

# Up Kilimanjaro



**Steve Vogel**

## A Photobook



*In 2012,  
five family members and I climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro  
in Tanzania on an adventure trip benefitting the Prostate  
Cancer Foundation. Along with raising \$10,000 to support  
researchers in search of a cure, I also wrote a blog and a book,  
The Prostate Storm, to help raise awareness about the disease.  
I wrote a photobook (no photos below) for the guys  
and our families who supported us to make the climb.  
We summited Kilimanjaro at the end of September  
and everyone had the photobook by Christmas.*

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"Kilimanjaro is a snow-covered mountain 19,710 feet high, and is said to be the highest mountain in Africa. It's western summit is called the Masai 'Ngaie Nagi,' the House of God. Close to the western summit, there is the dead and frozen carcass of a leopard. No one has explained what the leopard was seeking at that altitude."

Ernest Hemingway  
The Snows of Kilimanjaro

# Up Kilimanjaro

*The Kili Six Pact Takes A Hike:  
Not Your Usual Family Outing*

## Somewhere above 19,000 feet...

**I am stupid with exhaustion.** Legs shot, chest burning, a deadman walking. Hours ago, I lost the guys in the dark. I fell behind because I couldn't breathe or recover well, so I let them go. The final ascent had turned into my worst marathons, all strung together for seven hours. Kilian offers to take my pack twice, but I say No, stubbornly. My body is stressed to the max, but the battle is in my head, trying to deal with lack of oxygen and sleep, bouts with hyperventilation, dehydration because my bladder hose is frozen, little food. But by going it alone, I find a rhythm that works for me ... Hours drift by, grinding out one step, one breath at a time, until the sun breaks and throws a gold light on the summit above me, and to my amazement, I see the guys, moving *pole pole* (slowly, slowly), just ahead. Somehow I caught up. Chris tries to greet me under Stella Point. "I went to give a high five," he laughs later, "but you couldn't raise your hand, just swung an elbow at me. A little chicken wing." Yeah, I'm on fumes, loopy on thin air, but I can see it now, the crater rim, a place to rest at last, no epiphanies, no frozen leopard, just volcanic ash and rock and a breathtaking (literally) sunrise, at the end of a long humbling night.

## Let's back up ... to drinking a few Tuskers at the foot of Kilimanjaro

Climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro (and playing football on the summit) was the inspiration of my uncle Len Rose. He had mulled over the trip for five years, as a kind of extreme, high-altitude, pre-retirement party, then finally shared the idea with his son Dave and Ed Smith — and before you knew it, a bunch of us Family Guys were drinking pints of Tusker beer in Moshe, Tanzania, at the foot of Kilimanjaro.

Well, almost like that. The trip actually took a full year to plan and prepare for. None of us were mountaineers, or even serious backpackers. But we were game, and that was good enough. There was Ed, Dave, Chris Lundborg, Mark Chelmowski, and me, Steve Vogel, all joining Len on a little family outing that would be like no other. He even made up t-shirts for us, emblazoned with an Official Team Name — “The Kili 6 Pact.”

Incredibly, drinking Tuskers in Africa was the first time we had all got together to discuss the trip. So the question came up: Len, why climb a mountain, and why this one? “Well,” he starts, in his soft spoken way, “I wanted us to go on a family adventure where the journey and the outcome are unpredictable. I thought that would be a cool thing to do. Because of the severe altitude and the way we would have to live, outdoors, in tents, in the cold, with all the unknowns, Kilimanjaro, to me, seemed like the ideal adventure.”

And so it was. Bring the football.

This big coffee table book (now republished to this blog) is what we brought back: snapshots from our eight days on Kilimanjaro — at 19,340 feet, the fourth highest of the world's seven summits. It's mostly photos and screen captures from videos. A brief narrative

about what we did. Individual recollections. A few laughs. And yes, some necessary perspective on what actually happened. Because reality can easily get lost in the romance of climbing mountains, especially big iconic ones like Kilimanjaro.

Honestly, I don't recall any such romance, no lofty revelations from climbing so high — as least not yet. Maybe with time. During the journey, moments of enlightenment tended toward basic survival stuff, like: Hike slowly or hyperventilate till it hurts. Keep your headlamp close at night, so you can easily find your pee bottle in the dark. Sterilize your drinking water or all hell is coming your way.

So we'll try to keep it real. Chris made me promise. So enjoy the photos and words — but beware, if you stare at the following pages (screens) long and hard enough, don't be surprised if you start coughing. Hacking, actually. Not to worry, it's only trail dirt and volcanic ash. It'll clear up in a few weeks.

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**“KILIMANJARO IS THE ONLY MOUNTAIN IN THE WORLD** where you can hike through multiple climate zones, starting in a rainforest and ending in arctic glaciers. You can't experience anything like that anywhere on the planet.”

-My Uncle Len Rose, Expedition Quarterback

## **Introducing The Kili 6 Pact**

Aging skiers, runners and marathoners, senior tennis players and softballers, ex-jocks and geezerjocks all of us, our group of six has been physically active and competitive forever. Maybe greying and balding, a little creek in the joints, we're still up for a good challenge. As sea-level guys, this was a good one ...

