



# Climb Every Mountain

Adventure Traveler Alice Hiatt

Delivers Hope to Tanzania | BY SARAH LAVENDER SMITH

IT WAS A STARRY, FRIGID NIGHT LAST JANUARY WHEN ALICE HIATT DOGGEDLY PUT ONE FOOT IN FRONT OF THE OTHER AND CLIMBED THROUGH DARKNESS on Mount Kilimanjaro. Her ruddy, creased complexion and graying blond hair were mostly hidden under layers of clothing. The 60-year-old from Oakland had hiked all week to reach this point near the 19,340-foot peak, and as she embarked on the final ascent, she felt as though she were sleepwalking uphill in sub-zero thin air. Dawn, and the summit, still lay several hours ahead.

It was during those hours when she asked herself the question that every adventure traveler and endurance athlete inevitably asks, sometimes repeatedly: "What the hell am I doing this for?" She considered the fact she had pushed through this point before—it was her 11th ascent in as many years, having taken up mountaineering after turning 50—and told herself: "Because you can. You are strong enough, and you don't know any other white woman in the world who's done this so many times. Kilimanjaro teaches me something every time I go about my personal endurance and ability. It gets me out of bed; it's my carrot out there."

Her "carrot" of Kilimanjaro is more than a quest to test her endurance, more than a desire to see the world from one of its highest points. She feels drawn to the mountain as much to embrace the people who live at its base as to meet the more solitary challenges on its slopes. A registered nurse, a longtime teacher at Berkeley's Acupressure Institute and a grandmother who raised two sons, she has devoted the past decade to delivering hope to an impoverished village called Mbahe in Tanzania's Kilimanjaro region. She collects and distributes tons of donated aid; helps build much-needed homes, gardens and infrastructure; and provides food and clothing to some 400 children in an orphanage there.

Now Hiatt is on her way to start another year atop Kilimanjaro, and this time she and several East Bay friends are delivering a colossal gift that took all of 2007 to plan and fulfill: two 40-foot containers carrying donated medical supplies, clothing, hardware and other basic items for a hospital that serves Mbahe and the region. Conditions at Huruma Hospital, a crowded 300-bed facility, range from primitive to sub-standard; crutches are carved from trees, for example, and disposable surgical gloves get rinsed and reused.

The containers set sail in early November—one from the Port of Oakland, one from Southern California—and are on their way to Dar es Salaam, due to arrive in December. Hiatt, meanwhile, has arranged to lead 10 people on an eight-day climb up Kilimanjaro starting on or around Dec. 29. If all goes according to their plan, they'll come off the mountain just as the cargo finishes up its journey from the port to the village so they can help unload it.

"There's something inside me that says this is all possible, and it's all about allowing the opportunity for a better moment in these people's lives—a better death, a better life, a better ability to save their child," she says during an interview in her modest house in the Montclair hills, where virtually every inch displays colorful mementos such as African baskets and Buddhist prayer flags.

Making possible what others wouldn't dare to dream, let alone do, seems to come naturally to Hiatt. Before she began traveling to Tanzania, Hiatt walked across England and covered much of the globe while teaching Chinese medicine on a cruise ship. More recently, in late 2006 and earlier this year, she trekked with a shaman in the Andes in Peru and celebrated her 61st birthday at a Mount Everest base camp.

She'd rather not talk about her age, however—not because she wants to hide it, but because she thinks it's irrelevant. "When I'm climbing, do I think about how old I am? No, I think: I can do this! Age is a crutch, weight is a crutch—those are all obstacles that give you excuses as to why you can't do something. I don't care whether you're 13, 45 or 110; if you can wiggle your foot, you can dance," she says.

Hiatt forged a connection to Kilimanjaro when she became friends with a Tanzanian, Simon Mtuy, who works as a guide on the mountain and competes in ultrarunning events here in the United States. In 1998, they co-founded Hope Through Opportunity, a small volunteer-run nonprofit dedicated to improving the education, health and self-sufficiency of the Kilimanjaro region. On a recent trip, for example, Hiatt helped hand out 1.5 tons of maize, 400 toothbrushes, crafts and other gifts for an orphanage.

It was a visit to Huruma Hospital's maternity ward, and the site of a newborn in a small wooden box that was jerry-rigged to function as an incubator, that sparked her resolution to try to obtain whatever the hospital might need. She met with the administrators, "and I said, ►►

Craig Merrill