

KILIMANJARO INITIATIVE 2008

TIM CHALLEN'S DIARY

Day 1 – Marangu Hotel, Kilimanjaro

Six weeks ago, I switched on the TV to discover the result of the Kenyan General Election. Instead of seeing scenes of joyful expectations, I saw machetes, blood and fury. So it is with some relief that I find everybody sitting in the Marangu Hotel restaurant eating their breakfast and chatting away. Many of the youths are from Nairobi and when we spoke in early January, some were hiding in the slums and avoiding gangs who were intent on a kill. It is these young women and men who told me not to cancel Kilimanjaro Initiative climb 2008.

After a quick bite, I rush off to my logistical issues of sorting arrangements and payments with service providers. As I pass through the hotel courtyard, our 15 guides, 2 cooks and 36 porters are also busy with their own preparations for the climb. Seeing them reminds me that this is not just a climb, it's an expedition...

This year, the climb was only going to focus on youth and the environment but due to the unrest in Kenya we felt it was important to also highlight 'peace' and 'unity' in Kenya. That's the country where the 'Initiative' started and where we now work with a number of youth groups in raising awareness towards youth crime prevention and setting up small enterprises. Our group of 30 climbers includes Kenyan and Tanzanian youths, a Kenyan police officer, a former marathon champion, a Hip Hop artist, Walt Disney executives and some friends/relatives from Geneva, Nairobi and Hong Kong. A mixed representation - but to be honest with you, on this mountain, it doesn't really matter who you are or where you come from, all will be confronted to the same adversity.

After introductions, registration, speeches and the flagging off ceremony, we finally pass through the gates of the Kilimanjaro National Park and start making our way up the long trail, through a tropical forest, to Mandara hut.

Day 2 – Mandara to Horombo

Again, I did not sleep well! I've had so much on my mind these past few weeks that sleeping seems more like a distant luxury than an absolute necessity. The malaria tablets I've been taking aren't helping either. Nauseating tablets, but I do not want a mosquito I might have met in Dar es Salaam, a few days earlier, to send me back down the mountain.

Being awake early gives me an opportunity to watch the sun rise over the surrounding plains, before going and waking up the rest of the group. As group leader you are not

only an alarm clock, you also have to make sure people have breakfast and eat well, know that they pack their day packs accordingly and be aware of everyone's health.

We leave camp at 8:00 a.m. but 3 people stay behind to wait for a bag that went missing somewhere between Los Angeles and Amsterdam – that's how global the climb has become. It was eventually found and made it to Marangu Hotel last night, from where a porter has been dispatched, at first light, to bring the bag to its owner. I find that problems don't stress me anymore; you just get on with it - keeping in mind that there are always solutions. Actually, everyone on the climb is in good spirit, just a little anxious as to what lies ahead.

After a 7 hour trek through alpine tundra, with stunning views of Mount Kilimanjaro before us, we arrive at Horombo, a series of A-framed huts that sit on a ledge below Mawenzi Peak. The place is always thriving with activity, especially the cooks who produce three course meals in very small huts, packed with dozens of people. My amazement at this scene gets interrupted by news that some people are starting to feel altitude sickness.

Day 3 – Horombo to Kibo

We leave camp again at 8:00 a.m. and take our group photo a few hundred yards further, Mount Kilimanjaro is a perfect backdrop. The 'Peace' banner that we wanted to display has actually been left by its bearer with his porter. I give him a telling-off look that just doesn't seem to have an effect. Instead, we just smile and move on upwards.

One climber, a lawyer from Nairobi, is moving at an extremely slow pace. The altitude is really hurting and I ask him to hand over his day pack so that we can carry it. His aggressive objection is another symptom of mountain sickness and I make it clear that his ascent is over. As in most cases, pride takes over the person and so I find myself giving a hundred reasons why staying alive is more important than trying to reach the summit. In any case, Emmanuel, our chief guide with more than 3,500 climbs under his belt, had already decided that a return back was a 'life saving' obligation. Our lawyer finally agrees and I tend to think this shows more bravery than someone who will make it to top. It is not about the destination, it's about a purpose...

