

Shona's Kilimanjaro Adventure for Cancer Charity



When a friend suggested to Edinburgh woman Shona Pryde that they should spend their next holiday climbing Mount Kilimanjaro, her reply was, to be honest, less than positive or polite. After giving the matter some thought however, the 29-year-old specialist physiotherapist (working with people with brain injuries) eventually came to the conclusion that she did not have a sufficiently good reason not to do it, and accepted the challenge. Amazingly she even continued after her friend had to withdraw.

Shona is originally from Murrayfield, where her parents still live, (and she still calls home), but now lives in Belfast. She loves nothing more than accepting a good challenge, especially when she can raise vital funds for worthwhile causes like Fight Against Cancer Edinburgh (FACE). As a health care professional, and having had cancer diagnosed in her family, she knows the value and importance of the work that this charity does, but in particular, Shona wanted to raise money to help send sick children to visit Santa Claus in Lapland.

Here is her remarkable story, in her own words:

“When my traveling buddy first suggested climbing Kilimanjaro for a holiday, my response was less than polite. Let’s be honest, I hate hills. I’m not exactly fit. I throw up trying to climb the Mourne. I’m ginger and freckly, so don’t have a great relationship history with the sun. Or mosquitoes for that matter. I’m never seen with un-straightened hair. I get stage fright having to wee in bushes. Why on earth would I want to spend a week climbing the highest mountain in Africa

for a holiday?

“Then I thought about it and decided I didn’t really have a good enough reason not to. A few months later and a lot of talking myself into it, my travel buddy was no longer able to go, I put a plea on Facebook for moral support, and next thing I knew, myself and two lads I hardly knew were booked to climb Kilimanjaro. Just for fun. I thought my mates would be amazed, astounded, but apparently they were expecting this as some point as I’m always getting up to madness for charity. Everybody wanted to know what charity I was doing it for, and when I read somewhere that it is easier to be brave for other people than it is to be brave for yourself, I decided that the kids of FACE’s Lapland trip are some of the bravest people I know, so it was a no brainer that I would raise money for their trip.

“So training began. To an extent. The more I read, the more I realised it’s not so much about physical fitness, more so mental attitude, and how well or otherwise the altitude treats you. There was talk of one of the boys buying some sort of gas mask-esque contraption from eBay and running up and down the fire escape stairs at work to train for the altitude, I went for the easy option and got a prescription for anti-sickness drugs, although the side effects made me think that running up and down stairs breathing through a straw may have been more fun.

“It was only when my friends started putting ridiculously generous donations on my just giving page, that I realised the perceived enormity of what I was taking on, and, that stubbornness alone, of which I have bucketfuls, may not be all that was required. I had amazing support, both through their donations, and my friends coming walking in the Mourne’s and up Cavehill with me every weekend.

“Even the walks home from the pub when there were no taxis to be had and the hangovers from the ‘Shona’s big nights out just

in case she doesn't make it home' nights stood me in good stead for the effects the mountain had in store for me.

"So on the 16th September, I left this image as my Facebook status update, and off I went. Three flights later and in the middle of a most enjoyable mid-flight nap, the lads woke me to look out the aeroplane window. There sprawling out above the level of the clouds like some sort of fairy-tale palace, were two of the peaks of Kilimanjaro. In 6 days' time I was going to be higher than that aeroplane. And I was going to have walked up all that way.

"Our tour group were a great bunch; there were nine of us altogether from Scotland, Ireland, Wales, England and Canada. This was the youngest member of our group at 25, Dave's first adventure out of Canada and very first mountain. Victor, who we affectionately named 'Babu' (Swahili for granddad) was the oldest, at 68. We bonded well, as did we with our 'staff' of 32 locals who helped us every step of the way.



"The first couple of days on the mountain went quickly as we got to know each other, and admire the views. The walk takes in 5 different climate zones, each with their own wildlife and vegetation. We began walking through meadow, through rainforest, moorland and alpine desert before touching the ice cap at Gilman's. We learned some essential Swahili – the phrases for 'nae bother' – Hakuna, – Matata (think Lion King), and 'I'll have a cold beer please' – which was put to good use the moment we got off the mountain, and appropriate responses to 'How are you?' – roughly translated as 'pure dead brilliant' and 'powerful like a chicken'. This positivity and the rule that we weren't allowed to talk about summit night until summit night, were going to be the secrets to our success.

"Our first camp, just above 2700m was guarded by a man with an

AK47, just in case there were any unwanted animal visitors during the night. After arriving at camp, we rested before leaving our belongings and walking for another hour or so to gain more elevation before coming back down to sleep. This nightly ritual apparently helped with our acclimatisation. The starry skies of the Southern Hemisphere were a breath-taking sight.

“From day 2 we were walking above the level of the clouds. It was amazing waking up every morning seeing the sunrise out the tent door, and the sea of clouds below. Wake up call was around 6am, the porters would bring a mug of ‘bed tea’ (black tea with about 6 sugars) to the tent and ask you how well you’d slept. ‘Like a fat baby’ was the acceptable answer! This was swiftly followed by 10 minutes ‘washy wash’ time with a bowl of hot water, then into the mess tent for a feast of porridge, bacon, eggs, fruit and Milo energy drinks.

“The walking was varied; some days were long and flat, while others were short and steep. I’d been dreading day 2, as on paper it looked the longest at 13km and the most uphill at 1027m to gain. I actually enjoyed that day, and I wonder now did it make me complacent for the next couple of days in front of me.

