

Kilimanjaro Climber's Journal

http://mysite.verizon.net/grfiv/Personal/kili_journal.pdf

George Fisher

February 2004

I joined Wilderness Travel's [Serengeti & Kilimanjaro Climb](#) with a stop at Lake Manyara before meeting the rest of the group at the base of Mt. Meru in Arusha National Park. At Mt. Meru the climbing team assembled and met the trip leader Samia Asindamu, known on Kilimanjaro as The Mountain Lion – *Simba* in Swahili – because he holds the speed record for climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro ... 18 hours round trip.

When thinking about 18 hours round trip, keep in mind that we were setting out to do this in 9 *days* (216 hours) and that fewer than 50% of those who attempt the climb actually make it to the summit (some "official records" I dug up said 24,000 people try to climb Kili every year and only 15% make it; the point is that it's no picnic).

Samia is a phenomenon; and as we were to learn later, all the people who make their living climbing the mountain possess amazing strength and endurance compared to any of their clients.

I've put together a web site about Kilimanjaro: <http://mysite.verizon.net/grfiv/Personal/Kilimanjaro.htm> The following is the journal I kept during our climb.

Bear Claw: You've come far, Pilgrim. Far.
Jeremiah Johnson: It feels far.
Bear Claw: 'Twere it worth the trouble?
Jeremiah Johnson: What trouble?



6:47 PM Monday February 16, 2004 Tented Camp Iticone on the slopes of Mt. Meru

-- Arrival --

Tented camp is just what it says. The tents are tall enough to stand in and have 3 sections. I am presently sitting in the living room, covered but not enclosed, on a camp chair on a tarp on the forest floor, amid the noises and the bugs. Next, through a zippered flap, comes the bedroom with a cot and enough room next to it for duffel bags. Finally, through another zippered flap is the bathroom: a toilet seat perched over a plastic can and next to it a bucket shower. Just like Teddy Roosevelt and Ernest Hemmingway.



I was driven from Lake Manyara to Arusha past hundreds of Masai headed for market. We got to Arusha and picked up Alan Barkley who got in late last night: LAX-SFO-AMS-NBO-JRO. Unfortunately, some of his luggage was missing and he had spent the day with the assistant climbing leader, Noel E Mbwambo, trying to replace the gear he was missing. Alan tells me he is a friend of the Ricketts and Gress families of Omaha, who make up most of the clients on this trip of 13 people, and that Joe Ricketts founded Ameritrade. (Was Ameritrade the one with the crazy redheaded guy in their ads? That was a great ad.)

We finally got to the gate of Arusha NP and had to wait for paperwork. While we waited, we were treated to the sight of our own, personal giraffe, entertaining us by munching on a nearby acacia tree. (If you come to East Africa and learn nothing else, you will learn to recognize acacia trees).

Then we started driving through the park and it was everything I expected from Africa. We're high (6,500 feet) and the environment is montane forest, which is lush and dense. We forded numerous streams and saw

giraffe, hornbills, Cape buffalo, hyenas (bigger than I expected but just as nasty looking), wart hogs, dik dik, duiker and bushbucks. It's now getting dark and I am going to go over to the mess tent with my head lamp.

I forgot to mention that half way through the park we picked up an armed guard, named Israel, who possesses a very antique rifle. For protection from the predation of wild animals and the larceny of local villagers, I hear. Or maybe just to placate the fears of first-time visiting gringos.

2:00 PM February 17, 2004 Camp Iticone in Arusha NP at the foot of Mt. Meru

-- Test Hike and Equipment Check --

I slept well last night and didn't feel at all uneasy about being in a flimsy canvas tent in the middle of wild animals in an African jungle.

All but three of our party arrived last night at 1:15 AM and I met them for breakfast. Joe Ricketts and two of his sons, Peter and Todd, and daughter Laura. Jerry and Patti Gress are friends of the Ricketts and they travel a lot together, Jerry being the idea man for these adventures, two previous ones took them to game parks in Botswana and South Africa; I'm a safari novice next to these folks. Their two children, Michelle and Andy are also along. Alan and I round out the troupe at present. We seem to be missing two college friends of Peter Ricketts and one more solo traveler.

Met Samia, the trip leader, this afternoon. Remarkable contrast of reputation and persona: the Mountain Lion is soft-spoken and self-effacing. He studied to be a mechanical engineer but prefers being a Kili guide; the best, apparently.

After breakfast we set out on a test hike to something less than 7,000 feet on Mt. Meru. It was a jaunt and the weather was nice. I got a look at Israel's rifle and I'm not sure it's real: a single-shot bolt-action with no visible clip; the rear sight looks to be 45° off center. Cape buffalo is said to be the primary danger, I hope they don't look too closely at our protector's equipment. We saw some Colobus monkeys: they're black and white with long hair and long tails, and look sort of like skunks up in the trees jumping from branch to branch. Samia said that they are "Leopards' French Fries". Saw two waterfalls along the way, which was entirely along a dirt road; several Range Rovers passed us carrying people camping beyond the trailhead.



Right now I'm waiting for an equipment check and then I hope to shower. Tomorrow we set off for the Kilimanjaro trailhead and begin the climb. We'll have 69 porters! An army on the march.

Got an introduction to Safari Ants. Blind and mean. Watch where you step, brother.



8:00 AM February 18, 2004 Camp Iticone in Arusha NP at base of Mt. Meru

-- Mt. Meru to Kili Trailhead to Forest Camp --

Very clear morning. Kili visible but obscured by the trees. Meru completely clear and bathed in sunlight. Everyone seems to have passed yesterday's equipment check. Happily, Alan's luggage showed up. We are all packed and ready to set out for our first day of climbing. Kind of just milling around.



Last night the last of our party arrived after some problems with airline connections. Austin Snipes, an ex-Marine from Florida; and two sisters, Julie and Mary-Beth Pierog from Boston.

We had French toast and Canadian bacon for breakfast (we will certainly eat well on this trip) and our bags are laid out on the ground by the trucks. No matter how I try, I can't get all my mountain stuff into just one duffel. Some of the others are having their sleeping bags and ground mats provided for them, but even so I don't think I could do it with just one bag. ([Here's my packing list.](#))

We had a ceremony last night on a hill in back of the campsite. Samia took us up to look at Kilimanjaro in the distance and we toasted our climb; we were presented with Masai robes to signify that we are embarked on a serious undertaking that will require the strength and mentality of a warrior. Also had a lecture from Samia about emergency evacuation procedures.

9:22 AM in the Land Rover on the way to the trailhead

We catch glimpses of Kili through gathering clouds. Descend to 4,400 feet and leave the montane forest and re-enter the savannah. We see young giraffe “necking”: young males fighting to establish dominance.



