

TREK4MANDELA



MOUNTAIN SNOW: Esther Masinga and Nicole Capper, the reigning Mrs South Africa, pose for a picture in the freezing air after summiting Kala Patthar in the Himalayas.

Summiting for a good cause

Trekking for Mandela will yield positive results, writes Kevin Ritchie

ESTHER Masinga is off to Everest in 2020. She'll do it because she's put her mind to it, just like she told Sibusiso Vilane she wanted to go to Everest base camp with him this year.

Vilane, who is still on the mountain preparing for this third summit – this time without oxygen – on Saturday, May 19, met the 45-year-old maths and science teacher from Rustenburg on the annual Trek4Mandela to summit Kilimanjaro last year.

He told her that he was putting together a team of climbers to travel with him to base camp. She leapt at the chance, but he told her he would insist on making sure she trained.

"I got the e-mail in November last year," she laughs. "I didn't hesitate, I said yes. I used my own salary, because it's not easy raising funds for something like this if you are a woman."

They started the trek to base camp, which is 5384m above sea level, on April 6, arriving there on April 14. The next day, four of the seven climbers who had accompanied Vilane summited the nearby Kala Patthar. The peak, whose name means black rock in Hindi, stands at 5643m. It was a particularly difficult climb.

"From Lobuche, the last overnight stop on the way to base camp itself, it was uncompromising terrain, it was tough, but not as tough as climbing Kili. Summiting Kala Patthar, though, was like going from Kibo Hut to Uhuru Peak on Kilimanjaro, very tough, very torturous, very difficult."

Kala Patthar famously offers the best close-up views of Everest, Nuptse, Changtse and the Khumbu glacier.

"I felt so excited. We didn't stay long, because it was cold and windy... everything is frozen. We were on the summit for about 20 minutes taking pictures and then made our way down."

It was on the descent that her climbing

partner, Mrs South Africa Nicole Capper, developed altitude sickness and had to be airlifted off the mountain. She has since made a full recovery.

"I was lucky," says Masinga, "just like Kili, the altitude doesn't seem to affect me."

She and Capper had revelled in seeing snow for the first time.

"On our way up to base camp, as we left the tree line, we started playing in the snow, making snowballs and throwing them at each other. It was the first time I'd ever seen snow, ever touched it. We were like kids. The other climbers just looked on and laughed, they'd all seen snow before."

After a night in base camp, it took four days to complete the descent and then fly back home.

Now, her next challenge is Kilimanjaro itself on July 18, the 100th anniversary of Madiba's birthday. Kilimanjaro is the highest free-standing peak in the world and the highest mountain in Africa at 5895m – 500m higher than Everest base camp.

"I'd like to do the double summit like Sibusiso did last year, for no other reason than I'm a woman, we're disadvantaged and I want to show the kids back home that we can do exactly what men can do," she laughs.

She's the head of the maths and science department at Matetenene Secondary School in Rustenburg, married with three children, the oldest of whom is studying law at the University of Pretoria. In between raising a family and working, Masinga has been studying continuously from her first degree at the University of North West to a B Ed (Hons) from the University of Johannesburg, to the University of Pretoria for her Master's, qualifying too as a provincial maths examiner for the North West.

