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## Mount Kilimanjaro

Once dismissed in the Western world as an impossible myth, the world's highest free standing, snow-covered equatorial mountain has now been charted and climbed, and stories of her resident man-eating spirits are relegated to the realms of folklore. But Mount Kilimanjaro continues to preserve a mysticism that defies all recent knowledge of her slopes. Images of the towering snow-covered cone rising majestically from fertile green foothills have become a powerful motif for this land of extraordinary extremes. Few could deny a very distinct sense of awe when the cloud clears to reveal a glimpse of the towering peaks, shining bright in the equatorial sun. Kilimanjaro represents a powerful life force for the local Chagga people and all those who have made their lives around this mountain, providing rich volcanic soils for agriculture and an endless source of pure spring waters. One of the most amazing aspects of the mountain in the present day is the accessibility of its peak to climbers with no mountain climbing equipment or real previous experience of scaling such heights. The number of climbers has escalated to over a thousand a year during the last century, quite a development since Hans Meyer made history as the first European to scale the highest point of Kilimanjaro in 1889.

### *History and Topography*

Kilimanjaro Mountain is one of the largest volcanoes to erupt through the earth's crust, and is presently the highest free-standing mountain in world, reaching to 5895m above sea level just 330 km south of the equator. The whole is made up of three adjoining volcanoes that ascend in height from the extinct peak of Shira (3962m) and dormant cones of Mawenzi (5149m) to the dormant, snow-capped cone of Kibo. The highest point of Kibo has been named Uhuru Peak since Tanzanian Independence, (previously Kaiser Wilhelm Spitze), and the highest point of the eroded shards of Mawenzi crater is named after Hans Meyer in commemoration of his groundbreaking climb to the topmost peak. One million years ago the land where the mountain stands today was a gently undulating plain. Lava rumblings beneath the plates of the Great Rift Valley began a series of volcanic eruptions through the earth's surface, and these early fractures were followed by the emergence of Shira, Kibo and Mawenzi approximately 750,000 years ago. These grew up to 5000m before Shira collapsed inwards and Mawenzi became extinct and began to erode. Meanwhile Kibo continued to grow to the formidable height of 5,400 metres and the thick black lava that erupted through its cone 360,000 years ago created the majority of the dramatic scenery that makes up Kilimanjaro's distinctive mountainscape. But the action of the years has been harsh, and the face of the mountain has changed and re-sculpted as a result of glaciers melting and re-forming, landslides and erosion. Streams have now carved distinct routes through the mountain rock, and vegetation has taken hold at every altitude that it can survive. As for the future, as the

snow line continues to recede and Kibo is predicted to eventually lose its snow and ice cap as a result of continued weathering.

### ***Climate and When To Go***

Kilimanjaro National Park follows broadly the same ecosystem as the rest of Northern Tanzania, with short rains falling during November and a long rainy season from April and early June, but obviously the altitude and aspect of the mountain affect climbing conditions to different degrees throughout the year. Cloud conditions on the mountain extend a couple of weeks beyond the end of the rainy seasons elsewhere, and the dry seasons between January and March and July and October. The latter period on the mountain is very clear and dry during the day, but also much colder at night, whereas the earlier months are warmer throughout. Nevertheless, the park is open throughout the year, and climbers continue to ascend to the peak in all seasons. It is estimated that the temperature drops about 1 degree centigrade with every increase of 200 metres.

### ***Hikes, Walks and Climbs***

Kilimanjaro is the highest mountain in the world that every day tourists can climb, although it remains a considerable feat of human endurance. The breathable oxygen at the top is less than half the amount than is common at sea level, and climbers cover at least eighty kilometres on nothing but their own two feet over the five days it takes to reach the top and return. The increasing number of climbers each year has made it necessary for the National Park to insist that all climbs are pre-booked, and passes are no longer issued at the last minute at the park gate.

Although it is possible to simply trek a route to the pinnacle of Kibo without relying on professional climbing equipment, it remains a hard and serious endeavour that requires a level of physical fitness, stamina and a realistic awareness of the potentially damaging effects of high altitudes. It is of vital importance that anyone ascending above 3000m researches the symptoms and remedies for all high-altitude associated ailments and anyone suffering any ill effects should inform their guide, or immediately return to a lower altitude to recover and acclimatise. Most visitors to the mountain today are inspired by an ambition to reach the top. But this massive and ancient mountain comprises of many startlingly different scenic areas that range from a band of superbly tall and changing forests around the base, through wide open moorland and up into the stark frozen reaches of the highland plateaux. These different aspects make for a varied hike that can extend over a number of days, with different standards of walks to satisfy differing abilities and requirements. A superb photographic and written account of Kilimanjaro by John Reader tells how this single mountain 'forms one grand ecosystem within which lies an example of virtually every environment on earth. From waterless desert to tropical rain forest. From glacial ice field to sweeping savannah. It has been said that the descent from summit to rainforest on Kilimanjaro is akin to travelling from the Arctic to the equator.'

