The annually held Oxfam Trailwalker is one of the most popular and challenging events in Hong Kong. Its main aim is to support Oxfam's various poverty alleviation and emergency relief projects in Africa and Asia since 1986. It is a team challenge event comprising teams of four members to complete the 100km MacLehose Trail, starting from Pak Tam Chung, Sai Kung to Tuen Mun, within a 48-hour time limit. It was originally an endurance training exercise for soldiers and was only open to the public from 1986 onwards.

At one of the alumni activities, two of our members, Vins Fong and Adrian Ho, who participated in Trailwalker 2006, shared their experience with us describing not only the wonderful scenery through which the trail winds but also some interesting and touching stories, such as an aged self-volunteer, who carried loads of water uphill and served hot ginger tea to participants in the coal of midnight, also the delicious noodle served in light meal, their presence greatly inspired Nelson Chung and me so much so that we decided to form the "HKU MEICOM Alumni Team" for Trailwalker 2007.

We started our training in June 2007. The weather was surprisingly good this summer, fine and clear with blue sky and almost no smog from June to August. The visibility was so good that the tall buildings of Hong Kong Island East could be seen from the checkpoints through which the trail winds but also some wild monkeys on the trail were roused up by the support from our families and other members. Our team finished 232 out of the 941 teams which was, in a way, reminiscent of our effort to complete the MSc(ECom&IComp) programme!

In order to meet our target, we had to give up a meal of some favourite noodle in Yuen Long Au, and only took a short rest at the 8th checkpoint Tsuen Kam Road at noon. We turned on our internal "turbine" engines to accelerate our pace from the last two checkpoints. Towards the end of the trail, some volunteers were standing up to cheer us on but we found that we were still a few hundred metres from the finishing line. These last few hundred metres seemed to be the longest distance I have ever experienced. We finally reached the finishing point after 28 hours 17 minutes with the warm greetings from our families. Our team finished 232 out of the 941 teams which completed the Trail Walker.

We were all proud of our team. Without a team leader to urge us on, a caring alumni teamwork system for support, and a commitment on our part with the love and backing of our families, we would not have been able to complete this task. It was a memorable experience, joy mixed with steeplessness, tiredness, pain and perseverance, which was, in a way, reminiscent of our effort to complete the MSc(ECom&IComp) programme!

Our team had successfully raised over HK$40,000 funding and was able to secure a place in the 2008 race. If you are interested in taking part in Trailwalker 2008, please email us at sig_sports@meicom.hku.hk or contact any of the alumni directors.

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At each checkpoint, we had our food and then left immediately without taking a rest until we reached the support point at Tai Po Road Shing Mun Reservoir, which was then around 5:00am the next morning. The wild monkeys on the trail were roused up by us, and they also tried to steal the food carried by our support teams. Thanks to our Alumni President Michael Tsui and Algae Ma, the warm and delicious macaroni was kept safe from the money and thieves, so that we were able to enjoy it.

After a sleepless night, we suffered momentary "downtime" the next morning. We felt tired and exhausted and found it difficult to keep up the pace we had set so that we almost gave up on achieving our target. Vins was a very caring and organised team leader who constantly kept our spirits up and encouraged us to keep going, and we were able to recover our motivation and morale.

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Patrick Chan
2004 ECOM Graduate

MY TRIP TO MT. KILIMANJARO

The name Kilimanjaro comes from a Massai word meaning “Large Rock”. It is also called “Shining Mountain” in Swahili. Being the highest point in Africa (5,895 metres) and the world’s highest free-standing mountain (i.e. not being part of a mountain range or chain), Kilimanjaro towers above all that surrounds it.

It is widely believed that Kilimanjaro belonged formerly to Kenya and that it only became part of Tanzania because Queen Victoria presented the mountain as a gift to her grandson, the German Emperor Kaiser Wilhelm, when these two African countries were colonies of Britain and Germany respectively.

