

A person is standing on a rocky, brownish mountain ridge in the foreground. In the background, a large, dark mountain peak with a jagged top rises against a clear blue sky. The ground is rocky and uneven, with some small puddles of water. The overall scene is a high-altitude, rugged landscape.

Eugene Kaspersky

Awesome Africa

Or
The Tanzanian Triathlon

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From the author

Every New Year should be seen in... memorably and with a bang – if only so that you don't regret having celebrated it in a boring manner – or even sleeping through it!

Well the year 2016 was no exception to this rule, for we saw it in at the top of Mount Kilimanjaro! That was followed up by several days' African trekking and safari-ing.

Our Tanzanian expedition – made up of Yours Truly and a group of like-minded (adventure-loving) friends – began in December 2015. It was made up of three main parts:

- 1) Scaling Mount Kilimanjaro. This first leg, which took several days, culminated in our reaching the very highest point on the African continent, en route encountering several amazing African astonishments.
- 2) Safari-ing across the savannah, covering three national parks: Lake Manyara, Ngorongoro, and Serengeti, along the way studying both tourists' and the Maasai's lodgings.
- 3) Zanzibarring in Zanzibar. Crazy tidal flows, sensational sunsets, and... Freddie Mercury!

Scaling Kilimanjaro



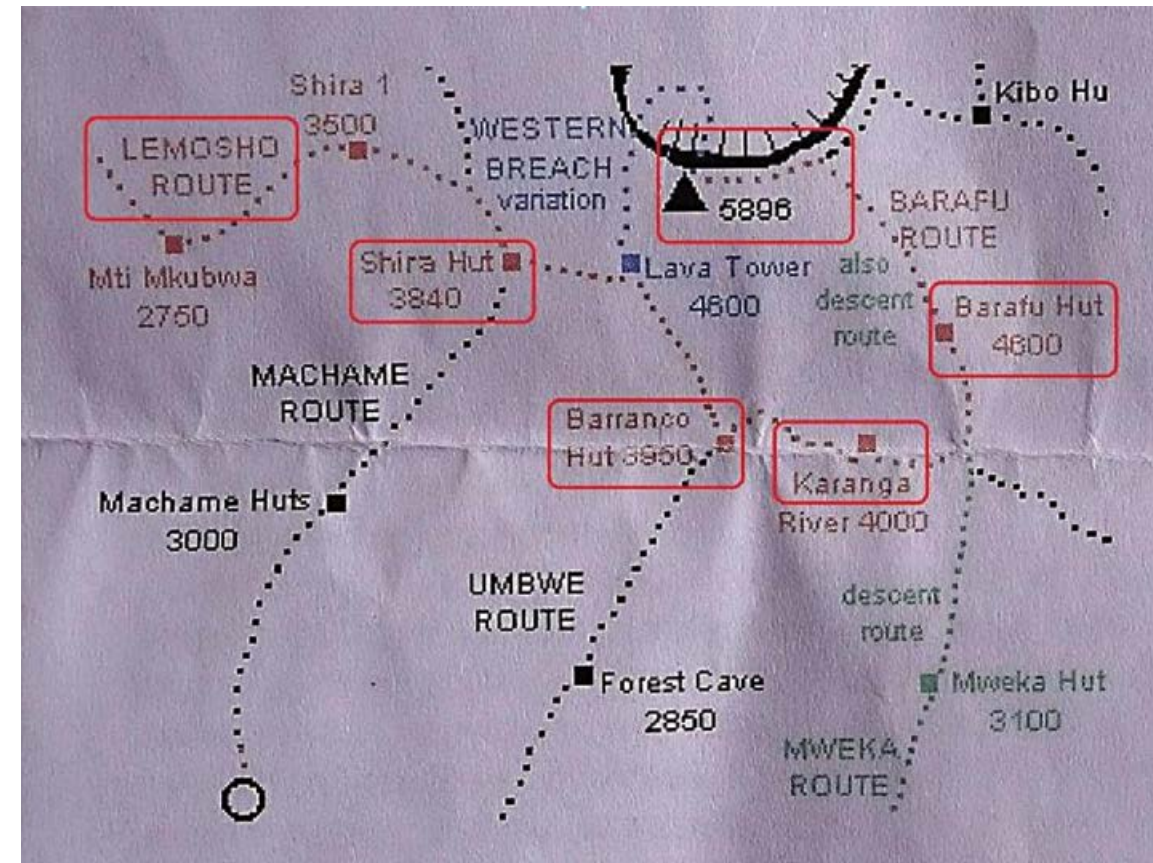
No matter who I'd talk to about Mount Kilimanjaro, they'd either been to the summit already (the majority) or intended to get there in the near future (the minority).

Well, on December 31, 2015, I joined the majority – for on that day I stood at the peak

of this volcano. I saw in the New Year up there too – with the inevitable champagne in plastic cups and a quickly erected small Christmas tree I'd taken with me!







Breathtaking beauty on all sides, beneficially broadening, personally pivotal – reaching the highest point in Africa is all of that. But it’s not just Africa; Kilimanjaro is one of the tallest volcanoes in the world: one of the Seven Summits, its peak is nearly six kilometers (5895 meters) above sea level! (Just in case you don’t know, the Seven Summits are the highest mountains on each of the seven continents.)

The main bit of advice to all those wishing to follow in our footsteps is that for such an expedition you really do need to start preparing well in advance, and to undertake that preparation as meticulously as possible. Kilimanjaro’s no beach holiday. Ok, you guessed that much, but still – whatever you do, don’t skimp on organizational/logistical detail. You’ve been warned!

Our Kilimanjaro expedition posse looked decidedly... senior in years; senior and untrained in climbing volcanoes! This made the prospect of struggling with altitude sickness all the more likely. Therefore, we decided to take the longest (= least steep) route up the mountain (out of several possible routes). That route was the Lemosho route: Mti Mkubwa – Shira Hut (Shira-2) – Barranco – Karanga – Barafu – peak. This route took us up the western slope of the volcano, and is considered the best for steady adaptation to and overcoming of mountain sickness.



Altitude sickness

Also known as acute mountain sickness, altitude sickness is what you can get when at very high altitudes (e.g., up a mountain) where there's very little oxygen (other factors like the weather (especially sharp changes therein), climate, how cold, dehydrated and exhausted you are, and a whole load of others can play their part too).

That's the theory. Our guide, Olya Rumyantseva, gave us the practical lowdown:

"The first stage of altitude sickness is euphoria: the individual becomes animated, excited, amiable, chatty... almost ecstatic. Very much the life and soul of the party.

The second stage is lethargy: the person becomes despondent, sad, bored, subdued and sluggish, with no wish to converse and no appetite. Very much the party pooper.

The third stage, eventually, is fatal: a swift worsening of one's mental and physical state, including such ghastly side-effects as... nope – they're just too dreadful to mention. Before it's too late you MUST get: oxygen (via a mask), medicine (injected), and a helicopter – to evacuate you to the nearest hospital asap".

It does all sound very alarming; however, altitude sickness can be safely avoided or at least kept to the bare minimum if you do one thing – generally take it easy: you don't ascend too quickly, you stay hydrated, and you don't overexert yourself. Thankfully, we ticked all those boxes: we were simply walking up Kilimanjaro steadily over several days – no climbing, no fast ascents, plenty of water with us, and weather (in Africa!) you'd hardly describe as cold. Phew!





What better way can there be than gently strolling up a volcano – especially up neat, clearly signposted footpaths that take you right to the summit and that are all one-way! Yep, you go up one, come down another, so there's never anyone coming in the opposite direction to get in your way. Genius!

Distance, altitude, attitude!

What's the most important thing to think about when considering a climb of one of the world's tallest volcanoes? Well, it's not the total number of kilometers that you need to walk, it's how tough those kilometers will be. What I mean is – how up-and-down the route is. To walk over mainly flat countryside for 20 kilometers, even with a backpack, and at a typical urban altitude – that ain't that hard. But try walking the same 20 km 4km+ above sea-level on a path that goes up gorges and down valleys non-stop... – yes, you puff; yes, you pant; yes, you sweat; yes, you start gasping for air (we're not

down on the beach – there's a lot less oxygen filling your lungs than you're used to). At times you want to give up and head back down, but no – what's started must be finished: no going back! So onward you march...

