

Climbing KILIMANJARO

Conquering famed peak was retiree's latest challenge

By Jane Mahoney For the Journal

Trudging up Mount Kilimanjaro, Arthur Ahr didn't particularly mind when the misty afternoon clouds obscured the speck-sized climbers more than a vertical mile above him on Africa's highest mountain. "I mostly kept my head down," says Ahr, a retired Sandia National Laboratories supervisor and retired lawyer who successfully conquered the famed peak in January at age 75. "I just kept my head looking down (and) watching my footing," he says. "I prefer it that way because it can be disheartening to look up and see how long and steep the trail is ahead."

Ahr faced the challenge one step at a time.

"I didn't realize Kilimanjaro was so high," he says with a smile from his Northeast Heights living room. "When I first thought about making the climb, I thought it was about 14,000 feet (above sea level)."

Try 19,340 feet. It is high enough for a daunting nine-day hiking and climbing adventure preceded by a year of training for a fellow who once described himself as relatively sedentary.

Ahr, now 76, approached the challenge of climbing the mountain with the same quiet persistence that has marked his life and multiple careers. An Albuquerque native who grew up roaming the Downtown neighborhoods as the son of a hatter, Ahr marked the end of a 30-year career with Sandia Labs by starting law school in 1991.

Setting his sights

By 2007 and officially retired from a law career that benefited hundreds of local senior citizens with his pro-bono estate work, Ahr was ready for a new challenge.

Blame the inspiration to climb Kilimanjaro on the "Nova" documentary "Volcano Above the Clouds," which Ahr watched one evening on public television.

"It seemed doable," recalls Ahr, as he began pondering the climb of a lifetime. "One doesn't need the technical climbing expertise to do this particular mountain. There are trails to walk."

Trails, yes, if one considers jagged volcanic rock-strewn slopes, 18-inch-deep mud, heavy backpacks to carry, ice- and snow-packed paths, and ever-diminishing oxygen levels that require hikers to acclimate at various elevations.

Ahr's wife of 30 years, Patricia, asked only that her husband get a doctor's OK before embarking on his quest. Ahr got more than his doctor's OK. He convinced his son, Andrew, and physician son-in-law Jack Greenberg, to accompany him, and gained a couple of training partners.

Ahr's training started with a three-mile round-trip walk from his home to Trader Joe's. Before long, he was walking seven miles per day, and then he set his sights on the Sandia Mountains to gain experience at different elevations.

He enrolled in Lovelace's Silver Sneakers program to gain access to a gym. Later Ahr signed on with Defined Fitness to work on his upper body strength.

"I'd never been to a gym before," he says, "but I knew I'd need strength in my upper body to manage the trekking poles."

Soon Ahr's routine entailed gym workouts three days a week, five- to seven-mile hikes another three days a week and a Sunday hike in the Sandias. The biggest physical challenges came in the mountains, including La Luz trail — which he'd last hiked 50 years ago when his son was a Cub Scout.

The two Ahrs and Greenberg departed Jan. 21 for Tanzania's Kilimanjaro via Amsterdam after signing on with a climbing company called Tusker Trail. The company provided a guide, two assistants and about 35 Swahili porters to transport the heaviest loads, such as camping gear and cookstoves; set up evening camps; and prepare hot meals for the eight climbers. The porters also carried emergency oxygen and a hyperbaric bag.

The per-person price for the trip, including airfare, was about \$6,000.

Ahr's son, Andrew, withdrew from the climb on day three after developing pulmonary edema and pneumonialike symptoms.

The elder Ahr earned the nickname Babu, which means revered one in Swahili. The group hiked a longer route across the oldest of the three volcanic peaks that make up Kilimanjaro before ascending Uhuru, the highest of the trio.

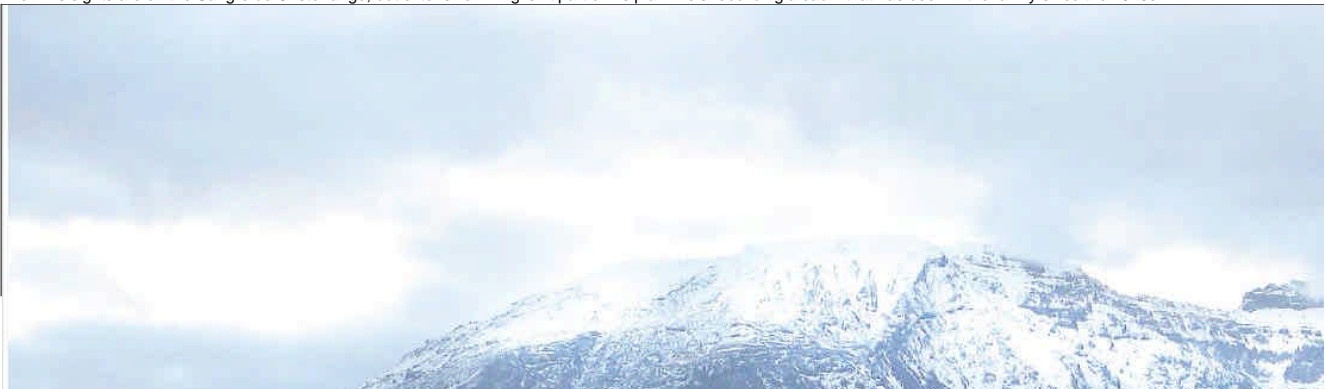
The party's stops included a rain forest, elevation about 7,000 feet, and the final camp at 18,400 feet before reaching the summit the next day.

By then, Ahr was trudging past glaciers and through six to eight inches of snow. The climbers linked arms and arrived at the peak together.

"We were blessed," Ahr says. "I was just happy to be there. When we finally got to the peak, the sun came out of the cloud cover."

The descent was a two-day ordeal, says Ahr. But he had conquered the highest freestanding mountain.

Now his sights are on the Sangre de Cristo range, but extensive hiking isn't part of his plan. He's rebuilding a cabin that has been in the family since the 1970s.





This view of Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, Africa, is from Shira Camp at 11,500 feet. The peak looks far away, says Arthur Ahr, a 76-year-old retiree who climbed the famous mountain this year. But five days later his group was at the top.



Looking north from Uhuru Peak, climbers will see Furtwangler Glacier.





COURTESY JACK GREENBERG Jack Greenberg, left, and his father-in-law Arthur Ahr reach Kilimanjaro's Uhuru Peak after a nine-day hike in January. Uhuru means freedom in Swahili.



Guides used to assist climbers to reach the top of this 300-foot volcano rock at Lava Tower Camp, elevation 14,950 feet. Climbers no longer tackle this peak because of recent rock slides. Arthur Ahr, left, is in the foreground with assistant guide Gaudance Kessy.