

## Kilimanjaro conquered!

Contributed by Sieg Eiselen, Johannesburg Bar

Six members of the Johannesburg Bar took the opportunity during the October 2000 recess to pit their physical and mental stamina against Africa's highest mountain, Kilimanjaro. Altus Joubert, Willem van der Linde, André Gautschi, Panayiotis Stais, Piet Louw and Sieg Eiselen formed part of a group of 18 adventurers who journeyed with Stais to the place of his conception, Moshi, at the foot of Kilimanjaro.

We left Johannesburg on the Saturday, and arrived in Tanzania fairly late due to a delay in our departure and failed to get our first glimpse of the mountain. However the next morning, with everyone a little nervous, we saw it. It is the highest free standing mountain in the world at 5 895 m above sea level and it rises majestically 5 km vertically above the plains below. Quite daunting! We were already regretting the hours that we had planned but failed to spend in the gym. Most of us were under-prepared as far as our physical fitness was concerned – and Eiselen was the only one amongst us who had any kind of previous altitude climbing experience. But we were not going to let the opportunity to climb this mountain pass.

The tour was very well organised by our tour operator, Wild Frontiers, which organises Kili climbs on a regular basis; everything was very professionally done. At the base station we met our guide John, a lanky Tanzanian who would be summitting for the 80th time. Our baggage was handed over to the porters who are employed to carry the luggage, equipment and food up

the mountain – very colonial, the whole set up, but it does provide sought after jobs and cash for the locals. Each porter carries about 25 kg, while the hikers only carry their daily rations and stuff like rain jackets, munchies and lots of water.

The first day we climbed 1 200 m from to 3 000 m along a winding path of 18 km through the most beautiful rainforest. The whole of the mountain is a nature reserve and has been very well preserved from the level of the rainforest and up. There is no deforestation and very little pollution, even by the hikers. It is a popular trip for hikers with about 8 000 people annually trekking up the mountain (with approximately 70% reaching the summit!).

Day temperatures were very pleasant as long as the sun shone, but dropped quite rapidly at night. But with proper gear we were never really cold. The first four days were a steady climb up the mountain through the different habitats, with vegetation and bird life becoming sparser as we trekked higher. The idea was to rise steadily so that we could acclimatise to the high altitude and thin air for the final summit push on day five. We also went fairly slowly for the same reason (*pole pole* in the local lingo). Day two ended at 3 800 m.

With all the baggage that was carried up, we camped very comfortably and were fed very well with the most amazing meals every afternoon and evening, although some of us distrusted the chicken served on day three. No normal hiking rations on this trip!

Day three saw the weather suddenly

changing with sleet, hail and snow alternatively as we reached a height of 4 600 m before descending to 4 000 m for the night. This left some people claiming that for the first time they felt like real mountaineers, though to some it was simply miserable weather. Late afternoon saw the sun appearing again and the most magnificent views of the berg – and it again brought the comedian in Louw to the fore.

Day four took us to the highest camp at 4 600 m where, after a light meal and some troubled sleep, we were woken at 11 pm for the final ascent. At midnight with only the aid of torchlight we started ascending, temperatures still quite nice at only -10 C and no wind. However at 3 am a howling gale came up and temperatures dropped to -30 C. Suddenly it was very cold, but we all had excellent gear ready for such conditions. This final push was very tough with the high altitude becoming a big factor. Walking and breathing became difficult and progress was very slow. We would walk 10 or 15 small steps and then stop to catch our breath before taking the next few steps. At long last just at daybreak we reached the rim of the crater at Stella Point (5 600 m) and the summit at Uhuru (Freedom) Peak (5 895 m) in sight. The last 300 m took us approximately one and a half hours to complete.

Reaching the peak was a really fantastic moment and feeling of achievement. We've made it! All the uncertainty and stories about mountain altitude sickness were forgotten, although Van der Linde insists that he saw a donkey on the summit.

Looking around, we suddenly realised that everybody had made it – a rare achievement for a group of this size. Even the six counsel somehow talked their way up the mountain, having convinced themselves that it was possible.

With conditions very cold and blustery, most of us did not spend more than about 20 minutes at the top to enjoy the scene and take the obligatory photograph before descending. The descent was a lot easier and by 11 a.m. most of us were back in the camp for a well-earned rest before tackling another four hour stretch to the final camp. Somehow, breathing was also easier at 4 600 m than it had been the evening before. On day six we descended through the rain forest to another base camp where we were picked up.

Although most of the hike was fairly easy, it is common cause that the summit push was definitely one of the hardest things any one of us had ever done, but it was well worth it. As a hiker the long cherished dream to scale this particular mountain was at last achieved by me. And, in all, it was good practice for Gautschi who would later be doing the Otter Trial. 



The conquerors, with Kilimanjaro in the background, from left to right: Altus Joubert SC, Willem van der Linde SC, Panayiotis Stais, Sieg Eiselen, Piet Louw, and André Gautschi SC.