We pass through a village with only a few completed houses but many foundations and partially completed structures. Our driver Charles explains that the finance system in Tanzania is not good and people who have taken loans in the past often lost their property. So most people now build over 5 – 10 years as they save enough money for a few more bricks.

Masai used to drink their cattle’s blood but recently because of the drought (which has dried up Lake Manyara) they don’t because it weakens the cattle too much. A few years ago, El Niño dumped so much water that all the roads were washed out for weeks in some places. Equatorial Africa doesn't have summer and winter (no declination), what they have is two rainy and two dry seasons. And there's enormous cyclicity in the extent of rain and drought. This is what it is to be in the Tropics. The long rains are expected to begin in March and climbing & safari-ing comes to a halt until June or July.

Drive through an entire forest of whistling thorn acacia. Average height 3 – 10 feet. Reminds me of the Wharton Tract's Pine Barrens with its stunted evergreens along the road to the New Jersey shore.



11:12 AM Londorosi Gate of Kilimanjaro NP 6,975 feet

We sign in. Having risen from the dry, flat savannah, covered with acacia and inhabited by gazelle, giraffe and Masai, we are now in a real forest – pine trees and eucalyptus, cultivated, with several ramshackle log cabin villages.



The locals seem to be engaged in potato and carrot farming. Charles says the forest is part of a government project and permanent houses are forbidden.

The weather became distinctly cooler as we rose toward the clouds that had obscured Kili from view all morning. Although we are ringed with threatening-looking clouds, right here we are under a patch of blue and rain does not seem to be immediately threatening. Our next stop will be to retrace our steps to the trailhead of the Lemosho Route; we signed in at the beginning of the Shira Route which also serves as a 4 X 4 evacuation route.

12:00 Noon on the road to the trailhead

Never been on such a bad road in my life. Passing through 7,000 feet.

Chart: SKI log

General

Duration: 09:00:00
JIT time: 05:33:00.0
Ride time: 01:51:00.0
Total time: 02:27:36.0

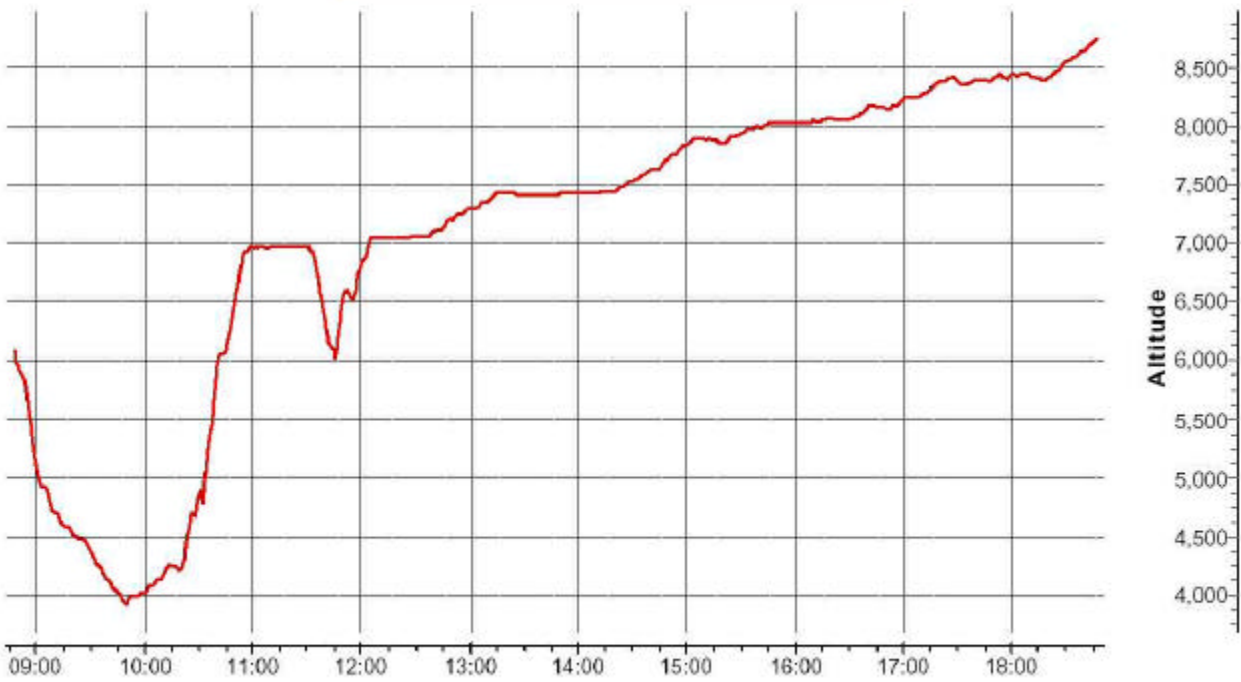
Run 1

Ascent / Descent

Avg dec: 21 ft/min
Tot dec: 3845 ft
Avg asc: 19 ft/min
Tot asc: 6299 ft

High point: 8737 ft
Low point: 3921 ft

**First Day:
Drive down from Mt. Meru to the
savannah and then up to the trailhead
Then walk to Forest Camp**



6:58 AM February 19, 2004 Forest Camp on the Lemosho Route 8,957 feet

-- Hike to Shira Plateau Camp --

I didn't write anything after we started out yesterday because when I got into camp last night I was pretty worn out. We gathered in the mess tent and a great meal was prepared for us. The conversation and sociability were terrific but after the soup I could not keep my eyes open. Literally. I was afraid I would fall asleep face down on the table.

We had driven up the road toward the trailhead after leaving the office where we checked in, along an amazingly bad road. The Land Rover definitely proved its worth because no vehicle other than a Sherman tank could possibly have made the trip. A credit to Charles' driving skills, too. The road was awash and deeply rutted. When it was flat, the car frequently spun out, ending up 90° to the direction of travel, often pointing directly at a chasm. When we ran along a hill, the car would tip as much as 30° toward the hill as the tires sank into the stream that formed along its base, and the side of the car would run along the hill itself, digging up the mud and ripping out any vegetation. Finally we reached a point where the road was utterly impassible, several miles from where we were supposed to be left off. But the car simply could carry us no further.

It was here that we met our porters. A pretty wild scene. There was order to it, but it certainly looked like chaos. We got out and our luggage was divided up.



We got started hiking at 1:30 PM, later than planned with several miles further to go. When we had hiked up to the trailhead we stopped for lunch, set up by our porters and camp staff, and then we set off on the trail up the mountain.



