

The Snows of KILIMANJARO

Like in the Hemingway story, there's a lesson to be learnt at the end of the trek up Africa's highest mountain

By **Praveen Suthrum**



Climbers walk past the glaciers that make up Mt. Kilimanjaro's iconic white-capped peak. The ice fields have been melting in recent years and it is feared that the glaciers will be gone by 2020.

AMARTYA MUKHERJEE

As Harry lies dying,

he remorsefully contemplates his life gone by. In the end, he dreams of a plane that flies him over a mountain that's "as wide as all the world, great, high, and unbelievably white in the sun".

On the fifth day of my trek, I am walking on the vast saddle that connects the peaks of Mount Mawenzi and Kibo, when I look upon the heavenly brightness of Kilimanjaro that Harry must have seen. Harry's reflections and death form the essence of Ernest Hemingway's short story, "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" in which he describes the mountain as an other-worldly place.



Kibo (top) is the best preserved of Mt. Kilimanjaro's three volcanic cones. It has three concentric craters, and signs of volcanic activity like fumaroles, are still visible here; Day two or three of the trek up Mt. Kilimanjaro takes climbers out of the forest and into the moorlands. The moorlands have mostly low shrubs, except for the occasional alien-looking giant senecio plants (right) that grow taller than people.



As a poignant reminder of Hemingway's story, I spot a crashed plane—a Cessna with grey paw marks painted on its side. Ripped metal has been flung a few hundred feet across this lunar landscape. Wires jut out of the disfigured cockpit.

We're on a rocky path close to the Kibo Hut camp (15,430 ft), from where we will begin our final climb to Uhuru Peak (19,340 ft)—the summit of Kilimanjaro, and Africa's highest point. The peaks of Kibo, Mawenzi, and Shira form the volcanic cones of the Kilimanjaro Range.

Having started from Moshi, we approached Kilimanjaro through the Rongai Gate (6,398 ft) in the north. I find it a little difficult to digest that 46 staff are accompanying our group of 12 on this seven-day trek. In the last few days, our trail has gone through cornfields and pine forests that eventually opened into vast moorlands. Yesterday, on the fourth night of the trek, we had camped at Mawenzi Tarn (14,206 ft), a campsite below the main spire of Mount Mawenzi. The lake had a mystical feel to it—reflecting our green and yellow tents at the base of a rugged white mountain. The trek didn't seem as demanding as Kilimanjaro is often made out to be.

Now, on the fifth evening of the trip, I'm restless and tired but I cannot sleep. I recall our group leader Sarah Kingdom's words from earlier that afternoon: "I know your bodies are ready—it's all in your mind now." She was preparing us for the final climb that will begin four hours from now at 11 p.m., so that we reach the summit by dawn. She's told us often that her groups have had 100 per cent success at summiting Kilimanjaro, so we should not be the exception. An Australian, she first visited Africa on a holiday as a 21-year-old, fell in love with the region and extended her stay a few weeks at a time before immigrating to the continent.

Failing to lull myself to sleep, I finally decide to step out of the tent. Mawenzi's spiky head is rising against a deep blue night sky. Local legend treats Kibo as the kind, younger volcano who helped Mawenzi by sending him fire from time to time. But one day when Mawenzi tried stealing the flame from Kibo's hearth, Kibo whacked his head, making him dormant and giving him a jagged crown.

DE AGOSTINI/R. JACOD/DINODIA (CRATER); KAZUYOSHI NOMACHI/CORBIS/IMAGELIBRARY (PLANTS)

I return to my tent and wriggle back into my sleeping bag.

"It's time!" someone yells. I wonder if I've slept at all. With four layers of clothing restricting my movements, I feel like an astronaut. We stand in single file, ready to make the final climb to the summit. In the light of my headlamp, I see Divya Bhalla smiling excitedly. We have trekked together in the past and she has helped me through my climbing struggles, caused by long-term hypertension. Several months ago, she had suggested that our trekking trio—Amit Chandna being the other member—climb Kilimanjaro, one of the world's tallest mountains that's accessible without specialised equipment.

"Don't look up," Divya advises. But I do, and I see a long, arduous trail. It seems unreal to think that we will go all the way to the summit in the next seven or eight hours. Beyond the peak, I see the moon, closer and brighter than I ever thought possible. I feel like I'm being watched.

"Remember to stay in line. We will break for only five minutes every hour until we reach Gilman's Point." Sarah says. Gilman's Point (18,652 ft) is the first of the three-part summit. Stella Point follows and then finally there's Uhuru.

The climb abruptly stops 10 minutes after we start. A quick message passes through our ranks: Susie has fainted. We wait. Susie Hunt had mentioned heart palpitations during the hike to Kibo. Several tense minutes later, she is up on her feet again with Sarah's support.