"I've been climbing since 1996, I've



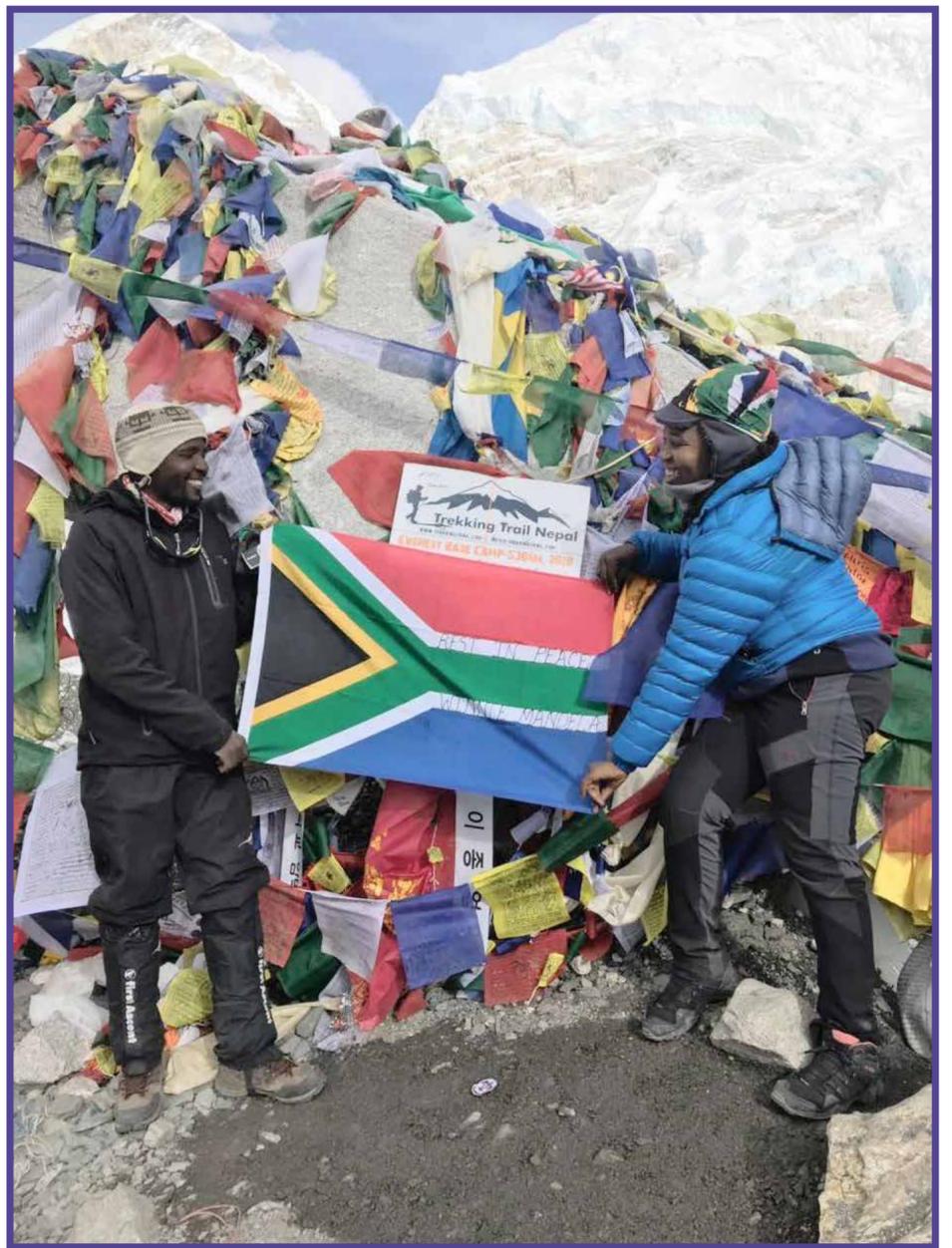
travelled all over the country doing hikes and trails. In September 2016, I did the Fish River Canyon in Namibia – it's the largest canyon in Africa – and I've hiked in Mozambique and Swaziland too."

In 2015, she summited the highest peak in South Africa, Mafadi, which is 3420m high, on the border of South Africa and Lesotho.

"I love it, hiking gets me in touch with nature. It's my passion, I'm adventurous, I do mountaineering, hill walking or rock climbing whenever I'm free. It gives me peace of mind, it makes me strong."

Last year she summited Kilimanjaro on her first attempt; not everyone does.

"I reached the peak, it was hard, chal-



SUCCESS: Esther Masinga (left) and Sibusiso Vilane pose with a South African flag inscribed "Rest in Peace, Winnie Mandela on April 15, after summiting Kala Patthar in the Himalayas. Everest looms behind them.

lenging, but through my experience and through my training I was able to do it – which is why I want to try the double summit this year."

For Masinga it's not just about the personal challenge but also inspiring the children that she teaches – and making a difference to their lives. When she climbed to Everest base camp, she did so to raise funds to buy school shoes for her pupils.