The environment was dense montane forest. A rain forest has trees hundreds of feet high, reaching for the sun. A montane forest has trees no bigger than any in North America but the ground cover is dense and everything is covered with moss and creepers. And wet. The trail was a mass of mud, which made footing treacherous and poles vital. The path was covered with rocks and roots. It was no more wide through the underbrush than a human body and very often more narrow than that. In addition, the trail didn't run in a straight line nor did it just go up; we probably went down at least half as often as we went up.



We had a number of people with modest altitude sickness: nausea and headaches. As the day wore on, everyone became weary. “*Weary*” is a condition of the whole body and the mind. It is not directly related to muscle fatigue and, in fact, my muscles didn’t hurt in the least. But crawling into my sleeping bag was all I could accomplish after dinner.

We are staying in expedition tents, with men's and women's pit latrines off on the perimeter of the campsite.



A very nice mess tent, which is where I'm writing at the moment, with great food in large quantities.



Samia refers to using the latrine as “doing your recreational thing”. Going along the trail as you’re hiking is called “checking your tire pressure”. We do this a lot because hydration is important to prevent altitude sickness ... tip: use powdered Gatorade, it makes the difference between getting enough water and kidding yourself. CamelBaks are good at lower altitudes but the tubes freeze higher up.

The stars were bright and in fantastic profusion. I need to research this more because Orion was not what I expected to see south of the equator, but see him I did, and beautifully displayed against a Milky Way as prominent as I have ever seen it, aside from the deck of a boat at sea.

This morning we had a great breakfast: papaya, toast, peanut butter & jelly, eggs & Canadian bacon, coffee, lemon grass tea, hot chocolate. Couple more people sick, with pretty bad diarrhea this time; a couple of them up and down all night, and this morning there was talk of [Cipro](#) and [Imodium](#). Now we’re packing up to begin a “long” day. I can hardly imagine how I’ll feel in 12 hours considering that yesterday was a “short” day. Today we’re supposed to be hiking out of the forest into the heather or moorland, above the heaviest rainfall and out of the dense undergrowth.

10:23 AM water break 9,462 feet

We’ve been walking for several hours through the same conditions as yesterday except the air is a lot drier. Although the ground is soaking wet, it’s not a river of mud.



Saw a fireball lily, which is a huge spherical mass of red flowers.



And an elephant trunk impatiens.



More Colobus and blue/Sykes monkeys. Got everybody's email addresses at the lunch break.

6:04 PM Shira I Camp, Lemosho Route 11,414 feet

11,414 – 8,957 = 2,457 vertical feet climbed today.

2,457 / 5,280 = Half a mile straight up

Don't know what the horizontal distance covered was, but it was a heck of a lot further than a half a mile. And even the "Half a mile straight up" figure is deceiving because we went down a lot and had to climb back up again just to break even.

A long day. We started out with pretty good weather but still with the mud and the roots of the montane forest. After several hours, the terrain abruptly changed to the heather zone. The vegetation, naturally, was heather, which stands 3 – 10 feet high and has grasses mixed in. The footing changed to be considerably drier with no roots (because no trees) but rocks, which made walking easier.

We had lunch at a broad meadow in a saddle with peaks all around. Very scenic. We saw two chameleons. Not the least bit afraid. Small, creeping along a branch discovered by our leader. Curious little things with peculiar eyes. After lunch we set out on a series of very steep climbs. The footing required caution and the climbing was extremely tiring. Then we made a series of steep traverses toward a tall ridge that marked the highest elevation of today's climb.

We were walking south with Kenya stretched out fantastically behind us. Karen Blixen's farm must be out there somewhere. She speaks of (1) seeing Kili, (2) being 100 miles south of the equator and (3) being 12 miles south of Nairobi. Not clear where that puts her relative to our field of view, but it must be close. Amboseli NP, too.

In the far left foreground the extension of the ridgeline made a huge valley of heather. In a very brief period a bright blue sky clouded up and in half an hour we were in a cold, windy deluge as we trudged the last half-mile or so to the top of the ridgeline. A beautiful rainbow appeared with the underside a gorgeous purple.

THEN we turned the corner over the ridgeline to the right and WHAM! Out across the huge, wide expanse of the Shira Plateau loomed snow-capped Kibo. A vast, broad, fabulous vista. This is one of the reasons we came here ... you simply can't get anything like this staying at home, folks. Ya gotta get outdoors and pay your dues.



Looking down from the ridge, we could see the night's camp way, way in the distance over the heather. Tiny because it was so far, and tiny because of the massiveness of the surroundings.



Chart: 580.log

General

Duration: 09:58:30.0
Jit time: 05:23:00.0
Ride time: 01:16:00.0
Flat time: 02:27:36.0

Runs: 1

Ascent / Descent

Avg dec: 31 ft/min
Tot dec: 3655 ft
Avg asc: 19 ft/min
Tot asc: 6299 ft

High point: 9757 ft
Low point: 3921 ft

**Second Day:
Walk out of forest into heather and
camp on the Shira Plateau**



6:30 AM February 20, 2004 Friday

-- Hike across Shira Plateau --

Awoke to frost this morning. From now until next Wednesday when we summit it will be getting progressively colder. The mountain looks ominous and it appears to have a lot of snow on it, which will make for slow going and cold toes.



The sun is just rising and Kibo peak is silhouetted against the sky. Last night – this morning at 3:19 AM – I got up and off to my left facing Kibo, low in the sky but absolutely unmistakable was ... The Big Dipper! Just after sundown to my right hand facing Kibo I thought I was looking at The Little Dipper low in the sky but I thought that I must be mistaken. Maybe I was right? Is it possible that Polaris is visible from the Southern Hemisphere? I wouldn't have thought that Euclid would allow it? Maybe it's Einsteinian. Here's a guess: we're only 200 miles south of the equator and several miles up in the air, so the effective horizon is actually north of 0⁰ latitude.

Today we walk across the Shira Plateau toward Kibo. If the weather holds it should be a spectacular sight.

7:24 AM

Standing around the campsite as it comes awake. The sun is making an appearance above the ridge to the left of Kibo and the area is warming up. People are emerging from their tents and greeting each other.



There's still a chill in the air despite the sun and I guess it's going to be progressively colder from now on. That's going to require more and more will power, even as our strength ebbs through altitude and exertion.

2:00 PM Camp 12,963 feet

The last hour was a hike up a 600-foot, nearly sheer cliff. We started out crossing the small stream behind camp that had cut a little ravine and set out across the heather meadow. This section was very low and was punctuated with burnt stumps. It was explained that poachers had accidentally set fire to this area while they were drying eland and buffalo to make the carcasses easier to carry. The terrain was not difficult but we broke into two groups: some went ahead fast and the rest maintained a pole-pole pace. Clouds rolled in around 11:00 AM but no rain.