Ranging in age from mid-40s to late-60s, we all loved the idea of testing our stamina and endurance on one of the world's big mountains. How cool was that. So we trained hard for the better part of a year, or longer. When the trip began, we were physically ready, though a bit concerned about how our bodies would react to extreme altitude — that being the most unpredictable factor in the climb. After all, none of us had done anything like this — or gone so high.

## **7740 feet — in the rainforest**

For our team, 7,740 feet above sea level is the start of the Lemosho Route. We chose this route for its remoteness, beauty and extra day of trekking to help our six bodies acclimatize to the altitude — to give us the best chance to summit.

To get to this starting point, we travel from the Springsland Hotel in Moshe in an old 4-wheel-drive military transport, which carries our supplies and most of our support crew of 19 porters and guides, including our African guides, Kilian and Rashid, and American guide, Natcho.

We drive through desolate plains, on the far outskirts of Mt. Kilimanjaro, where ant hills the size of Volkswagens populate fields as far as you can see. Right away, you get the impression that everything in Africa is bigger, grander, out of scale to any photograph you've ever seen.

After several hours, we head deep into a lush rainforest, tracking uphill over a wildly bumpy dirt road so narrow the trees and vegetation scrape by and claw at our windows.

Africa seems to be swallowing us up.

When the road ends, we pile out, excited, ready to hit the trail and begin our 45-mile trek to the summit of Kilimanjaro and back. After a year of planning and prep, we finally made it — to the first step of our “unpredictable” journey.

So we gear up and fall into single file behind our guide Natcho, who immediately leads us the wrong way across a field of thorny plants — headed God knows where — only to be turned around by our bemused African guides. Mulligan, whatever.

Little did we know, that first day is our easiest. It’s fun, going up and down small ridges and over creeks, through narrow trails of head-high vegetation. As Kili trekking goes, this is a gentle Disney E-ticket through the African rainforest ride. Even with Natcho setting a blistering pace, we don’t know any better and we don’t care. At this fairly low altitude, we are all full of go.

## **9,500 feet**

Mti Mkuba (Big Tree) Camp. One of our porters, who I appreciatively called the Tent Runner, booked it up here with all of our tents strapped to his back and pitched them under the Big Tree. We aren’t there long before a couple dozen more tents begin bubbling up, just footsteps from one another. Turns out, we are not alone on the “remote” Lemosho Route.

Late that first night, Dave has a close encounter, but not with a camper. Instead of breaking in his pee bottle, he decides to put on his shoes and headlamp and head to the edge of the woods. When

he starts to go, he's startled by a motion in the brush, followed by a strange hooting and howling noise. "Suddenly, one creature turns into several, and by the time I finish, easily five to 10 of these things are in the bushes in front of me, all hooting and calling out at each other," Dave says. The next morning, several people ask if anyone else had heard or knew why all the colobus monkeys were hooting and howling in the middle of the night — and Dave fesses up.

First lesson in the wilds of the rainforest: Don't piss off the monkeys.

## 11,500 feet

The next day, Natcho's aggressive pace takes its toll, as we begin more serious trekking, knocking out 2,000 feet of vertical climb over a series of high ridges and narrow trails winding through large rocks and thick vegetation. It's tougher hiking, but Mark seems unaffected, I've never heard him chatter so much. Len and Ed show great energy and conditioning in the rising heat and altitude.

Still, Natcho's hard pace breaks up our team. I take a middle position at one point, and can't see anyone ahead or behind me in the tall bush and boulders. We become a team disconnected from one another. And I for one am feeling the altitude, already.

Halfway through the day, our African guide, Kilian, takes the lead and slows things down, changing not only our pace but the entire journey. He introduces true "pole pole," meaning in Swahili "slowly slowly" ... as in, go gently, softly, quietly, don't excite yourself, take it easy. This is more like it.

Kilian is the master of the slow trek at altitude, the Michael Jordan of *pole pole*. With 10 years as a Kilimanjaro guide and 210 summits under his belt, he can read a group and adjust the pace perfectly.



Soon, our team strings back together, in comfortable single file, the trekking less arduous, even as the terrain steepens and the trails require greater effort. I can hear Mark again.

As we climb the last high ridge of the day, dark clouds move in and begin to pelt us with hail and, by the time we hit the Shira 1 campsite, a light rain also falls. On everything. Our backpacks, clothes and boots, it all gets soaked and smeared in mud.

Somehow, even Lenny's floppy white Bears cap is a wet mud mess.

So what do we do? Once the rain stops, Roger Moore, our go-to porter, helps us clean up the clothes and air them out on tents and large bushes. Next, we change into rain gear and throw Lenny's football around before dinner — now a Kili 6 Pact Tradition after hail, rain and general crap above 11,500 feet.

Overnight, I am the first to get sick with a nasty G.I. bug, followed a day later by Dave, and eventually Ed. Is it contaminated water or poor food preparation? Take your pick. We each sterilize 2-3 liters of drinking water daily with handy SteriPens, so my best guess is the latter.

All the guide services hire local, young Tanzanian porters — think teenagers — to prepare and cook the food. While proper food prep with clean, boiled water and clean hands is heavily stressed to these kids, shit still happens.

