

Out of the office: What Charlotte business leaders learned from their summer vacations

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Syntelli Solutions CEO Rishi Bhatnagar on top of Mount Kilimanjaro. “Standing on top of millions of years of history — it was joyous,” Bhatnagar says. “Four days of pain just vanished.”

RISHI BHATNAGAR



Bhatnagar was joined on the Kilimanjaro trip with his daughter Niharika. They decided to do "something big" before she turned 18. "It's the closest we've been in years — no distractions. I learned a lot about my teenage daughter, and I hope she knows her Dad a lot more."

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Charlotte's business executives spent summertime fanned out across the globe putting tired office cliches to the test. And this week they tell the *Charlotte Business Journal* staff how lessons learned climbing mountains in Africa or diving into Australia's Great Barrier Reef can indeed inspire better performance back at work. But like all summer-camp experiences, keeping the mojo alive becomes a challenge.

"When you go on vacation, you reflect on what's important in life," says executive coach [Mike Whitehead](#), founder of Charlotte's Center for Intentional Leadership. "But you have to transfer that mind-set to your calendar when you come back."

Whitehead says he recently added time to his calendar for writing notes to his college-age children.

Most execs who struggle to apply vacation inspirations fail to put the items on their calendars. "For busy executives that I coach, if it's not on the calendar, it doesn't get done," Whitehead says.

He adds two more tips for squeezing the most from summer excursions: Create tech-free zones where cellphones are off every day, and eat healthier food. "You've gotta get the toxins out of your diet," he says.

Reaching for the top

[Rishi Bhatnagar](#)'s summer began on a Sunday morning at Crowders Mountain State Park. It ended at dawn on top of Kilimanjaro. Bhatnagar, chief executive of Charlotte-based data and analytics software firm Syntelli Solutions, climbed the world's tallest free-standing mountain with his 17-year-old daughter in August. They completed a five-day hike to Uhuru Peak despite lost baggage and complete exhaustion.

"Standing on top of millions of years of history — it was joyous," Bhatnagar says. "Four days of pain just vanished." He and daughter Niharika awoke at midnight to ascend the summit and witness sunrise from Africa's highest point. At the crater rim of the long-dormant volcano, more than 3 miles above sea level, Bhatnagar says his body gave out. He had reached the top of the mountain, but the technical peak was about a 45-minute walk around the rim. So he kept going. "It killed me — man, I'm getting old," the 47-year-old says. "It became a mental test at that point, because physically I had nothing left."

Back in his Ballantyne office, Bhatnagar says the final push to Uhuru Peak inspired him. "I could have stopped and come back and told everyone I climbed Kilimanjaro, and it would have been technically true," he says. "But I would have been lying to myself. You have to end your mission at the peak. Building a solution for a client isn't enough. You have to go the extra mile."

The trip also delivered a bonding time with his daughter, a senior in Marvin Ridge High School's International Baccalaureate program. They decided in May to do "something big" before she turned 18. Niharika picked Kilimanjaro, and the next Sunday they headed to Crowders for training. They had just three months to get physically ready and plan the trip before school resumed.

The climb got off to a rough start when their luggage was lost en route to Tanzania (they flew to Philadelphia, then Qatar and then to Tanzania). They began with sneakers and none of the special hiking gear they had packed, until it reached them by special delivery on the trail. Their decision to take the Machame route up the mountain also turned

out to be the second-hardest path. But it came with the best scenery. “I’ve never seen stars so bright,” he says. “We got to see glaciers that won’t even exist 30 years from now.”

Above all, Bhatnagar says the time spent with Niharika is what he cherishes most. “It’s the closest we’ve been in years — no distractions. I learned a lot about my teenage daughter, and I hope she knows her dad a lot more.”

— *Adam O’Daniel*