

How I Spent Part of My Summer: Climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro

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From August 12-17, I climbed and then descended Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. Since many have inquired about the trip, what follows are a few remarks providing some sense of the climb with pictures to provide readers with a few major views of and from the mountain.

Mt. Kilimanjaro, a collapsed former volcano, is the tallest mountain in Africa at 19,341 feet. It is also the highest freestanding mountain in the world rising about 16,000 feet from its base in the plains below.



(From <https://anirishmanabroad.wordpress.com/page/33/>)

On the climb we took the Marangu Route, the shortest of several, which is about 28-29 miles from the park entrance to the summit, gaining 12,171 vertical feet. This is known as the “Coca Cola Route” because local residents used to supplement their income by selling Coca Cola at key points along the route.

Five days of climbing took us to the summit. Along the way we stayed at three different camps (Mandara, Horombo, and Kibo) all of which consist of quite simple, spare A-frame huts with limited bathroom facilities. We spent two days at Horombo at 12,300 feet for an extra day of climbing to assist acclimatization. On most days we climbed about 3,000 vertical feet averaging five to eight miles of hiking.

From the high camp at Kibo (15,500) the summit is 3,856 vertical feet and about four miles away. On the fifth day we began the summit climb at 12:30 a.m. under a waning full moon

and reached the ridge of the caldera at 5:30 a.m. in time to see dawn over Africa. Another hour and a half took us to the summit at Uhuru Peak, which means “Freedom Peak” in Swahili. The views from here were spectacular with glacier fields reasonably close (but they are under threat from global warming), the plains of Africa 16,000 feet below (somewhat obscured in haze), and our high camp 3,800 feet below.



(Dawn over Africa from Gillman’s point, 18,800; Carl Cranor)



(Summit ridge from about 18,800 feet; Carl Cranor)



(South glacier from summit ridge; Carl Cranor)



(North glacier and part of caldera from summit ridge; Carl Cranor)



(From summit ridge: nearby Mawenzi peak and Kibo Camp just a tiny speck 3,800 feet below; Carl Cranor)



(Uhuru Peak; Carl Cranor)

After spending about three-quarters of an hour on the summit, we returned to the Kibo high camp, where we ate, slept less than two hours, then descended another six miles over two hours to Horombo at 12,300 feet for another meal and a night's sleep. (We ate a lot and drank a lot of water on the trip at the Guide's insistence.) On summit day we hiked about eleven hours, first gaining 3,800 feet from Kibo, then losing 7,000 feet all the way back to Horombo.

On the sixth day we arose early and began hiking to get to our hotel and showers as soon as possible, descended another 6,000 feet and thirteen miles to the park entrance (not stopping at Mandara Camp). After a two-hour drive we took welcome showers, had a celebratory dinner and rested. The following day Crystal and I went on a six-day safari to experience scenes more typical of Africa.

The climb was a great trip to a quite different part of the world than I had been to previously. Since the ascent is quite challenging, preparation for it was extensive, but well worth it. Preparing for a high altitude climb was good for my overall health and conditioning. Many who climb Kilimanjaro describe it as the most difficult, even "hellish," physical activity they have ever done; some have said they would never do it again, once having done it. Some climbers suffer substantial headaches, nausea or even vomiting on the ascent or at the summit. I was fortunate not to have experienced these problems, but at the summit my legs were quite tired, no doubt reflecting five days of continuous climbing.