

# Kilimanjaro 2016



*Pictured before the start of the trek up Mount Kilimanjaro were (back row, l-r): Brian Hehir (Clare), Ciaran Cleary (Galway), Barry Gilbourne (Limerick), Darren O'Toole (Kildare), Noel Crowley (Cork), Rachel McDarby (Mayo), Cian Foley (Waterford); (standing on left, l-r): Carl Crehan (Dublin) and James O'Shea (Dublin); (sitting middle row, l-r): Claire Desmond (Kildare), PJ McMackin (Wexford), Emer Croke (Waterford), Nicola Foley (Waterford), Sean McCarthy (Galway), Aine Reilly (Cavan), Eithne Hobbs (Wexford), Caitriona Coleman (Sligo/Diabetes Nurse Specialist) and Angeles Zamarano (Spain/Mayo); and (sitting to the right, front row, l-r): Gary Brady (Kildare/DI Rep), Shashi Sopirla (India/Louth) and Ronan Canavan (Dublin/Consultant Endocrinologist)*

In September, Diabetes Ireland returned to Kilimanjaro with a fundraising group for the first time in over 15 years. With a summit of 19,341ft, Kilimanjaro is the tallest mountain in Africa and the highest freestanding mountain in the world. This trip of a lifetime saw 18 fundraisers from across Ireland take on this challenge of a lifetime.

The group were joined by our medical team of Dr Ronan Canavan (Consultant Endocrinologist, St Columcille's Hospital, Loughlinstown) and Caitriona Coleman

(Diabetes Nurse Specialist, Sligo General Hospital). Their work across the 10 days in Tanzania was incredible and a huge debt of gratitude is owed to them both by Diabetes Ireland as without them the trip would not have been possible.

The trip began with a group meeting on a very early 3am Thursday morning at Dublin airport, before departure to Tanzania via Amsterdam. When we landed in Kilimanjaro International Airport over 20 hours later, tired and stiff, we were met by a huge culture

shock of noise and heat, but once we got through visa control we were on our way to the local town of Moshi and our base hotel.

### First glimpse of the peak

The next morning we awoke to a glorious sunny warm morning and the reality of where we were hit us. Although the mountain was obscured by cloud we could all feel its presence and were searching for a vantage spot to catch our first glimpse of the peak.

After an information talk and trip

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*Camping in the clouds*

outline by the representatives and guides from the Tanzanian office of our tour operator Adventure Alternatives we had the day to ourselves. Half the group headed off for a one-day safari while the rest headed in to the town to see local life. We all got to see our first clear long-distance view of Kilimanjaro and although it was almost 50km away the scale was breath-taking.

It was an early evening for everyone as we had to repack our main bag for the mountain and get it within weight restrictions for the porters who would carry it on a daily basis.

A nervous energy was felt throughout the group as we sat on the bus the following morning. After 10 months of planning, fundraising and training we were finally here at the start of a challenge of a lifetime. Seven days of long trekking hours lay ahead before we would see a shower, running water, comfortable bed, cold beer or a western flushing toilet again!

## **From the Tropics to the Arctic**

The beauty of trekking Mount Kilimanjaro is that the trek to the summit covers a vast range of climates and landscapes, from the Tropics to the Arctic. The cultivated foot-slopes give way to lush forest and higher up lies the moorland zone. Above 4,000m, a surreal mountain desert supports little life. Then,



*Enjoying lunch above the clouds*

finally, the last vegetation gives way to a winter-scape of ice and snow – and the magnificent beauty of the roof of the continent.

The days were spent chatting to each other and the guides as we trekked five to seven hours daily. The camaraderie on such a trip and the people you meet and their backgrounds and lives is equally as interesting and memorable as the landscape. The three sit-down meal times daily were usually a raucous of noise, bad jokes, funny life stories and general banter, slagging and craic.

Our group numbered 21 in total but we were joined by 9 mountain guides

and 51 porters. A guide will have started out life as a porter before graduating to chef and then on to train to become a mountain guide. The porters carry everything the group needs. The bags they carry on their heads are limited to 15kg, but how they do it is incredible and unbelievable.

