



Front of the team T-shirt

Whoever thought that it would be a good way of celebrating the 10th Anniversary of The Mango Tree Orphan Support Programme was correct. It was fantastic – well, in retrospect.... Sixteen out of the seventeen climbers in The Mango Tree party reached the rim of the crater and twelve continued for another 500 ft to the summit, Uhuru Peak (19,340 ft).

The Mango Tree team consisted of six students from Tanzania and six from Kenya and a staff member from each country. The 'Wazungus' were Willie, Gail and one of our major donors, 77 year-old Rod Walker from the Wirral.

From Tanzania, the students were: Francis Mwakhaba, who has just completed a degree in Banking and finance, Beatus Kibona, a second year student studying for a degree in purchasing and logistics, Damien Mwandemele, who is studying for a degree in accountancy, Samjo Saadat, who has won a place at medical school, Geoffrey Ezekial, and Enesi Alex, both of whom plan to become teachers. They were accompanied by Samson Mwang'omba, head of the Education Dept in Kyela.

The Kenyans included: Neema Atieno, who is completing a diploma in business administration, Jane Ndago, who is about to start a university degree, Benter Akello, aged 12, Erick Odek, who is studying for a degree in journalism, Fred Odhiambo, who has just received a diploma in agriculture, and Barsil Okwany, who hopes to become a teacher. They were accompanied by Peter Kunyada, our Administration and Finance Director. Peter and Erick were our cameramen.

The team assembled in Arusha two days before we set off. This time was spent having everyone medically checked over and all the high terrain clothing and boots for the students had to be hired and checked carefully by our guides, Humphrey, Ray and Sammy, and Gail conducted a foot inspection, just to make sure that we all started off on the right foot

We left Arusha on the morning of Wednesday 1st August. After a final stop, to buy more water and sweets, we turned uphill to Londorossi Gate, where all our luggage was weighed and we had to register. This took a long long time, so our start was delayed. We were taken to the Lemosho Gate (6,890ft), close by, but up a very muddy track.

After some photos of the team, we then set off for a three-hour walk through the tropical rain forest to our first camp, Kiti Kubwa at 9,281ft. We passed groups of collobus monkeys, high up in the trees above us. Due to the late start, we arrived after dark into camp. Our luggage was again weighed and we registered. Then we had to find our way in the dark to our tents and to sort out all our kit. Not an easy task – as we had not yet got into a routine as to where everything had its home in the tent.



Damian kitted out for high altitude



The mess tent was a bit of a squash, but when the food started to arrive, we all relaxed. The soup was delicious and then the rice and meat casserole soon filled up the corners in our tummies. This routine was repeated both at lunchtime and in the evenings for the next seven days. After supper, Humphrey, our chief guide, arrived to tell us about the next day's climb: " You will walk up a forest path. It is a little steep and then we come out of the forest and it gets a little steeper. We then come out onto the Shira Plateau, where there is a surprise waiting for you". He then checked our pulses and took readings of the amount of oxygen in our blood. This was repeated after breakfast and supper each day.



Water stop in the forest

Humphrey knew the mountain well. We continued the next morning walking through the rain forest, with long trailing moss and lichen hanging from the trees. We were also getting used to our water platypuses, as we had to drink at least three litres of water a day. The plastic platypus holds about two litres of water. It remains in a rucksack and a tube threads round to clip onto the front of the climber's body. We then took the odd suck as we walked – and more, during the hourly 'water break'.

Gradually, the vegetation became shorter and, by lunchtime, we were above the tree line, walking through giant heathers and then into scrubland. Humphrey pointed out a tent on the shoulder ahead. Sure enough, this proved to be our mess tent with the self-styled Stomach Engineer close by, who produced some welcome soup and then a pasta and sauce main course.

True to his word, the terrain then did become quite a lot steeper. Up and up with wonderful views behind us, but just more of the same in front. Then, by mid afternoon, we came round a shoulder to see in front of us the iconic view of the summit of Kilimanjaro covered in snow and cloud ahead of us. It was a wonderful moment. There it was – for real – and it was to be OUR mountain for the next six days !



Mr Rod shows Benter his GPS



The start of Day Three – the mountain belongs to us !