"I teach in a very deprived area, it's a poverty-stricken area – all we can do as teachers is to show that we love them. We still use pit toilets; the children don't have uniforms. One boy comes to school in torn trousers with no underwear, with his backside visible, but no one laughs at him because everyone understands being poor."

Reaching Everest's base camp will make a difference for him and others like him. Caring4Girls, under whose auspices Trek4Mandela is held, will make a difference to schoolgirls who might otherwise have to miss up to a fifth of their high school careers because of the taboos still associated with menstruation and the shame of not having access to feminine hygiene products.

Last year, she set herself a target of

collecting enough sanitary pads to support 1500 girls. She ended up supporting 2268. "I collected 9072 pads in 2017, I'm going up the mountain again this year to get even more. We have to invest in our children. I'm passionate about them, I'll do anything to make sure they have the basics to make the most of their lives."

When she gets back, though, she will barely have time to clean her hiking boots and air them before hitting the trails under Vilane's guidance.

Vilane has already summited Everest from the north and the south. He's about to try to get to the top this time – through the death zone of only 30% of the oxygen that there is at sea level – without using bottled oxygen, just like Reinhold Meissner did for the first time in 1978. His next challenge will be to lead an all-African party of climbers to Everest in 2020, but with an added difference, all the training will be done in Africa.

As he explained in an earlier interview, his dream is to take mountaineers to Africa's seven summits, which all lie in East Africa, mimicking the international mountaineering checklist of the world's seven summits.

"I was joking about taking a

7SummitsAfrica team to climb Everest with some friends, who immediately said 'we can make it happen'. We had our first meeting in January to discuss and plan the project. We want to promote Africa. Africa has all the resources needed to train climbers for Everest. I was climbing in Uganda and I thought the glacier I was on was just like the Alps (in Europe)."

The technical challenges are there too. "Mt Kenya was one of my toughest mountains to climb," he says, "in fact I would like to do K2 (the world's second highest peak) because of the technical skills I have learnt over the years, which ultimately helped me successfully summit Mt Kenya."

For Masinga, Everest will be the achievement of a much-loved dream.

"I have agreed, I will go with him to Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania and Mount Kenya."

The next time she's at base camp, it will be passing through on the way to the top of the world.

● *If you would like to help Esther Masinga make a difference to her pupils' lives, please call her at 082 475 7959 or e-mail her at massingas@yahoo.com*

KEVIN RITCHIE

THERE are rubber tips at the bottom of your climbing poles. They're there so that you can get them past airport security without having them confiscated as weapons.

I've been hiking for almost four months now, but I didn't know that. Instead I've been getting a bit cross that the steel point hidden within has now popped through one of my poles.

It was Paige Lindenberg who pointed it out to me. She's new to hiking, like me, but a helluva lot more switched on. She also races cars and soups up bakkies to a pitch the manufacturers could only dream about.

"You're supposed to take the rubber bits off, you know," she chides gently from behind as I labour up the steps cut in the mountainside towards the Sphinx in the Champagne Valley in the Central Drakensberg.

We're due for a fairly serious hike this time, our second visit to the Monk's Cowl nature reserve. At the far end loom Cathkin Peak, Monk's Cowl and Sterk Horn. We will be going up Sterk Horn before we do Kilimanjaro – but not today, the ground's too treacherous after the heavy rains. The guides are understandably cautious after the tragic death the week before of actor Odwa Shweni who apparently lost his footing at the Sterkspruit waterfall and plunged 40m to his death.

It's a sobering reality that here, in the midst of some of the most awe-inspiring scenery imaginable, danger lurks. It's not just the

Mighty mountain, humble me

almost-sheer drops on the way up past the Sphinx and then over the back on to the Little Berg – it's the incredible mist that blankets everything. It's benign and mysterious at the moment, but in the back of your mind you know that the mountain can be capricious.

