

Trekking to the Roof of Africa

In the Field
By Amber Travsky

Mount Kilimanjaro rises above the savannah of Tanzania, looking like a scoop of ice cream poking above the green basin. Located only three degrees south of the equator, it is the highest point in Africa and the tallest freestanding mountain on earth.

Laramie resident Michael Day has viewed the peak repeatedly while on one of his many safari treks to Tanzania. He said he's visited Tanzania about five times over the past 10 years and was always drawn to the mountain.

"It was always just there even when I couldn't see it due to cloud cover," Day said. "The mountain is such a unique beast and is just beautiful."

The mountain beckoned to Day. On his safari trip last summer, he decided he needed to trek to the summit of Kilimanjaro and started making plans to attempt the summit this June.

"It would just be a shame not to do it," Day said. "As we get older, it is tempting not to do things like this so I decided I just needed to make it happen."

Now at 71 years young, Day is an accomplished trekker, having made it to the base camp of Mount Everest five years ago. That was to an elevation of 18,193 feet. He figured since he made it that high he would be just fine to go just a bit higher, to 19,344 feet, at the summit of Kilimanjaro.

Day's hiking companions included a friend from Montana and three from Tanzania. The group of five was joined by 18 porters who carried gear and assisted along the way. Using a trekking company is standard procedure for scaling Kilimanjaro since the outfitter secures the needed permits, makes necessary hotel reservations, and arranges porters to carry the bulk of the gear.

Unlike the highest points on the other continents, "Kili" looks like a benign and inviting dome. The mountain lacks crevasses or ice walls and the climb to the top is completely non-technical, requiring no crampons or ice axes.

This seemingly easy approach lures hikers from around the globe. About 15,000 people trudge up the mountain annually. Looks can be deceiving, though. Of those who attempt the summit, only 40 percent reach it, and each year about 10 people die trying.

Day's group opted for the Machame route which took seven days, starting at a base elevation of 6,000 feet. The first five days included some acclimatization where the route climbed to 15,000 feet before dropping back down to 13,000 feet – and then back up again the next day. Day Six was the big day to get to the summit – and the longest day.

"We started out around midnight," Day said. "It was a beautiful starlit night but quite chilly with the temperature only around five degrees." Day said they were lucky, though, since the weather included sleet and high winds just the night before.

"The weather was quite bad when we went to sleep," Day said. "But it all stopped before we headed out in the middle of the night."

Day said there is a Swahili phrase "pole pole" which translates to "slowly slowly" and that is the secret to a successful summit.

"If you go slow enough, the body seems to get used to it," Day said. He recalled passing other groups where the high elevation took a toll with headaches and retching. Day felt fine, though, with no ill effects from the high altitude.

It took nearly nine hours to reach the summit and Day said it was far from being a piece of cake.

“There is a point where everything about you wants to stop,” Day said. He related to the same feelings when running marathons or doing other extended physical challenges. “You just have to think of something else and keep going.”

Day said the summit at Uhuru Peak was stunning. He was so in awe that he spent extra time taking photographs and, as others in his group headed down, he told them he’d be along soon and catch up.

Coming down off the summit turned into a real challenge. Day felt rushed to catch up to his companions and, in hindsight, didn’t take the slow, methodical approach that he did on the way up the mountain.

“It beat the heck out of me,” Day said. “The route was still quite rough with lots of scree and, as we got lower, dust and heat.”

That day, Day hiked from midnight to 6 p.m., for a total of 18 hours. When he finally stopped he admits to complete physical and mental exhaustion.

“I felt so good at the summit,” Day said. “But coming down was one of the toughest things I’ve ever done - but, I did it. Next time, though, I’d like to spend more time at the summit. Maybe I’ll do that to celebrate my 74th birthday.”