

African Understudy

The best chance of summiting a high mountain will usually start with acclimatisation either on the mountain itself or on a subsidiary mountain. A good example of this is when I first climbed Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, I'd already spent five days on Mt Kenya in Kenya to acclimatise.

I'd heard about Mt Meru a volcanic mountain peak close to Kilimanjaro before, but without giving it any real regard, I'd always considered it as just something to do as an acclimatisation peak before Kilimanjaro. However I'd been wrong to disregard this interesting peak which offers interest and adventure at every turn.



Working for a UK based expedition company I was to lead two Kilimanjaro expeditions on what is termed a 'back to back'. That is, one straight after the other. Both expeditions went to Mt Meru prior to going to Kilimanjaro.

Mt Meru is in Arusha National Park, about two hours drive from the town of Moshi – where we were based. It was September and everything looked dry and sun baked. There was red dust everywhere, and in the fields dust devils twisted high in the sky as the wind blew. High within the clouds we could make out the snow capped peak of Kilimanjaro it was *so* high, it looked like a magical land set in the sky. Soon we pulled off the main road and down a dirt road to the park gates to get our permit to enter the park and climb the mountain.

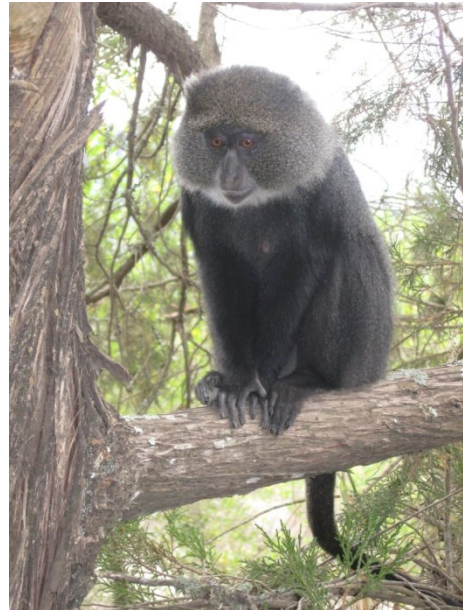


The bus skidded to a halt, a dust cloud enveloping us from the locked wheels. In front of us was a troop of baboons. Thirty or forty of these curious monkeys were making their way across the road. We all grabbed cameras and from the safety of the coach we took photos. To our right through a thorny hedge we saw a large grassy green plain. Here we were treated to views of big game –

giraffe, water buffalo, warthogs and zebra. It was an awesome sight. Large beasts grazing on the lush green grass, and going about their daily routines.

Again we took lots of photos as we felt that we were being treated to our own incidental safari. We carried on to Ngongongare Gate to pick up our permits (the official entrance to the park) and then onto the Park's ranger station.

At the ranger station, we ate our packed lunches being watched intently by some blue monkeys – who were desperate for a treat from our lunch bags. Our guides organised and arranged our loads. We were also assigned an armed ranger called James. We were going into the plains and scrubland of Mt Meru, full of potential danger from the animals. James and his rifle were accompanying us at all times on the mountain. Other groups of trekkers were arriving fresh faced and excited like ourselves and others were leaving the park; dusty and tired looking. There were shouts and a hive of activity as porter loads were arranged in piles. Then they were weighed on some scales and a note of the loads jotted down in a large ledger and the loads distributed amongst our thirteen porters. Each porter carried around twenty kilos.



Leaving the hustle and bustle of the ranger station we crossed the dirt track road and over a metal bridge crossing a wide fast flowing river. On the other side we passed through some acacia scrub and it was interesting to see the plants' defences from grazing; inch long thorns grew from the branches to protect the small green leaves. In the dust of the path we could make out giraffe tracks and we came across a large pile duiker spoor and tracks of this small shy antelope.

From the acacia scrub we entered a large green plain and were delighted to see buffalo, warthogs and giraffes. We spied a buffalo cow and her calf which was clearly taking its' first few wobbly steps. So it must have been born a few hours ago, perhaps at dawn. We left the plain and walked uphill leaving behind the 'circle of life' story of the plain. We picked our way on a well worn track through bush and open areas in the heat of the day. We stopped under the shade of some trees to finish off our lunches.



After a while we realised there was a putrid smell on the wind. After we moved off a few yards higher up the hill we came across the stripped carcass of a buffalo. James explained that it had been shot by a ranger a few days ago. Young male cape buffalos are

ousted out of the herd by the dominant male. They move higher up the mountain in the montaine forest. They get a pretty bad attitude from being ousted and James said they can be a real danger to people. If they don't move away from people after a warning shot; the second shot is aimed at them, to shoot them dead, before to one tonne animal charges.