Even among the better guide services, like ours, bacteria hostile to sensitive Western gastrointestinal tracts inevitably finds its way into the soups and on washed fruits. The GI distress saps your strength and kills your appetite, critical to adapting to higher altitudes. So you still need to find safe, appetizing foods to eat; in my case, Clif bars and beef jerky that I bring from home. (Dave has the best homemade jerky by far, thanks Violet!) Everyone also packs the antibiotic Cipro, which turns out to be a real life-saver within 24 to

48 hours. Till then, you just keep moving, a roll of TP at the ready.

That night, I realize I'm not the only one feeling lousy. The campsite is a cacophony of hacking coughs from hiking through clouds of dirt, and puking. Lots of that. Most of it is from altitude, others we suspect, like the cackling Norwegians, from an attempt at partying. (That shuts down after two nights.)

After midnight, I leave my tent with a G.I. bug emergency to find our portable toilet tent, which travels with us. But I get lost in the dark and freezing cold, wandering around camp, about to explode. When I find the little tent, I do my thing but pretty much ruin this pristine portable. With only a headlamp to see, I clean things up as best as I can, by pumping the water dry in the toilet and using up most of the paper. I feel really bad. Because I know the guys will be visiting the residue of my unspeakable mess in the morning.

Or not. Wandering back to my tent, I realize that getting lost in the dark has been truly good fortune for the rest of the Kili Six Pact. As it turns out, I had strayed into someone else's portable. Sorry. Bout. That.

—————WHAT DID WE EAT? For breakfast, hot porridge ("gruel," Ed calls it), burnt eggs, bland crepes that Chris would spice up with hot sauce, and stale white bread. For lunch and dinner, soup and more soup, burnt chicken legs, PB&J sandwiches, fruit (melon, oranges, bananas) and sliced avocado on stale white bread for a Davewich. For snacks, stale cookies and popcorn. Oh, and Kilimanjaro tea and coffee, the biggest agricultural products in the region. If you were lucky, you brought a stash of energy bars, candy and beef jerky. I didn't care for the food, but my expectations were low. C'mon, how good could it be? David, Ed and I lost 7-8 pounds, Mark dropped 5. Chris ate everything in sight.

## **12,600 feet and Dave's Shira Needle**

On a frosty Day 3, we get up very early (5:30 a.m.) to pack our gear, eat breakfast and begin crossing the expansive Shira Plateau, a gentle rise of grassland, heather and enough small rock everywhere to force your eyes down on every step. In fact, the whole trek is like that. Eyes down, not up. You sightsee at your own peril. "We flew halfway round the world to stare at our shoelaces," Ed says.

Natcho has us detour well off the main trail of the Lemosho Route, and head toward two magnificent peaks on the far southern rim of the plateau — the Shira Cathedral and the Shira Needle. Off in the distance to the east, Kilimanjaro glistens under the rising sun. For the entire morning, we can see the long ridge we'll have to climb to the summit. After coming so far, it's exciting to be so close.

Near the bottom of the 200-foot-high Cathedral, we shed our backpacks and begin our first scramble, grabbing rock holds and powering up, squeezing between boulders, scaling the rise on all fours, doing our best mountain goat imitations. This is great, we're no longer hiking, we're actually climbing.

Reaching the top, we stand high above the Shira plateau, overlooking distance volcanoes, jagged peaks and the snow-capped Kilimanjaro, our best view so far. Up here, we take lots of pictures, soaking it all in — when Natcho says, "Does anyone feel the obsession to climb the Needle?" Beyond the Cathedral, the Needle is the second peak in this stunning rock formation we're standing on. Natcho says the climb might take 20 minutes, but it looks much longer and very tricky.

Maybe this is why we got up before the crack of dawn. Natcho

needed extra time in our day's trek to include a climb up the Needle. Whatever, Dave is game, and in a flash, heads off with Natcho and Rashid over the spine of the Cathedral toward the Needle, and soon they disappear out of sight.

The rest of us settle into a lower cradle of rocks, where we relax, refuel with energy bars and water, and wait. And wait. And wait. At maybe 12,600 feet, the sun grows hot, patience thins, concern rises. Lenny lets his Dad side show and worries out loud that Natcho has put his son in jeopardy. Even easy-goin' Kilian seems a bit miffed, suggesting Natcho has pursued a personal quest to scale the Needle over the best interests of the group.

Finally, almost an hour later, the trio returns, to everyone's relief. Dave beaming. He's clearly energized by his climb up the Needle, one of the more amazing side trips en route to the Kilimanjaro summit. Even Dad is cool with that, now that we're all back together. Meanwhile, Natcho's role has evolved, from trek leader to spontaneous adventure-climb guide. Just proceed with caution.