During our 2012 Kamchatka expedition a battle cry emerged as a natural – optimistic! – human response to the bleak and demanding environment we found ourselves in. Four years later in Africa, not long after we set off we figured it fitted perfectly also this ascent of Kilimanjaro. The battle cry was: 'No regrets!'

None at all – no way; never!! No matter the obstacles that needed to be overcome, no matter the weather conditions, no matter there being too little or too much water, no matter the bloodsucking airborne hazards, no matter how much our legs ached...

So onwards we marched, with *no regrets!*





And we're off... sort of!

First of all we had to fill out some forms. All the tourists crossing the perimeter of the Kilimanjaro National Park need to give their names and a few other details. Those names are then checked off at every control point along the route – without exception. This is to make sure no one gets left behind, for example on quickly melting ice. Very prudent, I say.

The Kilimanjaro National Park is located a short distance north of the small northern Tanzanian city of Moshi, and 128km northeast from Arusha – the capital of the region. It's also 300km south of the equator. Its border lies roughly 2700 meters above sea level.

Reaching the top of Kilimanjaro is the main attractor to the national park for tourists, who flock here in their tens of thousands every year.

After our form-filling we were ferried to some other place in a minibus to have our backpacks weighed (to calculate how many porters would be needed). Then it was lunch! And we hadn't even set off yet! I guess they realized we'd need the energy :-).

Only then, finally, after luncheoning, did we start moving...





A word about the porters

While we tourists carried about our persons a bare minimum of bare necessities on our trek up Kili, the rest of our kit was lugged up the mountainside by local porters who, it turned out, are more than happy to perform such strenuous work since the pay's good.

So while we carried mere waterproofs and photo-video gear, our porters hauled large sacks or baskets containing tents, sleeping bags, sleeping mats, food, water, and all sorts of other bits and bats – on their backs or even on their heads!

We were told how each porter carries a maximum of 15kg of tourist kit, and that's on top of his own kit (they were all men), if any. Our guide explained this so: "15kg is considered

not such a massive load for an adult male. And their tending to carry stuff on their heads, that's just how they're used to carrying stuff – it's more convenient for them."

The guide went on:

"Work as a porter is highly coveted – it's not the most strenuous of jobs, while the pay's always good relative to other work in the region. And thanks to the national park's official policy of encouraging as many workers to be employed as porters as possible (hence the 15kg limit per porter), there's quite a bit of work available (for fit males). A good policy for the locals; a bit more expensive for visiting tourists."

We saw the policy in action: our group was assigned around 30 (thirty!) porters. That's just how things are on and around Kili.

Btw, our porters lugged up Kilimanjaro the following:

- 4 multi-berth tents;
- 1 individual tent for our guide from Moscow (= extreme luxury);
- 1 big tent for the local guides;
- 3 big tents for the porters;
- 1 kitchen tent;
- 8 folding chairs;
- Kitchen kit;
- Food for all for a week;
- Two bottles of champagne for New Year's Eve/Day; and
- A lot of other bits and pieces...





Sometimes the porters also get tired; sometimes they also suffer from altitude sickness. But they're used to it: they just take it easy for a bit, catch their breath, and then march onward and upward. They don't think they have a choice.

At the very end, after returning down to the bottom, the porters say goodbye with a farewell ritual sing-song and dance.



Day 1: Lemosho Gate – Mti Mkubwa

Finally, we set off!...

- Altitude: 2400m > 2800m
- Distance: 4km
- Average speed: 2km/h

Our first day was suitably equatorial to get us into the African spirit...

First up was a trek through an unusual equatorial forest; unusual mainly because of the masses of tropical moss that hang down off the trees. Same forest also gets very wet with frequent rains, so waterproofs are a must – as are waterproof backpacks with the tents and sleeping bags inside!





Late that afternoon we arrive at our first campsite. Altitude 2800m. Wet, dirty, with our tents pitched on mud. Hmm. On the brighter side: monkeys all around up in the trees! At times they climb down to seek out food in the camp – and make friends with the new visitors.

Day 2: Mti-Mkubwa > Shira I (lunch) > Shira II (overnight camp)

- Altitude: 2800m > 3500m to Shira I (+700m) > 3900m to Shira II (+400m) = 1100m.
- Distance: 7km to Shira I + 6.5km to Shira II = 13.5km.
- Average speed: 1.4km/h





On day two the tempo was decidedly slow, and with lots of stops for (literal!) breathers – not because we were lazy or anything, but because we'd risen above the tropical forest and entered some kind of equatorial tundra-pampas. We were already at quite an altitude where the oxygen's scarce – as can be seen by the sparser and more meager vegetation. Going at full steam ahead would have been foolish: we didn't want any altitude sickness. But on we marched – slowly – the only way to go: up!

Up and up we steadily go... when suddenly – a road! Who'd have thought it? Admittedly, it was the last road we saw until our return to civilization.



Shira I camp



Back to basics: old-school public conveniences

Day 3: Shira II > Lava Tower > Barranco

- Altitude: 3900m > 4650m (+750m) > 3950m (-700m) = a day gaining hardly any altitude at all.
- Distance: 9km.
- Average speed: just over 1km/h.



Now that's a landscape to wake up to!
Kilimanjaro towering up into a clear blue sky.



But the idyllic scene didn't last long. All of a sudden a strong wind blew up and a cold rain began to pour down from the clouds that had magically appeared. Hmm. Miserable. Made more so by there being so little oxygen (at 4000m).

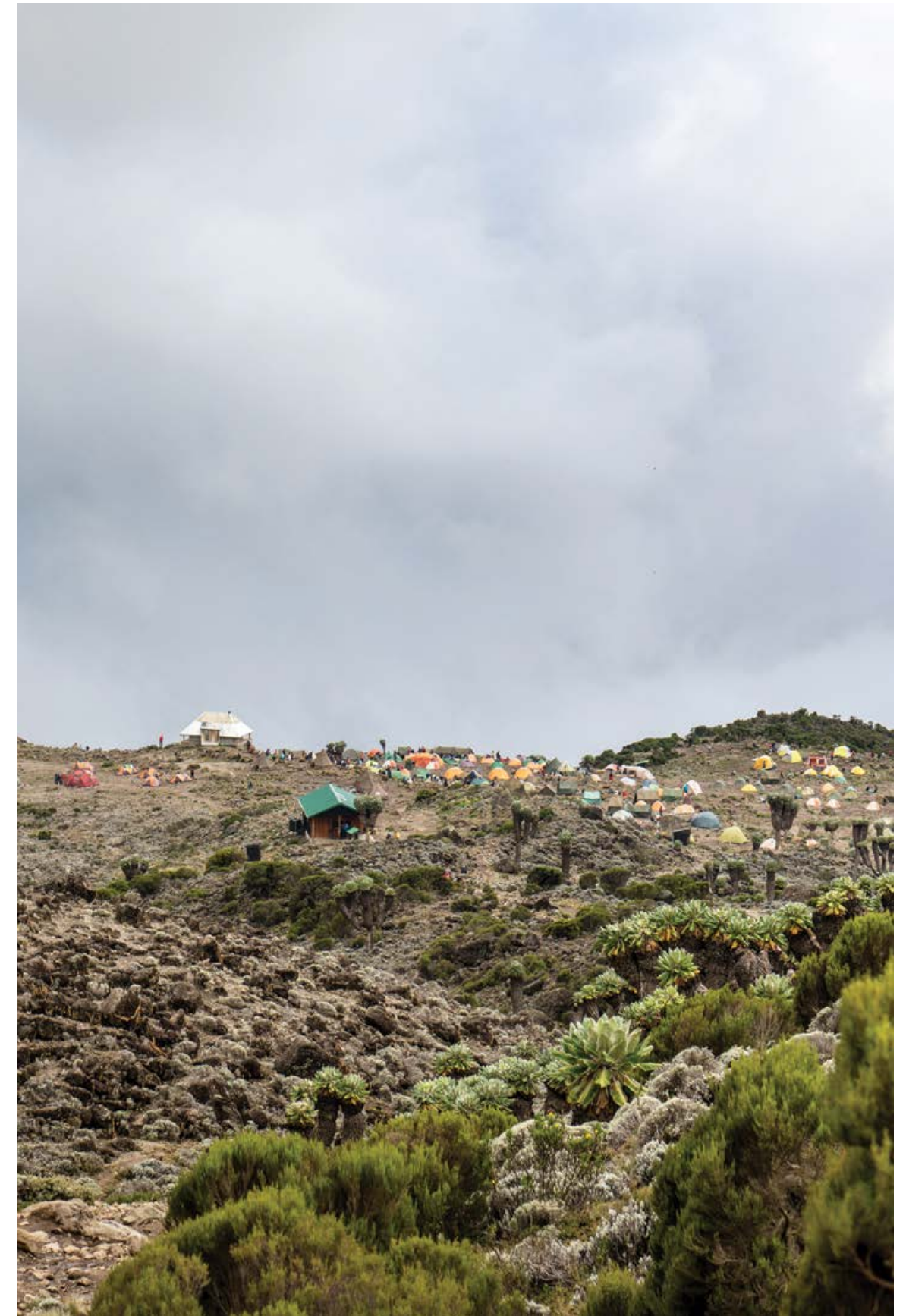
At Lava Tower things were even more dreary: dense fog, still the rain, and everyone's mood turning decidedly depressed. But wait! OH NO! That sounds like the second stage of altitude sickness! So we all buckled down to concentrating on the positive: to remember the adventure and achievement that lay ahead. That helped a bit mood-wise, but still, it was deemed (by our guides) that we needed to descend a bit to get out of the way of this ominous spot of bad weather; that way the acclimatization would be steadier, safer. And who were we to argue?