5:00 PM

Just took a walk to a couple of plaques commemorating Scott Fischer (Mountain Madness, *Into Thin Air*, and the blazer of this trail. "Very strong", according to Samia who seemed to know and admire him). The epitaph was "If you're not cruising, you're bumming".

Saw a Cape buffalo trail, but no animals. It's getting much colder. Tomorrow we have a long day, going up some 2,000 feet. I'm thinking it's time to start wearing some long underwear.

As Kibo looms above us, it makes me think about just how much effort lies ahead of us. We're at nearly 13,000 feet, so we have "only" 7,000 vertical feet to go but what we are looking up at is steep, rocky and

forbidding. Covered with snow and capped with glaciers that are clearly visible. It's going to be a long, hard several days.

“Poa” = cool in Swahili. “Mambo poa” seems to be even better.

We saw what I identified as a Lobelia but Noel said it was something that sounded Italian, but I forget what right now. It was a tall, dead-stalked palm-looking sort of thing. The old leaves hung down on the trunk and the new leaves were rather stunted.



Lobelia Deckenii

The group has gathered for tea but I think I'll just go through my stuff to prepare for tomorrow and then turn in early, I'm pretty tired out.

... the plants I saw were *Senecio Kilimanjarii* (also known as Groundsel)



The Lemosho Route is 50 – 60 miles walking.

The confidential, top-secret at Kilimanjaro is "polepole" ... slowly. Charles' farewell comment to me as he left me at the trailhead was "The mountain isn't going anywhere. Take your time."

Chart: Ski log
Setaram

Start time 09:30:20.0
JIT time 03:15:00.0
Total time 00:28:00.0
Roll time 01:46:20.0

Time 0

Ascent / Descent

Asp asc 2.8 mile
Tot asc 66 ft
Asp desc 7.8 mile
Tot desc 1407 ft

High point 12992 ft
Low point 11647 ft

**Day Three:
Hike across Shira Plateau to
Scott Fischer Camp**



6:25 AM February 21, 2004 Saturday Scott Fischer Camp, 12,972 feet

-- Hike to Lava Tower --

Part of the way through getting myself together inside my tent. Pills taken; sleeping bag, ground mat and down booties stuffed; day pack set up. Next will be to put on fresh underwear and lightweight long johns (first time for those), wash my self as best I can inside my little capsule, lather up with sunscreen and brush my teeth. I've given up shaving and must look a sight: I don't beard up very well. Pack up my two duffels, pull on my boots & gaiters, and emerge to greet the day.

IT'S COLD!



The big dipper was low on the horizon at 11:00 PM and had risen clockwise somewhat by 3:00 AM. I slept well until around 4:00 AM when I woke in my sleeping bag, noticed the time, and drifted off to sleep and had weird nightmares, in color. Anxiety? Altitude? Some others are feeling the side-effects of Diamox.

Today promises to be hard. Some 8 hours of walking. We're going up 2,000 feet vertical into lighter air, colder temperatures and more variable weather. The day after will be a day of rest and acclimatization at 14,500 feet, but we've got to get there first.

The camp is waking, the sound of tent zippers all around, and the porters are bringing tea. Nice touch.

2:33 PM 14, 925 feet

Looking up right now thru the clouds at the Great & Little Penck Glaciers. Within sight of the Lava Tower. We're to stay here tomorrow to acclimatize. I think we have two more camps before the summit and I'm not sure why we don't take the rest day higher.

We lost two people this morning. They were helped down to the 4 X 4 access road this morning along the Shira Route intersection where a Land Rover would evacuate them to Arusha and the Moivaro Coffee Plantation where they will join us for the safari.

Taco = rear end

To may fica = We made it

Caca = brother

Swahili is starting to produce a lot of good-natured gringo jokes.

We started out in brisk but bright air. The sky was bright blue and Kibo loomed above us, glistening in the sunlight. The way was dry, small stones; not quite scree and the walking was easy. The group was in good spirits. Around 11:00 AM, right on schedule, the clouds started to roll in, and the ground underfoot became scree for real: lots of small stones giving us unsure footing with lots of boulders to either step over or avoid.

We were making the transition from Heather/Moorland to Alpine Desert. We got some good pictures of Lobelias, but vegetation was getting sparse. A number of our party had to make frequent stops because of severe diarrhea, which cannot have added to their enjoyment, but to their great credit they remained good spirited, even joking about their condition.

Soon the landscape became almost completely barren and we started clambering over lava flows which required some serious scrambling and careful footing. We came over a foggy ridge and spread before us was an enormous bowl ... a real moonscape. Probably an old crater.



Lunch was at the end of this bowl. Took pictures of lots of interesting lichen; it's pretty much all that grows here. The Mars Rover could land here and completely fake out the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Water! We've discovered water!



Samia regaled us with stories of the Latham family, The Clients From Hell. They wrote an eight-page letter of complaint about Samia, griping about the weather and Samia's inability to choose campsites to their liking. These stories emphasized how important a group's attitude is; the alternatives sound grim: add nasty, complaining people to the natural difficulties of the mountain and you would have to work pretty hard to have any fun. Our group has been great.

As we finished lunch it began to rain in earnest, and cold. For the first time, I put on every layer I was carrying. We continued trudging. The low point came as we were walking completely exposed along the top of a ridge, walking slowly watching our steps and panting heavy, labored breaths ... when the wind came up, the temperature went down and it began to hail.

But here we are. Everyone safely in camp and ready for a rest. It's a panoramic, picturesque, dramatic area for a campsite, with a valley leading the way further up to the right as you look at the mountain, the view terminating with a lava tower that looks a bit like New Hampshire's Old Man of the Mountain, laid on its side, but bigger by far. Everything around here is "bigger by far". The creation of this mountain must have been quite a sight. The forces involved had to have been simply titanic. Far beyond modern experience of any sort, even atom bombs. The scale of this place is massive. And, by the way, it's just one, single remnant of the entire Rift Valley's creation.



7:05 PM

After a nap we had a Pasta Marinara feast. Some folks have chills and shakes. But Samia said the reason most people don't make it to the summit is not physical ... more than anything else, it is a failure to adapt mentally to the stresses the mountain serves up. Samia frequently stresses that, however difficult things are *physically*, it's the mental reaction that makes the biggest difference on this trip.

Tomorrow we take a short hike to learn how to climb the steeps and how to descend on scree.

