How to climb the Kilimanjaro like an alpinist

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Latest version of this document available at : `http://rdklein.fr/essays/kilimanjaro.html`.

Figure 1: Ill-equipped porters carry heavy tents at Stellar Point (5756m) while the temperature is below freezing.

Climbing Mount Kilimanjaro is a heartbreaking experience, as one has to witness and participate in the absurd masquerade organized by the locals. It is a pity that such a beautiful mountain can not be enjoyed freely, in the alpine spirit. We give advice on how to climb Kilimanjaro without porter, with one's own equipment and food, and on how to minimize the price. We hope this advice will lead to alpinists claiming back the roof of Africa by climbing it in the sanest possible way.

1 *Intro*

Mount Kilimanjaro is a volcano that stands higher than any other mountain above the ground around it. Its summit is the highest point in Africa, and it thus earned its place in the Messner list.

It is also the saddest mountain I have ever climbed, and I have climbed multiple mountains and hills all over Europe, in the Pamirs and in Borneo.

Climbing mount Kilimanjaro is not primarily a challenge of your skill, stamina and grit against a truly beautiful but dangerous and reasonably difficult mountain, as it could and should be. It is mainly a test of your patience and wallet against a corrupt bureaucracy, tightly applied nonsensical regulations, and exploitative tour companies.

Alpinists, and I use the word in its loosest meaning of *people that love mountains*, will be disheartened by this climb if they do it the usual way. I drew from my experience climbing Mount Kilimanjaro in August of 2014 and from what I learned before (while preparing the attempt) and after (when talking to porters, guides or other people involved in tourism in Tanzania) to put together a HOW-TO for climbing the roof of Africa. Following this advice, the climber can:

- budget according to the lowest prices one can possibly pay (subsection 4.1);
- completely avoid porter labor and thus the ethical and financial costs associated with it (subsection 4.2);
- minimize time spent in Kilimanjaro National Park and thus the outrageous financial costs associated with each day near the mountain (subsection 5.1);
- minimize the risk of altitude sickness, using actual scientific advice (subsection 5.2);
- take only and all of what is necessary for the hike (section 6);
- make sure that the guide(s) will at worst only minimally hinder progression (subsection 4.3).

Although this method allows one to take only minimal part in the sad circus that circles around the mountain, one still has to witness it. Therefore the short answer to “How to climb Mount Kilimanjaro like an alpinist" is : *Don’t*.

No, seriously, don’t.

2 *The highest scam in Africa*

The typical Mount Kilimanjaro experience has the climber choose one of many similar agencies[1] which will handle the red tape, lie about the porters' and the guides' salaries, add various random fees (such as transport fees from the hotel to the gate or food for whomever) and show a bill of at least 900 USD per person.

[1] This choice can be made directly from Moshi or Arusha, or from abroad in which case prices will explode for the same service.

Once on the mountain the hiker will walk from camp to camp with only a light pack on his back. While he enjoys breakfast sitting on a chair or a stool around a camping table, the army of porters he was more or less coerced in hiring packs everything and races to the next camp, so his tent can be set up before his arrival for a dinner cooked from fresh ingredients.

The last two days are the most difficult. After African water, despite the water purification pills, has had between 3 and 5 days to possibly destroy his digestive system, the climber must ascend the last two kilometers in 48 hours. The last 1200m are climbed sometimes at night in well below freezing temperatures, with unwanted pauses in the unpreventable bottlenecks that forms in the long line of tired and disoriented people attempting the summit.

The descent is no easy feat either. After a short time at the top spent exhausted taking pictures and wishing he was elsewhere, the now successful climber goes back down to enjoy some food and hot beverage at the stupidly named "base camp" he left a few hours ago. Depending on how he budgeted his attempt, he either must go all the way down to the gate or can stop at one of the intermediary camp for one more night.

Our climber has paid a lot of money to be baby-sat up the mountain, in a way that runs contrary to what is known about acclimatization while an army of wage slaves carried unnecessary gear for him. All that makes climbing a mountain a unique experience is gone, and Tanzania is not in any significant measure a better place despite all the money spent. To avoid this heart-crushing experience to those who love mountains, whatever their level or experience, I propose a technique that most closely match what can be done almost anywhere else.

