

Draft article for approval

CAROL THE COURAGEOUS

In a list of extra-ordinary women, Carol Clark would rate a high place. An incredible 68 years old, she has just climbed Mount Kilimanjaro, the highest mountain in Africa – alone, with only a guide, and porters. She now holds the world record for the oldest woman to have done so. Carol has not had an easy life – a marriage which ended in great torment for her, a divorce after 47 years in which she lost much of the money she had worked all her life for; operations for breast cancer and pelvic support problems – all of which she survived, overcame, and has been strengthened by. Patricia Hughes Scott talked to Carol in an exclusive interview at Msambweni, where she was relaxing, enjoying the beauty and tranquillity of the Kenyan Coast on the shores of the Indian Ocean, before returning home.

Carol is a softly spoken woman, slim, elegant, with blonde curls and an unlined face which belies her years. Now retired, she has embarked on one adventure after another, enjoying every moment, and looking forward with eager anticipation to the next. What brought her to Africa?

“This is my second trip” says Carol. “My friend Doug Sheppard proposed the idea of this climb to me back in 2001. I hadn’t thought of it before but I like trekking, and so we set a date for February 2003. Unfortunately, last year Doug broke his leg when working on his home in Kenya, and doctors advised against this climb, which they felt might do irreparable damage to the still healing leg. But I was so excited about the trip by this time, I decided I would go ahead and do it myself.”

Mount Kilimanjaro is a majestic outcrop with its volcanic-like flat summit soaring way up in the clouds, beyond the snow line. It is a formidable mountaineering feat to climb it and, for every 100 people who tackle it (men and women, young and old), only 17 succeed. What got this gentle woman, in her retirement years, up there when so many others failed?

Carol laughs – she laughs a lot, she has learned to enjoy life - ‘carpe diem’ could be her motto. “I was determined to do it” she answers. Did she take the easier route? (there is more than one) Oh no! Not this indomitable woman.

“I chose the Machame route” she says. “Most people choose the Marangu trail which is the easier one, nicknamed the Coca Cola route. Mine, the hard one, is nicknamed the Whisky Route. I read about it in a guide book which said the harder one was much more beautiful. What they didn’t emphasise was how much harder and I didn’t find out how difficult and how challenging until I started. When I arrived back I had been 8 days and 7 nights on the mountain!”

How did she feel at that point, when she came down to earth from the home of the gods? (the locals in the past believed their god dwells on this mountain)

“Exhilarated . . . triumphant . . . relieved . . . It was the most difficult and dangerous thing I have ever done but once I started there was no turning back. My guide Ken (I had one guide and 4 porters with me) made certain I was not going to fall off that mountain! I did exactly what he told me. I have been a leader myself (at work) and I know following directions is important. If he said put your foot there, I put it. If he took my hand to lead me over a dangerous bit, I held on. We had a good understanding”.

Climbing without oxygen to a height of over 19,000 feet is no joke. Carol makes it sound like a walk in the foothills, but this is real mountain climbing. She must have been fit - and she nods her assent. She was working out 3 days a week at a fitness centre in her home town of Columbus, Ohio, USA – one hour step aerobics and one hour strength and fitness for the last two years. Did she suffer any effects from this physical ordeal? Many people get altitude sickness, for example.

”No, I didn’t get anything like that, I don’t get headaches. What was annoying was diarrhea! It’s no joke crouching behind a rock when the temperature is 20 below! The major health problem was, in fact, sunburn on the last stage coming back! I have a very fair skin and I normally stay out of the sun or use sunblock but throughout the whole climb the weather had been cloudy. This last day I got Big time Sunburn! I had my mouth open to breathe and I burnt inside of my lip – even the backs of my hands – anywhere that wasn’t covered. I didn’t realise what had happened until I was back in the hotel and looked in the mirror. My nose was blistered. I eventually lost 3 layers of skin and it was coming off in crispy flakes like french fries!

When I finished the climb and I was back at the hotel, I felt a great sense of achievement but I was glad it was done - I could not have taken one more step! At times during the climb I was forcing one foot after another. Sometimes Ken, my guide, took my hand and we walked in tandem to maintain a rhythm which, he said, would help momentum. He was very caring and concerned. Sometimes he asked me if I wanted to give up. He always got the same answer – ‘No way!’ I was very conscientious about the need to drink, I took 3 litres a day. I lost my appetite, especially when I had diarrhoea, but I understand a lot of people don’t feel like eating”.

Carol now has the accolade of being the oldest woman to climb Mount Kilimanjaro (the record for the men is 74; the youngest a boy of 12). When did she find this out?

“I was back at the hotel and a park official called to say I had set a new record. He had examined the record book where you sign after completing the climb and he told me I was the oldest woman to climb Mount Kilimanjaro by the difficult Machame route. My guide and porters were ecstatic, I think happier than me, They felt it was a team effort that they had got me to the top! They were great, they had a good attitude throughout.”

“It took a while for it to sink in with me. I had been wearing the same clothes for 7 days so when I took a shower and washed my hair I felt much better. It was a terrific adventure. We went through five climate zones, I saw such disparate flora and fauna. We started off in rain forest and ended up in arctic conditions at the top. It was all white crystalline during the night. In the morning light one glacier was blue – it was like a fairy tale land. This was a once in a lifetime experience.”

This was Carol’s second time in Africa. What did she do then? Did she come on a traditional African safari?

“My first time in Africa was September 2001. I didn’t actually have much interest in coming to Africa but I believe you should always be open to possibilities and when this opportunity came up I came on safari with Doug and Mike of Grasslands Safaris. We went to various parks in Kenya and Tanzania and ended up with 3 days in Zanzibar, the island of spices. That was the trip of a lifetime – the climb was the adventure of a lifetime. The safari was so incredible, so interesting. I fell in love with the land. I could hardly believe there is this beauty and diversity of animals. And each place we stayed we were treated so well. Doug and Mike are well known, and they organised everything perfectly”.

A career woman and a business executive, Carol’s health let her down about 5 and a half years ago, and it is remarkable when she tells what happened that she is alive and fit enough to do all this. “I had breast cancer and had to have a lumpectomy. They took out 9 lymph nodes but I have full use of that arm, even though the area is still numb. After that I had operations for a cystocele, a rectocele and hysterectomy. During this 3 phase operation the surgeon accidentally nicked my bladder so I had incontinence to deal with as well as recovering from all this I eventually found a specialist who devised a treatment for it. I was terribly stressed over this period with my marriage problems too, but eventually I moved out and got my own condominium. And I am fine now. The important thing is not to give in, you find out how to get around problems”.

Since her retirement Carol has been undertaking these adventure travels and “meeting interesting people along the way”. She has used a company called ‘Adventure Women’ and on these trips every time they

change the location they change their room mate so “you really get to know all the party”. What about the future? we asked her. What’s next on her life agenda?

“Next is a fun trip with my 10 year old granddaughter to Utah – an Inter-Generational Elderhostel Trip. She and I like to do things together. Then I’m going hiking in Tuscany with my cousin with whom I have become close since we took our parents’ ashes back to Germany for burial in their native land. That’s with Walking The World company. In November I am going trekking in Bhutan. Only 5,500 people are allowed into that country each year and that appealed to me, I wanted to meet people of that culture.

“Next year I am hoping to go to the Antarctic. And after that – who knows? I want to use my time and my pension to live and do exciting things. I am waiting for opportunities to come”

And come they will. God helps those who help themselves, is a good proverb, and paraphrased for Carol it could be ‘God creates possibilities and journeys for people who are eager for adventure”

Carol’s two greatest life adventures to date were here, on the African continent. What a great accolade for us.