

# Pole-pole up Kilimanjaro with the PSA

By Lee Huckstep

Going pole-pole (the Swahili phrase for “slowly slowly”) is the key to a successful climb of Mount Kilimanjaro. And pole-pole (pronounced “polee-polee”) is exactly how seventeen members of the Philmont Staff Association and their friends made it to the top of this fabled mountain. At 19,340 feet, Kilimanjaro is the highest peak in Africa and the tallest free-standing mountain in the world. (A mere 7,000 feet higher than Baldy.)

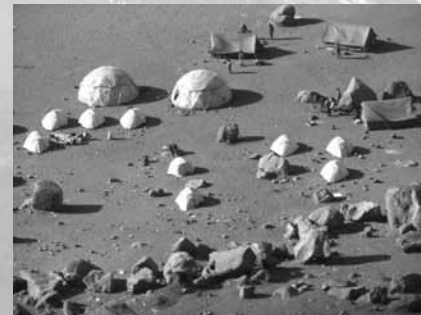
The PSA Trekkers’ moment of triumph came on June 20, 2011, when at 3:30 p.m. Tanzania time, with the odds being against them all making it, they all made the summit of Uhuru Peak, the tallest of the three summits on the gigantic collapsed volcanic rim which forms Kilimanjaro. Philmont’s own moment of glory came a few minutes later at 3:35 p.m. when the flag of Philmont, carried to the top by PSA Executive Director Randy Saunders, was unfurled on the top of Africa honoring all those who have hiked the trails, and who love the blessed plot we call Philmont. The Philmont flag has never flown so high.

(See side-bar story about additional honors associated with this flag during the return to the United States.) The PSA Kilimanjaro Trek took nine days and eight nights to complete. The Trekkers took the so-called Lemosho route, a longer route than taken by most people, but because it is longer, there was a greater opportunity for the Trekkers to acclimatize to the thin atmosphere. Taking that longer route paid off handsomely with all the PSA Trekkers making the summit.

The PSA Trek was outfitted by Berg Adventures International, (BAI) an outdoor adventure company specializing in climbs to the Seven Summits—the highest peaks on each of the seven continents. Owned by PSA member and four-time Everest summiteer Wally Berg, it was soon clear to the PSA Trekkers that BAI is the gold standard of outfitters on Kilimanjaro. All other outfitters bow down. It was common for trekkers from other outfitters to come to the BAI camp and ogle and photograph it, especially when the BAI staff was singing and



*Clockwise from above: The road to the trailhead; BAI staff meets PSA Trekkers with song and dance; a Kili trail lunch; porters carrying the heavy loads; Eli Fry at plaque commemorating Scott Fisher, who died on Everest; a room with a view; Crater campsite, elevation 18,700 feet. Photos by Eli Fry, Bob Birkby, Rick Touchette and Lee Huckstep*



dancing Kilimanjaro songs, as they did every time the PSA Trekkers entered or left camp.

The PSA Trek was personally led by Wally Berg who in turn was assisted by another distinguished PSA member: Bob Birkby—the author of the current and two past editions of the *Scout Handbook*, and the *Scoutmaster's Handbook* and *Fieldbook* as well. He was also instrumental in the founding of the Philmont Conservation Department. In addition to the leadership of Berg and Birkby, the seventeen Trekkers were supported by a staff of one hundred and ten Tanzanian guides, porters, cooks, and persons serving other

functions. The enthusiasm and friendship of these Tanzanians never faltered or ebbed, even when the going was tough or the morning temperature was at zero. They always greeted the Trekkers with song and dance when entering or leaving camp, served afternoon tea as soon as the day's hiking was done, and served tea and coffee at each Trekker's tent each morning. They managed to produce three delicious meals a day including a lunch at 19,000 feet (just before the summit) and dinner and breakfast at 18,700 feet (just after the summit.) They would even carry the Trekker's packs and take the Trekker's photos for them!



Despite all this pampering from the BAI staff, climbing and descending Kilimanjaro was very tough. The trails are rough and crude by Philmont standards—they are relentless up or relentless down. Switchbacks are rare and there is no trail which is a pleasant hike. The two toughest days were climbing the Barranca Wall and summit day. The Barranca Wall required wearing helmets and scrambling up rock walls, being helped over gaps in the rock-cliff trail (with nothing below) by the BAI staff, and generally not looking over one's back at the several hundred feet of free fall—a fall meant death. Summit day, in

comparison, was a straight up slog over loose volcanic dirt and scree beginning at 16,000 feet and ending at 19,340, with oxygen growing scarcer with every step. On summit day it was not productive to look up at the top to see how far there was to go—until the very end, the end always seemed a long way off.

