

20-22 January: travel days.

My Kilimanjaro Adventure began with Luc (and Cedric) picking me up at home at 11am on Friday, January 20th, to get to the airport for our 1:55pm flight. It promised to be a truly long haul: first from SFO to FRA, then FRA to ADD and then ADD to JRO. And a long haul it was, the whole trip took about 36 hours; we arrived at Springlands Hotel somewhere around 3am on January 22nd. After waking up someone to assign us a room, then insisting on another room because of a faulty water heater (I mean if the switch was broken at 3:15am it was still going to be broken at 9am when I would be ready for a shower!) things finally got sorted. TIA – This is Africa, things just don't happen at the same pace we are used to.

I ended up in a room with 3 single beds, so ample space to spread out and organize my gear. I deployed the mosquito net on the middle bed and I finally hit the sack around 3:45am – with a splitting headache that started sometime on the FRA-ADD leg.

At JRO airport Luc and I were happy to be reunited with all our luggage and a representative of Zara was waiting for us. At ADD we met Robert, who, together with his group, would become a great trekking companion.

22 January: Springlands Hotel.

The next morning I woke up just in time for breakfast, which was a good thing since I was starving. The headache was still very much present. Luc was present for breakfast as well, as were Robert and his friend Sergio.

Turns out Robert is from San Francisco so naturally drinks at 21st A were planned!

Finished breakfast, showered and then Luc and I took the shuttle into Moshi for a look around. We only spent about 1 hour walking around town (it was very hot and dusty and we were both tired) and enjoyed a fanta in 'Kilimanjaro Coffee Lounge'. Then back to Springlands for lunch. Yep. Waiting for the shuttle took up quite some time. I had to remember that everything here moves at a different pace. TIA, this is Africa.

After lunch I went for a much anticipated nap before the 5pm trek-briefing, only to be woken up by loud and insistent banging on my door. Someone was also trying very hard to get into my room. Then someone started shouting that I had to leave. Leave? I'd only just fallen asleep (my watch confirmed that I had only been sleeping for about 20 minutes) and was feeling rather groggy. Turned out they decided to fumigate that particular floor of the building I was in and I had to change rooms. Ok. They obviously didn't know that when they assigned me the room at 3:15am. So once properly awake, dressed and packed I was sent to a room.... with someone in it. Back to reception where it took me awhile to make

someone give me a key to another room. The whole exercise took about 45 minutes. No use getting back to that nap since the briefing was almost upon us.

At 5pm we had our briefing and met our head guide, Samwel. At first we weren't a 100% impressed but I was confident that once on the mountain all would go well (as indeed it did). We discussed route and extra rest days and agreed we'd sort things out as needed.

Afterwards I organized my bags (one for the porters, one daypack and one to leave at Springlands) and then it was dinnertime already. I hadn't been planning on eating but I was starving again. Dinner with Luc, Robert, Sergio and some others.

Quick shower after and early to bed. With ibuprofen for that persisting headache.

Springlands Hotel has free wifi so it was nice to be connected. I called Stephen on Skype but it turned out the satellite phone performed way better, no delay at all!

23 January: Day 1: Rongai Gate to Simba Camp/First Cave,

1,950m/6,398ft to 2,800m/9,186ft

I woke up at 6:30am and enjoyed my last shower for the next 8 days. Off to breakfast around 7:30am, but not before doing a last gear and bag check. The night before I had organized a safe deposit box and had already settled my bill – what an exercise that was! TIA.

As briefed we were all ready and eager to go at 8:30am.

And then a day full of hurdles started.

First I made sure that Samwel had indeed been able to procure (as booked) a second tent for us; he found one eventually – I'm guessing he hadn't been informed that Luc and I booked the whole trip as 'single accommodation'.

We left Springlands around 9:15am for what supposedly was a +/- 3 hour drive to the Rongai Gate. Accompanying us in the van was Robert's group (Sergio, Natalie, Sally and Silvia) who were also starting from the Rongai Gate and were on a 7 day trek. At 10:30am we arrived at Marangu Gate, the place to organize the permits. Two hours later we left there. After another 1,5 hour drive we stopped in a village to have lunch (which had been sitting in boxes in the car the whole time). From there it was then only a 20-25 minute drive to the Rongai Gate. More registration and organizing of the porters, which was going to take x-amount of time so Samwel sent us on our merry way with our assistant guide, Gabrel.

