



The majestic peak of Uhuru (meaning “independence” in Swahili) rises in the distance

The Mt. Kilimanjaro Adventure for the Pole Pole G7:

December 9th to December 16, 2009

By Karim Visram

Climbing Mount Kilimanjaro has been a goal of mine for a number of years. Being a native of Tanzania, the mountain stood as a permanent reminder to me of the omnipotence of nature and the remarkable endeavours of humankind. Last December I challenged myself to climb the mountain – and I succeeded, with six other Canadians, collectively known as the Pole Pole (“slow slow” in Swahili) G7. The group was comprised of one woman and six men, all from Montreal, Ottawa or Toronto. The youngest among us was a thirty-year-old and the most senior (yours truly), fifty-two. Together, we overcame some great difficulties and, in the end, reached Uhuru (“independence” in Swahili) Peak and back in seven days. The guides never had to tell us “pole pole”, as we were slow to begin with but our journey was a long one and indeed, a memorable one.

Day 0 (7th Dec): In Transit: After nearly twenty two hours in transit from Toronto and Montreal, we arrived at the Kilimanjaro airport late at night and were received by our tour operator and taken to the hotel to rest and get over our jet lag.

Day 1 (8th Dec): Life Size Bags

After having a nice breakfast at the hotel in the morning, we all went to visit the city of Moshi and did some light shopping at the local markets. After lunch at a local hang out in Moshi, the G7 headed back to the hotel to meet the head guide of our climb. Isaac was a young-thirty-something-year-old who spoke English very well. He went through all the details of the climb and personally checked each person's gear to ensure we all had proper equipment for the adventure. He made a few jokes about the size of my bag and asked if I was carrying someone in there! It was good to know that he had a sense of humour and laughed when I used a little bit of the Swahili that I still remember. It seems as though I did not pay heed to the instructions that read, "please do not bring a life size bag". Nonetheless, Isaac was good-natured and told me not to worry. I realized later why a slightly smaller (okay, much smaller) bag would have been very helpful in keeping the bag and my clothes inside dry. You see, each day the porters would put our bags into another waterproof bag, so that the bag and the clothes would not get wet if it rained (like it did). Lesson learned for my next mountain-climbing adventure.



THE GATES OPEN Our odyssey begins at the Machame Gate on the southern approach to Mt. Kilimanjaro (top left). Of the six established routes up the mountain, the Machame Route is considered the most scenic, but also one of the most challenging (see map on page 4). That must be why climbers are discouraged from carrying "life size" bags like the one I carried (bottom left). Our head guide, Isaac (bottom middle), joked that I must be carrying someone inside.



WET AND WILD

As we started our ascent towards Machame Camp (above), it started to rain, but our spirits remained undampened. At Machame Camp, we enjoyed the modern conveniences of a private Internet café, which also doubled as a washroom (left).

The serenity of the moment enveloped me, just as it had all those years ago.

Day 2 (9th Dec): To Machame Camp

At 7 am, a truck came to take us to the Machame Gate. We were all excited and nervous at the same time but eager to get started on our long awaited adventure. We met our team of porters and two guides (Isaac and Evarest) there. After signing in (a requirement for all climbers in case of an emergency), we started our journey at 10 am. We spent the day walking to Machame Camp through the mountain's lush lower rain forest. It started to rain around noon and did not let up until we got to the camp around 5 pm. Most of us, though a bit tired of the rain, were in good shape and sprits and ready for dinner – but we had a surprise in store for us. Our tents were really small!! It felt like the tents (for two) were five feet by six feet. Needless to say, we got to know our tent-mates really well (better than we wanted to at times). With our large bags, we had so little room in the tent that we almost had to take turns breathing. After dinner we all chatted in the mess tent until dark (8 pm). We headed back to our tents to retire for the evening and attempted to rest up for the next day. That night, when I caught a glimpse of the sky, a flood of memories came back to me of the nights I spent as a child gazing at the star-studded African sky. The serenity of the moment enveloped me, just as it had all those years ago.



