

Kilimanjaro

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In Tanzania, I am called “Mama.” It is an honor to be recognized in this way and to be the mother of our guide. Coming from a family of globe trotters, it was no surprise that my son Jordan also displayed a hankering for far flung adventuring; so much so, that he made it his life’s focus. My Kilimanjaro story is a personal one— about human connection, joy and immense pride.

On a cool spring evening over pizza and tea, Jordan pulled up the Kilimanjaro itinerary on his laptop.

“What do you think?” he asked. “We’d be tent mates.”

What did I think?! Time with my son! New adventures! Tent mates! “*Hell, yeah*” I wanted to shout, “*I’m in!!*”

But, still, I had to ask: “How’s everyone on the team going to feel about having YOUR MOM tag along?”

“It’ll be fine Mom. But we can check if that’ll make you feel better.” Jordan messaged the team on the What’s App thread.

“Hell yeah!” came the swift reply.

We arrived in Arusha to late-night heat and smiling faces. Welcome drinks of ruby-toned hibiscus juice followed. A king-sized praying mantis greeted us from our bungalow’s porch-light while shy geckos hid within the curtain folds. Excitement overpowered my jet lag. “This is incredible!” I gushed and hugged Jordan.

What does it take to trek Kilimanjaro? A lot. From cooking fuel and portable “comfort stations” (a much appreciated item, especially at higher elevations), to satellite phones and dainty pink cakes of soap. Some stuff is what’s between the ears: patience, an open mind, curiosity, kindness. Without these elements a positive experience can be questionable. By far, though, the most vital element of any Kilimanjaro trek is people. For our team of 14, we had an incredible community of support: 7 guides, 6 cook staff, 1 medic and 50 porters. For our

eight day journey, we, the participants, carried only day packs with extra clothes and two liters of water, collected and boiled each morning by the cooking crew before we even rose from our sleeping bags. Our duffle bags, plus all the cooking, tenting, camping gear needed to support our team in Kilimanjaro style were carried by the porters, who balanced impossibly huge loads on their heads, while also shouldering their own packs. After breakfast, these men stayed behind to pack up camp, passed us mid-morning in order to set up the lunch tent, stayed behind again to pack up and then passed us a second time to set up the evening campsite. The amount of physical labor involved in our care was astounding.

Each day brought new wonders as we slowly trekked through Kilimanjaro's five distinct climate zones. Bonne, one of our guides, pointed out the tiny red and yellow Elephant's Trunk flowers (*Impatiens Kilimanjari*) as colobus monkeys chased each other in the rainforest canopy. Higher up in the moorland zone I learned about the social behavior of elands from guide Omar while gawking at the improbable, Dr. Suess-like giant groundsel which towered over us as we descended onto a misty plateau. In the evenings Jordan briefed us on the next day's highlights and explained the different geologic features we encountered. We all marveled at the brilliance of the stars.

One evening, we arrived to music and dancing. Someone was playing the Harmonica. A circle of porters clapped and sang in accompaniment while a few fellows danced in the center. We approached, wanting to be part of the merriment and were welcomed into the circle. As it grew darker, one last refrain hung in the air. I turned toward camp, but a gentle hand on my shoulder made me stop.

“Mama-” It was the harmonica player. He patted my shoulder. Then proudly pointed to himself. “I 65! 65, hoo-hoo!”

I smiled back at him and hoo-hoo’ed too. “63” I said sheepishly, pointing to myself and thinking of his long day hauling gear. He patted my shoulder again, “*Hakuna Matata, Mama.*” No Worries. I looked up at the stars and took in a joyful breath. We were half way to Uhuru Peak, the summit of Kilimanjaro.

On day six we reached the upper elevation of the alpine desert zone at Barafu Camp. Being above the clouds, it was sunny but the wind had teeth. At 15,330 feet, tea, porridge, and soup had become my mainstays. Thankfully, the cooking

crew provided these items every day, so now I downed two bowls of porridge or soup rather than attempt the heartier fare. When Tosha, the head cook, heard that I wasn't eating much, he tried his best to spark my appetite with early favorites: mango, pineapple or hard-boiled egg. At our send-off dinner before our alpine start for the summit, I received soup and then my own (huge!) portion of plain chicken and rice. "Easy for your stomach," David, one of the cook's assistants, explained. "Try to eat!"

Spirited call and response singing from the "base camp" porters and cooking crew galvanizes us for the final push at 11pm. My friend, the harmonica player, leads the line, ready to play a lively tune. The wind is stinging cold as we shuffle, "*pole-pole*" (slowly) up, up, up first on scree and then rock slab. I am grateful for my insulating layers, but can't get my hands warm. I begin to fall behind. Jordan is up ahead checking on the others and then suddenly he is next to me rubbing my cheeks with his warm hands.

"Mom, how're you doing?"

"Cold" I shiver. He takes off his puffy and puts it on me. He takes off my outer mitts and gives me his warm ones. Instant warmth floods my body. Filomena, our only female guide and a force of nature, materializes at my elbow. She directs a young porter to take my pack and decides that singing Beatles songs is the best way to move me up the mountain. I marvel at her abundance of breath.

Left foot. Rest. Right foot. Rest. Left foot. Rest. Right foot. Rest. *Pole-pole*. "Hey Jude, don't make it bad..." The incline steepens. Jordan returns often to check my hands and cheeks.

"Still want to keep going, Mom?"

"Uh-huh" I mumble and keep moving.

Time passes in the rhythm of step then breath, step then breath. Filomena's singing stops. I stop and turn around. The orb of darkness that has cocooned me for hours now shows a ribbon of coral on the horizon. I look uphill and can just make out a snowy wall ahead. The crater rim. I feel like I'm swimming. Up to and over the wall, then down into snow, then up again, so, so slowly. The light is

strengthening and I walk in a slow motion procession led by the young man with my pack who somehow senses my tortoise pace. Filomena is nearby but I am moving on my own. The path to the iconic summit is straight ahead. At last I step into Jordan's embrace. All of us together whoop and hug in the full strength of the sun's rays.