

Kilimanjaro Guide

An image based guide to the Roof of Africa



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Kilimanjaro - at 5895 meter the summit of Africa

This is the images and stories from several treks up Kilimanjaro.

Many regard the ascent of Kilimanjaro as a climb, but most of the routes requires no climbing skills at all, and can be regarded as a trek, a trek taking you higher than usual for a trek, and a sometimes a pretty steep trek.

There are several routes up Kilimanjaro, as can be seen from the map on opposite page. Most of the routes start from the south or the west, but a single route, the Rongai route, starts from the north close to the border to Kenya.

Otherwise, the mountain is situated entirely in Tanzania, and you don't need visit Kenya to ascent Kilimanjaro.

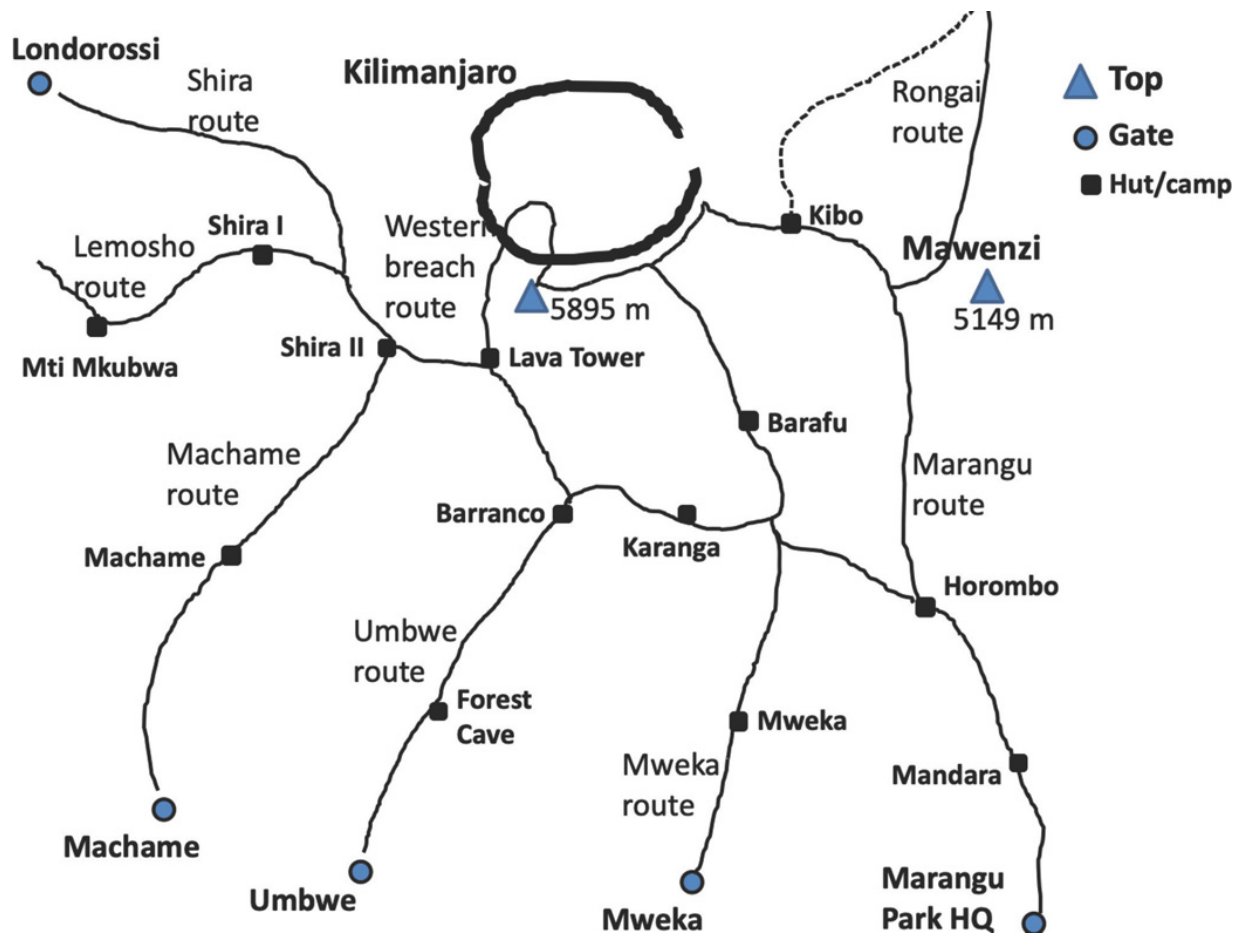
The summit of Kilimanjaro stands at 5895 meter and requires some altitude acclimatization in order to gain the summit safely, and furthermore to be able to enjoy the trip. Without further acclimatization, the ascent can be done in 5-6 days, taking shorter than that will invite altitude sickness to present its ugly face.