So at 3:50pm we were finally on the trail!!! So much for a +/- 3hour drive from Springlands to Rongai Gate.

The weather was gorgeous and stayed so the rest of the day.

First we hiked through pine forests, with potato fields next to them. Then through some villages and jungle vegetation. About an hour before arriving at Simba Camp at 6:30pm we hiked between the giant heathers.

Naturally dinner was served quite late that evening, from about 7:30pm till 9pm. But our tents were ready and we had a very nice dining tent. We even had candlelight dinner.
To bed at 9:30pm.

24 January: Day 2: First Cave to Second Cave.
2,800m/9,186ft to 3,450m/11,319ft

I woke and got up around 6:30am. And no more headache! Yay!
Organized most of my sleeping gear before breakfast, which was served at 7:30am. I called Sweetpea on the sat-phone.
Breakfast was nice. Some type of runny porridge that took a bit of getting used to but gave energy for the morning hike. A good dollop of honey to sweeten it helped. All packed and ready to go at about 8am.

We walked through a huge burnt area. According to Samwel it was a 'wilderness survival training' gone wrong only 2 days ago. You could still smell the fire. Some trainees started a fire because they worried about wild animals and it obviously got out of control. The burnt area was enormous; we walked through it for around 1,5 to 2 hours.

The hike was easy enough this day. We arrived into camp around 11:30am and our tents were up already. Our porters were amazing!

We sat down on a bench with table in the sun and relaxed before lunch. This was also when I finally got around to starting my diary.

Enjoyed coffee around 2:30pm and got ready for an afternoon acclimatization hike, when a 3 second strong wind gust brought down, amongst others, our dining tent and the other group's toilet tent (which we can use as well ☺ nice luxury to have on the mountain!). My camera was on our dining table and fell down but escaped unscathed.

After that little bit of excitement we set off on an hour hike up a ridge and back down. Elevation gain about 115m/377ft.

25 January: Day 3: Second Cave to Kikelewa Caves.
3,450m/11,319ft to 3,600m/11,811ft.

Slept reasonably well the previous night except for the fact that my tent was pitched on a slant: head higher than feet so I kept sliding down and hitting the tent, which caused my feet to get cold and consequently woke me up. Finally I put my daypack at the foot end, which helped, but only a little. Oh well.

Crawled out of my sleeping bag at 6:10am and packed away most of my things. Coffee and breakfast were late today but given that we had a short hike ahead that was fine.

Called Sweetpea around 8am and had a nice chat. He suggested getting a GPS fix with the sat-phone to clear up some confusion about the altitude (why didn't I think of that? ☺). After describing the camp to him we decided that we were indeed at Second Cave (there had been some confusion about that the day before. Although the guides know exactly where we are, they have trouble pinpointing it on a map. Plus it turned out that the ranger at Rongai Gate gave us the wrong altitude there. He was off by about 150m-200m/492ft-656ft.) So that morning I adjusted the altimeter on my watch accordingly (3488m according to GPS reading, just about what the map said).

Which meant that we only gained about 180m/200m between Second Cave and Kikelewa. A leisurely stroll really ☺. Good weather again. Gabrel carried my camera, very nice; otherwise it gets a bit much for me with the daypack and specially the poles.

Coffee and lunch were served and then a rest was in order. I needed it; I felt a tad zonked out. Rested from 1:30pm till 3pm and then it was time to get ready for our afternoon acclimatization hike. We set out around 3:30pm and went up to about 3715m/12,188ft. It was a gradual uphill, the start of our hike to Mawenzi Tarn the next day. Fog rolled in at one point and it cooled down considerably. It also obscured our view of Mawenzi for a short time. Walking back into camp the fog had lifted again.

Freshened up and got into my fleece gear, ready for the evening cold (before actually getting cold) and dinner.