It is estimated that about 40,000 persons a year attempt Kilimanjaro, but many of them do not make it. Some are laid-low by altitude sickness, some succumb to attitude sickness. Some people die in the attempt. The number of deaths a year is a guarded secret, but estimates run from twenty to forty



Above: The glaciers may be melting, but they are still big. Opposite page, clock-wise from far left: Campsite at Moir Hut; Eli Fry checking the elevation throughout the ascent—first 4,120 vertical feet to the summit, then 1,900, then 1,340, and finally nearly to the top at 260; a giant lobelia tree—Kili is famous for these; the Trekkers are only 340 vertical feet below the summit. Page 24, left to right: Climbing Great Barranco; the proudest moment—the Philmont flag unfurled on the Roof of Africa. Page 35, top to bottom: Path to cemetery where Baden-Powell is buried; Lee at the gateway to Nyeri cemetery; Rick and Lee with the unfurled Philmont flag over Baden-Powell's grave.

deaths a year, mostly because of severe altitude sickness. Outfitters do not post their summit success rates. The July 23, 2011 Wall Street Journal reports that the overall success rate for all routes is only 40%. Other research indicates that the odds were against all the PSA Trekkers making the summit even on the longer Lemosho route—but the PSA Trekkers beat the odds.

On summit day, the PSA Trekkers saw one person with a severe leg injury being bought down from near the summit in a stretcher, and saw countless more persons being led down by guides, sometimes being administered oxygen in the process. It was hard to tell from the looks on the faces of people being led down whether they had made it to the top, or if they had, whether they knew they had made it.

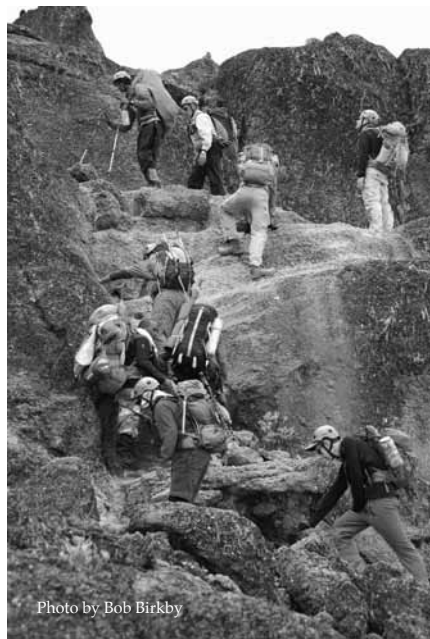


Photo by Bob Birkby

Easy hiking trails with abundant oxygen is not the reason the PSA Trekkers came to Kilimanjaro. The PSA Trekkers came for other reasons—these reasons include seeing if they were equal to Kilimanjaro’s mountaineering challenge, the opportunity to bask in the camaraderie of friends, to be amongst the last of those to see the shrinking glacial ice of Kilimanjaro and perhaps unspoken, deeply personal reasons, as well. By being well conditioned upon arrival, going pole-pole with each step, and with the support of the gold-standard BAI staff and each other, the PSA Trekkers were able to say proudly, “We all made it!”

*The PSA members making the Trek were Wally Berg, Robert Birkby, Rick Touchette, Dave Ramos, Randy Saunders, Jim Lynch and Lee Huckstep. Their friends on the Trek were Elizabeth Lockwood, John O’Brien, Reed Ference, John Privitera, Peter Nye, Adam Nye, Eli Fry and teenagers Will Lynch, Jeremy Archer and Max Archer. The author is pleased to report that the “mature” Trekkers did as well, or better, than the teenagers!*



## philmont flag decorates baden-powell’s grave

Following the summiting of Kilimanjaro, the Philmont flag which was unfurled on the peak was taken by PSA Trekkers Rick Touchette and Lee Huckstep to Nyeri, Kenya. Nyeri is the location of Paxtu, the last home of Lord Robert Baden-Powell, the founder of the world-wide Boy Scouting movement, and his wife Olave, the founder of the world-wide Girl Guides movement. Nyeri is also the location of the Baden-Powell graves.

Baden-Powell’s home in England was called Pax, for “peace.” After he had his last home erected in Nyeri, a simple dwelling consisting of a sitting room, two bedrooms with baths and a large veranda facing east to snow-capped Mount Kenya, he decided to call it Pax, too, or Paxtu. (Whoever knew Baden-Powell was such a wit?)

“Jambo,” the Swahili word for “hello,” which Touchette and Huckstep used repeatedly on Kilimanjaro, was confirmed by the Paxtu caretaker as being the word from which Baden-Powell coined the word “jamboree.” (This is disputed by some, but the caretaker’s word is good enough for this author.)

Baden-Powell died in 1941 and was buried in the St. Peter’s churchyard cemetery in Nyeri. His gravestone is marked with the trail sign “I have gone home.” The cremated remains of wife Olave, who died in 1977, are buried with Baden-Powell.

Touchette and Huckstep decorated the grave with the Philmont flag. The grave attendants were jubilant that the flag of Philmont decorated Baden-Powell’s grave and immediately posted photos to the Baden-Powell Facebook page. This well traveled and honored flag has now been returned home to Philmont.

