

Two Weeks, Two Continents and 20 Thousand Miles or It's A Long Way to Tanzania

Forward: It has been my honor to know Barton Foutz for 20 plus years. We first met by appointment to discuss his advertising needs. My question to him was "what makes you different from any other dentist in the valley?" A more humble individual you will never meet, but what fascinated me most is that he is a fourth-generation dentist. I was impressed by his professionalism and his family history and so took him on as a client.

Over the years he would be out of touch now and again because he was either involved with his Boy Scout duties here in Las Vegas or volunteering his dental services to young people in poverty-ridden villages in Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua.

So, it was no great surprise when he recently went missing again. When I caught up with him and asked where he had been, this is the story he told me.

Climbing the snow covered, dormant volcano Mount Kilimanjaro has been a life-long dream. Recently, that dream came true and I found myself in northeastern Tanzania. Kilimanjaro is not only the highest mountain on the African continent, but also the highest free-standing mountain in the world at 19,340 feet. After training for four months up in Kyle Canyon near Mt. Charleston, I felt I was physically ready and, more importantly perhaps, my psyche was set for the adventure.

September 14th was a Wednesday and D-Day. I met up with my buddy and brother-in-law Brent Ford and we departed Las Vegas for San Francisco to catch an international flight to London Heathrow, then on to Ethiopia and our final leg landed us at Kilimanjaro International Airport.

Now Friday, Brent and I were a bit travel weary but excited to spend our first night in the shadow of Kilimanjaro. Early the next morning, we checked out of our motel and drove to the entrance of the Marangu route at the 6000 foot level where we met our guides Frank and Laraa. After these two men gave us a thorough orientation, we pulled the required permits for the 50-mile roundtrip trek. At noon, the game was afoot. The four of us began our initial six miles through a dense, temperate rain forest to our first camp at about 9000 feet.

Like an old Tarzan movie come to life in Technicolor, hiking separately from us were our porters, each carrying up to 35 lbs of our gear, amazingly, on their heads. A cook and a waiter were also along to pamper us with three hot meals a day on our six-day journey – four days up, two days down.

The Marangu trail has the distinction of being the oldest and most established route. It's also the only one that uses huts instead of tents for overnight accommodation which Bwana Brent and I were grateful for. After a night's sleep and an early breakfast, we began a more steep hike through the remaining rainforest. The view changed as our path opened into a grassy moorland with stunning views of Kibo and Mawenzi peaks. I was pinching myself. Kilimanjaro was really happening.

"Polee-polee" is Swahili for slowly, slowly. That's the modus operandi to acclimatize to the altitude. Covering just over seven miles in seven hours, the test of the slow pace is to carry on a conversation without huffing and puffing. Climbing steadily through the moorlands, we reached the second camp, Horombo Huts at the 12,400 foot elevation mid-afternoon.

A few misty, high clouds were our daily companions, providing just enough shade but no threat of rain. At these elevations, when the sunsets give way to the night sky, the constellations put on breathtaking and unforgettable star shows. Looking down, the lights of capital city Moshi, put on another show. The beds in the huts were surprisingly comfortable or perhaps it was just the combination of eating well and tiring our bodies that made sleep so sweet.

Monday the 19th we enjoyed a rest day at Horombo. Sleeping in a bit, we continued acclimatizing with a day hike up to Zebra Rocks, a formation named after its dark and cream-colored stripes. We snapped photos and enjoyed a relaxing break before heading back to camp.

Bright and early the next morning, we continued the ascent towards our third camp at the base of Kibo peak. Leaving the moorland, we entered the unexpected alpine desert region. I had never been at such a high elevation and was pleasantly surprised by how good I felt. It is said that 50% of hikers have to turn back at this point due to altitude sickness.

The terrain changed yet again to volcanic scree, the loose, gravel-like debris. We covered about six miles in 7.5 hours moving "polee-polee" to reach Kibo camp and an altitude of 15,400 feet. It was early afternoon giving us time to rest before dinner and contemplate the summit ascent which would commence around midnight.

Our five hours of sleep was augmented by anticipation for the summit. We put on our warmest gear and started hiking up by headlamp. We allowed seven hours to climb the final 4000 feet. With 500 feet to go, we were stopped in our tracks by the dawn's rosy glow which soon sprang into the most gorgeous sunrise over Mwenzi peak.