In Hemingway's story, Harry develops gangrene that spreads from his leg—the slow rotting reflects what Harry the writer is thinking. He frets about all the things he had wanted to write about and didn't. I wonder how much of Harry was actually Hemingway himself: The American writer often ruminated about death and finally committed suicide.

I suddenly hear Amit calling, employing a nickname only he uses for me. "Chalo Gody, go, go!" he urges. I'm surprised when I realise that I have fallen asleep standing. I squeeze my eyes shut and open them several times and ask Amit to watch out for me.

After a long, zombie climb in the moonlight, I learn that we are at the halfway point.



While climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro, trekkers encounter five distinct ecological zones. Just before the summit is the alpine desert (top), a harsh terrain where vegetation is scant and the temperature plummets to below freezing at night; On a clear night, the sky is bright with stars (right) and it's even possible to see across the border into Kenya; The Maasai (left), who graze their cattle on the foothills of Mt. Kilimanjaro, know it as the "White Mountain". Their name for Kibo peak is the "House of God".



This is Hans Meyer Cave (16,896 ft), named after the first European to summit Mount Kilimanjaro. The cave is covered with icicles that shine in the glow of our headlamps. I try to recall geography lessons about the formation of stalactites and stalagmites but am too exhausted.

Omari Hoza, our principal local guide who has been leading the group at a measured pace tonight, and his assistants break into a boisterous mountain song. I join them, clapping my hands and swaying my hips as I see them do and feel a gush of energy.

The trail to Gilman's Point is rocky and precarious. I sometimes have to use both hands to pull myself up. Five hours later, we reach Gilman's, where it's windy and the temperature is several degrees below freezing. The cold defies the fact that we are just 350 km from the equator; I wiggle my fingers and toes to keep the blood flowing.

In the darkness, I see Mount Mawenzi's sharp, white edges in the distance. It feels strange to see the mountain from above after seeing it from lower altitudes throughout our trek. As we resume our climb, I'm astounded to find the moon at eye-level: There's a gentle hue around it, suggesting that it will soon disappear.

We are trekking on the outermost rim of the three concentric craters that rise towards Uhuru Peak. It's so cold I catch myself involuntarily clenching my teeth and blowing through them to keep warm. The cold wind numbs all sensation and I barely notice myself climbing. I feel as if I am on another planet.

We walk silently to Stella Point (18,885 ft), the second of Kilimanjaro's three peaks. We don't stop. The sun has now risen but the moon hasn't set. Everything around us seems to be washed in a shade of white. Even though there are people around, I feel alone. All thoughts fade away and I'm walking and breathing with a heightened sense of consciousness. I experience a sense of wonder at having glimpsed into infinity—and then that feeling goes away too. All I feel is a sense of emptiness that's fulfilling and complete.

I'm finally at Uhuru, which means "freedom" in Swahili, the last point on the Kibo Crater. The area around the sign that says "You are now at Uhuru Peak" is bustling with



The Mawenzi Tarn campsite (left) is located in a sheltered hollow by a small mountain pool or tarn. With the day's walking done early, Praveen and his companions get time to relax; Group member Susie Hunt poses with local guide Omari Hoza (right).



As we resume our climb, I'm astounded to see the moon at eye-level—there's a gentle hue around it, suggesting that it will soon disappear

the energy of a tourist destination. I can see a range of emotions around me: joy, accomplishment, exhaustion, love, irritation, sadness, contemplation, and bliss. I'm pleased to see Susie here. I look around and find that everyone has made it to the top. Soon we catch the excitement in the air and take a flurry of pictures.

I'm again reminded of an image from the beginning of Hemingway's story, when he describes the mountain as the Masai "Ngaje Ngai" or "House of God". He speaks of a frozen carcass of a leopard lying nearby. Perhaps, it was trying to summit Kilimanjaro too.

As we descend, I begin to realise that going downhill can be riskier than coming up. It starts to snow and visibility drops. The group slowly splits up as each person walks at their own pace. Loose rocks roll downhill every now and then, narrowly missing some of us. After an hour of hopeless scurrying, I'm short of breath and decide to sit down.

Divya and Amit catch up and insist on waiting with me until I recover, but even after a few minutes I don't feel much better. After much deliberation, they finally convince me to walk with Jackson, one of the assistant guides. He interlocks his arm in mine and we run down the scree. It's insane, but he insists that the sooner we descend, the better I will feel. I'm confused about my

condition. Is it the altitude? Is it related to a medical condition? What do I do? Jackson interrupts my thoughts. "Down, down, down, down," he insists.

Half an hour of perilous running later, we reach a big rock called William's Point (16,404 ft). Jackson says we'll get to Kibo in 45 minutes. Magically, my body begins to recover. The discomfort in my chest recedes and I breathe normally.

