

Kilimanjaro – Light of Maasai– Rombo

Could I possibly stand on the roof of Africa?

After four days of arduous trekking we reached Kibo camp at 15,000 feet and summit night had arrived. Months of training at home had prepared our legs, but nothing could prepare us for altitude sickness. This final push to the summit is a 32 hour round trip, with little or no sleep. I got out of my minus 20 degree sleeping bag at 11pm to prepare for our summit attempt, feeling nauseous from altitude sickness. I thought my climb was over.

Summoning up all my energy, I got dressed for the minus 15 degrees temperature...warm base layer, light fleece, heavy fleece, down jacket, wind jacket, fleece trousers, outer trousers, two pair of socks, two hats, two gloves, mountain boots and walking poles. I was ready to see how many steps I could take on the mountain. I had altitude sickness and the summit was 7 hours away!

Altitude sickness meant I had no sleep or food and as a result I had no energy. With only half the oxygen available at this altitude, the challenge was on! The question was....did I have what it took? Eight of us and 5 guides started the long trek up the mountain in the dark with only the light from our head torches to guide us. I was already completely exhausted and drained of energy. I thought of all the things that would motivate me....my wife, my new born son, my dad who had recently passed away, my sponsors and the children of Rombo.

During my frequent visits to Rombo to support the Light of Maasai Charity, there are a few constants. In addition to the immense poverty, poor living conditions, lack of education and clean water, there is Kilimanjaro looming in the distance. Kilimanjaro's massive presence inspired me to organise a fundraising trek to its summit. Accompanied by seven other trekkers from home, we set off on an amazing adventure on March 10th 2009.

Suddenly one of our trekkers stood out of the line and announced he could go no further. He was exhausted and his climb was over. One of our guides took him down the mountain. I leaned heavily on my poles breathing deeply. The lack of oxygen at this height can leave one breathless even while standing still. We

walked for another 2 hours with short breaks. Then another of our trekkers was asked to rest. He had blood shot eyes, nausea and was having dizzy spells. He had fallen foul of the dreaded altitude sickness. His climb was over and he too was escorted down the mountain. He had fought the sickness bravely, but in the end it got the better of him. We hugged him and he wished us well.

I asked our guide how much further it was to the summit. He said we were only half way and had another three hours to go. I had energy for only 3 more steps, but not for 3 more hours! I opened a packet of energy gel and sucked the sickly sweet liquid into my sick stomach. It was all or nothing. What I thought would be a physical challenge had turned into a mental challenge. **It was time to play my trump card....Rotary!**

Before leaving Ireland I wondered what I could do for this very eventuality. How could I motivate myself? I emailed as many Rotary clubs as I could and asked them to sponsor me, 1 cent for every foot I climbed. This meant that every foot was significant for the Rombo charity...Light of Maasai (www.lightofmaasai.com). If I could get 40 clubs to agree, it would raise approximately €8,000. As usual D1160 rose to the challenge, so I put my head down and prepared for the biggest challenge of my life. It was challenging enough before I fell sick, but now I had to dig deep. I knew if I could make it to the last hour of the climb, then nothing could stop me and I would not give in.

Daylight was coming and I knew I would stand in the snow and watch the sun rise over Kilimanjaro, the highest mountain in Africa and the highest free-standing mountain in the world. When we reached the summit we cried and laughed, exhausted and elated. The views of the crater, the glacier, the sunrise and the mountain were extraordinary. I wondered where the energy was going to come from for the decent! I tried to drink from my water pack, but it was frozen solid. I would have to wait for the sun to melt it.

As I gazed out over the African savannah far below, I search for a glimpse of Rombo. While I could not see it, I thought of all the positive things we would be able to do for the children of Rombo as a result of the money we raised on this incredible journey. Thank you to all my sponsors and to Rotary. With your support, you have enabled me to make a difference to the children of Rombo, Kenya.