

Kilimanjaro
One Woman's Journey to the Roof of Africa and Beyond



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Kilimanjaro



One Woman's Journey
to the Roof of Africa
and Beyond



Deb Denis

Foreword by Simon Mtuy

*Tanzania's foremost trail runner, expert mountain
guide, and world record holder for the fastest
unsupported ascent and descent of Kilimanjaro*



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For my family

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FOREWORD

As the 5th of 10 children born into a subsistence farm family in Marangu Mbahe Village, near the main entrance gate to Kilimanjaro National Park in Tanzania, education was scarce and opportunities were limited. After completing primary school and one year of secondary school I needed to work to earn income for my family and my future. Like many boys from the mountain with little formal education and few options I entered the climbing business, starting as a porter. At the age of 14 I began earning a few cents a day carrying huge loads of gear and equipment up the mountain for the tourists who came to climb Kilimanjaro. Despite the rigors of the hard physical labor, I enjoyed the excitement of being on the mountain, working as a team, and practicing English with the climbers. I saved my small wages for the guide training course and spent my free time learning as much as I could about the mountain. I finally submitted myself for the rigorous training entailing 6 days on the mountain, followed by 3 days of classroom lessons, and a final written exam in English. Upon completion, I became, at age 21, one of the youngest persons to earn my Kilimanjaro guide license. After a period of apprenticeship with other climb companies, in 1998 I registered my company and Summit Expeditions & Nomadic Experience (SENE) was born. From modest beginnings, SENE has prospered by abiding by the highest standards of comfort, health, safety, environmental ethics, and porter treatment.

As the owner of SENE and a mountain guide for two decades, I have seen thousands of people climb Mount Kilimanjaro. Yet during my 26 years of working on the mountain, I have rarely seen a woman climb the mountain as a solo climber, so I was very pleased when Deb chose us to be the outfitter and guide service for her incredible journey. As noted throughout this book, Deb faced many physical, psychological, and emotional challenges, but in the end she persevered and reached her goals while ascending to the *Roof of Africa*. As a non-athlete, Deb demonstrates that climbing Kilimanjaro is so much more than a mere physical challenge, but requires great emotional and spiritual fortitude. This resonates

with me, as a Chagga child of the mountain who feels the immense spirit of Kilimanjaro every day.

We at SENE are proud that Deb chose Kilimanjaro for her personal adventure and that she was able to experience the thrill and excitement of the mountain with our team. While reading this book, you will enjoy the insights that Deb provides into the total climb experience. Often using humor, she describes the difficulty and serenity that comes with being disconnected from family yet connected to the mountain. She also provides helpful lessons learned from her experience that will allow future climbers to come to Kilimanjaro well-prepared—at multiple levels—for a successful summit.

I was delighted when Deb approached me about writing the foreword for her book because it shows to me that people who are serious about connecting with the mountain desire to share this experience with others. Many books about Kilimanjaro provide the reader with technical information about the routes, eco-zones, plants, animals, and climate on the mountain, but few authors have written about the experience on the mountain from the perspective of a solo climber (and none, that I am aware, who are women). I am honored that we at SENE could be a part of Deb's journey and thankful for her willingness to encourage others in their personal aspirations. You too will find inspiration and delight in her insights. Asante sana Deb!

Kila la heri (all the best),

Simon Mtuy

Founder and Senior Guide
Summit Expeditions & Nomadic Experience
Kilimanjaro, Moshi, Tanzania

AUTHOR'S PREFACE: ABOUT THE BOOK

This book combines multiple types of media: typed excerpts from the handwritten journal I kept in the beginning, until I lost three pens—two of my own and one borrowed—as well as transcripts from recordings I made during the climb. These appear in italics to highlight what was actually from the journal and recordings. I've included quoted sections (also italicized) from the itinerary provided by the company that guided me up the mountain. Throughout the book, I've also interspersed quotes from other people who have been inspirational to me, because they just seem to fit here.

I created a website to go with the book, www.HerSoloSummit.com, where you'll find some of the actual recordings—my way to share with you the spontaneous emotion of particular moments. When I wasn't focused on breathing, walking slowly and drinking water, I was talking to my guides about the landscape and taking pictures, which you'll also see on the website. On many of the later days of the climb I took short videos at camp, which I shared with family and friends when I got home. Their enthusiastic responses to this media convinced me the videos needed to be included, so it's all available to you on the website.

