



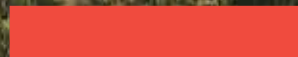
19,341 FEET



The author (wearing a red hat) hikes across Shira Plateau, 15 miles into her 37-mile journey to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro.

# Everyman's Everest

Africa's Mount Kilimanjaro, one of the world's Seven Summits, captures people's imaginations because it's doable. One novice climber details how to conquer it and what to expect.



by JESSICA FLINT

Photographs by TAYLOR GLENN



✕ MY OBSESSION WITH MOUNT KILIMANJARO, in Tanzania, manifested only last year, on a father-daughter hiking trip in Chilean Patagonia. Trekking up a 1,600-foot cliff near Torres del Paine National Park, I asked my dad, “What’s the most difficult nontechnical mountain that I could climb?” “Probably Kilimanjaro,” he replied.

At 19,341 feet, the same extreme altitude classification as Everest’s 29,029 feet, Kili (what mountaineers call it) is not only Africa’s highest peak but also the planet’s tallest freestanding mountain, meaning not attached to a range. I knew nothing then about what scaling the 750,000-year-old triple stratovolcano entailed, but in that moment, I decided I’d do just that.

Thus what follows isn’t a romanticized tale about Africa’s roof. We all know Ernest Hemingway owns that turf. No, this is simply a how-to account of what it’s like for a regular person—in this case, a 34-year-old New Yorker—with zero mountaineering experience to attempt the possible: turning a wild summit fantasy into, well, a summit.

The first step in any far-flung adventure is hiring a tour operator. Several hundred of them organize Kili trips. Three luxury outfitters I talked to suggested seven days on Machame, the most popular of the six trails up. But Brad Horn, owner of Epic Private Journeys, recommended eight days on Lemosho, the most scenic route, to acclimatize for an extra night. “Time provides the best summit chance,” he said. Thirty thousand trekkers climb Kili annually; 45 percent reach the top. Epic has close to a 97 percent success rate.

About ten people die on the mountain each year, generally because of altitude sickness and guides who aren’t prepared to handle it. Epic puts safety first with preclimb briefings, on-mountain twice-daily vital-sign readings, and portable oxygen tanks. I was enticed by Kili’s risk element but freaked out enough to trust only Epic. I signed up for a January Lemosho climb.

I started preparing in October. Jason Walsh, a Los Angeles-based personal trainer, gave me advice. “Don’t overprepare,” he said. “It’s literally a long hike.” So I ran about 20 miles per week. I felt physically ready leaving for Africa. And, after spending \$3,000 on base layers and gear at Patagonia and REI stores, I looked pretty legit too.



## The Night Before the Climb

THE OBJECTIVE A SAFETY BRIEFING

ELEVATION 4,550 FEET

My first stop in Tanzania was Rivertrees Country Inn, a 45-minute drive from Kilimanjaro airport. Here I met my trekking companions. I had come with two thirtysomething girlfriends. We didn’t know our other teammates, all Americans: a 61-year-old woman, 54-year-old “Camp Dad,” his 26-year-old son, and my 38-year-old male photographer.

Before dinner, we had a safety briefing run by our expedition leader, Ake Lindstrom, 39 (number of Kili summits: 60). He founded Summits Africa, Epic’s partner company for Kili trips. Ake introduced our head guide, Daniel Kilango, 36 (Kili summits: 200-plus). We’d also have a 45-person mountain staff: three assistant guides, two camp crews, two cooks, and 38 porters. Summits’ biggest Kili trip to date: 54 climbers (46 summited) and 168 staff.

Ake got down to business. “We will be climbing *pole pole*—Swahili for slow—to keep breathing and heart rates down,” he said. “Water! Drink three liters daily. Sip every ten minutes. Urine should be clear and copious. Take 250 milligrams of Diamox, the altitude drug, twice per day. Be honest with how you are feeling. Don’t surprise us.”

Ake and Daniel came to our rooms for a gear check. Duffle bags the porters carry—mine was 90 liters—can’t be more than 40 pounds. Ake wanted our 30-liter packs to always include a hydrator (a water reservoir with a hose), hiking poles, wind/rain jacket and pants, extra layers, a baseball cap, a wool hat, sunglasses, sunscreen, lip balm, passport, wallet, and snacks.

