

February, 2001

Rich and Cheryll Odendahl joined sailing friends Kate Fitkin and Bill Pierpont for the trip to Tanzania's Kilimanjaro International Airport at the southern base of the dormant volcano of the same name. Kilimanjaro is located three degrees south of the equator just south of the Kenya/Tanzania border. We connected through Amsterdam where we met Rich's friend since kindergarten, Jeff Wilson. Jeff was travelling from his home in Eugene, Oregon. In Tanzania we were met by representatives of our outfitters, the Marangu Hotel, but not our luggage. KLM had left it in Amsterdam and there wasn't another flight scheduled for two days. They agreed to pay to have porters bring it to us on the mountain when it did arrive.



We spent our next day working off the jet lag and touring the quaint village of Marangu with a local guide named Ludwig. Ludwig showed us the houses, which range from basic to very basic to extremely basic huts of bamboo and mud construction with grass roofs. The afternoon was spent in the storeroom of the hotel renting equipment for the climb should the bags not arrive before we were too far up the mountain. This was also billed to KLM. Fortunately, we had the foresight to put most essentials in our carry-on bags. In the evening we had a briefing for the climb along with three other groups which would also be starting the following day.

The scene at the hotel the next day could best be described as well orchestrated chaos. Guides and porters were carefully working through checklists for our supplies. Equipment was tested. Our duffel bags were placed in cornmeal sacks, then in heavy plastic bags, and finally into burlap bags which the porters would carry on their heads. The loads were distributed and weighed, and each porter carried around 50 pounds. We each carried daypacks with our lunch, water, cameras and rain gear. Our guide, Geoffrey, had been recommended by Rick Davis, a friend of mine from college. Geoffrey was assisted by five personal porters, one for each of us. There were two assistant guides who doubled as porters except on summit day, a cook, and two other porters to carry the food. Our National Park fees subsidized the local economy to the tune of \$2125 for the group. This included entry fees, hut fees and rescue fees for both us and the porters. We were driven a few miles to the park gate at 6400 feet above sea level and started our climb to Mandara Hut at 9000 feet. It was an easy three-hour climb through a beautiful forest, although it rained for the last hour. Geoffrey carried a tablecloth and thermoses full of tea for our lunch stop. Mandara Hut is actually a collection of small A-frame huts with bunks and mattresses. Cheryl, Jeff and I shared a room, which was about 9' by 9' and intended for four climbers. Kate and Bill shared another hut with a couple from England. There was a separate large dining hut with long wooden tables and benches, and the porters and guides huddled without sleeping bags in a separate cooking hut. It was cramped, but comfortable. At dinner, the assistant guides became waiters. We were served with cloth napkins and tablecloths, and the fare consisted of a little meat, large quantities of rice or pasta, vegetables, fruit and tea, lots of tea. This was Jeff's 40th birthday and he appeared to enjoy the simple celebration.



The second day's climb was to Horombo Hut at 12,500 feet. Most of the hike was above the tree line with spectacular views into the valley below. It was sobering in the morning when a group of porters passed us running downhill carrying/wheeling a climber on a stretcher. We never found out what had gone wrong. We trekked for five hours and were assigned another basic six-bunk hut without heat for two nights. The Horombo dining hall was populated by several creatures which Cheryll prefers to think of as "African Chipmunks" as opposed to "mice". We planned an extra night here to help us acclimatize to the altitude. Sleep was getting difficult in the thin, cold air. The temperature dropped well below freezing at night. A few hundred yards from camp there were flush toilets plumbed into a spring with very cold running water. I washed in a pool at the base of a small waterfall next to camp. Our luggage arrived the first evening via three very tired porters who had walked from the main gate in one day. We sent our borrowed equipment down with them the next day. We spent our acclimatization day climbing toward Kilimanjaro's second highest peak, Mawenzi. Mawenzi can't be reached without serious technical climbing, so we limited our excursion to 14,300 feet and three and a half hours round-trip. We descended to Horombo and met Kim, a Canadian schoolteacher currently working in Turkey. Kim was climbing alone, and Horombo was full, so she was assigned our sixth bunk.



