



Kilimanjaro- Stream of Consciousness

Altitude sickness is real. It can affect anyone, at any time. There is no way of knowing whether you will get it or not.

Out of the 25,000 people that attempt to climb Kilimanjaro every year only 60% make it, the other 40% don't, probably due to altitude sickness or Edema. Tennis champion Martina Navratilova didn't make it to the top of Kili. Enough said. Although I am a pretty positive person, I really wasn't sure if I would make it or not. Last time Jimmy and I hiked Mount Baldy (10k feet) I had fat hands so bad I could barely clench my fists...this is Edema but not the type that kills you (only Pulmonary or Edema in the brain can kill you). So...I just had to wait and see if altitude sickness would spare me and if my legs and lungs were strong enough to ascend 19k feet without the proper amount of oxygen; hence, this is the reason why people who attempt to climb Everest (27k feet) need an oxygen tank. And no, don't get crazy, I'm not going to attempt Everest!

Day 1. They said today would be the easiest day...5 miles / 4 hours through a rain forest walking at a "pole pole" pace. I got this. Papa Jimmy and I have been hiking pretty aggressively since August. The hike was nice, although the pace was frustrating but pole pole is essential in order to acclimatize. Got to Mandara hut in the early afternoon and bunked with Victoria and Ian, who were with me on the Serengeti trip, and Papa Pete, a lovely energetic happy-go-lucky Aussie in his mid-50s who is a marathon runner and had trekked up to Everest base camp a few years back. I made it very clear to everyone the first nite, "this hut is a snore free and fart free zone". Everyone complied. But of course at 2am my bladder started doing the Harlem shake, so I had to handle my business right next to the hut (too traumatized to go to the loo by

myself), while I listened to the cacophony of white Colobus monkeys...definitely much better than Hyenas and old angry buffaloes, which by the way was what nudged our tent in the Ngorongoro Crater.

Day 2. Today should be pretty easy, 6.8 miles / 5 hours through alpine desert. And it was pretty easy, given the fact that previous to this trek the only work out I was doing was with my mandible for the last 3 weeks. Shout out to traveling on a budget and eating simple carbs and 55% meat (cold cuts). My kangaroo pouch is back. I digress. On the way to the next stop I made the guides laugh by showing off my Swahili. Twende Mzungu (Let's go white people) I would shout. Stanley, our main guide who was probably around 60 and had climbed Kili over 100 times in the last 10 years, said I had good energy and that I would make it to the top. I was moved. His smile could light up a room. That night I bunked with Papa Pete's family in Horombo. His son Daniel and wife Talitha and his daughter Kylee and boyfriend Peter, the hilarious Irish guy that went to L.A. with his friends to visit and stayed in Inglewood cause he had heard about it in rap songs. Amazing. We shared stories...I told them about the flight attendant who snitched on me when I projectile vomited on the way over here, about descarado Dan who asked me to borrow my soap, the shit show of my border crossing into Tanzania and the famous story about how I broke Leslie's x-sister in law's nose on our trip to Spain ("Panchi is my nose crooked?"). Pete said some hilarious stories too. We all laughed for hours. Good times.

Day 3. The day we have all been dreading but also looking forward to. Today we hiked 7.5 miles / 5 hours to Kibo hut, at the very base of Kili. Then, at 12am we would start our hike to the summit. Coñó! Ahora si que se jodió la fiesta! We arrived at Kibo around 2pm and rested / slept til 11pm. We all bunked together that night, 12 of us (8 Aussies, 1 Brit, 1 New Zealander, 1 Canadian and me). I might have slept a couple hours at most. It was freezing and some of the peeps in the group were starting to feel symptoms of altitude sickness at 15,400 feet.

11 PM. Everyone is anxiously getting ready, slapping on those layers. They said I was the Michelin man of the group because of all my layers, I was like "Hey listen...I'm from Miami, anything below 70 degrees is cold for me...iCant". 6 layers on top and 2 on the bottom...wool socks and liners, bogus foot warmers, hand warmers, a balaclava, scarf, ski gloves, head torch, and 3 liters of water. This terrorista was ready.

12 AM. We start the ascent. It was pitch black with the exception of the 3 dozen or so head torches in a single file line going up and the entire constellation over our heads. We looked like a bunch of miners...it was pretty surreal.

