

After Everest

De-acclimatisation climbs in East Africa

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Overcome with international arguments, bad weather and sickness I sat in my tent at Base Camp while depression and frustration set in. Thoughts of other places came fleeting through my mind, of white beaches, warm blue seas, swaying palms and comfort. Suddenly it hit me: I would go after the expedition. I would go to the sun-swept coast of East Africa. I had friends in Kenya and enough money to have a holiday there.

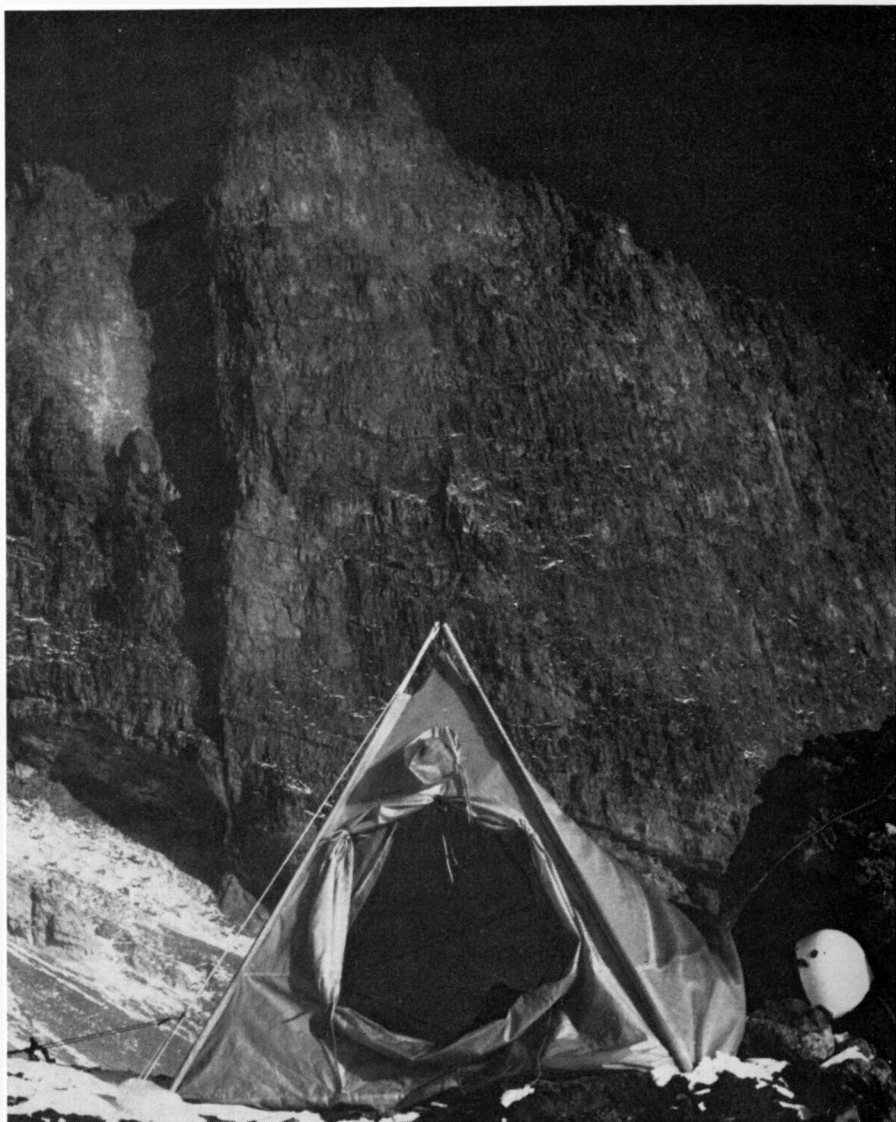
Once the expedition had finished I changed my return air ticket to include Nairobi. Within a week I was there, lying on a beach, covered in seaweed, lapping up the sun. It was glorious, for a couple of days, then boredom set in and I started to think about mountains again. Not really big ones this time, just medium sized, like Mount Kenya (5199 m) and Kilimanjaro (5895 m). I met an American climber named Phil Snyder who was on holiday and keen to try things that I wanted to do. This was very fortunate as climbing partners in Kenya are not easy to find.

