



What does Kilimanjaro look like?

Kilimanjaro is not only the highest mountain in Africa, it's also one of the biggest volcanoes on Earth, covering an area of approximately 388,500 hectares.

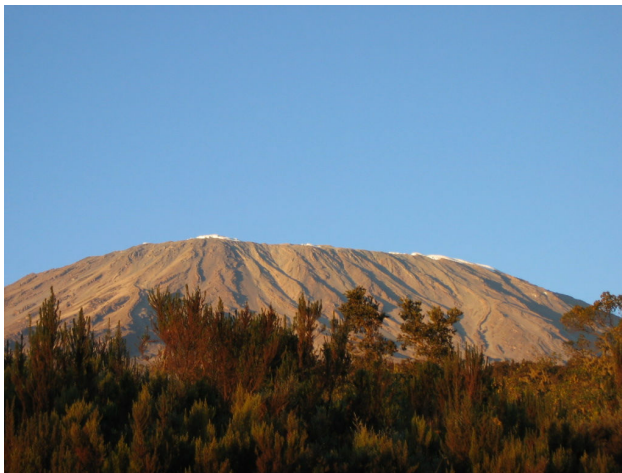
The summits of Kilimanjaro

Within this 388,500-hectare area are three main peaks...

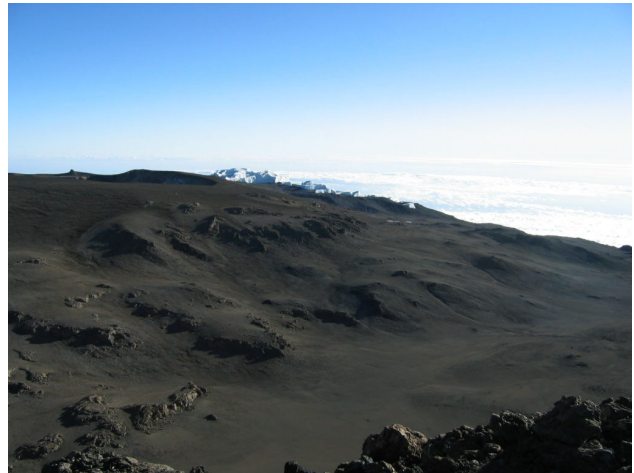
The Kibo summit

The **Kibo** summit is the best preserved crater on the mountain; its southern lip is slightly higher than the rest of the rim, and the highest point on this southern lip is known as **Uhuru Peak**. At 5895m, this is highest point in Africa and the goal of just about every Kilimanjaro trekker. Kibo is also the only one of the three summits which is permanently covered in snow, thanks to the large glaciers that cover much of its surface.

Kibo is also the one peak that really does look like a volcanic crater; indeed, there are not one but three concentric craters on Kibo.



Looking up at famous Kibo on Kilimanjaro



Kilimanjaro Ash Pit at Uhuru Summit

Within the inner **Reusch Crater** (1.3km in diameter) one can still see signs of volcanic activity, including fumaroles, the smell of sulphur and a third crater, the **Ash Pit**, 130m deep by 140m wide.

The outer, **Kibo Crater** (1.9 by 2.7km), is not a perfect, unbroken ring. There are gaps in the summit where the walls have been breached by lava flows; the most dramatic of these is the **Western Breach**.

Many climbers used to gain access to the summit each year through this breach, though that route has been closed since 2006 due to a rockfall on the route that killed four climbers.

Perhaps the most important feature of Kibo, however, is that its slopes are gentle. This feature means, of course, that trekkers as well as mountaineers are able to reach the summit.



Mawenzi

Mawenzi is the second highest peak on Kilimanjaro. Seen from Kibo, **Mawenzi** looks less like a crater than a single lump of jagged, craggy rock emerging from the Saddle (see 'Other features of Kilimanjaro' below). This is merely because its western side also happens to be its highest, and hides everything behind it.

Walk around Mawenzi, however, and you'll realize that this peak is actually a horseshoe shape, with only the northern side of the crater having been eroded away. Its sides too steep to hold glaciers, there is no permanent snow on Mawenzi, and the gradients are enough to dissuade all but the bravest and most technically accomplished climbers.

Mawenzi's highest point is **Hans Meyer Peak** at 5149m but so shattered is this summit, and so riven with gullies and fractures, that there are a number of other distinctive peaks including **Purtscheller Peak** (5120m) and South Peak (4958m). There are also two deep gorges, the **Great Barranco** and the **Lesser Barranco**, scarring its north-eastern face.



Mawenzi Peak on Kilimanjaro

The Shira Ridge

The oldest and smallest summit on Kilimanjaro is known as the **Shira Ridge**, and lies on the western edge of the mountain. This is the least impressive peak, being nothing more than a heavily eroded ridge, 3962m tall at its highest point, **Johnsell Point**. This ridge is, in fact, merely the western and southern rims of the crater formed by the original volcanic eruption (see the [geology page](#) for more information).

Other features on Kilimanjaro

Separating Kibo from the second peak, Mawenzi, is the **Saddle**, at 3600ha the largest area of high altitude tundra in tropical Africa. This really is a beautiful, eerie place: a dusty desert almost 5000m high, featureless except for the occasional parasitic cone dotted here and there, including the Triplets, Middle Red and West Lava Hill, all running south-east from the south-eastern side of Kibo.

These are just some of the 250 parasitic cones that are said to stand on Kilimanjaro. Few people know this, but Kilimanjaro does actually have a crater lake. **Lake Chala** (aka Jala) lies some 30km to the south-east, and is said to be up to 2.5 miles deep.

The **Shira Plateau** is a large, rocky plateau, 6200ha in size, that lies to the west of the Kibo summit (ie between Kibo and the Shira Ridge). It is believed to be the caldera of the first volcanic eruption (a caldera is a collapsed crater) that has been filled in by lava from later eruptions which then solidified and turned to rock.



The Routes on Kilimanjaro

Look down at Kilimanjaro from above and you should be able to count seven paths trailing like ribbons up the sides of the mountain. Five of these are **ascent-only paths** (ie you can only walk up the mountain on them and are not allowed to come down on these trails); one, Mweka, is a **descent-only path**, and one - the Marangu Route - is both an ascent and descent trail.

At around 4000m these trails meet up with a path that loops right around the Kibo summit. This path is known as the Kibo Circuit, though it's often divided into two halves, known as the **Northern** and **Southern circuits**.

From here, three further paths lead up the slopes to the summit itself. For a brief description of the trails, and a look at their relative merits, click on the Various Kilimanjaro Routes links.