Kilimanjaro is an extinct volcano, however to a geologist like myself, that doesn't mean it could not become active again. Actually, it is a feature of the active East African rift valley system, that slowly removes the among geologist named Nubian plate from the rest of the African continent. And a split of tectonic plates is always accompanied by volcanic activity.

We'll come back to the details of how the volcanic activity is displayed on Kilimanjaro, for now it is enough to see the cone like form of Kilimanjaro to know, that this really is a volcano.

The image below shows the author on the summit of Barres des Ecrin, French Alps.





Map showing the primary routes up Kilimanjaro.

There are several other routes, but these are either too difficult to be considered trekking, too obscure to be considered in any way, or gone due to glaciers disappearing. Only the "summit circuit" route, that combines some of the others with a circuit of the upper lava dome, is worth mention.

Many mountains have a so-called "normal" route, and if any should be considered normal on Kilimanjaro it must be the Marangu route, the reason for this being, that it is by far the most visited, though not the one with the highest success rate - we'll come back to that.

It is also by the entrance at the Marangu gate, the Park headquarter is situated. Most of the routes take their descent via the Mweka route, though most often trekkers on the Marangu route descent the way they came up.

A short history of discovery and ascent

Snow covered mountains in this area are mentioned first time around 150 AD by the Greek multi-scientist Claudius Ptolemaeus of Alexandria. It can only be Kilimanjaro, that he writes of.

As Rebmann, a german missionary, visited the area, he at first believed the white on the mountain to be silver. As he got up close, and his local guide called the white summit for "baridi" meaning "cold", he realized that there was snow and ice near the summit.

When reported, most readers regarded his claims as the results of malaria induced fever sights. Even Linvingstone participated in the debate claiming that it was a quartz like rock, that gave the snow like look.

Not until Claus von der Decken and the english geologist Richard Thornton in 1861 said the summit was no doubt covered in snow, was it accepted in the west, that snow could exist this close to the equator.

Decken also attempted to ascend Kilimanjaro but didn't get anywhere near. His attempt failed at 2500 meters. Decken returned together with Otto Kersten but failed again, this time reaching 4500 meters and stopped by a snow storm. It took place during the socalled "little ice age" when the climate was more cool primarily on the northern hemispere, but also affecting Kilimanjaro. They reported glaciers as low as 4800 meters, which tells us something about the enormous change that has happened since then.

After two failed attempts, the German geologist Hans Meyer return to the mountain in 1889 together with the alpine guide Ludwig Purtscheller. They applied Himalayan tactics and finally after 6 weeks of pushing camps higher, they reached the summit on october 6th celebrating Purtschellers 40 years birthday on the summit.

They attempted the much more difficult second highest summit named Mawenzi, that requires real climbing skills, but failed, and its summit wasn't reached until 1912.

The first woman to ascend Kilimanjaro is probably Sheila Macdonald who in 1927 reaches the summit. Even more impressive is the fact, that she shortly before was the first woman to reach the summit of the much more demanding Mawenzi.

Many points on the existing routes and the glaciers bear the name of early explorers.



Walking along the edge of the crater with Mawenzi in the background

Geographical setting

Kilimanjaro is situated 330 km south of equator close to the northern border of Tanzania, and bordering to the Amboseli national park in Kenya just north of the mountain.

It is one of the highest free standing mountains in the world, rising around 5000 meters from the surrounding savanna.

Kilimanjaro reaches 5895 meter in its Kibo crater and consists of three extinct/dormant volcanoes: Kibo the summit of Africa with its highest point Uhuru, Mawenzi 5149 meter, and Shira 3962 meter.

The formation of the three volcanic craters is connected to the fracturing of the earth crust due to the formation of the east African rift valley, but we'll come back to the geology on the next pages.

There are many separate glaciers covering part of the summit. Unfortunately, these glaciers are quickly diminishing in size as can be seen from the Landsat images on opposite page. Furthermore, as we have already learnt the glaciers extended to around 4800 meter in the 1880s due to the cold climate during the so-called "little ice age."



