

1 Planning and preparation

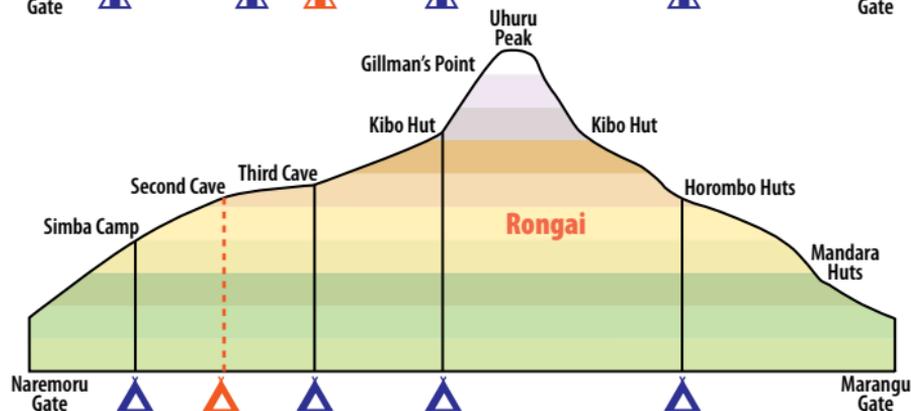
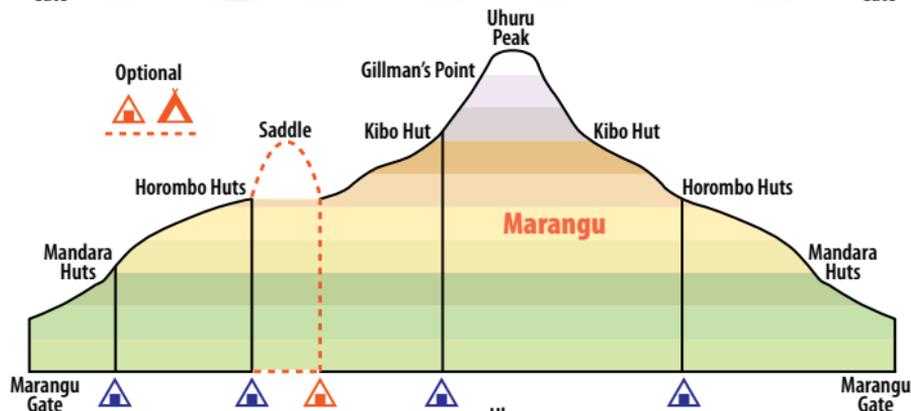
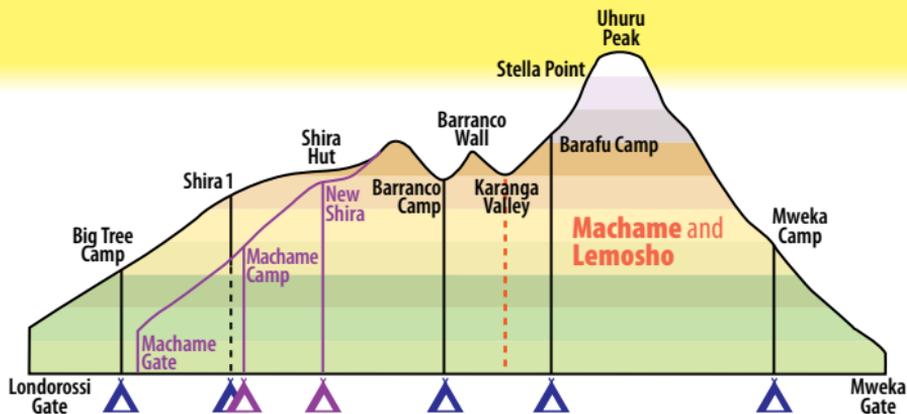
1.4 Choosing your route

The number of route names and permutations can be confusing at first. This book focuses on the four most popular trekking routes: Machame, Lemosho, Marangu and Rongai, and explains some other options on pp19-20. For a quick overview, see the route profiles and Table 1 on pp16-17. The map (inside back cover) shows these four and some variations. They fall naturally into two pairs: the Lemosho ascent joins the Machame route on the Shira Plateau, after which they are identical, and the Rongai approach joins Marangu at Kibo Hut, after which they too are identical.

Marangu, the original and still one of the most popular routes, is named after the village to the east of the massif. It's the only one where you sleep overnight in bunk-bedded huts with solar-powered electricity, and there are toilet blocks nearby with running water. Marangu is also known as the 'tourist' or 'Coca-Cola' route, because soft drinks and water are on sale. Most huts sleep up to six, except Kibo Hut which has 60 bunks in five dormitories. People of either sex are allocated to bunks on arrival, so don't expect privacy. But sleeping in a hut is warmer than camping.

Marangu is also the cheapest option, and although busy, at least the number of bunks limits overall numbers. Avoid itineraries that offer Marangu as a 3-day ascent. Unless already acclimatised, you need *at least* one extra night, taken at Horombo. This isn't high enough for good acclimatisation, but it's the only option. Marangu is the only route on which you go back the same way as you came.

If you prefer variety and enjoy camping, choose Rongai, Machame or Lemosho. You sleep normally two to a tent, using a head-torch for lighting. The latrines (toilets) are generally more primitive and further away, although your team may have a private toilet tent. Rongai approaches from the north and descends south-east via Marangu, camping near the huts. Rongai also offers direct and indirect alternatives: see p89.