On our descent down the valley from Lava Tower to the camp below another thing that helped in raising our spirits a bit was the unexpected endemic flora. Our guide reckoned these unusual though thoroughly charming trees were Senecio, though other sources seem to disagree with her. Not that it matters what they're called; these plants/trees are still totally awesome!



On the horizon, our next camp – Barranco.

Next up for us was a climb up that there vertical mountain in the pic. Oh my *gradient!* When we were told such news we felt a bit queasy, to say the least.



Day 4: Barranco – Karanga. The climb up Lava Tower

This was probably the most interesting day of our expedition (besides reaching the actual peak, of course). Some figures of the day:

- Altitude: 3950m > 4250m (the top of the tower) (+300m) > 3950m below in valley (-300m) > 4050 up to camp. A lot of up and down, but in total just a 100m increase in altitude.
- Distance: just 4km in five hours. And by far not the easiest hours or kilometers.
- Average speed: 0.8km/h!



We're headed that way – up that cliff face!



Of course this was going to be a tough day – just look at the day's progress stats on the previous page. Our guides kindly pointed out to us that thousands of tourists go up this cliff face every year, which calmed us down a bit – but not for long. I still wasn't sure. My gut feeling was persistently: 'no way; impossible; can't; won't' etc., etc.

BUT! If you look closer, you see it's not all just one sheer cliff: there are reasonably gentle slopes to the sides – easily navigable without special climbing skills or kit.

So, early morning, after a wash and a very large breakfast, we headed out to those there slopes for a spot of clambering, under the expert guidance of our super guides.



Most of the 'roads' are easily doable with just 'rear wheel drive', but in places we had to engage the AWD, just to be on the safe side.

All the way up: super views! Especially the one of the valley down below.

We slowly move up the slopes in a straight line one-by-one, while the speedy Olympic-athlete porters overtake us or take special off-piste routes to magically always be at the next rest-stop before us!

A little further... And here we are! We've made it!

Karanga camp. Kilimanjaro's peak getting nearer and nearer...



Day 5: Karanga – Barafu

- Altitude: 4060m > 4700m = 600m.
- Distance: Just 3km, but a very beautiful 3km!

This day was straightforward enough. We needed to cover just three kilometers of fairly easy terrain. Mostly plain sailing, despite the uneven ground underfoot. Lots of rest stops and lots of photo-taking. It all added up to a speed of less than one kilometer per hour! Not that we were in any hurry: remember – when scaling Kilimanjaro, slow is the way to go!





Around this altitude the flora disappears to leave a bare stone-and-volcanic-slag landscape. Only the odd clump of hardy grass is to be seen in terms of vegetation. This signifies we're finally here – up in *real* mountains – *real high* mountains. Nothing but rocks, snow, ice, tourists, porters, and a bitter, biting cold.

We make it to Barafu Camp – our last stop before the ascent to the very top. Main thing: keep calm, breathe deeply and evenly, then carry on!

Night/day 6: The ascent to the top

This was a first for me: a nighttime climb to the top of a very tall mountain. And this altitude: a personal record.

But why at night? Simple: that's the rule...

You're only allowed to stay one full day and night (24 hours) at the camp. That is, you can't get to the camp, spend the night, go up to the peak the next day, come back down to the camp, spend another night, and back down further below next morning. Accordingly, Kilimanjaro is always conquered at night. Oh well... only adds to the excitement, plus there's a bonus: a Kili sunrise!...





Arriving at Barafu in the late afternoon of day five, we got changed and kitted out for the final push to the top, but then just lay in our tents for several hours after dinner (which was at 17:30). Then, at 23:00, we were up and off for our overnight trek to the peak of Kilimanjaro. And, brrrrr, was it cold...

The going was ok at first (though it was dark, of course, which was rather disorientating), but it was once we'd passed the 5000m mark when things became difficult. Cold, tired, thin air... But it was the last stretch that was worst of all – an ascent in altitude of some 900m with a cold morning hurricane blowing! It was then when I understood why we were all kitted out in warm mittens and hats and coats. Who'd have thought it – catching your death of cold in Africa?!

Still, come 08:40 we arrived at the caldera – Stella Point (and I could have done with a Stella at that point for sure).

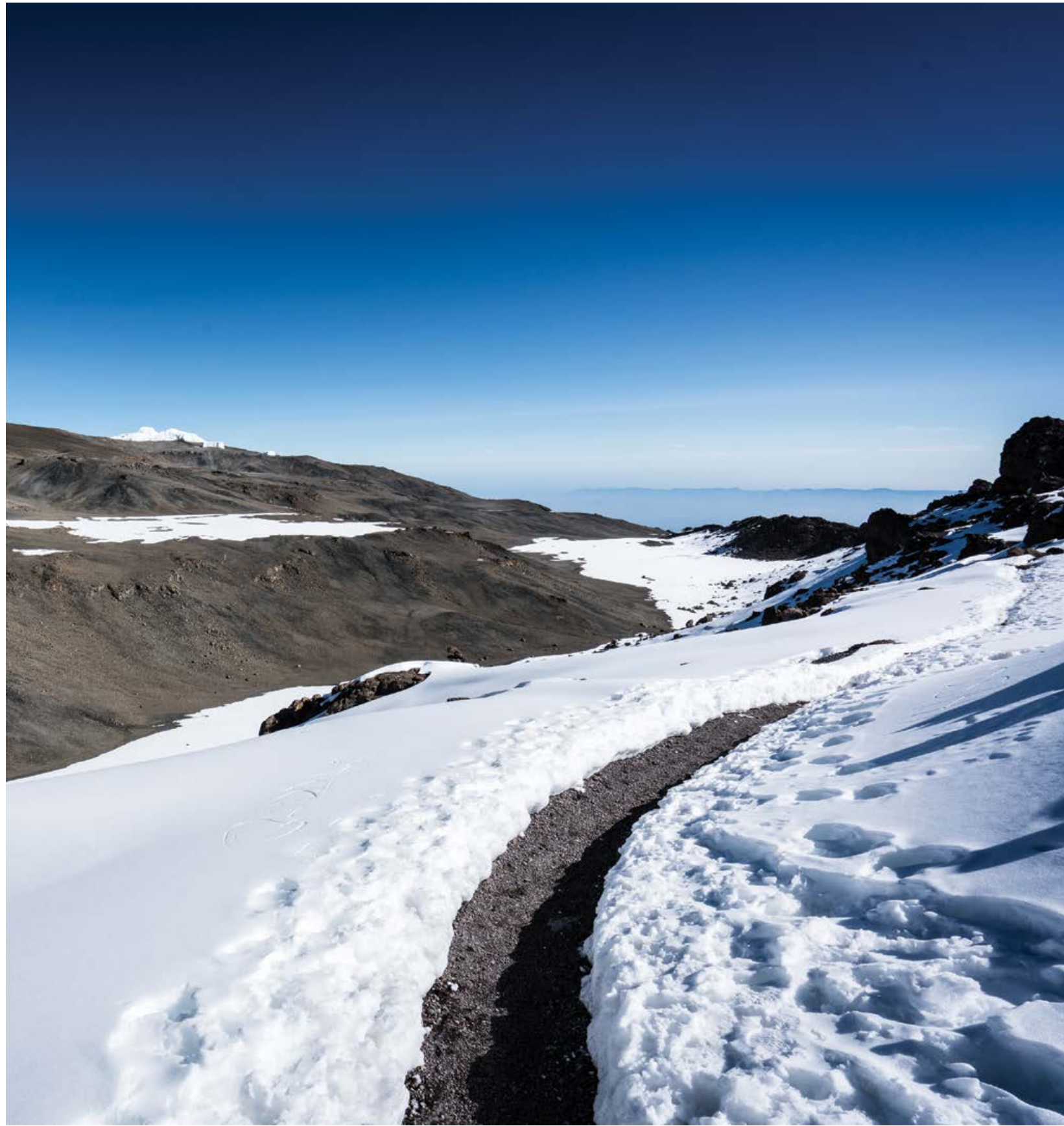


Here we are at Stella Point on the rim of the caldera taking a 'breather'. But I don't think I'd had a more labored breather in my life: our legs were aching with all the uphill trekking and clambering, and the air was so thin it wasn't easy breathing and gave us all headaches (as if something heavy was placed on our heads).