After three hours we arrived at Mirikamba camp at 2,500 metres. Mirikcamba camp is a collection of huts some for sleeping, cooking and a large communal dining hall. I had to find the camp manager and arrange bunk beds for us in the sleeping huts. I found him and he showed us to two small rooms which slept four in each. Our guide Lazaro, and the rest of the porter team went over to their own hut and we settled in to our accommodation. We had a simple but filling meal in the dining room. There were several other teams eating in there and we were all treated to views out of the window of Kilimanjaro in the sunset.

The trek out of camp early the next morning was cold – we were shrouded in damp, wet cloud, as we made our way through the montaine forest. We picked our way around, and under boughs of enormous trees, which were draped in grey/green beard moss glistening with moisture in the cloud. After a few hours the sun burnt off the cloud and the day began to heat up. The vegetation changed as the trees gave way to alpine scrub. Today was a big day, firstly we had to get to Saddle Hut at 3,500 metres, then scale 'Little Meru' peak, and then later that night launch our assault on 'Big Meru'.

Things were alot
quieter at Saddle Hut.

We settled into yet
more bunked rooms
and I secured the use
of a small dining
room for us. Soon
several teams arrived
into camp, they were
dusty and tired from
their nights' efforts in
scaling Big Meru.

They told us how
hard it was and I
think some of them

weren't properly prepared for the task they'd just undertaken.



We had lunch in our private dining room and left soon after bound for 'Little Meru' at 3,800 metres. We left Saddle Hut and then went up a steep dusty winding path, after about forty five minutes we made to a broken rocky ridge and then to the rocky summit; a sign proclaimed the peak and its' altitude. The views in front of us were of Rhino Point and the route we were taking later that night to Big Meru. Below was Saddle Camp. We could easily see the large circular ash cone beneath the broken caldera rim; evidence of this once active volcano at the bottom of the Rift Valley. It was really impressive, though it seemed a long

route to the summit. Our other view was of the flat plain lands that spread as far as the eye could see.

It only took half an hour to get back to the huts. Where we packed in readiness for later, and got as much rest in as possible. After having an early dinner we were to have breakfast at midnight and leave at 1.00 am. Midnight came all too soon. I hadn't really slept, I had kept myself awake running through equipment lists and the route we were about to take. We left in the dark starlit night out of camp on yet another dusty trail. We climbed high up on a switch back path. It was steep and in the thinning altitude some of us were breathless.

We got to a wide rocky arête (a bit like a mini Lake District, Striding Edge) and after this and a little more height gain, we made it to Rhino Point. Once again there was a sign saying 'Rhino Point' on a rocky cairn. Also upon the rocky cairn were some animal bones and skulls, some I could tell were buffalo, none were Rhino. We rested here for a while, had something to eat and drink and then continued on descending part of the caldera lip to gain a long rocky face which we traversed. This rock face was steep and seemed to go on for a long time. It was hard to see the end, the light from our headtorches didn't shine that far. In some places we had to use our hands to steady ourselves. I had a rope in my pack just in case anyone of the team needed assistance.

Before long we cleared the rock face and down some rocky steps. The terrain changed to a narrow track of ash and pumice. The track gained height and the going was tough. The ash and pumice track, had a layering of frost. This made the going underfoot a bit easier, as the



ice held the ash together. We carried on and on, behind us I could see the silhouette of Rhino Point and under the starlight it did really look like the outline of a Rhino's head. I could make out its' ears, horn and snout.

Dawn was slowly breaking and we passed amongst some rocky gendarmes to get to a spot called 'Cobra Point' (no sign here!). We took a well earned break at Cobra Point. There were three things above the clouds us, Cobra Point, and Kilimanjaro. The sun was rising fast up out of the cloud next to Kilimanjaro; throwing golden red and orange



light upon the snows of Kibo the main mountain on which is Uhuru Peak the highest point of Kilimanjaro and Mawenzi to the right a smaller older volcano, the area between them known as 'The Saddle'. It was a jaw dropping sight to witness this, - a normal daily African routine seemed so immense and amazing to us. We busily snapped away with our cameras. There



was a sense of satisfaction and completeness in seeing what we had just witnessed. It was hypnotic watching the sun rise up, but we were finally drawn away, the desire to summit the mountain became stronger.

Leaving Cobra Point we carried on the ash pathway until we hit rock beneath our feet once again. High up above me, I saw the summit, I saw a flag pole and Tanzanian flag. The team was behind me

and I made a real effort to push on and get to the summit. We all found it hard going, we were well over 4,000 metres in altitude and the top was getting close, a few more rock steps and we were there, on a small flat area. There was a sign saying we were at Socialist Peak (or 'Big Meru' as it is commonly called) at 4,562 metres.