Another hour and another mile along the rim brought us to the high point, Uhuru, at 19,341 feet. Clear, not too cold, and very little wind at 8:30 that morning, Glaciers and ice fields were all around us in the distance. A glorious day to make the summit named by the Maasi people "the House of God."

Less than an hour later, we started our descent. What had taken seven hours going up took less than 2 hours going down thanks to being able to "scree ski" down the steepest gravel and sand portions of the trail.

After resting a spell at Kibo camp and grabbing lunch, we continued down to Horombo huts. Along the way, my stomach started complaining. Probably something I ate at Kibo. It didn't improve overnight so the next morning we cut bait and the remaining 12 miles taking a jeep ride back down to the base. Perhaps an anti-climatic and a little disappointing finish, but discretion is still the better part of valor.

With Kilimanjaro accomplished, our African adventure continued with an amazing 3-part safari park tour that would have made Hemingway himself envious.

Friday morning we met up again with Frank our lead Kilimanjaro guide who morphed into our safari guide and introduced us to our driver. For the next three days, this duo made sure we got our fill of African wildlife.

Our vehicle was an African "tough-built" Toyota Land Cruiser specially designed for safaris. It had a pop-up top that allowed us to stand in the shaded fresh air to view the wildlife and capture them on camera. Sweet.

Tarangire National Park was our first destination. We would drive a little bit, stop, pop the top, look around and take pictures until we were ready to move on and repeat.

Elephants, giraffes, a pride of lions with a recently killed wildebeest, and various antelope species from big to small were all in view. My binoculars let me get right in on the action, a telephoto lens got me almost as close as the binocs, and I even scored some video on my phone. Extraordinarily peaceful except for the lions eating the wildebeest, but even that felt a little like "The Lion King".

In the evening, we drove north to the Highview Hotel operated by our tour company. Located high above Karatu town, it had gorgeous views over the local coffee farms and surrounding hills.

Saturday dawned early and our guides drove us straight to Ngorongoro Crater -- the largest intact and unfilled volcanic caldera in the world. The floor of the caldera expands 100 square

miles and is 2000 feet below the rim. Only one way in and one way out on cobblestone roads. Aesthetically speaking, Ngorongoro Crater is a scenic wildlife “bowl”.

There were many wildebeest and zebras, punctuated with warthog, ostriches and the occasional elephant. We saw cape buffalo, hippopotamus, and hopeful lions. We even spied a black rhinoceros at a distance. Hippos were mistaken for big gray rocks in the waterways and ponds until they wiggled their ears. There is a very alkaline lake in the lowest part of the crater where migrating flamingos feed and maintain their sunrise pink plumage.

For safety, we were confined to the Land Cruiser until the designated lunch area where we met other touring groups plus one odd mascot. A large, 4 foot tall stork-like bird with a remarkable 2-foot bill wandered opportunistically around the picnic area, the chief of droppage. By far the largest mooching bird I've ever witnessed.

We made our way to the exit through some prime leopard habitat but, alas, we saw no trace of that elusive animal. This was our longest safari day and well worth it. We returned to the Highview for our final night's rest. We had dinner, packed our bags and touched base with family on wifi.

On Sunday the 25th, departure day. our bags were loaded into the vehicle and we set out for Lake Manyara National Park. Hornbills, small herds of elephants and troops of baboons were abundant as were gray-faced monkeys and blue monkeys. We spent only a couple of hours there since we had a flight to catch.

There was just enough time to visit a Maasai village built in the traditional way with brush corrals for the livestock and round mud huts for the families. Villagers performed their traditional greeting dance and demonstrated how they start fire with a stick, soft wood and elephant dung. They proudly showed us inside their huts and we shopped some of their wares for souvenirs.

Later, at the airport, we said goodbye to our trustworthy guides with much thanks and appreciation. After 36 hours of flights, we arrived on home soil.

My dream of climbing Kilimanjaro was eclipsed by the real, unforgettable, once-in-a-lifetime African adventure.

Closing Note: I asked Bart how he feels about his odyssey now that he's back home. He said, "I love traveling and I love challenges. Climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro was definitely a challenge. And being on the summit gave me a new perspective on my place in the overall scheme of things. I am humbled and grateful to be alive in this world of ours."