3 *The* as least nonsense as possible *technique*

Mount Kilimanjaro is administered completely backwards. It is impossible, short of breaking local law, to climb it without taking part in this absurd and damaging masquerade. The game is then to minimize the damage.

3.1 Dura lex, sed lex

In a perfect world, climbing Mount Kilimanjaro would be a matter settled between you and Mount Kilimanjaro. Sadly, regulations will add multiple parties to the mix. Here is what you can avoid and what you must deal with.

Among the unavoidable madness is the red tape. Every day on the mountain will cost you 120 USD that go with very little accountability to the Tanzanian government. A wise choice of route (subsection 5.1) will minimize the number of days spent on the mountain. Each day should be spent either climbing or acclimatizing. No“scenic route" nonsense. At 120 USD per day, you want minimize the distance between you and Uhuru point as fast as altitude sickness will let you. The fastest route is truly beautiful, and the few glimpses of the volcano you may catch between two clouds on the longer routes are just not worth the money.

Also unavoidable are the guides. The guide is hit-or-miss. A seasoned alpinist with a thorough local knowledge can be invaluable if he is fully on board with your unusual way of climbing. On the other hand, you may find a racist, aggressive guide that refuses to understand why you don’t want to promote local employment by hiring porters, or how climbing experience anywhere else than on mount Kilimanjaro can possibly be relevant here. He knows the regulations better than you do and can seriously jeopardize the attempt. Talk at length to your guide before even agreeing to anything, much less paying and setting foot in the park.

Completely avoidable are the porters. It will be difficult to make the agency admit that you want to try to climb without porters (because they make a nice profit from their supposed salary) but as of yet, no regulation forces you to hire one. Don’t fall for the "but it provides employment" trap. This is just an excuse used to justify what clearly is wage slavery. Porter is a dangerous, widely underpaid even by Tanzanian standards, difficult job. You will see them, ill-equipped, sweating or freezing under heavier weight than regulation supposedly permits[2] to carry unnecessary stuff higher than the top of Mont Blanc or Elbruz for people that have no business being here[3].

[2] No porter is supposed to carry more than 25 kg, but with water, garbage and the occasional hand lent to a friend in need, a porter carrying more than that is not a rare sight.

[3] See section 7

3.2 *Off the beaten track*

What is considered so usual in mountaineering that it is not even worth mentioning will seem strange to some on the Kilimanjaro. Agencies and guide will assume you want to do as everybody else unless you explicitly state otherwise. Here is what you should make clear from the beginning.

Altitude sickness should be avoided the simple, reliable and

backed with scientific evidence way : ascend ; if you feel bad, stop ; if you feel really bad, go down ; repeat (subsection 5.2). Explain this to your guide and make sure he agrees. Refuse any "walk high sleep low" nonsense and take the most direct route (subsection 5.1).

Book for the minimum number of days, and pay any extra day when exiting the park. Be confident in your abilities, Mount Kilimanjaro is a high altitude hike. The only thing between a well-equipped and reasonably fit alpinist and the summit is sickness either from altitude or dirty water. Altitude sickness is cured with patience and money (150 USD per day in the park), stomach problems are bad luck, not a sign of your capabilities as an alpinist.

Fully acclimatize at the last camp at 4600m before attempting to reach the top. You will be better shape for the final push, and you will be able to rest as long as you like at the "base camp" during your descent. Non-acclimatized climbers must continue going down and can not stop for long at 4600m.

Seeing you carrying your own stuff, setting up your own tent and cooking your own meals is likely to get reactions from other tourists or guides and porters. Some react by encouraging you and talking, in an open minded way, about your motivation. Some react with more or less overt hostility. Be prepared.

4 Agency choice

4.1 On-line or on-site ?

The cheapest way to book is definitely on site. Asking for unusual conditions will also be easier on site, negotiations will be quicker. Go to Moshi (Arusha is bigger, dirtier, further away from the gates and feels less secure) and talk to a few agencies. Whatever accommodation you have will probably have a company they usually work with. Work with them, then go to town a ask two or three other agencies. Most will give the prices listed in table 1.

