

AIMING HIGH FOR A PURPOSE

Conquering Kili & the Climb for Conservation

Some climbs start with a map and a dream. Ours started with a purpose. What began as months of checklists, training hikes, and late-night Googling slowly sharpened into something bigger than a personal challenge. Kilimanjaro wasn't just a mountain to conquer. It was a way to give back, to raise funds for conservation, and to prove that a small team with the right reason can go further than they ever imagined.

Months of checking lists, gear laid out neatly on the bed, and late-night rabbit holes of “what to expect on the mountain.” Between work, life, and trying to squeeze in training hikes at sea level (Cape Town isn't exactly known for its altitude), preparation felt relentless and exhilarating. Every detail mattered: the right socks, the right layers, the right mindset.

But what truly powered us was the why. Climb for Conservation wasn't just an adventure – it was a mission. Sarah, my colleague at Ker & Downey@ Africa, and I have always cared deeply about protecting Africa's wild spaces. So when the opportunity came to climb for a cause – raising funds through the OKOA Fund and African Bush Camps Foundation to help protect lions,

wildlife, and communities – we didn't hesitate. This wasn't just a bucket list. It was a purpose.

SIX PEOPLE, ONE MOUNTAIN

Soon, our team of six was locked in: Sarah and I, Simone and Shannon (two Cape Town friends-of-friends who quickly became family), Charles (our Arusha colleague), and Iggy (a local filmmaker with an eye for grit and grace). What started as a half-joking “we should climb Kilimanjaro one day” turned into training hikes, WhatsApp groups, and booked flights. Then we were there, and suddenly it became real.

The night before the climb, we met our guides, Paulo and Barrack – calm, confident, mountain-strong. Paulo was preparing for his 297th summit. We repacked, weighed, fine-tuned, and tried to sleep through the nerves.





INTO THE GREEN

We chose the Machame Route because it's tough and beautifully varied (rainforest to moorland to alpine desert), and it felt right for a climb rooted in impact. Day one began in mist and green: moss-draped trees, ferns, wild blooms, laughter. By Machame Camp, the air had sharpened, and we felt like a team.

It's impossible to tell a Kilimanjaro story without honouring the people who make it possible: the porters, guides, and crew. While we walked with daypacks, they carried everything that built our world up there – tents, food, cooking gear, bags – arriving ahead of us with songs and smiles that softened the hardest days. “Pole pole” (slowly) became both instruction and philosophy.

HIGHER, THINNER, HARDER

As we climbed higher, the mountain kept changing. The rainforest fell away, replaced by moorland and thin air. At Shira Camp, we stood above the clouds, watching the horizon turn gold and purple. At Lava Tower (4,600 meters), everything turned stark and volcanic – step, breathe, repeat. Descending into Barranco, life returned in surreal shapes and textures. It was like walking through another world.

Altitude hit two teammates hard one afternoon. We rallied with water, medication, encouragement, and time. It wasn't dramatic, but it was defining. Leave no man behind. That night, the summit appeared in full view: snow-capped and magnificent.

SUMMIT NIGHT

Base camp at Barafu was high, exposed, and silent. The kind of place that makes you speak softly. At 11 p.m., we started the summit push. Seven

hours in the dark. -14°C. A small circle of light in front of each step. The guides sang low and steady to keep us moving.

At one point, I looked up and thought the stars were strange. Perfectly spaced and moving slowly in unison. It was then that I realised they were head torches. That's how far we still had to go. I didn't look up again.

Stella Point arrived with the first streaks of dawn. From there, the Arctic Zone: scree, ice, and air so thin it barely felt real. Then Uhuru Peak. 5,895 meters. The Roof of Africa. Hugs, photos, disbelief – and a quick descent before altitude could catch us.

Hours later, we stumbled into Mweka Camp filthy, wrecked, and quietly proud. The next morning, we walked out to birdsong and green air, lungs finally full again. At the gate, cold Kilimanjaro beers tasted like triumph. We sang one last time with our crew – slower, heavier, full of gratitude.

Baranco Valley



Sunset Over Basecamp



WHAT THE MOUNTAIN GAVE BACK

Kilimanjaro strips everything back to breath, humility, and “pole pole.” We came to Climb for Conservation to raise funds and awareness, but left with something else too: perspective, gratitude, and proof that with purpose (and people who have your back), you can go further than you ever thought possible.

The campaign was a success. Together with the OKOA Fund and the African Bush Camps Foundation, we raised \$7,000 to build seven lion bomas in Zimbabwe, helping protect livestock, keep lions safe, and support coexistence between people and wildlife.

A small victory on the mountain – and an even bigger one for conservation. 🌱

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