



Gig and Bill's personal guides use the English names Trevor, left, and John, rather than their Swahili names during the climbs.

CLIMB, FROM PAGE 22

head. Then, with backpacks secure and walking poles in hand, we were off.

The trail begins in a rich rain forest that weaves around huge tropical trees, waterfalls and jungle flowers. Wildlife is surprisingly sparse, with only an occasional monkey or bird. After climbing four hours to 9,000 feet, we reached our first overnight stop.

Mandara Hut is a spartan settlement providing basic needs and a respite for the weary. The A-frame huts are a bit claustrophobic but appropriate for adventure lovers. I'm more of a Marriott/Hyatt type, but when you're tired, the huts are fine.

The camp featured a distinct international atmosphere, with people from Europe, Asia and North America. English, however, was the common language.

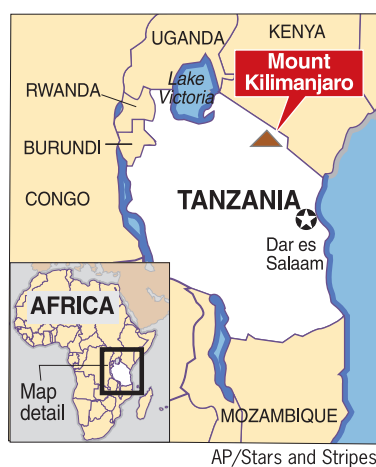
We were up at the break of dawn the next day for a breakfast of porridge and tea and then the normal equipment check before an eight-hour trek to the next hut.

Sunrises are an African masterpiece above the clouds. The hike begins in the moorlands and winds through unspoiled trails upward to 12,000 feet. By now my legs and feet were starting to hurt.

Day three found us walking through a moonlike area known as the saddle. We passed through the picturesque twin peaks of Kilimanjaro and reached the Kibo hut in early afternoon. This basic camp area, at 15,500 feet, is at the base of the final sharp ascent. Before retiring, a final check of equipment was mandatory. Sleep was difficult; the anticipation of the final climb was on everyone's mind.

The moment of truth was at hand. Our guides woke us at midnight because an early start is required. The idea is to get to the top of the mountain and back to the camp before the sun goes down the next day. The only nourishment we were allowed was some hot tea — climbing on a full stomach is to be avoided.

This was the steepest part of the climb, and with flashlights in hand, we were once again reminded to go *poli poli* (Swahili for "slow") because of the time needed to acclimate to the altitude. The trail is rock and sand, and each step is deliberately slow and precise. Our walking poles were a great help in preventing backsliding on the loose scree.



AP/Stars and Stripes

Some groups had pushed ahead, while others were winding up the trail behind. Only flashlights were visible in a zigzag, firefly pattern.

An hour into the ascent, my friend Bill dropped to his knees and started dry heaving. "I've got to go down. I'm dizzy," he said.

"No," I said. "Just rest, and we'll continue — you'll adjust."

Four times he tried to resume the climb, but altitude sickness had nailed him at 17,000 feet. Finally, one of the guides shouldered Bill and started down the dark mountain.

"Climb it for both of us," he said.

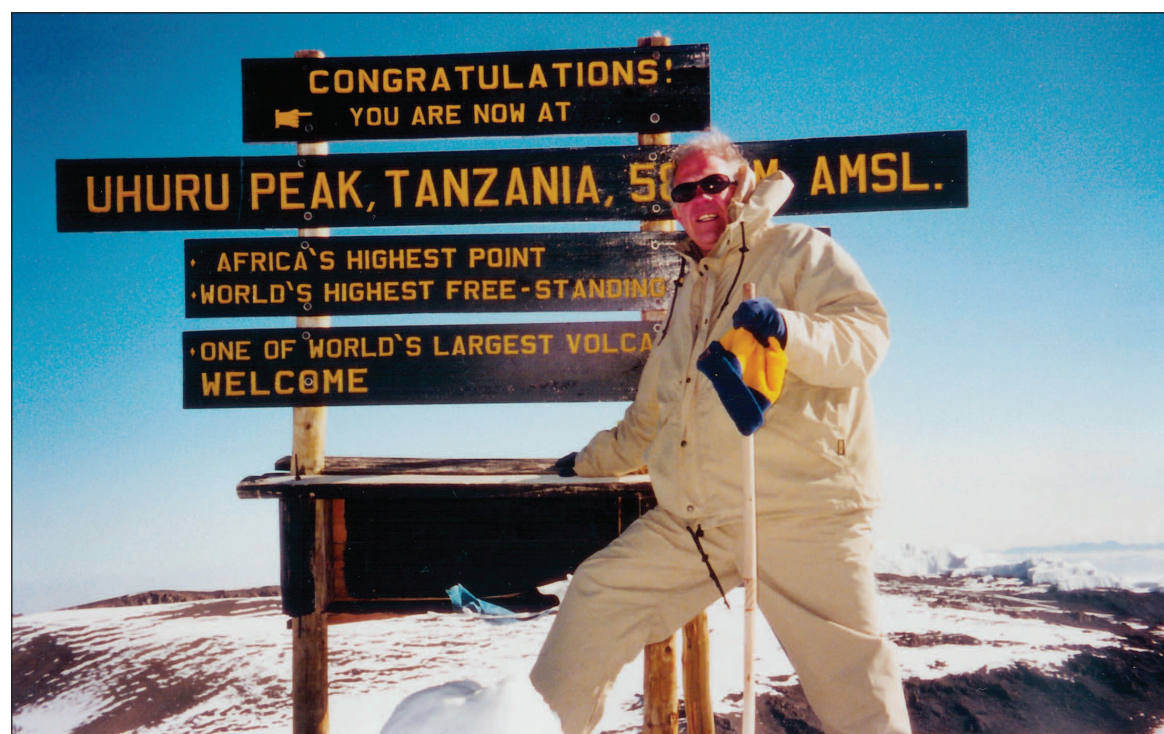
What a reversal of events — he was the trekker, my mentor. He was the explorer who had hiked three times through the Himalayas. He had the knowledge, not me; I'd never trekked longer than a day in my life.

