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## Climbing Giants

*Anyone who thinks summiting Kilimanjaro is easy hasn't climbed it. Anyone who thinks it's too daunting hasn't either. A virgin climber heads to Africa, into 19,340 feet of thin air.*

As my fellow climbers and I staggered up the shoulder of the great volcano, I gasped for oxygen in the thinning air and wondered who among us was going to make it to the top. Early odds favored the hardcore mountaineer and his tough young buddy, the survivor of an attack by a blue-balled monkey. But I couldn't discount the Himalayan trekker or the climber so committed he'd contemplated drinking his own urine.



Explorers Club president and trek leader Richard Wiese hacks out snowsteps at 17,000 feet on the tricky Western Breach trail.

It was just past dawn. More than two miles below us sunlight warmed the African savanna. But near the rooftop of the continent, frozen-fingered glaciers clung to the rocks around us. The wind carried an arctic chill. Two of our party had already turned back, and I had doubts about my chances.

"So," said Richard Wiese, pausing for a breather, "do you see now why I told you this would be the hardest thing you've ever done?"

Wiese was a shoo-in for the summit. He was also the leader of our expedition, and the president of the Explorers Club, a group renowned for seeking out extremes. In the 100 years since the club was founded, its members have gone to outlandish lengths in the name of scientific discovery: planting flags on top of Everest, alighting on the moon, plumbing the depths of the Mariana Trench.

The destination this time: Mount Kilimanjaro, the highest peak in Africa. Even as

someone who generally prefers the elevator to the stairs, I felt the lure -- Kilimanjaro, the whitecapped giant that looms over the land of the Masai warriors, the mountain that was muse to Ernest Hemingway. To prepare for the trip I hiked the hills around my home in California and brushed up on Papa's work.

"Close to the western summit," Hemingway wrote in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," "there is the dried and frozen carcass of a leopard. No one has explained what the leopard was seeking at that altitude."

The big cat's remains are by now long gone, but the mountain has laid lots of others low. Of the 20,000 people who try the climb every year, it's estimated that nearly half fall short, beaten back by bad weather or the wearying effects of altitude. It isn't any wonder. At 19,340 feet, the air at Kilimanjaro's summit contains half the oxygen of air at sea level. Some call "Kili" the poor man's Everest, because the way up is a long trek, not a technical climb. But nothing is a cinch in a stingy atmosphere. Thin air can leave you like a banged-up boxer: punch-drunk, stumble-footed, slurring your speech. Before we started our ascent I had heard the climbing described as a long slog toward senility. Or worse: Like all tall peaks, Kili can kill you.

One man in our party, a New York stockbroker named Alan, was making his second attempt at the summit. Twenty years ago, young and cocky, he'd rushed up to 16,000 feet, only to be rushed down, coughing blood.

"Bottom line," said Wiese. "Anyone who thinks climbing Kilimanjaro is easy hasn't climbed it."

A key to success is adaptability. Kilimanjaro, which sits in northern Tanzania near the Kenyan border, rises from the tropics, but tops out in temperatures that solidify your spit. Along the way you pass through five climatic zones. The climb is a journey from sub-Saharan summer to Siberian winter. Or, as one of my companions put it, like walking from the equator to Alaska in a week.

Day one began with a 12-mile march through lush rain forest, a tangle of Tarzan vines and towering trees where white-fringed colobus monkeys make their home. The canopy shrouded our view of the mountain but the massive unseen presence felt magnetic, drawing us uphill.

Not everyone in our group belonged to the Explorers Club, but they shared its spirit. Bo, for instance, who would start the trip two days late but catch up with our party at 12,000 feet, was a 27-year-old bungee jumper, skydiver, scuba diver, you name it, intent on bagging the Seven Summits, the tallest peaks on each continent. He'd already knocked off four, including Antarctica's Mount Vinson the month before, and was using Kili partly as training for a run at Everest this spring.

Clif, though 40 years Bo's senior, matched his youthful vim. He'd conquered the highest mountains in North and South America and had prepped for Kili by hauling around a backpack stuffed with 60 pounds of rocks. The day before our climb, Clif informed me that he'd considered conducting an experiment at home in which he'd drink his own urine. "Think of the energy you'd save not having to carry water," he said.

Eight hours into our trek, the forest gave way to giant tufts of heather, and we camped in a rocky clearing. From my tent I looked up at the broad back of the mountain, rising to an unlikely height as it narrowed and vanished into the clouds. As daylight waned, the clouds cleared and I made out the sawed-off summit, the iconic snow-topped image of Kilimanjaro. The prospect of reaching it seemed preposterous. But just as pessimism began to plague me, darkness fell, the outline of the mountain faded, and the fat face of a full moon smiled down on us. et's go, packs on," Wiese

called out.

I'd awoken to the rhythms of a marching band only to realize it was just a lone bass drummer pounding inside my skull. Just shy of 10,000 feet, the altitude was already playing with our heads. Two members of our party, a father and teenage son, decided to turn back that morning because the son felt feverish.

