

One of the expedition leaders has been ripping the innards from the leader files, and we suspect it may be a certain Ceri Williams. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to accompany Mr Williams to Tanzania and to find out whether he is indeed the Leader-file-Ripper.

And so it was that I found myself on the Cancer Research UK Kilimanjaro trek with Ceri, Sonya and Julia: my first overseas trip with Across the Divide.

The 7-hour bus journey from Nairobi to Moshi gave us a sense of the scale of the East African plains, and several opportunities to buy some small carved wooden animals. I had imagined that we would see Kilimanjaro looming on the horizon as we crossed the border into Tanzania, but it was not until the following day when we stopped at *Mshuwa* shop for *Coca Cola* that I got my first glimpse of Kilimanjaro poking its head out of the clouds.

That afternoon we started our trek on the Rongai route up to our camp at the First Cave. Wildlife spotting for the day included seeing spider monkeys in the trees and great heaps of elephant dung (although, sadly, no elephants) on the path. The trail was extremely dry and dusty, and Sonya and I soon came to realise that a girl can never have too many body wipes on a camping trip on Kilimanjaro.

A few hours later we reached the small cluster of bright yellow *Eureka!* tents that comprised our camp, and settled down to cream of cucumber soup (for the meat eaters), and cucumber soup (for the vegetarians), followed by fish and chips for everyone. The food on this trip was fantastic, even if the distinction between vegetarian and non-vegetarian was often blurred. On the third night the vegetarians were offered leek and potato soup, whereas the carnivores were offered that well known meat soup - pumpkin.

Just before turning in on the second night our guiding medic urinated on a slope above our expedition leader's tent, unleashing a tidal wave of wee on its way towards the fly sheet. This pretty much set the tone for the rest of the trip. Sonya became known as Droopy when the *Diamox* caused her mouth to sag on one side; but got revenge once Ceri began sporting a swollen bottom lip of Bob Marley-esque proportions towards the end of the trek.

The immediate scenery on the mountain consisted of little more than volcanic rock and the odd bit of hardened high altitude vegetation such as the everlasting flower, but the wider views were something to behold. Below us, and beneath the clouds, lay the endless stretches of the Masai Steppe: above us stood the glacier-clad "roof of Africa" with the rugged Mawenza peak glowing red against the setting sun. Tanzania really is big sky country.

At 11pm on the 25th October we donned our head torches, thermals and down jackets and set out from the Kibo Hut for the summit. Ten hours later, 11 participants and 5 ATD-ers arrived at Uhuru Peak: Africa's highest point.

After tears, hugs and photos at the summit, we began the weary journey back down the mountain. I put my new Rab kit to the test by sliding down the scree slopes of Kilimanjaro on my bum, and discovered that my trail pants may be wind and water-resistant but they sure as hell aren't scree-proof. We finally arrived back at the Kibo Hut some 14 hours after we'd left, to be greeted with orange squash, toasted cheese sandwiches and soup. I could have murdered a burger, but you take what you can get.

From the Kibo Hut it was another 3 hours or so to that night's camp. One of the participants, a sunburnt Scottish chap named Stuart, had the right idea and managed to get himself carted down the mountain on a trolley. It must have been a bone-shaking ride and I don't think the trolley had any brakes, but full credit to the guy: he was sat at camp with a cold beer in his hand some 2 hours before I was.

I learnt a lot on this trip. I discovered Ceri's predilection for wearing hot pants (and filthy ones at that); Sonya's love of pain, gangsta rap and Barbra Streisand; and the fact that one of my man-calves (the right one apparently) is bigger than the other. I also met some truly inspiring people who, having been affected in various ways by cancer, decided to turn a negative into a positive and haul themselves up a sodding great mountain for charity. I had an absolutely fantastic time with a wonderful group of people - many thanks to all concerned. Meanwhile, the search for the Leader-file-Ripper continues...

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