

TREKKING THROUGH TANZANIA

TAKING ACTION FOR CHARITY, FOUR WOMEN SET OFF ON AN EXPEDITION TO KILIMANJARO, AFRICA'S HIGHEST MOUNTAIN. BY JASMINE WONG



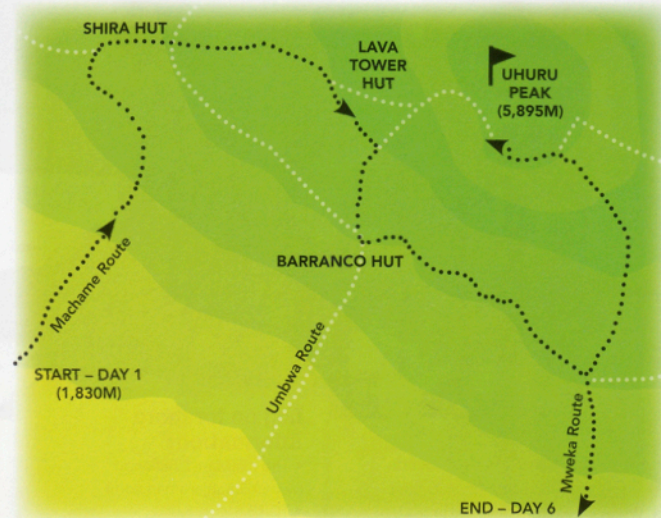
The TCRP Founders and catalysts – all set to conquer the mountain.

CONQUERING KILIMANJARO

The Kili[Man] Challenge is a three-part race that includes a six-day climb of Mount Kilimanjaro (the highest peak in Africa at 5,895m), a 200km mountain bike race around the base of the mountain on days 7 and 8, and finally the 42km Kilimanjaro Marathon on the ninth day. This is the most arduous adventure that the TCRP founders (Zhang Tingjun, Alexandra Toh, Anina Boshoff and myself) have embarked on. Joining them on the ascent were seven other TCRP catalysts from Singapore. Here's a peek into the group's travel journal.

PART 1: SCALING MOUNT KILIMANJARO

With each of our backpacks weighing around 8kg, our group hiked over 70km in six days to reach the roof of Tanzania and return.



DAY 1 We entered a lush temperate rain forest, with emerald mosses and lichens clothing the tree trunks, and huge ferns growing beneath thick foliage. The undergrowth on both sides of the trail was abloom with flowers. It was an apt immersion into the six-day journey for our group of city dwellers. Even the intermittent rain did little to dampen our spirits. After a seven-hour hike, we arrived at our first campsite: a village of tents at an altitude of 3,030m.

DAY 2 We continued our ascent in the early morning. The verdant rain forest soon gave way to the quiet beauty of an open moorland. Surrounded by giant heathers, we saw the top of Mount Kilimanjaro in the near distance. After six hours on foot, we reached our second campsite (3,850m). Nestled in our tents under the stars and the looming vista of snow-capped Kilimanjaro, we fell asleep with anticipation in our hearts. It was an awe-inspiring sight, and our excitement grew at the thought of standing atop that peak.

DAY 3 As we made our way up, we found ourselves in the desolate surroundings of an alpine desert. Void of vegetation, the landscape was a harsh, dry land of rocks and scree (debris). The thin air and higher altitude began to take their toll on us, magnified by the accumulated fatigue from the past days' effort. We made our way towards Lava Tower, which at 4,640m, was enshrouded by clouds. It felt surreal. We also started to feel the biting cold and put on our gloves and thicker jackets. It took another eight hours of hiking before we could call it a day.

DAY 4 It was the start of a long day as we planned to hike continuously into Day 5 with a short break in-between. Some of us were already suffering symptoms of altitude sickness such as headaches and appetite loss. Despite the discomfort, we soldiered on, scaling a very steep wall of volcanic rock formation, then descending into

The adventurers also met with Maasai warriors.