We were right on the volcano crater rim. Far beneath us was the collapsed caldera, complete with the ash cone. In the distance we could see Uhuru Peak and Mawenzi peaks of Kilimanjaro. There was the glisten of water with a curious pink ring around the water much nearer to us, perhaps ten miles away.

‘What’s that?’ I asked Lazaro. ‘Momella Lakes’ He replied, ‘yeah, but why are they pink?’ ‘Flamingos’ was the one word answer. I thought how many flamingos there must be, to see pink rings of them from this far away.

One of my clients Ben said ‘It would make my trip if we went to see the flamingos – I don’t care whether I summit Kilimanjaro or not’ he said earnestly. I said I’d see what I could do.

Close to the Tanzanian flag was a metal box containing a large visitors’ book. We took photos of each other and we signed the visitors’ book.

Relaxing on the summit we were very pleased to have made it to the top. We drank some water and ate some snacks, took in the last of the views, and turned to retrace our steps. Laid out beneath us was the long dusty path we had taken in the night. At least it was pretty much all downhill. When the slope allowed, we ran down the ash path, great clouds of dust blew up around us. Over the crater lip, we were given some good views of the ash cone – none of us had seen anything like it before.

Soon enough we scrambled over the rock face and in the sunlight wasn’t the challenge it had been in the night, and along more dusty slopes to Rhino Point. Once again we stopped to drink some more water and eat a few snacks. As we descended towards Saddle Hut, I saw something scamper across the path; I threw my walking poles to the floor and dived onto the creature, catching it in my hands. It was a green chameleon, which was quite harmless, put it on my arm and it walked in its’ jerky manner up my arm – rather disappointingly it didn’t turn from green to pink to blend in with my arm! We took some pictures and I carefully put it in a bush by the side of the path.

We arrived at Saddle Hut and had a well earned lunch. Our day didn’t stop there though, we had to pack our bags and make them ready for our porters. We then had to make our way back down to Mirikamba Camp. This seemed a long way down after summiting the mountain over a thousand metres above and now we had another thousand metres to go down to Mirikamba.

It took a long time to get down to the Camp, but it was good to walk through the lushness of the montaine forest and it was all downhill. It was good to get down and put our feet up and drink some well earned tea, pleased with ourselves for the effort and achievement for summiting. We had a celebratory dinner. After which I discussed with the group, tips. Tips



for the ranger, guide, and the porter team. We worked out what we were going to give out and counted out the money (in American Dollars) and put each persons' money into small brown envelopes.

After a very early night and a very heavy nights' sleep we left the camp, and instead of returning by the same path. We decided to leave via a longer route, that wasn't as steep and therefore easier on the knees on the way down. Soon after leaving the camp, we walked past many clumps of red hot poker plants – the red and orange and coloured flowers of these plants are familiar to many English gardens. Passing below the 3,000 metre rock face of Mt Meru, we saw several

giraffes eating foliage from the tops of trees they were unconcerned about us and moved off slowly.

We were following a dusty four wheel drive track. As this track turned a corner, James our ranger unshouldered his rifle and froze, 'buffalo' he said in his deep, but hushed voice. I didn't see it at first, but about thirty yards into the scrub was a huge male water buffalo. We all bunched up close to James and carried on walking carefully and quietly. The buffalo raised its' head and stared at us. It licked its' nose and I could see saliva dripping off its' tongue, lips, and nose. It tensed, muscles rippling down its' flanks. This was a real 'fight or flight' moment, none of us knew which one the buffalo was going to do. Suddenly it lurched to its' right and was off, disappearing and crashing through the bush. It had of course, and luckily for us, decided 'flight'.

We continued along the track descending slowly, enjoying the heat and the shade of the trees. In front of us was a three inch wide black line that seemed to cross the track from one side to the other. We investigated this odd sight. 'What is it?' I said to James, and both Lazaro and



James answered back in unison; 'Siafu'. *Siafu* or safari ants are the stuff of old black and white horror films. These ants move through the forest hunting anything from small insects to rodents and lizards. Wherever they go they strip the forest of all life.

They're well known to the Masai people who look at them with respect and reverence. When an army of siafu come through

villages they clean out all the insects in houses and fields. It was clear there were two types of ants on patrol. The many workers and on the outlier areas of the swarming line; soldiers with huge jaws. Apparently the soldiers jaw are so large and strong that the Masai and Chagga tribes use the soldiers to clamp shut deep cuts and gashes just like medical stitches. They place the soldier so its' jaws are around the cut the soldiers jaws clamp shut and they twist the body of the soldier ant off, leaving the head and jaws behind!

I got too close to the marauding ants and as I knelt down to get some close up photos. They were crawling up my hiking boots and even on my camera strap, much to the alarm of James and our guides. I quickly brushed them off and moved away pretty quickly from the swarm.