Guide salary	20 - 25 USD/day
Porter salary	10 - 15 USD/day
Office profit	100 - 150 USD
Random bullshit fees	150 USD
Camping fees	50 USD/day/person
Park entrance	70 USD/day/person
Rescue fee	20 USD

Table 1: List of prices as presented by most tour agencies in Moshi, divided between agency and government profits.

Agencies will not voluntary speak in depth about tipping. Plan on at least 10 USD/day/person for both guides and porters, adjust according to your feelings. Porters do a physically harder job than

guides, and you probably will not need your guide's "expertise", so tip your guides more than your porters only if there exist a good reason to do so.

Do not let yourself be bullied into hiring one or more porter if you don't want to. Be sure to bring the people you are talking to on board with your project. If they don't seem willing to help you, get out and find somebody else. Agencies have strong incentives to make you fall in rank. They want easy money doing the usual thing. The proposed method deprives them of the money they make by paying porters less than they say they do, furthermore you will spend fewer days in the park than most other tourists so there is less money to be made off the guide's work.

If they invoke park regulations to make you pay for something you don't need (such as extra guides or porters, or some equipment) play dumb with the next agency. If all invoke the same regulation without you prompting them, there is a chance it is real. Regulations applying to tourists are blindly followed by anyone on the mountain, and you may get denounced if somebody sees you. As stupid and arbitrary as they may seem, follow the rules unless you are prepared to jeopardize your attempt and loose a lot of money just to make a point.

Do not accept to bring any "security" equipment. If you follow the correct acclimatization guidelines, you will need neither oxygen nor a portable hyperbaric chamber.

Plan on a total bill of at least 1000 USD per person, including tips. If you manage well you will have some of it left, but you may or may not have the patience to find somebody willing to scam you less than others and if you give up early you will save your sanity at the cost of around 100 USD.

Do not get friendly with the agencies. They are scamming you, exploiting the guides and porters and there is not much you can do about it. Pay the park fees yourself at the gate. Ask for a receipt.

4.2 Porter and guide labor

Porters on Mount Kilimanjaro are forced to do one of the stupidest job on the planet. If some of them were made to dig holes on the ground that others had to fill back, it would at least be less dangerous and less damaging to the ecosystem. They form an almost uninterrupted flow around the mountain. Those who left at sunrise arrive at the next camp when the last to depart from it are still packing. If you stay 24 hours at a camp, you will see it disappear and reappear during the day. Tents from large agencies are being replaced by the exact same model brought up by the porters of the following day as

if the tent had actually stayed there, only it didn't and somebody will break his back circling one heavy tent all the way from gate to gate.

Unnecessarily luxurious equipment and food, such as tables, chairs, portables toilets, bread and fresh vegetables are also carried up on man's back. The best way to avoid this madness is to handle your food and your tent yourself.

If your agency plays the friends game, tell them you only give them the office profit, and will give the salary directly to the porters and guides, the transport fee directly to the driver etc. ; watch the smile wash away from their face as they find excuses as to why this is not possible. If they let you do it, rest assured they will take that money back behind your back. A porter or guide that claims his announced salary would never find work again, have I been explained by an ex-porter and a current guide.

If you do need to hire porters, request to manage their loads yourself. Regulations theoretically forbid porters from carrying more than 25 kg, but on the higher camps they may or may not be followed, particularly because water need to be brought up from a lower altitude. If you let your porter carry a humane weight of 20 kg or less, be careful, your guides may unload their packs on the porter's back.

4.3 Guide choice

Imagine how a last minute addition to a climbing party can derail an attempt if characters don't match, and add to the mix a commercial relationship based on a lie about the salary. Now realize that the new comer is at home while you will be tired, ill foreigners and you will have a good idea of how much the choice of your guide matters.

Talk at length with your guide before making any commitment. If he doesn't speak well any language you are proficient in, ask for somebody else. If he seems reluctant to climb without porter and you are not absolutely positive your explanation as to why you do it that way has convinced him, ask for somebody else. If he does not acknowledge your previous climbing experience or refuses to adapt his acclimatization strategy, choose somebody else. If you have any uneasy feeling, ask for somebody else. The best is to find a guide with climbing experience outside of Kilimanjaro, possibly somewhere in Western Europe. Some are even real mountain guides by alpine standards, try to get one of those.

