

Kilimanjaro (19,341 feet) - Roof of Africa

**In memory of Gin Guo,
And his unfinished dream - Kilimanjaro**



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September 8, 2003**

Kilimanjaro; where ordinary people can do the extra ordinary thing



PROLOGUE

Perhaps the experience at the summit of Kilimanjaro will haunt me for the rest of my life, but never once did I have any regret. When I first realized no one from the Chinese Mountain Club (CMCNY) would be as “crazy” as I was, I knew, if I really wanted to go to Africa, I had to do it alone.

The time that I spent in the mountain, I realize life can be simple. For the six days, I did not have any luxury items (especially shower) that I was so accustomed to. On a strange land, I developed friendship and became quite comfortable with people whom I never met. This journey taught me to be flexible in life, to be kind and generous with others, and most important, to have confidence in myself.

Kilimanjaro was personally satisfying. If others think it was “stupid”, or “crazy”, who cares? I had a great time with good people, laughed a lot, met interesting people, enjoyed an exotic location on the planet and found adventure. After this trip, I raise the ceiling on my expectations, consider greater possibilities and open my thoughts to new ideas. I may not act on them all, but I have learned I can trust my decision making enough and at least ponder the possibilities.

East Africa is a magical place, Kilimanjaro is a wild mountain. I hope my journal will inspire some of my friends from the Chinese Mountain Club to take on a journey like mine; to discover your own self, your ability and your courage to do the extra ordinary thing.



It's not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves.
(Sir Edmund Hillary)



Kilimanjaro - Mountain of many faces



The legend of Kilimanjaro

The East Africans called Kilimanjaro the mountain that shines. Crowded by eternal snows, the mighty Kilimanjaro dominates the landscape unlike any other mountain. Historically as well as in the present, the challenge of learning about, exploring and climbing this mysterious mountain has captured the imagination of people throughout the world. Much more than the highest mountain in Africa, it is innately and inexhaustibly symbolic. Writers render it, climbers conquer it, and Africans worship it, and I was bewitched by it.

Kilimanjaro is located in the country of Tanzania, only 3 degrees below the equator. The mountain is a 750,000 years old extinct volcano and its last eruption occurring 100,000 years ago. Because of the mountain's proximity to both the equator and the Indian Ocean and because of its tremendous height, climbing it would mean passing through five climatic zones, including rainforest, heath, moorland, alpine desert, and arctic. Temperatures range from 85 degrees Fahrenheit to below zero. The entire hike will take average 5-6 days, travel 50-60 miles with total elevation gain 13,400 feet. Its highest peak, Uhuru Peak is even higher than the base camp of Mt. Everest. (17,300 ft) Kilimanjaro is the must climb for mountaineers. It is one of the seven summits in the world.

No one knows for sure where the name Kilimanjaro came from. There are many theories. Most agree that the name is probably a Chagga or Swahili name, or a combination thereof. Kilimanjaro may mean "mountain of greatness", "mountain of water," or "white mountain". Long time ago, the native believed Kilimanjaro was the home of supernatural beings who were guarding vast riches. They also believed the air up in Kilimanjaro was poison (without knowing it was the thin air). To attempt to climb into the realm of the gods meant blasphemy and certain death. Of course the story is not true but the danger of climbing the mountain had been recognized by Tanzanian long before the European's first expedition of Kilimanjaro in 1848.

Kilimanjaro is composed of one extinct volcano; Shira and two dormant volcanoes, Mawenzi and Kibo. Being the tallest mountain in Africa and the highest freestanding mountain in the planet, Kilimanjaro attracts 15,000 climbers every year, and more than 50% of them fail to reach the summit and average 10 people die from Altitude Sickness. Most of the people who had climbed Kilimanjaro agree that climbing Kilimanjaro is not about reaching the summit, it is about making the journey; a remarkable journey that rewards those who are not afraid of adventure and commitment and for those who are not afraid to learn what is like to be in awe.



The People

East Africans live a very simple life. Perhaps by North American and European standards, they are quite poor. It is not unusual to see people walking for miles, carrying goods and containers of water. Car and even bicycle are considered very luxury items which most Tanzanian can not afford. The average monthly wage of a driver in Tanzania is about 30,000 Tanzanian shillings (US\$30). However, Tanzanians whom I encountered are incredibly friendly. Children always like to approach “the white people” out of curiosity. I was always rewarded with their most genuine smile every time I approached them. My guides and porters were very polite and they treated me with the utmost respect.

While I was on the road, I often spotted the Chagga (Native tribe) wearing their traditional bright red and blue color clothing walking casually on the vast landscape. The image resembles so much of the scenery that I saw in Safari: a wild animal wandering leisurely in the distance. For the first time, I saw human is no different than animal. We all are part of the nature’s eco system. We are creatures of the universe and live in harmony under the same big sky.



My Journals

8/11/2003

Exactly one year ago, the thought of going to Africa was initiated. Thanks to Elizabeth Tom who gave Maria and me free tickets to watch the IMAX movie playing at the Museum of National History – “To the Roof of Africa” I came to know the existence of the unusual mountain – Kilimanjaro. Since 8/11/02, my plan to Tanzania began.