### **On the Shira Needle climb. Dave's take ...**

*"Natcho took off quickly and moved fast down into a valley between the two peaks. Rashid stayed behind me. There were a few times we lost sight of Natcho and weren't sure where to go, as we wound our way through small hills, rocks, heather and brush, but he came back and directed us each time ... When we got to the back side of the Needle, there was a clear way up, with only minimal scrambling and climbing ... The top of the Needle was not a point at all but a thin ridge, and the view was spectacular. Although a tiring hike, I felt strong ... After taking pictures, we headed back, quickly again, and for the first time, I felt the effects of altitude and became exhausted ... Later, Kilian told me that if he had led us to the Shira Needle, he would have taken at least two hours to get there and back. We did it in 50 minutes."*

## **A night at 12,600 feet**

After our detour to the Shira Cathedral and Needle, we continue on to Shira II camp, gaining 1,000 feet after a long day. You can't help but feel the increasing altitude in your breathing and energy level.

Along the way, we pass ancient lava caves and a giant helicopter pad in the middle of nowhere, encircled with painted rocks, where hikers in trouble are brought down and flown to safety — a sober reminder we are about to enter ... the no-fly zone. Local helicopters generally won't go any higher.

Shira II camp is around 12,600 feet, just above the elevation of Big Burn at Snowmass. On this third evening, we have a stunningly clear view of Kilimanjaro. To get to the summit, we must hike to the bottom of the ridge on the far right, just beyond the giant ice fields on the southern exposure.

We have a ways to go.

## **Reaching 15,200 feet at the Lava Tower, playground for Mark and Chris**

Every day the treks get tougher, as we push into higher altitudes. Kilian tells us that one in four people are unable to summit. Altitude sickness is the main culprit. But many get helicoptered off the mountain due to heart conditions and accidents. Several climbers die every year, he says.

One in four people don't summit, and there are six of us. Statistically, we're pushing the odds. We talk about it some, not much. We understand that no matter how fit we are, altitude could spoil the party. Not cold nights in tents, lack of sleep, G.I. bugs or physical stress — but altitude. Altitude is Len's great unknown,

which makes the journey and outcome unpredictable. We all bought into this.

We had all done our pre-Kili prep: running, gym workouts, climbing Stairmasters. Chris and Mark did some low altitude hikes. Dave ran. I did the Insanity program. Len chugged up and down a building stairwell with a 15-pound backpack. Ed, who deserves the trophy for most prepared, dragged a tire over a bridge for hours at a time and worked out in the gym, almost every day, all spring and summer.

Well, today is our first real test at altitude — a monster 8-hour hike from our Shira II camp at 12,600 feet to the Lava Tower at 15,200 feet, and back down to a lower camp. The trek allows us to hike high, sleep low, helping our bodies acclimatize to the altitude. To make things interesting, the GI bug is spreading among the Kili Six Pact. David got wicked sick overnight, losing sleep, his appetite and dinner. I am bouncing back on the Cipro, but still spend quiet time staring at my boots.

As we gain altitude, the landscape becomes increasingly stranger, a study of molten lava rivers pushing around rock and coming to an abrupt stop eons ago. We climb up and down falls of boulders, ascend steep ridges, and finally find ourselves at 15,200 feet, staring up at a massive 100-foot tower of lava rock. Again, Natcho probes to the group to see who's game. With Lenny and Ed pacing themselves, and David and I in recovery mode, Mark and Chris are primed for a Natcho-led assault up the next major side-climb: the Lava Tower.

### **On the Lava Tower — Mark's take ...**

*"I had no inclination to do any extra climbs, but when Christopher said he would do it, I thought someone should keep an eye on him. So without much thinking, I said I'd go ... The climb to Lava Tower was mostly a scramble up steep boulders. Only a few places scared me. One spot was a narrow ledge with*

*a sketchy handhold and a 10-foot drop off. Losing the handhold meant a likely fall. I watched Natcho gracefully do the maneuver to get around this point, gulped and then slowly did the same ... Shortly after, we made it to the top and posed for pictures. It was exhilarating to look around and look down at where we started from ... On our way to the next camp, Natcho walked back faster than I would have liked and we almost caught up to the rest of the group. I was exhausted by the end of the day. But Lava Tower was worth it."*

### **More on the Lava Tower — from Chris...**

*"My big day on the mountain was the Lava Tower climb. First time at 15,200 feet, I definitely felt lightheaded. It was like scuba diving when you stay down too long and you feel what I call "loopy," where fine motor skills fade and you have to will yourself to concentrate on the task at hand. At this point, I was just trying to focus on breathing and getting my head straight, as we still had several hours of hiking to reach our overnight camp.*

*"Natcho suggested climbing up Lava Tower before continuing our afternoon hike. This side climb appeared to me not as an upgraded scramble but more of a technical climb. Don't know if it was the altitude, but somehow I thought this was a good idea and Mark, who must have been feeling the altitude as well, agreed it was a good idea. Ed, Lenny, Steve and David were apparently very clear minded and made the obvious decision not to climb up Lava Tower.*

*"As we began climbing, it was very steep and breathing became very labored. I remember double-checking my footing and hand placements before every step and movement. We all got to an overhang where we had to stretch and actually pivot ourselves across. Here Mark lamented that Terri would not be pleased at all with this decision and made me swear this stayed on Kili (oops).*

*"When we finally got to the top, it was an incredible view, although I was very loopy and it took me a few minutes to feel confident to walk around. Natcho told us this would be the highest point before summit day. When we began to climb down, I saw rope guides hammered into the rock. I asked Natcho about them and, being as safety-minded as he was, told me "most people use ropes on this climb."*

