

## **KILIMANJARO - An unforgettable experience! Nov 2007- Neeta Patel (UK)**

The journey to the top started at the beginning of this year when three friends (Dharmi, Hansa and Indira) and I signed up to do a charity trek to climb Kilimanjaro. We were raising funds for the charity 'Bridge2Aid', based in Mwanza, Tanzania. We had nine months to get fit, both mentally and physically in preparation for the ascent in September.

I am no stranger to keeping fit as I regularly swim and believe that a fit body and mind are very important for our well-being. We all trained in our own way initially. I joined the local gym to improve my stamina and strength and continued swimming regularly. We knew that good preparation would be the key to our success in conquering the Kili.

Disaster struck in February, while I was on holiday skiing. I broke my leg below the knee and had to have a metal plate inserted into the tibia bone. My initial concern was whether I would recover sufficiently and then of course, I would need to train harder. I put the thought out of my mind and concentrated on being positive. In a way, this accident had made me more determined to climb the Kili.

My recovery was uneventful and after 10 weeks, good news, I was given the go-ahead to start back to work and also to begin with gentle training. My consultant signed me fit to do the trek in June and I was overjoyed. My leg was feeling fairly strong but I would still need to be careful.

As part of the training we were told to do some hill walking. We managed to climb Mount Snowdon twice and also went to the South Downs coastal area. Locally, we went on long walks together carrying our backpacks to get used to the weight that we would be carrying on the actual trek itself.

The long anticipated day arrived. We had our kit bags packed and the excitement was mounting. The journey to Kilimanjaro went well but we were pretty tired on arrival at the hotel. We were met by our guide, Henk, who worked for Classic Tours. They were the tour company who had organised the trek for Bridge2Aid. After a de-briefing we retired for a good sleep. We would be starting the trek the following morning.

The day dawned bright and sunny and we were all in good spirits. I had to pinch myself that I was actually here and about to start on my first real adventure of a lifetime. We followed the Marangu route up the mountain which had three camps. The first camp was Mandara and would take 4-5 hours to reach. As we started to walk it was emphasised that the pace had to be very slow (that's Pole-Pole in Swahili) and that nobody was allowed to go past the lead guide (John). It was a gentle ascent through lush rainforest. We were surrounded by an incredible variety of towering trees, giant ferns and wild flowers. I was expecting to hear the chattering of Colobus monkeys but surprisingly it was very peaceful.

On arrival at Mandara we quickly organised ourselves into the huts where we would be sleeping and then set off again to walk a further 100metres up to the Maundi crater. The reason for doing this is to help with acclimatisation. It is important to climb a little higher than the camp each day and then to sleep low as this helps on the following day's trek. We were at 2744m.

Day 2 was an early start. The sun was shining and we would be walking uphill for 7-8 hours to reach the second camp, Horombo. We passed through more rainforest but gradually the landscape started to change into a more rugged and rocky terrain. The trees disappeared and the vegetation consisted of more bracken bushes and mountain flowers. We saw our first glimpse of the magnificent peaks of Mawenzi and Kibo. I felt a real sense of accomplishment on reaching

Horombo Camp. There was another acclimatisation trek which was quite steep and rocky. We were now at 3761m.

On day 3, an acclimatisation trek of 5 hours followed the upper Kibo trail to Zebra Rock at 4000m. This was a beautiful rock formation with black and white striations. A further 200m climb lead us to an observation point where we got spectacular views of the peaks and the saddle trail which we would be walking the following day. We also got sight of the next camp called Kibo.

I arose early on day 4 to see the sunrise. The clouds looked so fluffy around us that it was hard to imagine how high we really were. A very long day was ahead of us as we would be following the lower Kibo trail across the saddle. This terrain was almost desert-like with mountain flora and fauna consisting of giant cacti and lobelia trees. It was very windy and getting much colder. We saw a large sand twister which was amazing as I had never seen one before. It disappeared up high into the clouds. After 7 hours of walking we arrived at Kibo camp which was much more basic than the previous two camps. A further acclimatisation trek followed on arrival and I found this difficult due to tiredness and the effects of altitude causing my heart to beat a lot faster. We were now at 4732m. The following day we would be ascending to the summit.

Summit day arrived and we were all quietly nervous. The morning involved another acclimatisation trek to 5000m after which we would prepare for our ascent to the summit that evening. I was unable to sleep as my mind was racing with constant thoughts about the challenge ahead. I had done enough reading to know that this was going to be the most steepest and difficult part of the trek so far.

We awoke at 9.30pm and layered up as it was absolutely freezing. The ascent was very, very slow due to the altitude and we only had head torches lighting our way as we zigzagged up the slope. When I looked back I could see a trail of lights snaking behind me. It was a beautiful sight in the otherwise complete darkness. The guides helped us along by singing mountain songs in Swahili as they effortlessly walked up the slope. This helped to lift our spirits. My heart was beating much faster to cope with the effects of the altitude and this was quite frightening but I kept on going at a steady pace. I was determined to get up there. I reached Gilman's Point on the crater rim at an altitude of 5685m and I was feeling exhausted.

It was still dark and the sun had not yet risen. I rested for just a few minutes to take a photo before continuing onto Uhuru Peak which was a further 200m at 5895m. I knew that it would still take 2 hours to reach Uhuru. I dug deeper in myself to find the energy to keep on going and carried on around the rim of the crater. The landscape was rocky but so beautiful. I tried to take it all in, but started to feel very emotional as we got closer to the summit. Seeing the wooden boards in front of me when we finally arrived was too much. I started to cry with tears of joy, relief and a very real sense of achievement. I knew how hard I had worked to get to this point and it had all been worth it. My leg was feeling fine, the sun was shining, and I didn't have a headache or feel nauseous. I was on the 'Roof of Africa' looking out over the clouds and the spectacular glacier.

Our unforgettable experience is etched in our minds forever. One cannot underestimate what a huge challenge we took on and how being prepared for the challenge was so important. Fitness was only a part of the whole experience as a will to succeed helped the final drive to reach the summit. I have learnt that 'Where there is a will there is always a way'. The African proverb is right- Adversity is your best friend, because it introduces you to yourself!

Bridge2Aid are a dental and community development charity working in Tanzania to alleviate dental suffering and to improve the lives of the 'Maskini' people who live on the streets. Many are disabled and suffer from leprosy. I was one of the first UK dentists who went out to Tanzania in 2004 to help train Rural Clinical Officers to perform extractions of teeth and I myself extracted over 100 teeth in the course of the 10 days that I spent there. Bridge2Aid now have a Dental Volunteer Programme running three times a year but also invite non-dentists who would like to volunteer, to help improve the facilities at a community centre for the homeless called Bukumbi. The experience was very rewarding and left me with a sense of fulfilment that I really did make a difference to the lives of many individuals.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all my family and friends for their support in helping me achieve my goal and to all the people who sponsored me to help me reach the target of £2800 (which is the minimum sponsorship required). I eventually raised £3500 and the money will make a huge difference to the people of Tanzania.

The whole experience was very rewarding for us all leaving us with a sense of fulfilment and for me, a great sense of personal achievement!

**Dr Neeta Patel**

*(Neeta is the daughter of Keshavlal J Patel)*

