

ACCLIMATISATION TREK – MT MERU

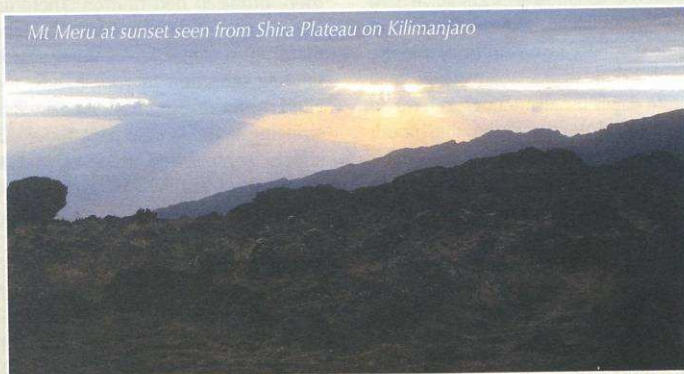
In order to aid acclimatisation and their chances of success on Kilimanjaro, many people undertake an earlier acclimatisation trek that sees them climb to a reasonable altitude before descending once more. The climb closest to and most accessible from Kilimanjaro is the ascent of Mt Meru. Mt Meru is located in the Arusha National Park, which was once described by the British biologist, Sir Julian Huxley, as 'a gem amongst parks'.

At 4566m high, Mt Meru is the second highest mountain in Tanzania and the fifth highest on the African continent. Overshadowed by the larger mountain to the east, Mt Meru is nonetheless a very impressive freestanding volcano in its own right. It makes a superb four-day trek that is very rewarding and picturesque. The trek involves walking through forest and grassland on the lower slopes, before completing a dramatic and exhilarating ridge-walk to the summit that provides stunning views of the Ash Cone lying several hundred metres below in the crater.

The local Waarusha people maintain that the volcano is sacred. Although they conducted animal sacrifices on its slopes, it is unlikely that they ever climbed to the top. First sighted by Europeans in 1862, the mountain was probably first climbed in either 1901, by Carl Uhlig, or 1904, by Fritz Jaeger. It has since received far less foot traffic than Kilimanjaro.

Mt Meru is a perfectly conical shape. It was formed by volcanic activity associated with the creation of the Rift Valley a quarter of a million years ago. It has an internal crater surrounded by precipitous cliffs, some of which are more than 1500m high. More recent eruptions, some within the last 100 years, have resulted in the formation of a resurgent ash cone.

Mt Meru at sunset seen from Shira Plateau on Kilimanjaro



Over 400 species of birds and animals make their home on these slopes. The forests are also home to larger game than is seen on Kilimanjaro. As the mountain receives less visitors than Kilimanjaro, the animals are yet to be scared away by the frequent and heavy presence of people. Rhino, elephant, buffalo, baboon, warthog, duiker and black and white colobus monkeys have all been seen in the forest and on the moorland.

In order to climb Mt Meru you must pay the Arusha National Park entrance fee. This is US\$25 per day. There are also hut fees (US\$20 per day), a rescue fee (US\$20 per trek) and, as all groups are obliged to take a guide, guide fees (US\$15 per day) to pay. All fees are payable in cash at the Momela Gate. Although you don't need to take porters on the trip, you may wish to and this cost will also have to be taken into consideration.

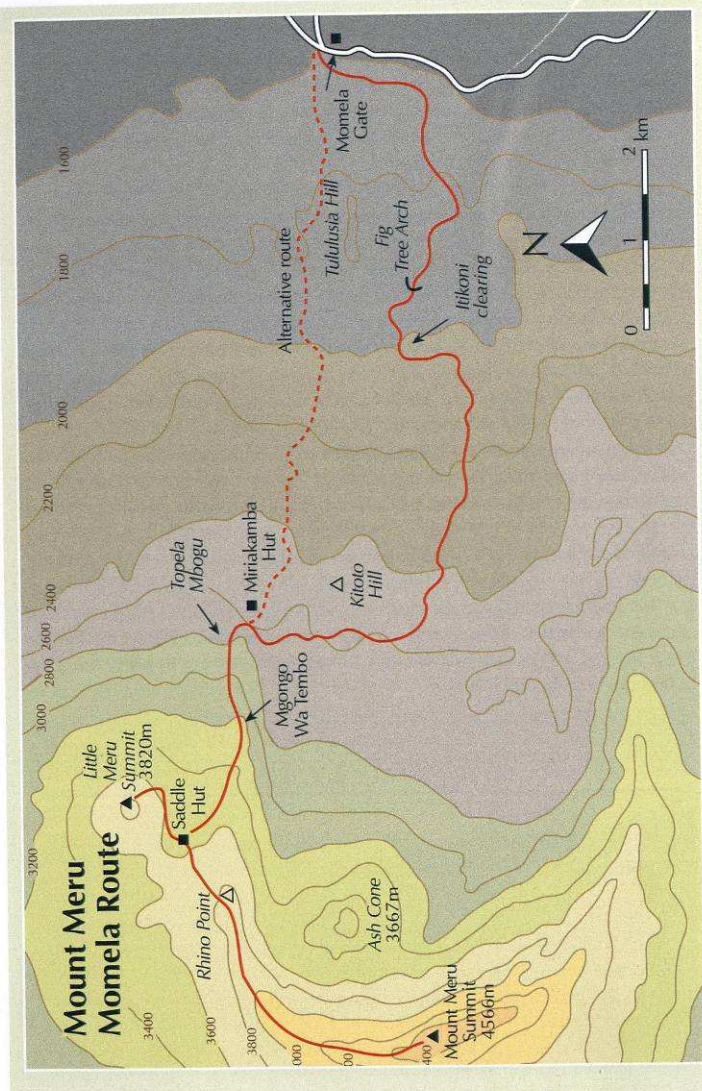
The guide who has to accompany you is a national park ranger who is there to make sure that you remain safe on the mountain, rather than show you the way. The guides carry guns in case of unexpected contact with wild animals, but they will try not to have to use them.

