

# Africa: Day Seven – Summit Day!

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The alarm on my watch was set to wake me at 11:00pm, - as if I could actually be sleeping! We had all gone to bed early to get as much rest as possible for the big day. For me, sleep was fleeting at best. As the hours dragged by, my mind entertained a cycle of thoughts and emotions: I worried, I prayed, I hoped and I reflected. After months of planning, preparing and training, the moment was finally here. My friend Trent had climbed thousands of stairs, swam many laps and hiked more than a hundred miles with me to help me train. Was it all enough? Did I bring the right gear? Would the weather hold? Would my teammates continue to be strong? Would my face show triumph or defeat as I descend back into camp later today?

After a brief breakfast of hot chocolate and cookies we donned our packs and braced ourselves for the daunting task ahead. At 12:18am, we took our place in line behind the head guide, Frederick, and the uphill trudge commenced. Our group of seven climbers would be accompanied by four guides; the porters would remain at camp. Most of us did not use our headlamps as the nearly full moon provided ample illumination. Frederick maintained a very slow but steady pace. 30 minutes into our summit attempt, Frederick began singing to us. His beautiful voice melted the hours into minutes as he serenaded us in both Swahili and English. Most of his songs I recognized as hymns and did my best to sing along – not an easy task with so little oxygen to spare. What an amazing place to be, while singing the praises of an amazing God!



At about 6:00am we reached Stella Point as the sun was making a glorious first appearance! Stella Point is the end of the line for many climbers. It is basically at the top of the mountain, but is by no means the highest point. From here the first glimpse of the Reusch Crater can be enjoyed.

Following a five minute break, we pressed forward towards the true summit, Uhuru Peak. I was now feeling quite sure that we all were going to make it! As an early reward, we were treated to a view of the silhouette of Kilimanjaro projected onto the clouds in the distance.



Minimal conversation was taking place amongst our team due in part to lack of sleep, Frederick's calming songs and our resolute focus on the task at hand. The terrain involved no climbing, just upright hiking, so the trail itself was of no particular concern. However, the lack of oxygen at this altitude warranted a very slow, calculated pace. After all of the time and effort already invested into this trip, now would be a lousy time to develop altitude sickness! Upon reaching Stella Point, my trepidation rapidly receded. Our group was faring quite well and became much livelier now that we were within sight of our goal. The warm alpenglow painted a glacier and added another dimension to its imposing stature.





As I completed the final steps to the summit of Uhuru Peak, I strutted with a sense that I was free from all of my troubles and concerns. This was fitting as Uhuru means “freedom” in Swahili! My eyes filled with tears as I hugged Brenda and told her how proud I

was of her. She, by far, had the least mountain experience in our group, a fact that could not be discerned by watching her climb. She weathered the combination of elements that constitute a seven day backpacking trip on a huge mountain (with no running water or curling iron) like a seasoned pro! – And, she did it without a single complaint! The others in our team also took this mountain in stride; I was privileged to be in their company as we stood at the summit of Uhuru Peak, the highest point of Mount Kilimanjaro at 19,340ft!





The next thirty minutes were consumed by congratulatory hugs, pictures, a text message and collecting summit rocks as trophies. All too quickly it was time to begin our descent. Only the beauty provided by the glaciers, the summit and the moment could console the pain of having to leave such a spectacular perch. We would retreat 3 miles and 4,249ft of elevation to earn lunch at the previous night's camp. Our faces, though tired, beamed with triumph!

















We made good time back to the Barafu camp, arriving at 10:00am. Lunch would not be served until noon so we had two hours to nap. This time, sleep came easy and it came fast! It seemed as if this day was actually two days. Now that the climb was over, the focus

was re-directed towards getting back down. Four miles and just over 5000 vertical feet were all that separated us from the Mweka Camp, our last camp on the mountain. The inhospitable rocks quickly yielded to strange vegetation as we began to notice and enjoy the abundance of oxygen. Once at camp we started preparing money to be given to our porters and guides the following morning. This was a sad moment. Our new friends,



people we had carried our supplies, cooked our food, guided us up the mountain and shared countless laughs with would soon be working for other clients. While we may never see them again in person, they will exist in our mind's eye for a very long time. While the mountain was great fun, the time with the people was of great value!