But there was still the last stretch to go...

So after our pseudo-breather, off we schlepped – already at 5750 meters above sea level. Another 150 meters up to go!...







Finally!

Here are all our guides

And here's us lot!



And that's how we got up Kilimanjaro – all in one piece and without a single injury (so we won't be needing that there makeshift trolley). Ooh, and look, it's New Year's Eve! What better way to end one year and begin the next than being nearly six kilometers up an African volcano?!





Kilimanjaro statistics state that only 45% of those starting out actually make it to the top of the volcano. Interestingly, the longer the route you take, the greater the chances of success. For example, on the fast-track five-day route, the likelihood you'll get to the top stands at just 27%; on our seven-day route it's 64%; while on the eight-day route it's 85% (the eight-day route is our route + a night stopover at Shira I).

Starting out at Lemosho, our group numbered eight, + one (Moscow) guide + four local guides + around 30 porters. Later on, at the base camp, one woman gave up and went no further (told

you it was tough). Later, another couldn't drag herself up to Stella Point (on the edge of the caldera). I mean, *really* couldn't not wouldn't, as altitude sickness had gotten to her. So she was carried up the last stretch by the guides – at least then she could say she'd been at the top. Once there, literally immediately she was sent straight back down below – as quickly as possible. She was accompanied by her son too, who walked beside her trolley. Incidentally, in the rush, he took the KL flag with him by mistake! Oh well, not to worry. But that's the reason there are no pics of it being waved around by us up at the top.

So, out of our group of eight, five made it to the very top. That makes 62.5% – higher than the average. Hooray!



The highest point of Kilimanjaro is the caldera of the old volcano. This is where tourists tend to be taken. But inside the caldera there's the cone of a new volcano – a fresh one, just a few hundred years old (I reckon), but it's not easily visible from everywhere up at the top. Accordingly, ideally you need to spend the night in the caldera to be able to then investigate the new cone properly the next day. To me, to be able to say you've 'done' Kilimanjaro fully and properly, you really need to get to the top of this newer inner cone too. Just as well: gives me another excuse to come back – for the full, real, genuine Kilimanjaro experience!

'Up Kilimanjaro', by EK

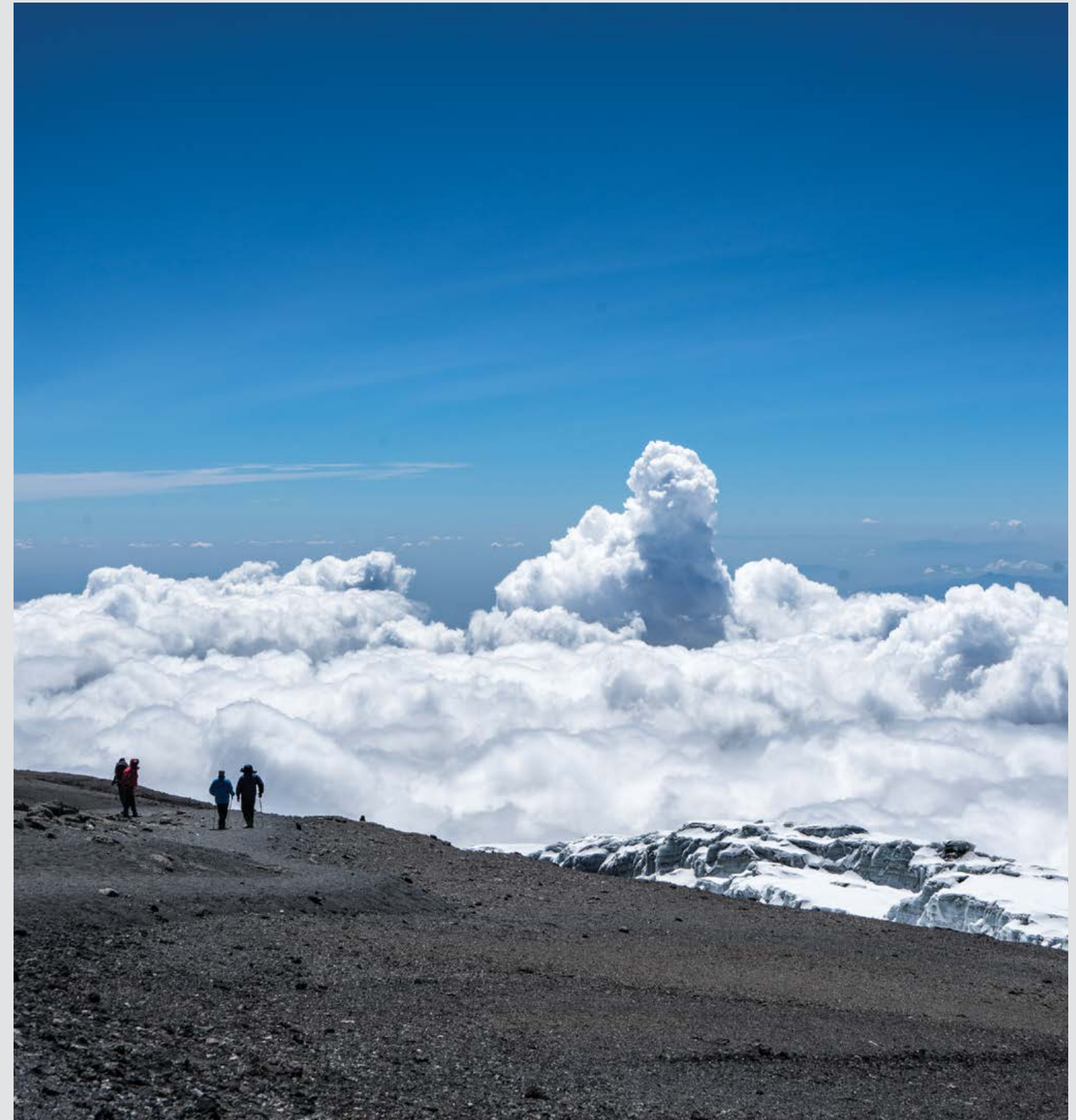
Who's been there – is nostalgic and wants to go back there.

Who plans on getting there – will get there.

Who dreams of getting there – the dream will come true.

Who's only just heard of Kili has a chance.

But who's just been born may never see its snowy peaks as they may melt for good!





“Then they began to climb and they were going to the East it seemed, and then it darkened and they were in a storm, the rain so thick it seemed like flying through a waterfall, and then they were out and Compie turned his head and grinned and pointed and there, ahead, all he could see, as wide as all the world, great, high, and unbelievably white in the sun, was the square top of Kilimanjaro. And then he knew that there was where he was going.”

Ernest Hemingway,
The Snows of Kilimanjaro

The snows of Kilimanjaro coming into view from the plane



Kilimanjaro: a veritable vegetable patch

A trip to Africa always entails a good bit of amazement and astonishment – no matter which part of it you visit. Well, we were fully prepared to be both amazed and astonished on our winter trip to Kilimanjaro, but we weren't quite expecting this: acres upon acres of fertile land with all sorts of vegetables growing thereupon!