“As the days went on, and the scenery became more barren, it began taking us all our energy to put one foot in front of the other. Eating became a real chore. Even the lads who had been asking for thirds the first couple of days struggled to finish one small portion. Not only does the altitude diminish your appetite, a few of us were struggling with nausea and vomiting. It has to be said the food was amazing when we could manage it though. Three course dinners of amazing soups, pastas, stews, even fish and chips and the group’s favourite: bananas and custard.

“I needn’t have worried about the lack of playing cards for the evenings’ entertainment. We were struggling to stay awake

past 7pm. At the campsite, the headaches got worse; the naps got more frequent but less productive, as we constantly woke ourselves up during the night for breath. As we climbed to higher altitudes, taking the 10 metre return trip to the toilet tent was an exhausting experience, and even rolling over, or crawling the few centimetres back uphill if the sleeping bag and I had slid down during the night took it clean out of me. We heard tales of people who took 20 minutes to lace up their boots on summit night, just because of the fatigue and coordination problems caused by low oxygen pressures. We witnessed this ourselves, when one of our team mates was completely unable to get his waterproof trousers or his boots on himself, and unfortunately spent the night of our final ascent confined to his tent.

“Day four probably hit me hardest. Difficult to believe as it was only 9.5km and an elevation of 382m. It took us four hours. That’s the fun of being at 4600m above sea level. We could see the entire path and our destination of Kibo Huts the whole time. Maybe in the back of my head was the fact I’d be setting off again around midnight and walking through the night for our final ascent to the summit.

“Despite the unwanted physical effects, I actually enjoyed the walking, the guides and the rest of the group kept us in good banter, and the views down through the clouds of Tanzania and Kenya were amazing. After lunch, we took a nap at Kibo, before being woken dinner, then back to bed before getting up to start our ascent at midnight. I knew eating was going to be a necessary, but pointless exercise for me. I had no appetite and it was 24 hours since I had managed to keep anything down, but I knew I needed every last ounce of energy I could force into myself.

“Summit night is by far the hardest thing mentally and physically I’ve ever done. We set off shortly after midnight. Apparently we take off in the middle of the night so that the walkers can’t see how soul destroying the never ending uphill

shale path is. We were the last group to take off, and although we couldn't see the path, we could see the headlights of 100 other walkers in front of us snaking their way up the hill, not only in front, but far above up in the distance. Even in the dark, it was soul destroying. Luckily the lads and I had the same mentality, it didn't matter how long it took, we would make it eventually.

"I couldn't be sure if it was altitude or pure exhaustion, we had to stop to catch our breath every 5 or 6 steps, 2 of those we lost as we frequently slid back on the unsecure shale, and when we stood still, we started drifting off to sleep. It brings a whole new meaning to the word sleep walking! I struggled with simple tasks like changing the batteries in my head torch and trying to unscrew the top on my water bottle, the tube on my Camel pac had long since frozen over in the -9 degrees cold. And true to my form the last couple of days, my body refused to accept any of the fuel I was trying to get into me. Our amazing guides had seen it all before and helped us with everything, even carrying our daysacks (and rubbing my back!) by the end of the climb.

"After six hours we stopped to admire the sunrise below over Mawenzi peak, where we'd camped on the third night. And another two hours later, at 8am, we were the last people to hit Gilman's point at 5681m above sea level. I thought there might have been tears, but turns out I was either too exhausted or too dehydrated to cry! I absolutely love the fact there are photos at the top of me with my sunburnt red nose and frost nipped purple cheeks.

"We stopped for a cup of tea and to get our photos taken, then began the four hour walk/slide/ski back down to Kibo camp. At this point I just wanted to be off the mountain, it was a long descent. Back at camp, I was too tired to speak, I passed out face down spread eagle in the tent, and although I couldn't even contemplate taking my boots off, at least I had the decency to leave the tent door open with my legs and feet

sticking out. A lovely sight I'm sure. I thought I could easily sleep for a month, but after two hours, we were up, fed and watered and (as) ready (as we'd ever be) for the five hour descent to our final camp at Horombo.

"On the final day and a half descent, we discussed what training advice we would give to anyone thinking of doing it. Our combined answer would be '8 hours on a stair master at the gym, breathing through a straw, with the worst hangover ever, with the air conditioning at full blast, having eaten a dodgy take away the night before, having not slept, every day for a week'.

"As demanding as it was, my photos at the top would tell a different story, wrapped in my Saltire with a huge smile, the sense of pride and achievement oozing out of me. I even smile when I write and tell people about the sickness, the hallucinations, and the sheer exhaustion. Would I do it again? Definitely. I imagine it's something like childbirth; the end result is worth the journey 100 times over.

"It's great that the trip raised so much for FACE, but doing it for them definitely pushed me to the top. About 100m off the summit, when I had no idea how I thought I had nothing left, my friend puffed and panted sat me 'do it for the kids, Shona' and I did."

FACE was founded in 1990, and originally stood for Fighting Against Cancer in Edinburgh but has come to represent the activities of a group of people working throughout the South East of Scotland.

They are a charity based in the Western General Hospital in Edinburgh which raises money to improve the facilities for the benefit of patients there and the peripheral clinics in Fife, Edinburgh and the Lothians, the Borders and Dumfries

The main aim of FACE. is to raise money to support and make possible a series of small improvements to patient care and

comfort.

To donate, visit <http://www.justgiving.com/faceclimb>