

The barefoot impi

Induna Matt Botha and his barefoot impi left their shoes at home when they set out to conquer Kilimanjaro. Facing their own mental and physical boundaries, the global tribe of adventurer-philanthropists peeled the layers off their souls and soles, to make a difference in the lives of another special tribe of young warriors. By Nelia Vivier.

Photographs by Rich Hamman.

He would have loved to live in the pioneer times of extreme adventurers, going up Kilimanjaro like Sir Ranulph Fiennes and his team or joining Captain Robert Falcon Scott's expedition in his race to be the first to set foot at the South Pole.

"We wanted a challenge that would make the impossible, possible," Matt Botha explains his dream of summiting Africa's highest peak, with the team of the Old Mutual Barefoot Kilimanjaro Expedition, and ultimate goal, raising funds for the Red Cross Children's Hospital, for kids who have even bigger mountains to climb.

"So many people have achieved this climb, but no one has done it barefoot. Well aware of the odds against us, in fact, we even raised money from bets that we wouldn't succeed, the very real danger of failure was never an option for me. I just never went there in my mind," he recalls.

"What did inspire me, ironically enough, was Ernest Shackleton's South Pole dogsled expedition in the early 1900s, one of the greatest failures ever, yet one of the most incredible adventure stories of all times. Recruiting a crew to sail with him, he placed an ad in London's Times, reading: *Wanted. Men for hazardous journey. Low wages. Bitter cold. Long hours of complete darkness. Safe return doubtful. Honor and recognition in the event of success.*

"Ending up marooned with no hope of rescue, their heroic struggle to survive resonated in my own stubborn spirit to conquer a challenge that would be one of pure endurance. That, and doing something adventurous with a purpose, ignited the flame within me."

On the other side of the coin, Matt knew from a marketing job he held at SA Breweries and his own Urban Cowboy event management venture, the cold reality of losing toes and worse, "that there would be no happy ending, resulting in 'You irresponsible idiots, what were you thinking' views, unless our expedition was a success.

"As for the guy that went up the mountain, well first of all I had very little mountaineering experience. I am an experienced kayaker and trail runner, a rugby player who made my career, in Ireland, America and at home for Griekwas and Natal. In the end, I wanted more than merely being caught up in the loop of practice, game time, work in the gym and back on the field.

"I knew it was going to be a physical and mental challenge, actually the possibility of achieving the seemingly impossible, weighed heavier. We knew the three definitive elements to face over the nine days, as we near the summit at 5 895m above sea level, was climbing at 65 degrees on volcanic scree, frostbite of our bare feet and altitude sickness. Taking longer than the usual six-day summit, going barefoot necessitated slower going, which enabled us to acclimatise better."

His team – including a cameraman, mountain guides, a media guru and barefoot climbers, himself, Camilla Howard, Clyde Barendse, Andrew King and Hedley Young, top local mountaineer Sean Disney, and Dr Ross Tucker from the SA Sports Science Institute who also ended up barefoot, and who looked after their bare feet – trained for months beforehand, acclimatising their bodies, enduring temperatures of -15°C and hiking barefoot up trails all over the country.

"My first reward happened right there in the ice chamber, when I realised what the human body can be conditioned to do when you put your mind to it, the amazing experience of learning to trust my body, as I went from barely making two minutes to spending hours in the chamber. The worst was having to postpone the initial expedition date due to cutting a tendon while training barefoot on the beach.

"Although elements on the mountain itself such as the cold, were actually worse than we expected, we never imagined how much fun we would have, which can be attributed to the team dynamics. During selection, we didn't always opt for the most obvious, the most experienced, and this gut feel turned out to be the best decision.

"The only woman in the team, Camilla Howard brought balance to the team, gave as good as she got, but still let us boys be boys. 'Skinny Cappuccino' Clyde turned out to have a reservoir of inner toughness. Apart from carrying the heaviest back pack I've ever seen someone shoulder, his hysterical one-liners lifted the team spirit at crucial times, leaving us howling with laughter.

"The purpose of our climb, the kids back home, pulled us all together. Every time I had to dig deep, I would think of those *laaities* in the hospital, and then remind myself, 'What do I really have to complain about? When I got back home, the first thing I did was to go straight to the

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hospital. Some of these kids are real characters; take Milane for instance. The little guy is severely burnt but full of mischief and the most charismatic person I've ever met. All of them were so excited about this expedition.

