The Elbrus Letters

Episode 1

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Day 1 - From London to Terskol

As is the case with most of my trips with Rahhalah Explorers, I signed up for the Mt. Elbrus expedition without a second thought. Instead of pausing to grasp the immensity of the looming challenge I would face, I surged ahead with a yearning for adventure.

It was only in London during some last minute shopping for climbing gear two days prior to my Mt. Elbrus climb that I was prompted to consider the gruelling nature of the journey. One of the salesmen asked which route I would be taking up the mountain. I looked at him blankly, not knowing there was more than one route leading to the summit. He then asked where I was coming from, and I responded Dubai. He recalled knowing a "Suzanne from Dubai" - the first Arab woman to climb Everest, and said that I would be in safe hands if I was travelling with her. I smiled, admitting it was because of Suzanne that I could afford to be a little ignorant about the climb.

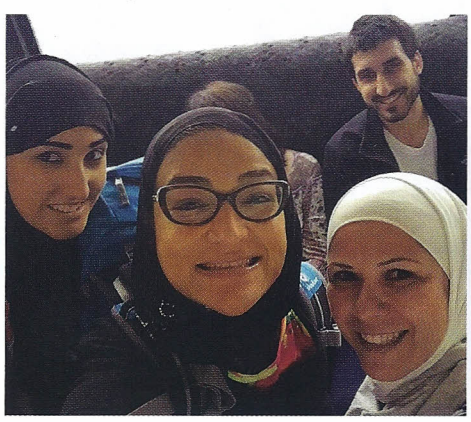
The two days before the climb were ruthless. I arrived in London from Dubai at 10:00 p.m., hurriedly packing my gear and equipment in a frenzy. Snatching a couple hours of sleep, I then awoke at 5:00 a.m. and rushed to the airport, bleary eyed but nevertheless amped up with adrenaline and that pulsating sense of adventure. My intensive work schedule had prevented me from preparing more adequately for the trip (I had travelled to Nigeria for business before London and Oman before that). I had to buy my snacks and energy bars from the Duty Free, hoping that they would sustain me throughout the climb. Finally, trembling with anticipation, I sat down in the terminal waiting for my flight and prayed that I had not forgotten anything else.

Upon landing in Mineralnye Vody, I lurched out of the airport to a scene that reminded me of my hometown, Cairo - hounded by drivers offering taxis left and right while dodging hysterical family reunions. My team and I found our driver, who did not speak a word of English but did signal with his fingers that it would take three hours to reach our destination. For some of the girls on our team those three hours could not have ended sooner.

We were warned about the drive – or driving I should say -from the airport to the hotel in our itinerary (which I had skimmed through briefly). Even as a half Egyptian who grew up in Cairo, this was some next level chauffeuring. We were like hostages being transported to unchartered territory in a high speed car chase, without the slightest interference from the brakes, driving through a grey, barren countryside. The driver seemed hell-bent on winning a race he appeared to be having with an imaginary Ferrari. We had a few stops on the way engineered by our brave team of girls; Manal, who was desperately trying to signal, without looking too crude, that she needed the bathroom, Rama and Danah, stoically negotiating with a man in a phone shop to buy a local SIM Card with internet, and of course the mandatory selfies the girls were adamant about taking next to a random fruit stand by the side of the highway. Upon nearing our destination, we picked up a hitchhiking couple standing in the rain. A sleeping Manal awakened and it took her a rough 20 minutes to notice their presence. She also screamed "Cow!"multiple times to alert the driver to stay clear of the farm animals strolling on the highway.

We finally reached our hotel in the town of Terskol, where we were introduced to our guide Lisa, who would be with us the whole way pushing us to the summit. We had some time to unwind and relax, until Suzanne, Rama and Dana collectively decided the group would engage in a late night walk: a mini exploration around the village. We spotted a hotel with the word "karoake" emblazoned on the side in bright, blinking lights. Naturally, there was no walking past it so we had to go in. However, upon entering, we were ambushed by 20 Chechen university students residing there. It was our foreign accents that enticed them, and they pleaded with us to participate in their "comedic" project.

It was a bizarre exchange, as they asked us one by one to sit down in front of the camera and explain how their music (which consisted of two notes - a slap on the knee and a clap) would inspire us to achieve our goal of reaching the summit. They then took pictures with us, cementing our celebrity-groupie bond, wishing us luck before we returned back to the hotel.



There I met up with the fifth and final member of the team who had just arrived; Mohammad. Mohammad and I had summited Kilimanjaro together the year before and he was a great mountain partner.I went to bed and prepared for the early acclimatisation hike the next day.

Day 2 - Forget The Chairlift, There Has to be Another Way!

It was a relatively relaxed morning as we had breakfast and headed to Cheget Village, where we would climb Mt.Cheget at a height of approximately 3000m to begin adjusting our bodies to the high altitude. One thing our itinerary neglected to mention (after I finally read it thoroughly), was that we would be using chairlifts to ascend to a certain point on the mountain, climbing over the village and up the steep slope. With the chair connected to the wire by a single pole, we creaked our way up the slope for what was one of the most anxious fifteen minutes I have endured. As my legs dangled helplessly over the scenic trees, I kept myself occupied by assessing which points I had a higher chance of surviving in the event that the chair disconnected and toppled down. I concluded that falling through some of the trees would break my fall and despite a few bones as well I would at least have a fighting chance of survival. I spent the other half taking selfies with Manal. Thankfully, we reached the platform where we hopped off to finally begin our first day of climbing.

Our temporary guide for the day was another Mohammed, a local from the village studying tourism. He shared some historical titbitswith us, as we continued the hike until the path ended, close to the summit, where we took some pictures with Elbrus in the distance.

We descended, another highly stressful, creaking 15 minutes on the chairlift and down to the village. Mohammed invited us to indulge in a tasty local delicacy that had us all craving for more –a dish called shashlik. It is a plate comprised of tender, grilled meat cubes with sliced onions – My mouth is watering and I can almost smell that luscious aroma as I write this.

The final task of the day was the gear check procedure. This was to ensure that we were all fully equipped and suited up for the next four days. Naturally, none of us made the gear check list 100% correctly and Lisa drove us to a rental shop where we secured some last minute supplies; from plastic boots and crampons to ice axes and any other outstanding items and/or clothing. Getting accustomed to walking in the plastic boots was quite the challenge. Like baby penguins taking their first tentative steps, we waddled awkwardly around the store and Lisa requested that we wear the boots for the remainder of the night to start getting used to the feel of them as they would be the only footwear we would be wearing for the big climb. We then headed back to the hotel where we had a fulfilling dinner and shared some stories before having a nice warm shower; the last one I would have for a few days... To be continued.