BREATH TAKING

At 3840 m, Shira Camp takes your breath away in more ways than one. While we all started to feel the effects of the thinner air, the glorious views were simply breathtaking. From Shira Camp, we set off towards the first major challenge of our climb: the Barranco Wall.

Day 3 (10th Dec): Machame to Shira

As luck would have it, it rained most of the night. Also, due to condensation, our tents were dripping inside as well. With most of our clothes wet from the rain the day before and the dripping tents, it was hard to find dry clothes. I managed to find a few that were reasonably dry. After breakfast, we packed up to start our climb through the Shira Plateau and then to the Shira Camp. At around 8:30 am, we started our climb cross a valley and a stream and then up a steep ridge for 3-4 hours. The path then opened onto a river gorge before ascending more gently onto the moorland of the Shira Plateau, one of the most fascinating areas of the Mountain. The camp at Shira sat at an altitude of about 3840m. At this point, we all started feeling the difference in elevation. We were out of our own water and were now drinking from the stream. Though it was boiled, it did not taste very good, especially with the water purification pills. I felt quite nauseous and was worried, as we still had a long way to go. I could not eat anything that evening. Something had to give; I knew that I had to drink the water or else it was going to be a very difficult climb. My comrades were worried for me but Isaac and Evarest assured me that a little food and rest would take care of my nauseousness. I took some gravol and a few other medicines which managed to knock me out at around 9 pm. That was the best sleep I had over the course of my journey.



STRATEGY SESSION Our guides ponder our approach to the notorious Barranco Wall.



...we had to get over the wall by then, or else it would be an impossible task

Day 4 (11th Dec): Shira to Barranco

Isaac and Evarest were right. The next morning I felt a little better. I stopped using the water purification pills and added Gatorade to the water. My fellow mountaineers from Montréal (whom we endearingly called Steven Spielberg and MacGyver) also gave me some water drops they had which made the water taste much better. After a healthy breakfast, we walked for about seven hours enjoying sightings of typical Kilimanjaro mountain vegetation (senecios, lobelia, helichrysum) and reached a high point of around 4600m (at the Lava Tower) before descending for the rest of the day. On a clear day, one can see distinct glaciers. These glaciers, however, are shrinking as global temperatures increase. There is speculation that in fifteen years, many of these glaciers will disappear – forever! The path down the Barranco Valley was particularly rewarding and the view of Kibo peak, truly spectacular. In the evening, a blanket of cloud often hangs just below the valley, fluttering in the dying light. The camp at Barranco sat at around 3950m. While it was a very difficult day of hiking, the spectacular scenery made it worthwhile. I felt much better at the end of the day as the water lost its bitter taste with Gatorade and the drops. Unfortunately, two other members of the Pole

Pole G7 (Mountain Willy and Bul Bul) were getting sick. Both caught a bug which they had to deal with for the rest of the climb. But both were fighters and were not about to feel defeated. After making camp late in the evening, it did not leave us much time to enjoy the views or rest. We had a quick dinner and talked about the first of the major challenges facing us the next morning, namely: the Barranco Wall. None of us were looking forward to climbing this wall, especially if it were to rain, as had been our luck over the last three days. Isaac and Evarest suggested we get an early start as it would most likely rain in the afternoon and we had to get over the wall by then, or else it would be an impossible task. We ended this night like all the others, listening to our funny man Spielberg's jokes, which made us feel relaxed and forget our fatigue. Before going to bed that night, I took a couple of minutes to walk around the camp and enjoy the extraordinary sights. It was breathtakingly beautiful. I had to pinch myself a few times to make sure that this was real and that I was, in fact, on Mount Kilimanjaro. I was feeling much better but unfortunately Mountain Willy and Bul Bul still weren't, and the first lady of the group, Salma, was also experiencing discomfort. But they displayed nothing but courage, a testament to the strength of the G7.