*"Now I really did not know if he was kidding or not, but at that point, it hit me that this hike was in the bag for me, that I was gonna enjoy every minute on the Barranco Wall, summit and back. After we all climbed back down, I was walking around feeling invincible!"*

*"We then began our three hour hike to meet up with the others and I had a huge bounce in my step. I looked over at Mark, who apparently did not have the epiphany that I had experienced. I asked Mark if he was okay, and he responded with "I think I shot my wad on Lava Tower." Line of the trip, if not in the top five."*

**After taking a lunch break at the foot of the Lava Tower**, the rest of us hiked to a lower elevation again — as part of our acclimatization strategy — to the Barranco Camp, which turned out to be a spectacular hike. David put it best: "Some glacial springs and waterfalls, giant Groundselss trees and Giant Lobelia flowers that look like huge artichokes — an otherworldly landscape. I felt like I was on an expedition with Kirk, Spock and Bones on some distant planet." (Any time you can reference *Star Trek* on a mountain hike, you're getting your money's worth.)

Exhausted at the end of this eight-hour hike, the longest on the trip so far, we found the afternoon sun warm, the skies Colorado blue, and the views of Kilimanjaro magnificent. The elevation? Maybe 13,000 feet — still over a mile straight up to the summit of Kili from where I'm seated below. My volcanic seat, the snows, the warm sun, the moment — it got an old English major to thinking...



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FORTY YEARS AGO I wanted to make this climb, after reading “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” by Ernest Hemingway, at the time, my Word Hero. Arriving in the Barranco camp, I leaned back on this lava chair to take in the mythical Western Summit he wrote about, wondered what the frozen leopard was seeking at that altitude, and gave thanks for an old dream that came back to me. Just in time too. Papa's “Snows” are melting, rapidly, from climate change. Sitting there on that perfect blue day, I tried to imagine 70% more white cap, as in Hemingway’s days. But then I considered future climbers who will only wonder what any white Kili must’ve looked like once upon a time. By 2030 , the “Snows” (glaciers) will be gone and they’ll only have photos. Sad. But for the moment, this moment, the glacier fields are still here, still gleaming in a September sun, and while Hemingway wrote this place into every wannabe adventurer's imagination, truth is, he never climbed this high. Hence, my shit-eatin' grin ...

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## **14,000 feet and The Great Barranco Wall**

What happens next is an adrenalin junkie’s dream. An acrophobic’s nightmare. After Night 4 camping at 13,000 feet at the foot of The Great Barranco Wall, we strap away our hiking poles — freeing our hands — to scramble up a 1,000-foot vertical rise, without a rope ... without a parachute.

We have no choice. For us to join up with the Southern Circuit, the major trail that connects most routes up Kilimanjaro for a summit attempt, we must get over the Barranco Wall, which is slightly higher than three football fields stacked end on end.

The scramble takes three hours. That means we move up a body length every minute. It’s slow going. We climb up narrow trails.

Scramble in and around boulders, on all fours. Hug rock walls to traverse little ledges poised over ... nothing. Air.

Basic rules of ascent: Focus on your next move, next step, next handhold. Don't lose your balance, no mistakes, no screw ups. If you hate heights, don't look down. Stop to let the porters fly by with their 50-pound packs, *Jambo* ... they're insane. They're mostly teenagers!

I absolutely love the Wall. For me, after passing on the Needle and Lava Tower climbs, this is the best, controlled rush on the mountain. By the time we reach the top, we're almost giddy with relief that we all made it in one piece.

The views from the top, above the clouds and under the snowy face of Mt. Kilimanjaro, are sensational. We take more pictures: Of "flat" people. Of jumping off rocks, frozen in mid-air. Of Tebowin. For an hour, we bask in the warm sun and lightness of being atop The Great Barranco Wall.

Not long after, things start to change.

## **After a night at 13,200 feet, *The Day of Ed***

After scaling the Wall, our hike that afternoon traverses a couple valleys, including the lush Karanga Valley, complete with a series of taxing ascents and steep descents, sometimes made slick with runoff from the glaciers. All I can think about is doing these traverses in the rain. How insanely treacherous that would be. We've been lucky. Except for late Day 2 hail and light rain, the weather has held out beautifully — mostly sunny, dry, pleasant temps.

After a night in the Karanga camp, at 13,200 feet, Ed shows signs of being fully in the grip of altitude sickness. He just can't breathe,

and is often bent over, struggling for air. Even on the Wall the day before, a guide helps him out by carrying his backpack. Knowing how hard Ed has prepped, it is tough to watch. He is clearly in distress.

Mark brought a tool to measure oxygen concentration levels in the blood, as well as pulse rate, and every breakfast and dinner we take those measurements. Chris and Mark are always the strongest in the mid-90s; when David and I get sick, our levels fall into the mid-80s but pop back into the low-90s as our health improves. Lenny and Ed are solid in the low 90s and high 80s.