After a seemingly endless walk through the lunar landscape that is the 'saddle,' we finally arrive at Kibo Hut. I don't like this spot – it's damp, your mind is not quite with it and you get very little sleep before the final ascent to the crater rim – it's just an inhospitable place and you would certainly die if you stayed here too long. The spaghetti bolognese we get served, a childhood favorite of mine, is the only comfort I get.

11 p.m. - time to wake up, put on four layers of clothes, step out into the cold night, and begin on our way to Gilman's point, first point on the crater rim, and hopefully onto Uhuru peak, the highest point in Africa.

Day 4 – Kibo to Uhuru (and then back down to Horombo)

A girl from Nairobi collapses in front of me, holding her chest and gasping for air. We are 1 hour out of Kibo and we have already had five people abandon their ascent. Along with a guide we pick the girl up, rubbing her back while she throws up. She cries in pain and is probably wondering why she is there, on a very steep slope and a long way from home. There is only one medicine for this condition, and that is straight back down. I watch her and the guide descend into the night, only to turn round and find another victim of high altitude. The air is especially dry this year, making this difficult last leg even harder.

As there are no other guides around, I decide to bring this climber down. He is wobbling and I resolve myself to the fact that I will not reach Uhuru Peak this year. We descend about three hundred yards until we reach another guide. I hesitate between telling him to bring our victim back to Kibo Hut and doing it myself – after all, I would have had a good excuse for ending my hardship there and then. But for fear I would later feel somewhat guilty, I hand over one of our last climbers and start the long trek back up. 10 steps – pause -10 steps – pause; drink some water – 10 steps – pause; “Great, my high energy bar is frozen!” – 10 steps...

I arrive at Gilman’s Point around 6:00 a.m., feeling in bad shape but confident that no one has been left alone and all are with a guide. The sun is announcing its presence, as I can see the night getting lighter and, after a short rest, I look over in the distance to Uhuru Peak and start putting one foot in front of the other. A few minutes later, I turn round to see a warm orange glow come over Mawenzi Peak – the sun is rising over Africa!

I meet a few people from our group returning from the summit, they are looking tired but relieved. I’m actually jealous because I’m still going up. Eventually, I make it to the top. No exhilaration, but the feeling that I am in a mystical, magical and beautiful place where you know man can never stay for too long – nature for itself! After wondering at the melting ice, the scorched volcanic earth, the clouds and plains below, I commence my descent.

Day 5 – Horombo to Marangu

It doesn’t matter if you hate sleeping bags or your neighbours turn snoring into a hi-tech surround sound system, EVERYONE sleeps well the night after reaching the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro. Having said that, I am still the first one to open my eyes and I go round to wake people up. All the climbers are in good health, having recovered from sickness, headaches and exhaustion.

I give my last briefing after breakfast and we all set off back to Marangu, 20 kilometers of pain for the knees. But everyone is in good spirit, talking about the previous day’s hardships and the warm shower and cold beers that lie ahead. It is actually during the descent that you really take in the awesome landscape of Mount Kilimanjaro and talk freely to your co-climbers, knowing that the problem is now behind you.

We stop off for lunch at Mandara, before continuing on down through the rain forest to the gate. Transport from the hotel is waiting for us, we jump in it looking behind us one more time towards the trail and sampling the last moments of our expedition.

After a long hot shower, we gather for the closing ceremony of this event, to tip and thank our supporting team of guides, cooks and porters, and to distribute the ‘climb’ certificates that have been awarded by the Tanzanian National Parks Authority.

The feeling is good, the respect is mutual, an understanding of one another is reinforced, links have been created, and a new synergy is born. I take a moment to myself and look up to Uhuru Peak, a long way away. Inside, I am crying – this mountain has inspired me so much, brought new friends and taught me valuable lessons about life – and I know it will always continue to do so because, ultimately, the journey goes on...

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