Day 5 (12th Dec): Barranco to Karanga Valley

We were up early this morning as we wanted to get started on the Barranco Wall before the rains came. Our morning routine included having breakfast, getting water for the day (three liters), pack, get dressed, and commence the hike. Today we ascended the Barranco Wall, which is akin to rock climbing straight up for about three hours. In the process, we had to be careful not to look down too often, in order to avoid being frightened stiff. At certain points on the wall, one misstep would have resulted in a very long fall down. Our luck held out and it did not rain during our climb up the wall. But guess what? Rain and wet snow started to fall as soon as we were up the wall, until we reached Karanga camp at 4100m. The Barranco Wall was a tough pursuit but a few of the G7 (such as our first lady and Spielberg) excelled in this terrain and were smiling and giggling all the way up! In the meantime, the rest of us were sweating it out and asking for divine intervention. Even in the rain, one could appreciate the breathtaking views of the Western Breach and the southern glacier. And once again, all of my clothes were wet when we got to camp, but this time the rain let up for a few hours, which enabled us to get organized and enjoy the magnificent view from the Karanga camp. By now I was feeling great. Mountain Willy and Bul Bul still had challenges (diarrhea and headaches) but were fighting through it without any complaint. For the most part, all of us were coping well with the altitude but were having difficulty finding dry clothes. Isaac and Evarest suggested that as the next day to Barafu Camp was a short day, we leave a little late hoping for some sun in the morning to dry our clothes. Some of us found that our boots were not as water resistant as we thought they would be. Imagine having soaking wet feet after an intense hike. Isaac suggested that they be dried in the cooking tent overnight. If only I could have slept there as well.



CONQUERING HEROES From left, Mountain Willy, myself and Isaac after conquering the Barranco Wall (right).

Day 6 (13th Dec): Karanga Valley to Barafu

From Karanga, we went up a moraine ridge, taking our time and going slowly (“pole pole”). The views of the southern glacier and of the glacial valleys are breathtaking here, as they snake their way down the mountain. The final stage to Barafu Camp was quite steep, and as always, we took it very slowly. Similar to the day before, we reached camp by 3 pm leaving lots of time to prepare and relax. The reason for this short day was that this was the summit night and we had to get up at 10 pm for an 11 pm start up to the summit. The 11 pm start was designated to meet two objectives: the first, to make the ascent to Uhuru Peak and back down to the Millennium camp (estimated to take between fifteen to twenty hours) and, second, so that we couldn’t see how steep the climb was to the peak, which may have left us feeling discouraged. As such, we had lunch and dinner and slept early. By now it was getting quite cold outside but it had stopped raining and we were above the clouds. Yes! It was an incredible feeling to know that at 16000 feet, we could see the clouds below us! The excitement among the G7 was palpable. Problems, however, still persisted with two of my comrades (Mountain Willy and Bul Bul). But they were not about to slow down ... the summit awaited. I no longer had many dry clothes (if any), but to stay warm, I had to wear everything



THE SUMMIT AWAITS

At the final camp before the summit, Barafuhut, we gathered our remaining strength. At 11 pm, we set off so we could reach the summit by the next morning.



I had! I wore three layers of thermal bottoms and tops and my winter coat to sleep. I was so pumped that I hardly slept before the 10 pm wake up call. To ensure that we did not throw up at the higher altitudes, we received some tea and just a few cookies before the start to Uhuru Peak. Finally it was going to happen – the goal that I had been dreaming of for ten years was within reach. I could not wait, I was ready to go. But then again, I could not sleep anyway. I lay in my tent thinking of the journey ahead and how it held so much promise. I was focused on the challenge ahead. I did not even hear my tent mate, Giraffe, snore – and he was only six inches away from my face ... or so it felt most of the time. It was 11 pm when we set out. I was wearing five layers of clothes and carrying four liters of water.