We set off up Mount Kenya, to Kami hut which is situated on the north side of the mountain at 4450 m. The weather was bad and it snowed heavily each day causing torrents of melt-water on the rocks. In a week we managed to snatch only one small route. So we decided to leave and packed ready for the morning descent. At the crack of dawn next day a continuous drone reminded us of an air drop we had arranged with the Mount Kenya National Park Warden. He was bringing us food for the next week. Slowly the little Super Cub gained altitude and eventually a little parachute peeled out and deposited gently a forty pound load of fresh food not far from the hut. We would have to stay now, at least until the five kilos of sirloin steak had been consumed. Fortunately some friends were there to help us with our gluttonous task. Threatened by a large party of ramblers arriving at Kami hut we moved, together with our steak, to Minto's hut which is situated further down the mountain on the eastern side, but convenient for climbing in the Gorges valley. The upper part of this valley is an impressive gorge carved out by the Nithi river, exposing a subsidiary trachyte plug which offers steep solid rock with many vertical features, ideal for climbing. Never before had anybody realised this, expecting the rock to be similar to the majority of the outlying rock, a treacherous agglomerate. The result of our excursion to Minto's hut was to open up a good 'bad weather crag' on Mount Kenya. The crag offers routes of 500 to 1000 ft high, steep and sustained in nature and of a high technical standard. The situation and bulging top section protects climbers from bad weather and the hut is literally only five minutes from the top of the climbs.

Temporarily satisfied with our efforts on Mount Kenya we turned our attention

to Kilimanjaro. Although it is the highest mountain in Africa its 'plum pudding' shape makes it less satisfying than Mount Kenya for climbing. Thousands of tourists, with no knowledge whatsoever of mountaineering, drag their exhausted bodies to the roof of Africa rather than visit one of the many game parks. One rock feature which spoils the plum pudding shape of Kilimanjaro is the two thousand foot vertical step of the Great Breach Wall. This dominates the western side of the mountain which is seldom visited. It was this wall which we had in mind when we set off from Nairobi. Studying photos of it beforehand it appeared to be very smooth and dripping with vertical ice, a most uncompromising thing to climb at that altitude. For this reason we were armed

33 *Kilimanjaro—The Great Breach Wall.* This and next two photos: I. Howell



with the complete range of climbing equipment when we set off on the four-day approach from Moshi in Tanzania on 6 September. The weather promised fair and although the 'march-in' was long, the views we had were spectacular.

As we got closer tiny features on the Great Breach Wall started to appear and even a line or two took shape. It might be possible after all. During our approach we had some difficulty in finding water as the route follows a narrow ridge through the forest and moorland. At one bivouac on the ridge we had to descend 1000 ft to a stream to collect water. As our water bottles did not hold sufficient for a night's supply we opened our sacks to find polythene bags to carry more water. Struggling back laden with water we found to our dismay that ravens had looted our open sacks and taken all our bacon, cheese, meat, butter and bread. We would have to go sparingly with the remaining food.

On the fourth day a snow storm deposited several inches of snow on everything including the Great Breach Wall. All the holds and ledges were now plastered. The next day it snowed again and we disappointedly decided to give the wall a miss. However, still wanting to reach Uhuru peak on Kilimanjaro we ascended by an easier glacier route called the Little Breach glacier. This involved only crampons and much deep breathing. On the top of Kilimanjaro we examined the ash-pit crater, which was gently smoking away producing pungent sulphur fumes. After visiting the summit we descended easily on the trade route which drops down to the saddle on the eastern side of the mountain. On the saddle is a collection of disgusting shacks where tourists stay before their final push to Uhuru peak. Although worse than a bivouac in our tiny tent, we decided to stay here and try to cadge some food. This was not difficult as unacclimatised



people visiting these altitudes often have a disturbing loss of appetite. Two heaped platefuls of chicken charmain were placed in front of us, shortly followed by two more.

Greatly revived by this kind gesture Phil and I wondered what we should do next. We had traversed Kibo, the highest peak from west to east and decided to cross the saddle and traverse Mawenzi (5148 m) in the same direction. We still had a little food and could probably complete the traverse in another three days. The next bivouac was in the tiny shelter near the foot of the Oehler gulley on Mawenzi. Back to our dwindling rations we savoured each mouthful and waited patiently for the next meal. The Oehler gulley is the *voie normale* on Mawenzi and is really only a scramble up a rotten stone chute. This presented no problem but the descent of the other side had been worrying me ever since we had planned to descend it. The East face of Mawenzi is the remains of the inside of a very old volcano, the missing rim having been blasted or eroded away long ago leaving a massive complex of walls, dykes and gullies leading down to two spectacular gorges named the Great and Little Barranco. We aimed to descend the narrow ridge dividing them which is called the Central Buttress. The last 1000 ft of the face to the summit although very steep is made up of rotten and very unstable rock, and it was this section of the descent that troubled me. However, an ice couloir descends for 700 ft from the notch between Hans Meyer Peak (the summit) and Nordeck Peak. This couloir was named 'Thomson's Horror' after an ascent by Thomson and Edwards several years ago while making the first ascent of the East face of Mawenzi. We decided to descend this knowing that we could use ice-screws if the rock was too rotten. This we did in six long abseils from screws and dubious rock pegs. One overhanging ice pitch caused some concern; as I swung in after passing over the lip I broke off several hundredweight of icicles which clattered down on top of Phil who was hanging from an ice screw some 70 ft below. Fortunately he survived unhurt.