"For me the transcending moment happened in the last hour and a half, from Stella Point onward, as we hiked in dead silence. It must be a genetic thing, but I was fine with the altitude sickness, but very emotional as all the memories of the past few months came flooding in – how many predicted that we won't make it, the concern of my parents, who did climbing and knew the risks."

For now, he does the motivational circuit, finding it awesome to hear the questions the kids ask, but more importantly, sharing the lesson he has learnt, "that when society tells you something can't be done, it doesn't mean that it's impossible. All you need is a plan, however small, and identifying obstacles and distractions and overcoming them before you begin."

He does dream of another trip, this time to the Antarctica, but for now, his body needs time to rest. "I'm also a mad keen fisherman and am wild about Mozambique, its wild, undiscovered places."

He's wants to run marathons on every continent, has his mind set on the slopes of cross-country ski trails in Sweden, other expeditions that "will take me out of my comfort zone, might not bring me fame, but can provide the opportunity to make a really positive impact in someone else's life. What matters most is how I live my life, as in Linda Ellis' *The dash poem*: from the beginning to the end of one's life, it is about how you spent the dash in between."



Matt Botha.

We climbed Kilimanjaro!

We have done it! We climbed Kilimanjaro, the tallest free-standing mountain in the world, **from gate to summit – Barefoot.**

After setting off this morning in sub-zero temperatures, the team realised that today would challenge each one of us. It would be **a day that would make any previous day look very ordinary**. The gradient and loose volcanic scree continued relentlessly for four and a half hours from Kibo Huts (4700m) to Gilman's Point (5681). **On the way up we had a couple disheartening encounters** with climbers that had failed to summit and were visibly delirious and vomiting. **This was an eye-opener** as we had not for one second factored in that one of our team members would suffer the same fate. On the other side, we had a few very positive interactions with summiteers who were **gob-smacked at the sight of the barefoot team** – as they were well aware of the task on hand.

Coming over the crater rim at Gilman's we were totally blown away by the awe-inspiring sight of the vast snow-covered crater with the southern ice field glaciers in full view in the distance. The climb and altitude clearly took its toll on the appetites of the team as most of the packed lunches remained mostly untouched.

After a quick bite for some, we set off toward

Stella Point. **The pace was most definitely squarely in the 'pole pole' range (Swahili for slowly slowly)** Even at this pace each step was a challenge and there was a lot of heavy breathing and not as much banter.

Coming around a bend, we faced a daunting and yet exciting terrain – snow and ice.

There had been a two-foot dump of snow a few days prior that we had not seen from base camp. Although there were sections where hikers had trodden a path through the snow, there were other areas where the **barefooters had to negotiate their own route** over the snow

and ice. Arriving at Stella Point, we were rewarded with even more spectacular views of glaciers on either side of us.

At this point, many of the team were digging deep as the air was noticeably thinner and **each step took a Herculean effort**. Taunting us about two kilometres further along the rim was the sight of Uhuru Peak – our ultimate goal. The weather started coming in and an icy wind seemed to cut through the layers. **The mystical feel of the swirling clouds only added to the almost spiritual experience of being on top of Africa.** The upside to our unorthodox strategy of attempting a summit at this time meant that we, as a team, had the summit and the mountain to ourselves.

As the iconic Uhuru Peak sign edged closer and closer, the morale of the team lifted and the hardships of the past five days started fading. We reached the peak as **one very emotional tribe**, knowing that we had achieved what we had set out to do. The entire barefoot team had summited – sore – but with no serious injury. We were also a very proud team, knowing that the integrity of the trip was rock solid and no corners were ever cut. *Posted by Andrew King on 20 January, on the roof of Africa, on Barefoot IMPI's blog.*

The Table Mountain Challenge

Chances are that the Khoi could claim the first barefoot ascent of Table Mountain, which they called **Hoerikwaggo – the mountain of the sea. Now you can join the Barefoot Impi Table Mountain Challenge**, which begins on Tafelberg Road, follows De Saldanha's 1503 route up the split between the cliffs of Platteklip Gorge, and ends at Maclear's Beacon. Successful summiteers receive the Table Mountain Impi shield on completion of ascent only. **Safe, non-technical and unexposed**, and mostly benevolent to barefoot climbers, the one to two-hours route is fairly steep, so you need a base level of aerobic fitness. Rather than tackling the more difficult barefoot descent, first-timers should rather use the cableway.

Held on most weekend mornings, to take part, sign up at <http://barefootimpi.org/the-challenges/table-mountain/#sign-up> and follow the tribe @barefootimpi for scheduling.



Clyde Barendse, Ross Tucker, Camilla Howard, Andrew King, Matt Botha and Hedley Young.