



NATURAL HIGH

After a dozen years of missteps and disasters, 60-year-old cancer survivor **Ashok Mahadevan** wanted to prove he still had the strength to climb a mountain over three miles high. But was that courage, he asks, or just adolescent bravado?

SWALLOWED THE anti-diarrhoea pills and stretched out on my sleeping bag. I was waiting for my stomach to stop churning when, suddenly, my right calf convulsed into an agonizing cramp. I tried stretching it, but the pain just got worse. “Bill!” I yelled through the tent walls. “Help!”

Bill Garside, an English medic whose tent was next to mine, arrived swiftly and began massaging my right calf. As if in protest, the left calf went into spasms. Gritting my teeth, I asked Bill

what he thought was wrong. “It could be a bad stomach infection.”

I groaned. If Bill was right, the potential consequences were awful. This was day one of a five-and-a-half-day climb to the snow- and ice-streaked summit of Tanzania’s 5,895-metre Mount Kilimanjaro, Africa’s highest mountain. But it wasn’t just a holiday. Climbing Kilimanjaro was the sort of epic adventure I’d been dreaming about, planning – and then repeatedly missing out on – for over 12 years. I’d been planning





God, Kilimanjaro is one of the world's great treks, attracting tens of thousands every year. Despite being more than three and a half miles high, you don't need ropes, oxygen or special equipment. It is, essentially, a long walk. Even blind people and amputees have done it.

But it's no cakewalk. The oxygen content of the air at Kili's upper reaches is half that at sea level; almost everyone on the trail suffers from breathlessness, headaches and nausea, and more than half give up before getting to the top. And every year, a few trekkers die on Kili's slopes from altitude sickness. To me, Kili seemed a challenge with just the right amount of bite to make it interesting.

On Independence Day 2010, a group of us gathered at Moshi, a small Tanzanian town near Kili. We were mostly Indians or NRIs, with a couple of Britons and a pair of Italians. Our average age was 45. For many, like me, the trek was more than just an exotic vacation. Apart from my own particular reasons, I was also climbing for charity.

Our five-and-a-half-day route to the summit was going to be tortoise-like compared to the world record of five hours 38 minutes and 40 seconds, set by an Italian who *ran* to the top. But it would ensure we had time to acclimatize to the thin air.

After a three-hour drive from Moshi, I got my first look at Kili: it burst suddenly out of the flat landscape like a whale surfacing, foam coursing down its bulky head. I had just one thought. *How on earth are we going to get to the top of that?* Even with our 70-strong entourage of Tanzanian guides, cooks and porters to carry our tents, food, cooking utensils, gas cylinders, chemical toilets and other equipment all the way up, it looked like a gargantuan effort.

After registering with the Kilimanjaro National Park authorities, we set out on a trail that wound through maize fields then climbed gently through a pine forest. Black-and-white Colobus monkeys watched us silently. After walking for about four hours, my stomach already starting to twist and turn by then, we reached our campsite on the edge of a moor. And then the cramps started.

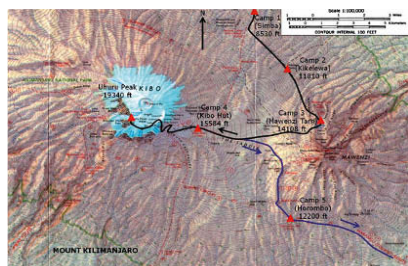
After a stomach-churning night of →

I was going to have to drop out of the climb, and maybe drop out of the dream altogether.

As I lay there, I reflected on the run of bad luck that had preceded this point in my life. For years I'd been trying to reach the top of Mount Kailash, Shiva's abode in the Tibetan Himalayas, a journey that involves trekking across mountain passes nearly six kilometres high. The first time I'd tried, in 1998, my group of trekkers had been forced to turn back by a landslide just ahead of us that killed nearly 300 people, including the dancer Protima Bedi. The following year, when I was about to try again, a stray dog bit me the day before and I had to stay behind for anti-rabies shots. Before I could make a third attempt, I was diagnosed with cancer and went through four operations.