As for Wiese, he looked as fresh as he had at sea level. Now 45, Wiese first climbed Kilimanjaro at age 11, with his father, Richard Sr., an airline pilot who gained fame in the 1950s as the first person to fly solo across the Pacific.

This was Wiese's sixth Kili climb, and he was pleased that we were traveling the Machame trail, a winding 55-mile route designed to give us time to acclimatize. Most Kili climbers take the touristy Marangu Trail, or "Coca-Cola" Trail, which shoots directly up the mountain and is easy on the legs but brutal on just about everything else. Trekkers on the Marangu often climb too quickly, fall sick, and fail. They run a greater risk of altitude sickness, which in severe cases can burst blood vessels in the lungs and bring on fatal swelling of the brain.

"Altitude is the great equalizer," Wiese said. "Someone in great shape might get struck down while someone else who smokes three packs a day feels fine."

Midway through the second day, I was joined on the trail by Jack, Bo's high school buddy, who'd climbed Mount Vinson with Bo the month before. Although new to mountaineering, Jack had taken up the sport with the fervor of a convert. Earnest, intense, and given to new-agey aphorisms, Jack saw mountain climbing as a physical and spiritual journey. Every day outdoors taught him "life lessons," which he dutifully jotted in his journal at night. He looked at Kilimanjaro not as an outlet for competing with others, but as a personal test. "It's not the challenge among us," he told me. "It's the challenge within us."

Two days before the climb, on safari in the shadow of Kilimanjaro, Jack had met a challenge when he came face to face with a velvet monkey, which Jack took to calling the "blue-balled monkey" for reasons that become clear when you look between the animal's legs. Transfixed by the sight, Jack had stepped closer. The monkey lunged at him, sending Jack scurrying for the jeep, where the monkey pursued him, leaping through the vehicle's open top. Jack emerged unsettled but unscathed.

We had now climbed well beyond the realm of blue-balled monkeys into an otherworldly landscape of large rock outcrops and low-lying mist, as on a Scottish moor. Kilimanjaro's peak was shrouded again, and miles below us the savanna was blanketed in dark clouds. Thunder rumbled. Bright flashes lit up the horizon. We were walking above a lightning storm.

Our path narrowed into a hairy passage with a 40-foot drop on the left. We crossed it just in time. The storm that had been below us was now above us, shelling us with hail that quickly turned to frigid rain. In seconds I was soaked and shivering.

"The weather turns so quickly," Wiese said, after we'd reached camp, "if you were alone or unprepared, you'd have hypothermia before you knew it."

"Whatever happened to hot Africa?" asked Alan, the New York stockbroker. One of the Tanzanian guides traveling with us chuckled and said something in Swahili that, roughly translated, meant, "You're not in Kansas anymore."



The wondrous, indigo-streaked, five-story Furtwangler Glacier, at 18,500 feet.

Kilimanjaro was formed by the eruption of three adjacent volcanoes, each one building on the other. For centuries local tribesmen prayed at its base and conducted animal sacrifices on its slopes. But no one reached the summit until 1889, when the German climber Hans Meyer completed the feat. Nine years later Meyer noted in his journal that the snows of Kilimanjaro appeared to be melting.

Actually, the glaciers were sublimating, evaporating into the atmosphere, part of an epochal process that has been accelerating. I could see this for myself as we pushed toward the summit: The volcano had a white receding hairline, its visage more aged than what I'd come across in photographs. I'd heard predictions that in another 20 years, the mountain would be bald of snow.

All of which gave me a sense of urgency. Now was the time to see the summit. But no one had more urgency than Bo.

He'd caught us on the third day, riding an access road to meet us at camp. Wiese was worried that Bo wouldn't have time to acclimatize. "Bo's strong," Wiese said, "but he's never seen how bad things can get on a mountain."

In a matter of days Bo would get a glimpse. But for now he was buoyant, charging up the trail well ahead of the group.

"Polepole," ("slowly") one of our Tanzanian guides said repeatedly in Swahili. Every ounce of energy saved would be sorely needed as we neared the summit. A gradual pace would spare our legs and help us keep our wits as the thin air turned our minds to mush.

High altitude, I'd been told before our trip began, tests a climber's temper and heightens tensions within a group. I kept waiting for someone to get voted off the mountain. But the mood in our party remained upbeat.

Dan, a 52-year-old semiretired businessman, recounted tales of a trek he'd taken through the Himalayas, while Clif proved a ceaseless source of mountaineering trivia, rattling off fun facts like an alpine version of Alex Trebek.

Meantime, I barely had the breath to speak.

