

SOLO

I Lost My Home, My Job and My Marriage, So I Climbed Kilimanjaro

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Savoring the summit with my newfound soul mate Susan (left). PS: We're not that fat, just wearing six layers of clothes. (Photo: Susan Paley Abramson)

It's 2 a.m. and I'm in a tent pitched on snow just below the summit of Kilimanjaro. I haven't felt my fingers or toes in a few days, and my head has hurt for just as long. I'm coming down with bronchitis. I'm clutching a hot water bottle inside my thick down sleeping bag but still shivering too hard to sleep, and also filled with a Christmas-morning anticipation of getting this journey over with tomorrow.

I'm awake through yet another pitch-black, endless lonely night. It dawns on me that I've been too heedful of the guides' admonishments to drink lots of water to fend off altitude sickness. I fumble around for my headlamp, then retrieve my [Sani-Fem Freshette](#) from its sticky Ziploc and take care of business (don't ask). But I must be delirious from the elevation, and I let my pee bottle overflow. I search for some disposable clothing, then set about mopping up my tent floor. I've had some bleak, embarrassing moments in the past couple years, but this is surely a new low. I wonder why I've paid for this misery.

I could have just gone to the Bahamas for my birthday.

About two years earlier, my life had exploded. In February 2012, I had a dream job as the travel editor of a respected luxury magazine; I was married to a lovely man who my friends and family seemed to think was the best thing that ever happened to me; and I lived in a sun-drenched loft in New York's East Village. By that September, I was trying to respect (and support) myself as a freelance writer and blogger, in the messiest part of divorce proceedings, and crying on the kitchen floor of my new bare-bones railroad apartment in Brooklyn, which I would be sharing with a friend of a friend and which I quickly named Fort Squalor.



Almost done with the Western Breach. Notice the puffy, tear-stained face. (Photo: Susan Paley Abramson)

Shortly after that, I turned 39. I was staring at 40. Middle age. And this was no longer the life I was supposed to be leading. I wasn't ready to think about 40.

I was doing everything you're expected to do when you're 25—living in the cheapest apartment I'd had in my 17 years in New York, having late-night conversations with my roommate (who was herself 28), traveling, blogging, and dating, shall we say, enthusiastically. In the midst of my forced reinvention, I had as much freedom—and fear—as I'd had at 25. And maybe I didn't quite look 25, but a lifetime of sunscreen vigilance had paid off. Nothing in me identified with 40.

And so. What now?



With the summit still looming far in the distance. (Photo: Susan Paley Abramson)

My birthday gift to myself for 39 was the deposit on a trip to climb Kilimanjaro. The plan was to turn 40 on the mountain. It'd be my "F— you, 40" climb, proof that I was still gutsy, fit, vital, strong, slightly crazy, and young. It would also be my way of showing that in spite of losing my job, my marriage, and my home, I was still standing. Not just still standing—standing atop a 19,340-foot summit.

I wasn't a serious hiker, and certainly no mountaineer. I grew up in New Mexico, with mountains in my front yard, and I'd climbed a 14-er at summer camp in Colorado, but it was only in my mid-30s that I started to enjoy hiking. But I still had a very casual relationship with it, taking the occasional day hike in the Hudson Valley, hitting the trail on a work trip, or doing bits of the Appalachian Trail with a friend who's section-hiking the whole thing. (My AT nickname—all hikers get one—is Girlie Badass. A fellow hiker promptly said, "I get the girlie, but....")

I remembered that one of the most exhilarating afternoons of my life had seen me at the top of a minor peak in New Zealand's Southern Alps, coaxed up there by a real badass mountain man of a guide who spent half his time leading trips up Everest. I hadn't thought I'd be able to make it up the icy scree, but there I was, posing with my poles in the air for a photograph that still hangs on my bedroom wall, five years later. The 360-degree view was tremendous, but what intoxicated me was the sheer adrenaline around my sense of accomplishment and my surprise at what my mind and body could do.

That afternoon had gotten me started thinking about Kilimanjaro. I wanted that same rush, but on a grander scale. I wanted to be challenged more, to push myself further outside my comfort zone (which, after 12 years of writing about luxury travel, is shamefully narrow), to have what everyone bills as a life-changing accomplishment. I wanted a bigger mountain.



Another day of climbing done. (Photo: Susan Paley Abramson)

Kilimanjaro (I didn't let myself call it Kili until after I was back down, feeling that I had to earn the intimacy and the right to use the diminutive nickname) is the easiest of the Seven Summits, the highest peaks on each continent. The climb isn't technical and is really just a walk-up, at least on the route most climbers use. The challenge is having the physical and mental stamina to keep plodding forward as the air gets thinner and thinner, and not succumbing to the altitude sickness that keeps about a third of climbers from reaching the summit.

The latter is partly a matter of luck, but I increased my odds by booking with [Wilderness Travel](#), whose "luxury" climbs follow the eight-day Shira–Western Breach route, rather than the crowded five-day routes most operators use. The smaller elevation gains each day help climbers acclimatize, which gives Wilderness a high success rate.



Breakfast on day five. The key to making it up is finding small milestones to celebrate every day. (Photo: Susan Paley Abramson)

And while I'd told myself I didn't care about the "luxury" elements, I really did appreciate tables and chairs in the dining tent, chemical toilets, pans of hot water each day for washing, and a crazy climber-to-porter ratio. Our group of 12 pampered Americans was supported by a moving city of about 80 Tanzanian guides, cooks, and porters, who carried all of our gear and 10 days' worth of fabulous food, and practically carried *me* across one particularly scary stretch.



Good morning! Porters delivering tea at dawn, one of the saving graces of the author's experience. (Photo: Susan Paley Abramson)

The slow route, however, increased the part of the climb that I found the hardest: sleeping alone in a tent on a freezing-cold mountain. Even with a kind porter waiting in camp to help me take off my boots, camping is camping. And it's something I'd never done before.

In all my preparations for the trip, I'd been focused on hiking—something I know how to do and enjoy. I'd bought every item on the three-page gear list. I'd done lots of cardio. I'd rehearsed what each day would look like: walking, walking, walking, resting, walking, and the idea of one step at a time. But I hadn't thought about the half of the trip that would pass in total darkness, when I wouldn't be moving, when I wouldn't be making incremental but satisfying progress toward a far-off goal, when I wouldn't have conversations to distract myself from the enormity of what I'd gotten myself into.

And so, after dinner the first night, I brushed my teeth, wriggled into my sleeping bag, attempted to write in my journal or read but gave up because I was (already?!) too cold, tried to sleep, panicked, completely lost it, and cried most of the night.

Tune in for Part 2: [I Conquered Kilimanjaro for the Big 4-0](#)

Ann Abel has written about 66 countries on six continents and counting. Her work has appeared in [Afar](#), [Departures](#), [Robb Report](#), [National Geographic Traveler](#), and [ForbesLife](#), and she writes [a luxury travel column for Forbes.com](#).

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