8/31/2003

Joseph, Flora, Maria, Tim, Joanne, Sarah, Wade, Jomi, my boss, and my sister in Hong Kong called or e-mailed me to wish me a nice trip. I know I will not be alone in Africa. These people will be with me everyday.

9/1/2003

Time to say goodbye to New York, my plane left for Amsterdam 6:05pm. It took nearly 20 hrs to travel to Tanzania. At the airport, I held on to my carryon luggage so tight (it contained all the summit gears) and not willing to give it up. The man at the ticket counter complaint my carryon luggage was too big, I had to check it in. NO, NO, I CANNOT! but in vain. I worried sick until I saw my entire luggage at the Kilimanjaro airport. As I expected, 48 unlucky travelers were without their luggage that night! KLM, the airline needs some improvement.

9/2/2003

Zara (my outfitter) is considered as a very reputable company in Moshi (a small town at the foot of Mt. Kilimanjaro). It does not provides its clients a luxury tour but a comfortable and affordable climb to the mountain. Since I dealt with Zara directly and not through its agent in the US, I only paid \$920 for the 7 days package which is a substance saving compared to all the famous trekking companies in the US, such as Mountain Madness and Tusker (at least \$5,000 - \$7,000). After I made my \$400 deposit, Zara took care of all the arrangements. When I arrived at the Kilimanjaro airport, sure enough, the driver was already there waiting for me.

Doug, Bob & Randy



That night, I met my climbing buddies: three men from Colorado. On our way to the hotel, there was power failure and I later discovered, in Tanzania, it happened quite often.

9/3/2003

Today a representative from Zara would have a meeting with us to go over some important things about the climb. 4:30pm, a young lady (who never climbed Kilimanjaro, ironic!) gave us a briefing about the climb, such as the AMS, daily trekking, guides, porters, foods etc. All the things I already knew by reading all the stories in the internet. I went back to my room and started packing all the climbing gears in one duffle bag which would be carried by my porter. I left all the Safari clothing, passport, and some money behind in the hotel storage room. I did my prayer that night specifically asking Goddess of Mt. Kilimanjaro to be kind to me.

9/4/2003 – Day 1 Machame hut camp 10,005 ft

7:30am in the morning after breakfast, Bob, Randy, Doug and I reintroduced ourselves to each other. These three men had a 6 days hiking schedule and mine was for 7 days. The plan was: four of us would hike the first 4 days together and at Camp#4, we would split and I would stay behind and take one day off for the acclimatization.

After we left the hotel, the driver took us to Moshi – Zara’s headquarter to meet our guide, porters and cook. Zainab (lady in charge) seemed to be a very capable woman. She introduced the guide to us. His name is Daniel and he is not much taller than I am. He is very friendly, can speak more English than the rest of the porters. He would be the key person making all sorts of arrangement for us (communication, decision making etc) up at the mountain. After making last minutes shopping for foods, we traveled to the Machame Gate (elevation 5,980 ft). The drive passed through cultivated coffee fields and small forest.

We registered with the park service, signed our Life and Death agreement (!) and waited nearly 2 hours to start. It turned out that Daniel was not qualified under the new park service rule. He had to call Zainab to send up another guide for us. His name is Kavuu and he is older and much serious man than Daniel. After all the confusion, our group finally consisted of four clients, two main guides, one assistance guide, one cook and 10 porters. 14 people would be our servants in the mountain. I felt like a millionaire for a moment! All and all, I was the only female among 17 men. Daniel told me that I was her first Chinese female client ever climbed Machame Route. He thought I was a very tough DaDa (means sister in Swahili).

Starting point – Machame Gate 5,983ft



Randy & Bob telling Chi a story



The base of the mountain is very lush, appearing to be in perpetual springtime. The trail was relatively easy at the beginning. It later became quite steep. Once we reached the higher elevation, the air was much cooler. My T-shirt was completely wet and I had to wear my rain coat to keep warm. The campsite was much too crowded. Climbers and porters were everywhere. My tent was already set up for me and my duffle bag was immediately dropped off in front of my tent. Five minutes later, a bowl of steaming hot water was sent to me. It was the treat of the day. I closed my tent and gave me myself a sponge bath. It felt wonderful even though I would much rather preferred a hot shower. Popcorn and roasted peanut were served before dinner. We had hot potatoes soup and pasta for dinner that night. My appetite was good and life in the mountain so far was just fine.

After sun down, the temperature dropped to 40F. We all went to bed right after dinner. In fact, after the dark, there was nothing we could do except crawled into our tent. I had a mild headache that night so I started taking Diamox. Diamox is a drug that is supposed to alleviate some of the symptoms of altitude sickness, but it is also a diuretic. One of the side effects of this medication is to make you go to bathroom often. I woke up at midnight and while I was doing my business, I looked up the sky. Not a drop of cloud, Kibo was visible under the bright moon. The snow cap at the summit was shimmering under the moonlight. No wonder, they call Kilimanjaro the mountain that shines.