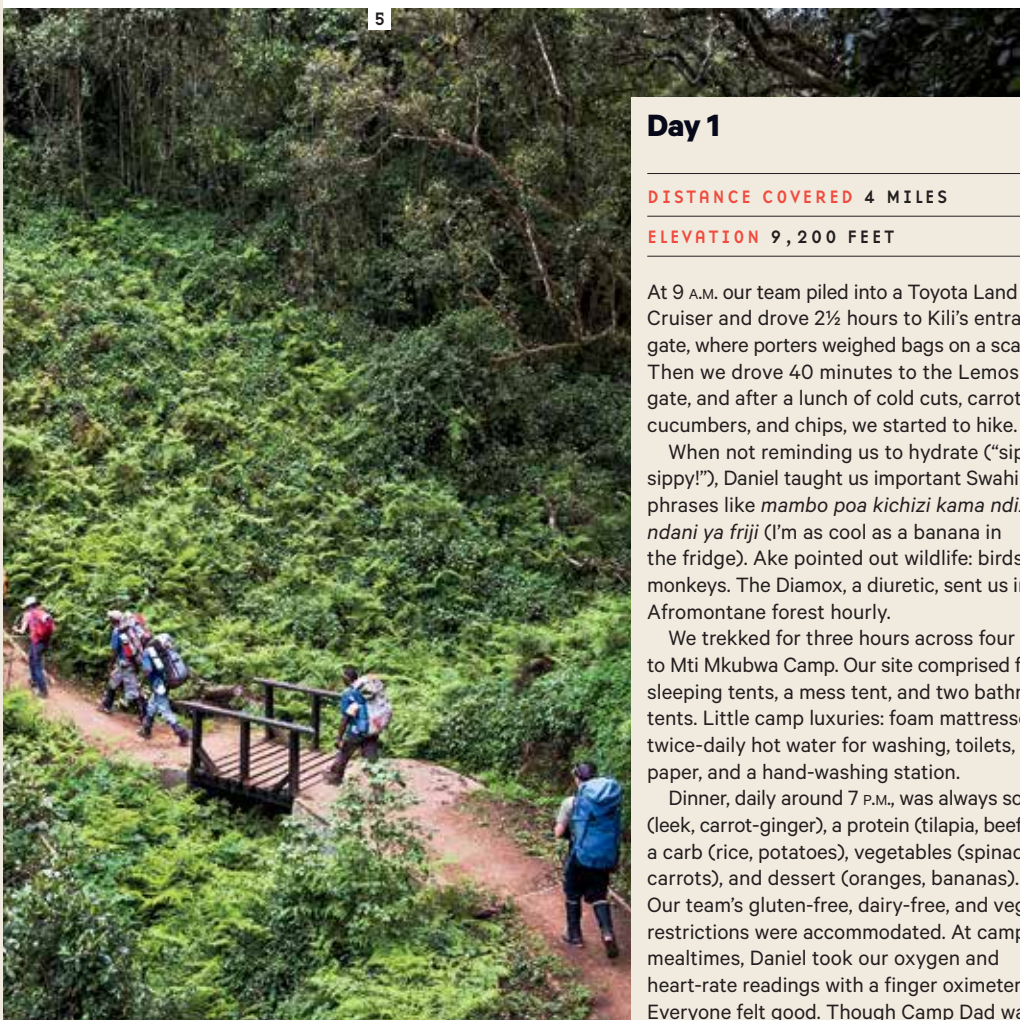
Afterward, we all went to sleep. Tomorrow our summit quest would begin.

1 The writer signing into the guest log at Kili’s entrance gate

2 At Mti Mkubwa Camp, Epic’s small legion of staff welcomed the trekking team by singing “Jambo Bwana,” a traditional Kili song.

3 Ake’s camp rule: no sleeping in the afternoon. On Day 1, the team killed time drinking tea.

4 It takes a village! The writer, in a red hat, gets trail-ready with her teammates’ help.



## Day 1

DISTANCE COVERED 4 MILES

ELEVATION 9,200 FEET

At 9 A.M. our team piled into a Toyota Land Cruiser and drove 2½ hours to Kili’s entrance gate, where porters weighed bags on a scale. Then we drove 40 minutes to the Lemosho gate, and after a lunch of cold cuts, carrots, cucumbers, and chips, we started to hike.

When not reminding us to hydrate (“sippy, sippy!”), Daniel taught us important Swahili phrases like *mambo poa kichizi kama ndizi ndani ya friji* (I’m as cool as a banana in the fridge). Ake pointed out wildlife: birds, monkeys. The Diamox, a diuretic, sent us into Afromontane forest hourly.