I took stock of myself in the dark, only a third of the way to the top. Our theory had been that



Photos courtesy of Gig Gwin

Clouds hover above a glacier at the rimline of Kilimanjaro Peak.



A triumphant Gig Gwin poses for a photo at Uhuru Peak, the highest point in Africa.

the true climb was 75 percent mental and 25 percent physical, and now it would be tested. The words of the original briefing came back to me: "Fast spells failure, slow wins the battle."

"Seize the moment," I thought, looking at my guide, John, and I muttered with conviction, "*poli poli*." Slowly up the African mountain we trudged.

Heads down, with flashlights watching for dangerous rocks and slippery footing, we plodded one step at a time. The altitude was taking its toll, and I rested often. Small groups of climbers started passing me as I sat on boulders, sucking hard for oxygen. Some had encouraging words: "You can make it"; "Don't stop now"; "See you at the top."

My progress seemed minuscule as John and I finally reached the halfway mark, an area called the caves. It seemed as if an eternity had passed, but John said, "Mr. Gig, we are halfway," and he smiled.

As I looked up at the mountain, most of the flashlights were now above me. While I rested on a welcome boulder, a parade of determined Brits, Germans, Swedes and Japanese passed by, leaving me behind with my thoughts.

Finally we entered the toughest part, the switchbacks. John's feet were almost above my head; the steepest part was the last

The details

- **Location:** Mount Kilimanjaro is in northern Tanzania, near the Kenya border, about 140 miles south of Nairobi, Kenya.
- **Height:** 19,340 feet.
- **Summits:** Kibo (19,340 at Uhuru Peak) and Mawenzi (16,890 feet).
- **Trail blazers:** The first Europeans to reach the Kibo summit were German geographer Hans Meyer and Austrian mountaineer Ludwig Purtscheller in 1889.
- **Point of interest:** The Kibo summit is covered with snow and ice even though Kilimanjaro is only 3 degrees south of the equator.
- **Outfitter:** Marangu Hotel, P.O. Box 40, Moshi, Tanzania. Telephone, 255-27-27565941 or 255-27-2756361; fax 255-27-2756591; e-mail info@maranguhotel.com.

— GIG GWIN

1,000 feet. Two more climbers with altitude sickness were descending with help from their guides. I reminded myself, "Fast is bad, slow is good."

A few climbers had made it in four hours to the crater rim, an area called Gilman's Point. Some had made it in five hours to view the magnificent sunrise. I chose to view this spectacular display of nature sitting on the side of the mountain, 200 feet from the top.

Then, with one last burst, I dragged my exhausted body to the crater rim, 6½ hours after the midnight start. I received warm congratulations from other hikers, some already beginning their descent. My guide hugged me as I attempted to breathe air that contained about half the normal amount of oxygen. The hammer blow of altitude had hit.

"You and I go down now," John insisted.

"No, John," I said weakly, "give me 10 minutes, and we'll walk the crater rim to Uhuru Peak."

"No," John said. "We should go down now."

But I prevailed, caught my breath, and off we trekked around this incredibly beautiful crater.

The top of Kilimanjaro is bigger than you can imagine. Pillared ice fields surround the rim. The sight of these glaciers glistened in the morning sun and the cold wind were numbing. As we trudged through the snowy slopes, I exchanged high-fives with returning hikers. There were words of encouragement

and thumping gloves as I lumbered toward Uhuru Peak.

Stark beauty was everywhere. Directly below, the deep circular crater was abundant with snow. A halcyon calm came over me; victory was an inner peace. Hikers had said euphoria would take over and I'd forget the shortness of breath, the wind, cold and annoying headache. Triumphant photos were taken, and the awesome vista was imprinted in my mind. Then we started down.

Last up, last down — it took me 13 hours round trip to trek back to Kibo camp. All other climbers had already left for the lower huts. So after a short rest, and four more hours of forcing one foot after the other (but this time it was all downhill), we arrived at Mandara Hut. John should've been paid time and a half for his extra hours.

Wandering into camp, I was met by Bill, who was now back in good health. I offered condolences; he extended congratulations.

"Sometimes you get the mountain," Bill said. "Sometimes the mountain gets you."

The next night, back at Marangu Gate, we signed the park rangers' victory log and shared cold beer with our porters and guides. After we handed out gratuities, they returned the favor by singing a spellbinding African chant.

And with that, the quest for Kilimanjaro was complete.

Gig Gwin, owner of Gwins Travel in St. Louis, is one of only a handful of people to have visited every country in the world, as recognized by the Travelers' Century Club. He completed the list by visiting his 318th country in 1999. He welcomes your e-mails at ggwin@gwins.com.