But this morning, Ed's blood oxygen level plunges to 77, a very low number. Combined with a high pulse rate of 124 beats per minute, it's no wonder he's fighting to breathe. (Think about that — your resting heart rate is stuck at 124 bpm. That's a good treadmill workout, and you're not doing anything! This is a problem. The summit is still over a mile straight up from here. )

No one, not even Mark, our resident physician, wants to tell Ed that the prudent thing to do is descend to a lower elevation and recover, before things get worse. We'd come so far. For part of the morning, Ed tries to push on, but nothing works. Not pole pole, not someone carrying his backpack, not frequent breaks.

“Halfway through the morning trek to summit base camp,” Ed recalls, “my chest was in a knot, breathing extremely labored, even my foot placements were unstable. Most everyone agreed it was a dangerous situation.

“I faced several options – returning to the camp below, continuing to drag along with the hopes of making it to the next camp, or Kilian would take me across a porter's trail to the final camp, where I would meet everyone after their summit. I chose the last option, my body was breaking down. So I gave a thumbs up to the team — my summit attempt was over.”

That night, alone in camp with a porter assigned to care for him, Ed's G.I. tract started to rebel. Adding insult to injury, the bug hit him with a vengeance too.

"That's when the real fun began. I had no idea where the public toilet was and finding it in the dark was going to be impossible. So I fashioned toilet bags out of shopping bags that I had. I can't imagine what the porter thought the next morning when I swapped him my shopping bag for breakfast ...

"Throughout the day, I checked my watch, wondering where the team might be on their summit attempt. Finally, the porter told me the team had made it and was on their way down ... Incredibly, I had to pack up all my gear and move to a lower camp and wait for them ... Some hour or so later, the humbled team started straggling in. It was the longest day ever."

## **15,500 feet. Base camp for summit attempt.**

We have no way of knowing his condition, but with Ed now hosting the evil G.I. bug on top of his altitude sickness, a midnight summit attempt would've been near impossible for him. Clearly, he had made a good decision. Because the toughest hike, by far, is ahead of us.

Welcome to Barafu Camp, 15,500 feet, the highest we've ever been outside a plane. After a year of planning, a day-long flight though Europe to south-central Africa, and six days of trekking, the team has made it, unfortunately without Ed, to our launching pad to the summit. It will be our sixth night on the mountain.

This is a strange, crowded, and in many ways, awful camp. But the Tent Runner has claimed another prime spot for us, in the highest

corner of the camp, above the wretched smells of waste and whatnot that waft through the lower levels. It's pretty gross. But our tents are pitched above it all, on the edge of a cliff, like mini-penthouse condos, overlooking a valley and clouds that go forever.

After choking down dinner (I'm way over their food), we climb into our sleeping bags around 7 p.m., wearing base layers of summit gear, and try to sleep. I drift off, until a windstorm rips through camp, howling like banshees, shaking and battering my tent. I'm thinking, we can't summit in a hurricane. Then: Are we gonna blow off this cliff? Did the teenage porters tie us down to withstand a Cat-1 storm? I don't sleep any more.

11:30 p.m. is official wake-up. The wind has died down to nothing. The only sounds outside my tent are a steady shuffle and murmurs. Headlamps are now snaking through our campsite, dozens of them, early-birds heading up toward the summit, on a perfectly clear night of a billion stars.

After coffee and a quick bite, Mark, David, Lenny, Chris and me — led by Kilian and Natcho, and flanked by Rashid and the Tent Runner — begin our long, slow slog to the summit.

This is what we came for. It's Game Time.

## **Reflections on a full moon summit, 15,500 to over 19,000+ feet**

A year before the climb, in full Kilimanjaro romance, it seemed like an awesome idea that if we were going to do this thing — climb to 19,341 feet above sea level, halfway 'round the world — why not do it under a full moon? How cool. The final ascent bathed in surreal light, the moon hugely bigger and dreamier, 'cause we'd be closer, right? and flanked by a billion twinkling stars ...

Reality: Just before midnight, we strap on our headlamps and, for the next seven hours, I look down at every perilous next-step, no sightseeing, no night dreaming, no bathing in Beautiful Moon Moments; in fact, I don't know if I ever looked up. I suppose I did, but I can't remember. The visual part of the ascent, for me at least, had nothing to do with what I could see outwardly, into the night, but what I dealt with inwardly. The utter fatigue. My labored breathing. My big fear. I'm an epileptic, and while controlled on medication, no sleep and no food were classic triggers for seizures. Tonight, I was vulnerable. If anything happened, no one could really help me this high up.

But I couldn't turn back either. I just needed to take care of myself the best way I could. That meant slowing down and letting the group go, because I was hyperventilating too much at their pace, which seemed dangerous. So I stopped trying to keep up. And I began to feel better. For hours, I wandered uphill, with only Rashid at my back. When my bladder hose froze, he made sure I had water. Natcho must've kept a eye on me too, because I recall him shoving three energy chews in mouth after learning I hadn't been eating. That helped tremendously.

By letting go of the group, I learned how to move forward at this altitude, at my own rhythm, eliminating the hyperventilating. I learned to keep my mind quiet, in a kind of meditative trance, taking a short step, a breath, a step, a breath, *pole pole* ... very basic, it was all about breathing. I could give a shit about the moon.