At 15,000 feet, the lone bass drummer inside my skull found himself part of a percussion section. My head throbbed. A wave of nausea, another side effect of high altitude, washed over me. Woozily, I made my way toward camp along a zigzagging trail. The terrain was rugged volcanic rock, dotted with prehistoric-looking spike-topped plants. To my left, sheer cliffs rose toward the summit. Glaciers, tinged with blue ice, dangled from the mountainside. In the distance I heard steady popping, like a rapid-fire succession of rifle shots. It was the sound of glaciers siring calves. By the time I reached my tent, I could barely stand.

"On a mountain," Wiese said, consolingly, "character is measured not by how we stand on the summit with a flag, but how we pull ourselves out of the crevasse."

Early the next morning our camp was roused from sleep by guttural grunting. Wild dogs? Leopards? Both still lived on the mountain. I peered through my tent to see Jack, reeling off push-ups in the cool, damp air. I strapped on my boots. It felt as if I'd just run a marathon. The thin air acted like a shock collar: When I strained against it, it zapped me to the ground.

Fortunately, we were set to rest that day, so our bodies could acclimatize. Wiese predicted that with every passing hour I would grow stronger. He was right. By the following morning, I was geared to go.

Jack wasn't. As we prepared to break camp, he announced that he was turning back, abandoning his quest for the summit.

Was Jack injured? Ill? He wouldn't say. (At this point in the trip, he also decided he didn't want his real name used in this article.) He indicated only that his "heart and soul" had told him to go down. When we saw him again, three days later at the base of the mountain, he had given away all his money and clothing, except for the outfit he was wearing.

Life lesson: Mountains make men to do surprising things.

On and up we went, through a camp at 16,000 feet, where a worn metal sign memorialized a 27-year-old climber who'd died of altitude sickness in 1972.

Wiese warned that the next phase of our trek would be the most difficult -- a seven-hour scramble up the Western Breach, a steep, craggy face that had been iced over by a recent late-night rain. Bo shot ahead, vanishing quickly amid the boulders. The rest of us climbed carefully through slick passages that, given a false step, would have sent any one of us whistling down the mountain like a luge.

Gradually, the altitude turned our ascent into a grind. I gasped for air, but came up mostly empty. Soon even Wiese was moving at the lead-weighted pace of a hobbit on the last leg of his mission up Mount Doom. My head swam. It was difficult to think coherently. Someone asked me my daughter's name and it took several beats to settle on an answer. With every tentative step I gained fresh respect for the hazards of high altitude, a deeper understanding of the dubious decisions some mountaineers have made in thin air.

We rested on a small plateau, and Clif pointed out how nice it would be not to have to carry water. "This would be a good time," he declared, "for my urine-conversion machine."

The mountain, for its part, teased us with a series of false summits. Time and again,

clambering over what I thought were the last of the rocks, I looked up to see another thousand steps to go.

And then, at day's end, one of the false summits turned out to be true. I staggered to my feet and blinked at the sight of Kili's sunken tabletop, where, 200 years ago, the volcano last belched lava before nodding off. The setting was a moonscape, frozen over. Beautiful. Desolate. A vast expanse of blinding white, ringed in the distance by ice-blue glacier walls.

Wiese embraced me.

"I always get a little misty-eyed when I see someone get here for the first time," he said.

Technically, we hadn't reached the summit. There remained another 800 feet to Uhuru Peak, the highest point on the crater rim. But that was for the morning.

We crawled into camp, where Bo was waiting. He seemed in good spirits, but an hour later Wiese found him in his tent, shivering, vomiting, his face the spooky pallor of Michael Jackson. He'd lost one of his water bottles in his rush up the breach. Now he was dehydrated, his temperature plunging, in the early stages of hypothermia. For the next two hours Wiese had Bo inhale steam and sip hot water. Finally his Michael Jackson coloring retreated. Bo looked ready to moonwalk again.

If Bo had learned a lesson about his own limits, it wasn't apparent the next morning. Once again he surged ahead, leading our group up a steep, snaking trail, carving out footholds for us in the snow. Two hours later, with the wind howling and the sun in fighting spirits in a cloudless sky, we reached Uhuru Peak. A sign at the summit welcomed us to the highest point in Africa. Exhaustion. Delirium. A sense of satisfaction diluted by the sudden urge to sleep.

I soaked up the panorama. More than three miles below us the savanna stretched into the hazy distance. Beyond it lay the Serengeti and Olduvai Gorge, where early man had most likely taken his first upright steps. As a species, we'd come a long way. And as climbers we had, too. I scanned Kilimanjaro from base to summit, its rain forest fading into fields of solid lava, the lava rocks rising into alpine desert, the desert giving way to a flattened dome of ice and snow.

I marveled that we'd made it from there to here.

Our descent along the spine of the mountain was swift, a day-and-a-half jounce that jarred our knees and swelled our lungs with oxygen. At 10,000 feet we came to a hut where a man was selling Kilimanjaro beer. I bought three bottles, popped the tops, and Wiese, Bo, and I toasted our accomplishment. The beer was awful, flat, and warm. It didn't matter. I inhaled deeply, drinking in the sweet, thick air.

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(May 2005)

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