On Machame, you ascend from the south via Machame Gate. After ascending via Barafu, you descend by the more direct Mweka route. Lemosho involves a long approach from the west, and because it's much less busy, you'll see signs of large animals – buffalo, elephant or even lion. These are more strenuous routes than the other two, because

- you walk further, with more ascent and descent
- the terrain is tougher so the hiking takes more effort.

To summarise, if you wish to avoid camping, or if budget is the main factor, choose Marangu. Otherwise, choose Rongai, which is both easier and more flexible than Marangu, has more variety and fewer people, albeit a longer journey before beginning your hike. If you relish the challenge of some easy scrambling and are confident of your fitness, choose the more scenic Machame route, or, if you can spare an extra day and a bit more expense, upgrade to Lemosho. If you find the choice difficult, read Part 4 carefully and visit our website forum: www.rucsacs.com/forum. There are lots of diary accounts of every route on the web.

Table 1: Summary of Kilimanjaro's main routes

| Route | Book sections | Days for ascent | Overnight | Grade* | Comments |
|-----------------------------|---------------|-----------------|-----------|-----------------|--|
| Machame | 4.1 | 4 or 5 | camping | B/C | scenic route; involves some easy scrambling |
| Lemosho | 4.2 | 5 or 6 | camping | B/C | approaches from west, then links to Machame ascent |
| Marangu | 4.3 | 4 | huts | B | 3-day ascent possible if acclimatised |
| Rongai | 4.4 | 4 5 6 | camping | B A / B A | direct route (if pre-acclimatised) direct or indirect indirect route |
| <i>Descent (all routes)</i> | 4.5 | +2 | | | <i>first 'descent' day includes the overnight summit attempt</i> |
| Overall total | | 6 to 8 | | | the longer your trip, the greater your chance of summiting enjoyably |

* A means easy, C is moderate, E is very strenuous; route grading excludes summit day which is D/E in all cases.

How does route choice affect your chances of summiting? Overall, 'success' rates for Marangu hover around the 50% level, although some operators claim 70% or more. The average is depressed by low-budget, minimum-stay tourists who omit the extra night at Horombo, a false economy because most people suffer altitude sickness as a result.

Higher percentages are quoted for Machame, Lemosho and Rongai, but this doesn't mean you improve your personal chances by avoiding Marangu. Fit, experienced hikers are attracted to the other routes, and they are more likely to succeed than the budget tourist on Marangu. Exertion is a major risk factor in altitude sickness. If your main aim is to maximise your chance of reaching the summit, choose Rongai or Marangu, which have only one seriously taxing day. On a 6-day Machame, your summit attempt comes after four fairly strenuous days of trekking, and is immediately followed by a prolonged descent.

Reaching the summit, however, is not everything. There are good reasons why many people prefer longer and more scenic routes. Machame can be made less strenuous if your itinerary adds an overnight in Karanga Valley. The Lemosho route is a 7- or 8-day itinerary and gives you a much better chance to acclimatise. It also has fewer hikers and more wildlife sightings.

Overall, Marangu is the cheapest route, with Rongai next, then Machame, and Lemosho the most expensive. This mainly reflects the time spent on the mountain, because Park fees and wages are charged by the day. Any route becomes more expensive, and also more likely to succeed, if you include extra days at high altitude. The longer your trek, the greater your chances of summiting enjoyably. And once you take in the cost of your flight to Tanzania, saving two hundred dollars or so may seem less important than choosing the best possible itinerary.

Other options

You may hear about some further route choices, such as Shira and Umbwe. Shira is a seldom-used variant of Lemosho: you are driven straight to the Morum Barrier Gate at 3400m, and begin your hike above the forest zone on the Shira Plateau, with little opportunity to acclimatise. Unless you add extra nights to this short route, it is suitable only for those who have already acclimatised. Umbwe is a steep trail that takes you direct to Barranco via Umbwe Cave, less busy than most, and little used because of its steep, treacherous terrain, and because almost everybody would then need an extra night at Barranco. However, Umbwe offers some spectacular views, and it's the route where the IMAX movie was filmed.

The Western Breach is a huge gap in the crater rim that creates a short-cut to the crater via the ruins of Arrow Glacier Hut. The climb involves steep, icy scree and rock, sometimes requiring technical equipment, and used to be offered widely as a more challenging finale to the Machame/Umbwe ascents.

Scrambling up the Barranco Wall

However, the route was closed after a fatal rockfall in January 2006. About 40 tonnes of rock loosened by melting ice-sceel slid steeply downhill at speeds of 40 kph (25 mph), killing three tourists, an unknown number of Tanzanians and seriously injuring many more. Although it reopened in December 2007, some experts consider it unduly dangerous, and many responsible operators no longer offer it, whilst others require a special indemnity form. If considering this option, refer to www.westernbreach.co.uk – especially to its videos and the report of the accident investigation.

A final variation is the option of making camp in the crater, which is expensive (several hundred dollars per person) because of the extra work to move the whole team and gear to such high altitude. Normally porters and their loads go no higher than Barafu (4600m). Crater Camp (5790m) demands much more effort from the whole team, and in extreme weather it sometimes has to be rearranged.

To sleep at extreme altitude, you need to be better acclimatised than to make a brief visit to the summit. Staying in the crater is feasible only as an agreed part of one of the longer itineraries, and even then it's offered only by some companies, subject to conditions. When all goes well, you make the 5-6-hour ascent from Barafu in daylight, and stay at Crater Camp, perhaps also visiting the Reusch Crater with its Ash Pit. Next day, the summit climb takes only a couple of hours, avoiding the midnight start of other itineraries.

Crater Camp, near the Furtwangler Glacier

