Everest region; and even walked to Machu Picchu instead of riding the train. But all these experiences could not have prepared me for the challenges in climbing Mount Kilimanjaro. After half a year of planning, training, and strategizing, I finally found myself at the gate of the **Kilimanjaro National Park**, ready to take on this epic journey.

COVERING THE BASES

On average, Kilimanjaro can be summited in five days. For our trek, my companion and I allotted eight days to allow ample time for altitude acclimatization. At first, our expedition outfitter offered us the chance to join a group of eight but we decided to go on a private trek. This way, we could control the pace and not have to keep up with anybody else. This strategy may have been one of the reasons why we made it to the top.

There were about 20 people in our team made up of a guide, an assistant guide, a cook, a camp manager, kitchen staff, housekeeping staff, and porters. Can you believe that all of these people were there to accompany just us two trekkers? In an ordinary trek, the ratio of staff to client is three to one. It was at least ten to one for us. Having more than one

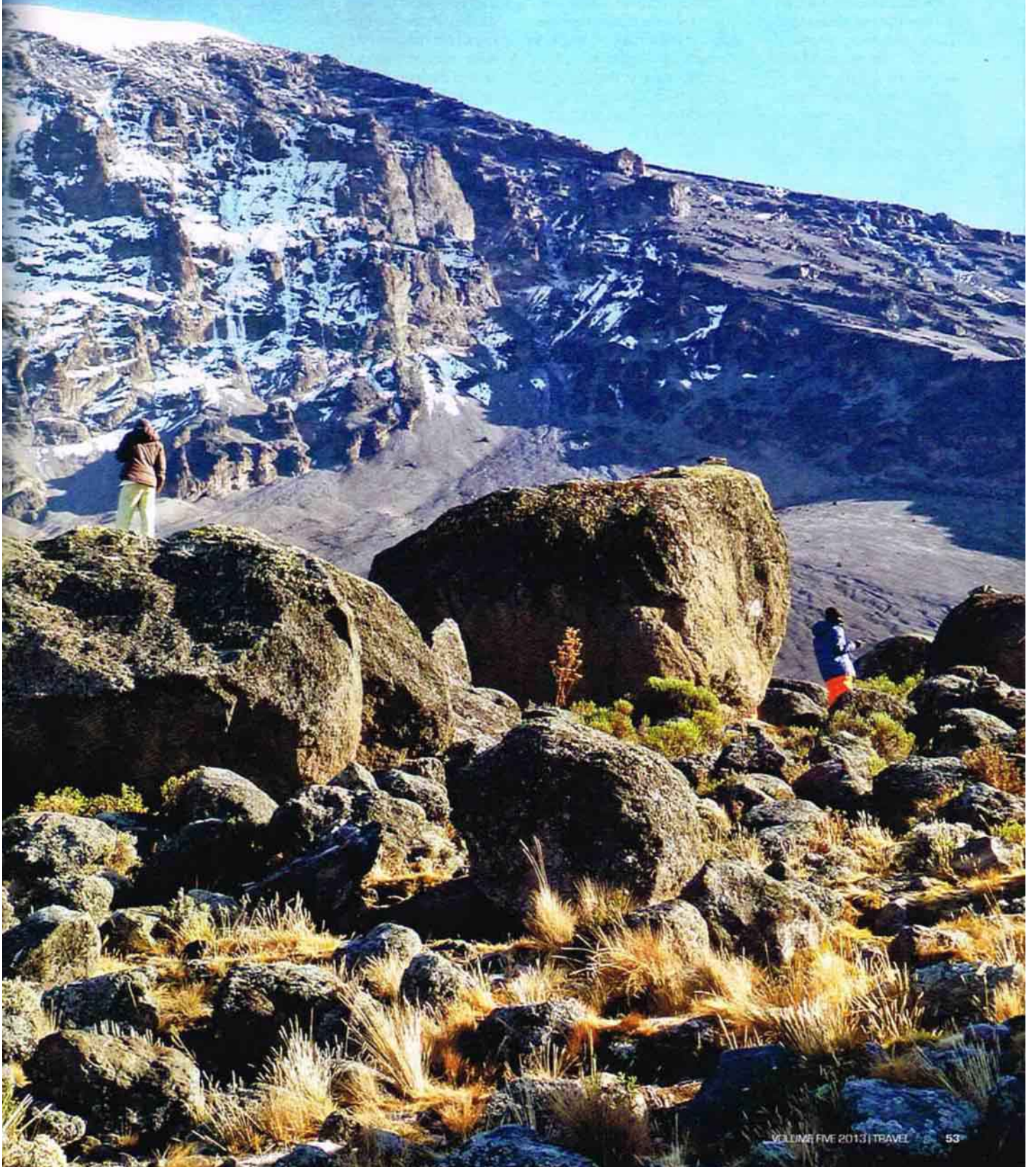
guide is important—in case a trekker has to be brought down for altitude sickness, the rest of the group can continue with their trek. The guides also serve as coaches; they will pace you, let you know where you are, and tell you stories about the forest. The rest of the team brings up all the equipment and supplies, sets up camp, and cooks your food. Unlike in the Himalayas, there is a policy in Kilimanjaro: porters can only carry a maximum of 20 kilos per person, and there is a checkpoint by the base camp for this.