9/5/2003 – Day 2 Shira camp 12,685 ft

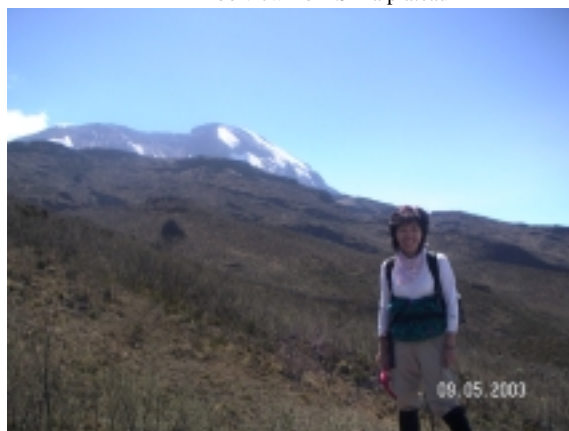
Luckily, my headache went away in the morning. The air was a bit chill but as soon as the sun came up, the temperature warmed up to a comfortable level. September is one the best months to climb Kilimanjaro according to the local. It is a dry season and the weather is getting warmer each day.

My climbing partners greeted me cheerfully outside my tent. My first impression of these three gentlemen was: they were very easy going. I had no doubt that we would get along. Among the three, Doug is the quiet one (charming Indian Jones type), Randy is a tall funny man (look like Jesus - Wanzoongu) , and Bob is not shy at all (PlayBoy type). They made believe that we were the characters from the Wizard of Oz; I was Dorothy and they were lion, tin man and straw man. They wanted me to tell them which one of them was a lion. I was sure they all wanted to be a lion, so I told them; they were all lion just to satisfy their ego. We had a good laugh.

We started our hike around 8:30am. Before the hike, four of us did a little prayer which became a daily exercise. Although I am not a religious person, I do believe paying respect to the mountain and to the local custom are important. Many many moons ago, the native believed that Kilimanjaro was a sacred place and climbing it was an intrusion of the mountain Goddess. Today, the outsiders climb Kilimanjaro with the help of the local people. A lot of the climbers disrespected the mountain by electing their country flag up at Uhuru Peak, leaving garbage along the trail and ignoring the local's advice to hike slowly. Statistic shows that each year average 10 people die of AMS. Most of them were young and energetic climbers. Until and unless those arrogant climbers come to acknowledge the wisdom of the local guides, the statistic will continue.

Leaving the Machame Hut, we crossed a small valley and began our ascent. The environment changed from heath forest to moor lands. These moorlands were littered with two species of giant groundsel: Senecios and Lobelia. Our older Guide Kavu could name almost every plants and flowers along the trail. His experience with the mountain was apparent. The climb up to the Shira Plateau from Machame Camp was not as steep as promised. It follows a rocky ridge that projects off the high plain between Shira and Kibo. As we climbed to the Shira Plateau, we could easily spot the devastation wrought by a huge forest fire about 3 years ago. The Kilimanjaro National Park Authority employees were unable to fully extinguish it until assistance came in the form of the rainy season, some months later. Subsequent to this, campfires were forbidden and portable stoves now do all cooking. The forest, what was left of it, began to give way to bushes and moorland. Flowers soon appeared everywhere. After we met a river gorge, the trail descended slightly to a plateau. The terrain was changing to high desert.

Kibo view from Shira plateau



Wise mountain man - Kavu



The Shira Plateau is a vast relatively flat high area which stretches westwards of the mountain and here we set up camp. The campsite was much bigger and less crowded. Aloft our tents was the giant dome of Kilimanjaro in the distance. From the campsite, we saw a beautiful sunset over Mount Meru (the second highest mountain in Tanzania) with thick layer of cloud around its base. The view was just spectacular!

2nd highest mountain in Tanzania – Mt. Meru (15,100 ft)

Daniel announced dinner was dinner tent. Our dinner tent at night. It was a small 2-person tent, four of us would either sit inside the tent or sit on a folding chair right outside the tent. I am either way. However, my much taller and bigger than I am, usually would just sit on a stool stuck his head inside the tent to an awkward position for him. I (Our 1st day, it was bearable, volunteered sitting inside the tent was ordered (1st time and the serve the foods. They should be gladly to do it for them. Oh



ready and would be served in our tent. When foods were served inside sit inside the tent or sit on a folding chair outside the tent and get his foods. It was a very funny just wish I had a picture to show it. came to the 2nd day, Doug tent, finally came to the 3rd day, I only time) to sit inside the tent and have asked me on day one, I would well☺)

Dinner was rice and hot soup. I while I was resting, my headache quickly and I found myself continued to take Diamox for the midnight going to the bathroom. sleep until dawn.

loved the Africa rice. After dinner returned. The evening chill crept in shivering inside my sleeping bag. I altitude and woke up again at That night, I could not go back to

9/6/2004 – Day 3 Barranco Camp 13,141 ft

The temperature was 34F inside my tent when I woke up. As usual, one of the porters bought me a bowl of hot water for wash. I was a bit spoiled by him. He always brought me the bowl to my tent but just left the other bowl for the “boys” outside their tent. This morning, I noticed the water was much less than usual. I was not happy about it. The “boys” were still inside their tents and their bowl of water was sitting on a piece of rock untouched. I sneaked to their tent, snatched the bowl of water and poured some into my bowl. Job well done, they did not even notice it. ☺



