

WHAT IT TAKES: THE PORTERS OF KILIMANJARO

High-altitude adventure wouldn't be possible without porters and guides. In Tanzania, on Africa's highest peak, works a dedicated group of locals earning a living in one of the most extreme environments on earth.

Words: **Anna Smith**

The beautiful thing about Kilimanjaro is that anybody can climb it. Despite standing at 5,895 metres, the current most popular routes to the top don't require technical climbing skills and the main thing that turns people around is altitude sickness. It is well known for its accessibility and is a popular place for 50,000 tourists a year – young, old, healthy, recovering, experienced and novice – to prove that they have what it takes to master one of the earth's seven great summits.

Though, hidden on this mountain of opportunity, in the allure of its forests, moorlands and glaciers, is a great truth in the words not spoken. Anybody can climb Kilimanjaro; anybody with a porter. Up to 50 support staff will guide a group up the mountain, carrying tents, toilets, food, oxygen and duffel bags with a week's worth of the clients' belongings. The weight of the gear required for five to nine days on the peak would rule out the majority of climbers should there not be porters willing to share the load.

This fact is true for many great adventures and has been since the first recorded ascent of Kilimanjaro. Under the colonial control of Germany, the mountain was an object of interest for visiting geographers and alpinists in the late 1880s. Hans Meyer was eventually the European credited with the first successful summit, but his 62 porters, whose names are seldom known, and his guide, Mwini Amani, are left out of the story. Many of the team climbed without shoes and Meyer recorded that Mwini slept without a tent or proper cover in temperatures below zero.

Experienced climbers from across the globe have successfully summited without the aid of porters, but the growing popularity of adventure tourism has rapidly increased the demand for the role. The Kilimanjaro Porters Assistance Project (KPAP), a Tanzanian charity advocating for worker's rights on the mountain, estimate there are 20,000 porters working on Kilimanjaro each season, in addition to guides and other local support staff. Though an extreme line of work, its seasonal and volatile nature means the exact number of staff is unknown. Roughly 7,500 staff are registered with KPAP certified companies and are guaranteed a fair wage, working conditions and a channel of redress, which leaves upwards of 12,500 porters in unreliable employment scenarios nearly 6,000m above sea level.

According to the World Bank, the Tanzanian economy benefits \$50 million from tourism every year and, with little to no barriers to entry, portering remains an appealing job prospect for many Tanzanians in the region and beyond. Whether it is for a love of the mountains or simply a need for work, thousands flock to Kilimanjaro's gates every January and June, often without climbing gear or mountain experience, to share in the profit of Africa's highest, most achievable peak. Though it may be true that anybody can climb Kilimanjaro with porters, it is perhaps more true that anybody can porter – for better or for worse.

An Exchange

Lightness Samwel Laizer was born in Arusha, Tanzania, and has always wanted to climb mountains.

"I really, really wanted to climb mountains, to be a mountaineer. I saw a lot of pictures of Mount Kilimanjaro. I had the willing inside my head and just needed to climb the mountain as a guide and lead groups of people from other countries."

After a struggle to find funding for her secondary education, she completed school in 2017 and came to the mountain in 2018. Now 25, she has realised her dream of becoming a mountain guide and has summited Kilimanjaro 17 times over her year and a half as a porter and four years as a guide (notwithstanding the period when the COVID-19 pandemic prevented climbs).

Though porters need identification cards to work on the mountain, there are no other formal requirements and no training needed to gain work. In Tanzania, education above primary level must be paid for, and the additional costs that come with schooling prevent many from completing any stage of education. In 2017, 26% of the population had not completed primary education, with UNICEF estimating in the same year that 70% of children between 14 and 17 were not enrolled in secondary education. With a clear line of promotion, from porter to specialist porter (such as cook or tent attendant), summit porter, assistant guide and finally the coveted role of lead guide, Kilimanjaro is the opportunity for many Tanzanians to have a fulfilling career without the need for a further education.

Despite her higher education, Lightness had to "battle to find funding to study to pursue a career in tourism" according to her biography





on the Robertson Outdoor Bursary website, the charity that enabled her to obtain her guiding license in 2020.

“Now I’m able to afford my basic needs through the salary which I have been paid. I can manage to do different activities in the community through that money.”

The minimum wage for porters, though regularly disregarded, is 20,000 Tanzanian shillings, or s£6, per day (though this Kilimanjaro Park Authority rate hasn’t been increased since 2008). For guides, this can grow to up to £20 a day, with cooks and specialist porters receiving closer to this also. For many who look to portering and guiding for work, this is a life changing amount of money. Other recipients of the Robertson Outdoor Bursary have used their earnings to buy land for crops and livestock, which can help them sustain their income over the monsoon season, pay for their children and family’s education and save for the future.