We came down a gentle slope into our camp, Shira Camp 1 at 11,500ft. There we were able to relax and just enjoy the wonder of the mountain. We spent hours just looking at the mountain and watching the cloud burn off before the sun began to set. We were excited and slightly nervous at the same time. It looked to be a long long way away – and VERY big. Will we REALLY get to the top of THAT ?

The next morning – the start of Day Three, the mountain was in profile at dawn. As the students started to come out of their tents, they soon realised that the water in the bottom of their water bowls, which they had used the night before for cleaning their teeth, had turned to ice. For all of them, this was the first time that they had seen ice in its natural state. Great excitement. The guides had impressed upon us the need to walk slowly. They would set the right pace and we should follow. This would allow our bodies to develop more red corpuscles, which would enable us to absorb more oxygen at high altitude. If we walked too fast, we would be in trouble later on. Despite these warnings, four lads regularly went ahead of the guides. Sure enough, one of these failed to make the crater rim and another failed to get right to the top.

Today's walk was quite gentle. We walked across the Shira Plateau, watching the mountain becoming closer and closer. We passed various landmarks, such as Cone Place and the Cathedral. Our campsite was under some dramatic cliffs, of sandstone, covered in lava. In many places the sandstone had been eroded, leaving some very strange shapes and overhangs of the harder lava including caves, with icicles – another first for the students. This was Moir Camp, at 13,665ft. Looking back, we also had some great views of the sun setting close to Mount Meru.



A group find icicles in a cave near Moir Camp

The following morning, we climbed to the Lava Tower at 15,213ft. This was quite a steep ascent and we became aware of the lack of oxygen. We lunched at the top of Lava Tower and spent time getting used to this altitude. In the afternoon, we continued downhill to Barranco Camp, which was down at 13,048ft. Before we arrived at the camp, we came down a valley full of very strange plants, called giant lobelias. Soon after arriving into camp, the weather closed in and we found ourselves in thick mist – we were now in very cold cloud.

The following morning, we woke to no cloud, but we could see the next task

ahead of us. The Breakfast Wall. This is a sheer cliff of 800 feet. No one is sure if it is called the Breakfast Wall because you tackle it straight after breakfast or if it is because many climbers leave their breakfasts on the wall. Anyway, for this part of the climb, we stowed our walking poles in our backpacks and then set off. This reminded me of childhood rock climbing at the seaside. We used both hands and feet and up and up we went. However, there was another problem. Our 31 porters set off after us, as did the porters of about three other groups. They caught us up, so we were constantly being overtaken by these young lads, who were as agile as mountain goats, with the most enormous packs on their backs. No sooner than I had found a good hand hold than a foot was placed firmly on it! It was really quite unnerving. We went slowly and steadily, but when we arrived at the top, we found four of our young lads playing cards as though they were on a picnic.



Card players at the top of the Breakfast Wall

Having crossed the Shira Plateau, we were now walking from the western side of the base of the mountain to the south-eastern side from where we would make our ascent. So, having climbed the Wall, we continued round the base, keeping the mountain to our left. This was not a long day. We arrived into Karanga Camp (13,232ft) after just four hours of walking. But, again, we soon found that we were in swirling cloud, so we were unable to film the students.

Day Six was another short day of gentle walking until we reached the final slog up to Barafu Camp at 15,331ft. It is a very bleak exposed point where several routes converge for one of the main final

ascent routes. The camp seemed to go on forever, with many other parties – some like us, about to ascend, others who were celebrating their ascent earlier that day. It was cold and cloudy on arrival, but after lunch, the cloud burned off, so we were able to interview and film some of our students. Then the weather turned nasty again. It became very windy, and we feared that our tents would be blown away. If the weather was as bad as this, how will we cope tomorrow, when we still have another 4,000 ft to climb?

After supper, we had a final briefing for tomorrow from Humphrey, who told us to wear at least five layers of clothes on our top halves and three on the bottom halves. Happily, just after we had settled in for the night, the wind dropped.

We woke at 4.30am to prepare for this ascent day. We packed our daypacks carefully and gave extra care to our feet. The Stomach Engineer had provided some porridge and tea and a packed lunch. We had our final pulse readings taken and all were deemed fit to climb. We assembled to start from the camp at 5.45 am.