Then there were the great many fir trees we saw on the mountain slopes of Tanzania, which appeared to have been carefully planted in neat rows. Well, at least – they sure looked like fir trees...

...The trunks looked like those of fir trees, but the branches... What were they? Don't know.

Some kind of Thuja.

Anyway, more surprising were all the vegetables being grown: carrots, marrows, potatoes, pumpkins, zucchini and more!... who'd have thought it? In Africa?!

Turns out these veggies are the raison d'être for the 'fir' trees: for the vegetable patches to stay fertile, hardy trees were planted to protect the less-hardy vegetables below from the fierce African sun. The result is a nicely balanced symbiotic agro-ecosystem. This means more veggies – grown quicker and cheaper. Bingo!

And of course, the soil here being of the volcanically fertilized kind thanks to big old Kili sat in the middle of it all... that too helps ensure the harvests here are always plentiful. Bingo again!

But, then, you still might be thinking something like: "Africa – the continent where droughts are common? Er, how do all these veggies get watered/irrigated?". Yet another surprise: it rains a lot here. While we were on the mountain rain fell daily – at impossibly consistent times of the day: a little before lunch, and then a little after it. Around 1 to 3pm – every day. No variation!

If you were wondering how all the vegetables stay irrigated: here's your answer!





I never knew a volcano – especially one in equatorial Africa – could be so successfully, abundantly agricultural!

Just check out all the green in this pic. This is Africa. Remember? I kept forgetting...

Safari!

After coming back down Kilimanjaro to the plains below, before we had time to utter 'descent acclimatization', we were whisked off... on an African safari!

Initially, the colonial meaning of the term 'safari' meant something like: 'to go and shoot wild animals in Africa', not necessarily to later cook and eat them or even use their hides for whatever; just like at a shooting gallery – only with live targets.

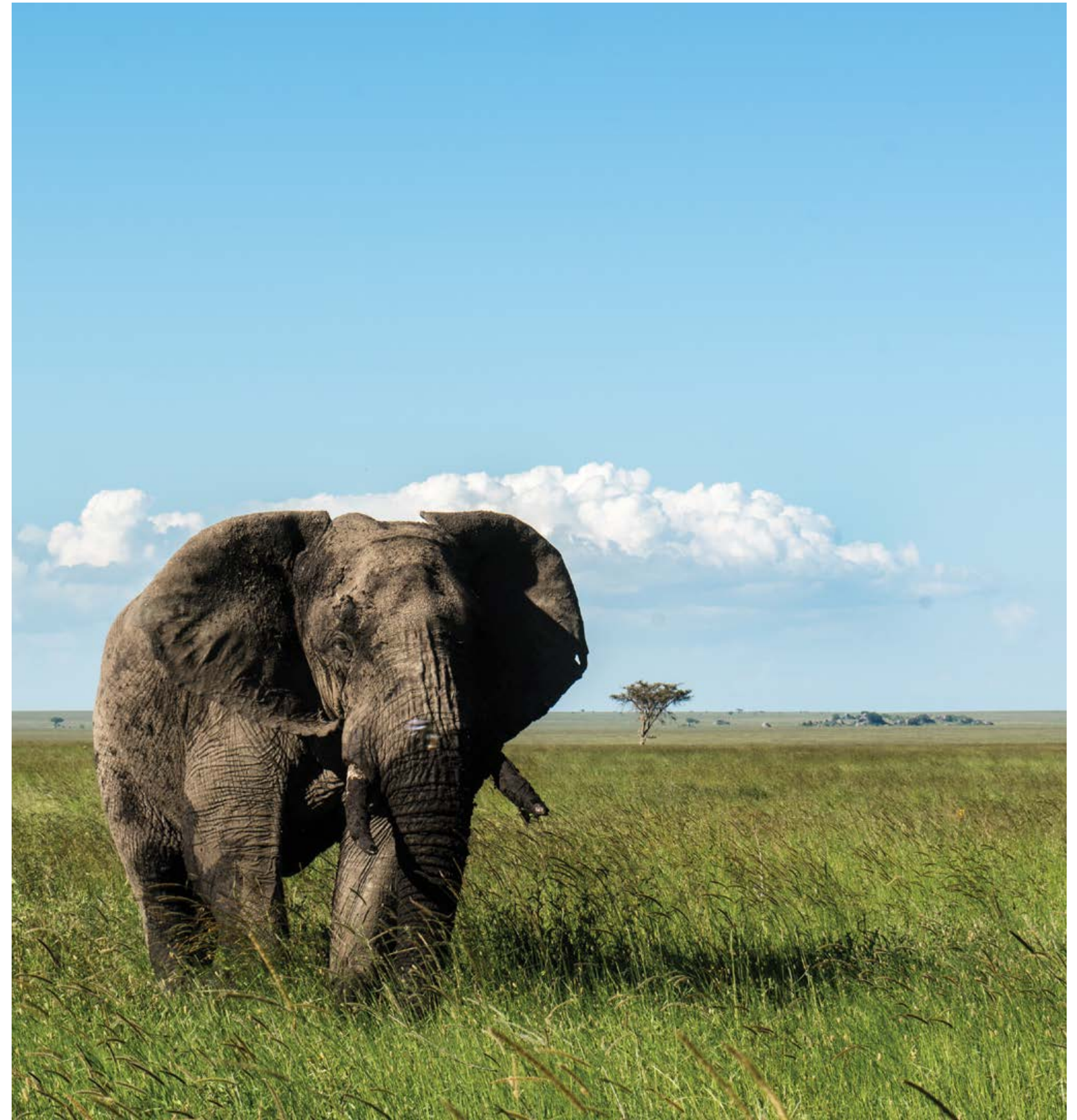
Time has passed and mores have changed for the better, and now the term means 'to look at wild animals in Africa (from a car or jeep)'... and take photos of them in all their wild poses.

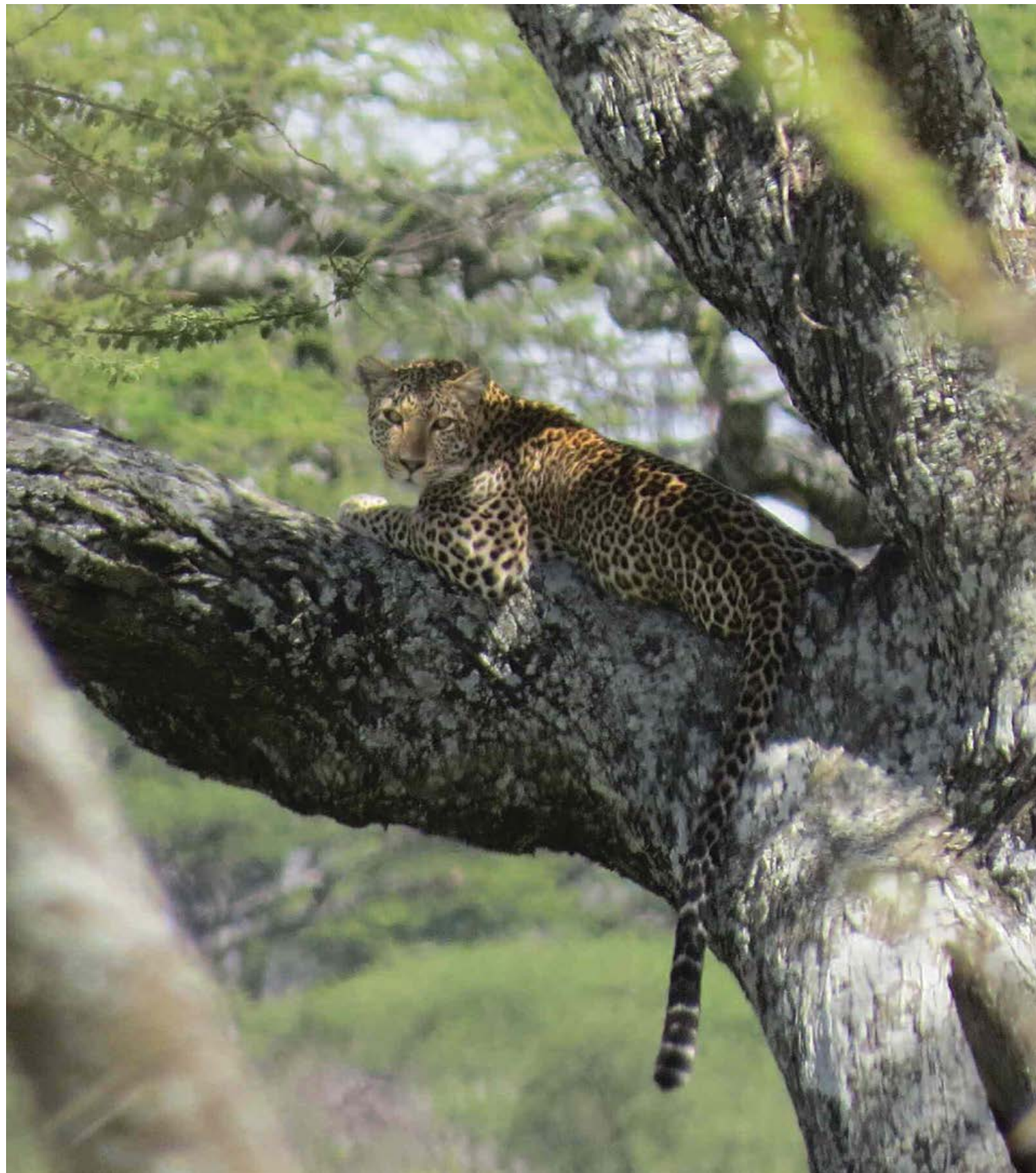
Wikipedia states that the word safari comes from the Swahili term for 'journey'. Aha! So, I add that to my concise (jeans' coin pocket!) Swahili dictionary (in addition to *Hakuna matata!*).