Day 7 (14th Dec): Summit Night

Bundled in layers and equipped with headlights, the fourteen of us – G7 and seven guides – started towards Uhuru peak. We were all ready for it. Our attempt of the summit started at 11 pm at night. Each one of us had been assigned a summit guide to ensure that everyone made it to the top and returned safely. The

going was very slow and often quite frustrating on the scree, but persistence and patience paved the way to steady progress. As much as we tried to stay together so that we could all reach the summit together, we started to fragment. Between fatigue and the effects of the altitude, a few of my colleagues fell behind. Closer to the top, it appeared that there were only two of us, Bul Bul and myself, still going as the others were out of sight in the dark. We were climbing at night in pitch darkness and, as a result, we were not aware of the progress we were making and how close we were to the summit. It wasn't until the sun started rising that we could feel Stella Point was close by. Evarest, who was with Bul Bul and me, kept telling us, "sio mbali" (it's not far). But it seemed like it was taking forever to get to the Point and there was still at least one hour from there to Uhuru Peak. Furthermore, the climb was so steep that we could not even see Stella Point when we looked up. I decided that I was going to focus entirely on each and every step and not worry about when we were going to reach the Point.

It was 6:30 am before we finally saw Stella Point. That was reason to celebrate. At Stella Point, one is already

... it felt like we were running, even though we were moving slower than turtles.



NIGHT APPROACH From left, myself, the First Lady and Isaac take a breather on the way up.



WE'RE HERE! Bul Bul and myself with our porter, Sabatini, at the summit.

... emotionally we were on top of the world!

higher than any point in Africa! Bul Bul and I rested there for five minutes and knew we were close to our ultimate prize, Uhuru Peak. We could still not see Uhuru Peak from there. Many climbers turn back from here but Bul Bul and I mustered up the courage, got up, and continued with our climb. It took us half an hour before we set our sights on the Holy Grail. It was a sight for sore eyes. The peak seemed far off in the distance but it gave us the impetus and drive to keep going. In fact, from that moment on, it felt like we were running, even though I am sure we were moving slower than turtles. At almost 20,000 feet, there is less than half the oxygen than at sea level.

It was 8:01 am when Bul Bul and I made it to Uhuru peak – the summit. We were so excited to finally have achieved our dream; I was on cloud nine. Bul Bul and

I could not stop smiling and hugging everyone in sight and taking pictures of anyone or anything standing. Bul Bul had not smiled very much the last few days but he was beaming at that moment. The view from the roof of Africa was stunning. I had never experienced such beauty and satisfaction with anything prior to this (other than the birth of my two boys), that I, too, could not stop smiling and talking. My fatigue vanished, as did any memory of the more challenging moments of the climb (the rain, the Barranco Wall, and the prior eight hours). After twenty minutes of celebrating and taking pictures at the highest point in Africa (19,853 feet), other members of the G7 arrived. First was Giraffe followed by MacGyver. MacGyver (a.k.a. Mr. Prepared) looked so alive in his red outfit and big smile that I thought he took the short route or had been flown up! The First Lady was next (with her Million



MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

All members of the Pole Pole G7 made it to the summit – a rare feat. At Uhuru Peak, I posed with photos of my sons, Aqil and Kiyaan, who were with me in spirit on the entire journey.



dollar smile), then Spielberg, and Mountain Willy. Even though we were not able to take a group picture up at Uhuru Peak, it was still a feeling that was out of this world to know that not only had I made it, but all the members of the G7 made it to the peak. We were told that it is very rare that 100% of any group make it to the top. We may have physically been at the highest point in Africa, but emotionally, we were on top of the world! This was a dream come true for us all. Some members of the G7 (Bul Bul, Mountain Willy, and our first lady) had a challenging last few days but the courage they mustered up on the last day was unbelievable.

