

**Peak experience:** rising above a sea of clouds, Kilimanjaro is the highest free-standing mountain in the world.



# Higher love

He found fame in 2007 for crossing the Tasman Sea in a double kayak, but when **James Castrission** set out on an adventure to climb Mount Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest peak, there was much more at stake than merely his life ...

**W**ITH HIS THICK AFRICAN ACCENT, our pilot instructs the cabin crew to prepare for landing. I gaze out at the glistening snow-capped peak I've dragged my girlfriend, Mia, halfway across the planet to climb. There it is: Tanzania's Mount Kilimanjaro, at 5895 metres the world's highest free-standing mountain. I feel for the beautiful engagement ring in my pocket and imagine I'm Frodo Baggins on a quest. But as my stomach churns, I know I need to conquer my recently developed – but deep – fear of altitude to pass the gates of Mordor and complete it.

Last year, my romantic notions of mountaineering were decimated by an attempt to climb my first big mountain, Mount McKinley, North America's highest peak. I still wake at night reliving the moment I received news of the deaths of two climbing friends in a tragic accident near the summit, our efforts to rescue another three climbers injured after a nasty fall, and the fact that, rather than conquering McKinley, we were forced to retreat after I succumbed to the crippling effects of altitude sickness.

I felt so tortured that I binned my ropes and hung up my ice axe. But within weeks my irrational urge to go climbing returned. I showed family and friends photos and told stories, but no one understood my motivation, especially when I could not explain what had happened to me on

Mount McKinley. It provided some comfort knowing that when answering the question, "What is the use in climbing mountains?," legendary British explorer George Mallory replied, "It is no use... What we get from this adventure is just sheer joy." But I wanted Mia, especially, to understand the mindset of an adventurer and Mallory's explanation fell terribly short. What better way for her to gain an appreciation of mountaineering than to experience it herself? I wanted her to feel the ice crystals crunch like cornflakes under her boots, fill her lungs with air purer than the Mother Mary and feel the warmth of the sun's first rays rising over a continent.

All these noble thoughts begin to disappear as we descend towards Tanzania and I realise that I really shouldn't have eaten that chicken in Nairobi. I hotfoot it to the bathroom the moment the plane doors open. An hour later, after our 4WD pulls up at the base of the mountain, I am barely able to stand, so just flop on the ground listening to our guides and porters preparing for the eight-day climb. The novelty of having porters to carry our gear is incredibly welcome, but as we set off up the muddy track from the foot of the mountain, I'm unable to appreciate our lush rainforest surrounds. Mia sympathises, but can't resist the occasional joke: "Seeing you're the oh-so-tough adventurer, the gods must've thought it fair to even up the playing field!"

WE STUMBLE INTO CAMP ON THE FIRST NIGHT AND I collapse in our tent. My fever peaks through the night while I drift in and out of vivid hallucinations. I'm fairly sure we'll be heading back down the mountain in the morning. So much for overcoming my fear of altitude and showing Mia what mountain climbing is all about.

As morning breaks, I lie listening to the porters chanting mountain songs in Swahili. Eventually I peel my eyelids open, awaiting the nausea's return. Surprisingly, I feel human again. Looks like the cocktail of antibiotics, Nurofen, Stemetil, Imodium and Diamox I swallowed yesterday has worked a miracle. I crawl from my sleeping bag. Then swaying a little, calf muscles cramping and tummy contorting, I realise my hallelujah moment was premature. I force down some dry toast and decide to push up to Camp Two, taking it nice and slowly (*pole-pole*, as they say in Swahili).

As the days progress I begin to feel stronger. So far, so good. At High Camp (4600 metres) we sip tea, doze and acclimatise as we prepare for our midnight ascent to the summit. Late that afternoon a piercing cry of pain and a stampede of rushing feet wakes us from our mid-afternoon snooze. Mia and I sit bolt upright to see a man with a broken leg being carried on a stretcher. We hear one porter nonchalantly disclose that just 12 hours earlier he'd carried the corpse of a European climber down on the same stretcher.

The situation is eerily similar to what I experienced on Mount McKinley. Self-doubt begins to consume me and negativity bombs my mind: is this an experience I want to share with Mia? How will our bodies handle the higher altitude? What happens if she gets sick? *What was I thinking?*

Mia talks it all through with me and, after a few

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**A climb romance:**  
(above) James Castrisson proposes to his girlfriend, Mia, at the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro, 5895 metres above sea level.



nervous hours, we don layers of clothing ready to combat the freezing temperatures. We set off for the summit at 11.30pm with our goal to reach the crater rim (5500 metres) before the sun warms the frozen scree and makes progress impossible.

Time seems to stand still as we edge up the mountain in darkness. Have we been walking for five minutes or 50? Lack of oxygen to the brain – less than half of what you'd find at sea level – compounds the confusion and it feels as though we are trying to sprint up a staircase while sucking breath through a drinking straw. Our assistant guide is also having trouble breathing and immediately heads to lower altitude.

After four hours shuffling upward, the terrain steepens and the track zig-zags up the near-vertical last few hundred metres to Stella Point on the crater rim. Our progress slows and I become extremely irritable; my hands begin to freeze. “Keep calm, mate,” I mutter to myself, feeling the familiar symptoms. “Keep plugging on, one foot in front of the other. You've got a ring to deliver.”

After endless switchbacks, the terrain begins to level out and I clumsily bump into our guide's back. “Welcome to Stella Point!” he exclaims, lifting his arms to embrace Mia and me. It is so cold

that momentarily stopping causes our fingers and toes to turn into something more closely resembling Calippo ice blocks than human digits. We sway euphorically along the crater rim, knowing that in less than 90 minutes we'll reach Africa's roof. Nothing is going to stop us now.

Tears wash down my face from both happiness and I don't know what. How will I propose to Mia, and what kind of reaction should I expect? Staring ahead, the morning's first rays reveal an object fluttering in the distance. Surely not ... yes ... it is the summit flags. Our pace quickens and all of a sudden we're there. No more up! Straight away, I clumsily pull off my puffy gloves, reach into my jacket pocket, find the ring and drop down on bended knee. Mia looks shocked, but I don't hesitate: “Mia, will you marry me?”

Her reaction isn't what I'd imagined. There is no reply, just a few nervous giggles and grunts that don't resemble anything like a “yes” ... or a “no”, for that matter. It is going to be a long, awkward walk down the mountain if I don't get an answer soon. Not quite knowing what to do, I prod: “So, should I take that as a yes or a no?”

“YES!” she finally shouts.

Still on one knee, I slip the ring on her finger. The diamond sparkles in the early morning light. We hug each other, symbolically making a pact that this is the new dawn of our life together.

Standing with Mia atop Kilimanjaro means more to me than conquering any other mountain. I can see in her an understanding of what it means to climb mountains – in essence, what it means to be me – and, best of all, she seems to like it. The climb has allowed the person I wanted to spend the rest of my life with to understand what it is to be an adventurer. **GW**