Just below Stella Point, I somehow caught up with the guys, just as the sun broke on the horizon. That was my Wow Moment, on multiple levels: I'd rejoined the group, the sunrise was every bit as spectacular as advertised, I'd survived my worst fear ... and I knew, finally, that I would summit.

**Dave:** "I knew the ascent would be tough, just not how tough. We walk slowly, silently in our line. Every time we step over rocks, the

extra exertion causes fatigue. We're taking one step every second or two, but I am breathing really hard. Every step, I need to blow out, then suck air back in. Then coughing begins ... step, blow out, suck in, cough, my mind is 100% focused on this process. ... When the sun came up, I see the top. I felt energized and relief, the mad trance over. For the first time I realized I was going to make the summit."

**Mark:** "The biggest surprise for me about the whole trip was how hard the summit was. Starting the day with almost no sleep, the thin oxygen at altitude, where everything seemed like it was in slow motion. I read a lot about it, but the reality was far more demanding than I ever imagined ... Our guide Rashid told me it's not so much about conquering the mountain as it is conquering yourself — your fears, anxieties, and to dig deep, to persevere. He was right. I dug deep."

**Chris:** "This was the hike we were here for. Everybody had their game face on. As we gained altitude, the temperature dropped with the oxygen and it was dark. Loopiness was in full effect, but I soldiered on, one foot in front of the other ... After hours of this, the sun came up, pictures just can't do this justice. You could see the curvature of the earth! After we hiked the last segment in morning light to Stella Point, I didn't feel tired. I thought the hard part was over. But I could not have been more wrong."

**Dave on Len:** "Heading up, in line, pole pole, I remember my dad settles into his place behind Kilian. He places his right foot where Killian's right foot was, then he places his left foot where Kilian's left foot was. He bumps his head into Kilian's backpack a lot. He's not taking any chances."

**Len:** "That was the toughest thing I've ever done."

*"When going through hell, keep going." -Churchill*

## Tasting it at Stella Point

**THE SHORT HIKE from Stella Point** to the highest summit at Uhuru Peak is hard going at this altitude. But views of the Kibo crater, monster glaciers and Ash Pit are stunningly spectacular, with or without oxygen.

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For over 40 years, Len has kept a quote in his wallet, inspiring him to take risks in life. Who knew. Well, it worked, again. At 69, Len became the oldest guy Natcho has ever guided to the summit. His back-pocket inspiration ...

*"In the battle of life, it is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how a strong man stumbles or where a doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust, sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error or shortcoming, but in the end knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself in a worthy cause; who, at best, knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at worst, if he fails, fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who have tasted neither victory nor defeat." -Theodore Roosevelt, 1910*



## The Summit

**“Life is poa at 19,340 feet.” –Chris**

After a brief rest and pictures at Stella Point, we get moving again, to Uhuru Peak, the highest point. It is only one kilometer away (six-tenths of a mile), but it takes 45 minutes to cover. It’s a beauty walk, if you can gather your wits and take it all in, along the edge of the massive Kibo crater, an ancient Ash Pit and towering glaciers.

Almost eight hours after this slog began, we finally arrive at the highest point on Kilimanjaro. The new green sign says it all. Congratulations! You Are Now at Uhuru Peak, 5895 Meters, Tanzania, Africa’s Highest Point ... blah blah blah ... I can’t read it, everything is so incredibly bright, the moment so wacky, I just know what it says, from YouTube and photographs.

“That last walk to Uhuru Peak was brutal to me,” recalls Chris. “But I shook it off, as I realized WE DID IT. Man, it was a great feeling. Life is poa at 19,340 feet.” Poa is Swahili for cool. I think he has t-shirt there too.

“On the walk to Uhuru, I couldn’t believe how difficult it was. I started to sweat, so I removed my Bears coat and stuffed it in my backpack. That was exhausting,” Dave says. “But I looked across the crater and was amazed at how big the ice fields and glaciers were.”

Natcho is videotaping our last few steps, and Lenny, in front of me, says “For you, Ed” into the camera, and I blurt out, “Kurt,” my brother, who is suppose to be here sumitting but instead is getting radiated for prostate cancer. Then Mark says, “For you Brian”... and Chris, “For you, Ed” ... and so it went.

“Way to go, guys,” Kilian greets everyone. “Way to go.”

I'm drunk on thin air. I'm happy, humbled, totally spent, hugging the guys and all. But I'm not all here, not fully, but it still feels great, mindlessly great, in a joyful, loopy, slo-mo way. Mostly I'm relieved to be done walking uphill.

Suddenly, the groups that got to Uhuru Peak before us are done taking pictures, so now it's our turn. Everyone piles in under the green sign. I unravel my "Kilimanjaro '12: Climb2Cure Prostate Cancer" banner for the fundraiser... the Beta flag (three of us are Beta brothers) ... snap, snap ... The Money Shot of the team with no advertising ... SNAP! And more photos ...

It's all a blur.

The next thing I know, Lenny's Chicago Bears Nerf football is flying around, someone's videotaping a bunch of us playing catch atop Kilimanjaro ... this is all LenVision, throwing a football at the summit ... when crazy Natcho RUNS a down-and-out pattern toward the open crater, catches the ball, dodges invisible tacklers into an imaginary end zone and spikes the ball, which nearly bounces down into the crater.