So this was my chance to make up for all those lost opportunities and, more than that, to prove to myself I still had some fight left in me.

A cone-shaped, dormant volcano whose summit is called the House of



this one since 2008, and it was costing me over \$3,300. At 60 years old, my chances of doing this, or anything like it, again were shrinking rapidly with every passing year.

Even worse, I had been in a battle with colon cancer a few years before, and surgeries had left my stomach muscles weakened with incisional hernias. They were more unsightly than dangerous, but if they became constricted I'd need immediate surgery to save my life. At best, if I didn't recover tonight,

I got my first look at Kili: it burst out of the landscape like a whale surfacing. How on earth were we going to get to the top of that?



PEAK FITNESS

The tropical glaciers at the top of Kilimanjaro. (Left) At the summit, Uhuru Peak. (Below, left) At Kikelewa Camp



I stumbled up a seemingly endless slope of scree in the dark, asking myself: *Why the hell am I here?*

viewpoint on the rim of the crater of Kilimanjaro's dormant volcano. But to get to Uhuru Peak, you have to walk for another hour and a half.

I wanted a drink before we set off, but my water had turned to ice. That tends to happen at nearly six kilometres above sea level. At around 8.30am, I found myself surrounded by the evidence of that: the massive blue-white tropical glaciers of Uhuru Peak. Several members of our group were already there, celebrating.

I wasn't. In fact, I felt nothing. But I forced a smile and took a swig of the whisky that was being passed around. Then I remembered the beige-and-maroon *dupatta* my wife had given me for good luck. It was wound around my neck, under so many layers of clothing that I hadn't seen it for days. I dug it out and asked someone to take a photo of me. Wives need proof.

We couldn't stay long. In total, the trek up and down from the top to our camp was going to take 17 hours. As we made our way back, Bill said: "I'm sure this has shortened our lives."

I agreed with him. Right then, climbing Kili seemed like the stupidest thing I'd ever done, putting myself at risk because of an adolescent desire to prove that the old man still had some blood left in him. I could tell myself that it was all worthwhile just because a friend and I had raised over ₹8 lakh for charity. But I know it's not only that.

Perhaps climbing Kilimanjaro was a stupid thing to do. But, believe me: not attempting it would have been stupider still. ☺

imagined potential disasters, I awoke the next morning feeling... fine. This time, I'd been relieved.

The next few days of the trek were relatively trouble-free. On the fifth day, after a six-hour hike across a barren plateau strewn with shiny black boulders, we reached our campsite, Kibo Huts. It was misty and cold. Everyone was tired and many were unwell.

I was feeling low, too. An hour earlier, we'd come upon the wreck of a small white plane that had crashed in 2008, killing four. The remains resembled an animal's dismembered body. I recalled Ernest Hemingway's *The Snows Of Kilimanjaro*, which begins with the carcass of a leopard. Hemingway's tale of a dying writer haunted by wasted time always hit me close to home.

Our destination – the summit of Uhuru Peak – was now just over 1,100 metres above us, and getting there would be the steepest and most grueling part of the trek. We'd have to climb all the way through the freezing night. If we started at 11pm – and all went well – we could reach the top just in time to watch the sunrise.

We set off in single file with our

headlamps on, led by our chief guide, Chombo. Way above me, I could see moving pinpricks of light – trekkers who left Kibo Huts hours before us. They were still only halfway up.

Gradually, the conversations petered out. Our once-tightly packed line disintegrated as more and more people failed to keep up the pace.

It was pitch black. I could only see what my headlamp illuminated – a tiny patch of trail and the boots of the person ahead of me. I slithered and stumbled up a seemingly endless slope of scree in the frigid darkness, panting and asking myself: *Why the hell am I here?* As the air continued to thin, I wasn't the only one on the team asking that question. Some felt nauseous, others like their lungs were being squeezed in a vice. But everyone seemed to find their own way to deal with it, and no one wanted to turn back. Some lost themselves in an iPod or a chant of *Om Namah Shivaya*. I just focused on the best spots to put my feet.

As dawn broke, and warmth began creeping back into my bones, I hoisted myself over mounds of lava and reached Gilman's Point, a breathtaking