



A lifestyle exposed: my journey up Mount Kilimanjaro

A guest reflection by Sarah Dreier, legislative representative for international policy for the ELCA and the Episcopal Church

This summer, my partner Loren and I vacationed in East Africa and climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. The five-day journey to Uhuru (“freedom”) Peak, the highest point on the African continent, presents a challenge that draws adventurous tourists from around the world. Our fellow hikers included USAID workers, alumnae from U.S. colleges, French Ironman triathletes, and European university students. But our journey up the mountain’s rigorous hiking trails, with their clear displays of the stars in the midnight sky and ever-changing views of one of Africa’s most iconic landscapes also became, for me, a journey that exposed a system of inequality among people and carelessness with the gifts of God’s creation; a journey which brought into harsh relief the ways in which my own lifestyle relies upon and exploits people and land around the world.

As Loren and I picked up our light day packs at the gate of the Machame Route on the first day of our journey, joining dozens of other tourist climbers we were led and followed by a stream of Tanzanian porters who carried our camping gear so that we might climb the mountain unburdened. The rules of the national forest area prevent tourists from leaving the trail’s gate carrying hefty packs – guaranteeing work for the porters and safer, more comfortable climbing conditions for the tourists – so our porters carried our clothes and thick winter jackets, our sleeping bags, sleeping tent, mess tent, kitchen tent, water, dining table, hot tea canisters, food coolers, and other camping luxuries.

Like the tourists, the porters also wore attire promoting the Chicago Cubs, Dartmouth University, and various professional football teams — sweatshirts and t-shirts the porters had purchased at local Tanzanian shops after they had been discarded or rejected in the American clothing market. But unlike the tourists, these strong and nimble locals could not afford to attend secondary school or even to visit near-by Nairobi. The porters hiked, scrambled, and at times ran up the mountain dozens of times a season, carrying their own necessities in addition to an— almost 45 pounds (or heavier; per Kilimanjaro National Park) — pack of supplies on their shoulders and necks.

As we began our climb, I also began to see the impacts of thousands of climbers on God's creation. The path to Uhuru Peak is peppered with trash (water bottles, juice boxes, even wrappers from Cliff Bars and Energy Gel Packs which fuel long-distance athletes). The trail of trash became thicker as the air thinned near the summit, a summit whose legendary snows, once year round, are now only seasonal — a witness to our warming earth.

I was moved by the gripping realities of these inequalities that the mountain exposed — by the fine line between a rejuvenating vacation and tiresome manual labor, by the unintentionally intrusive impact that my tourist hiker colleagues and I were having on a beautiful wilderness.

It was heart-wrenching to watch our porters traverse Mount Kilimanjaro carrying our load on their shoulders so that we might tread lightly. I was reminded of Christ's own trek up a mountain, bearing his cross — that unthinkable load — trudging toward his ultimate sacrifice in death so that we may all live. As a comfortable American, my daily life protects me from having to confront the ramifications of my actions and implications of my lifestyle. I can carelessly toss a wrapper in the trash without entertaining a thought about where it will end up. I can make consumer decisions without imagining who it will impact, or who will shoulder the burden. And I can discard clothes with outdated insignias because the value of a warm sweatshirt is irrelevant in my closet of plenty. But a journey up Mount Kilimanjaro offers no such luxury of ignorance. It strips away my ability to focus on my own, limited perspective and requires that I see, and name, the suffering of others and mistreatment of God's earth. I must watch those who struggle up the mountain so that I might summit with unnatural ease and comfort. I must see the trash at my feet in an otherwise

pristine and spiritual holy place. And I must savor the remaining snow on the peaks, knowing that it has become transient.

But this story is not without hope. [The Kilimanjaro Porter's Assistance Project](#) is working with porters, tourists and guide companies to support fairer wages, safer climbing conditions, and sufficient gear to protect porters from the mountain's elements. Our guide company, which was dedicated to local empowerment and environmental sustainability, paid each porter a comparatively high-end wage of 10,000 Tanzanian shillings a day (ironically, the amount of money Loren and I spent on a single round of Kilimanjaro Lager the evening before we left). And, at the end of each climbing season, many of the locally-based guide companies run volunteer climbs to pick up trash that tourists had carelessly tossed aside on their way up the mountain.

Early morning on our last day, our lead guide, Valarian, diverted our attention from the sun rising over the rigid peaks to an understated memorial. A collection of rocks had been carefully assembled into a cross, four-feet long but easily missed as it was camouflaged with the gravel path.

"A porter was lost here last season," Valarian explained. He had died of hypothermia after hiking in the rain without a proper poncho. His colleagues were unable to get him down the mountain in time to save his life.

"Where were the tourists who had hired him when this happened?" I asked.

"They were summiting the mountain — on their way to Uhuru Peak."

As we proceeded down the mountain, I took one more backward glance at the cross of rocks, quietly commemorating the people who go easily unnoticed, even on this exposed mountain.



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