There may be a financial incentive for the guide to hire porters : sometimes guides are tasked with sharing the tip with their teams, and they do not share as instructed. If you suspect you may be talking to one such individual, ask for somebody else. In any cases, give tips individually. Don't expect a thank you (although you may get

one), your tip makes up most of their actual salary, they think you owe it to them. Give the tip at the latest opportunity, as some guides or porter will stop caring about you once they get their money.

Don't be deterred by this appalling list of warnings, there are helpful, competent, interesting guides on Mount Kilimanjaro, but you must at all costs avoid a rotten apple.

5 Route choice

5.1 Itinerary

Most routes begin by a few days of dicking around and maybe seeing the mountain between two clouds. With 120 USD/day/person of park fees, plus the tip and salary, these are not the routes you want to take.

The most direct route, the Mweka route, seem to be forbidden for ascent. This is a shame as it would be the best choice. The next best is the Umbwe route. Two of its camp (Barranco and Karranga) are at the same altitude (around 4000m), therefore one of them may be skipped. The time gained should be spent acclimatizing at Barafu (4600m). Most tourists hike for only half of the day as the camps are quite close to one another. A long day could allow you to skip one camp, depending on your fitness level. If you intend to do so, get you guide on board and get up early, you will have more time to walk and you will avoid the bottlenecks that overwrowding forms on the way.

One can skip any of the first three camps of the Umbwe route. This means that instead of the usual 4-days path: Gate (1700m) - Forest Cave (2850m) - Barranco (3950m) - Karranga (4000m) - Barafu (4600m), one can go :

- from the gate to Barranco, and then to Barafu (2 days),
- or from the gate to Forest Cave, then Karranga and Barafu (3 days),
- or from the gate to Forest Cave, then Barranco and finally Barafu (3 days).

The time thus gained can be used resting at higher camps to make the average altitude gain per day come down to 500m as recommended (subsection 5.2).

The way from Barranco to Karranga includes a steep ascent and may require the use of hands, but if you manage to avoid traffic you can actually progress quickly there. I suggest not spending one full day between Barranco and Karranga, either start from Forest Cave, or stop at Barafu. An exception to this rule is if you feel the need to sleep one more night at Barranco to acclimatize, then maybe go sleep

at Karranga instead if your body can bring you there.

Warning : the last water point is Karranga valley, a 5 minute speed walk from Karranga camp. Plan accordingly.

Think hard about whether seeing the sunrise from the top is worth climbing at night in the bitter cold behind slow moving large groups. It is indeed a breathtaking sight. It is difficult to enjoy cold, tired and sick, though. If you are fully acclimatized, you can start after sunrise, get on top before clouds come, and be back down to sleep where you started. Other tourists have to start early because they can not rest at 4600m and must use the rest of the day to continue going down.

Usually, the porters keep an eye on your tent while you go for the final push. If you elect to go without porter, you must find a way to secure your belongings. Split your party, hire a porter just for that task, go with one more guide than is necessary... Theft is not unheard of at Barafu (or on other camps as well).

5.2 Altitude sickness

The current medical consensus [4] on how to avoid altitude sickness is, above 3000m, to climb less than 500m/day on average. Diamox is an effective drug to prevent altitude sickness, with only minimal side effects.

The "walk high, sleep low" motto is unproven in general. The altitude reached during the day seem to have little effect on acclimatization, the altitude at which one sleeps is more important. In consequence, don't tire yourself walking up and down : ascend gradually, then rest. The particular implementation of "walk high, sleep low" that most guides adhere to runs contrary to all acclimatization guidelines as you would spend most of your time around 4000m and then climb the last two kilometers in less than 48 hours.

To help you assess the severity of altitude sickness and take appropriate action, the Alpine research association ARPE published[5] a scoreboard (table 2).

Headache	1
Loss of appetite, nausea	1
Vertigo	1
Medication-resistant headache	2
Vomiting	2
Panting while at rest	3
Abnormal or important tiredness	3
Decrease in urine quantity	3

Table 2: Scoreboard for assessing the severity of altitude sickness.