By seeing and hearing my story through the recordings, the pictures and the videos on the website, I hope you'll get a sense of what this experience was like. Come along on the adventure with me

* * *

There are several audiences for this book: those who have said yes to a Kilimanjaro climb and have already done it, or are just about to; those who are interested in and may be considering a Kilimanjaro climb in the future; and those who can't imagine they ever would or could climb this mountain, but who may be inspired to try this or some other big, crazy goal. This book is also for

people who are simply interested in reading a true story of adventure.

If you're in the have/will/may climb group, you'll find the research components of this book helpful—the steps I took to narrow down the sea of choices surrounding the climb that you've undoubtedly encountered already. For those in the group of “I can't imagine myself doing [insert your intimidating goal here],” I hope you'll be inspired by the story and find yourself establishing your own crazy goal to accomplish.

This book is also about what I learned and how I grew through the experience of being in East Africa for a month, which included giving myself permission to leave, and incorporating the lessons learned there after coming home.

To me, this climb was a big goal that delivered big lessons. I share it all with you, the reader, since, though these are my experiences, each of you has your own challenges to work through and maybe, just maybe, part of this story will resonate with yours.

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PROLOGUE

My name is Deb Denis and when I was 45 years old, I decided I wanted to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro before I turned 50. This is the story of that journey.

From my online Journal on June 1st—Departure Day

What is the name of that game where the dealer holds up the cards and says, "Pick a card, any card"? That's been the theme of the past week for me . . . with emotions. Pick an emotion, any emotion, and I have it going on.

A little homesick already but too juiced up on adrenaline and lots to do before I sleep. Up at 4 a.m., going, going, going until 11 p.m. when I set the alarm for 2 a.m. and give it a try . . . tossing, turning, sleeping for a short time, then waiting for the alarm to ring, which it does.

I am packed, ready as I'll be for this adventure, and so very excited for it to begin. For weeks it's been sharing the mental and emotional plate with so many other worries but it's time to go. My ride should be here any minute.

Eighteen minutes later she's not here, so I call. "Michelle, where are you?" A sleepy voice tells me this business owner of an airport transport company forgot about me, but there's no time to be crushed about it . . . got to go! Now it's time to pull a rabbit out of the hat: "I've got to call a cab!" I tell her, hanging up.

I make it to the airport late but strangely on time . . . the gate doesn't open for another 20 minutes.

Ah, it's a great feeling to be early to the airport and confident that I'm as ready as I can be, bags are so efficiently packed that Chip—our son who is prepared for everything—and my husband Alan—the packing efficiency expert—would be impressed.

The check-in gate finally opens, but the self-directed check-in kiosk can't find me. An agent discovers the problem—I'm flying

tomorrow. Ah, it's great to be early at the airport . . . but this early? Flooded with embarrassment—did I actually just go through all of yesterday's craziness a day early? I catch another cab and go home. It's an expensive mistake but on the way home I think about it.

There isn't anything to do. I'm ready, the house is ready, everyone believes I'm flying to Africa today . . . heck, so did I until less than an hour ago. So, what should I do today?

Driving back home at 4:30 a.m., the sky begins its transition, providing just enough light to see homes along the way. They're idyllic in their stillness—different homes, different families all nestled inside and sleeping soundly. I breathe deeper to enjoy wafts of summer blossoms. I do love this place we call home.

BECOMING A LIGHTER PRESENCE IN THE WORLD

Walking on the edge is where she grows.

The whole idea of climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro started to form when I was in Paris with a group of international accounting practitioners. Two men previously with the group had attempted the climb a year before; one of them made it to the top, the other became sick from the altitude and did not. I'd never known anyone who'd climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro, at least not that I knew of. It never would have entered my mind to do something like that.

I left the conference and travelled to Asheville, North Carolina, for a professional development retreat. I'm an Executive Coach by training and trade, and a self-declared lifelong learner. They say that when you love what you do it's not work, and I love being and growing as a Coach.

At the end of the presence-based coaching retreat, I made a commitment to "being a lighter presence in the world." I didn't know *exactly* what it meant but had a general idea that it consisted of three parts: lighter, presence, and world.

To meet the objective of being lighter, I thought my plan should include the kinds of activities that would help me be more flexible and move more freely, like yoga. I could be lighter physically by losing weight. I could approach the world with a lighter, less uptight presence, one that could be cultivated through meditation. Think Buddhist without a lot of rules.

I wanted a healthy, thinner body; a less scattered, more ordered mind; and a resulting energy that would extend into the world through my coaching. I wanted other people to experience me as a calm, centered presence. Yoga, meditation and exercise would surely contribute to developing me into a person with a grounded, satisfied, and pleasant presence. Think Zen.

This is what it means to be a lighter presence in the world.