We trekked for three hours across four miles to Mti Mkubwa Camp. Our site comprised five sleeping tents, a mess tent, and two bathroom tents. Little camp luxuries: foam mattresses, twice-daily hot water for washing, toilets, toilet paper, and a hand-washing station.

Dinner, daily around 7 P.M., was always soup (leek, carrot-ginger), a protein (tilapia, beef), a carb (rice, potatoes), vegetables (spinach, carrots), and dessert (oranges, bananas). Our team’s gluten-free, dairy-free, and vegan restrictions were accommodated. At camp mealtimes, Daniel took our oxygen and heart-rate readings with a finger oximeter. Everyone felt good. Though Camp Dad was coming down with a head cold.

At night the zzzzzzip of the sleeping tents was heard every hour with teammates doing Diamox runs. Some of the men eventually designated a pee bottle in their tents instead.

5 Hiking single file, as usual, on Day 1 through Afromontane forest.

6 Head guide Daniel led the trekking line daily. Ake and three other guides were also always on the trail.

7 Ake got the Tanzanian government to sign off on Kili’s first legal drone expedition for the writer’s trip. The team named the drone Simba 1. It broke. Simba 2 took its place.



## Day 2

DISTANCE COVERED 6 MILES

ELEVATION 11,500 FEET

“Good morning!” said camp manager Steve at 6 A.M. as he delivered chamomile tea to my tent, a daily ritual. Breakfast, usually at 6:30, was porridge, eggs, bacon, sausage, and toast. We were on the trail at 7. The porters stayed behind dismantling the camp, which they carried to the next site. “Culturally that’s how Tanzanians collect water,” Ake offered as an explanation for why porters haul bags on their heads.

We trekked six hours across six miles into juniper forest until we burst out at 10,000 feet into the heath zone, typified by Erica heather. It was overcast when we arrived at Shira 1 Camp, at 11,500 feet. After an hour-long afternoon hike to acclimatize to our new altitude, as we were sitting at an outdoor table hydrating with tea and chatting about bodily functions (entirely normal mountaineering talk), the clouds parted and we finally glimpsed Uhuru Peak. That’s Kili’s summit on Kibo, the highest of the mountain’s three volcanoes. It had been hidden in the clouds our entire trip so far.

Dinner conversation revolved around Ake. Born in Nairobi, Kenya, he first climbed Kili in 1999. “It changed my life,” he said. When he started leading trips in 2001, he was horrified by the guiding system’s corruption. “There is a lot of price pressure,” he said of the corner-cutting in wages and guide training. He’s now at the top of the industry for pay. His porter salary is \$10 per day, so \$2,000 to \$2,500 annually, whereas the average porter salary is around \$1,000 (the average Tanzanian’s salary). Now Ake has more than 300 exclusive staff. He mandates twice-yearly training.

After we ate, walking from the mess tent to my sleeping tent with my headlamp illuminating the way, I paused and looked up. The stars were magnificent.

8 A snack break. The writer packed Justin’s Almond Butter and RxBars. The bars often froze in the cold.

9 The summit view at Shira 1 Camp. Ake sent staff up the mountain early to secure secluded sites.





### Day 3

DISTANCE COVERED 5 MILES

ELEVATION 12,500 FEET

“Look around, fool!” I was standing on Shira Plateau, and Ake was commanding our team to take in our surroundings. I did. Miles of mostly flat moorland strewn with wiry green shrubs, spiky brown tussock grass, and large boulders gave way to Kili’s towering summit. Ake was pointing to the rocks and giving a geological lesson, but I couldn’t focus. All I could think was: Whoa, we have a long way to walk to get to the top.

We’d done our usual morning drill and were in the middle of a five-hour, five-mile trek to Shira 2 Camp. The landscape morphed to brown and rocky as we climbed Kibo’s outer slopes up to 12,500 feet. It was sunny, but the wind was cold. January is quiet (and mostly trash-free) on Kili. “What we are seeing now is empty,” Ake said of the few other trekkers on the trail.

Yesterday I had a barely there on-again, off-again headache; today was the same. Otherwise, despite a constantly full bladder, I felt great: no fatigue, no soreness, no blisters. Camp Dad’s cold was worse.

Ake told us Kili attracts such a wide range of people because it’s conquerable. “The journey is pitting yourself against altitude on a remarkably friendly mountain,” he said. But I also sensed all my teammates were here for a deeper reason: transformation. I think people go to peaks in search of something. And when you push yourself further than you think you can go, that’s when change happens.

