

A mountain man at his peak

Sibusiso Vilane is off to Everest for the third time – after two marathons and the Trek4Mandela

Kevin Ritchie

SIBUSISO Vilane is gearing up to climbing Everest soon. And when he's finished, he's going to run the Comrades in June, then climb Kilimanjaro for the Madiba Centenary edition of Trek4Mandela.

But before then, he'll run the Two Oceans over Easter.

It's a stupendous amount of exercise, but then, Vilane is no ordinary person. The first black African to summit Everest, in 2003, he repeated the triumph two years later from the other side. Then he did the seven summit challenge, knocking off the highest peaks on the six other continents, in 2008, as well as going to the South Pole with fellow mountaineer, Alex Harris.

They walked from the coast of Antarctica to the South Pole unassisted – 1 200km, the first – and, to date, only – South Africans to do this.

By 2012, he'd completed the triple poles (the two ends of the earth and the highest point), when he trekked to the North Pole.

To look at him, you'd never think it. He's humble to the point of self-effacing, lightly built, but when he speaks the room quiets and everyone listens. There is an unmistakable authority he exudes, even if you didn't know who he was.

"I don't climb mountains," he tells aspirant climbers at The Nest in the Drakensberg. "I walk up them."

There's nervous laughter at his self-deprecation. The 40 hopefuls are in the Berg as part of this year's Trek4Mandela, bidding to summit Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest peak at 5 895m. This will be Vilane's 23rd ascent of the Tanzanian peak – if you count last year's double ascent on the Trek as two.

He pioneered the Trek4Mandela with Caring4Girls founder and social entrepreneur Richard Mabaso, after Mabaso phoned him in 2012 with his idea to scale the peak to raise awareness of the plight of poor girls forced to miss school because of their periods – and break the taboo associated with it.

The first year it was just the two of them. Now there are 40 people ready for their briefing before what will be for many of them their first climb in the Drakensberg, a "leg-stretching" 22km hike up 1 000m and across the face of Cathkin Peak and Monk's Cowl the next day.

"Don't think about tomorrow," Vilane advises, "in the mountains we only focus on one day at a time."

In the group are three of the six climbers who will be accompanying him to Nepal on April 2. Two of them are products of the Trek4Mandela project.

They are going to climb with him Base Camp at Everest, then he'll spend 58 days building up his strength and acclimatising, before tackling the world's highest mountain – this time, without oxygen.

"It's absolute madness to go back for a third attempt," he says. "I last summited nearly 13 years ago and then the curiosity entered my head: only a handful of climbers have done it without oxygen, can I? I'm



FRIENDS: Sibusiso Vilane with two-time Kili climber, but first time trekker, Vicky Ganesh.



VIEWS: The Sphinx at Monk's Cowl.

not interested in reaching the summit with oxygen – I've done that twice."

Vilane is inspired by Reinhold Messner, the Austrian mountaineer who was the first to summit Everest without oxygen in 1978. Messner stunned the world's doctors with his successful ascent without oxygen, disproving medical theory that the rarefied air, with only 30% of the oxygen there is at sea level, would disorientate climbers and kill them on sustained exposure.

But Vilane's not foolhardy either – he will carry oxygen with him in his bid, but if he feels he has to use it in the mountain's death zone above 8 000m, he will turn back and go down.

"The summit will be when my body says 'no more.'"

There's every chance though that he will succeed in his quest. He is in incredible shape and training hard. If he does, the



CROSSINGS: Trek4Mandela hikers ford a mountain stream in the central Drakensberg.

PICTURES: KEVIN RITCHIE

historic ascent, but first Vilane would have to join a trekking group going to Khumbu valley near Everest to practise ascents on the nearby peaks. Vilane applied for his annual leave from the game lodge, without telling anyone why or where he was going.

"I didn't think they'd let me," he says. He hadn't trained, but summited Pokalde and Island Peak, both over 6 000m. He was in, but had to raise \$40 000.

"I told John, who would sponsor a novice?" But he did get sponsored, by a Good Samaritan who believed in his dream, getting to the top of Everest in 2003 and making history.

• For more about Trek4Mandela or to donate to Caring4Girls, e-mail: nkateko@imbumbafoundation.org or call: 011 883 0379.

Then, he was on a whim. He had been challenged to climb Everest after being told by a guest at the Malolotja Nature Reserve in Swaziland where he worked that he had all the makings of a natural mountaineer. Vilane had dismissed the thought – he'd never even seen a picture of the mountain.

But then the man, John Doble, asked if he would do it if money wasn't an option. Vilane said yes.

He started by climbing the peaks in the Drakensberg, followed by his successful first summit of Kilimanjaro in 1999. In 2002, having forgotten about Everest, he suddenly received a letter from Doble.

Doble had found a group going to Nepal to summit Everest for the 50th anniversary of Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay's



VISTAS: The Champagne valley in the central Drakensberg seen from the foothills of Cathkin Peak. PICTURE: KEVIN RITCHIE

Climb teaches me how best to enjoy journey

Kevin Ritchie

THERE are many things you learn on the mountain.