With most of the old lowland forest now cultivated and settled, the first experience of the mountain environment begins with the dense vegetation of tropical montane forest that surrounds the mountain between 1850m and around 2800m. Cloud condensation mainly gathers around the forest, so this area is regularly damp or drenched with rainfall,

creating an intriguing mass of plant life and running rivers between endemic tree species such as the formidably tall *Olea Kilimandsharo*, that grows up to 30 m.. The area of heath just beyond the tree line also enjoys a relatively misty and damp environment as cloud clings around the density of trees. This is covered with heather and shrubs such as *Erica Arborea* and *Stoebe Kilimandsharica*, and a number of dramatic looking *Proteas*. Then from around 3,200m a wide expanse of moorland extends beyond the heath and the cloud line, so that here the skies are generally clear, making the sunshine intense during the days and the nights cool and clear. The climbing incline remains gentle, but thinning oxygen provides less fuel to energise the muscles and can dramatically slow the pace of walking. Hardy endemic species of Giant Groundsels (*Senecio*) and *Lobelia (Deckenii)* towering up to 4m high thrive in this moorland zone and give the landscape a strangely primeval atmosphere. Even higher, beyond 4,000m, this sensation intensifies as the landscape develops into a more bizarre 'alpine desert', with sandy loose earth and intense weather conditions and temperature fluctuations so dramatic that barely any plant species survive other than everlasting flowers, mosses and lichens. Only the odd lichen survives beyond 5000m, after Kibo Huts and beyond the Saddle, where the landscape is predominantly rock and ice fields as climbers experience the final steep push to the summit.

The easterly routes, Marangu, Mweka, Loitokitok and Rongai all converge west of the saddle near Gillman's Point, between the peaks of Mawenzi and Kibo. Kibo's crater is roughly circular with an inner cone extending to 5,800m, (100m lower than the summit at Uhuru Peak). At the centre an inner crater with walls between 12 and 20 m high contains another concentric minor cone, the centre of which falls away into the 360m span of the ash pit. This is the 120 metre deep central core of the volcano, and casts sulphurous boiling smoke from its depths despite the frozen, snowy outskirts.

### ***Routes***

There are a number of different routes to the summit, the most common being the least expensive and easiest Marangu Route, which usually involves 4 or 5 nights on the mountain, or the more scenic Machame route over five nights. Prices decrease if climbing with or joining a group, and increase with the ascending difficulty of each route. Rescue fees must be paid for anyone intending to ascend above 3000m.

***The Marangu Route*** is the most popular route, and also considerably easier than any of the other trips to the summit. Climbers usually covering the 34km each way over a period of at least four or five nights on the mountain, making use of the three stages of wooden huts for overnight accommodation on route. These three stages provide shared accommodation for a number of climbers in rather close wooden quarters, but they are at least dry and sometimes warm, and standards of accommodation and privacy are not reasons for being here. The first two of these huts are manned by permanent staff, and the 'easy' climb and sales of soft drinks along the way have given this path a reputation as 'the Coca Cola route'. This climb is the least strenuous, and follows excellent gravel pathways recently laid out through the Forest Reserve to Mandara Huts at 2700m at the end of the first leg. The second day continues through the heather to the edge of the short cropped moorland plains to Horombo Hut at 3,760m, from where Moshi township and

the Pare ranges can be seen on a clear night. On day three walkers press on across a clear and fresh expanse of moorland for around a three-hour stretch, and then the landscape changes again beyond the last water point at 4200m, from where the walk continues across the barren stretch of alpine desert to Kibo Huts. The fourth day final ascent from Kibo is the most arduous part, including a hard climb of about 6km with little oxygen under fierce climatic conditions. The final ascent is normally timed to arrive at the summit (Uhuru peak) for Dawn. There-after there is a descent for the night at Horombo hut. Finally it is a mornings descent to the Marangu Gate.

The beautiful ***Machame Route*** is highly rated as the most scenic route of all those up Kilimanjaro, with diverse vegetation and wide views as well as a number of possible route choices beyond the Lava Tower Camp at 4630m. The Machame Route can therefore take either five or six days, depending on the fitness of the climbers, and the final ascent is steep in each case. This route sets off from Machame village, and reaches the first Machame Camp at 3000m where the forest meets the heather. The track continues across moorland to Shira Camp on the western side of Kibo, with excellent views over the Shira Plateau. From here it is usual to follow the Shira Route to the Lava Tower Hut and then join with the Umbwe route down to Barranco Camp for an overnight at 3950m, but very fit climbers may continue to ascend the much steeper route via Arrow Glacier, (although the hut here is no longer in use). Those at Barranco Camp ascend to Barafu Camp by the Mweka route, and continue on this trail on the final ascent to the summit. This route will usually descend by the Mweka Route.

***The Mweka Route*** is the most direct path to the summit, and is short and extremely painful. This is the steepest and most demanding climb, taking only 4 days in all and including a very hard climb on the third day. The Mweka Camp and Barafu Camp on route are both basic, being unfurnished and with no toilet facilities.

***The Shira Route*** is also popular with those who have accomplished it, but is a long climb taking up to 7 nights and 8 days, and requires accessing the National Park through the Londorossi Glades Park Gate on the western side of the mountain. From here it is possible to take a vehicle on to the Morum Barrier, only in a 4x4 drive in the dry season, and walk the final stretch to the Shira Plateau. This is a scenic route, with superb views even from the car park. Climbers are advised to then spend a couple of nights at the Shira Camp to acclimatise before continuing via the lava tower.