So, after descending Kilimanjaro, we began the second stage of our adventure. Mercifully, it was a mobile stage – in jeeps, after seven days on our feet. Pheeeew!

Off we headed – across the national parks of Tanzania. Safari! Birds and beasts! Maybe a long-held dream of mine would come true – to scratch a crocodile behind the ear and gently tug a hippopotamus by the tassel of its tail! And let's not forget checking out the African 'big five': the lion, elephant, buffalo, leopard and rhinoceros (we saw them all!). The term 'big five', incidentally, was thought up by (white) big-game hunters in Africa, and it doesn't refer to the biggest five animals; it refers to the hardest to hunt on foot!





Of course there's also the hippo and the giraffe to be seen (both 'big'!), but, clearly, they weren't so tricky to hunt in the past. Whatever; we saw both species – in very big quantities).

All righty, let's go! Ahead lie three national parks/nature reserves: Manyara, Ngorongoro, Serengeti.



Manyara

The Lake Manyara National Park is a narrow strip of land between the Gregory Rift to the west and Lake Manyara, an alkaline lake, to the east. This park is best known for its abundance of pink flamingos – normally; alas, the park's lake – which can cover two-thirds of the whole park when the water's high – was all dried up, so we didn't see a single one – not even through binoculars. Our driver-guide told us that the lake has been dry for several years already. While a passer-by told us about some 'green folks' (eco-activists or some such) from developed countries who came and decided to save the ecology of the lake by clearing it of some kind of dangerous algae. But it turned

out that this 'dangerous' algae made up part of the daily ration of the flamingos! Naturally, wanting to maintain their preferred diet, they just flew off in search of it; and they found it – to the north, in Kenya, where they decided to stay. Anyway, I couldn't fully work out what really did cause the drying up of the lake and the lack of flamingoes; I can only confirm the result: very dried up, and very un-flamingoed.

But we did see loads of other beasts of different sizes and quantities – including elephants grazing by the roadside!





Ngorongoro

Ngorongoro is a gigantic round caldera (crater) some 20km in diameter and with fairly steep walls all around, and a UNESCO World Heritage Site to boot. From its edge, across the whole crater can be seen tiny specks that sometimes move – sometimes in groups, resembling ants. Those specks turned out to be large animals – not that you'd guess through binoculars.

They say that large beasts like the rhinoceros and hippopotamus can't get up the crater walls (~600 meters high) to get out. But then, they probably don't need to – they're well fed down in the crater. Our guide told us that elephants are cleverer than the other large animals and get out of the crater by slowly traversing the walls in a zigzag fashion – much like how a serpentine road will wind up a mountain. As for smaller animals (zebras, antelopes and smaller), they've no problem getting out – trotting up and down, back and forth, whenever they feel like it.

In Ngorongoro there's a place called Elephants' Graveyard. According to legend, submitting to instinct, elephants come here to die – alone. They've been doing so for eons, so there are a lot of bones to be found here. And just like with the dry lake and the flamingos, there's more than one theory for this phenomenon.

One of them is that the elephants would crowd here during a famine since it was one of the few places where there was at least some food to be found. The food soon ran out though, and the elephants died there of starvation. Another theory states that old and toothless elephants (due to old age and having used up their quota of (several) sets of teeth (see below paragraph)) would search for soft food they'd be able to chew with their gums and the few remains of their teeth. Such food can be found usually in moist/swampy places – and the 'graveyard' just happened to be such a place. They'd finish their chewing and pass away, not getting up from the 'table'.

Btw, data on how many times elephants get new sets of teeth vary. Some sources say four times, others – five, still others – six. Surely it must depend on the particular type of elephant?

Still on the elephant teeth topic, it turns out that they don't have one set of upper and one set of lower teeth, pointing down and up, respectively, as humans do; theirs protrude out of the side of their gums – horizontally.

Sadly, despite efforts to protect the species, the number of elephants in Tanzania over recent years has decreased by two-thirds. Poaching's to blame: tusks are highly sought after for traditional Chinese medicine.







Along with the animals different species of bird graze here too – the flamingo, ostrich, some gray breed I don't know the name of. But out of all of them my favorite for sure is the secretarybird – in this pic here.

Vultures wait in the wings for their invite to the dinner table...





One muddy rhino! Hippos! Alas – we didn't see any crocs.

It was here where we were treated to a an episode of a soap opera! A Thomson's gazelle had just given birth. But for some reason the nearby zebras didn't like this one bit, and started to shoo off the mother from her newborn! The zebra don't touch the offspring, but they don't let mommy anywhere near it either. Why? I don't know. I just hope the episode had a happy ending and the baby rejoined its mother and wasn't eaten up by lions or vultures.

A Central African Warthog



In the parking lot at the entrance to Ngorongoro we encountered a troop of baboons. And not all of them were friendly, to say the least – like this one here in the pic bearing his teeth. Hold on to your bags and cameras folks!





Here are some Maasai herding cows toward the fertile crater pasture. They had to go down the 600-meter-high wall into the crater, than back up it come the evening. Stamina: respect.

Serengeti

Serengeti, which in the local tongue means 'endless plains', covers an area of some 15,000 square kilometers, is home to approximately 500 (!) species of bird, plus a total of around three million (!) individual large animals! It's basically a gigantic national park crammed full of vegetarian beasts and carnivorous cats. Simply amazing. This is the main attraction safari-wise for sure.

It's here where the famous great migration takes place. This annual event sees more than a million wildebeest and a quarter of a million zebra move from the hills in the north to the valleys in the south – where short bursts of regular rain ripen the grass for the animals to graze on. Alas, we missed the 'rush-hour' of the migration (its precise timing is unpredictable), but nevertheless we still had our fill of wild beast watching here.





As soon as we hit the park we caught our first glimpse of giraffes, plus countless flocks of wildebeest. We were told that during the Great Migration there are even more of them, and the whole savanna landscape is just a sea of black (wildebeest) with some white stripes here and there (on the zebras!).



In Ngorongoro there were a few, but here – zillions

This, ladies and gents, is a hyrax. You won't believe me but it's the nearest relative to... the elephant! Yes, those fine – enormous – beasts with the tusks and trunk.

And in the pic below the hyrax – two dik-diks, the smallest antelope in the animal world. Extremely timid (otherwise it wouldn't have survived). It gets nervous just by a camera being pointed at it.



Lion alert! Actually, no alert necessary: the ones we saw were all sated, lazy and sleepy. We were told how they can sleep for up to 20 hours a day. A hard life those lions have.



All of them – beauts!

Especially by the road side...





At the tops of trees in the park were huge flocks of marabou storks



I've written plenty about all the beautiful creatures we saw on our Africa trip. But what about the less pretty (if not darn ugly!) creatures (like, say, hyenas or elephant seals in other parts of the world)? Well, Africa has its fair share of... *unsightly* wild animals too. For example, the marabou stork.