1 AM. For some strange reason the song "Step by Step" by NKOB keeps playing in my head. Make it stop pleaseeee! iCant

2 AM. I'm the last one in the line, by choice. I want to make sure I get there, pole pole. Every so often I look up at the stars and burst into tears. I've only seen the stars this bright in The Keys. Incredible. I think about my grandmother and I mourn her death. Suddenly, I feel like she's

walking next to me. Funny because I'm walking at the pace she used to walk, it's so bizarre. I feel her presence, her foot steps, and I burst into tears. Abuela I miss you. I imagine what she would have said to me before climbing and I laugh...I can hear her cracking up and saying "locaaaa...eres una loca" catching her breath in between the laughter. I think about how strong she was those 6 weeks she was in the hospital. I think about all the immigrant workers who work so hard, people who do hard labor every day, people living in poverty, people who are hungry, people living on the street...I think about Jimmy and all our hikes, especially when I had the panic attack on Mount Baldy...I think about my mom and hear her saying "Ten cuidado"...I think about my dad and I hear him saying "You can do it baby!"...I think about all he's been through, how strong he is, how he would be here with me if it wasn't for the stroke, how he would be saying "Coñó pero esto no es fácil. Como carajo se te ocurrió escalar esta montaña? Y yo más loco que tú por acompañarte!" I look up at the stars again, like if I was seeing them for the first time. I cry. Catharsis.

3 AM. I'm feeling great. We are half way to Gilman's Point (2nd tallest peak). By this time, a few of the people in the group by have full blown altitude sickness, throwing up, nausea, headaches, chest pains, diarrhea Cha Cha Cha. No signs of altitude sickness for me. Thank you baby Jesus. But hold up...I have to pee. Oh no. Oh shit. I asked Stanley where I could pee as I see Victoria turning off her head torch and popping a squat 5 feet away from the group. I'm cracking up. He points in her direction and off goes my head torch. Talitha said it best, you lose your dignity in these types of trips. I was like honey don't get me started on the shit show I went through in the Serengeti! We started moving right after my white mzungu ass was exposed to my 11 cohorts and 5 guides. You wanted to be in nature? Well there you go! I reach for my iPhone and play Mumford & Son's Babel on full blast. I'm having a religious experience. My energy is at an all time high. I'm going to make it, I'm going to make it.

4:30 AM. 1.5 hours away from Gilman's Point. The breathing is getting difficult. Right about now I'm breathing like a cross between Predator and Swamp Thing. My legs are tired and my lungs feel like they're expanding. Stay focused. I can do this. I think about things to motivate me but the soreness in my legs and lack of oxygen in my lungs overpower my thoughts. One of the guides looks at me and says "I believe in you, don't let me down." I put on Biggie, I need that hard shit to get me through this. F&\$k!!

5:30-6 AM. I'm almost there. I can hear those fuckers that made it to the top already hollering and screaming. My legs and lungs at this point are about to give out on me. I'm stopping every 3 steps. Paul, one of the guides, keeps probing me like cattle. I look back he nods as in keep it movin'! I'm struggling. Oh shit, f\$@k, holy shit, oh my God, f\$@k, shit, I'm dying, I can't, oh f@\$k are the thoughts that keep ruminating in my head. I'm dying a slow death and I swear Edema is around the corner like "yea bitch you thought you were gonna make it? Not you, not now, not neva!" The sun is rising, I look back and it's the most stunning view I have ever seen. No joke. The sun rising above the clouds at 18k feet. Again I burst into tears. I feel like the double rainbow guy right about now. Every 5 steps I take I look at the sunrise and every time I cry. Double rainbow all the way!!

6 AM. Reached Gilman's Point!! OMFG I'm finally here. I'm crying. My heart is pounding. I feel like I just won a gold medal or some shit. I can't stop crying but I have to stop myself because

there isn't too much oxygen. Keep it together. I take pictures of my accomplishment. But...this isn't the tallest peak in Africa, it's Uhuru and it's 2 hours away, another 3.7 miles. There is no time to rest. The weather was getting worse and quickly. You have to decide now said Stanley. At this point 7 of us had made it to Gilman's and only 4 of them wanted to continue. I debated it in my head. I had minutes to decide. My legs and lungs accused me of being a Nazi and said I was on my own. I responded, f#@k you I didn't come this far not to go all the way! Twende mzungu!

