

POLE-POLE: TO THE TOP!



On a lazy Sunday afternoon in June, when my mom announced the trek to the 5986 meters tall Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania Africa, we were still preparing for the 5850 meters tall Shreekhand Kailash in Himachal Pradesh, India. Fabled to be one of the toughest pilgrimages in the world, it was already giving me the jitters. I looked up at her, bewildered, wondering if I had heard her right. Not only were we both, who have been trekking together for 2 years now, going, but she had plans to take my younger siblings aged 14 & 11 also with us: who were new to trekking and probably the youngest climbers attempting such a summit. I did not know then, that this trip would change our lives forever.

On the 21st of December 2013 as we boarded Kenya airways, the atmosphere was an eclectic mixture of emotions. Though Ma and I had summited tougher peaks, this was going to be a challenge and I knew my mom was depending on me to help my siblings out. As we caught a glimpse of the gorgeous mountain from outside our plane's window, my heart churned an amalgamation of excitement and fear. I knew that soon we would all be there, standing on the roof of Africa!

Kilimanjaro, by any name, is a metaphor for the compelling beauty of East Africa. When you see it, you understand why. Not only is this the highest peak on the African continent; it is also the tallest free-standing mountain in the world, rising in breathtaking isolation from the surrounding coastal scrubland – elevation around 900 meters – to an imperious 5,895 meters (19,336 feet), looming over the African savannah. It is also one of the world's most accessible high summits, a beacon for visitors from around the world.



But what I discovered is that there is so much more to Kili than her summit. The ascent of the slopes is a virtual climatic world tour, from the tropics to the Arctic. Higher still lay the moorland zone, where a cover of giant heather is studded with otherworldly giant lobelias. Above 4,000m, a surreal alpine desert supports little life other than a few hardy mosses and lichen. Then, finally, the last vestigial vegetation gives way to a winter wonderland of ice and snow – and the

magnificent beauty of the roof of the continent. The variation is straight out of the most magical book ever written. And ironically, this varied landscape and high altitude is what makes it the toughest for climbers to acclimatize on the mountain. But as we “pole –pole” (the mountain call for ‘slowly slowly’) move upwards the Kibo crater, we know why Mount Kilimanjaro is considered an outstanding example of a superlative natural phenomenon.

For us climbing Kilimanjaro inspired transformation, giving us the opportunity to see the world a



different way from the roof of Africa. What seemed impossible in one’s life might just be doable. We saw that very transformation in my 11-year-old brother Vedant, who almost gave up the climb, and after a little bit of coaxing and cajoling ended up summiting Stella Point first. While my younger sister Lavanya, 14 and my mother summited the Stella point after my brother, I went even higher to reach Uhuru peak at 5895 meters. At an excruciating temperature of -19 degrees, with our bodies almost frozen (we had lost our bags and most warm clothing in transit) and in bare minimum light as we started at 11:00 pm the previous night, it was an

achievement for all of us to steadily and continuously trek upwards for almost 7 hours on the 5th day of our attempt to the summit. What I learnt is that though there really isn’t any substitute to hard work, once you are clear about what you want, somehow the entire universe comes together to help you accomplish your goals.

Climbing Kilimanjaro was like walking from the equator to the North Pole in a week, providing dramatic changes in vegetation and animal life day by day, even nurturing the delicate elephant flower and the bizarre Kilimanjaro tree. Though physically tired, our minds were refreshed every morning when we opened our eyes. Walking above the clouds for most days gave me an inspiration beyond words and I can safely say that I look forward very soon to summit another such glorious mountain so that I may forever remain transformed. Such experiences have taught me to appreciate, be eager to learn, accommodate, support and to stop, for sometime-and let nature work its magic!



Goutami Talati

Grade 12 Student