Chart: BH log

General

Duration 05:15:30.0
Alt time 04:05:00.0
Rise time 00:15:00.0
Fall time 01:55:30.0

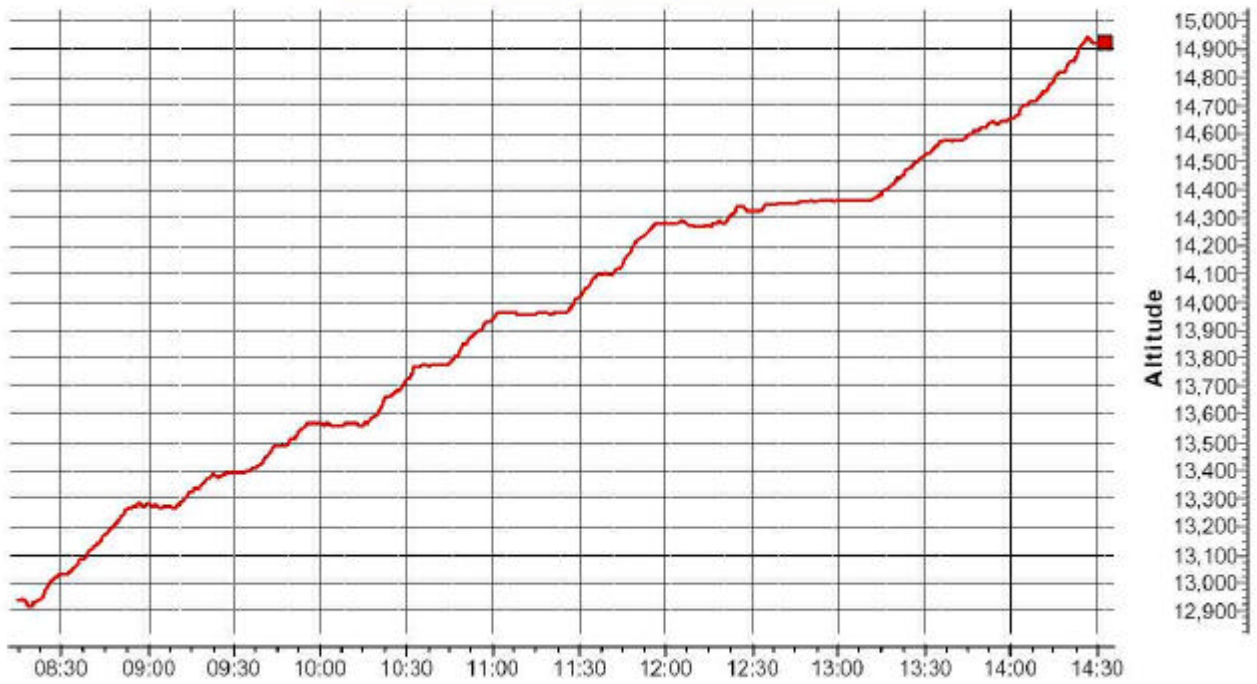
Runs 0

Ascent/Descent

Avg asc 7.8 ft/mi
Tot asc 112 ft
Avg des 9.8 ft/mi
Tot des 2096 ft

High point 14941 ft
Low point 12920 ft

Day Four:
Hike to Lava Tower



8:00 AM February 22, 2004 Sunday Camp near the Lava Tower

-- Acclimation and Climbing Practice --

Tough night. Overcast, humid, cold, windy. Couldn't sleep. Sore throat this morning. Samia gave me [Amolin / Amoxicillin](#) 250 mg capsules. 5-day treatment. I thought it was just irritation caused by the dry, harsh, cold air; he said it was definitely an upper respiratory infection that needed treatment.

Today we do practice hikes for steep accents and scree descents.

11:24 AM

Just got back from acclimatization climb where we practiced climbing and descending scree slopes ("stone loose scree" according to Samia). Turned out very well. The weather didn't improve, in fact it started to snow at the top of the climb and it's spitting right now, but spirits were good after breakfast, and everyone made the climb and enjoyed it.

Except that I need a padded, waterproof camera case, I was dressed perfectly for the conditions:

- Capilene Liner socks
- Heavy socks
- Boots & gaiters
- Regular underwear top & bottom
- Lightweight long johns
- Middleweight long johns
- Lined climbing pants
- Gore-tex outer pants
- Safari shirt
- Fleece jacket
- Gore-tex outer jacket
- Wool ski cap
- Gore-tex shell gloves & liners
- Lots of SPF 45 sunscreen on hands, neck, face
- Bandana around neck
- Julbo 93% glacier glasses + nose cover
- Suunto altitude watch
- Camera
- Day pack + 2 liters of Gatorade-flavored filtered water + rain cover



The topographical line on the map for our whereabouts is 4,600 meters. Times 39, divided by 12 equals 14,950 feet on the button. Recalibrated my altitude watch. The topo lines get a lot closer together for the next two days, which means hard climbing ahead.

I'm presently sitting alone in a two-man tent. With my two duffels to one side and sleeping bag on the other, it's just the right size. The doubles are supposedly four-man tents but I think two, two-man tents would be a lot more comfortable for two people than a double in a four-man. It may seem less sociable but privacy is a rare luxury when you're sick, cold, etc.

3:30 PM

I'm reading in my tent. The weather is lousy: one minute it's so warm that I'm out of my sleeping bag with my tent door unzipped; the next minute, it's raining and cold and I'm all bundled up and shivering.

Chart: 88 log

General

Duration: 02:34:36.0
Jit time: 00:54:00.0
Ride time: 00:49:00.0
Rest time: 00:51:36.0

Pass 1

Ascent / Descent

Avg asc: 10 ft/min
Tot asc: 935 ft
Avg desc: 0 ft/min
Tot desc: 932 ft

High point: 15344 ft
Low point: 14866 ft

**Day Five:
Acclimatization and climbing practice
at Lava Tower Camp**



1:40 PM February 23, 2004 Monday Arrow Glacier Camp, 15,981 feet

-- Arrow Glacier Camp at the foot of the Western Breach --

Short day but steep. We hiked through lava fields past the Lava Tower, which we left behind and below us as we hiked higher and higher; closer, and closer to the Kibo massif, which towers enormously above us. The Little Penck Glacier was visible all day, looming above our heads. Apparently just a few weeks ago a large piece of this glacier broke off and tumbled down two of the valleys we crossed. What we saw was a terrain littered with large boulders, but until very recently the area was relatively clean and clear.



The last part of the day's climb was very steep scrambling up a lava face in several pitches and we are now camped in a bit of a bowl of stones utterly devoid of any living thing. The sun made an appearance around 8 AM but by 11 AM it was foggy and cold; and now a steady shower of hail pellets is falling and thunder is rumbling in the distance. Lot of tired people in camp this evening.



Some folks are getting pretty worn out. I asked Samia why O₂ wasn't indicated, but he feels it is not. Samia has seen a lot of people in various states climb this mountain in his 132 trips up and back as a guide, and he is the main teacher of mountain rescue and first aid to the local guides and rangers, so I guess he knows whereof, etc. But we've got nowhere to go but up.