The mist can change to dense fog, the temperatures can plummet – Blindman's Corner wasn't named on a whim. Go left and you'll go deeper into the berg, go right and keep to



MADE IT! Kevin Ritchie celebrates on the third level going up to the top of Sterk Horn. There are still 12 levels above and 650m to climb. PICTURE: TAWANDA CHATIKOBO

the contour path, you'll be rewarded with an incredible vista across Champagne Valley – with the disappointing knowledge that the peaks of Monk's Cowl and Sterk Horn are still almost 900m above.

The first time we did the route in reverse, so for months, I've had the descent (which is now the ascent) gnawing with increasing vigour at my guts. Now that we are up on the little berg, it's time to get a little cocky – the worst is over.

On the mountain, I've discovered, there's a time to chat and there's a time for silence. When the going gets tough, everyone shuts up, but in the beginning the conversation skips from the banal to the inconsequential – with the perennial questions; what's Kili like?

Kili, Kili, Kili. Kilimanjaro – 5895m above sea level. Africa's highest peak, the world's highest freestanding mountain. Hemingway wrote about it. Gogos climb it, some athletes don't even get past Kibo hut. We're due to summit on July 18, 100 years to the day Madiba was born. We're literally The Trek4Mandela. I don't know about the others, but that snow-capped peak in East Africa is never far from my mind as the days tick down.

"What should we pack?" chirrup one of the novices. "Should we take Diamox (the altitude sickness drug)?" chitters another. "I'm glad they're asking, I'm puffing too hard

to get any coherent words out, but I'd like to know, too.

The truth is no one knows. Altitude apparently affects everyone differently; your emotional fitness matters as much as your physical fitness. The key to these hikes is understanding yourself, understanding that you carry what you pack and you pack what you need. But what do you need? And, more to the point, how do you pack it?



PLAY MISTY FOR ME: The milestone on the Little Berg pointing the way to Blindman's Corner, which you don't want to miss in mist. PICTURE: KEVIN RITCHIE

We've just received our new backpacks. They've got water bladders inside, with hosesipies running along your shoulder strap with the mouthpiece easily accessible at shoulder height. We've got climbing poles, which for someone as heroically as uncoordinated as I am is almost more of a curse than a blessing, especially trying to walk with both feet and use both poles at the same time.

When we break for lunch, there's a debate among the group about what to do next. The guides want to turn around and follow the route we've just come, but there's a splinter group led by our own Black Panther, Tawanda Chatikobo, better known as TC, who's a banker by day but a bit of a superhero on the berg. He wants us to push on and if we can't go on, we need to go up. He's not alone – there's been an incredible drive in this group to get fit, to commit to the project. The organisers are impressed, they've said as much.

TC wins the day for the enthusiasts. Some of the trekkers will head back the way we came; there's no dishonour, no dropping in brownie points – it's all up to the individual to do what they think they need to, to prepare. Somehow, I find myself in TC's group and we're headed back, turning right at Blindman's Corner, down through a dense thicket and up into the foothills. The clouds are quite dense.

Our guide, Phumlane Ndumo, says it's too late to get to the summit of Sterk Horn. We'll do the first three levels "if we can". The levels are confusing, because the cloud is very low. Getting there isn't easy. I've learnt to scramble, which is hiking using your hands, too. The slope is steep. TC's already at the top and disappeared. I'm in the middle trying not to overbalance when I stop to catch my breath.

When we get to level three, there's time a for a celebratory Coke and a bar of chocolate. I'm bursting with pride, so much so that I stifle my shyness to ask TC to take my picture.

Going down is far harder than going up. I'm using my poles like a dervish, trying to keep at least three points of contact with the ground – sometimes those three points are one pole, one backside and a heel as I skid down in places.

Suddenly we're back on the little berg. Verkyker's Kop looks like a toy in a kiddie's sandpit from up here.

I look back, the mist has lifted. Suddenly I understand what Ndumo meant by the levels – there's another 12 to go and what looks like another 2.5km to the summit.

My own achievement not even 20 minutes ago looks wholly insignificant. The mountain has brought me back to earth. It always does.

That's one of the lessons we all have to learn before leaving for Tanzania.

● *The Trek4Mandela organisers thank Volkswagen SA for the kind loan of the vehicles to ferry the group from Johannesburg to the Drakensberg and back.*