Carrying on we came across some bushbuck antelopes that quickly bounded off into the scrub and above us we heard a crashing in the canopy. We managed to spot large black and white Columbus monkeys, there was maybe a family four or five, despite being quite large they were hard to see in the canopy, but it was good to say we saw them.



The steepness of the trail eased and we took a small detour off the trail to rest by a pretty waterfall. I checked my boots and legs once again to make sure there were no ants lingering on me, and we rejoined the trail. After ten minutes was the highlight of this trail; Fig Tree Arch. From a distance it looked like a large tree in the middle of the trail, with a huge hole through it at its' base. When we got closer we could see the hole through the tree was big enough for a land rover to pass through. James said that elephants sometimes pass through the hole. It was actually two strangler fig trees whose host trees had long rotted away and what was left was the two figs separate at their base but joined higher up. We took a few group photos and relaxed a while.

After the arch and around a bend in the trail we came across a troop of baboons sitting on the trail. Some of them were eating red berries off a nearby bush. There were babies playing in the dust and in front of us a huge male standing guard. I said to James 'what happens? Do we let them give way to us or do they move out of the way for them'? James said 'keep going they'll soon move off'. I rather gingerly walked towards the troop eyeing the big male all the time. Sure enough they began to move off on a small trail in the hedge. The other side of which was marshy ground, and it was fantastic to see them one by one negotiate a small stream. Leaping over it like an Olympic long jumper. We tried to take pictures of this

spectacle, but it was hard to capture them in mid jump.



The trail eased and the terrain became flatter – we were getting back to the grassy plain close to the ranger station. We spotted giraffe prints and more interestingly elephant tracks, but alas we didn't get to see any. Before long we came across the bridge over the river we'd crossed a few days ago, crossing it and a few minutes later we were back at the ranger station.

At the station I asked the guide team to line up. I thanked them on behalf of the group. They all came one by one and shook the hands of the clients and myself. Especially me, because as they shook my hand I handed out their individual envelope with their tip. I'd been given a pay scale back in the U.K. and we had decided to give them the highest figure on the scale. They were all pleased with their tips. I tipped James the ranger and he gave each of us two certificates; for summiting 'Little Meru' and 'Big Meru' respectively.

Our bus arrived and I asked Lazaro if we could ask the driver to detour, and go to Momella Lakes. Lazaro said our park permit was valid until nightfall so we could go anywhere within the park. The driver gladly obliged after I gave him a ten dollar incentive. The bus took



some four wheel drive trails to the lakes. He stopped and let us off at the lakes. The flamingos were less than ten metres away.

There were hundreds of thousands of Greater and Lesser Flamingos. All making a cackling noise as they walked away from the lake edge to get away from us. There was quite an odour in the air as well from all these birds. Ben 'oohed' and 'aahed' and said he

couldn't believe this sight; Which was a pretty awesome sight. I never thought there would be so many birds.

After we had our fill of flamingos we got back on the bus. The driver managed to get it wheel spinning several times as we tried to get over a small hill; dust enveloping the bus and choking us as we quickly wound up the windows. After the fourth attempt, the bus got some purchase and we got over the hill. We then joined the road back to the park entrance, from which we joined turned right, onto the main Arusha/Moshi road.

On the way back to Moshi, I realised that this mountain, had ticked so many boxes. It will always be over shadowed by its' bigger brother, Kilimanjaro; the main mountaineering attraction in sub Saharan Africa. Meru however, had given us all important exposure to altitude with relative ease, before we were going to attempt Kili. It had revealed constant interest around every corner, whether that was flora and fauna, or even geological. The mountain was full of interest and surprises.

Never to receive star billing and always playing a supporting role. Meru might not be the household name with the fame Kili enjoys, but it's got a number one fan in me.

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Lee Farmer is a professional mountaineer who has climbed mountains on all the worlds' continents. He is a specialist in extreme environments and has led expedition teams in the humid heat of jungles to the extreme cold of the polar regions.

He is the 180th Briton to summit Mt Everest, and has been to the South Pole three times. He was made a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) in 2008 and is a schools' ambassador for the Society.

If you want to understand the passion of climbing mountains, what drives climbers to it, how they cope with everything from pain to sleep deprivation, deep weariness, fear, sickness and fighting both the elements and the clock, this is your chance. Audiences are captivated by Lee's 'no holds barred' lectures giving the listener real insights to; life on expedition, the experiences, the drama, and his own intense drive and the ability to re-motivate when there seems no point in going on.

Lee is a regular media figure. He has co presented on BBC Radio, and appeared on both BBC Television and Independent Television. He has been featured in national, regional and local newspapers and business publications. When not facing the world's most feared mountains, he settles for rock climbing, travel writing and taking people into world's mountains for teambuilding and personal development.

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