26 January: Day 4: Kikelewa Caves to Mawenzi Tarn Hut.

3,600m/11,811ft to 4330m/14,206ft

Slept reasonably well, woke up a few times but managed to get back to sleep ok. Same routine in the morning: got out of my sleeping bag at 6:15am and put my gear away. Slept with thermal bottoms and top + short sleeved top and fleece hat. And I had put my fleece jacket on top of my chest, keeping it in place by tucking the sleeves under the mattress. Worked well! Also I read a bit the previous night before going to sleep and to not get cold I had put my arms in the down jacket and put gloves on. Worked well too.

We set off at 8:15am from Kikelewa Caves, but not before talking to Sweetpea. I told Stephen about our plans for a daytime summit attempt (as opposed to leaving in the dead of night like most people). Luc and I discussed it with Samwel and we all felt good about that idea.

The hike that day started fairly easy but got steeper towards the end. I took it slowly and made it ok; was a bit of hard work though.

We walked into Mawenzi Tarn Hut Camp at 11:15am after precisely 3 hours of hiking.

Hot drink (tents were up again already), lunch and a rest afterwards for me. Luc stayed up and went exploring. Man, there were many noisy people in camp, the noisiest being Bruce, the other Zara group's guide.

Up and ready at 3pm for our afternoon hike. We left at 3:20pm. We went up this very steep rocky and uneven path and all I could think of was how difficult it would be for me to get back down this slope. I turned back, with Samwel, at 4,440m/14,567ft. We did get views of Kibo Huts, our goal for the next day.

Samwel tried to pick the easiest route back down for me, but it was still a bit hairy. Once through the hard part we took a much gentler route back to camp. My knees were ok although the right one felt a bit tender (all was well again the next morning though). I had also developed a new, slight headache (due to altitude this time; the former one was ascribed to travel exhaustion) so an ibuprofen before bed was in order.

Hot chocolate at 5:30pm - yum. We had the only rain, followed by a light hail shower, of the whole 8 days during that hot drink; it only lasted all of 10-15 minutes.

27 January: Day 5: Mawenzi Tarn hut to Kibo Hut.

4,330m/14,206ft to 4,703m/15,430ft.

Slept ok-ish. Took ibuprofen during the night to subdue a splitting headache again – it actually woke me up around 2:45am. Also took some anti-histamine to clear a totally blocked nose. And naturally nature called as well. I did manage to stay warm.

Same morning routine, we were all getting pretty good at that. I got up a little later than the previous mornings; breakfast wasn't till 7:15am anyway. Appetite had slowly been diminishing the higher we got, but I did force two bowls of that runny porridge down. No more eggs or sausages for me, they hadn't been sitting well lately.

We set off from Mawenzi at 8:15am. I knew to expect some uphills on route to Kibo before hitting the steady upwards trail across the Saddle.

We again had gorgeous weather, it wasn't even windy to speak off across the Saddle. We saw the wreckage of a small plane that crashed some years ago (2008?). I took it 'pole pole' through the Saddle because it is a deceptively steady upwards slog up towards Kibo Huts. I enjoyed this day very much. I had been looking forward to crossing this vast desert-like expanse again and it didn't disappoint; having great weather helped.

We walked into Kibo Camp at 12:15pm and naturally our tents were ready and waiting for us again. I kinda went straight for a rest before lunch. Got up for lunch and had soup and a giant veggie samosa. I'd also had 2 of my cheese sticks with

an ibuprofen. Samwel was happy that I was eating enough. As we'd been gaining altitude he'd made a point of checking especially how much I'd been eating at each meal. He wasn't worried about Luc, since Luc's appetite seemed totally fine: whatever I didn't eat, Luc usually finished it off ☺.

Straight back to my tent after lunch. Luc went for a hike (+200m/656ft); I couldn't manage today. Samwel told me to rest and keep my strength for the final push the next day.

I got up around 4:45pm and felt better: rested and no more headache to speak of. Took some photos around Camp and wrote my diary. Joel, our waiter, had also just replenished my water supply for the evening.

I took it easy till dinner and hit my sleeping bag early to rest up for the big day tomorrow.

28 January: Day 6: Kibo Hut to Uhuru Peak, to Kibo and onto Horombo.

4,703m/15,430ft to 5,895m/19,341ft. 3,720m/12,205ft.

What can I say about that memorable day!!!

Success on the Summit! I stood on the Top of Kilimanjaro that day, feeling immensely emotional and immensely proud of myself!!!