I learnt that I didn't pack properly. One pair of socks for a two-day hike is several pairs too few. One pair of shorts, when you've just lost your footing in an ice-cold stream is one pair too few – especially when they dry with a wonderful tea stain across your backside.

Or you can carry too much water. Enough to inspire a Capetonian to mug you, but too much to carry up the hill, so much that someone else has to carry your bag and almost blow their energy in the process.

I learnt that while Coca-Cola might be the bane of stressed mothers with hyperactive kids, it's mother's milk for fat, unfit 50-year-olds. I also learnt that five people can share a can of it – and get enough sugar rush for the next hill.

I learnt many other lessons on the mountain, too, but most of all I learnt to be myself in the company of others, to think about others before myself. To enjoy the journey and forget about the destination.

It's a key part of the preparation for the Trek4Mandela. In five months' time, the mountain won't be in the central Drakensberg but in northern Tanzania, Africa's highest point; the 5 895m Kilimanjaro. We are all equal, says Trek4Mandela founder Richard Mabaso. It's not easy this climbing stuff, but then it's not supposed to be, says his fellow founder, South African Everest legend Sibusiso Vilane.

He's telling us what lies in wait, not the hike – 22km across and up through the Champagne Valley in the unspeakably beautiful Monk's Valley Nature Reserve in the central Drakensberg and then across the face of Cathkin Peak before exiting hundreds of metres above the Sphinx and out – but rather Kili itself. He's an expert, this year will be the 23rd time he's got to the top.

"It's a leg-stretcher," says head guide Sibusiso Dlamini about the Drakensberg hike we are about to do, "it's shaping up for the next one, it's moderate, not very



QUICK REST: Kevin Ritchie peers at the map, after reaching the 2 100m crest of the hill that marked the highest point of the 22km Drakensberg hike done by the Trek4Mandela hikers. PICTURE: MAGS NATASEN

strenuous." He's lying. Or maybe it's just been lost in translation.

"Thank you for letting us train with you," says Vilane. He's taking two Trek4Mandela alumni with him to Everest's base camp in six weeks' time.

As my thighs quake through the rain forest, the exertion is made all the more worth out by the incredible sights that play out. As I lie back and pant like a dog, I'm humbled as my mind spoils back on the testimony session the night before in the briefing room at The Nest. The aspirant climbers stand up, introduce themselves and share with the rest of us why they're doing this.

Some are doing it for the bucket list tick of climbing Kili, but all are doing it to make a difference to girls who would otherwise miss school a couple of days each month and imperil their ability of eventually matriculating.

"Each one of you is supporting 100 girls for a year, just by being here," Mabaso tells us. "If you think Kili was exciting, wait until

you go to the school you have nominated then you see the excitement, you listen to the girls and you hear their dreams."

Kili hopeful Mags Natasen asks straight out: "Shouldn't sanitary pads be accessible in restrooms across the country, just like condoms?" It's a real question that goes to the heart of what Caring4Girls is all about – changing society's priorities.

Trek4Mandela though is also about taking people who would never have thought about climbing a mountain and getting them out into the open.

Vicky Ganesh, a two-time Kili veteran, first-time Trekker fast becoming renowned as Super Vic for his willingness to help and carry people literally up hills, is waxing lyrical: "Mountains create the Earth, they form the clouds that bring the rain, they teach you humility."

As for me, the Monk's Cowl Valley has already humbled me. The next time we're here, at the end of April, we will be doing it in reverse. I'll pack more socks – and extra shorts.



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HAVE YOUR SAY

Public Hearings and Submissions on the Western Cape Additional Adjustments Appropriation Bill (2017/18 Financial Year), 2018

Various standing committees of the Western Cape Provincial Parliament will consider the Western Cape Additional Adjustments Appropriation Bill (2017/18 Financial Year), 2018, as part of their oversight function at meetings scheduled for 8 and 13 March 2018 at the Provincial Legislature Building, 7 Wale Street, Cape Town.

The purpose of the Bill is to appropriate an additional adjusted amount of money from the Provincial Revenue Fund in respect of funds that have become available for the requirements of the Province of the Western Cape in respect of the 2017/18 financial year; and to provide for matters incidental thereto.

Interested persons and organisations are invited to attend and to participate in these meetings where the adjusted budgets of the provincial departments of the Western Cape Government will be discussed. Please contact Ms Waseemah Kamish-Achmat (tel: 021 487 1657, fax: 021 487 1685, email: wachmat@wccpp.gov.za), the Budget Committee Coordinator, to request a copy of the schedule of the meetings.

Written submissions and requests to make verbal presentations on such submissions must be directed to the relevant standing committee by no later than one day before the scheduled meeting of that particular standing committee.

Once the Bill is introduced on 6 March 2018, copies of the Bill will be available on request and an electronic version will be made available on the Western Cape Provincial Parliament's website (www.wccpp.gov.za).

Proof of identity (identity card, identity document or driver's licence) is required to gain access to the Provincial Legislature Building.

Issued by Mr Denis Joseph (MPP), Chairperson of the Budget Committee

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