6:30 AM. I'm instantly regretting my decision. It's -23 degrees F. Holy f#%k holy shit FML!!! My hands and feet are freezing. I want to turn around. Paul tells me to hand him my back pack. I'm a bit relieved but still...I'm walking like a hammered penguin. I'm delirious. I'm dehydrated. The water in my bottles is freezing, chugging it makes me colder. No I don't want water, no I don't want biscuits. I want my Mami. I should turn around. I tried, I really tried, it's ok I don't have to go all the way. Who the fk do I think I am? Rambo? Chuck Norris? Just give up...go back...fk it, I did the best I could. But I don't stop. I hear my dad saying "Keep on trucking baby" and I do.

7:30 AM. It's a bit of a blur for me. There was so much snow and rocks and more snow and more rocks and yellow snow and goddamn rocks...I was stumbling, resting every 3 steps on my hiking stick, aka my holy shit stick. I'm fading. Paul takes me by the arm. We are walking pole pole, arm in arm. I'm fading. I imagine myself being arm in arm with my dad on my wedding day. Everything around us is white. Snow. I imagine me being arm in arm with my future husband. I am comforted by these thoughts...for a whole 5 minutes until I stumble and almost eat ass. No it's not my wedding day...it almost feels like I'm walking the plank towards my death. I get it Guy, I'm paying for all my sins but really have I been that bad? F&\$k meeee!!

8 AM. We made it!!! We f^#king made it!!! I'm standing with my worn out calloused feet on Uhuru, the tallest peak of the tallest freestanding mountain in Africa!!! 19k feet above the clouds!!! Holy fkn shit!! I am indeed Jorge Medina's daughter! I did it! I fkn did it! No but really, I wasn't this excited. I was way too exhausted to be overcome by joy, instead I wanted to just take the damn picture and jump off the side of the mountain so I wouldn't have to trek all the way back down which would be another 4 hours. Can I die now? Really can I? I've had a good life. This would be a great way to go...Loren climbed Kili and jumped from the tallest peak. No. Bro. F-M-L. I have to walk back, I have way too much to live for. Ok Joel Olsteen STFU. I hate my life right now.

Descent. The way down was ridiculous. The incline was really steep but the good thing is that the faster you descend the more oxygen you get into your lungs; hence, your muscles start functioning again. 4 hours later we are back in Kibo hut. When we arrived we were greeted by the other guides and porters. They all hugged us and congratulated us for making it to Uhuru. Stanley hugged me really hard, gave me a kiss and said "You see mzungu, I told you you would make it. You are very strong!" It was a beautiful moment. I won't reiterate how exhausted I was, let's just say I felt like lieutenant Dan from Forrest Gump, after he lost his legs. We rested all of 30 min ate a light meal and trekked back to Horombo, a 3 hour hike under sleet. FMFL!!! I was the last one to arrive. I walked with Paul the entire time. We chatted for hours. Our favorite music is Reggae. I played him some of the old school joints and we were jamming to Barrington Levy, Shabba Ranks, etc. Paul has a farm besides his job as a mountain guide. He sells his

produce to the local market when he's not on the mountain. He's 34 and not married because financially he's not ready. He must buy a house before having a wife. He would love to travel but has no money to do so. He asked me about my culture and how we get married. I explained it to him and told him that men didn't have to pay dowries. He was surprised. I told him in America I'm not a mzungu and he didn't understand. I explained to him how black folk in the U.S. make a distinction between white and Hispanics. I think he got it. Paul was the reason I made it to Uhuru. Without him I highly doubt I would have made it. I am forever grateful for Mr. P.

Finale. The next day was a 12 mile descent back to Marangu gate. Easy, after climbing that filthy animal. Got back to the hotel and took about a 30 minute shower moaning the whole time. I can't even describe how filthy I was. Damn that was the best shower...EVER! In the afternoon we bought a round of beer for the guides and porters, those poor souls. My porter's name was Jackson. I gave him some of my unused thermals and socks and my balaclava, I told him to wash it because it was full of snot and saliva. True story. I don't think he understood me but I guess he'll find out when he rocks it with peste a boca. Sorry Ms. Jackson. El pobre. All of us had some beers while we got our certificates. We laughed for hours talking about how we lost our dignities throwing up and peeing in front of each other. Oh, Africa! It was a beautiful experience overall. Not only because I did something that was incredibly difficult and succeeded but because I did it side by side with some really beautiful people. In just 5 days we shared so much and accomplished something so memorable. Even if we never see each other again, I will never forget my group, our guides, my porter, and most of all, Kili.

"After climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb" - Mandela