We had six guides with us on this day. The leader was Ray, who turned to me and said "I want you to follow me and just put your feet into my footprints". I followed this advice the whole way up. Earlier in the week, I had read an account of the final ascent day where the writer said that he felt totally demoralized, as whenever he thought that he had reached the rim of the crater, he saw yet another possible rim ahead. I was determined not to get into that situation, so I resolutely did not look up. I concentrated on Ray's footsteps and also looked to either side, admiring the wonderful sunrise with Mawenzi Peak just to the south of the



Geoffrey, Erick and Beatus



Sunrise with Mawenzi Peak

sun.

The terrain was scree and dust. It was fairly steep, but unremittingly boring. We had water stops after every thirty or forty minutes, rather than the hourly stops we had had until now. Gradually, we were becoming more tired and I would frequently suggest to Ray that he might consider another stop. But Ray was deaf to these suggestions. He just trudged on and on.

Ray was very encouraging. As the ground became steeper, so he started to go really slowly. He encouraged us to take really deep long breaths and he started to take VERY short slow paces. He took half the normal pace length. Slower and slower. Deeper and deeper breaths, but we just continued upwards. Then, he suddenly announced that Stella Point, which is on the rim of the crater, was only twenty minutes ahead. So, on we went, still not looking up, until he said "There it is – just above us. You can see it now". At that I broke my vow of not looking up and there ahead – rather a LONG way ahead, I thought, was the rim of the crater. This last section was VERY steep and the ground was very soft. It really was almost pure dust, so our feet slipped back a little at each step forward. But, having come this far, we were not to be deterred.

At last, we did reach the crater rim at Stella Point. We arrived at about 12.00 noon. We had been climbing for just on six hours. We had some photos and congratulated ourselves, as this is regarded as one of the peaks of Kilimanjaro. However, the highest point, Uhuru Peak, was still another 45 minutes and 500 feet ahead of us.

By now, we were really struggling for breath, so we needed to bash on and not waste too much energy. The party had rather broken up into small groups by now. Benter and some of the young had set off towards Uhuru Peak, so we soon followed. I found the going really VERY hard by now. I had to take long breaks every few minutes. The track was now firm and to our right we looked down into the wonderful snow and ice filled crater and to our left was a spectacular glacier.



The twelve at Uhuru Peak

This was not difficult walking. It was just very strenuous. Ray stayed with us and encouraged us all the way. After what seemed like a lifetime, he pointed out Uhuru Peak ahead of us. This also spurred us on and very soon we had arrived, just behind the advance party of Benter, Geoffrey, Mr Rod and Barsil. By now it was 1.00pm

In the exhilaration of reaching the summit, Gail went to the side of the track, bent forward and honked her wee heart out. I comforted her by pointing out that she had actually achieved the HIGHEST projectile vomit in the WHOLE of Africa. Meanwhile, I felt that I had little men with hammers on my forehead. I felt as though I was coming round from a general anesthetic. It was really most strange. I went and sat under the big green sign for the summit and put my head between my knees, continuing to

breathe deeply. Whenever I heard someone say, "Smile!" or "Cheese!", I would look up, so all the photos show me smiling happily, but between shots, I slumped forward again.

I cannot say that we felt a great feeling of exhilaration at that point. We had done it. We had achieved what we had set out to do all those months before – and more importantly, eight of the twelve students had reached the summit as well, with the youngest in the party, Benter, reached Uhuru Peak first.

We paused for about twenty minutes for photos and to ensure that no more people were coming up behind us, as we had group photos with the special banner that we had brought up from the bottom.

Snow and the glacier at the top

Once we had decided that no one else was going to arrive, we set off back to Stella Point. There, we sat and ate our packed lunches – it was now about 2.00pm. We heard that Peter Kunyada and Erick Odek, our cameramen had not made it to the top. They had had to run ahead to set up their cameras to shoot footage of us walking towards them. Then, they would pack up and then hurry to catch us up, so they were not following the “pole, pole” (slowly, slowly) advice of the guides. In fact, Erick had become delirious when he reached Stella Point, so two guides ran him back down the hill, and one went with him the whole way back to our camp, which they reached after 45 minutes. By which time, Erick had completely recovered. We also learned that Beatus had not made it as far as Stella Point. He was advised to turn back about 45 mins before reaching the crater rim. Samjo and Neema had also not continued past Stella Point. So, our tally was a very creditable 16/17 reaching Stella Point and 12/17 reaching Uhuru Peak.