Kilimanjaro has been known throughout recorded history for its altitude as well as for its famous “snows”. Its huge snow-capped summit, towering high above the surrounding savannah grassland, is one of Africa’s all-time iconic images. You may have already seen it as the backdrop in Walt Disney’s famous movie “Lion King”. What we don’t want to see is the fact that the white cap of glacial ice is rapidly disappearing, probably owing to global warming. According to NASA’s research, the ice cap volume has dropped as much as 80% in recent years. Al Gore showed, in his bestselling book “An Inconvenient Truth”, pictures of Kilimanjaro taken in 1970 and 2000, and cited a mountain glaciers expert’s prediction that within 10 years there would be no more “snows” of Kilimanjaro. This was how I first heard and knew about Kilimanjaro.

Then Angela Pang, our alumni member and running/hiking mate, informed us in the summer of 2006 that she would climb Kilimanjaro in the autumn, and she really achieved it. She said that it was an unforgettable experience though it was the toughest trip she has ever had. I envied her for her achievement, and at that same time I was inspired to consider taking this challenge.

I ran my first 10km race in 2005 in the Standard Chartered Hong Kong Marathon. Then I finished my first full marathon and first Oxfam Trailwalker in 2006. Climbing Kilimanjaro seemed to be a difficult yet attainable challenge for 2007. Compared to other mountains of similar altitude, the ascent to the peak of Kilimanjaro does not require any rock/ice mountaineering skills or specific equipment. It is merely a hike taking 6 days. I told myself that if I could withstand the cold weather and high altitude sickness, I might have good chance to tackle it.
My dream did come true! One evening in September 2007, I found myself sitting in an aircraft bound for Tanzania amongst a group of 18 trekkers. Being the first time in Africa, we were busy taking pictures of the vast expanse of land, the primitive villages, the friendly people and the strange-looking plants even before the trek began.

There are a number of routes that trekkers can take to climb Kilimanjaro. We chose the Machame Route, which was the second most popular one. It was neither the easiest nor the shortest one. But the initial steep ascent and the extra trekking time helped with altitude acclimatization and thus improved the chance of reaching the peak. And it offered spectacular scenery, from the tropical rain forests then bushlands below 3,000m, to grasslands and moorlands at higher altitude, then alpine desert at 4,400m, finally a zone of permanent ice at the peak.

The ascent from Machame Gate (1,800m) to Barafu Camp (4,600m) took 4 days. It was not a route going uphill all the way. We did once reach the point of 4,600m on the third day and descended to the campsite at 3,800m. This followed the climbers’ adage "climb high, sleep low," and reduced the chance of suffering from high altitude sickness. After a brief sleep at Barafu Camp, we set off excitedly at midnight on 2S September to attempt the ascent to the peak. It was the Mid-Autumn Festival, so being the first time in Africa, we were busy taking pictures of the vast expanse of land, the sun rose and the moon viewed from that altitude was astonishingly big and bright.

The trip is unforgettable, not only because of the satisfaction of “conquering” the peak, but also many new experiences earned in the journey. For example, at high altitudes we had to move at a very slow and steady pace. This was like doing slow motion in a normal altitude. But it was essential strategy for beginners to guard against altitude sickness. And trivial things like packing the sleeping bag and tying shoelaces were no longer easy tasks.

AlSO, I never imagined that we would be served a hot lunch everyday. The chefs were so considerate to prepare a sit-down hot lunch for us every day, even though the original arrangement was for a packed lunch only. I must also thank the guides and porters who helped us along the trek, not only for leading the mission and started sharing with each other our experience. The further descent took another 1.5 days. In the evening of 27 September, we returned to the village in Arusha where we had a comfortable bed and shower for the first time after 6 days.

There are too many things to include in such a short article. Those who are interested in finding out more about visiting Kilimanjaro, please feel free to email us at sig_sports@meicom.hku.hk or join the monthly happy hour to have a chat.