Our fourth day on the mountain retraced the previous day's route and then continued across the saddle between Mawenzi and Kibo, Kilimanjaro's highest peak. The vegetation became sparse and then disappeared altogether. The views of Kibo were incredible. We looked at the daunting route for the next day's climb. It was extremely steep, and most of the route was on loose gravel (scree). It was strewn with large boulders and covered with snow and ice for the top 1000 feet or so. The evening was spent at the very spartan Kibo Hut at 15,500 feet. That's as high as Cheryll and I had ever been before. Kibo Hut is a single stone building for climbers and a second for porters. It has five rooms with twelve bunks each. It wasn't crowded and we got our own room for the five of us. There were three outhouses with nothing more than a hole in the floor built out over the edge of a nearby cliff. There was a fence to keep oxygen-deprived

climbers from stumbling over the edge during any late night visits to the facilities. There was no water other than what was carried up by the porters. We felt pretty good, but the altitude made breathing difficult and deep sleep impossible. Our guide told us to try to rest and that he would be back at 11:00 PM to wake us.

During the evening, Bill started to accumulate fluid in his lungs. We believe that it was the onset of High Altitude Pulmonary Edema. The only cure is rapid, immediate descent. Bill made the difficult, but very wise decision to start down. We helped him pack his things, and he started down under his own power with two porters at midnight. He rested at Horombo for three hours in the morning, then continued to the park gate. He was fine after a couple of days of rest at low altitude.



We put on all of our warm clothing and the climb for the rest of us started under headlamps at 12:30 AM. It got colder as we slowly ascended the steep slope. We only stopped to catch our breath, have a drink and change our headlamp batteries. Cheryll said she was glad that it was dark, because she would have had doubts in daylight being able to see what lies ahead. We could see the lamps of other groups on the mountain, but Cheryll didn't want to open her eyes when a climber from another group was escorted down past us. Occasionally Geoffrey stopped to have a discussion with the assistant guides in Swahili about the best route. Jeff recognized the word "hatari" from his Swahili phrase book being spoken several times. "Hatari" means danger. We plodded on, occasionally scrambled over and around large boulders. The sunrise behind Mawenzi was spectacular. The last hour and a half to the summit were spent in the icy rim of the crater. We had to be careful and make good use of our poles

not to be blown off the slippery path by a gust of wind. All four of us reached Uhuru Peak on Kilimanjaro's Kibo Peak, the highest point in Africa, at 7:30 AM. It was 10 degrees F and the winds were about 40 mph. It was exhilarating, an accomplishment like nothing we've ever felt before. Geoffrey sang "Happy Birthday" for me. I was running on pure adrenaline. Cheryl had been chanting "Sisu, sisu,...."; Finnish for strength and stamina. The ten minutes at the summit made every minute of training and planning worthwhile. We made it back to Kibo around 11:00 AM, had lunch, rested for an hour, and headed down to Horombo. We spent 14 hours hiking on February 2nd, and, after a brief 40th birthday celebration at dinner, slept for eleven hours.



On our sixth and final day on the mountain we hiked six hours to the park gate. We were passed by another climber going down on a stretcher. Back at the hotel, we bought beer for the guides and porters and were presented with certificates for our accomplishment. The hot shower felt great.

The next three days were spent on a safari to Ngorongoro Crater and Lake Manyara National Parks. The concentration of wildlife was exceptional. We stayed at the luxurious Ngorongoro Sopa Lodge and spent many hours in our Land Cruiser watching elephants, rhinos, buffalo, zebra, giraffes, lions and countless other wildlife. Kate tried to keep score, but it was impossible.