After spending about an hour at the peak (any more is not recommended), we started to head back down to the Barafu Camp for lunch and rest. We had lots of energy coming down as we knew WE HAD DONE IT! But we had to get down to a lower altitude fast and the guides brought us down a short route full of scree. It

was much more difficult than we thought it would be and was very hard on my knees and hips, which until now were holding up quite well. We reached the camp around 1 pm for a quick rest and lunch and headed back down to Millennium Camp for 6 pm. This was the final resting place after a nineteen-hour hike up to Uhuru and down to the celebration point. We rested, ate, and had lots of laughs talking about the experience and joy we all felt. We were all in agreement that this was the hardest thing any of us had ever done yet was also the most satisfying. That says a lot especially with one of the members of the G7, Spielberg, being a marathon runner and an avid mountaineer. That night, I thought that I would sleep like a baby (as I was exhausted) and was looking forward to the final leg of our trek to Mweka Gate the next day. We had one last night in our miniature tents.



COMING DOWN

While our porters danced and sang their way down (left), two members of the Pole Pole G7 took it a little easier (bottom).



Day 8 (15th Dec): Millennium Camp to Mweka Gate – Hotel and Shower

It turns out that I didn't sleep as well as I thought I would. Maybe I was over-tired, over-excited, and not having had a good shower in six days, coupled with sleeping in a mini-tent with someone confronting the same challenges, did not make sleeping very easy. Anyway, I was glad to see the morning come.

Before embarking on our final leg of the journey, Isaac and Evarest gave a speech to thank us for coming to Tanzania and seeing their beautiful country. Then the G7 asked me to speak on their behalf. I thanked them for the tremendous help they were to all of us in helping us to achieve our goal for the trip. The porters sang a few songs for us (Kilimanjaro is a beautiful song) and we departed for the Mweka Gate where we were picked up and taken back to the hotel.

Once again, the trek down was harder than we thought it would be but we were still glad we were nearing the end. We got to the Mweka Gate at 2 pm and after lunch, were off to the hotel. The first thing I did, like the rest of G7, was have a shower and shave (to look more like me again). We then went out for a nice Tanzanian-style dinner to celebrate!



Climbing a mountain is not an obstacle to be overcome, it is a challenge to revel in.

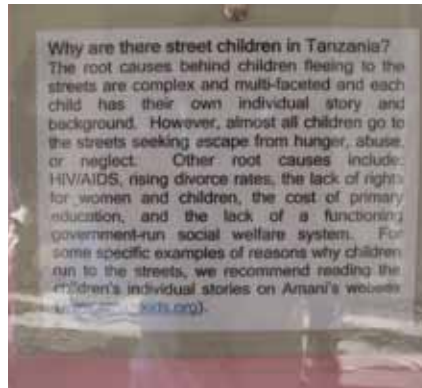
FINAL THOUGHTS ...

What can I say about my journey? It was the most exhilarating experience of my life. It was also a very humbling experience. My goal was never to conquer the mountain. After the climb, I realized that humans have an untapped potential to work in harmony with nature, rather than subdue it. Climbing a mountain is not an obstacle to be overcome, it is a challenge to revel in. I would never have been able to climb Mount Kilimanjaro had it not been for the porters. They are the unspoken heroes of our adventure. Not only did they carry three times the load we were, they were walking three times faster than we were, that is, when they weren't running. They were willing to do whatever it took to make us comfortable and helped us reach Uhuru Peak, even if it meant carrying us along with their load! And to my Pole Pole G7 compatriots: Salma ("the First Lady of G7"), Will ("Mountain Willy"), Yenani ("Giraffe"), Hani ("Steven Spielberg"), Allain ("MacGyver"), and Nabil ("Bul Bul") – we have created a lasting bond and share in the memory of having climbed Africa's tallest mountain. For this, you will always be in my heart.

Signing off ... until the next adventure,
Karim

Epilogue: The truly epic journey

While in Africa, I took the opportunity to visit the Amani Centre for Street Children, which is an important cause to me. For the street children of Tanzania, daily survival is an epic journey – and one that too many children sadly do not complete. But thanks to the amazing work of the Amani Centre for Street Children, many street children get the chance to learn, play and grow in a safe and healthy environment. Thank you to everyone who donated towards the Amani Fundraiser, which raised close to \$15,000 for this very important cause.





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