There are opportunities to camp on the Momela Route – there are pitches adjacent to each of the huts along the trail. The huts can not be booked and instead operate on a first come, first served basis, so it may be as well to carry a tent in case you arrive late and find that the huts are already full. Whether you choose to camp or find yourself doing so out of necessity, you will have to pay the hut fees.

Most outfitters that organise climbs on Kilimanjaro will also be able to set up an ascent of Mt Meru. A four-day trek tends to cost between US\$500–600. Tips for the guide and any porters that you hire are not included in this price and your budget ought to incorporate this.

MOMELA ROUTE

| | |
|----------------|---------------|
| Time: | 4 days |
| Length: | 38km |
| Altitude gain: | 3066m |
| Grade: | Moderate/hard |
| Start: | Momela Gate |
| End: | Momela Gate |



This is the only available route to the summit of Mt Meru. The Momela Route begins on the eastern side of the mountain and climbs to the summit via the northern shoulder of a horseshoe-shaped crater. The climb takes four days. Since this is most often done as an acclimatisation trek, there is no point in rushing and wasting the opportunity on hand.

Day 1 The first day is a 4–5hr trek over 10km that ascends 1014m. The trek begins at Momela Gate (1500m), from where it crosses the Ngare Nanyuki River and climbs through the forest, past a sacred fig tree arch and the Itikoni clearing, towards the crater. The path crosses a number of streams and passes several excellent view points that show the wide open plains and Momela Lakes. It ascends steeply to the Miriakamba Hut (2514m). There are two bunkhouses here (with bunks and mattresses) that can accommodate 48 people. Long-drop toilets and a good water source are nearby.

Day 2 The second day takes you to the Saddle hut. The route covers 4km over 3–4hrs, climbing steeply to gain 1056m. The path winds through the pleasant forest, passing Buffalo Swamp (Topela Mbogo) and Elephant Ridge (Mgongo wa Tembo). From the ridge there are exceptional views into the crater. The path leaves the forest and continues up through the heath. It clambers onto a wide col between the slopes of Mt Meru and the secondary peak, Little Meru. Saddle Hut (3570m) is set here. There are two bunkhouses, one newer than the other, and long-drop toilets. Water is retrieved from a stream about 10 minutes away.

Due to the short nature of the day, it is possible to take a detour to the top of Little Meru (3820m). The ascent takes a further hour and affords you superb views of the summit and of Kilimanjaro.

Day 3 This is a 5km climb up 996m to the peak followed by a descent to Miriakamba Hut for the evening. This will take 9–11hrs. By leaving Saddle Hut at 2.00am or just after, you ought to be on the summit of Mt Meru in time to see the sunrise behind the great bulk of Kilimanjaro.

The ascent to the top is along a narrow ridge. The drops on one side are sheer and the exposed nature of the path can prove too much for more timid trekkers. Aim first for Rhino Point, by heading across a plateau behind the hut before climbing steeply. The point is marked by a cairn and takes around 1hr to reach. From here you can see the inner walls of the crater being set aglow by the sun. The path then drops slightly before rising more steeply to edge around the rim of the crater. Walk around the rocky crater rim for a further 4–5hrs to reach the summit, Socialist Peak (4566m), from where the views are outstanding. The descent (–2052m) is along the same path. It takes 3–4hrs to return to Saddle Hut, and a further 1–2hrs to descend to Miriakamba Hut.

Day 4 It takes 2–3hrs to descend the 10km from Miriakamba Hut to the Momela Gate the following day, along the same route that you used to climb the mountain.

Alternatively, some groups combine the third (summit) day and the fourth (descent) day. This is entirely possible, but does mean that the summit day is very lengthy, since you must descend right off the mountain in the same day.

