

‘ALTITUDE SICKNESS WASN’T A PROBLEM, BUT MORE SIGNIFICANTLY, NEITHER WAS [REDACTED] ATTITUDE SICKNESS’

Africa’s brand authority Thebe Ikalafeng recently conquered Mount Kilimanjaro. He shares how he did it and what lessons you can learn from his experience

HOW DID THE IDEA TO ATTEMPT A KILIMANJARO SUMMIT COME ABOUT?

It was initiated by an NGO that works with the Nelson Mandela Foundation. They wanted to raise funds for girls who were missing school because they don’t have the money to buy sanitary pads. Statistically, these girls are missing 30 days of school a year. The plan was to have 27 (the number of years Madiba was imprisoned) prominent South Africans – a mixture of celebrities, business leaders and influencers – to summit on Mandela Day. I was keen to do it from the start, but I was acutely aware that I was unfit, and it became a daunting prospect.

WHAT WAS YOUR MOTIVATION FOR THIS TRIP?

My motivation for it was threefold. Firstly, I believe if you're to succeed as an African, you must first succeed at home. So, in this context, I wanted to climb our continent's highest mountain before considering any of the other peaks around the world. In a way, it was a metaphorical view on African excellence and success. Secondly, Mandela stood head and shoulders above everybody else and rose high, to the highest peak of humanity. That symbolism was a powerful motivator for me, and I wanted to honour him in that way. And finally, the fact that we would be doing some good for fellow Africans sealed the deal for me. When he was asked how he would have liked to be remembered, Mandela said: 'Here lies a man who has done his duty to his people and his country'. I wanted to do my bit to continue that legacy.

WAS THERE ANY POINT IN THE LEAD-UP TO THE CLIMB WHERE YOU HAD SERIOUS SELF-DOUBT?

No. I was utterly convinced that I would summit. I had no fallback plan. I left here very naively, though. Some others in the climbing party had already done extensive research. I didn't, and only when I was on the route up, I found out something as significant as there being two peaks before you finally summit.

WHAT WAS HARDER, THE TECHNICAL AND PHYSICAL TRAINING OR PREPARING YOURSELF MENTALLY?

I would consider myself to be pretty unfit and I also have high blood pressure and a compressed lower spine issue, which did complicate matters. I said to myself that I was going to have to transcend all this. The physical challenge was very big, but undoubtedly, mental toughness was more important than the physical aspects were.

There are moments on that mountain that will test your mettle, and if you are found wanting, then you're in a dangerous situation. The unpredictable element you haven't asked about is altitude sickness.



‘I WAS UTTERLY CONVINCED I WOULD SUMMIT. I HAD NO FALLBACK PLAN’

Only once you're on the mountain can you tell if it will affect you. One of the climbers started suffering from it only about 150m from the summit. Altitude sickness was never a problem for me, but more significantly, neither was attitude sickness.

WHAT WAS YOUR TOUGHEST MOMENT ON THE CLIMB?

We started walking at 11 am on the Tuesday. On the Friday, after walking for about five hours that day, they told us that we would be doing a two-hour acclimatisation walk in preparation to begin the summit that evening. Summit night was freezing. At around 2:30 am on that summit attempt, we rested and I started dozing off. They woke me up and strongly encouraged me to stay awake. At that temperature and altitude, sleep could mean death. It was tough to stay awake, warm and hydrated, but it kept me motivated. Despite this, at no point

did I feel a level of resigning physical or mental fatigue.

THE EXPERIENCE OF SUMMITTING: CAN YOU DESCRIBE WHAT THAT MEANT TO YOU?

It was an emotional release. I broke down crying because I had achieved something significant.

WHAT DID THE CLIMB TEACH YOU ABOUT YOURSELF?

It reinforced something that I already believed: that I can always exceed my perceived limitations. The second thing it taught me was not to listen to all the negative voices trying to distract one from one's goal. There were plenty of people who said I'd never be able to do this. It affirmed my confidence that when I put my mind to something, I can achieve it, even if it's out of my realm of experience.

YOU HAVE A NUMBER OF HIGH-PROFILE SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS COMING UP. AT THE AFRICAN LEADERSHIP FORUM IN NEW YORK, YOU WILL BE SPEAKING ABOUT LEADERSHIP IN AFRICA, SUSTAINABLE GROWTH AND GLOBAL INFLUENCE. CAN YOU BRIEFLY SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THOSE THREE ASPECTS GENERALLY, FROM AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE?

My passion is to contribute to a positive narrative about Africa through my area of expertise. I champion Africans driving their own agenda. If we are creating things like our own food, water and shelter, among other things, it means we'll be firmly in charge of our own destiny. However, if we're constantly looking to the rest of the world to help us, we will never be able to rescue this continent. That will be the gist of it.

HIGH FLYERS

6:42:24

The record time for an aided ascent and descent achieved by Karl Egloff in August 2014

7 The age Keats Boyd was when he summited in January 2008, making him the youngest person ever to have done so

85 and 84

The ages of married couple Martin and Esther Kafer, who in October 2012 broke the records for the oldest male and female to summit



Words: Ryan Vrede | Photography: Paul Shiakallis, Courtesy Images

THRIVE PERSONALITY

HOW HEALTHY OR UNHEALTHY IS ‘BRAND SOUTH AFRICA’, GIVEN CONTINUING ISSUES SUCH AS CORRUPTION AT GOVERNMENT LEVEL, RISING UNEMPLOYMENT AND CRIME?

Our country is under tremendous pressure and facing some massive challenges. If we continue in this negative growth trajectory, it is going to compromise the South African development agenda. Outside of the growth pressure we're experiencing, there is also significant leadership pressure. We're not building on the leadership that got us here. If you compare the post-1994 country that was growing and thriving with the one that we see now, it's deeply concerning. These things all erode the strength of brand South Africa.

I'D LIKE TO PICK YOUR BRAIN ON TREVOR NOAH, WHO STARTS HIS HOSTING DUTIES ON THE DAILY SHOW ON 28 SEPTEMBER. HOW IMPORTANT IS IT THAT HE IS SUCCESSFUL, IN A SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT?

Trevor is the perfect example of my earlier point about Africans first summiting in Africa then the rest of the world. Any time an African does something significant on the global stage, they contribute to a positive narrative about Africa. So, for that, Trevor being successful on *The Daily Show* is very important. **Man**



GOING UP

Final summit mark

Uhuru Peak

Thebe arrived at 7:31 am

5 895m

Second summit mark

Stella Point

Thebe arrived at 6:15 am

5 739m

First summit mark

Gillman's Point

Thebe arrived here on Saturday 18 July, at 5:26 am

5 681m above sea level