Working on the mountain also serves as an opportunity to do what we all want to do eventually; climb Kilimanjaro. “It is still amazing because of the view after reaching the summit. It is a spectacular view. Every time I reach there it is like a new day to me.” Even after 17 trips, the mountain, which was once believed to be the seat of God, retains its magic for Lightness. “I enjoy it a lot, because I meet with different people. The different visitors from different nations. Through that we share a lot of things, knowledge and skills. So it’s an exchange and you can make good friendships.”

All in a Day

“I really like the Lemosho route. I really like it because it’s a long day but we normally have a break after reaching the base camp, having enough time to rest and get prepared for the next day.”

Even with the barriers to entry for a career on Kilimanjaro being low, there is a mental and physical fortitude required to carry the heavy equipment in unforgiving circumstances. Companies registered with KPAP agree to limit luggage to 20kg plus an extra 5kg for the porter’s personal belongings.

“The first day I was a porter I was crying a lot, especially on day two, because it was very hard for me. I saw a lot of people on the way but later they left me behind. At that time I just put down my luggage and started crying. I was the last person to reach the camp that day, but I didn’t give up. I usually push myself and talk to myself and say I can do something. And I can. The last day we went down to the Mweka Gate. All of the crew had already reached the gate and I was still at the back.”

Lightness spent a long time at home suffering with muscle pains after her first trip but she refused any pain medication, thinking that if she wanted to make a career as a guide she would have to learn to recover on her own. Now it takes her just two days to recuperate from a trip.

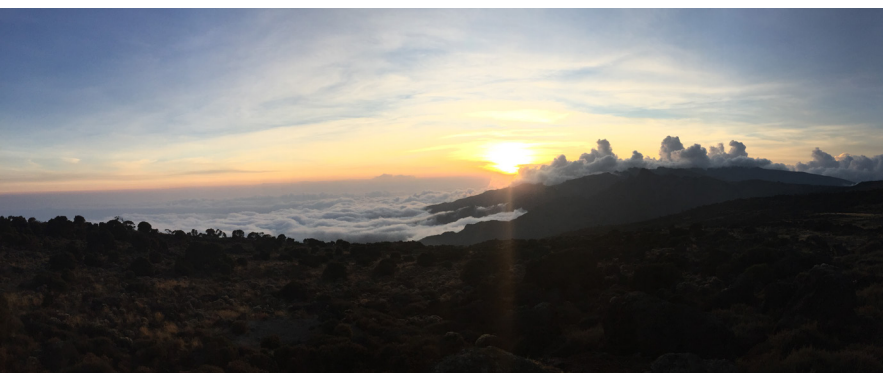
“From the Lemosho Gate to Mti Mbukwa camp, or ‘Big Tree Camp’, is almost seven kilometres, so we normally spend three to four hours to reach the camp, but it depends on our pace. After reaching there we provide water for visitors to wash, then after that we give them tea. Later on dinner will be ready. After dinner we have a short briefing for the next day. The wake up time is usually six o’clock in the morning.”

Porters will typically set off after guests, having packed away camp, and overtake them to set up once again at the next rest stop. Their knowledge of the mountain and its trails is extraordinary. Guides hike with clients, telling them about the wildlife, the mountain and the country, and solving any issues.

Pictured

Pictured are the Exodus Travel and Robertson Outdoor Bursary 'Mountain Lionesses' cohort from 2020:

Lightness Samwel Laizer (pictured bottom left)
Irene Maandi
Sintia Robi Mwita
Nembeke A. Kundara
Elizabeth A. Laizer
Veronica L. Makini
Kitaba Wadia Kapanya
Sabrina Hassan
Irene S. Moshi
Lorren P. Shoo





Credit: Exodus Travel

They ensure guests are comfortable and safe, looking out for changes in the mountain, like rock falls or hazardous weather, as well as signs of altitude sickness. If necessary, porters and guides will stabilise and evacuate clients from high slopes, with international travel and adventure insurance companies footing the bill for any expenses. Unfortunately, for many porters and guides, evacuation off the mountain isn't a luxury afforded to them.

There are many recorded cases of injured and sick porters having to walk themselves back to the gates, with other crew then bearing their portion of the luggage for the remainder of the trip. Whilst recovering, those porters are rarely offered desk work in the companies they are employed with and have little redress for their loss of income or medical expenses.

The number of crew who don't make it back down the mountain each year is unknown. In 2013 the World Bank estimated that up to 20 staff die each year, with causes ranging from altitude sickness to pneumonia, rock falls and other injuries. Markus Hauser, a Swiss academic, estimated that six or seven climbers die per year, the majority from altitude related complications.

With up to 50,000 climbers and 20,000 porters on the mountain, these statistics confirm that Kilimanjaro is a relatively safe high mountain to climb. The disparity between porter and climber incidents is nonetheless significant. Whether the porter's role is more than twice as risky as the climber's is a question worth asking, however, in such a precarious environment as the high mountains, these events never take place within such a neat vacuum as statistics.