And what a luxurious camp set-up we had. It included a top-of-the-line Mountain Hardware tent outfitted with cots, mattresses, pillows, fleece blankets, and the best down sleeping bags money could buy. A few steps away from our tents, our own personal hot shower tents and flushing toilets awaited us at the end of each long day. Ultimate luxury for Kilimanjaro.

Because our tour operator gave us a lot of porters, we were even able to trek with virtually nothing heavy on our backs and shoulders. "That helped so much. Can you imagine carrying so many things while having to deal with altitude and the terrain? This is a classic example of the saying "you get what you pay for."



Some of the ice found in the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro are thousands of years old



THE POLE-POLE SYSTEM

On the first day, we drove northeast to the town of **Londorossi** where we completed mandatory paperwork (including immunization papers and travel insurance documents) and met the rest of the team. Then, we drove for another hour on a narrow muddy and slippery road to the starting point at **Lemosho**, where a picnic lunch spread awaited us. While one of our guides stayed behind to organize the porters, we began the trek at around noon at an altitude of 7500 feet. The walk was slow and beautiful—we only walked five kilometers that day but it took us five to six hours to get to the camp. This is one highly suggested strategy: our guide Gabriel would always remind us of the “pole-pole” system, which means “slowly, slowly.” You really have to go on an almost snail-like pace, like walking with a cane, to help you adjust to the altitude and terrain.

As we ascended, I felt more and more lightheaded, and

my feet seemed to get heavier with each step. The air was getting thinner and the terrain more challenging. When we arrived at the campsite, we were surprised to see that we were the only ones with a shower and toilet tents. Yet again, another luxury that we couldn't afford not to have. You know how a shower always refreshes you? It felt a million times more refreshing in Kilimanjaro. After a draining day of walking uphill and battling altitude sickness, I got a burst of energy from my shower.

The next few days leading up to the final camp was a serious battle with the killer altitude. If you are physically fit, just climbing uphill is easy. But altitude is a whole different thing, a natural phenomenon that one cannot control, and we had to strategize carefully to make sure our lungs got used to the altitude and allowed us to adjust our breathing. We had to pace ourselves, climb up to a certain altitude level, then trek back down to set up camp.

What also helped was the quality of sleep and food we had during the trek. Getting

enough sleep will recharge you and give you high energy levels for the next day. A fresh and balanced diet is also important. There should be enough carbohydrates and not too much oily food. Some outfitters just carry a budgeted amount of food, so by the end of the trek, they run out or the food gets spoiled. By the fourth or fifth day of our trek, new porters were sent up to our camp to deliver fresh bread, eggs, and assorted ingredients just so we can eat well until the end of the trek.

VIEW FROM THE TOP

The day before we climbed to the summit was reserved for rest and preparation time at **Barafu Camp**, and we basically just slept and talked about what to expect. But it was so windy that day; when I stood for a few moments outside the tent, I felt like the tornado-like wind would blow me away. At one point, I thought that our ascent would be canceled. The next day, when they woke us up at 3 AM, I felt like I was in a trance. I was bundled up in two pairs of thermal waterproof socks,

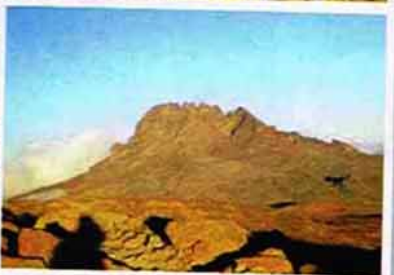
two layers of expedition weight thermal pants, my heavy-duty North Face pants, a pair of Arcteryx beta waterproof pants, two short-sleeved Capilene shirts, another two layers of long-sleeved Capilene expedition weight shirts, a fleece jacket, an Arcteryx Theta jacket, and two down jackets. I looked like a snow ball! Just to be sure, I tore open several gel heat packs and tucked some in my stomach, my freezing behind, and in between my socks and hand gloves.

