If you want to reach one of the 7 Summits without any technical climbing or mountaineering required, then a Mt. Kilimanjaro climb is one to put on your list.

Mt. Kilimanjaro is the highest peak in Africa at 5895m above sea level and is known as one of the most accessible of the seven summits because it can be hiked by those with good fitness, determination and who can cope physically and mentally at high altitude.

**Fitness for Kilimanjaro**

Fitness is very important, and in general walking and hill training is a must for any multi-day hike. This is how we prepared this in the months leading up to departure as we found this to be the best way to replicate what we would be doing on our trip. This is also a good time to wear in the trekking boots you’ll be wearing to ensure they’re properly broken in before your trip. It is an extremely high-altitude experience as well, so this cannot be overlooked or taken lightly when deciding to commit to this trip.

A glimpse of our goal – Mt. Kilimanjaro 5895m above sea level.

**Choosing your route**

Acclimatisation is the key so choosing the right tour and pace is important – we did an extra night on the climb to help give us the most success at getting to the summit. We also chose to do the Machame Route as it’s known for scenery and some rocky challenges, plus it helps
How I Climbed Mount Kilimanjaro

avoid the crowded Marangu Route, which has huts.

We preferred to camp and with 3 alternative routes commercially offered with most trekking companies, the Machame Route ticked boxes for us.

**Selecting the length of your trek**

We chose a 7-day trek to give us an extra night on the mountain before our summit attempt. Looking back, this was the best move we made. Having that extra night on our trek meant we only had a half day of walking to base camp for our midnight summit attempt. Most other 6 day treks walk a whole day to get to Base Camp and then summit that night.

*Ian and our guide, Baracka, cheering before we get to camp on day 2.*

**The tour guide company we used**

We travelled with an amazing local crew of guides, porters and cooks through G Adventures. We had our tent and a sleeping mat provided so we needed to take our own down sleeping bag, liner (rated -4), water storage, purification tablets, clothing and a head torch.

Our guides also put our minds at ease (especially mine) about how to deal with things like headaches, stomach gas (some team members did get windy above 4000m!) and not overthinking it too early – anxiety about getting altitude sickness is common. It was
reassuring to be in the hands of those who had trekked the route many times over and knew how to look after trekkers who might be feeling the effects of altitude.

I had been at higher altitudes only once before while trekking the Inca Trail in Peru (around 4200m) many years ago so I had not ventured much higher since and was hugely anxious about getting to the summit (in a conscious state). Looking back, I realise that 90% of this climb was psychological.

**Pacing yourself**

We chose a 7-day trek to give us an extra night on the mountain before our summit attempt and looking back this was the best move we made. Having that extra night included on our trek meant we only had a half day of walking to base camp for our midnight summit attempt. Most other 6 day treks walk a whole day to get to Base Camp and then summit that night.

The climb pace is agonisingly slow but for good reason! Our guides told us ‘pole pole’ (pronounced poly – poly) meaning ‘slowly slowly’ in Swahili, as we took our time on the trails. At times we felt like robots, but it’s very important to take it easy and not push yourself too much.

*Stopping for lunch along the way to recharge for the rest of the day.*
Camping along the way

Camping is still a pretty comfy affair as there’s a team of guides, porters and cooks. Most companies also offer a mess tent for serving multiple course meals. The porters carry the tents, your personal possessions, sleeping mats and camping gear – and will often manage to arrive before you and set the tents up by the time you reach camp.

It’s phenomenal watching the porters pass, moving fast and sweating with huge loads despite the weights being strictly monitored before the trekking teams depart. With just our daypacks, we still were not able to keep up with porters carrying much heavier loads.

Acclimatisation

The first 5 days are slow going – acclimatisation is so important – you just need to remember to breathe! It’s a great opportunity to bond with fellow trekkers and our guides. We soaked in the scenery as day by day it changed from rainforest on day 1 to bare rocky ground by day 5. Each night we chatted with trekkers from Spain, the UK and other parts of the world.

Altitude sickness

Both my hubby and I reacted differently to the altitude at different times on our trek. While
he suffered on the 3rd day with fatigue and vomiting, on the 4th day I simply felt drunk and lightheaded and had to stop many times to remember to breathe deeply. It was just the effects of less oxygen and as it turned out I really just needed the extra rest. I love camping but I find it hard to sleep at high altitude, so I was not functioning well on a few hours of broken sleep each night.

**Keeping clean and going to the toilet on the climb**

The conditions make it tough to stay clean. There are no showers, and it can be very windy and dusty. Going to the toilet is something to get used to on the mountain, so good hygiene is paramount. Pack hand sanitiser, water purification tablets, more toilet paper than you would normally need, and wash your hands as often as you can as water is not available readily at all camps.

