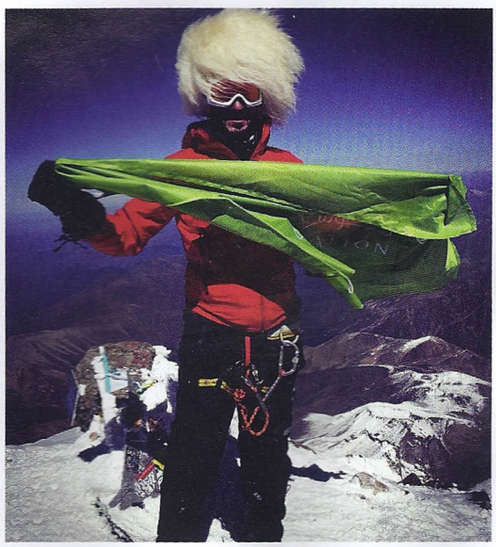
The Elbrus Letters Finale

Words + Photos By: Fahd Abu Aisha

Day 6 – The Day Before The Summit

Today was all about controlling our nerves and relaxing our bodies. After an uncomfortable sleep (a Turkish couple shared our crate that night and were quite vocal about preparing for their summit in the early hours of the morning), we had some breakfast and took more time than usual in the kitchen, keeping warm and maintaining our high spirits. We planned to unwind as much as possible to physically prepare for our summit attempt, which would begin at 4:00 a.m.

We learned how to use our ice axes and how to tie our harnesses - skills that would be crucial when making the final ascent to the top. Most of the day was spent nestled in my sleeping bag, keeping warm and preparing myself mentally for the long night ahead. While we were all gathered at the table, Suzanne shared with us her story about the longest day of her life – the summit of Everest. She will definitely write a book about it, and it was an honour to hear it in person. Her message to us was something that will always resonate with me when faced with any challenge or obstacle; we would summit if we truly wanted to, no matter how tired we were. The strength to summit would only come from the strength of our spirit.



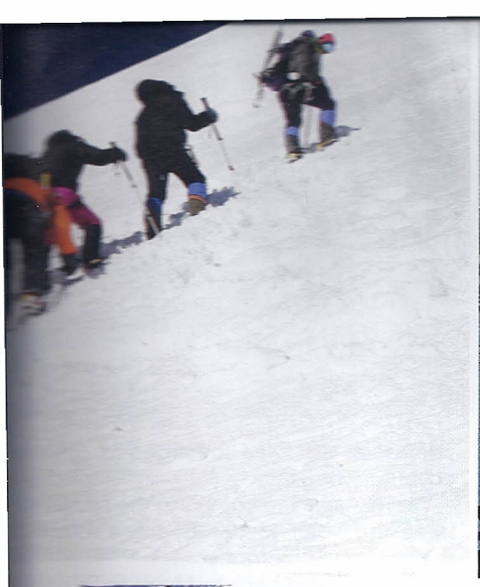
Day 7 – At the Summit of Europe

I only managed one hour of sleep due to the escalating apprehension of what was to come. Wide awake at 1:45a.m., I was packing in the dark, well before the generator in our crate would automatically switch on for us. As Mohammad and I squeezed into and stretched over layer upon layer of clothing, we woke up one of the Belarusian climbers who had moved into the crate with us that night. It was starting to feel like a mountain halfway house. He smiled and wished us luck, and then to our amazement, slipped out of his sleeping bag wearing nothing but a T-shirt and boxers. As he put on his slippers, Mohammad and I almost choked as he traipsed out into the freezing cold to make a trip to the bathroom. We stared at each other in awe, like decorative snowmen, then broke into guffaws of laughter. That successfully thawed our nerves, which up until that moment felt as though they were etched in ice. The team was ready to go at 4:00 a.m. as planned, and we walked over to the snowcat - a truck-like contraption that was to take us to the point at which we stopped on the Pashtakov Rocks.

Driving through the snow with the flickering dots of lamplight scattered throughout the endless, ink black night cloaked around us made me feel as though we were flying through space surrounded by the stars. Upon reaching our point I started to feel the mild headache again. Not knowing the meaning of altitude sickness the year before during my ascent of Mt. Kilimanjaro had made that summit day easier for me. I was able to take solace in being blissfully ignorant, attributing the pain to exhaustion without worry. Now however, after accumulating knowledge and experience I knew altitude sickness was the cause of the headache and it made me uneasy knowing it would only worsen as I started ascending into the darkness.

The sun rose about an hour into our walk, when my body was already starting to feel heavy due to the lack of sleep. A few moments later, the team suffered the biggest blow to our morale yet when Suzanne (who was struggling with stomach pains the night before) sat down on the slopes to rest. Seeing our leader struggle was a mental knockout at that point as I allowed the mountain demons to climb into my head and over exaggerate any minor pain I was feeling to a full blown hospital emergency in my head.