Chi was enjoying her treat of the day - bowl of hot water for wash

Lava Tower (15,200 ft)

Today's schedule was to reach Barranco Valley at 13,200ft for the night. Afterward, we would climb: climb high and sleep first sign of altitude sickness. He morning. Randy is a tall and of humor, but this morning, he breakfast, he was just staring at Our guide Daniel warned him the must try to eat something to gain breakfast consisted of scrambled (looked like hotdogs) toast and porridge. Usually, I would cheese (Chinese does not eat seeing him trying so hard to want him to suffer more by



Lava Tower at 15,200 feet. immediately descend to Barranco This is a principal of high altitude low. This morning, Randy showed had diarrhea three times in the funny man. He usually had a sense was awfully quiet. During the porridge and could not eat any. long and difficult hike ahead, he back his energy. Our typical eggs, hot tea and coffee, sausage fresh fruit, goat cheese and gladly gave up my portion of goat cheese) to Randy; but this morning, swallow some porridge, I did not eating my goat cheese.

Shortly after breakfast, we began led Bob, Doug and I towards a would stay behind with Randy Unlike other days, the porters would not hike as high as we were today. Instead, they would carry all our equipments and supplies to our next campsite by cutting across the South Summit Circle which remained at elevation of 13,000ft.

our hike. The older Guide Kovu much higher elevation. Daniel and tried to catch up with us later.

Bob, Doug and I climbed high up towards the steep final slopes of the mountain which rose more than 3,000 ft above us into the mist. When we reached Lava Tower, the elevation was above 15,300 ft which is higher than any where in the continental US. A light snow began to fall. Above us, the southern cliffs of Kilimanjaro towering up into the clouds, its glaciers around the summit were visible behind the moving fog. This was the first time we were so close to Kibo. Looking at the intoxicating view of the summit of Kilimanjaro, I knew it was my destiny to be here.

Western Breach Route to Kibo



At this high elevation, I had no symptom of AMS. In fact, I felt very good and even tempted to climb the famous Lava Tower. Kavuu, our head guide discouraged the idea after showing Bob and I the difficult route to the top. We did not want to break our legs right before the summit day. We had our lunch break and I gave up all my goat cheese, fruits and breads to either Doug or Bob in exchange for a hard boiled egg. I noticed my appetite started to deteriorate. My typical food for the day was two hard boiled eggs. I was eating less and less but continued to drink at least 2-3 liters of water everyday.

At the foot of Lava Tower, we met a young German girl heading toward the notorious Western Breach Route. She told us her boy friend got very sick and had to turn back. She did not give up her plan and determined to hike with her guide alone. I admire her courage and perhaps someday, I will do the same.



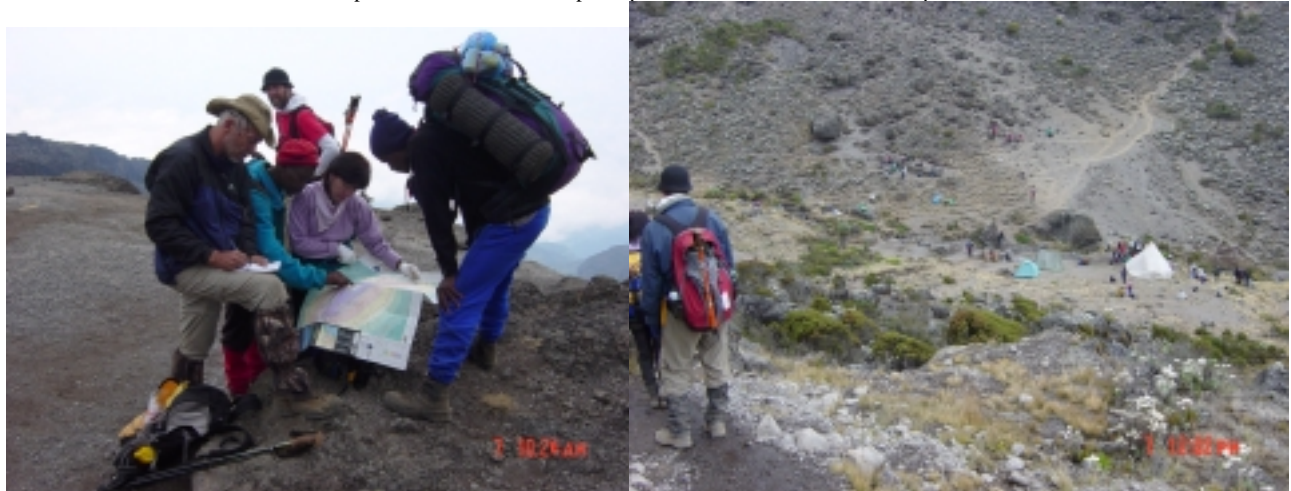
After a short break, we descended through giant Lobellia and groundsel back down to 13,200 ft and rested at a very pleasant campsite right next to the Great Barranco Breach Wall. On our way down, we united with Randy and Daniel. Randy lost all his energy and he looked very very tired. He never made it to the Lava Tower. Instead, he took the same route as the porters and hiked at the lower elevation. He told us he was looking forward to rest in his tent as soon as he got there. All of us started to worry about him. Doug and Bob even talked about changing their plan to stay one extra night in the mountain with me. They did not want to summit without Randy. They are really good buddies.