Pity I didn't get to talk to Sweetpea; there was an issue with the iphone (we talked the next morning and he was as sorry as I was for not connecting – that was the whole idea of bringing the sat-phone. iPhone didn't ring; we've had that issue before – very unfortunate timing for that to happen that moment).

As planned we got up early, around 5:30 – Samwel gave us an extra 30 minutes. I had organized as much as possible the day before, including water for the summit attempt.

Breakfast was had at 6am: a light one: no sausages or eggs, stomachs had enough with liquid porridge.

And then at 6:30am the moment was upon us: we started our daytime summit attempt of Kilimanjaro. 'Trende', let's go!!!

We left Kibo Hut on the long, steep scree slope towards Gilman's point (our intermediate goal). From 2003, when we started around midnight, I remember freezing cold, not seeing where I was going and all-round misery.

This time it was different.

I wore an icebreaker long sleeved shirt, my light blue fleece and my down jacket and the soft shell pants that Stephen had picked out for me a few weeks prior. Because it was daylight and sunny it wasn't freezing cold and that made all the difference for me. Cold: yes. Freezing: no. Which meant we could stop and sit for 5-10 minutes without shivering our butts off. And I needed rest stops.

I felt ready but was also anxious.

Looking up the slope and knowing it was about 1,200m/3,937ft vertical was rather daunting. Samwel and Gabrel set a nice, slow pace and I slogged up the first part in the footsteps of Gabrel. He was carrying my camera, Samwel carried my daypack. These 2 guides were great; this made a huge difference for me. They also got to know me over the last week and knew exactly how to gently spur me on. I can't put enough emphasis on their help and support, and also Luc's on this day.

We stopped more than a couple of times, always because I needed a rest. We all 4 stayed together throughout the climb. Luc was quite happy to follow my tempo.

If the scree slope was brutal, the last +/- 100m/328ft vertical just below Gilman's Point were hellish: big steps over big uneven rocks, covered in scree and very steep,... enfin: my least favorite surface. And Gilman's didn't seem to come any closer even though I could see it. But hard as it was, I soldiered on. Having come this far I wasn't about to give up then. But man it was hard work for me (and I was trying not to think about negotiating the same way down...). Some more breaks later and finally there it was: Gilman's Point! Photos and a break were taken before continuing on to our ultimate goal: Uhuru Peak. It was only a mere 214m/702ft vertical and 1,5 hours of very hard work further. Even the slightest uphill had me panting. Combine that with frozen snow patches and altitude... suffice it to say it was very challenging.

But then.... There it was!!!! The sign proving that I had reached Uhuru Peak, the highest point in Africa at 5,895m/19,341ft. I got emotional and cried and Luc gave me a big hug. So did Samwel and Gabrel. Instead of walking around to take pictures, I broke out the satellite phone to ring Stephen. Tried 4 times but no answer (see earlier).

After about 15 minutes at the top we started the descent back to Gilman's Point. From there down that very hard bit was difficult for me but Samwel helped me when necessary. And then we again faced the scree slope. Coming up we zig-zagged our way up. Going down was 'slightly' faster and the reason to wear gaiters. Samwel took one of my poles and hooked his other arm in mine, leaving me with the other pole in my other hand. And we just skidded down! It took me a few minutes to get into the rhythm but once I got the hang of it and felt more comfortable it was kinda fun. And a helluva lot faster than walking down! The last bit into Kibo Hut Camp we hiked at a more normal pace again (unfortunately we'd run out of scree slope ☺) and lo and behold there was Joel coming towards us with the best cup of juice ever! Sweet!

We walked back into camp around 2:30pm; Luc and Gabrel beat us by about 10 minutes.

It was slowly beginning to sink in what I had just done and it was still hard to believe what I had just accomplished!

I had just summated Kilimanjaro and had finally put those 2003 summit demons to rest!

But the day wasn't over yet. Thirty minutes rest and some food later (and some help packing from Luc because I had no energy whatsoever left) we were back on our feet at 4pm for the 9,46km/5,88m hike down to Horombo, where we arrived at 6:45pm.

Washed up, quick dinner and I hit my sleeping bag. With my sunburnt swollen panda-face.