Lisa, still at the helm, ordered us to keep going. We continued onward against the slope of Elbrus's second peak, trailing up and around it for a few hours before descending into the final checkpoint; "The Saddle." This was a short, flat plateau that offered some respite to climbers, before elongating upward into the final gigantic slope of Elbrus where our goal lay in wait. Seeing the enormity of the task ahead caused a few of the team members to crumple initially, but I was having none of it. I told them to man (and woman) up because we were all going to make it. It was at that point that I knew nothing would stop me lest my body collapse without my control. At that perfect moment of crystal-like clarity, Lisa cried out, pointing back at the trail we had come from. Suzanne was ploughing through the snow at an extraordinary pace, catching up with us hard and fast. It is an understatement to say that in that second, any negative thought from any team member dissipated instantly. Together, we simultaneously felt this indescribable, palpable surge



Day 6 - Rest Day at Camp

ergy shoot up and resonate between
f us, connecting us together as we
ed in the glory of what the true mean-
f determination was. We, The Team, all
t together.

e made our way up the vast sheet of
e, pummelling through the frost. My
is by that time were frozen, but I didn't
My nose had been running earlier in
imb but by that time the cold had fro-
my body fluids into mini icicles around
ostrils. The final ascent required us to
n ourselves to a harness. As we had
iced the previous day, we promptly
the correct technique to pull ourselves
rds. We were only a few metres (or so
ught) from reaching the peak, however
s one of the longest stretches of the
. A group of climbers ahead of us were
ing at a snail's pace. The stopping and
ng was tiring me out, making me im-
nt and irritable. I could see the goal in
of me. My internal tank was running on
st nothing, and all I could do was gnash
eth together and envision myself at the
As I climbed over the hill, the elation I
eeling came crashing down at the sight
at lay ahead of me; an infinite plateau
te and a small hill in the distance. This
t another 20 minutes of walking and,
gh it was a flat surface, made me feel
distraught. We were 5600+ m high
e altitude had me full on. Some of
am were ecstatic, cheering and jumping with joy. I was fading. I wanted nothing more than to just get there — to be there. I painstakingly conjured up the last few millilitres of energy I had left, starting at a slow sprint. Gathering momentum, feelings of pent up frustration started to elevate into enamoured, boundless energy. I ran past the team, only to make a mutinous mistake; attempting to overtake Lisa. She immediately stopped me, roaring that on the mountain nobody from the team was to be infront of her. Feeling like a revolutionary caught attempting a coup, I felt the frustration amplify tenfold within. Dejected, solemn and close to committing a mass murder on Mt. Elbrus, I turned to the back of the line, where I found Suzanne, standing in front of me. Like the true Master and Commander of mountain climbing that she is, she had caught up with us, saving me from myself and injecting me with that one last sliver of willpower to get me through that final stretch to that hill.

The feeling of being on top of Europe is inexpressible. Your mind goes through 1001 thoughts; the body feels regenerated, reborn and replenished. Emotions are on a high that are too alien to humanise, to put down in words. We raised our flags (mine for the Al Jalila Foundation) and shared hugs. It is a moment I will never forget.

The climb back down was when I actually felt the consequences of what I had put my body through. It did not take long for the headache and pain to come rushing back to me full throttle as we began our descent. It is a strange thing to write but I do not remember much of anything on the way down. I was fading into black, the view of the white snow (tinted red by ski goggles) was growing darker. My eyelids felt like they were carrying the weight of the world and all I could hear was my deep breathing. My body was on auto pilot, one foot in front of the other. I must have wondered if this was what a monk that has reached Zen must feel. I don't remember how long it took. All I wanted to do was sit and rest for a bit, but sleeping was not an option at that dangerous altitude. We could not stop until we descended back to camp.

We found the faithful snowcat waiting for us at the same point it dropped us off, and as it whisked us down the mountain, my legs groaned with grateful pleasure. It felt like every tendon and ligament in my body was thanking me. Going down at a rapid pace in the snowcat awakened my body and I regained awareness. We got back to the camp, where we packed our things and headed to the chairlifts, which I found myself welcoming the sight of. Back down at the hotel, I spent half an hour taking a warm shower and feeling invincible, revelling in the satisfaction of knowing how this will remain with me for the rest of my life.

Suzanne and Lisa treated us to the most savoury dish of Shashleek at a local restaurant, before we boarded the plane the next morning to head home.

I would like to thank Rahhalah and our guides for taking us on this extraordinary journey, all the while never faltering in the meticulous care they took of us. I would like to thank Suzanne for being such a wonderful inspiration and, like my beloved Grandmother, always pushing us to strive past our limits, establishing and conquering mental boundaries we at one point thought were impossible to overcome. I would like to thank my special team who are an amazing group of individuals; Danah, Manal, Mohammad and Rama – Team Awesome! And finally I would like to thank the Al Jalila Foundation and my friends and family who supported my cause for Cancer research in memory of my grandmother Safeya Sarwat.

Fahd climbed Elbrus in support of Al Jalila Foundation. It is a global philanthropic organisation established by His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum to transform lives through medical education and research. 100% of funds donated to Al Jalila Foundation are invested into local healthcare programs. For more information please visit **www.aljalilafoundation.ae**.