10 Epic’s water is cleaned with purification tablets and filtration.

11 Picnicking at 13,800 feet with Kili’s summit as the backdrop



### Day 4

DISTANCE COVERED 4 MILES

FINAL ELEVATION 12,960 FEET

Our morning routine was upended by a breakfast crisis: We were nearly out of Tanzanian honey! Ake assured us we’d live. Tomorrow was resupply day.

The motto for today’s 8½-hour trek: “Walk high, sleep low,” Ake said. A desolate trail—extreme temperatures (as low as 25 degrees) make it so flora or fauna can’t really survive—led to Lava Tower, a volcanic plug at 15,800 feet where we had lunch and Diamoxed. On the way up, I felt the bizarre altitude-induced sensation of my heart working hard while my *pole pole* physical exertion felt like almost nothing. Then, with thunder clapping, we descended upon Barranco Camp, a tent city encased in fog at 12,960 feet, like something out of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*. About 115 trekkers and 300 staff were there; peak season might have 250 guests and 600 workers. It’s crowded because the Machame and Umbwe trails also converge here. Note: Barranco is the only camp we stayed at that had any chance of getting cell service.

On eight-day trips, it’s generally not altitude that sends people down the mountain. A regular old cold can become problematic. Speaking of which, today Camp Dad talked to Ake about an evacuation plan.

In my journal that night I listed things I was glad my teammates packed: Byredo perfume for the women’s bathroom tent, a solar-powered battery charger, a UE Boom speaker, matcha, and an Aerolatte. Things I wish I had brought: more wet wipes, a fingernail-cleaning kit. Things worth leaving at home: dry shampoo, a mirror.

12 The Day 5 post-Barranco Wall breakfast

14 One of the team’s assistant guides on the trail

13 Expedition leader Ake. The women on the trip found his usual outfit of shorts and gaiters to be very sexy.

15 “I’ve officially reached my capacity for camp food.”—the writer’s Day 5 journal entry



### Day 5

DISTANCE COVERED 3 MILES

FINAL ELEVATION 13,450 FEET

Roll call: 5:30 A.M. “We’ll purposefully be on the trail by 6:30,” Ake said last night. He wanted to avoid getting stuck in line with other climbers scaling the demanding but doable Barranco Wall, an ominous-looking 843-foot rock face that required us to ditch our hiking poles for 1½ hours and use all our limbs to scramble up. At the top, we had a breakfast of Nutella crepes, sausage, bacon, and Snickers (the original energy bar)—at 13,800 feet. Then we made our way to the 13,450-foot Karanga Camp via a two-hour, knee-jamming hike down to the Karanga Valley floor on slippery scree, only to be faced with a 20-minute, everything-burning vertical ascent to camp.

At 6 P.M., we had a one-hour dress rehearsal hike to prepare for tomorrow night’s summit assault. Ake had us put on our summit gear. For me, that was five layers on top (a base layer, two fleeces, a down jacket, and a wind/rain jacket) and four on the bottom (two bottom base layers, insulated pants, and wind/rain pants). I also wore a balaclava, wool hat, and headlamp. “Your hydrators will freeze,” Ake said. He had us put Nalgene water bottles in our jacket pockets as a second water source. All we were to stash in our packs was one liter of hydrator water, snacks, a sun hat, sunglasses, and passport.

Tonight I lingered outside my tent. I could see my breath as I looked out over Moshi, the 190,000-person town twinkling thousands of feet below. I thought about how I had come into this adventure anticipating an individual experience but how I had grown to care deeply about my teammates. I wanted my entire camp family to succeed on summit night.

16 On the Barranco Wall scramble, Epic’s guides lent the team a hand—literally.

17 In the trekking line, the higher the altitude, the more the trail talking stopped.



### Day 6

DISTANCE COVERED 3 MILES

ELEVATION 15,744 FEET

After a 6 A.M. wake-up we trudged like ants dressed in a rainbow of Gore-Tex for four hours across barren alpine desert. A sharp ascent then led to the organized chaos at Barafu Camp, at 15,100 feet. Something tragic happened on our way there: One of our porters slipped and was badly hurt. Ake’s crew did a spinal-immobile evacuation on a stretcher. It’s a reminder that on the mountain, anything can happen.

