

SOLO

I Conquered Kilimanjaro for the Big 4-0

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May 7, 2014



(Courtesy: Thinkstock)

When [Ann Abel's life imploded](#) she chose climbing a mountain over wallowing. She'd lost her job, her husband and her beautiful apartment and still opted to spend her fortieth birthday summiting Africa's highest peak.

I'm not going to make it. Who was I kidding? Why did I think I could do this? I'm a spoiled princess, not a girlie badass. This is only the first night and it's just going to get colder and lonelier and harder. I'm going to fail. I hate failing. That's going to be humiliating. I've been talking about Kilimanjaro for years. Everyone knows I'm doing this. It's my Facebook status. It's my out of office message. It's going to be so awful when I have to tell people I didn't make it. My return flight isn't until two weeks from now—what will I do until then? How will I ever get all this muddy gear clean?

But then I saw light from coming through my tent, heard my porter saying good morning as he delivered my tea, and realized that I had made it through the night. At breakfast, a few of the other women confessed to having similar thoughts, and one pointed out that while the guides would take down anyone who was genuinely sick, they weren't going to take us down just because we were uncomfortable or had changed our minds. I found that strangely comforting. I was going to finish this because it would be my only choice. Kind of like my whole Brooklyn blogger reinvention thing, which I'd done because there was no alternative.



Climbers, porters, and crew in the last camp. (Photo: Susan Paley Abramson)

From there it got easier, though I still cried every night and occasionally during the day, out of panic over losing my footing and out of thoughts of the magnitude of what I was doing. The terrain was beautiful and different each day, the encouragement from the porters and guides was motivating, and my companions were interesting and lively, especially Susan, who had also just turned 40 after a tumultuous year and became my instant soul mate, and Candace, who inspired us both by uncomplainingly climbing the mountain at age 69.



Almost there. Our last ascending camp, at 18,600 feet. (Photo: Susan Paley Abramson)

The last full day of up, though, was brutal. We started at 16,000 feet and climbed up icy boulders (wearing helmets) to 18,600, where we'd be camping on snow. There wasn't enough air to walk, panic and cry at the same time. When I lost my footing, chose panicking and crying, and sat down on the frozen scree, I went sliding about ten feet before a guide pulled me back up

by the shoulders. He helped me to the designated rest spot to continue my meltdown; then I blew my nose, ate a Kind bar, and went back to climbing.



Back down. On day 10, a few hours before the best shower of my life. (Photo: Susan Paley Abramson)

We summited under a bright blue sky around 8am New Year's Eve. (The other great advantage of the Shira–Western Breach route is that you camp high the last night and have only about two hours' walk to the top, rather than the all-night slog that most climbers endure.) We hugged, high-fived, and posed for photos under the Uhuru Peak sign. I gorged on the exhilaration and joy that I'd gotten a taste of five years before in New Zealand. I forgot all the mountain meltdowns and Freshette mishaps. I celebrated the fact that I'd have just one more night in a tent, and at a relatively warm, oxygen-rich 10,000 feet.



The last day, after we got off the mountain and into the Land Cruiser and got Kilimanjaro beers. (Photo: Susan Paley Abramson)

No one talks about the inevitable post-climb let-down, but I was in a strange funk for a few weeks afterward. I didn't know what to do with myself. For all of 2013, I'd been focused on this goal, training for it, saving for it, psyching myself up for it. Now it was 2014 and I'd accomplished it, and I didn't have anything new to reach for. It took weeks to get used to saying, "I climbed Kili" in the past tense.

I realized that I'd somehow thought I would Figure Everything Out on the mountain. I'd assumed some magical epiphanies would just happen to me, that I'd find purpose and direction for the second half of my life. But there was no time for that. My mental energy was taken up by conversations with my fellow hikers, concentration on my footing, and the increasing labor of breathing. Getting through each night was a triumph; I didn't have the strength to soul-search on top of it.

But I see now, three months later, that the climb taught me that I would be able to do whatever I'd have to. It reminded me of the power of incremental progress, and the need to accept help. Maybe even ask for it sometimes.

"Poly-poly" is what the guides constantly reminded us. *Slowly, slowly*. It pays to be patient, to let things take time, but to work for them instead of expecting them to just come to me without any dedicated thinking of effort.

I still don't feel 40, but I'm much better now at feeling unsettled and believing that dark nights will pass.

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](#).