All my energies and concentration had gone into thinking about getting to the summit. I had not given ANY thought to the fact that we would have to retrace our steps back to the camp that day. We set off from Stella Point at 2.20pm and it seemed a VERY long way back to camp. It was a great relief to drop height and to start to feel the nausea disappearing. Soon, the little men with hammers also departed, but we were ALL very tired by now. But, we had no option but to keep going. We took regular breaks to recharge the batteries and Rod produced some Tesco's Pick'nMix sweeties – which gave us sugar surges, which we really needed. Thank you Rod!

After what seemed like another lifetime, we arrived back into camp at about 5.00pm, which was 11 hours 20 mins since our departure this morning. We were all absolutely bushed!

Back in the warmth and safety of our tents, we did then begin to sense a feeling of achievement. We had DONE IT !

We had an early meal and then got our heads down fairly soon that night. It had been a very long day.

The next morning, we were due a reasonably gentle day's walk to Mweka Camp, a descent of about 1,600 metres. We set off in small groups, and made very good time to Mweka. We took three and a quarter hours to get there. We consulted with Humphrey, who said that it would be possible to make it all the way down to the bottom, if we wanted to get off the mountain that night. The thought of a lovely HOT shower in the Impala Hotel was unbelievably alluring. We took soundings from the young, and the unanimous decision was that we should keep going. We had to hang around for some time for the Stomach Engineer and his team to produce some food for us. During this time, we saw three young American girls being stretchered off the mountain at speed. We used this time to film the remainder of the student interviews.

This last leg was probably the worst part of the whole trip. We were now re-entering the equatorial rain forest. It was VERY muddy under foot, so it was slippery. Much of the path had been made into steps at some time, but many of these steps were broken, so the path was very dangerous and we were already tired. We broke up into several small groups and just went at our own pace. This really was most unpleasant.

At last we reached a decent road, which took us a final forty minutes to walk down to the Mweka Gate (5,331ft). We had descended 10,000 feet that day, which is something that we are highly unlikely to repeat ever. At the Gate, we had to sign out of the Park and Humphrey produced our certificates to prove that we had climbed the mountain.

All the porters were assembled at the Mweka Gate, where Freddie, the boss of F&K Cultural Tours, was waiting for us. Once we had all arrived they broke into song and a few cans of beer and soda seemed to arrive from nowhere. After many more photos, we got into our buses and slowly made our way back

to Arusha. After a LONG HOT shower, we had a quick fill of pasta before enjoying our first decent night's sleep for nine nights.

The next day, we had to return all the hired equipment, but that evening, Freddie organized a barbeque, where a goat was roasted on a spit by a group of Maasai. We were also entertained to some Maasai dancing by another group. In one dance, a man appeared to have an epileptic fit, but we were relieved to hear later that this was very much a part of the dance.

At the end of the party, we held an awards ceremony, where everyone ended up receiving an award of a "I've climbed Kilimanjaro" T-shirt. This had been a wonderful experience for everyone and one that we will all remember for the rest of our lives. The following morning, the Tanzanians headed off south and the wazungu joined the Kenyans in their journey back to Kosele.

We could not fault Freddie and his team from F&K Cultural Tours and Safaris (motto: Love and Peace through Tourism). Humphrey, Ray and Sammy were so kind and encouraging. Nothing was too much trouble, and Wilfred, the Stomach Engineer, produced the most amazing food in very strange places. We could thoroughly recommend them to anyone thinking of climbing Kili – see www.fk-safari.com

Back home, several weeks later, we were able to start counting the wonderfully generous sponsorship money that had been coming in during our absence. This is continuing to mount up. As I write, we have so far raised an astonishing £46k from the climb.

We would like to thank our donors very much indeed for their support. We have been experiencing a drop in our income, at a time when our costs are increasing (as so many more of our students are now continuing on to tertiary education). So, we thank you all very much indeed for this much-needed support.

William Fulton