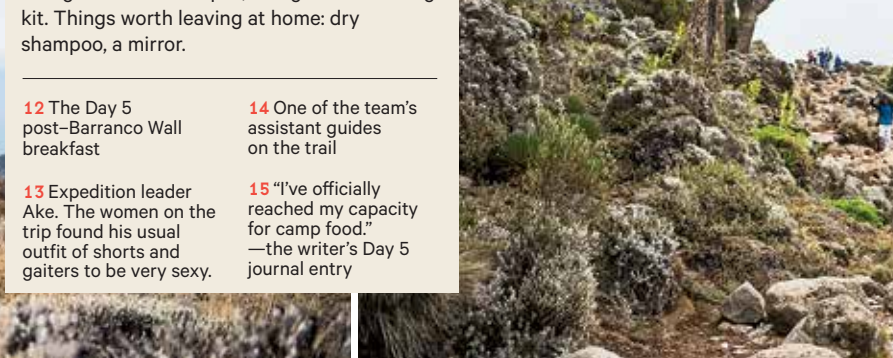
Most trekkers stay at Barafu. We, however, climbed a steep lava flow for an hour to High Camp, at 15,744 feet. A special permit is required to camp here, and Ake has one. It was only us, above the clouds. Our team was mostly feeling okay. Even Camp Dad had turned a corner. Though nerves were starting to get to people. One teammate’s small gastrointestinal issue caused her to panic.

“Tonight we’ll leave around midnight,” Ake said. “The summit hike will be about six hours. Drink and eat a snack every 15 minutes. The mission is to get to the top for sunrise. You will not be acclimatized, so at the top, you’ll take pictures and get down to a lower altitude quickly. Then we will walk for three hours back to camp. After a rest, we’ll hike to Millennial Camp. Tomorrow will be a half-day walk.”

After dinner, I asked Ake if it was normal that I was nervous about summing. “Everyone is worried about it,” Ake said. “Once you’ve summited 30, 35 times, then you can finally start sleeping the night before.” With that, I went to bed. As predicted, I couldn’t sleep.

18 The groundsel trees on the walk down to Barranco Camp on Day 4

19 Epic’s mountain staff overlooks the site they set up at Karanga Camp on Day 5.





Summit Night

DISTANCE COVERED 6 MILES

ELEVATION 19,341 FEET

Camp manager Steve came by my tent at midnight. It was go time. After a quick fuel-up (porridge, Snickers), we put on our headlamps, and, at 12:40 A.M., we hit the trail, where we encountered about ten trekkers coming up from Barafu. Our High Camp advantage quickly became clear: These climbers had already been walking for an hour. Ake estimated about 150 people would be attempting to summit from Barafu today.

We hiked up scree on an incline with switchbacks that required us to, at times, climb over boulders. My headlamp illuminated only the step in front of me. I could have been walking next to a cliff for all I knew. The thin air up here has half the amount of oxygen than at sea level, which is why even elite marathon runners have said summit night is the most difficult physical pursuit they’ve ever tackled. The elements started to get to some. One teammate got dizzy and hung behind with a guide. Camp Dad started shaking so violently from the cold he had to borrow a teammate’s extra down layer. As for me, I felt amazing—something Ake would later tell me was not at all normal. But that’s the thing about altitude. “Next time, you might get hit,” I recalled Ake saying at our safety briefing.

The 5½-hour climb went by in a blur, but I can remember snippets. I can still feel my lungs burning from the zero-degree air and my toes frozen in my boots, even with toe warmers. I can still see the blood-red crescent moon in the black sky mingling with Orion and his belt, the Southern Cross, and the Big Dipper. I can still taste the hot tea that six of us sipped out of our guides’ thermos at the crater’s rim, Stella Point, at 18,171 feet. And I can still hear Daniel’s voice. “Do you see it?” he said. In the distance, past the 11,000-year-old glaciers that will be gone in a decade and rising out of the brown lunar landscape, was the sign with yellow writing. Uhuru Peak. It was 6:13 A.M. The sun rose at 6:34.

I think the summit holds something different for everyone. As promised, I won’t romanticize what it held for me or my teammates, who all eventually summited too. Though I will say this. At 19,341 feet, as the first sliver of dawn was breaking, I looked out at the red-orange horizon and I saw the most magical sight: that the Earth, dear reader, is round. And in that instant, with tears in my eyes, this newly minted mountaineer was thinking only one thing. Life as I know it, for some reason, can never, ever be exactly the same again. ♦

Epic Private Journeys’ eight-day Lemosho trip up Kilimanjaro costs \$5,600; [epicprivatejourneys.com](http://epicprivatejourneys.com).

KILI’S SUMMIT,  
JANUARY 22

Our head guide said Kili attracts such a wide range of people because it’s conquerable. “The journey is pitting yourself against altitude on a remarkably friendly mountain.”