



MISSION TO A GOLDEN HEIGHT

SHANE QUINNELL



It's early morning – the sun has just risen on a perfect day and has spread a golden glow up the jagged peaks in front of us. The air is still, crisp and frigid. The rocks, not yet having had the chance to bake in the sun, are cold to the touch, even through our gloves. Despite the pockets of snow and ice, the remains of yesterday's blizzard, we feel confident that the weather god is smiling on us and our mission. Or that's what we thought on the morning of our summit attempt ...

Mt Kenya National Park (also a World Heritage Site) is a wild and awesome place. Situated about 300 kilometres north of Nairobi, Kenya's capital, it is still home to some of Africa's most incredible creatures, including the African Elephant. The mountain is considered sacred to many of the local tribes who believe their gods live on the mountain.

Batian, the highest of Kenya's three peaks (Nelion [5 188 m] and Point Lenana [4 979 m]), rises to 5 199 m. It is only reachable by hiking for two days and completing approximately 700 metres of technical (all trad) rock climbing. Summiting Mt Kenya is a dream of many aspiring African and international mountaineers. It had been my personal dream for almost seven years.

Our team (Immo Bartens, Tarryn Stevenson and I) were attempting to summit Mt Kenya along with friends from Australia (Richie Chipman and Jeremy Parsons), New Zealand (Sarah Grain) and Kenya (George Gaston and Olivia Howland), through 'Mission to a GOLDen Height'. The mission was an expedition created to raise awareness and financial support for the Southern African non-profit organisation GOLD (Generation of Leaders Discovered). GOLD does an amazing job of uplifting underprivileged communities throughout Southern Africa by identifying, training and supporting young leaders in their own communities. We were supported in our mission by a great bunch of sponsors, including Windlab, Black Diamond, Beal, K-Way, Cape Union Mart and *SA Mountain* magazine, who all shared in the ideals of the trip. We were proud to fly their flags.

Our Lenana summit gift; the most beautiful sunrise with Nelion glowing in the early morning golden light.

SHANE QUINNELL



TOP: Immo looking back to Shiptons admiring the conditions. SHANE QUINNELL

MIDDLE: Our struggle to survive continues as Immo battles to get off the rope and to safety on our way down. SHANE QUINNELL

ABOVE: Part of mountain life, Shane takes a refreshing bath in a stream near Shiptons. IMMO BARTENS

Our goals in Kenya were simple: to hike the secondary peak Point Lenana, climb Batian and have a great adventure while doing so. Point Lenana was our first target and on the third morning we awoke long before daybreak with the intention of summiting the peak at sunrise. As is usual on mountains, the effects of altitude gurgled in our stomachs and throbbed in our heads, while our tired bodies protested at being dragged out of sleeping bags. However, the possibility of seeing the sun rise over the peaks spurred us on and soon we forgot our struggles.

We made it to Lenana in time to witness the most beautiful sunrise I have ever seen. The sun peeked from behind the horizon throwing colours all over the sky. As the sun rose higher, the light morphed into a golden glow which spread over the entire landscape, including the impressive peak of Nelion to the west. We were all more than stoked to be there; a lot of time and effort had led to that moment. For half of us, though, this was but the beginning: Batian still waited.

After Lenana, I and the other climbers (Immo, Richie and Jeremy) circumnavigated the other peaks to help acclimatise and then spent the entire next day resting, yet all the while galvanised by our pending climb. Finally, on the fifth day, we awoke determined to finish what we had started: Batian was in our sights.

The day started in perfect fashion, and we were optimistic about our chances. The difficulty of climbing in clunky hiking boots with a 20 kilogram backpack at a height of 5 000 metres wasn't lost on us though and reminded us of the reality of our undertaking. This notion was further reinforced as rocks hurtled down from



The beautiful moonscape of Mt Kenya National Park. RICHIE CHIPMAN

above as we slipped our way up snow and black ice from yesterday's storm. However, we were not discouraged; this was all part of the adventure.

Only a few hours after starting, our attitude changed ... with the first snowflake. We had been on the mountain long enough to know that once it started snowing, it didn't stop. It was not a good sign. Our intuition was right and within minutes, while Jeremy was halfway through pitch 4, the world changed colour. Soon the landscape of rock we had become accustomed to was blanketed in snow and gleaming with moisture. We watched and waited. Things didn't improve. Finally Immo said it: 'This is getting really dodgy.' He was right. The rock was wet, it was snowing like crazy and we were 5 000 metres up in the middle of nowhere. If someone had slipped and



Tense moments as Shane starts up the first pitch of the North Face route. RICHIE CHIPMAN



LEFT: Tarryn fighting her way through the vertical bog towards Shiptons. SHANE QUINNELL
RIGHT: Shane and Jeremy short roping between pitches over treacherously slippery ground still frozen from previous storms. RICHIE CHIPMAN



The mission team at Shipton with beautiful Batian in the background (top left): Jeremy, Sarah, Shane, Tarryn, Immo, Olivia, George, Richie. MICHAEL GARINGU

broken something there was a 50 percent chance they were not going to get out, and the likelihood of slipping was increasing by the second. Yet, despite knowing this was true, it was hard to admit. We all knew this meant admitting we had to turn around and turn away from our supporters, our preparation and our dream.

It took us nearly half an hour in steadily deteriorating conditions to make



Beautiful and untouchable, Mt Batian after the storm which flung us off her slopes. RICHIE CHIPMAN

a decision: we were turning around. At the time it seemed a huge decision to make, but it was one which I, for one, am glad we did. The way down was treacherous, covered in fresh snow and ice. By the time we reached the top of pitch 2, a waterfall comprising entirely of snow-melt had formed over the route. There was no other route, and we had a nerve-racking time abseiling down the frigid water with the enhanced possibility of rockfall. It was not until all of us finally got back down that we relaxed, knowing that we were all still intact.

After hiking back to the hut and warming ourselves from our glacial states we discussed the possibility of trying again. Finally we concluded that in the light of our experiences in the last week the likelihood of getting a decent weather window in the time we had left was almost none. It was time to go home. Though we did not summit the peak I am comfortable with the decision we made and still believe it was the right one. We are still here and so is the mountain; there will be other opportunities.

I learnt many valuable lessons on the mountain including that inner strength can at times actually lie in making the conscious decision to stop, rather than push on down a knife edge. I understand that this mentality means that at times others may succeed where I turn back. I am comfortable with this knowledge as it also means I am more likely to come home. I don't climb mountains or live life to prove a point. I do it to learn, challenge myself, and most of all because it makes me feel alive.

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