With a score from 1 to 3, take a painkiller. From 4 to 6, take a painkiller and stop climbing. Above 6, go down until symptoms stop

[4] Andrew M Luks, Scott E McIntosh, Colin K Grissom, Paul S Auerbach, George W Rodway, Robert B Schoene, Ken Zafren, and Peter H Hackett. Wilderness medical society consensus guidelines for the prevention and treatment of acute altitude illness. *Wilderness & environmental medicine*, 21 (2):146–155, 2010

[5] Jean-Paul Richalet, Jean-Pierre Herry, Christian Rathat, Hugues Chardonnet, and Dominique Jean. Brochure sante et altitude. `http://www.arpealtitude.org/librairie/librairie.html`, 2009

(they will disappear suddenly).

The proposed route allow you to stop at various points during your ascent to rest and acclimatize according to the recommended ascent rate (500m/day on average). As previously said, fully acclimatize at the last camp (the "base camp") before attempting. The higher camps don't always have a water source, you may fall short ; one member of the party may have to go down to Karranga to get some more water.

6 Equipment

You may rent or buy some equipment in Moshi, but the price or quality may not be satisfying. The surest way is to bring everything from home, including dehydrated food which may be hard to come by in Tanzania. Gas canisters can not fly, but 450g Butagaz propane/butane cartridges can be bought in Moshi. Bring a compatible burner or a liquid fuel stove.

Plan on having 20 kg, give or take 2 kg, on your back at the beginning, the pack becoming lighter as you consume food. Take the usual equipment for both a jungle trek (it starts with a few kilometers in a rain-forest) and a high altitude hike. Temperature on the summit can reach -15C. If you are not sure what to bring, buy and read *Freedom of the Hills* (Eng [2010]).

Plastic water bottles are forbidden on the mountain [6]. This is infuriatingly inconvenient. Bring alternative means to carry water and water purification pills. Boiling for at least ten minutes is impractical short of bringing a lot of gas, and pills take time before you can drink therefore you will have to be careful with water management. Bring containers whose volume can be purified with a integer number of pills, including at least one large container to use during water runs at higher camps. Double check for leaks[7].

Garbage is weighted at every camp. Bring multiple strong garbage bags. If you pack only dehydrated food, you will not meet the quota, as your garbage will be too light by day 3 or 4. You can try to gather any garbage you find on your way[8] to gather more weight or hide a stone in a dirty Kleenex (they may look into the garbage back, be stealthy). If you wish to argue about the stupidity of the quotas, be prepared to stay there all morning and then gather some more garbage anyway.

Biological waste is a problem on the mountain. Please be responsible if you have to go outside of a designated place. Ideally, one should put the used toilet paper in a plastic bag and empty it in the next toilet. Be also careful not to pollute the streams, they may irrigate a lower camp. Finally, despite the dreadful state of decrepitude

[6] Your own guide may denounce you to protect his licence.

[7] If you climb fast, there will be more pressure inside the container than outside...

[8] The water points in particular need cleaning, you can find rusted batteries or metal cans there.

they are in, please use the toilets. At Barafu, either the stench is truly unbearable and one has to be quick not to suffocate or there is no door, but this is still better than finding an improvised toilet on the way. Bring more toilet paper than you think you need, the one you can buy in Moshi is flimsy and there is not much paper per roll.

The hike starts high enough so that mosquitoes are not a problem. Malaria prevention medication must be taken one week after exposure has stopped, this means that if you take some before you will have to continue treatment during your attempt. This may not be a good idea. If you go directly to the mountain you can reasonably spend without protection the one or two days it takes to prepare everything and begin treatment after you come down if you plan to stay in an infected area.

Plan your equipment as if you were climbing with no addition to your party. If your agency or guide ask to check your equipment, show them. Ask in return to check the guide's equipment. Some of them don't have gloves and spend the final push hands in their crotch to avoid losing a finger. If your guide don't have the correct equipment, there is a very slight chance he is too poor to buy it, but most probably he does not see the point and spends his money elsewhere. Therefore do not feel sorry and keep your good gear for yourself. A guide with good equipment is an encouraging sign that he may have actual climbing experience.

