ANTICIPATION IS EVERYTHING

In early 2020, I saw an Instagram post about a group of women who were planning to climb to the top of Kilimanjaro that spring. Kilimanjaro. I’d heard of it before. It was a “big” mountain on another continent, and there was no way that I, a 30-something civil engineer from Maine who had really only just gotten into hiking in the past few years, could ever do that...or could I?
I’m the kind of person who will get an odd idea in my head, and just never let it go — this was one of those ideas. I did some research and found that Kilimanjaro was truly a hike and seemed like a reasonable challenge for someone who wasn’t a technical climber. The true test was in the elevation, and that was something that you really couldn’t prepare for until you tried it. You could be a marathon runner, or a hiking newbie and altitude sickness could hit you the same way — hard or not at all. I live at sea level (in a town with the word “beach” in the name...) and the highest point in Maine is actually lower than the starting gate for the Kilimanjaro hike, so all I could do was try!

In February 2020, I decided I was going to do it and signed up with a group hiking at the end of the year. I would spend 2020 gaining more hiking experience in and around New England and then I would ring in the New Year on the Roof of Africa!

In the spring of 2020, we all know what happened...COVID reared its head and took hold of the world. Everyone stayed closer to home than they usually did. I had already been planning for a year of hiking, so I was ready to spend my time exploring the great outdoors in Maine mostly, with some New Hampshire and Vermont thrown in too. I found plenty of new places to explore and hone my camping and hiking skills.

COVID forced me to push my trip ahead another year. Not sure what the next year would bring, I was cautiously optimistic that the trip could still happen a year later. This gave me another year to get my hiking feet under me, including a fun trip in the spring to hike Mount LeConte in the Great Smoky Mountains of Tennessee with a great group of Tau Bates (see image below).
I was incredibly excited in the fall of 2021 when I started to hear from our guides that they were finalizing the details, and the trip was a go! After almost two years of anticipation, I was going to have the opportunity to make it to almost the top of the world — to the top of the highest free-standing mountain above sea level, to be exact!

GETTING THERE

Landing at the Kilimanjaro International Airport in Tanzania the day before Christmas, it was obvious that I was joining a lot of people who were also planning to celebrate the New Year on Kilimanjaro — there were a lot of backpacks and duffle bags coming down the baggage carousel, ready to make the trip up the mountain.

On Day 1 in Tanzania, I took a “warm up” hike to see a local waterfall. After that, it was time to get down to business, meet up with the rest of our hiking group and guides, and do a gear check to make sure we were prepared with clothing and supplies for the trip. Each of us would be carrying a backpack with daily supplies that we’d readily need — extra clothing, first aid materials, snacks, and most importantly water! We each carried at least three liters of water with us every day.

All of our other supplies — sleeping bag, clothes, toiletries, and more snacks — were packed into duffle bags that would be carried up the mountain by porters. These men and women were an amazing group of Tanzanians who worked together to make sure that we were able to successfully make it to the summit. In addition to carrying our duffle bags of supplies, the porters carried and set up our tents, food and cooking equipment, and countless other supplies we needed.

GOOD TO KNOW

The Kilimanjaro Porters Assistance Project (KPAP) is an organization that works to ensure the fair and ethical treatment of the porters who assist hikers. The group provides training and resources for the porters when they are off the mountain and establishes standards for partner tour and guide companies to follow during hikes on the mountain. If you plan to climb Kilimanjaro, be sure to hike with a company that has registered with KPAP.

THE HIKE

On the first morning of our five-day hike, we were all excited and ready to go. Our group consisted of 10 hikers, 4 guides, and about two dozen porters; we were one of many groups taking-off that day. While the pandemic had an impact on the number of people who climbed Kilimanjaro over the past two years, numbers have rebounded. A lot of people were excited to get back to the mountain to celebrate the upcoming New Year.

That first day we climbed in the rainforest from the Machame Gate up to Machame Camp. At seven miles, this was one of our longer hikes, but with about 4,000 feet of elevation difference, the incline was not too severe. It rained a bit...but we were still in great spirits, and being a rainforest, we expected it. With camp at 9,350 feet, that was the highest elevation I have ever hiked to — a first of many milestones for this girl from sea level.