A true marabou belle)



And here's the surrounding savanna. They call this endless lowland here the 'Green Sea'



Where to stay while on safari

In the African savanna there are two options: spending the nights either in tents or in hotels.

They say that the tent option on safari is really cool. Although not the most comfortable night's sleep, what more than makes up for that are the night sounds all around: the growls, woofs, meows and roars that occasionally cut through the constant background hums and hisses of all creatures wild and great and small as they eat, hunt, mate or whatever else it is they get up to at night.

But we preferred to stay in hotels.

So what can you expect from a hotel deep within the Tanzanian savanna, tens if not hundreds of miles from the nearest civilization? As it happens, you can expect something rather great! The places where we spent the night were really decent, each with a swimming pool and plenty of other conveniences and facilities on site. There are of course the inevitable local 'specifics' you have to get used to, but then you

get those practically anywhere. A few examples while on safari: the brightly-colored poison-laced linen sheets hung up to protect you from the tsetse flies; and the mosquitoes that seem to get through such sheets: they bite, as god intended! So best to sleep in trousers and a long-sleeved shirt. Apart from these minor irritants, it's a paradise!

Ngorongoro Sopa Lodge. This was where we spent our first night at the top of the edge of the Ngorongoro Crater. Main impression: the OMG views of the park. Second best: how wild antelopes and other beasts come right up to your lodgings; not for the easily spooked :).

Regrettably no electrical grid reaches here, so all power comes from generators. This means certain conveniences we take for granted normally are somewhat curtailed. Hot water, for example, is only available between 5 and 8am, and 5 and 8pm. Besides, power outages are known to occur.

However, there's a perfectly reasonable internet connection (not the fastest, but at least email can be downloaded), the rooms are comfortable, and the restaurant isn't bad at all. One fairly freaky specific of Ngorongoro Sopa Lodge: since to get to the rooms from the lobby/pool area you need to walk down the 'street', you need one of the appointed staff to accompany you – they know exactly how to deal with the wild animals that might take an interest in you en route). It's the same in most hotels in the savanna.

Alas, we arrived at sunset and departed at dawn, so we didn't get round to checking out the amenities to the full. We didn't even get a chance to have a dip in the pool; same goes for the other hotels. A slower pace would have been better, to have at least till noon to take it easy and bathe and take in the surrounding sights from the comfort of a comforting hotel.





On our second night we stayed at the **Serena Serengeti Lodge**.

Perched atop a hill, this complex is made up of small thatched-roof cottages with three rooms in each. Clean, cozy. Restaurant, pool, internet: all present and correct, sir. The pool and the views around from it – oh my *greenery!* Sadly, once again, we didn't have time to kick back in comfort: we arrived late, left early after a quick breakfast, and that was that.

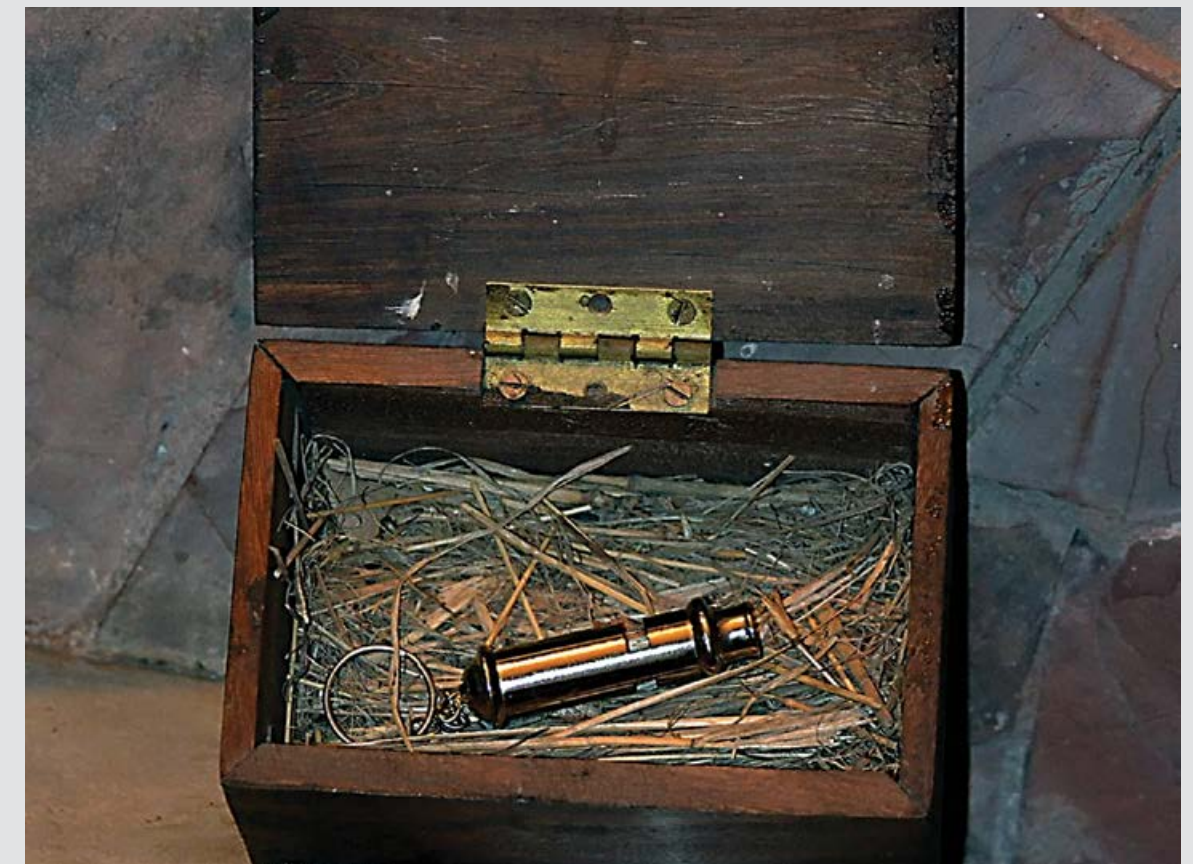


Our third night was spent at the **Mbalageti Serengeti Lodge**.

It's reeeaaal far, almost as far as Lake Victoria! This hotel is also on a hill, and also surrounded by 360 degrees of insanely beautiful savanna scenery. It even has a conference room – perfect for meetings where you don't want to be bothered by anyone. For though it's remote, there's also no internet – or mobile coverage; not even land lines in the rooms! Perfect).

The one means of communication that was present in every room was... a whistle in a box! I reckon these are used when you need to attract the attention of the staff. Haven't seen that in any of the zillions of hotels I've stayed at around the world. I just feel sorry for the other guests. Imagine having a high-pitched whistle going off when your neighbor gets the munchies in the middle of the night!

The generators here come on between five and nine in the morning and four and half-eleven in the evening. At night: candlelight only! Not that that's a problem: tourists are normally beat after all their safari-ing and are all early to bed.





Before and after climbing Kilimanjaro and then also after the safari, we spent a few nights at the **Ngare Sero Lodge** in Arusha.

Very nice lodgings! Comfortable cabins, a pond with birds, monkeys up in the trees, electricity, and internet 24 hours-a-day. Civilization!

Porters – females only!



Behind the trees – Kilimanjaro.
The first morning (before climbing)
we looked at it in anticipation – if
not trepidation; afterward – with
nostalgia. I just want to return!



Hi, Maasai!

The Maasai people are a semi-nomadic African ethnic group that has almost entirely rejected modern civilization in favor of their traditional way of life.

As we were driving through a Maasai village, we decided to stop to have a look around and hopefully interact with some of the tribespeople, which is just what happened...

The village is made up of about 30 huts housing around 120. There's a school, where it seems they at least count and read. Not sure about writing: I didn't see any pens or pencils.

So what did the locals have to say? They told us how they live a rather poor existence. They breed cattle. There are no sources of clean water nearby, so they drink milk, animal blood, and something else (I can't quite remember what).

As to their diet, they're well and truly carnivores; they eat meat, and only meat. They say there are no vegetables at all in their diet. I believe them: we saw nothing growing around their villages. It remains a mystery to me how they get their essential minerals and vitamins. Maybe they nibble on some grass by the roadside... Walking seems to be their only mode of transport – they don't have any vehicles, and we didn't see them riding any donkeys or zebras.

They reject all modern medicine, preferring their traditional natural remedies – various herbs, tree bark and roots.

