

## From Kilimanjaro porter to tailor, Esther dreams on

Esther Crispin doesn't know exactly how many times she has climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. 'Many times,' she says and gives a shy smile. The 30-year-old Tanzanian is one of the few women working as porters on Africa's highest mountain.

Every year, around 20,000 mountaineers try to conquer the 5,895-metre peak, which can be done without ropes and climbing irons.

Those who reach the top owe much to the porters who carry food, tents and, in some cases, even mobile toilets up the mountain.

'I am glad to have this work,' said Esther, who has been working as a porter for seven years. 'In Tanzania it's hard to find work.'

Esther has to look after two daughters, aged eight and 13. Her husband died several years ago. 'When I'm up on the mountain the grandparents look after the girls.'

Esther carries some 20 kg of luggage, just like her male colleagues. Her own things, sleeping bag and camping mat, she carries in a simple backpack, with the remainder of the burden on her head.

Depending on the organiser, this could be open straw baskets, sacks crammed with tins and kitchen utensils, aluminium boxes or bundles wrapped up in plastic sheets.

'It's not an easy job,' Esther says. 'But it helps me provide for my family.'

Porters earn around 30 euros (\$39) on a five or six-day trip, and if they are lucky, they will get the same amount in tips.

On average, each group is accompanied by three helpers per hiker - one or two mountain guides, a cook and the porters. The porters leave later in the morning when the tents have been taken down and packed up, but they overtake the mountaineers in the course of the day.

The greatest risk on Mount Kilimanjaro is altitude sickness, which can hit anyone no matter how fit they are. It includes symptoms ranging from headaches and nausea to water in the lungs and brain oedema.

Some 20 mountaineers die on Mount Kilimanjaro each year. The porters are not immune to altitude sickness either. Most of them belong like Esther to the ethnic group of the Chagga, who farm at the foot of the freestanding mountain. Unlike the Sherpas in the Himalayas they are not particularly used to altitudes.

When the day's trek has been completed, Esther sits with her colleagues in the warm kitchen tent where the food is simmering on one of the gas cookers they themselves had carried up.

In her jeans, T-shirt and trainers without socks she does not look like someone who has just completed a hike, which her clients only managed with walking boots and telescopic hiking sticks.

'If I improve my English I might be able to work as a mountain guide some day,' Esther says. 'But it would be even better if I could built up my own tailoring business. Then I would always be near my children.'

( © IANS / India eNews)