Day 2 brought us up to 12,500 feet at Shira Camp. A much shorter hike at three miles, it was still challenging as the air thinned...and the rain continued! This was a trend through much of our hike, but we were typically greeted with clear skies and mountain views in the morning. I was incredibly appreciative of the Gore-Tex® in my gaiters and boots that kept my feet dry every day.

Day 3 was our first serious acclimatization hike. First, we hiked up to the Lava Tower, at an elevation of 15,200 feet. We ate lunch and waited in hopes that the sky would clear. Finally, we did it! We were greeted with breathtaking views of the mountain and the sky turned blue.

Day 4 was the big one. Our group consisted of 10 hikers, 4 guides, and about two dozen porters. We were one of many groups taking-off that day. While the pandemic had an impact on the number of people who climbed Kilimanjaro over the past two years, numbers have rebounded. A lot of people were excited to get back to the mountain to celebrate the upcoming New Year.

That first day we climbed in the rainforest from the Machame Gate up to Machame Camp. At seven miles, this was one of our longer hikes, but with about 4,000 feet of elevation difference, the incline was not too severe. It rained a bit...but we were still in great spirits, and being a rainforest, we expected it. With camp at 9,350 feet, that was the highest elevation I have ever hiked to — a first of many milestones for this girl from sea level.

Day 2 brought us up to 12,500 feet at Shira Camp. A much shorter hike at three miles, it was still challenging as the air thinned...and the rain continued! This was a trend through much of our hike, but we were typically greeted with clear skies and mountain views in the morning. I was incredibly appreciative of the Gore-Tex® in my gaiters and boots that kept my feet dry every day.

Day 3 was our first serious acclimatization hike. First, we hiked up to the Lava Tower, at an elevation of 15,200 feet. We ate lunch and waited in hopes that the sky would clear. Finally, we did it! We were greeted with breathtaking views of the mountain and the sky turned blue.

Day 4 was the big one. Our group consisted of 10 hikers, 4 guides, and about two dozen porters. We were one of many groups taking-off that day. While the pandemic had an impact on the number of people who climbed Kilimanjaro over the past two years, numbers have rebounded. A lot of people were excited to get back to the mountain to celebrate the upcoming New Year.
days rain and hail might stop (it slowed a bit) and then we continued on to Barranco Camp where we slept down at an elevation closer to 13,000 feet. Some in our group were starting to feel the effects of the elevation, but I was getting pretty excited — I was now at a higher ground elevation than ever before and I was still feeling great.

Day 4 thankfully started out bright and sunny, as this was the day that we needed to climb up and over the Barranco Wall. With support from our guides, we were able to make our way up the stone face of the wall carefully, and all together as a group within a long line of hikers. This was an exciting milestone in the trip. We ended the day at Karanga Camp at around 13,100 feet. We barely gained any elevation and we only covered three miles, but it still took most of the day to complete the hike. The rain continued, of course, and we got to experience thunder and lightning! We also got to see the Dendrosenecio kilimanjari, a giant groundsel prehistoric plant, that is only found atop Mount Kilimanjaro. At this point, we had reached the alpine desert and there was no longer much plant life at all.

Day 5, we made our way to Barafu, the base camp. We stopped at the first Barafu camp, and then continued on for another hour, this time in snow, not rain, to the second Barafu camp finishing at around 16,000 feet. Not everyone can get a space at this second base camp; sometimes it’s not open due to weather, but we were lucky enough to be able to stay there. That hour hike makes a big difference for the summit climb.

SUMMIT
Kilimanjaro is a dormant volcano, and Stella Point and Uhuru Peak are both part of Kibo, the tallest of the mountain’s three volcanic cones. Kibo is estimated to have been dormant for 360,000 years and could still erupt in the future, while the other two cones, Mawenzi and Shira are extinct.