"We almost made our offering to the Kilimanjaro gods," Dave quips.

Then this remarkable moment:

Mark grounds his knee into the volcanic ash, and says to no one in particular, "This isn't for any cameras, guys." Several of us kneel down with him in a circle, impulsively, not sure why. A Tebowin' Mark then audibilizes an amazing prayer of thanks — thanks for our safe journey so far ... thanks for taking care of Ed ... thanks for a safe descent ahead ... thanks for this incredible family adventure ...

Wow. In my oxygen-starved state of mind, I couldn't believe someone could string together coherent sentences, much less a thoughtful, elegant prayer. In the happy chaos of being on top, Mark reached a little higher — and found a moment of stillness and clarity.

Kneeling on the roof of Africa, his words of gratitude felt good, real good. No oxygen required

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“SO WHY DID I DO THIS? To push myself beyond my limits. Ego — it's pretty cool to tell people I climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro. Most important, my Dad. We've had fun trips together as a family, but this is a whole different category, a great adventure, and I wanted to do it with my Dad.” -Dave

“EVERY SINGLE DAY we faced different obstacles, from terrain changes to all the issues associated with extreme altitude ... then finally, the exhilaration and excitement of making it to the top, playing catch at 19,340 feet. We all wished Ed was with us. But it was a great achievement for everyone.” -Len, tossing a football on the summit.

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## **All downhill from here**

We hang out on the summit for almost an hour, before heading back down to the Barafu base camp ... down through soft scree fields of ankle-deep volcanic ash and numbing exhaustion. Yeah, the fun is just starting. This trek takes three and a half hours for most of us.

Unfortunately for Mark and Len, it's not getting any easier. Len's bum knee is swollen up, and any step down makes things worse; after the summit, of course, it is all downhill. Meanwhile, Mark is feeling godawful. Earlier on the ascent, he dealt with migraines; now on the downhill, overwhelming fatigue.

Chris ate like a champ all week and never got sick. He summited strong and descends the same way, flying off with Rashid down a separate scree field "in ash as thick as powder in Aspen," he says. We don't see him for hours. Chris seems to thrive in less oxygen. I get the feeling Kilimanjaro is more like a giant jungle gym set for him than gauntlet. I could be wrong, but not by much. He makes it to base camp in 90 minutes, beating the rest of us by two hours.

At base camp, we all collapse into our tents. "I think it qualified as passing out," Dave clarifies. Later, we talk about light fevers and chills and bronchial congestion on top of monumental fatigue. "When Mark arrived back at camp, I've never seen him so distraught," recalls Chris. "Although both of us were in various states of agony, we still had a very spirited chat over the life expectancy of those who summit this mountain versus those who spent a lost weekend in Vegas, like normal people who make bucket lists." Classic.

But today's hike is not over. Base camp is just a half-way stop to pack up our gear bags, catch a bite, and continue downhill, to another camp 5,000 vertical feet lower. After a brief rest, we hike another three-plus hours downhill.

Just before nightfall —18 hours after we started toward the summit — we stop for good, at the 10,000-foot Millenium Camp, where we join up with Ed again.

"A long and memorable day," Dave says. "A day I'm sure we will all remember for the rest of our lives."

## **Last night at Millenium Camp. Breathing easier again.**

Bone weary but loving the oxygen at this altitude, we have our last dinner on the mountain — the usual fare of soup, PB&J and burnt chicken legs. Tonight is also the last of our Love Notes from our wives and kids, and that is better than food.

Every night after dinner, these notes are dessert. One of us reads someone else's wife's (or daughter's or son's) letter. Often sitting there in semi-comas, we feel inspired and touched, as each message tells us we're doing something special, reaching higher, living larger ...

Okay, maybe, maybe not, it doesn't matter — because every night your kind words and humor and enthusiastic support always make us feel good. And that is a good trick. To our support team back home, Asante Sana!

**The next morning**, our last hike never seems to end. From Millenium camp to the bottom, we walk another nine miles, mostly over treacherous rock-strewn trails through thick rainforest. All downhill, every step ... down. Toes in boot, knees and hips, backs, all jammin'.

This descent is a tough stretch for Ed, sick with the bug on top of everything else, and Len, whose swollen knee continues to take a beating on the downhill steps. But no one complains. In fact, I never hear Len complain about anything the whole trip. Well, take that back, two things bug him: his hands, all cut up from scrambling over rock ... and the tiny opening to his tent, which squeezes him out every morning like toothpaste.

## There is a saying among Tanzanians ...

“If you have never climbed Kilimanjaro, then you will never know what it is like. If you have climbed it once, then you do. If you have climbed more than once, then something is wrong with you.”

Now, I can't speak for everyone in the Kili 6 Pact, but I doubt any of us will be climbing Kilimanjaro again. I've been asked that question several times, and it is an easy No for me. One and done. (Probably.)

Still, Kili was an experience of lifetime. We are extremely proud of what we did, and the effort we gave. We left it all on that mountain. We also kept our sense of humor throughout, even when short of food, sleep and oxygen. (Try that!) In the end, we had a lot of fun. We went on a family adventure and discovered just how much of a family we are.

Which is very poa.