More comfortable now, I start talking to Jackson for the first time since we started descending. When I ask him something he says, "Don't you recognise me, brother?" I look closely at his covered face. I'm embarrassed—he has served us breakfast and dinner every day of the trek. He tells me that he has no family and is studying to become a guide. Finally, hugging him with gratitude, I walk ahead to Kibo.

Back at camp, we take a short break before continuing on a four-hour descent to Horombo Huts (12,200 ft). With our minds clearly winning over our fatigued bodies, we begin our way through a landscape that slowly starts showing signs of life, and thankfully, has more oxygen. We reach our final campsite 35 hours after we first started walking towards Kibo the previous morning.

The next day, we descend further, through

the Marangu route, passing scrubby pastures and tropical forestland that stand in contrast to the barren path of the previous days. The sun and rain have created lush green surroundings and I take several quiet breaks to look at giant groundsel (*Dendrosenecio kilimanjari*), that grow here in abundance.

As my journey is coming to a close, I think about the end of "Snows...", when a hyena makes strange, human-like sounds, signalling Harry's death. Throughout the narrative, it seems as though all that Harry wants to do is let go of the hyena within and become the leopard near the House of God, attempting to scale Kilimanjaro.

At the Marangu Gate (6,100 ft) the trail finally ends. I pass several trekkers in sneakers who will walk for a few hours and return after glimpsing Kilimanjaro from a distance. I feel the urge to tell them to go all the way to the top of the mountain, but I refrain. They must have decided the ends of their journeys, before setting out. Besides, I'm not even sure why I want to climb mountains. All I know is that with every climb, something in me is changed forever. It's less about what I am able to accomplish and more about what I am able to let go of. ■

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PRAVEEN SUTHRUM

THE GUIDE

ORIENTATION

Mt. Kilimanjaro (5,895 m) is located in Tanzania in East Africa, close to the towns of Arusha and Moshi in the northern part of the country. It is 640 km northwest of the capital Dar es Salaam.

GETTING THERE

Mt. Kilimanjaro has its own airport. It is possible to fly there from India with a halt at a Middle Eastern hub like Doha, or a well-connected location in Africa, like Nairobi or Addis Ababa. Another option is to fly to Dar es Salaam, from where buses to Arusha are easily available (644 km/8.5 hours; tickets ₹1,200). The bus journey is arduous but savings are substantial.

VISA

Indian citizens need a visa to travel to Tanzania. The application form can be downloaded from the website of the High Commission in New Delhi and must be submitted three weeks before travel (visa fee ₹2,700 to be submitted via demand draft; forms and list of documents required available at www.tanzrepdelhi.com/visa.html). A yellow fever vaccine is compulsory for travel to Tanzania.

SEASONS

As Kilimanjaro is close to the equator it does not experience summer and winter, only dry and wet seasons with an average temperature of 27-31°C. Kilimanjaro National Park is open year-round, though the weather in January, February, and September is considered ideal for climbing, followed by July and August. It is hardest to climb during the rainy months of April and May when visibility is poor, though there are fewer people. While climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro, the temperature drops rapidly and night temperatures at Uhuru Peak range between -18 and -25°C. Weather conditions can change abruptly during the climb.

CLIMBING MT. KILIMANJARO

There are seven routes that lead up Mt. Kilimanjaro: Marangu, Machame, Lemosho, Rongai, Umbwe, Northern Circuit, and Shira Plateau. Marangu is the most popular route and considered the easiest. It is the only route that has huts and requires pre-booking. Machame is considered the most beautiful route. A useful website with information about the various routes is www.kilimanjaroroutes.com. The writer ascended

Kilimanjaro via the gentler Rongai route and descended on the Marangu route.

BOOKING THE TREK

A licensed guide must accompany climbers. For those unfamiliar with the logistics, it is simplest to travel with a tour operator. The eight-day trip costs \$2,172/₹1,33,500 (includes Kilimanjaro National Park fee of US\$850/₹52,300; does not include flights). The writer travelled with White Magic Adventure Travel, which operates both in India and through a partner in Tanzania. There are several well-known Tanzanian tour operators that organise the climb. Some of them are: Chagga Tours, Marangu Hotel, and Zara Tours.

PREPARATION

It is important to begin training at least three months before the trek. The training should include building joint and muscle flexibility, cardiovascular capacity, muscular strength, and endurance. This helps climbers acclimatise better at higher altitude. Though the overall trek is classified as easy, the final ascent is strenuous and Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS) can strike anyone above the altitude of 3,000 m.

The forests and savannah surrounding Mt. Kilimanjaro, which stretch across the border into Kenya, have large herds of elephants and other animals.



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