High Quality

Lightness, like the majority of porters and guides, buys her own climbing gear. Though there isn't much of an industry for high-altitude, cold weather clothing in Tanzania, for a guide who works with a KPAP certified company (and therefore receives an adequate wage), "safe and warm" footwear and clothing is attainable. For those start-

ing out or being paid poorly, often the only option is to climb in what they already own.

KPAP along with other non-profit organisations may donate clothing to staff, and it is a requirement for KPAP certified companies to ensure their guides have adequate equipment before climbing. There are also gear 'ceremonies' where climbers returning from the peak may gift equipment to the porters and guides who assisted them. These ceremonies are some of the only ways to access the same standard of gear that most climbers wear from territories with robust outdoor industries. High import taxes are placed on even small, personal amounts of gear being brought in from overseas.

For many mountain workers, not being able to access high- or low-quality hiking gear means summiting the peak in flip-flops, jeans, or whatever they have on hand. In 2021, Alpinist.com reported on a rockfall on the risky Western Breach route where none of the porters had helmets (no staff were injured in this incident, with one climber suffering a broken ankle). Conditions like these exacerbate the dangers high on the mountain, with Lightness naming "mountain sickness", "low oxygen levels", and "freezing" temperatures as the workers' main concerns. Other significant issues are porters receiving just one meal a day, inadequate sleeping conditions, and luggage weighing up to 40kg per porter – if they receive work at all.

Turning the Tide

Work on Kilimanjaro is seasonal. For the staff, this means finding other sources of income during the low season. Lightness grows crops and does other jobs around her local community. Many of the Robertson Outdoor Bursary recipients have marketing backgrounds, others are dressmakers or jewellers or waitresses. Reinvesting their mountain wages in these pursuits allows their communities to be resilient.

This relies on a fair wage being paid, which is a guarantee under KPAP certified companies. On every climb, a KPAP investigative porter is sent to monitor working conditions for porters on the mountain,



Credit: Exodus Travel

including how they are paid and that tips are distributed fairly. On climbs that aren't monitored by KPAP, porters sometimes have to bribe companies to guarantee work on a specific climb, and, with no written contract, there is no guarantee that they will get paid for this work, relying instead that guides pass their tips on, which in some cases they don't. Wages when they do come can be as low as 10,000 Shillings, or £3, per day.

Porters are voicing their concerns and advocating for themselves by setting up organisations, communicating with each other about conditions, and working with charities like KPAP as investigative porters. The nature of the industry unfortunately means that if even a large group of porters reject low wages, there are enough people who want the work to take it. Nevertheless, an atmosphere of change surrounds the mountain. KPAP and similar organisations demand a minimum wage, pack weight and number of meals per day for porters, as well as a minimum standard for sleeping conditions, provide up-skilling classes in subjects like first aid, environmental management, finance management and English language, provide higher quality gear for free, and act as an accountability platform. The steps being taken by workers on the mountain are slowly turning the tide on conditions, enabling these seasonal workers to enjoy the career they have dreamed about or simply earn the money they deserve for their work. The added power of an international voice can only strengthen its pull.


The Culture

Yvonne Robertson, the enigmatic founder of the Robertson Outdoor Bursary, says the thing to do is climb the mountain. She climbed Kilimanjaro for the first time in 2013 and was moved by the story of her guide, who was able to get his license through a private donation from a client he had portered for. Yvonne looked for a place to do the same and, when she came

up empty handed, decided to found the charity and do it herself. The bursary now pays the tuition fees of some porters at the Mweka College of African Wildlife Management so they can get their guide license, 10 places of which are part of the Exodus Travel 'Mountain Lionesses' programme for female porters.

She believes that climbing Kilimanjaro with intention and financially supporting reputable trekking companies can speak volumes to those who exploit workers on the mountain. Asking questions of companies (how much they pay, whether they are registered with KPAP etc.), vocalising concerns for porters and guides, and being transparent about your tips can make all the difference. It's accepted that the client demand for female guides has helped to encourage more companies to hire women on Kilimanjaro, with them now representing 18% of the workforce.

Yvonne made clear that there is no interest in trying to change the culture around portering, and perhaps that you couldn't if you tried. It is a casual, seasonal job for anyone who wants it. The interest lies in ensuring that porters aren't exploited for their want or need of a career on Mount Kilimanjaro. Their work is the only reason many of us will ever reach the roof of Africa, and, for Lightness, it is the work she has always wanted to do.

"The first time it was very hard because it was the first time I was in a high elevation. To gain the altitude was very hard. Now, because of my passion and my willing, it's very easy for me. No one forced me to climb the mountain. This is because of me, I just needed to be at the top one day." 

*There are many ways to support the work of porters and guides on Kilimanjaro, including the **Robertson Outdoor Bursary** (www.robertsonoutdoorbursary.org), **KPAP** (www.kiliporters.org) and the 'Mountain Lionesses' programme at **Exodus Travels** (www.exodus.co.uk).*