They carry everything that the full group needs on the mountain, this includes all our main bags, our 11 tents and sleeping mats, our large mess tent, tables and 21 chairs, cutlery and delph, cooking utensils, gas canisters and cookers and enough food for all 80+ people for seven days... extraordinary work and



*Hours before hitting the last part of the trek up to the summit, with a start at 11.30pm*

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*Uhuru point, the highest point on Mount Kilimanjaro (5,895m/19,341ft)*

we all felt rather ashamed and embarrassed as we left camp each morning with just our day bags on our backs.

But as well as this, they are a beautifully friendly and helpful people. Their dedication to ensuring we were catered for and happy throughout was above and beyond, and many friendships were made throughout the week.

“Pole Pole” means “slowly slowly” in Swahili and is the call of the trek as we move slowly to acclimatise to the altitude. We are a long way from our everyday lives of offices, computers, WiFi, deadlines and stress as we climb day after day. The trek is about so much more than reaching the summit, it is about new friendships, new perspectives on life, new cultures and time to think and breathe in life. No hurries means no worries, “Hakuna Matata”. We all need a bit of “pole pole” in our lives.

## **Reaching the summit**

After five days of hiking and camping through Machame Camp, Shira Camp, Baranco Camp, Karanga Camp we arrived at Barafu Camp, the launching camp for the summit. Landing just before lunch after a four-hour trek we ate and headed to our tents for a few hours rest. We got back up for dinner at 6pm before heading straight back to bed as we are due to get up at 11.30pm

for a midnight departure to the summit. Four layers on the bottom half and seven layers of clothing on the top half of our bodies seemed to be the average, along with gloves and hats to combat the biting cold.

This is where the tagline ‘challenge of a lifetime’ became a reality. An all-night hike for bodies already tired and extremely fatigued on a very steep gradient is not something anyone undertakes in normal life. Who knows how many switchbacks we took as we trudged in the freezing cold darkness, a never-ending vertical challenge, higher and higher we rose.

Each stop for a sup of hot chocolate or a sweet or a snack was pure joy, and exhaustion. Every chew took three or four big deep breaths, a drink of water will leave you out of breath for 20 seconds! For hours, all any of us saw was the hiking boots of the person in front of us as we dared not look up lest we glimpse the trail of hundreds of head torches weaving and stretching impossibly skywards.

Just when needed most, a glimmer of red appeared as the sun started to rise to our east and flooded the plains of Tanzania with warmth. Our group is perked up and set for the summit. Various levels of altitude sickness and

exhaustion have kicked in for a number of the group by this stage and one in our group has had to turn back. The rest of us help each other and encouragement and support abounds.

At 7.30am the majority of the group reached the crater rim and the summit (Stellar Point – 5,756m/18,885ft). Emotion overflows as we congratulate each other, and ourselves. Seven days earlier we stood relatively quietly and awkwardly as a group for the first time in the departures area of Dublin airport. At the summit, we were now bear hugging each other with tears in our eyes. Challenge accomplished!

At 9.30am the last of the group to make the summit reaches this point, a truly monumental effort.

The crater rim of this ancient volcano is not a smooth rim and the highest point on the rim itself is Uhuru Point. This entails a further 40 minutes of walking from Stellar Point and is only 139m/456ft higher at 5,895m/19,341ft. Many of the group walked on to this point for ultimate satisfaction.

It was then one and a half day of trekking downwards before a return to our base hotel and the joyous reunion with a soft bed, hot shower and a cold beer.

Overall 20 of the 21 in our group made the crater rim summit. An incredible achievement. The group included six trekkers with Type 1 Diabetes and one with Type 2 diabetes, all who reached the summit.

On behalf of myself and all at Diabetes Ireland I want to thank the group for their incredible support. Their efforts across the year resulted in over €41,000 fundraising profit for the charity from this one event, a absolutely fantastic result. It was a pleasure to work with you throughout the year and to spend 10 unforgettable days in Tanzania with you.

If you are interested in joining us in 2017 for this adventure, please do get in touch – the challenge awaits!

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**Gary Brady is the Fundraising Manager at Diabetes Ireland**