I woke up again at midnight. Since camp#2, it became routine that I would fall asleep around 8:00pm and would stay awake until dawn. I was frustrated with the situation, my sleep was very important for the next day hike but I could not do anything about it.

9/7/2003 – Barafu hut Camp (15,300 ft)

In the morning, I heard Randy’s cheerfully voice again. He seemed to be better and he promised to eat lots of energy bars today. We were happy to see him recover so soon. Daniel told us that the group would split this afternoon. He informed us that today hike would be simple for me. My next camp was only a four hours walk to Kalanga valley (13,200 ft) and the three gentlemen would continue for another 4 hours hike to their last camp. Kavu would guide Bob, Randy and Doug together with 10 porters to camp at Barafu hut that night preparing for the midnight hike. My guide, Daniel and another 3 porters would stay behind with me at Kalanga valley.

Chi decided to skip her acclimatization camp and pushed on to the summit with her partners



I had been debating whether I should change my plan to their so I did not have to hike alone on the summit day. We had been getting along so well. Doug was a true gentleman, Randy always made me laugh and Bob always had new stories to tell. I could not imagine how my trip would be without them. On the other hand, my physical condition was not 100% since I had been losing my sleep and appetite lately. I would certainly be benefit from the extra day relaxing. Looking at Randy, he just recovered from his illness and he did not hesitate a moment for his summit attempt. I was in a much better condition than he was. If Randy could do it, so could I. I told Daniel my decision and he seemed to be delighted to hear it.

The morning hike started with the famous Great Barranco Wall, often called as Breakfast Wall. It is a part hike part scramble trail, you would definitely get your hands dirty on the way up. It was quite an amazing scene that all the porters carrying large loads make it up the wall as well. At one point we were on a narrow ledge looking down over the valley to see waterfalls which was invisible from our camp. At the top, the scene of Mt. Meru floating in a sea of clouds was just magnificent



We had our lunch break by the river, right before another cliff wall. The melting snow from the glaciers forms the river. The water was cold but crystal clear. I had the urge to touch the water and sprinkled some on my face. My climbing partners were watching me and I could not help playing a joke on them. I told them if they would let me sprinkle some ice water on their face, they would be blessed. They all believed me. Even the wise old man Kavuu was willing to stand in front of me, closed his eye, squeezed his face and let me splashed ice cold water on him. I was dying to laugh.. hahaha..... To be the only woman in the group had the advantage. I was always given first right to choose my tent. My guild Daniel usually let me have whatever I wanted and the three gentlemen never crossed me. They were even afraid to talk about their “pee bottle” in front of me. Life was good!



The foods inside our lunch bag were almost the same everyday: a fruit drink, a hard boiled egg, a few piece of fresh fruit, goat cheese, peanut, breads and sweet cake. I ate all the foods on the first day, and by the 3rd day, I gave away most of the foods to the porters or my climbing partners. My stomach did not agree with the Africa foods and I got sick by just looking at them. Most of the time, I just ate the egg and some beef jerky that my friend Maria bought me for the trip. The afternoon hike had lots of up and down. Even my young porter - Eremesti had a hard time catching up. Usually, my tent and bag would be ready for me when I got to the camp. Today, Daniel had to send another porter down to help Eremesti. Daniel apologized and explained to me that Eremesti was only 20 years old and this was his first time to hike on this route.

Porters are human and they can suffer AMS just like us. Besides, they had to carry 30-40 lbs weight on their head everyday. Our porters usually packed up our tents after we left the camp and had to reach the next camp before us. Zara, our outfitter, does not run a luxury climb. We ate our breakfast and dinner on the floor and we were quite happy about it. Some of the outfitters provide their clients with tables and chairs in the mountain. It is not unusual to see young porters carrying heavy wooden table and chairs on their back. Some of the lucky porters will get paid \$3-5 per day and some do not get paid at all. They have to depend on the tips from their client. When at night, the temperature drops below zero. We slept comfortable in our warm sleeping bag. Our porters, even our guides had to share a thin blanket with each others. Four or five porters crowded in a small tent in order to stay warm. Last year, two young porters died due to AMS. Sometimes I felt so guilty seeing young Eremesti sitting on a rock trying to catch his breath. Every morning, I would put two small chocolate bars in his pocket so he could have some energy to go on. He usually gave me a big smile in return. Chocolate are luxury items in Africa and they cannot afford to buy them. I read about it in the internet before the trip and bought two big bags of chocolate with me. It was the smartest thing I did.

