

Walking up MOUNT KILIMANJARO

by Michael Lewis



*Robert and David at the
Kilimanjaro Summit*

Christmas is not a time to make commitments and promises. The real world is temporarily far away, all is right in the universe, the future yet unmapped, alcohol flows, it's warm and comfortable and nothing is impossible.

It was at such a moment I agreed to walk up Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania.

Kilimanjaro is a dead volcano that is the tallest peak in Africa at almost 20,000 feet and the largest free-standing mountain anywhere.

At Christmastime 1998, my son Robert and his family were home on leave from Johannesburg RSA after 2 years working to open a local office for his international company. He had become well versed in the culture of South Africa during this time and, because I was also familiar with the country after numerous trips there, we had much to talk about.

With my son David (the crazy one) listening in, Robert regaled us

with his experience of the rites of passage of the young South African men he was recruiting and I shared my similar experiences of university students observed while teaching at Rhodes University in Grahamstown and at Stellenbosch University in the Cape.

The biggest rite of passage is the Comrades Marathon run every year from Pietermaritzberg to Durban (or the other direction on alternate years) a race of some 56 miles through the mountainous country of Kwa-Zulu Natal. Another important event in a young man's life is the Dusi Marathon; this is a three-day kayak race between the same two towns.

A third challenge is to walk up Mount Kilimanjaro; as Robert spoke of this David roused himself and with perfect clarity despite the extraordinary intake of beer said "We can do that!" (Did I say he was the crazy one?).

Without a moment's hesitation

we agreed.

We then, excited, invited my daughter Karen to join us on this cool adventure. Karen is among the wisest women I know (she gets it from her mother) and startled us by promptly and without a moment's hesitation refusing to engage with this great idea. She also had a babe-in-arms at the time.

We men, still full of bravado and booze, shook hands on it and authorized Robert, upon his return to South Africa, to arrange the trip to Tanzania and the mountain. Which he did.

That's the problem with Robert—he is very literal and so took us seriously.

In the cold and sober January of 1999 I began to research the challenge of walking up Mount Kilimanjaro. Turns out it really is a walk or trek and no special climbing gear is necessary. Good physical fitness is necessary, accli-

matization to high altitude is necessary, good equipment is necessary, a good support team of guides and porters is necessary but only those who are determined to succeed do so. Somewhere between one-third and one-half of those attempting the summit fail to reach it.

The climb takes six days on the Machame trail.

The equipment was easy to acquire from REI. Fitness was something else. I set about getting in shape. By strenuous exercise and careful eating I managed to slim down by 30lbs to a mere 200lbs (my target) before departure. As I was perfectly acclimated to an elevation of 52ft, which was hardly high enough, I set off to Johannesburg in mid-August a week or so before our trek to acclimatize in that mile high city.

But eventually we found ourselves in Moshi, a small town on the lower slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro, at a charming hotel. The mountain, blue in the moonlight, loomed intimidatingly over us. Here I was first called Babu. I thought that charming; turns out it is a title of respect that means grandfather in Swahili.

Another word we would soon learn was poley as in poley-poley or slowly-slowly, which was the speed of walking required to survive the high altitude. This was necessary because we quickly climbed up through several of the mountain's five climate zones and spent a good deal of time at 10,000 to 15,000 feet.

There are no facilities on the



David took this picture of Robert and me looking down onto the clouds from the Barranco Wall section of the walk.

mountain; everything one needs must be carried. We had 12 porters and they earned their keep. I had brought with me a large cache of candy and chocolate assuming that I would continuously gorge on these high-calorie snacks. Turns out that was not the case and so I left a pile of candy on my bedroll each morning for the porters. I again earned the sobriquet Babu.

Walkers climb the last 3,000 feet or so to the summit on the last night and that experience is frozen into my memory. It was a harrowing and exhausting time and this is where dogged determination came in.

We set off about 3-am wearing our headlamps and could see the headlamps of all the other climbers on the mountain ahead of us and behind us. It was extremely cold. I had stashed a half-pound bar of Cadbury's chocolate under my jacket for sustenance on this part of the climb but on the mountain

it froze solid and was like chewing on a plank of plywood.

The sun at dawn warmed away thoughts of quitting.

The boys and I had made a pact that those who could go to the summit would go on and leave behind those who could not. Although I fell behind, I made it to Stellar Point where I joined the boys and from there we set off together for the topmost point called Uhuru Peak. At the very top we hugged and cried and laughed and slapped each other's back and broke out the whiskey and the flags.

From there it was literally all downhill, but by now we were very tired and I remember slipping and falling often; we arrived exhausted and filthy back at the hotel ready to sleep for a week. Instead we joined other climbers who had reached the top and were now trying to drink the hotel bar dry. We did our share because we had done it!



Michael J. Lewis, Ph.D., is professor emeritus of brewing science at the University of California, Davis, and recipient of the UC Davis Distinguished Teaching

Award. He is a humorist whose column in the Davis Enterprise, "A Point of Brew," has been running 25 years. He lives in Davis with his wife of 59 years, Sheila.

Published by OLLIMemoirs, the publication of memoirists in writers' workshops given by the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. All rights reserved by the author. Contact: info@ollimemoirs.org. May, 2019.