



## LETTER FROM TANZANIA

## High five

Dear Aunt Ethel

Master-organiser Ian's engineering contract in Tanzania from mid-2004 was the catalyst. He suggested a Kilimanjaro Christmas to older brother Andrew in England, and they welcomed their father's request for inclusion. Family friend Sÿa found the challenge irresistible, and Francie could not let her mother be the only woman in the group, now comprising postgraduate first-year medical student, civil engineer, teacher, dermatologist and physician. Other interested parties lost enthusiasm as the time to put body and money on the line arrived.

The plan was to summit at sunrise on Christmas Eve, meet mother/wife Pat at the hotel in Moshi next day, and proceed to Serengeti and Zanzibar. Full moon was on the 26th, so weather conditions should be spot on. Dire warnings in *Getaway* and from English nurses regarding young South Africans descending in body-bags did not deflect us, and Bush-and-Bundu and Cape Union Mart outlets were repeatedly consulted and handsomely remunerated, so that we could comply with the daunting clothing and equipment requirements. Training consisted of walking new boots and day-packs in, tramping some local hills in the process. Favourable reports from recent ascenders, some via the Umbwe Route we had selected, helped to dispel last-minute doubts. This route seems a good one for acclimatisation, since the first two days achieve a considerable height and get one accustomed to steep long slogs, with some relief over the next two days prior to the final assault. Medical supplies included Diamox, which we would all take from the night before the expedition in a dosage of 150 mg bd to lessen the likelihood of mountain-sickness; Malanil for malaria prophylaxis, to be started after the climb, Decadron tablets and injectable corticosteroids and furosemide for treatment of cerebral or pulmonary oedema, simple and sophisticated sticking-plasters, Imodium, analgesic/anti-inflammatory agents and antibiotics. Water-purification tablets and high-energy snacks were purchased; US dollars and travellers' cheques last but hardly least.

Our daughter described my departure expression as one of nervous anticipation, and had texted her brothers to 'look after the stubborn old troll' by the time I met them at Kilimanjaro

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Airport, Arusha, Tanzania. Sÿa and Francie joined us 24 hours later at Springlands, the Zara Tours base hotel, a mixture of oasis and mirage. We set off next morning after breakfast and the hiring of outstanding equipment. A bus transported the five of us, eloquent and outstanding guide Joseph, effervescent assistant guides Karimi and Hamisi, chef-de-luxe Elvis and ten amazing porters to the end of the 4X4 Umbwe track. There the rain-forest and our climb began at 1 800 metres, in warm conditions cooled by the forest canopy and even more by the afternoon shower which caught us napping and without gaiters and ponchos. We reached our tents at the Umbwe Cave Camp still within the forest with only an hour of daylight to spare, at 2 850 metres. Warmer layers and supper were welcome: soup was a fine regular fixture, and a meat dish was good. Bedtime was early, sleep difficult to achieve with unfamiliar firm ground and sleeping bags, but complaints about snoring indicated that insomnia had not been total.

We were roused with coffee and hot water for a face-wash daily at 7 a.m. by the ubiquitous ever-smiling workaholic Karimi who also laid the table, waited on us and made sure that guy-ropes were taut. Breakfasts were at 7.30 and resumptions of the climb at 8.30. The porridge was wonderful. The porters overtook us within an hour or two: we marvelled at their fortitude and balancing ability as they carried 20 kg loads on heads or shoulders, on a particularly tough route as the first two days were long steep ones with the baggage at its unconsumed heaviest. Day 2 saw the fascinating transition from forest to giant heather to moorland up the steep Great Barranco: 1 100 metres in 6 hours. There were ferns and mosses and lichens, delicate flowers like the *Impatiens kilimanjari* and extraordinary trees like the *Senecio kilimanjari*. Occasional tingling of fingers and toes was experienced by all, but may



Rained on in the rain forest.



Steep, hey!

have been coincidental rather than a side-effect of Diamox. Tea at the camp included popcorn, whose saltiness proved most satisfying after our copious water intake. We had a chat under the stars before retiring, icy Kibo peak towering above, and the lights of Moshi twinkling below. Sleep came a little more easily, but some felt the cold even though we were already wearing fleeced layers.

Day 3, Barranco Camp at 3 950 m to Karanga Camp at 3 963 m, meant little net gain in height, but there were lots of ups, to as high as 4 100 m, and downs as we traversed the Southern Circuit. The vegetation thinned: moorland gave way to alpine desert. After a short deep nap following a cooked lunch at camp, three of us went on an hour's acclimatisation walk and enjoyed the best views of the journey as the weather cleared. What a contrast there was, between the lush vast cane-fields near Moshi and the forbidding main peak and glacier of Kili. Next morning I was admonished by camp officials for using the great outdoors instead of the 'squat long-drops' provided: but the latter were beyond my ken — and the pale, we all agreed.

Day 4 was a short one, to Barafu Camp at 4 550 m — just under 600 m in 3½ hours, and vegetation petered out completely: even to the exclusion of the *Senecios*, which to Ian had looked like vultures, to Sÿa like antennae. All along there had been minimal bird and animal life: pesky crows, cocky starlings who monitored the long-drops, and four-stripe mice who ran cheekily up to the tents. Tension was mounting. Supper was early, so that we could be in our tents soon after 6 p.m. to get some sleep or at least recumbency before the final ascent. Some read, thanks to headlamps which were to be vital to our nocturnal progress. Karimi woke us at 11 p.m. We were dressed for the assault, apart from boots and outer waterproof layer. The night was brilliantly moonlit and cold, and tea welcome. The time of reckoning was at hand: group photos confirmed grim expressions, before midnight ushered in December 24. The guides carried emergency oxygen.