Young Eremesti with my duffel bag



Arriving at High Camp (15,300 ft)



After 8 hours hike, we finally reached the high camp. The camp was located above 15,300 ft and was fully exposed. The scenery around the site reminded me very much the base camp of Mt. Everest. Another thing that was also exposed was the bathroom. It is built so close to the cliff and has no door. People camping above the cliff looking down can see the activity inside the bathroom. By the 4th day in the mountain, I did not really care anymore. A porter was looking at me when I went in and I just waved to him and smiled. He was embarrassed and turned away.

typical toilet at Kilimanjaro



Right before dinner, Daniel briefly went over what we should expect for the next 24 hours. We had a long day and was about to get longer. First, we would have our early dinner, then try to get some sleep. Our goal was to be in bed by 7:00pm, and wake up at 11:30pm for the start of the summit climb. If all went as planned, we should be leaving high camp at 12:00am and reach the crater rim (Stella point - 18,000) by sun rise, 7:00am. Dinner tonight is spaghetti with tuna fish. My stomach just went sour! I gave Daniel two bags of oriental noodles and asked him to cook them for me. After they were cooked, I shared them with my hiking partners. At the end, four of us could not even finish the noodles. We all lost our appetite, not a very good sign right before the summit climb.

Sun set



As the sun went down, the sea of clouds at the end of the valley seemed to flow like a pink river. Mt. Mawenzi was standing spectacularly in the distant. Unwillingly, I crawled into my tent and started putting on all the summit clothing. I wore 3 layers of pants, put on thermal underwear, coolmax shirt, wool shirt, dawn vest, long freeze and finally my Gortex shell jacket. I used the thick beautiful scarf that Winona made for me to cover my head and face. By the time I finished dressing myself, I could hardly move. Lying on top of my sleeping bag, I tried to get some rest. Normally, I would fall asleep by 8:00pm, but tonight, sleep did not come so easily. I was sure, none of us could really fall asleep knowing that the most difficult hike of our life was just a few hours ahead. I stayed awake until 11:20pm. Few minutes later, I heard a soft voice calling me outside my tent. Our young assistant cook had bought me hot tea and biscuits. I could not get out of my tent right away because I was putting on my contact lens. When he called me again I was agitated so I sent him away. When he returned for the second time, I just lost my patience. I unzipped my tent and was about to say something rude, then I changed my mind.

9/8/2003 – Summit night Uhuru Peak (19,341 ft)

Outside, the air was cold. Our shy assistant cook, Hamisi only wore a very thin jacket. (none of our porters had advanced, or even adequate personal climbing gear) Normally, at this hour, he would have been in bed with other porters. Tonight, in order to serve us some hot tea before our summit climb, he ran back and forth between our tents in a freezing temperature. I did not have a heart to be rude to him. I thanked him and took the hot tea and biscuits from him. Tumbling in the darkness, he walked down to Doug, Randy and Bob's tents and offered his service diligently. For a moment, I hated myself.

Drinking the Africa hot tea, I sat on a rock and looked up. The sky was absolutely clear and the moon illuminated the night. Kibo which usually hides behind the cloud during the day was visible as a massive black dome loomed above us. The air was cold but calm. It was a perfect night to summit. I was not cold, but was trembling as I was nervous about the upcoming 4,000+ feet climb.

Kavu, Daniel and our assistant guide Hamisi (the hunk) would accompany four of us to the summit. Kavu set a gentle pace – pole pole as ever (means slowly slowly in Swahili). Immediately behind Kavu were Bob and I, Doug followed me closely. Randy, due to his early illness, set his own pace. Daniel and Hamisi watched over Randy from behind. An hour after the hike, I started breathing heavily and grasping for oxygen. My guide, Daniel came over and took my backpack. He urged us to take a short break and drank some water. Suddenly, Bob excused himself, disappeared in the dark. He had diarrhea and had to take care his "need" in the open. He did not look so good when he returned. We continued at a "step - breath - step" pace and it became extremely difficult for me to hike on a rocky trail. I tried very hard to maintain my balance every time when I step on a rock. Doug, as patient as he could, waited behind me to take another step. Kavu constantly looked back to make sure we could catch up with him even his pace was so painfully slow. Bob began bobbing about his lack of sleep. Every few minutes, he paused and placed his head on his hiking poles. Sometime, he just lay down on a rock trying to catch his five minutes sleep. As soon as he did that, Daniel and Kavu would go over to Bob and shook him hard so he would not fall asleep. I was not much better than Bob. Although

I did not have any headache, my head was numb. A feeling I never had on any high mountain. "Daniel, it is tougher than I thought!" I remembered complaining to my guide.

Kibo under moonlight



Looking down, we saw a trail of flashlights from other climbers trailing all down the hill. Sometimes they passed us, sometimes we passed them. Looking up, I could also see tiny lights high up in the darkness with no real point of reference. Most of Kibo was a massive black hulk. The moon, however, full and bright, was looking down at us with its gentleness. Hours went by, Doug announced it was nearly 4:30am. Suddenly, I spotted a brilliant shooting star whizzing across the sky. I cried out very loud, as Randy told me later. At this time, we were at or above 17,000+ feet. Somewhere beyond this point I started losing motor skills and

coordination. I began to think about all the HACE and HAPE stuff I had read before leaving on the trip. The most important thing I did not know was how to distinguish between non-acute AMS and something more dreadful. Where do you cross the line? How do you know? If you can still ponder the question, does that mean you are still ok? I sat on a rock, began telling Daniel my home telephone number. The test I remembered I had to do when I had doubt of my well-being. I forced myself to tell Doug, Bob and Randy their names and asked myself where I was. I had all the answers and I passed the test. Therefore, I convicted myself to go on.

