**Climbing Kilimanjaro: the good, bad and ugly sides to conquering Africa’s highest peak**

September is not only the best time to summit the 5,895-metre mountain, it is also the most popular, so choose your route carefully to avoid the crowds

By **Tim Pile** 6 Sep 2018

The Good

You’ve collected the signatures, chosen a charity to support with your endeavours and booked flights for the holiday of a lifetime. You’ve studied Tanzanian sunshine and rainfall statistics and scheduled your trek to coincide with a full moon. The result of this meticulous preparation is an eight-day assault on Mount Kilimanjaro, culminating in a summit attempt on the moonlit evening of September 25, 2018.

This month is generally accepted to be the best time to conquer the 5,895-metre peak, voted Africa’s leading tourist attraction at the World Travel Awards for the past three years. Favourable conditions are only part of the picture, however. September is also an ideal month to combine the climb with a Serengeti wildlife safari and visit to the island of Zanzibar.

The first thing to know about reaching the summit of the world’s highest free-standing mountain is that no mountaineering skills are required. Any reasonably fit adult should be able to walk up without experiencing anything more than the minor altitude sickness symptoms of fatigue, dizziness or shortness of breath.

The hike is best attempted over seven or eight days and there are numerous routes; some drier and busier, others wetter but spectacularly scenic. The landscape changes as the trails thread upwards through a range of climatic zones, from dense rainforest to heath and moorland, alpine desert and, finally, arctic ice cap. And if all goes to plan, you should easily end up with a treasured selfie atop the Roof of Africa.

The Tanzanian government requires trekkers to be accompanied by a registered, licensed guide. Porters and cooks make up the team and within minutes of commencing, you’ll realise how crucial they are to overall success. Who else did you think would be carrying the camping equipment, chairs and tables, purified water, cooking stoves and gas bottles, mobile toilet, oxygen cylinders and first aid kits? And if you find yourself gasping in the thin air, they will offer to balance your backpack on their head as well. Best of all, when you eventually reach camp after a gruelling day, the porters will already be there to greet you with a song and a hot meal.

About 50,000 people set out to climb Kilimanjaro annually (about 50 times the number attempting an ascent of Mount Everest’s 8,848 metres), and there are at least 200 licensed operators to choose from. Deciding whether to book with a local outfit or an international company comes down to personal preference but be sure to check the company’s success rate for reaching the summit.

Ah yes, the summit. Witnessing Kilimanjaro’s glaciers illuminated by the full moon is enough to bring some breathless trekkers to tears. The moonlight also helps with visibility on the final overnight push to the top but new-moon expeditions are increasingly popular among stargazers who appreciate the dark nights as they contemplate the splendour of the heavens.

The Bad

September might be the best month to climb Africa’s loftiest peak, weather-wise, but it is also the busiest, so pick your route carefully. An important statistic to consider when choosing your trail is that about a third of the 50,000 people attempting to summit Kilimanjaro each year don’t make it and the reason they turn back is altitude sickness. Success rates are much higher for trekkers using the slower Northern Circuit Route or the Lemosho Route, both of which provide more opportunity to get used to the thin air. The other option is to spend longer on the mountain and obey the mountaineer’s maxim of climbing high but sleeping low.

Unfortunately, many ascents are rushed; not least because the Kilimanjaro permit system is based on a daily charge, instead of a one-off fee regardless of time spent on the mountain. Some low-budget operators agree to hurry their clients through in five or even four days rather than turn down the business but, without enough time to accli­ma­tise, there’s a greater chance of failure.

No one except the Tanzania National Park Authority knows exactly how many people die on Kilimanjaro each year and, fearful of jeopardising the popularity of such a lucra­tive attraction, they are not telling. Best estimates are that eight to 10 climbers perish annually from altitude-related illnesses, falls or pneumonia.

However, this figure relates only to foreign tourists and doesn’t include the deaths of porters. The high elevation is less of a problem for locals but they are under far greater stress due to the heavy loads they carry, meagre rations, inappropriate clothing (flip-flops!) and inadequate sleeping arrange­ments. There’s a certain irony in the idea of wealthy trekkers struggling summit-wards to raise funds for the needy, as many do, while placing their lives in the hands of a team of Tanzanians who exist on the edge of poverty.

A Kilimanjaro ascent doesn’t come cheap. A summit attempt with a reputable firm costs about US$3,000, minus flights, but shopping around for the cheapest deal is likely to result in a skeleton support team of overworked, underpaid porters, and will ultimately affect your chances of making it to the top. The cost is the reason why many people choose to meet it by raising funds for charity. Cynics question the approach, claiming it is simply a way of getting a free holiday, and suggest it would be more sensible to collect the sponsor­ship money but skip the expense of travelling to Africa and donate the entire amount to charity.

If you are still determined to help the underprivileged, consider offering a contribution to the Kilimanjaro Porters Assistance Project (KPAP), which aims to provide fair and ethical treatment for mountain workers. A list of trekking companies working in partnership with KPAP can be found at kiliporters.org.

Lastly, while you *can* train for the climb before heading to Tanzania, it is impossible to simulate the conditions of high altitude. So if you do suffer from nausea or exhaustion and end up throwing in the towel, don’t be disheartened. Kilimanjaro will still be there next year.

The Ugly

Heavy snowfall this year has helped replenish Kilimanjaro’s glaciers, which provide meltwater to those living and farming in the shadow of the mountain. Whether it is too little, too late is debatable – scientists say the glaciers have been shrinking for decades as a result of climate change and deforestation.