The Maasai practice polygamy! Parents choose a wife (or wives) for their son. It's all just a part of their ancient traditions. One of the first questions they asked the men in our group was: "How many wives do you have?!"

One thing you notice is how good they are at telling stories. Apparently they get quite a lot of tourists visiting them. Perhaps they've been taught the secrets of being a good tourist guide :).

However, as to facilities tourists are used to, there were practically none here: virtually no traces of modern civilization. The exceptions were some plastic buckets in the corners of the huts, sandals made of car tires, small (decorative more than anything) padlocks on hut doors, and someone wearing an old watch. I have to say that the padlocks, albeit very small, were not exactly a sign of benevolent primitive social relations within the tribe. What do they need locks for? It looks like civilization has some downsides too.

More photographic evidence of the Maasai's shift toward civilization is this picture of them with a pad and pen. They're clearly not jotting down observations of visiting tourists for a future novel. My hypothesis is that they're keeping track of details of what they did for tourists, so they can distribute their earnings among themselves: they took out the pad immediately after they performed their traditional dance.

Life here moves in a groove. On the right hand side of the road the Maasai lead donkey caravans carrying some sort of goods, while on the left there are zebras and giraffes grazing. They don't interfere with each other, and everyone's happy.

The Maasai are also OK about using 'modern' means of transportation. However, I'm not sure these guys really were Maasai or just pretending. Just so that you know, in Tanzania there are lots of people pretending to be Maasai. The locals really love to use the Maasai theme with the tourists.

Maasai – or people just pretending to be Maasai – were frequently spotted along the roadsides. Of course, it's hard to tell who is genuine, but I'm pretty sure the people in these pictures were actually Maasai.

One of the reasons for them to be on the roadside is to pose for photos with tourists for money. The interest in money also points to some degree of civilization. By the way, the black clothes and faces painted white show that this is festive attire. As the tribal leader's son told me, there are three main colors for their clothing: blue is salutatory-welcoming, red is for working (so they can see each other better in the bush), and black is festive.

When I quietly asked a Maasai whether any of them had a cellphone, he first pretended not to understand what I was talking about, but then confessed and said yes, some members of the tribe do have mobiles. What I want to know is how they recharge them. There was no sign of electricity sources in the village! Perhaps they only switch their phones on to make a call, and then immediately switch them off again. Their Nokias or whatever could last for months like that without being charged. I'm afraid I don't know the answer – I couldn't dig that far into modern-day Maasai mysteries.

Let's see if I can find any more interesting facts about the Maasai. Here is what Wikipedia tells me:

Notable Maasai people:

- David Rudisha – middle-distance runner, 2012 Olympics champion, and 800-meter world record holder;
- Bolaji Badejo – appeared as the Alien in the film of the same name.



In the village the conversation quickly turned to greenbacks: "for just \$50 per car" the inhabitants will perform their traditional tribal welcome-dance. Women to the left, men to the right, we pay the fee, and the show begins!...



Zanzibar – Wunderbar!

I have to admit that I didn't quite know where Zanzibar was. Well, I knew it was in the Indian Ocean somewhere, but that's about it. But what was the real revelation for me was that the Zanzibar archipelago belongs to Tanzania!

It turns out that in 1964 the authorities of Zanzibar and Tanganyika signed an agreement to merge together and form a new 'United Republic of Tanzania', within which Zanzibar remains a semi-autonomous region. Since 2005 Zanzibar has had its own flag, parliament, and even its own president.

All I was told of Zanzibar before getting there was about its beautiful beaches and the hot ocean water splashing over them; also, its crazy low tides that extend the beaches out towards the ocean a lot further than you'd normally expect; and crazy stunning sunsets.

Well it all turned out to be true. That is, apart from the sunsets, with which we were just unlucky: we only saw the one spectacular sunset on the evening we arrived. After that the horizon was always shrouded in dense cloud of an evening. But for the rest – oh yes: amazing...

And so – Zanzibar...!





With legs tired from all the trekking up and down Kili, and with bodies thoroughly shaken (and stirred) from the bumpy safari roads (and all we saw from them), Zanzibar was just the thing we needed. For it is paradise – all of it, 24/7.

And thus began the third and final stage of our African triathlon.

Along the coast there are the usual seaside resort scenes: folks sunning and bathing, boats cruising, fish swimming – and being caught.





I really like wandering hither and thither on such a beach, inspecting all the activity going on along it, people-watching, and of course seeing how much they depend on modern SCADA industrial systems – and rejoicing that they in fact don't depend on them one bit: they know all about air-gap security :). So, reassured that there's no work for us to be done here, I could relax and just stroll, snap, pina-colada, sun and chill. Sweet.



The Zanzibar low tide.

Visiting tourists are always warned here about Zanzibar's beaches: they can be... tricky. Basically, the tides ebb and flow really fast and really far. Of a morning, one minute you're stretched out on the sand with your toes in the ocean, the next minute that ocean is hundreds of meters away! And if you decide to chase the tide, you still won't get any decent swimming done: even if you walk into the sea hundreds of meters, it still only just comes up above your knees.

At the same time, the extreme low tide forces you to try other things besides paddling in shallow water; for example, checking out the stalls selling paintings right on the beach. In the meantime, the tide goes out still further, leaving expanses of seaweed-and-marine-life strewn beach – swiftly investigated by Petrovich. “Hey, Petrovich. Where you off to?!”...





The boats were parked up on the beach because it was Sunday. The following day there weren't any to be seen at all – they were all out to sea, the working week having begun...

The upside of the mega ebbs of the tide is that you can walk hundreds of meters from the shore – sometimes up to two kilometers from it! – and check out all the sea life in the shallow pools that are left, which includes sea urchins and starfish. Just don't step on any; the latter – though seemingly harmless – would see you limping for a week or two.



That starfish has no brain at all! But its elegance surely makes up for that trivial biological shortcoming, no?!

The lighthouse is the northernmost point of the island. If we'd have taken a left and continued along the coast – that'd have been a walk round the whole island: at least a two-week-long hike! No, we simply about-turned and headed back south for more starfish-gazing.





The Show Must... Start Somewhere Too

The archipelago is called Zanzibar, while the capital is called Zanzibar City, on the island of Unguja. It's a very old African-Arabian city. Though cramped and somewhat dirty, it's said to be a hit with tourists ("it's so genuine"), which brought me to the conclusion: I'm not a tourist :).

Zanzibar has some rather somber history to it. It was once a principal center for the slave trade – and remained an illegal one thereof even after slavery was outlawed in the 20th century. That fact is about all we got to find out on the topic though, as we didn't spend long in the city to learn more.

Oh, and btw – on a much brighter note – in this house here ~70 years ago, a certain Farrokh Bulsara was born. You might know him better by his stage name: **Freddie Mercury!**

Prison Island – Turtle Island

Changuu, aka Prison Island, is best known for its giant turtles, which were originally brought to the island by the neighboring Seychellois in the early twentieth century. There's some less benign history here too, which you can probably guess by the alternative name of the island. Yep, it was used as a prison for 'rebellious' slaves in the 1860s.

Back to the turtles: they really are huge. If I compare them to those I've seen in all sorts of other places, these are by far the biggest I've seen.

Parental Advisory! These two love birds turtles have a whole 138 years between them, according to our guides! Loverboy there is 192 years old; Lolita – 54!





Farewell Tanzania! We'll be back!

And that just about wraps up my tales from Africa – at least for now. What an experience: up a volcano, across the savanna on safari, plus idyllic beaches (with the weirdest low tides) – all within two and a half weeks. In places it was tough, sleep was scant, there were loads of transfers between our various stops, and the tips of our index fingers were almost blistered with snapping. But all the same, I recommend it to everyone. I'm already missing it!

Eugene Kaspersky

Awesome Africa

Or the Tanzanian Triathlon

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Visiting Africa is always a distinctive, wondrous experience. And this particular visit was more so than usual as we experienced contrasting sides to it – including its volcanism, savannah, and beaches! In short, two-and-a-half weeks of astonishment and pleasant surprises!

It got a little tricky at times – never really getting enough sleep, lots of driving, and stamina-busting trekking – but the extraordinary surrounding scenery made it all worth it – which I hope I convey sufficiently in this book through all the photos I took.

In all it was an experience that was absolutely Africanly awesome! I can't recommend Africa highly enough. Meanwhile, I can't stop getting all nostalgic about the place!

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