After the ice couloir three more abseils took us to easier ground and terrain which seemed more like the moon than the earth. One more bivouac and a very trying descent through giant heather found us back in civilisation and the comforts of normal life enjoyed at the Loitokitok Outward Bound School. It had taken us nine days to make the first complete traverse of Kilimanjaro.

After a few days rest at the coast, which was very welcome this time, I was left with just enough time to revisit Mount Kenya before returning to the U.K. Therefore Phil and I found ourselves in Two Tarn hut at 4420 m on the south-west side of the mountain. For a long time I had had my eye on the Diamond couloir. This is the narrow ice couloir which joins the Diamond glacier to the Darwin glacier and splits Nelion from Batian (the two summits of Mount Kenya) on the south side. During the summer season, January and February, ice-held rocks on Batian and Nelion are loosened by the tropical sun and are funnelled into the top of the Diamond couloir, turning it into a suicide helter-skelter. Several years ago three R.A.F. climbers were killed instantly by stone-fall when only traversing the Darwin glacier beneath the snout of the couloir. We wanted to climb this, but now it was late September and the sun having



35 *Mount Kenya—In the Diamond Couloir below the great ice roof*

been in the northern hemisphere for several months the couloir was well iced-up and in a fairly safe condition.

This couloir is an obvious line on Mount Kenya, and can easily be seen from the 'trade route' up to the huts. It must have caught the eye of many a climber on his way to Top hut. Viewed from this angle it looks terrifyingly steep and this maybe is the reason that it has attracted so little attention. Only two attempts had been made on it, to my knowledge. One of them was at Easter when it was bare black ice with a continual bombardment of stones. The other party that tried it was turned back by not having any rock pitons, or only unsuitable ones. What appears to be an impossibly steep ice pitch protects the bottom of the climb. The next section looks steep enough leading into a complex of ice bulges and roofs before it leans back into the Diamond glacier.

Delayed by heavy sacks, our first day, which was meant to be a reconnaissance day, turned into a rest day. We were therefore one day behind schedule. The alarm went off at 4.30 in the morning of our climb. It took ages before I finally dragged myself out of bed and into icy boots. A cooked breakfast cost valuable time but was well worth it. Using head-torches we set off across the moraine ridges to the Darwin glacier. The snow was crisp but only on the surface. The night had not been as cold as we had hoped. The avalanche snow cone steepened

to the first ice pitch, the one that from a distance appears to be vertical. It was not so. However, it was steep enough for us to have to cut steps. It was unrelenting for a full 150 ft and then it eased in angle and a rock belay was possible. To our surprise and delight the next 500 ft of the couloir was steep kickable snow, Phil estimated it to be 55° . So we gained height fairly quickly. The weather was overcast which spoilt our view but this was probably a blessing in blanketing the sun and hence reducing the chance of falling ice. The next section was a series of ice bulges culminating in an enormous ice roof above which was the easier angle of the Diamond glacier. This ice roof was out of the question for us, but we found a line which after traversing left led on to the glacier at about the same height as the roof. Phil led a steep pitch which again necessitated step cutting and belaying again on rock. Two more similar pitches led to the lip of the glacier. From here the climb was virtually over, and it would have been no problem to continue to the Gate of the Mists, the gap between Nelion and Batian.

It was now a question of time and we realised that to continue would commit us to bivouac, when really we should be down in the valley that evening. Although we had not completed the climb to the summit we had certainly 'cracked' the Diamond couloir. We therefore decided to climb and abseil back down the couloir. It was during the descent that we found ourselves continuously being covered in spindrift which had started to slide down on us in enormous quantities. It would pile up in front of us until we were completely covered, not particularly dangerous but extremely uncomfortable.

The descent took three hours, about half the ascent time and we breathed a sigh of relief when we actually stepped out from the bottom of the couloir with no more than a few minor bruises from some falling ice and our clothes full of spindrift. The next day found me back in Nairobi and packing ready for my return to U.K.

SUMMARY Kilimanjaro—complete west-east traverse of Kibo (5895 m) and Mawenzi (5148 m). Mount Kenya. Diamond couloir, first ascent. Rock climbing in the Gorges valley.