At lunch Samia warned us that tomorrow would be long and difficult. Not long in horizontal distance, maybe only a mile or two, but a solid 2,500 feet in elevation gain over a very steep scree and lava terrain. And cold. We will set out at 6:00 AM promptly in order to be through the worst of the rock fall by 10:30 AM while the ground is still frozen. Otherwise, if it's not frozen when we attempt to climb it, it's virtually impossible to make forward progress and it becomes significantly more dangerous as it becomes slippery.

This is the Western Breach that we've been hearing about. The map shows numerous, tightly packed topo lines, indicating a steep ascent. And the group is pretty pooped. I hope we can set out early and get it behind us.



I'm feeling pretty strong, after several days of languishing. At lower elevations the younger guys had a much easier time with the altitude than I did, but now maybe I have acclimatized. Also, I've been lucky and not contracted any bad intestinal problems.



The IMAX Kilimanjaro film has outstanding cinematography but I have to say that they either failed to portray or else explicitly edited out the hardships that anyone who comes here will encounter. That movie shows everyday with sunshine and mild temperatures; no latrines, no illness, no effects of altitude, no porters, etc. It's worth watching for general interest but the NOVA film does a much better job of depicting the whole gestalt.

Chart: 58 log
General

Duration: 03:03:41.0
Jitter: 01:57:00.0
Ride time: 00:12:00.0
Flat time: 00:24:41.0

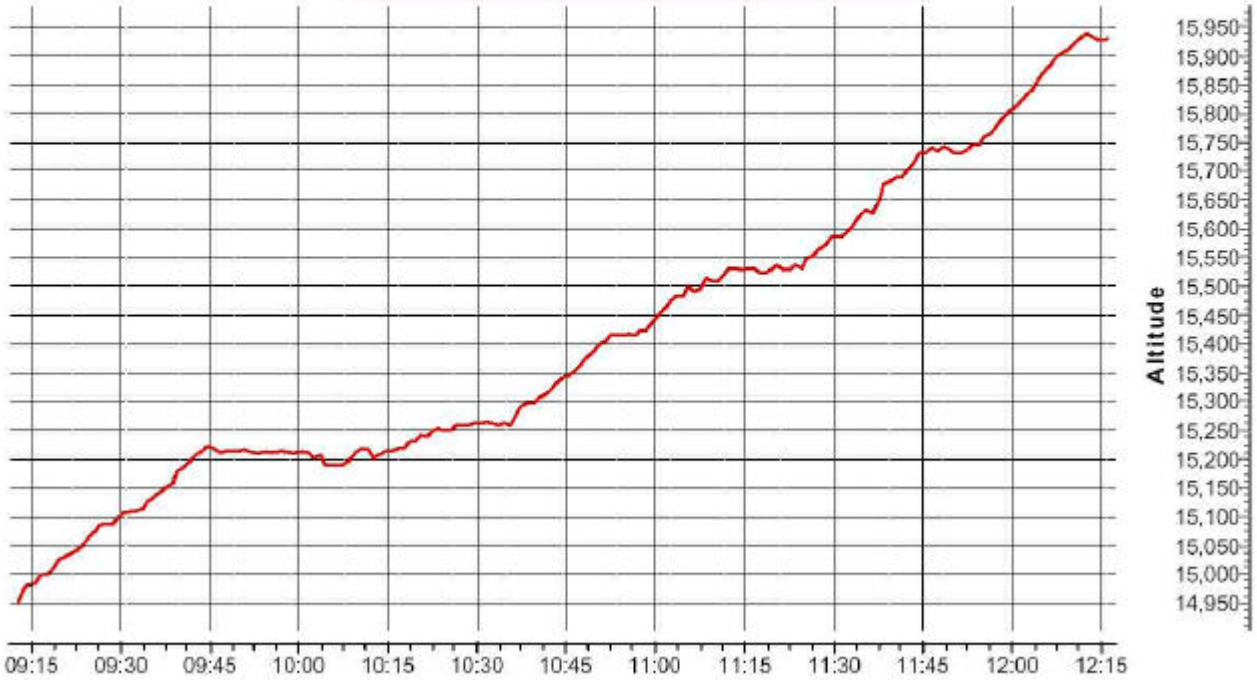
Sum: 0

Ascent / Descent

Avg asc: 7.87/min
Tot asc: 74 ft
Avg desc: 9.87/min
Tot desc: 1000 ft

High point: 15939 ft
Low point: 14951 ft

**Day Six:
Hike to Arrow Glacier Camp at the foot
of the Western Breach**



2:14 PM February 24, 2004 Tuesday Crater Camp 18,602 feet

-- Climb the Western Breach --

We are finally at the base camp for tomorrow's assault on Uhuru Peak. Up the Western Breach ... every bit as hard as we were warned; more.

Today was the ultimate so far in terms both of exertion and achievement. We left at 6:00 AM and ascended 2,500 feet, essentially straight up. In 10° F and a windy snow. I'm far, far too fatigued to write about it now, so this will have to serve as a place marker, a reminder to tell the whole story when I am physically and mentally able, which I am absolutely not, right now.

Written in Lake Manyara Serena Lodge 02/28/2004 7:15 AM ~6,000 feet

It has taken me four days to recover enough from last Tuesday to start writing again. Even though there was more climbing to follow, Tuesday was the killer and every step from then to now has been in a daze.

Shortly after I wrote the place marker above, I came down with extremely severe AMS symptoms: deep chills, crushing headache, and nausea that sent me sprawling to my tent door. Samia provided [Compazine](#) for the nausea and [Decadron® \(the steroid Dexamethasone\)](#) for the headache. I staggered to the mess tent and had tea. Three hours later, I was feeling considerably improved, if not actually "better". Once again, Samia had proven his mastery of the situation. But I was done for the day, really knocked out.

--/--

Yesterday, we were up at 5:00 AM and ready to go at 6:00. I felt pretty good after I got up and had breakfast. I knew the day would be hard and Samia said he wanted everybody who could go up quickly to go and to leave as few for him to help as possible.

We had camped that night at 16,000 feet and the crater floor where we would camp this evening was at 18,500 feet. 2,500 feet at high altitude: nearly half a mile vertical, into thinner air. We started up a "stone loose scree" slope with a very steep grade. Looking back behind us as we ascended we could see just how steep it was and it was a scary sight.



The rock fall we were climbing was very wide, maybe miles wide, a huge, huge place; very steep at the bottom and nearly vertical at the top. The weather was cold and windy, and as the day went on the temperature dropped and it began to snow. By the time we got to the top, several inches of new snow had fallen.