If the agency suggests you rent or buy more equipment, be very critical of the suggestions. Do not be bullied in bringing oxygen. If you have a medical condition that may require oxygen breathing, don't climb Mount Kilimanjaro. If you fear severe altitude sickness, follow the scoreboard and you will never get to the point where you need oxygen. Kilimanjaro is not a 8-thousander and oxygen is expansive and heavy.

7 Who can climb

If you are unsure about your physical and technical ability to climb Mount Kilimanjaro, head to the nearest mountain range for a two-days camping trip. On the first day, climb 700m with a 20kg backpack, on the second climb 1200m with only food and water. If you managed that without too much difficulty, you probably will be able to climb the roof of Africa. Difficulties will pile up : disease, bureaucracy, overcrowding, cold, water scarcity and altitude, but with grit you can overcome them and maybe enjoy this mountain as if it were free.

If 20 kg is too much for you (and it is indeed damaging to your body to haul heavy weights), you may hire help. Hiring a porter

is not a deathly sin. Make sure he is paid fairly and that he carries more or less 20 kg of useful stuff. Just don't kid yourself in believing they are all happy with their job.

Almost anybody can attempt and succeed. Even a 70 years old that couldn't climb a moderately difficult hill alone. But maybe he should refrain. I believe there is nothing wrong with using alternate means of reaching the top of a mountain, be it with a chopper, a cable car, a 4x4, a donkey... But when those alternate means rely on the exploitation of other human beings, I think a red line is crossed. My position on whether or not to climb Kili would then be : don't climb if you refuse to take responsibility for the well-being of those that will work for you. The method I propose uses self-reliance to ensure almost nobody works for you, but craploads of money and a little bit of common sense and decency could work as well. A rich retired slow walking 70 years old can enjoy the summit without selling his soul to the devil.

8 Related work

While researching in preparation for my attempt of August 2014, I was unable to find most of the information presented here. Everything is distorted by the implicit acceptance of the park's silly rules and customs. I have written this HOW-TO to help tear the veil of madness that floats over this mountain. Information online describe Kilimanjaro as how it works, with all the tour agencies, porters, guides etc. not as how it is as a mountain : the water points, the difficult parts etc. All the bullshit that surrounds the mountain has actually shaped it and now almost completely defines it.

This HOW-TO is, to the best of my knowledge, the only work that describes how to experience Mount Kilimanjaro in a sane way.

Bissell [2007] describes the usual experience and while it does not denounce it, it describes the madness.

The IMEC[9] used to maintain a list of agencies that treat porters decently. Sadly, they are not allowed in the park anymore by the authorities, so they are unable to control employment conditions on the mountain and withdrew their list from their website. On Reddit, */u/dJe781* reports that one can mail them to get their last partner list, though.

[9] `http://www.mountainexplorers.org/club/partners.htm`

Most other resources are, links to, or source from info-advertisement put online by tour agencies. They may even not be up to date.

I was unable to find an english version of the park's regulations (such as the garbage weighting system or the forbidding of water bottles). Maybe they're oral tradition.

9 *Conclusion*

The proposed method is, I believe, the least frustrating way of climbing Mount Kilimanjaro. It is still very frustrating. The climb is difficult as it is (it is only a hike, but a difficult one), but you will have to pay for services and live with people that most probably won't actually help you that much.

You also will have to look as nobody seems to notice the sheer absurdity of having hundreds of local workers setting and breaking camp every day, Sisyphus-style, for a handful of tourist.

Finally, you will always be surrounded by other tourists, guides and porters. Some climb with more than twenty workers for a party of 3 tourists.

If this HOW-TO helped you in your ascent, and you saved a couple hundred USD following this advice, then please consider spending some of it to help an NGO involved in Africa. If you want to take direct action, allow me to suggest contacting Integrity School in Arusha (integrityschooltz -at- gmail.com). They provide cheap education to low-income families and will probably accept money or material help (such as school supplies) with great relief.

This article was submitted on reddit : `http://www.reddit.com/r/alpinism/comments/2f6aai/how_to_climb_the_kilimanjaro_like_an_alpinist/`.

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