

Multnomah Village resident ventures to climb Africa's highest mountain

POSTCARD FROM KILIMANJARO

By Maria Thi Mai

Last December I traded my bike shoes for hiking boots. In the dead of winter and the shortest days of the year, I stepped out my door in Multnomah Village at 5:30 a.m. and walked to work.

For two months I trekked back and forth over Terwilliger Boulevard. Each step brought me closer to a childhood dream. These 10-mile a day treks were all about conditioning just so I could check one last continent off my bucket list—Africa.

Our adventure started in Portland and then on to Seattle, Dubai, Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, and Mt. Kilimanjaro. Three days and a series of calamities later, we finally arrived in Moshi, Tanzania. Here we met our guides and prepared to reach a new high, and I mean that literally.

Thanks to a friend's nephew who hooked us up with Gladys Adventures while in the Peace Corps, we had the best tour company in all of Tanzania. Gladys Adventures is a rare breed of successful women-owned tour companies.

Gladys and her staff provide custom tours with Tanzanian kindness. When we first met Gladys she hugged us like family.

A day after our arrival, we repacked our bags, separating climbing gear from safari clothes and handed two 25-pound duffle bags to our porters. Let the adventure begin.

Climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro takes a village. We had nine porters, two guides, a cook and a waiter for a total of 13 people to help get just the two of us up the mountain. Let me say that again. We had 13 people supporting just the two of us. We felt like royalty.

With porters carrying all our gear, all we had to do was carry a small daypack with water and an extra jacket and walk "poly poly." Walking poly poly is the Swahili word for slow slow. We were reminded of

this for the next 6 days and 40 some odd miles.

Without a doubt the hardest part of the climb is "Summit Day". Up until this time our days went like this: get up about 6:00 a.m., eat, pack and hike about four to five hours. We then rest, have lunch, then do an acclimatization hike for another two to three hours.

These first four days took us from about 7,000 feet to 15,000 feet. Kibo Hut is the base camp on the Rongai route and where we prepared for Summit Day that is really Summit Night.

After hiking for about five hours we arrived at base camp in the early afternoon. At 15,000 feet I didn't have much of an appetite and found myself out of breath walking 50 yards to the bathroom and back to our tent.

Nonetheless, we rested and prepared for our midnight ascent. When we awoke at about 11:00 p.m. and crawled out of our tent, the full moon illuminated tiny lights twisting up the mountain like constellations.

I asked our guide, August, what time did they start to be that far up the mountain when we hadn't even started. He calmly said, they might be going slower and not to worry. He was right.

Just when I didn't think I could walk any slower, August and Ignas slowed the pace down even further as the gravel rock crunched beneath our feet. Walking poly poly we crept higher, from 15,000 feet to Gilman's Point at 17,000 feet.

From here to the summit, you listen to your breath and concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other. No singing. No talking. Just breathing.

As the moon gives way to day-break, we see hundreds of people converging from the other routes to the spine of Mt. Kilimanjaro. Excitement rises. We are almost there. Yes, we did it – I celebrate my seventh continent on the summit of Mt. Kilimanjaro.

Now that we have reached the summit, you'd think the story ends.



Maria Thi Mai, with guide Ignas Kimath, en route to Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, Feb. 10. (Photo by Kenyon Fink)

Not so. After taking the ubiquitous photos and video wishing everyone a Happy Valentine's Day, Kenyon, my boyfriend, stoops down, starts digging through his pack and mumbles something about one more pic.

Agitated with the growing hoards of people, I say, "Let's go, I'm getting chilled." Our guides, August and Ignas, huddle close and start singing "One Love" and Kenyon's numb fingers hold up a shiny ring. Truly surprised, I say "yes" and we all cry tears of joy. I later learned, Kenyon had been choreographing and rehearsing the whole way up.

Now back in Multnomah Village, I can proudly say, my bucket list is nearly full.

Editor's Note: Where in the world are you going? Don't forget to send us a postcard! Travel essays and photos for "Postcards" are welcome. Email essays as Word document attachments and limit essays to 500 words. Email color

or black & white photos at least 3 x 5 at 300 dots per inch. The Post welcomes reader response.



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