

Ascent of man

Mount Kilimanjaro's Uhuru Peak is the roof of Africa, rising nearly 6,000 metres above the Serengeti Plain. **David Kootnikoff** discovers what it takes to make the summit.

"*Hakuna matata*," says Freddy, our guide, reminding us once again that there's "no problem".

It's 4am and nearly 6km above sea level, where we are clinging to Mount Kilimanjaro, the "roof of Africa", like castaways from *The Lion King*. "*Iko Matata*," I reply. "There is a problem."

An icy wind is slicing through my scarf, raking my face like a bag of thorns and I'm pushing on the wife's bottom to prevent her from passing out. We've been going for close to six hours through the frozen dark. In a few more hours the sun will finally peek over the horizon. OK, we were warned, and we accepted the small print as we signed off on this "helliday" to climb "Kili". Yuko was a bit apprehensive at first but finally agreed. Now she's cursing like a pirate.

There's only a few hundred more metres to go before the summit, but it's this last bit that is a killer. It's never easy to predict how a climber's body will react once above 5,000 metres. For most it means shallow breathing, heavy limbs and frequent stops. Water is essential. So are energy bars. For others, it means giving up, turning around and going home. Then there are the unlucky few who don't make it out alive.

Mount Kilimanjaro rises from the Serengeti Plain, 300km south of the equator, in the northeast of Tanzania and on the border with Kenya. Kilimanjaro is actually the name of the national park that makes up three volcanic cones – Kibo, Mawenzi and Shira.

Pictures: Yuko Kootnikoff

Kibo's Uhuru Peak is the highest point and it's the goal most climbers try to reach. Most people do the whole trio – up and down – in four nights on the popular "Coca-Cola" route known as Marangu. We're taking five nights – four up, one down – on the Rongai route, starting from the Kenyan side. It's supposedly more scenic and less busy.

Kili has five climate zones, five different moods. On the lower slopes it's hot and restless, but soon relaxes into tangles of sultry rainforests as the altitude increases. After 3,000 metres it bristles into scrub and moorland, wielding sharp edges and giant cacti; at about 4,000 metres it rapidly cools and becomes the shocked moonscape of an alpine desert. Finally, up above the clouds at 5,000 metres, Kili transcends itself, reaching a state of grace with a crown of opal-frosted glaciers. But the glacier is retreating – it's now only a small remnant of an enormous icecap that once covered the entire summit. Between 1912 and 2000, 82 per cent of the cap disappeared, and according to experts, it only has somewhere between 20 and 40 years left.

The oxygen is about half of what it is at sea level. Nothing up here grows and few animals have ever made it this far. In the 1920s, a German missionary found a frozen leopard carcass. What drove it to these heights no one knows.

Freddy has been doing this for seven years. When he walks he rolls his body like an inner tube, grooves worn in the joints and flesh sagging under his eyes.

He's 32 but looks 42 and barely makes enough to support his wife and three children. In the evenings he drinks "gongo juice", Tanzanian moonshine, to relax. A few weeks ago he passed an older man who had died on the way up.

We've had a small tribe of 12 working for us, hired by Freddy with a budget from the travel company. I feel like a slave driver. Adam, the cook, has sent knowing glances our way periodically. We don't eat meat and he seems happy to have navigated our fickle tastes. The food has been good and hearty – lots of pasta and eggs. We even have our own personal "waiter": Michael, a Maasai nomad who tosses the plaid blanket of his tribe over his shoulder, like a regal chieftain, when he walks. He never smiles and is meticulous in his table settings.

On the first morning at Camp Simba (2,800 metres) we wake up in a wet, gauzy web – dew and mist blankets the entire camp. Soon the sun burns it all away and we get our first view of the peak against the clear, blue sky.

It would be nice to have Kili all to yourself, but that's impossible. A bearded Belgian in his 50s, pipe in hand, tells us he dreamt of scaling the mountain as a boy, after reading about the adventures of Tintin and Snowy. At his age he isn't sure what will happen to his body above 5,000 metres.

Camp Barafu (4,660 metres) is our final stop before the peak. The sky is slate grey and the only sign of any colour is the orange and blue tents of



other trekkers dotting the mountainside. Large, white-necked crows are everywhere, scavenging for morsels. We turn in at about 8pm and wake at 2am to begin the final ascent. We have been told it's easier to climb at night because the glacial scree is usually frozen, making it better for traction.

In Kafka's short story *In the Penal Colony*, a "traveller" is invited to an execution and agrees to attend out of politeness. This is how I'm beginning to feel, but it's my own execution and I've willingly consented to die for fear of causing Freddy any offence. Morning comes and the sun is as clear and bright as a spotlight in a sky full of mirrors. The snow beneath our feet is like crushed glass. We're getting closer. The blue ice of the glacier is in sight. I'm moving automatically and feel elated and exhausted. "There it is," says Freddy.

It must be no more than 30 metres ahead, the first summit – Stella Point (5,756 metres), but it's still an hour to Uhuru. My legs feel like they are being sucked into the ground, as if I'm walking across a glass surface with suction cups attached to my feet. I'm feeling dizzy, too, my mind is reeling back and forth.

After a brief rest we follow Freddy and can see our goal, Uhuru, above us. Snow is everywhere, but there's an easy path to follow. As we start to walk, Yuko complains of stomach cramps and then vomits. Freddy assures us it's common and that she'll feel better when she's finished. And she does. But over the next hour as we walk along the edge of the glacier overlooking the caldera she vomits again and again. Each time she feels better for a while, but she's also getting weaker. I feel invisible, like I'm transparent and weightless, as though something has given way and let me go. We finally reach the peak and the wooden marker announcing:

"Congratulations! You are now at Uhuru Peak, Tanzania, 5,895 metres, Africa's Highest Point." Even with sunglasses the bright sunlight stings. At this first summit people are embracing, dropping to their knees. When I try to touch Yuko she pushes me away and tears fill her eyes.

"You're crying, too," she says. It's all too much – the nights camping, the long daily treks, the gradual ascent into thinner air.

Yuko's adrenalin seems to take over and we snap some photos. Her face is puffy, like her jacket, and she looks like the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man.

It all begins to make some sense now that it's over. Kili looks down on the Olduvai Gorge, the cradle

Other page: higher than the clouds on Uhuru Peak. Above: Kibo is the tallest of Kilimanjaro's three volcanic cones. Below right: a welcome signpost. Below left: the permanent snow cover is fast disappearing.

of humanity, the plain where our ancestor *Homo habilis* was born. The world is convinced it can maintain its voracious lifestyle while at the same time reducing its so-called "carbon footprint," but the snow beneath our feet is literally melting away. We've got one foot in the cradle, the other in the grave. I don't know exactly what the future holds, but I do know this moment is enough to sustain Yuko and I for many years to come.

Getting there: Kenya Airways (www.kenya-airways.com) flies three times a week from Hong Kong to Nairobi (Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays). From Nairobi, you can either fly or take a bus across to Tanzania, where most climbing routes begin. To book a tour, go to www.climbingkilimanjaro.com.