Four groups had set out within minutes of each other, and guides were whooping as the torch-lit teams snaked up the

steep pathway to the rim of the crater at Stella Point. Andrew was so nauseated for the first half-hour that he wanted to turn back: but then he was better, and we all seemed to be doing well. Too well: I was puzzled by Sÿa's long strides, for a septuagenarian colleague had warned me that all one could do for six hours was put one foot just in front of the other: *pole-pole* in Kiswahili, pronounced poley-poley: slowly-slowly. There seemed to be a little contest going on between the groups: the only mistake the excellent guides made, in our opinion.

After about three hours I had almost shot my bolt, and asked to drop back with Karimi, who had told me the day before that he would be personally responsible for *Babu*, the greybeard. Forthwith, both assistant guides accompanied me and took my day-pack off me, and Andrew insisted on joining us. Karimi put a hand in the small of my back, and Hamisi's pack was right in front of my headlight, so that I could mimic his steps, and slow him down further every so often. Andrew took his place when Hamisi raced ahead to organise a group tea-stop, which was afterwards agreed to have made the difference between success and failure for each of us. Cold hands — especially the one which held the all-important ski-pole — were the problem for all of us as the temperature plummeted and the wind got up as the moon disappeared behind the summit. Thoughts of frost-bite were realistic.

Remarkably, one started feeling better as time went on, particularly when the wind dropped and our guides began to greet the dawn excitedly, stressing that Stella Point was within reach. Even the hands started to regain control, and feel less like blocks of ice. Surprisingly, our slower sub-group gained the snow-clad rim of the crater at Stella Point no more than ten minutes behind Joseph, Francie, Sÿa and Ian. The horizon was heralding a perfect sunrise, the early rays illuminating the glacier. The hour's gentle climb towards Uhuru Peak, 5 895 m at 6.32 a.m., gave incredible views of snow, glaciers, crater and ash-pit, the sky and all that lay below it. Feelings of relief more than achievement, tears rather than laughter, made it difficult to take much in. Karimi and Hamisi pretended to rush me ahead to the summit point, so pleased were they that their *Simba*, the



Keep right on to the end of the road ...



*It's my party and I can cry if I want to*

lion (presumably a retired Boswell-Wilkie circus one, or a *pole-pole* bear more like it) had made it: but we had all got there as a team. We took photos galore and headed downhill for the steep volcanic scree as Andrew and Ian developed the headaches regarded as an early symptom of mountain sickness. Even the slowest of us was back in Barafu Camp by 9.15 a.m., 9 ½ hours after starting the ascent. We crashed in the sun in our tents, had a midday lunch and headed straight down to Mweka Camp, experiencing the reverse in vegetation changes, including an exquisite tract of proteas, until we were back into the rain-

forest, in time for an early supper and a good night's sleep.

December 25th did not feel like Christmas Day, white though the early part of the Eve had been. We made an early start and by 10.30 a.m. were receiving certificates verifying the attainment of Uhuru Peak, Africa's highest point, and the humbling privilege of the conquest of Kili. The vehicle was further down the road, and we were back at Springlands, the fortress that flattered to deceive, at midday. Pat was there to meet us: shave, shower and swim, accompanied by a large Kilimanjaro lager, could not have been more welcome. Thereafter, we could all sleep, Francie nurse the blisters she had somehow endured from day 1, Sÿa and the young men their aching leg muscles — achieved by the latter together with exacerbation of headache or the odd roastie by racing down the scree — and I some numb finger-tips. Each agreed: Kilimanjaro had been inspiring, emotionally and visually; the summit arduous, at times nightmarish, physically and psychologically; the guides safety-conscious, caring and professional; and our group interaction great and vital to the success of the expedition. Would one do it again? In a next life perhaps: and then I'd take 12 Imodium and completely avoid the abysmal toilet facilities!

Yours affectionately

**Robert-Ian**

## The 10th Sensitive Midwifery Symposium

Cape Town, Friday 27 May 2005 • Pretoria, Thursday 2 and Friday 3 June 2005

The Sensitive Midwifery Symposium is the largest and most influential nursing and midwifery conference to be held in South Africa.

The idea of the Symposium was conceived by well-known baby and child specialist Sister Lilian and a few colleagues at the Sister Lilian Centre in Pretoria in 1995. The first Symposium was held in 1996. It was attended by about 100 midwives in both hospital and private practice, from labour wards and other fields related to pregnancy, birth and childrearing and from state and private facilities.

The spirit of the Symposium is to support all in this special profession in rendering the most sensitive service possible to clients and patients. The symposium has grown tremendously and is now an annual event held over two days in Gauteng and one day in Cape Town, and attended by close on 800 delegates.

The Symposium will always strive to offer a mix of current ideas, updating of expertise and sensitive practices, to challenge non-defendable policies and to provide a forum of inspiration for our profession. All nine provinces of South Africa are represented, and neighbouring countries like Swaziland, Botswana and Namibia regularly send small delegations.

In 2005, the 10th Symposium will have a particularly exciting programme, with internationally acclaimed medical doctor and author John Briffa being the keynote speaker

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