9/8/2003 - 7:00am - Fear of Death

Over the next half hour, my surrounding changed from dark to grey, then silver, then pink, then orange. I looked to the horizon. The sun just began to rise. It was a stunning view. I wanted to enjoy this moment but suddenly, I saw light flashing back and forth in my eyes. I began hallucinating mildly, hearing someone talking very loud but not realizing I was the one talking. Perhaps another 15-20 minutes passed, I started veering off the trail and became disoriented. Clearly I was at no condition to go on. Before I completely lost my judgement, I turned to Daniel and told him that did not feel so good. Perhaps I needed to go down.

Despite of dizziness, vomiting, disorientation, most climbers are willing to tolerate for a chance at bagging in the summit. I recalled a story I read from the internet about a climber who came so close to die. He was breathlessly coughing up blood, a textbook demonstration of AMS, but he insisted that he would be okay after a short rest. Luckily, that day, a well known American mountaineer Todd Burlison was around. He and his friend, a cardiologist examined him and determined he had pulmonary edema, and he did not have hours, but minutes to descent or he would die.

Bob & Randy – exhausted at the summit Uhuru peak – 19,341 ft.



Sick climbers do not usually know when to stop and they rely on their guides to make decision for them. Apparently some deaths at Kilimanjaro were the result of poor judgment by guides. They were either poorly trained in recognizing AMS or simply ignored the symptoms of AMS. I, however, believe the fact that some guides fear they will get less tips if their clients fail to reach the summit. My guide Daniel is no exception. When I told him my intention to turn back, he dismissed the idea at once. He explained to me that if I gave up, I would not receive any certificate. Stella point (the crater rim - 19,000 ft) was just another 45 minutes away. Doug and Randy appeared from nowhere and checked how I was doing. I just remembered I kept telling them I did not want to die. I really thought I was going to die.

Randy & Chi arrived at Stella Point (19,008 ft) sunrise 6:23am



I did not know how I got to the crater rim. The memory between the conversation with Daniel and finally reached Stella point was a blur. Bob came over to congratulate me and I became aware that Daniel was holding me very tight. I looked down to the crater. It was covered with soft snow and a light fog was hovering right above it. Coated by the early morning sunlight, the crater wall was

reflecting the most beautiful orange color I ever saw. Kavuu, our elder guide, approached me. He pulled down the scarf from my face and said something in Swahili to Daniel. Daniel helped me to put the new batteries in my camera and took a few pictures for me, then he grasped my arms under his and told me only another 45 minutes, I would be at the Uhuru peak.

Chi & Daniel at Uhuru Peak – 19,341 ft



I recalled protesting the length of the hike several times to Daniel but eventually gave up. On my way to the summit, a lady leaning on her guide passed us. She looked pale and sick. Daniel did not want me to see her but I did. Our progress was slow but the climb seemed a bit easier than before. Once in a while, we still had to stop and breathe. Along the crater rim, there were enormous ice fields and towering glaciers, hundreds of feet tall standing next to barren ground. The scenery was exactly the same I saw in the IMAX movie a year ago. Suddenly, I was there, after 7 1/2 hours of climbing, the highest point in Africa. I could not believe I was really here. Although my coordination was not so good, I managed to stand in front of the famous summit sign and let Doug take a few pictures for me with Daniel, Kavuu and Bob. Few minutes later, Kavuu approached me again with a much serious tone: "Took pictures? Go down now!" Judging his expression, I knew I would be in trouble if I did not listen to him. I turned to Daniel and told him we needed to go down FAST! Daniel did not argue with me this time. We left Doug, Bob and Kavuu and headed to Stella Point.

My head was still numb and sever headache began to emerge. Passing Stella point, I became very dizzy. I hanged on to Daniel, halfway ran and halfway slid down the mountain. I



Ice Glacier

could not believe how steep the hill was. We descended by a different path to save time. The route was a much steep decline over scree (a light layer of dirt and gravel). By now, my condition turned to worse. My headache kept building. I grasped my forehead and refused to move. Daniel had to drag me down to the slop and I began to cry. Daniel was a bit frustrated and asked me what was wrong. "WHAT IS WRONG! I COULD HAVE DIE UP THERE DANIEL!" I put my head down and sat on a rock and did not want to continue. "You will feel better Da Da (sister in Swahili), just keep going". I knew he was right. In order to cure AMS, the only way is to get to the lower altitude (even a few hundred feet) as quickly as possible. By now, I was up 24 hours without any sleep. My stomach was completely empty, and my face was badly burnt by the morning sun. My entire body

was covered with dust and sands. I was totally exhausted, aimless and apathetic. "I will never hike again" I made a promise to myself.



Mt. Mawenzi – Kibo's brother mountain



From 19,340 feet we descended quickly and painfully some 4,000 feet. It took only two hours but seemed like forever to reach our campsite. All the porters were already up and waited for us to return. Daniel helped me to get into my tent and at once a young porter bought me an orange drink. After the drink, I collapsed to the mattress with my legs still sticking outside the tent. Daniel tried to take off my gaiter but I told him to leave me and just let me sleep. With the tormenting headache, I gradually drifted into a deep deep sleep. I was awake by Doug's voice. My climber partners just returned from the summit and checked on my condition. It must be around 11:00am but I could not recall. The sun began to heat up my tent and I was hot but I was too weak to take off my Gortex jacket. I had not gone to the bathroom for more than 12 hours. I needed to go but I could not bear to get up. Few minutes later, I fell into another deep deep sleep again.