Our Air Tanzania flight to Zanzibar was cancelled, but we caught a later one on a different airline. The islands of Zanzibar are part of Tanzania, but separated by 20 miles of the Indian Ocean and a completely different fundamentalist Muslim culture. It has a reputation for decades of peace, but two weeks prior to our

arrival; there had been several casualties at a political demonstration. All that appeared to remain of the situation was regret over the fact reports of the violence had resulted in cancellations by 90% of the tourists who are responsible for nearly half of the island's economy. We rented a four-bedroom beach bungalow and enjoyed a couple of days touring the island, snorkeling and relaxing on the beach. Jeff was glowing after putting his new diver's certification to use. Cheryll, Kate and Bill got henna "tattoos". We watched the sunset each evening while enjoying a two-hour dinner at a table set on the beach with white linens. There was gourmet food, crystal and Kilimanjaro beer.

It took 36 hours to fly home including a twelve-hour layover in Nairobi. We hired a cab and visited Karen Blixen's house from "Out of Africa", a giraffe farm, and had a wild game dinner at "The Carnivore" restaurant.

It was an excellent adventure and a 40th birthday party that I'll never forget. Cheryll is more than a little concerned about what adventure I'll cook up for my 50th birthday.

Appendix A: The Statistics

19,340 feet – Altitude at the summit

50 miles walked in 36 hours

1200 miles walked in preparation over the past year

6 inoculations required for each of us

2 or 3 porters for each climber on the mountain

3 hungry hopefuls standing outside the hotel gate for each porter on the mountain

12 porters who mysteriously appeared to carry our bags to our rooms at the Ngorongoro Sopa Lodge

16,000 frequent flyer miles earned

1500 Tanzanian Shillings (about two dollars) - cost of a bottled beer at Mandara Hut

25% of the East African population is HIV positive

100% of our group has Type A-Positive Blood; a wonderful coincidence since we didn't want to have to depend on the local blood supply

3 pairs of socks worn on summit day

-36 degree F wind chill at the summit

20 chemical hand warmers provided by Jeff's girlfriend Deb were wrapped around our water bottles which were stuffed into socks to keep the liquid from freezing

22 lions seen in Ngorongoro Crater

2000 Shillings – Government controlled price of a kilo of cloves on Zanzibar – the “Spice Island”

14 passengers who got off the airplane in Zanzibar

1964 – Year in which Zanzibar gained independence by overthrowing the Sultan

0 – amount of ice used in the Zanzibar market to keep the meat and fish fresh

\$20 – cost of a visa to spend a day in Kenya

34 - size of the zebra print boxer shorts Rich received as a birthday present

Appendix B: Top Ten Lessons Learned in Africa

10. Kilimanjaro isn't just a mountain; it's a beer, too.
9. Always pack essentials in your carry-on.
8. The first price quoted for anything in Nairobi should be ignored.
7. You can show up without a reservation and have a hotel to yourself two weeks after a violent political demonstration.
6. Five friends can share tight quarters for two weeks without friction and come out smiling.
5. Gazelles are very similar to hartebeest.
4. The literal translation of the frequently spoken Swahili phrase "Hakuna Matata" is "No problem". The actual translation is more like "Yeah, there is a problem, but I'm not going to let it bother me".
3. If you're staying at an African luxury game lodge, five porters camp outside your room in the early morning to pounce if you try to carry your own bags to the lobby.
2. Zebra meat tastes better than crocodile.
1. If you don't push yourself, you'll never find out what you're capable of doing.

Appendix C: Our Theme Song

Kilimanjaro

(Sung to the tune of Gilligan's Island)

Just sit right back and you'll hear the tale, a tale of a painful trip,
That started on this tropic mount, inside these well-worn boots...
The porters were strong mountain men; the guides were brave and sure.
Five climbers started for the top that day
Their feet would become sore... Their feet would become sore.
The weather started getting cold, the snow did start to fall.
If not for the knowledge of the fearless guides,
Cheryll'd be at the mall...Cheryll'd be at the mall.
The group limped down to the starting point at Marangu Hotel,
With the Sea Captain... the Check Chick too.
The Middle-Aged Guy... and his Wife.
The Computer Geek... the malaria pills and big thrills
Here on Kilimanjaro!