

Conquering Mountains Figuratively and Literally: A Climb With MS up Kilimanjaro



I was diagnosed with MS weeks before my 30th birthday. As many who are diagnosed with a chronic illness - and me, a very active person at that - my mind went through the whole gamut of what ifs. MS has such a range of possibilities, and no one person's experience is the same.

After the initial period of grieving for the life I thought I would lose, I decided to start fighting back. I started researching and realized I needed to keep myself as healthy as possible. I overhauled my diet and did away with processed foods, went to low carb and started exercising more. Together with treatment, I started to feel better than I had in a long time. As part of my motivation to live a healthy lifestyle, I started signing up for increasingly difficult physical feats. I was never runner (I struggled with the mile in gym class growing up), but I started doing 5Ks, then 10K, then a triathlon, then a half marathon. Having a commitment to work towards was the motivation I needed to stay active, and I felt like staying active was paramount to fighting MS.

When a good friend had wanted to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro for her 40th birthday, I knew I was in. It was already on my bucket list so there was no way I wanted to pass it up.



They say Kilimanjaro is the mountain for everyone, as it's not a technical climb, or even a long one - 35 miles or so over 7 days is not that much if you are reasonable fit. What you don't know is how your body will react to the altitude, because even the very fit can struggle at 19,000 feet. As someone who struggles with chronic headaches, asthma and MS, I was very nervous about how my body would react to the pressures of the climb. I trained with an altitude mask and increased my mileage on my hikes, did the stair climber and some jogging again, but ultimately, was not all that worried about the physical aspect of it since I was an avid climber.

Armed with a slew of medications for potential medical issues, the day finally arrived, and I was off to Africa.



One of the most amazing things about Kilimanjaro is the diversity of the landscapes you cross. Starting in the rainforest, you cross into the heather moorland, alpine desert and at the summit, the arctic zones creating an ever-changing landscape.

I think all of us in our group underestimated the climb as the days are mostly 5- to 7-mile treks, which seem nothing to our group of marathoners, triathletes and generally active people. But due to the altitude, you have to walk extremely slow so your body can gradually adjust and lessen the chance of altitude sickness. The first 4 days were still a cake walk compared to day 5: the day before summiting. I managed to catch a couple hours of sleep before our 11 p.m. wake up call, which involves being brought hot tea in your tent by the wonderful porters as an enticement to get out of a warm sleeping bag in below freezing temperatures. Also having Raynaud's disease means that my toes and hands get cold very easily, so I warmed up with rechargeable hand warmers.

Armed with headlamps, several layers and packs of toe and hand warmers, we finally set off at midnight towards the summit.



The first hour or so, I was feeling pretty good and excited: crisp night skies, still feeling my fingers and toes and looking forward to the sunrise and summit. As the hours continue, however, the morale begins to drop. Everyone is tired, you can't see anything interesting, and you are walking so, so slow that you can't get into any kind of rhythm and you have no idea how far you have left. It gets colder, windier and it seems to never end. Your water freezes and snacks don't seem worth the effort of having to take off your pack and gloves to get to them.

Eventually we hit the first summit point, Stella's Point. By now some people are starting to feel the affects of the altitude and needed assistance from the guides and even oxygen. I was actually feeling good myself - I am thankful for my training with an altitude mask and my use of Diamox for altitude sickness, so I made a beeline for the final destination: Uhuru peak.



After all the planning, training, stress and worry of if I would get headaches, nausea, have issues with my hands and feet being cold, have weakness in my limbs, would my MS infusion medication wear off (I was due for a treatment only two weeks after I would get home and it was a new treatment), I finally made it to the summit!

If you told me when I was diagnosed with MS that I would climb the highest peak in Africa and feel pretty good, I would have never believed it. There was a time before starting treatment where I had weakness in my right knee and could barely climb stairs, weakness and burning in my right hand, and I could barely type, write or hold anything, and recurring numbness and burning in my legs that made walking or running uncomfortable.

As long as I can, I will try to climb mountains, travel the world and truly live life to the fullest. I may not feel great in a year, a month, a week (as I type this having had recent numbness in my knee again), but I will keep fighting and learn to live my life my way with a disease, not a life defined by disease.