If you wear contact lenses, it is recommended not to wear them at night and switch to glasses where possible by day, if you can. This is not just for hygienic reasons but to maximise the oxygen supply to the eyes. I ended up wearing glasses for most of the trek. It was just easier. My hair was permanently tied up and under a beanie or Buff to keep it tidy and out of the way. Buffs are awesome for keeping your hair back, to cover your nose and mouth from dust, or as a scarf when it’s chilly.

We did pack wet wipes to ‘bathe’ with each night in our tent, so we could wipe off a bit of sweat and grime in place of a shower. It was a mental pick me up to do this and nice to clean up at the end of a walking day before changing into our thermals and camp wear. You do get used to feeling unclean and smelling similarly after a few days – but it’s comforting knowing everyone else is in the same position as you.
Dealing with sleep deprivation and the cold

The most challenging elements of the summit night are the sleep deprivation and the temperature. We got our “wake up” call at 11 pm even though we had not yet fallen asleep, and it was sleetimg. We did not realise this at the time, but we would not see a bed again until 6 pm the next day.

The temperature was minus 15 degrees, so it’s really important to pack layers, as I soon found out. I had 5 layers on top - including 2 thermals, a long-sleeved shirt, a polar fleece and Goretex jacket and 4 layers on my legs - 2 thermals, trekking pants and rainproof pants. My hands suffered the most, however, I had 2 pairs of gloves but this was not enough. I had to add a pair of socks and smack my hands together to get the circulation moving in the cold.

Delayering for a toilet stop was interesting! It took a lot longer to get the job done and did I say to pack loads of toilet paper? We ran out by summit night, and packed wet wipes instead which froze – making wiping a whole new challenge!

Getting through the climb

The moonlight climb was long and slow in darkness. We kept our heads down, breathed deeply and then breathed deeper again. We tried to eat and drink regularly but our water
bottles eventually froze. I also made the mistake of looking up at one point in the darkness and all I could see was a zig zag lined of head torches above. It was going to be a long slog so I had to stay positive and focused!

I was yearning for the sun to rise. All I wanted was to see where I was after climbing all this way and to enjoy the views. But that would come.

The spectacular views on day four of the trek.

Reaching the summit of Kilimanjaro

Finally, after about 6 hours, the sun started to rise. We were nearly at Stella Point at 5685m. Reaching this felt like the hardest challenge yet. It was a struggle to do the last hour or so and push on to Uhuru Peak.

We reached Uhuru Peak around 8 am after a very slow trudge to the top. With tears of relief and elation, we had made it to 5895m! Our photo shoot was a quick one, it was really hard to get the oxygen in our lungs to stay up there long. We turned around and made a hasty descent back to Base Camp. The challenge was not quite over though, as we had to move on after a late breakfast back at camp. We then descended to High Camp arriving mid-afternoon. It had been a long time between sleep! Our final descent the following day had us at Mweka Gate by lunchtime – and just like that our trek finished.

This was by far the toughest climb I have ever done, challenging me physically and mentally.
How I Climbed Mount Kilimanjaro

The fact I achieved it still surprises me sometimes when I reflect back on this trek.

The saying is true though if it doesn’t challenge you it doesn’t change you. And, that first shower at the end of the trek was a long one.

Here we are at the summit – 5895m above sea level!

Tips for travelling to Tanzania

- Getting to Tanzania is a bit long winded so allow some extra days in your itinerary before attempting the climb. Throw in a short safari if you can, as you’ll be so close to the Serengeti and Ngorongoro Crater. This will also give you time to get over jet lag before you start, or if you lose your luggage and it needs to find its way to you.

- Carry your boots in your carry-on luggage. You can replace most gear if your luggage gets lost or delayed. But, the right pair of worn in boots are pretty much invaluable for a trek such as this.

- There are visas required for Australian passport holders so best to have these organised before you depart.

- Register on the Smart Traveller website and check for the latest official travel advice regarding Tanzania.
Vaccinations and health checks

- Don’t forget to check with your doctor regarding vaccinations you may require, and altitude sickness prevention advice.
- Get an overall medical check-up prior to ensure that you’re in the right health to attempt this climb.

Gear tips

- Get a decent headlamp – you will need it for most of the summit night climb! If you need help choosing a headlamp, check out our guide here.
- Hiking poles are invaluable especially for protecting your knees if they are prone to fatigue on multi-day hikes.
- Small thermos for the summit night is a good idea, so your water doesn’t freeze.
- Ensure you have a high-quality sleeping bag that can cope with sub-zero temperatures. Down sleeping bags are super warm and well worth the investment for many years to come.

*Has this inspired you to climb one of the seven summits of the world? Which one do you think you’d be up for?*