



**Omega3  
not good  
for health**  
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# CANVAS Life

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## Stairway to compassion

*Climbing Kilimanjaro is a character-tester of note*

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**K**ILIMANJARO looms large on our consciousness as Africans – both as a literal and figurative reference. Nothing, though, can really prepare you for its reality.

Last Saturday 46 people, mostly South African, set out on the Marangu route, the toughest of the five routes to Africa's highest peak. They were doing it as part of the Centennial Trek4Mandela expedition hoping to summit on his birthday on Wednesday.

Most of them have been in training since January, including some arduous day-long hikes in the higher reaches of the Drakensberg every second month.

This training will pay off in spades during the four-day walk to the final assault on Gilman's Point.

The journey starts at the eponymous Marangu Gate with a limb-loosening 8.1km amble through the rain forest to Mandara Huts – 1 000m higher up.

Halfway up we are served lunch at a picnic spot. It's our first encounter with the people who will humble us with their friendliness, generosity and ingenuity.

On arrival at Mandara, our bags are already there, carried up by the porters, and our travelling kitchen staff are putting on tea and coffee as supper cooks in the background.

The next day we leave the rainforest on an 11.6km hike to Horombo Hut, which lies in the moorland above the rainforest, perennially cocooned above thick white clouds.

It's also the first time we have had sight of Kilimanjaro, glistering like a diamond, well cloaked in snow and ice for the first time in years.

We acclimatise on day three, a little jaunt a further 500m up and then back to Horombo.

It's known as climbing high and sleeping low and is as much an integral part of getting used to altitude as the famous *pole pole*, the measured slow march up the mountain designed to ensure you never overexert yourself, start panting and precipitate mountain sickness that can attack either your brain or your lungs as the air pressure drops with each 1 000m, making it that much harder to get in the oxygen your body craves.

On the fourth day it's time to start getting real – 9.6km to Kibo Hut, the base camp in the dry khaki dust of the Alpine desert that surrounds Kilimanjaro.

There, billeted in a single double-decker bunk that runs the length of the room, we will try to sleep fully kitted up before being woken by the guides at 10 that night for our 11pm start.

The atmosphere is tense, like soldiers preparing for battle, quips Dillon Subramanian. The analogy is apt. As we set out in the pitch dark we do not know what awaits, but we are about to find out.

Guided by our headlamps we look only at the heels of the climber in front of us. For the whole of the day before we have been looking at Kilimanjaro as we edge ever closer.

Our route is clear from distance – a steep climb through scree – just over 4.1km straight up, unrelenting and unforgiving. The temperature keeps dropping. We begin to break up into little groups.

"Close the gap," enjoins Everest hero Sibusiso Vilane, our expedition leader, over and over again.

He's been brilliant as expedition leader, aloof yet engaged, deadly serious but leavened with wit, leading by example while getting us to behave and think like adults and not mindless – and sometimes petulant – spoilt kids that some of us have been in the last few days.

The climb is supposed to take eight hours, but like much else

in Tanzania there's a very real disconnect between claims and reality, particularly when it comes to distance and time.

The route becomes congested as other climbers catch up and start trying to overtake – all in the pitch black, freezing cold.

Many climbers are crying about three quarters of the way up; some retch uncontrollably, others have the machine gunner's stare as hypothermia and oxygen deprivation take their toll. At least one person lies on their stomach, their face in a pool of vomit as their body heaves.

The climb is bringing out the best and worst in people; ubuntu and devil take the hindmost simultaneously.

The undoubted heroes are the guides – some climbing with neither headlamps nor gloves – carrying the daypacks of those who can't carry their own, often more than one at any time.

Some of the climbers are doing their best to help those in need, cajoling and encouraging. Others aren't so noble, showing instead the baser instincts of self-survival – at any cost.

Day begins to break just after 5am, an unimaginable beautiful orange stripe cleaving the heavens from the earth.

As the sun rises higher we see not just the carnage that the climb has wrought on our few low climbers, but also the cruellest discovery yet – the boulders and rocks that have to be negotiated if we are to reach our summit, Gilman's Point, 5 685m above sea level.

But we do. In fact, we do it exceptionally well.

Of the 46 who began the climb only two turned back before the summit. Forty-four made it, a phenomenally high success factor on the mountain's oldest route, which normally extracts a toll of up to half of all those who attempt it.

By all accounts this makes it the most successful Trek4Mandela yet. From Gilman's there's the opportunity to climb down into the crater and from there approach Stella Point – the mountain's second highest peak at 5 756m – and then onto Uhuru Peak, the highest peak in Africa at 5 895m.

It doesn't look like much on paper; the difference in elevation is only 210m, much like the Westcliff Stairs in fact, and its only another 1km and a bit. In truth, it might as well be on another planet.

I am tired, grumpy but I know if I don't complete the hat-trick it will haunt me. The only way I ever want to see Kilimanjaro again at this stage is on Discovery Channel – but I won't have that luxury if I leave with unfinished business.

The snow, while picturesque from afar, is treacherous as the sun rises ever higher and the snow starts to melt only for the water to then freeze as ice.

The slog, though, is worth it. Being at the peak is emotional for many. Some break away to reflect, others become garrulous. Some are content with one picture of themselves, others take more with different permutations of the people around them.

Each one of us does it differently. I'm hit with emotion as I walk back, away from the peak and down towards Stella, trying not to slip on the ice and end up careening right over the edge.

Suddenly I'm weeping uncontrollably as the grief of burying two beloved brothers-in-law within nine months of each other hits home, coupled with the overwhelming gratitude for all that I have received; my wife, my children, and the simple and most precious gift of all – life.

Vilane has been at pains all week, enjoining us to know our why, the root of our drive to do what we do, why we were climbing this mountain.

We have all done that. We have done it with the support of some of the poorest people imaginable, who have been nothing but kindness and grace, freely sharing the little they have with us who have everything.

They have taken us to the mountain, which has been blithely despoiled by the affluent leaving the detritus of their endeavours behind: cigarette stompies at Gilman's, discarded sweetie wrappers and

chemical handwarmers in divots in the snow.

It is shameful. As shameful as a society that doesn't as a matter of course make sanitary pads available in public for free with the alacrity they do condoms.

Many of the climbers have spoken of climbing this mountain in solidarity with the mountain our girls have to climb every month.

Before I thought it was trite, now I know it wasn't.

As I make my way down the mountain Johnny Clegg's immortal Kilimanjaro plays in my head: *I'm sitting on top of Kilimanjaro,*

*I can see a new tomorrow... I will climb the ancient mountain, I will find the last flicker of the light.* Kilimanjaro is all that and more.

In the last six days, it has been not just the perfect metaphor for life but also an incredibly real and tangible way to celebrate what would have been Nelson Mandela's 100th birthday.

● *The organisers of Trek4Mandela wish to acknowledge and thank FastJet for their generous sponsorship of the climbers air travel between Dar es Salaam and Kilimanjaro.*



Environmental activist and Amnesty International head Kili Naidoo displays the Africa Declaration on Madiba's birthday atop Uhuru Peak.

PICTURES: KEVIN RITCHE



Trek leader Sibusiso Vilane with Kilimanjaro in the background.



Kevin Ritche atop Uhuru Peak.

PICTURE: SUPPLIED