9/8/2003 afternoon - Mwcka Camp - 10,600 ft

It seemed like a long time when I eventually had the strength to get up. I took off my jacket and headed to the toilet. I saw Doug was lying in his tent with his legs sticking out. He did not even bother to zip up his tent. Doug and Bob shared their tent and I only heard snoring coming out from their tent. I was released that four of us returned from the summit safe and sound.

Daniel came over and was happy to see me walk again on my own. He informed us that we needed to pack up and head to the lower camp in an hour. After I finished packing, I sat on a rock just staring at the smelly toilet. My mind was a blank. I thought for a second about eating. I had been climbing up and down virtually non-stop since 8:30am yesterday morning. I had covered some 10,000 vertical feet up and down. Intellectually, I knew I should have been hungry. I pulled open a Power Bar and took a bite. It tasted like dry cardboard. The afternoon sun was burning my face but I did not care. I examined myself and was totally disgusted about my appearance. I refused to look at the mirror two days ago, but I could image how I looked. I had not taken a shower for 5 days. My fingernails were all black, things came

out from my nose were black, every inch of my body was covered with dirt. My hair was tangled with dust and sand and I could not even run my comb through it. I did not feel like a woman.

In spite of the exhaustion, none of us had any major physical complaints and were ready to go for the next camp. Of the group, Doug seemed in the best shape. Randy got ill on the 2nd day, Bob got sick right before the summit climb and I was totally disoriented at the peak. Doug had none of those problems and he looked as clean as day one. Perhaps he is really “Indian Jones”, adventure is a piece of cake to him. Our next camp was still a long way off, another 5,000 feet down. It took us four hours to reach Mweke Hut. The temperature at Mweke Hut was warmer, and the oxygen was so rich and I felt much better already. My headache was completely gone. Our tents were already set up for us. Daniel bought me a big, I meant very big (the boys did not have that much!) bowl of hot water to wash. By the time I finished cleaning, the water was black, disgusting black!

Chi's guide, assistant guide, cook and 'waterboy', and 2 personal porters



My taste for food had started to return. Dinner was Africa pancake, my favorite, but for some reason the sight of the foods made me nauseous. After a few bits, I could not bear to eat anymore. Four of us had a long day and we decided to call a night right after dinner. That night, I had an uninterrupted night of sleep.

Chi's favorite porter – the good looking “cook”



9/9/2003 – Mweka gate Ranger Station

I woke up the next morning feeling wonderful. I ate all my eggs, the whole hot dog (sausage) and Africa porridge but still gave up the cheese to Randy. Daniel told us we should be by the Gate around noon. I took a last look at Kibo and reluctantly said my farewell. The mountain gradually disappeared behind the den forest. I was a bit sad but I know someday, I will be back.

The mood of everyone seemed to be much better. Because of the French's attitude toward the US war with Iraq, my buddies from Colorado did not like the French at all. Randy kept making fun of the French. When he spotted a piece of garbage along the trail, he would announce: "The French was here!" Bob was playing Tarzan with the vine hanging from the tree. Doug changed his reputation and decided to take care his "need" in the open behind the bush. Daniel, Kavu and our hunk (assistant guide) just kept chattering among themselves with Swahili. I kept dreaming about the hot shower. The atmosphere was very relaxing. Finally, we reached the gate, had a drink with all the porters, paid them with our generous tips and received our gold certificates. Back in the hotel, I spent the next hour in the shower to wash off all the dirt on my body. I was back to be a woman again!

Chi's three hiking buddies from Colorado (left to right) Doug, Bob & Randy



The following day, we went on our next adventure: Safari. We visited Lake Manyara and Ngorongoro Crater and saw lots of wild animals. Lions bathing under the sun, herds of buffalo and zebra crossing in front of the lake, elands, hartebeests and elephants hiding behind bushes, hippos playing in the pool, hyenas watching us closely, big ugly warthogs eating their feast, of course, my favorite animal: the giraffes with their big beautiful eyes. Finally, I was lucky enough to witness thousands of flamingo flying on the horizon in Tarangire National Park.

Baby Zebra & mother



Hippos



Chi's favorite animal – giraffes



Baby elephant & mother



Thousands of Flamingo



Female lions



Male lion



The author – Chi S. Chan signing off



THE END

Frequently asked Questions:

The outfitter I used: Zara Tanzania Adventure. Email: <http://www.info@zaratravel.com/kili/kilimanjaro.html>

Total costs:

- 1) climbing 7 days package: \$920
- 2) Safari 4 days package: \$600
- 3) Airline ticket: \$1,120 Email: <http://www.capecairo.com>
- 4) Tips: \$450 (I was very generous about the tips, so usually less than this amount)

What would I do differently:

- 1) I will definitely bring more my own foods
- 2) Drink more water 4-6 liters a day
- 3) Take Diamox, it really helps

Best time to Mt. Kilimanjaro:

September is the best month, less people, no rain and warm weather

Will I do it again: most certainly, and I will use Western Breach Route!