Hiking to the summit of Kilimanjaro had seemed like such an impossible feat just a short time before, but when we found ourselves at base camp, we were almost there. After a quick lunch, it was time to nap before our summit
attempt in the middle of the night. I was nervous, but still no altitude sickness, and even with my nerves I was able to get some sleep.

We all gathered in the mess tent in the middle of the night for a meal and to collect final supplies. I brought a batch of chocolate fudge I had made back home and shared with the group for some last bits of energy. We lined up with our guides and a group of summit porters, and were getting ready to go, when suddenly we heard cheering and shouting from all over camp — it was midnight and the New Year had arrived in Tanzania! With that, we were off.

One step in front of the other: “Pole pole” (Swahili for slowly slowly) and “Hakuna matata” (it means no worries…I bet you remember that one from Disney’s The Lion King).

Slow and steady we climbed with only the light of our head lamps, stopping for breaks every 45 minutes or so. We were in snow and ice, and it was COLD, but finally no precipitation! As we pressed on, making our way to the summit, we were greeted with an amazing sunrise. After a trip that had been marked with so much rain, it was a beautiful day when it mattered.

I made it to Uhuru Peak at 6:42 a.m. on January 1, 2022. Five others from our hiking group made it at that same time, and three more summited about a half an hour later. We celebrated and took photos for a few minutes and then headed back down. At 19,341 feet, even the hardiest climber can’t stay for too long! It was truly an amazing experience to be in that place at that moment. I’ll admit, I teared up (complicated when it’s that cold and you are wearing glasses…), and all of us were feeling the same way. We were proud of ourselves and each other for making it to the top.

AND BACK DOWN...

What goes up, must also come down… and that happens a LOT faster! The goal of our guides was to get us back down the mountain and into a more reasonable elevation very quickly. After hiking back down to base camp, we rested a bit, packed up, ate lunch, and then hiked down to our last camp on the mountain, Millennium Camp. At under 12,500 feet, we were already back to our Day 2 elevation.

Our final day, we hiked the last eight or so miles back to the Mweka Gate, where we had to then leave Kilimanjaro behind. After a week of lukewarm water and ginger tea, the ice-cold cola I had at the exit gate was probably the best thing I’ve ever tasted in my life!

After finishing, we went on to celebrate and show appreciation to our guides and porters for the trip. We could never have done what we did without their tireless work — carrying supplies, setting up campsites, cooking our food, and cheering us on. Many of them have climbed Kilimanjaro tens if not hundreds of times, but they still took on the mountain with the enthusiasm as if it was their first journey.

Looking back at the entire trip, I still can’t believe that it happened. I’ve been hiking before, but this was more than a hike, it was an experience that I shared with an amazing group of women, who are now good friends. There were moments along the way where we weren’t sure it was where we really wanted to be (one of the women commented one day, mid-rainstorm, “I wouldn’t wish this on my worst enemy”) but in the end, we all agreed it was exactly what we needed. The only thing left is to figure out where to go next!

LAUREN J. SWETT, P.E.

is a principal and technical manager at Woodard & Curran, where her work includes site development and stormwater projects. She has B.S. and M.S. degrees in civil engineering from the University of Maine. Lauren joined TBP in 2004 and participated in community service projects with the ME Alpha Chapter. She has been an Association volunteer since 2008, serving as a District 1 Director for nearly 14 years, and finds working with student leaders very rewarding.
Supplemental Images

Image 1:
Even with rain during the day, most mornings were clear and cold. Here, at the Barranco Camp, hikers woke to a layer of frost on the tents, but a perfect view of the snowy summit.

Image 2:
The group of hikers enjoying a break on the Barranco Wall.
After reaching Uhuru Peak, the group of hikers started back down the mountain, pausing for a bit just off the summit to rest, snack, and take in the early morning views.

Image 3:
The group of hikers celebrated after their first night of camping at the Machame Camp.

Image 4:
The Dendrosenecio kilimanjari, a giant groundset species that is only found atop Mount Kilimanjaro.

Image 5:
After reaching Uhuru Peak, the group of hikers started back down the mountain, pausing for a bit just off the summit to rest, snack, and take in the early morning views.