The climb was a series of pitches: steep scree punctuated by steeper lava flows which required scrambling throughout and rock climbing skills more often than I expected. On the lava flows the poles were either extraneous or else a dangerous impediment as they interfered with arms and legs and got caught in cracks in the rocks.

Walking up the scree was a matter of taking one step and then two labored breaths. When walking, you could stop and rest; when scrambling and climbing, very often you could not. At one point our guide pointed to the right and said, “Don’t fall there”. He was pointing to a ravine that cut past the lava flow we were climbing and fell without interruption all 2,000 feet or so to the bottom of the rock fall. Had you slipped onto that you would have certainly fallen most of the way down with serious injury. And the possibility of either competent or speedy evacuation was zero: we were high on a cliff, miles from anywhere, in bad weather.

I was in the first group of us to ascend; we struggled. The groups that followed faced even worse hardships. In addition, a couple of people were still suffering with diarrhea. Samia and Noel performed a miracle getting everybody up the Western Breach that day.

Once we reached the top of the Breach, the crater floor was flat, a long easy walk over fine powder ash past glaciers to the campsite at the bottom of another steep rock fall just below Uhuru ... the final leg of the journey; tomorrow’s challenge.



I actually felt good when I got up to the crater floor and I took a long detour on the way to camp to look at the glacier up close (the crater floor at the foot of the glacier had no snow and I thought it felt warm.) However, hypoxia was evident because despite feeling physically strong, I was aware of being somewhat mentally woozy.



We had been planning to take a side trip after we reached the crater – 2 hours – to the rim of the ash pit and I very much wanted to go. At the time I got up the rock fall I was sure I was strong enough, but when I got to my tent I got the AMS and was completely out of action. I don't think anybody went to look at the ash pit this trip. When I got up later in the early AM I was feeling a lot better. Well enough to do it all again the next day to the summit.

I remember in a microbiology course in college being impressed at how delicate human cellular systems are; on this trip I became impressed at how powerful and resilient the whole human being is in aggregate. People achieve incredible things because they are more than a collection of mitochondria. Our group demonstrated this a dozen times over: there were plenty of places people couldn't get up, but they did get up them; and there were plenty of reasons to complain, but everybody was cheerful through everything.

We're camped 800 vertical feet below the top of the crater rim and Uhuru peak. Up early again tomorrow.



Chart: SW log

Context

Duration 06:05:00.0
Jit time 04:27:00.0
Ridetime 00:38:00.0
Falltime 03:02:05.0

Rate 0

Ascent / Descent

Avg asc 6.5/min
Tot asc 200 ft
Avg desc 10.5/min
Tot desc 2525 ft

High point 18605 ft
Low point 15938 ft

**Day Seven:
The climb up the Western Breach**



5:00 AM February 25, 2004 Crater Camp Wednesday 18,500 feet

-- Final Ascent ... up to Uhuru Peak and then down to Mweka Camp at 10,000 feet --

The final assault. Up early, ready to set off again at 6:00 AM. Up 800 feet vertical to the crater rim, Uhuru Peak, and the accomplishment of our journey. The weather, thankfully, was much improved from yesterday's wind and snow

However, the snow was deep and in the early morning cold my toes went numb. The sunrise to our left as we ascended was quite spectacular, rising through the clouds and the rays of the early morning sun lighting the crater floor with its background glacier and the yellow & orange of our tents down in the camp. I fell into a rhythm of one step, two deep breaths as I leaned on my straightened downhill leg, then wiggle my toes as I swing my foot forward for the next step ... then stopping again for breaths.

The crater floor fell away slowly but we did soon reach the top. The actual point of Uhuru Peak was a half a mile away across an easy incline of ash and stones.



Mawenzi from Uhuru



Mt. Meru seen beyond Kibo's glaciers

When all of our group was up at the top, everybody was in great spirits, cheering, high fives, “to may fica”, etc. It was a great moment. We probably took several hundred pictures among us.



I didn't realize it at the time but a drama was starting to unfold even as everyone was celebrating. Somehow, I didn't think it was at all unusual for someone to lie down on the rocks, ash and snow and complain of total exhaustion. However, I guess Samia did notice, because he started urging the rest of us to get a move on and start down the mountain as quickly as possible. Saying, once again, that he needed to have as little interference as possible to deal with the people who needed his help.

At camp a couple of days before, Samia had given us a gentle lecture on "flexibility". At the time we all laughed at him and accused him of redefining the word to mean, "do whatever Samia says". With a client lying on the ground and the memory of yesterday's difficulties still fresh, Samia began asking me and the others to please show some flexibility. So a group of us set off downhill. We were soon making pretty good time in the sandy scree that often allowed us to ski and jump in great strides like astronauts on the moon. For the next several days my quads and calf muscles were exceptionally sore, the only time in the entire trip I had any muscle discomfort at all, but the combination of climbing poles and knee braces prevented any damage to my knees.

Our descent that day was to take us all the way from Uhuru at 19,000+ feet to Mweka forest camp at 10,000. Nearly two miles vertical in half a day. Just as we passed the halfway point for lunch, we were passed by several porters heading uphill. In limited English they informed us that they had to go "rescue Babu". But we could make no sense of why Babu needed to be rescued.

All the guides carried cell phones and they all claimed their batteries were dead that day so we had no way of communicating. It's hard for me to piece everything together, but after a very long time the last of our group limped into the lunch site, utterly spent. But apparently nothing life threatening. Once again, Samia shooed

the healthy ones down the mountain so he could tend to his patients in peace, promising that stretchers were on the way up the mountain to carry people down.

Amazingly, we passed no fewer than four wooden and canvas stretchers cast off by the side of the trail as we went down. I tested one of the last ones we passed and it seemed to be in perfect working order. What stretchers were doing lying beside the trail, I never did find out. It's not like we saw these things everywhere we went, only after some people in our group needed them but weren't getting them. We stopped at a Ranger camp and learned that an edema patient in another group had just been evacuated to the Kilimanjaro Christian Medical Clinic in Moshi and that an ambulance was standing by for the ailing people in our group, but that they wouldn't be able to use it until tomorrow. Not very reassuring.

Then we learned that people were still up where we had left them, waiting for metal stretchers with a big bicycle wheel in the middle. We eventually passed some porters rushing one of these contraptions up the trail. As we approached 10,000 feet – long after rock had given way to heather and heather had given way to forest – two people came bouncing down the path strapped into these rolling stretchers, being piloted by a half dozen or more yelling porters. A crazy, surreal sight. It seemed that if the porters let go the stretchers would careen all the way to Zanzibar. In the end, however, everyone in our group was OK. Samia, again, to the rescue; don't leave home without him.