Jasmine with the Amani children

Karanga valley, before ascending into an increasingly inhospitable landscape. We approached the bleak and barren Barafu camp after eight hours, greeted by blustery winds that tore at the tents. It had also begun to snow.

After a three-hour rest, the group was up again at 11pm to brave the elements for our hike to the summit. We put on all the clothing that we'd brought, each of us swaddled in at least four to five layers of thermal wear. Like a small army of Michelin man-like hikers, we made our way up to Kibo by the light of our headlamps.

DAYS 5 AND 6 The going was tough – the winds howled relentlessly as we threaded our way laboriously behind our guides. The air was so thin and

“The looming vista of snow-capped Kilimanjaro was an awe-inspiring sight.”

MAIN PHOTO ALEXANDRA TOH OTHER PHOTOS COURTESY OF WEI CHUA

VENTURE OUT

cold that even breathing sapped our energy. Our fingers and toes went numb and the water in our drinking tubes froze. But we plodded on into the seemingly endless night.

Then somewhere in the distance, the first faint rays of the sun licked a pale orange line on the horizon. Our hearts leapt as we saw the Kibo peak towering before us. Yet what seemed so near was still so far away with our slow progress. We pressed on. We stumbled. And then we were there – on top of Mount Kilimanjaro, 5,895m above the world!

The hike down from the summit was steep and demanded the last ounces of our energy and concentration. Our ankles rolled dangerously close to sprains as we battled the treacherous loose volcanic scree. The ascent and return had taken us over 14 hours. We were bused when we got back to Barafu camp.

Falling behind schedule, we could only afford a two-hour mid-afternoon break before we continued our downward journey to the campsite at Mweka. It was a sore but jubilant group who finally arrived in the dark. After a night's rest, we headed out of the Kilimanjaro National Park.

PART 2: MOUNTAIN BIKING

DAYS 7 AND 8 After the climb, our four TCRP founders took to the foothills of Mount Kilimanjaro on wheels. The scorching sun smote us with affection – we were thoroughly burnt despite slapping on sunscreen diligently. We toiled up and down undulating slopes,



and were smothered in dust clouds raised by trucks that rumbled past us. We braved countless potholes and endured numerous punctures. Through it all, we enjoyed the bright smiles and greetings from the locals we rode past.

The race ended at a Maasai cultural village where we were treated to a stunning performance of the athletic prowess of the Maasai warriors.

PART 3: THE KILIMANJARO MARATHON

DAY 9 After eight arduous days, the four of us dragged our tired bodies out of bed in the wee hours of dawn. No matter how tough it'd get, we were determined to complete the challenge. Nothing was going to stand in our way.

The marathon course wound through Moshi, beginning with a stretch along the busy road that connected the town with Dar Es Salaam. It was the main thoroughfare and we ran alongside huge trucks,

buses and curious crowds who had gathered to watch the race. To many of the locals, running was necessary to get from place to place quickly, but few consider the activity as pleasure.

About two hours into the marathon, the sun had risen high. It was a continuous uphill slope for the second half of the marathon (the 20th to 33rd kilometre). We ploughed on and

Log on for more information:

- The Kili[Man] Challenge (www.kilimanjaronan.com)
- TCRP (www.thechainreactionproject.com)

counted the remaining minutes. We knew this race was not going to be easy and we'd almost met our match.

Picture our delight when we saw the marker for the 42nd kilometre and knew that the end was near. Yes, we had done it!

BEYOND THE ADVENTURE

Amani Children's Centre (www.amanikids.org) is our adopted beneficiary for this trip. Based in the town of Moshi (at the foothill of Kilimanjaro), it is a centre for the street children in that region. Beyond looking after these children, Amani also has programmes aimed at reuniting them with their families. Such efforts are only possible when the problem of poverty can be eradicated in the families. As such, Amani also helps equip the parents and families with skills so that they earn enough to sustain themselves.

TCRP raised more than S\$30,000 towards buying a plot of farmland for the centre. The produce from this farm will go towards feeding the children, thus reducing the operational costs for the centre, as well as offering the opportunity to impart agricultural knowledge and skills to the children.