In my head, I was talking to myself, counting the steps and pushing myself to go forward. We would stop whenever we would need an extra boost of energy to munch on chocolate and drink a lot of water. Right before the summit was **Stella Point**, where you get a certificate when you reach it; some decide to end their treks here. I almost gave in, but my trek partner convinced me to go much further. “We’re already here, so why give up now?”

Even if I was so exhausted (I could barely stand without my trekking poles), I refused to



There are seven routes you can take to summit Kilimanjaro; this is the Lemosho route.



This route offers a higher success rate, as it gives trekkers better acclimatization.

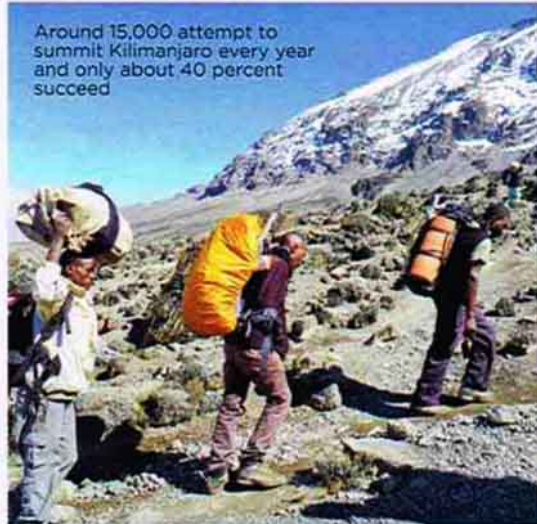
Kilimanjaro is actually a large stratovolcano—it's made up of layers upon layers of lava and volcanic ash



be carried. Other tired trekkers would resort to being helped this way, but I felt that would be selling out. But on the final stretch to the summit, I had to hang on to Gabriel's backpack for a few hundred meters while walking. I was telling myself, "Just a few more hours and you'll have a nice clean shower by tonight and a bath tub to soak in tomorrow! You'll go on a safari! You are strong, you will make it! Failing is not an option!" I figured if Kilimanjaro was patient enough to wait millions of years getting this high, I could wait a couple of extra hours to get to the top.

When we got to the top, I burst into tears of joy immediately. I couldn't believe that I actually made it. It felt like I was in middle of a dream. I don't even know up to this day how I made it and I would still shake my head in wonder. It's not advisable to stay more than 15 minutes at the summit, so after breathing in the scenery and taking lots of photos, we began our descent.

Going down is hard too. One would think, it's all



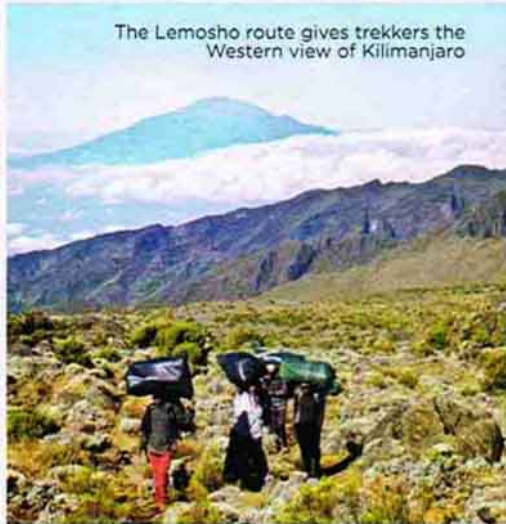
Around 15,000 attempt to summit Kilimanjaro every year and only about 40 percent succeed

downhill right? Well, it is downhill—on loose scree (loose stone and rock debris) and rocks. It was really hard on the knees. Many hikers are unprepared for this ordeal. But summiting had given me an extra burst of adrenaline, so it only took a few hours to get to the final camp. By the time we reached **Millenium Camp**, I had walked a total of 16 hours. Upon reaching our camp, we

celebrated with the team by partaking in local cuisine.

Before leaving the final checkpoint and campsite, we got our certificates and signed our names on the logbook. It saddened me to see that several of the trekkers we saw along the way didn't make it to the summit. I realized being physically fit and determined to succeed are not enough to reach the top. It's not about

The Lemosho route gives trekkers the Western view of Kilimanjaro



just you—it also rests on your guide, your outfitters, the quality of sleep you get, the freshness of your food, and your water intake. It all depends on how well you plan. 🌟

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