My own walk down the mountain was nice. The weather cooperated and once we passed the barren, stony Alpine Desert portion and had entered the heather we could see the lower slopes of the mountain spread before us in the distance and it was quite interesting to see the very clear demarcation line between heather and montane.



Our camp, Mweka, was a site shared by many groups and it was a dirty, riotous place that put the lovely settings of all our previous camps into sharp contrast. The expeditions that use the heavily-traveled routes travel in squalor. Our climb was clearly the best of the bunch. I would criticize the rescue procedures, but that's an endemic issue and all the issues that were self-contained and manageable by our porters and camp staff were attended to in a first rate way. Anyone who does with less will/does have a much more difficult time, and for no good reason. And those people who do the climb in 3 or 5 days round trip, terminating with an all-night push to the summit from 16,000 feet live through hell; who needs it? Who can't afford a couple of extra days for the sake of making their lives and their experience bearable?

Ours was an extremely difficult experience. And yet the average for summitting of all the groups that try is less than 50% (some sources I've read say 15%!). I can see why the others fail so dismally: they make the difficult into the impossible. I am told that alcoholic drinks are available along most of the "Coca Cola Route" which simply passes understanding. Who are these people?

Chart: SM log

General

Duration 12:58:15.0
In time 07:41:00.0
Ride time 07:35:00.0
Flat time 04:10:15.0

Runs: 1

Ascent / Descent

Avg asc 21.6 ft/min
Tot asc 8800 ft
Avg desc 6.8 ft/min
Tot desc 568 ft

High point 19029 ft
Low point 10344 ft

**Day Eight:
Summit Day and then descent
to Mweka Camp**



Last Day on the Mountain: February 26, 2004 Thursday

-- Final Descent --

Off again this morning, on the final descent leg. It was hard on the muscles but somebody had applied engineering skills to the path through the forest, with runoff ditches and steps. We descended over 4,000 feet, ending at 5,860 feet at around 11:00 AM.

Looking backward, we could see where we had been just the day before: Kibo shining beautifully in the morning sun.



The sun was high and we emerged to see a group of buildings. We signed out and testified to having summited. Warm Coke was on offer. Give me hot chocolate or lemon grass tea anytime.

We piled into Land Rovers and made for the Moivaro Coffee Plantation. I was shown to my room and immediately sent every stitch of clothing I had to the laundry. I put on flip-flops and a bathing suit and went for a swim in the pool after covering myself in SPF 45 and DEET. I added my climbing boots and poles to the wash pile and they came back much better than when they left. I then repacked so that I had only one bag for the safari.



We had a big group dinner that night and Jerry, Alan & I drank way too much at the bar and sang songs to the disgust of the other patrons and the bar staff. I sent a bleary email to haddonfish. *Pace*. Now to find another mountain. Or do this one again?

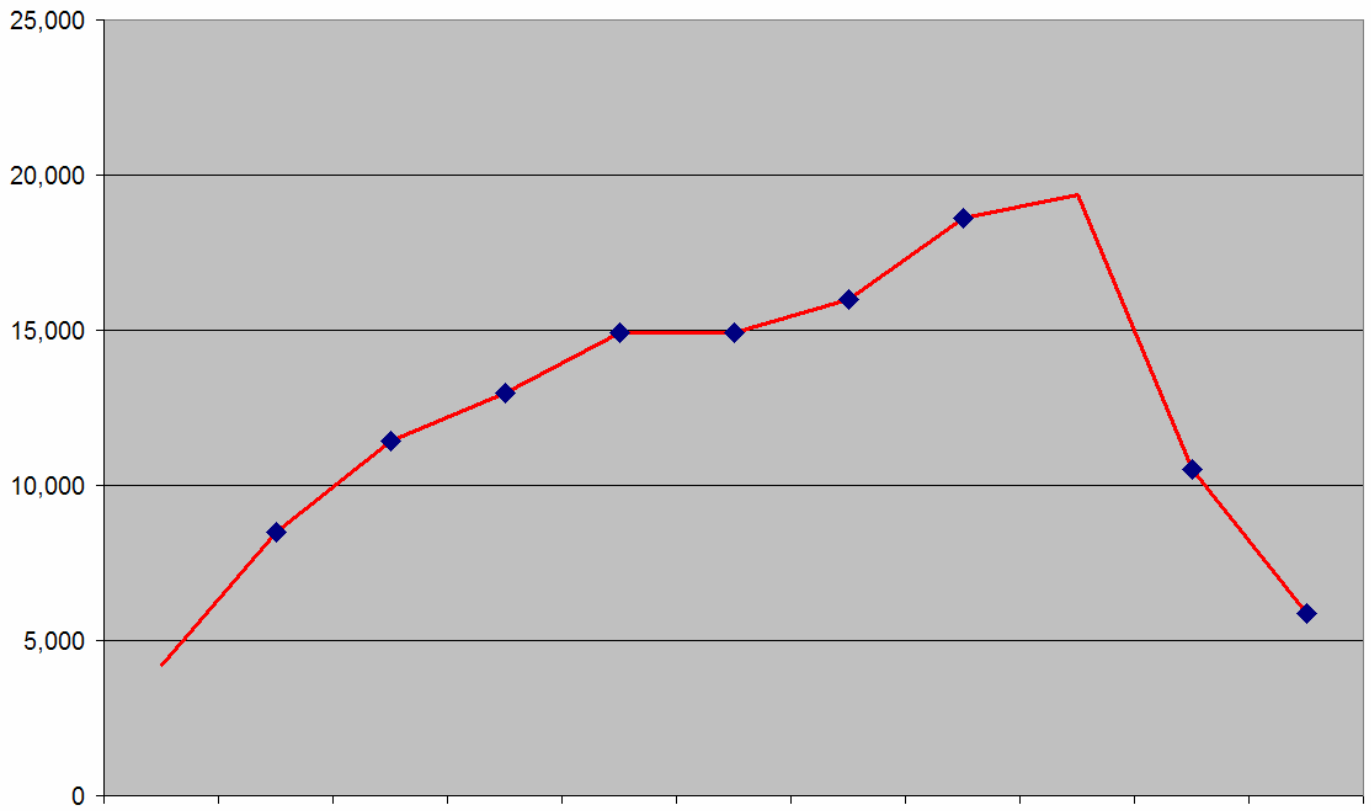
Chart: SM log
Context
Duration: 03:02:46.0
JK 1896: 00:18:00.0
Ridetime: 02:25:00.0
Rating: 00:27:46.0
Type: O

Ascent / Descent
Avg asc: 29 ft/min
Tot asc: 4465 ft
Avg desc: 0 ft/min
Tot desc: 0 ft
High point: 10325 ft
Low point: 5800 ft

Day Nine:
Final day ... descent to Ranger Post



Kilimanjaro Altitude



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