Slept well enough : woke up the usual times when sleeping in a tent: noise, mattress on a slight slant, altitude, blocked nose and toilet. And Horombo is a very noisy place.

29 January: Day 7: Horombo Huts to Mandara Camp.

3,720m/12,205ft to 2,727m/8,947ft.

The next morning we could sleep in for a 9:30am departure from Horombo. We took our time walking to Mandara and taking in the scenery and arrived there around 1:30pm.

I thoroughly enjoyed both the hikes from Kibo to Horombo and Horombo to Mandara. Because we left late (later than all the others) on both hikes it sometimes felt like we had the whole mountain to ourselves. Except for a few porters we didn't see any other hikers.

We saw black-and-white calebas monkeys just as we reached Mandara Camp. Cleaned up and rang Muis (we had a nice chat) and Alison (left a message). Luc went for a late afternoon hike to a nearby crater, the only hike I still wanted to do was the one the next morning to Marangu Gate.

*From the other Zara group we befriended all 5 (Robert, Sergio, Natalie, Sally and Silvia) made it to Uhuru Peak, so 7 out of 7!

30 January: Day 8: Mandara Camp to Marangu Gate.

2,727m/8,947ft to 1,900m/6,234ft.

I was awake quite early, around 5:30am, and was all ready, dressed and packed by 6:30am before breakfast. Luc, Samwel and Gabrel were suitably impressed since that was a first, me being ready first ☺. Luc totally attributed that to the fact that it was our final hike out and that I could almost smell that shower at Springlands – and he wasn't wrong!

We set off around 7- 7:15am. Because of our early start we had the whole last part (or beginning, depending on which direction you look at it) of the Marangu Route to ourselves. This is also called the 'Coca Cola' Route because of its high popularity and big crowds. Until the last half hour of our hike out no one was coming up yet, we were the first ones to leave the camp. We saw blue monkeys close to Mandara.

We reached Marangu Gate just before 10am, enjoyed a coke and signed the register (I was the first one for the day). We then had to wait for our certificates to

be produced but that was quite all right. You could judge by the state of people's boots who was going up and who had just come down.

Around 11am we set off for the drive back to Springlands where we arrived around 12:20pm.

Got a room, dropped bag in it, picked up other bag from storage, got things out of safe and organized tips for our crew.

Then I had that 8-day anticipated shower – niiiiice! And then lunch buffet was ready. As 9 years ago: the best food we'd had in along time! Amongst others they served a delicious liver dish, I went back for seconds. Don't get me wrong: the food on the mountain was great, it's amazing what our cook managed to produce! I had lunch with Luc and Robert.

And then we just relaxed; I checked email, updated Facebook – so nice to see all the comments of friends following my adventure. I had asked Stephen to update my status while on the mountain and the reactions were plentiful. Started airing some things out, but left the packing till the next day. Luc managed to extend his safari with a few days in Serengeti and was very happy about that.

Luc and I had invited our whole crew over for drinks (most seem to only invite the 2 guides and the cook; we figured that the whole crew needed to be there) and around 7pm they all arrived (except our cook who had family commitments). Kilimanjaro beers were enjoyed by all and Samwel gave us our certificates with everyone present, which made it very special. Hugs all around and the whole crew basked in our glory. Without them we would not have made it. It was very touching and very appropriate to have them all there. We ended up inviting the whole group for dinner as well. It was a very fun evening.

Luc and I had also decided to tip Samwel and Gabrel \$50 extra each 'off the record'. The whole tipping process is strictly controlled to avoid abuse.

To sleep around 10:45pm, after reading a bit.

31 January: Travel home day.

Up at 7:20am, showered (oh so nice), and breakfast with Luc before he left on his safari.

I spent the rest of the morning packing and organizing my bill: quite the challenge without cash (that all went to tips) or ATM card, but with a bit of insisting I managed to swing an online credit payment. TIA. But a bit of persistence can go a long way.

My shuttle to the airport left at 1pm for a 3:30pm flight.

No hassles at JRO airport, on the contrary it was a very pleasant experience. Bags checked all the way through to SFO, no lines, the whole process, including clearing immigration took about 10-15 minutes.

And then the 36+ hour journey home started.

Caroline.

