

Far left: Karen gets a piggyback to Gilman's Point. Some sections were simply unrideable on the trike
Right: At the summit, Karen and Steve both made it, although altitude sickness halted other team members

billows of my sleeping bag and thought: "I wonder what will happen...?" I felt better at the spill of dopamine caused by being open minded and filled with wonder.

THE SUMMIT BID

Feeling physically rough but mentally ready, we set out for the summit. As the sun rose behind us, the scree looked more aggressive. We progressed very slowly and, despite the focus and pressure to keep moving, I called a pause. A sunrise has to be appreciated. We sipped water and looked out in awe. To the east, the jagged ridge leading to neighbouring Mawenzi Peak was a dramatic black shadow against a pink and orange dawn. I breathed in the sight, the height, the beauty of the inversion, clouds far below coating the East African plains. I imagined the power of the elephants and the ferocity of the lions far below, powering us onwards and up.

The terrain became steeper, then finally it was too vertical for scree to cling to the mountainside. Only dust and slabs of rock remained. As I looked up, my strength of mind wavered. "How?!" It appeared impossible to navigate unassisted. I watched Steve pass me, his bike carried on his guide's back, and wondered whether it was time to call a stop. My African team were determined. Their focus strengthened and they began to piggyback me. They rotated me from tall Maasai Lucas to shorter Chagga-tribe Joel. As I gripped tight, I felt their bones, their strength and sure-footedness.

Inch by inch, we reached Gilman's Point, the first official summit on the crater rim. It was still too narrow to ride, so the piggybacking continued part way along the ridge towards the second official summit at Stella. I was astounded by my team's constant smiles and resilient intent, worried for their backs but flowing with their plan. Finally I was reunited with the comfort of the ICE trike. It felt luxuriously comfortable, and the rideability of the final stretch of ridge was both a relief and a surprise.

The elation of reaching the cairn of Kilimanjaro's main summit felt surreal. The dizzy height of 5,895m (19,340ft) felt wonderful in many ways. It wasn't quite as we had envisaged it as there were just three of us from the original eight. Kevin, Steve and I hugged through the



Right: Karen Darke. Opposite: Kevin Benstead

puff of our warm jackets, emotion flowing. While doing so, we got news that Bow, Amelia and Sherrill had turned back. The altitude was harsh. Jannie and Mike were still climbing.

High above the big African landscape, with a view of the shrinking glacier and a handful of other climbers hungry for denser air, we held each other in a poignant moment. Yet it was no place to languish. The summit was only halfway. An easy pedal down the ridge took us back to piggyback land. Whenever the going got tougher, the team voted for the main man: "You are Maasai Lucas. You drink blood. You are strong to piggyback Karen here." He took me steadily and safely back to the scree.

In billows of dust, the trike descended the loose stones without tail-ending. It was faster down than I had imagined. Lower down, Steve and I rolled on down the rocky trail with relative ease. Bumpy, tricky and with never a dull moment, we arrived a day later at Marangu Gate, celebratory, oxygen-replenished, a little bruised of body but rich in heart and mind. ●

Our journey to the roof of Africa was made possible by the fantastic team of porters, cooks and guides at African Scenic Safaris. Thank you for bringing all your strength, singing and best feet forward.

Speakers from the edge

Karen and/or Steve will be sharing their incredible journey in Africa and up Kilimanjaro in a UK tour, running from 24 January to 3 February 2024.

Join an evening of film and insight that will illuminate the gifts that lie within the tough stuff of life and how we might transform what, at first, seems messy into something rich in meaning and magic. From the physical demands of the trip to the emotional healing that mountains bring, take a journey of discovery and inspiration.

Check out the dates and venues at speakersfromtheedge.com/theatre-tours/2024/wild-tracks. The team was championing the value of technology and mental wellbeing, and was involved with the charities voiceofsap.org and worldjennysday.com.