

Through the Ice Window to Nelion

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The thrill of poring over the maps and guidebooks, the endless lists of food, clothing and equipment has brightened up many a long winter's evening. Oliver Turnbull and I had made detailed plans in February 1982 to spend a fortnight climbing on Mount Kenya. A painful flight to America following a routine dental appointment and filling convinced me that my tooth required further attention. Even if I could cope with the altitude it was clear that my tooth would not. The offer of an evil looking dental tool three days before our departure, to remove the filling if necessary, convinced me that this was not the time to go. We consoled ourselves over whisky and haggis in Glen Brittle, climbing the Black Cuillin in snow.

A last minute decision by a British Minister in September 1984 to visit the new road being constructed between Thuchi and Nkubu to the east of the mountain gave me an excuse and opportunity I could not resist. Oliver was unable to join me at such short notice but through a colleague I contacted Peter Brettell who was prepared to climb with me although we had never met. Peter having lived in Nairobi for some years did not seem surprised when I phoned confirming I would only be able to spend four days on the mountain. His relaxed response, 'What route do you have in mind?' really puzzled me until he explained that he and Ian Howell frequently go up to the mountain for a weekend's climbing. Surely, this wasn't the same mountain? I decided that Peter was in another class and I hurriedly mentioned which Scottish winter climbs I had done, and without waiting for an answer mumbled that I had heard that the W ridge and the Ice Window are classic routes. Peter thought that the W ridge was too long and there was too much ice. The Ice Window had been climbed by Peter in 1978 and he remembered the crux being roughly equivalent to Scottish grade 3.

After a couple of phone calls, and an urgent request for ice pegs, I flew to Nairobi, landing early in the morning. I was introduced to Peter, swigged a cup of black coffee and we drove north to Nanuki. We registered at the National Park entrance and continued up the greasy mud road to a clearing in the forest at 3000m. That was as far as we could drive.

We took five hours to walk up through the forest over the high moor where the giant heathers grow, and along the Teleki valley past giant groundsel and lobelia to the Rescue Hut at 4100m. The sacks felt heavy even though we were not carrying ropes and some of the climbing gear. Peter and Ian usually approach the mountain by this track leaving equipment in the Rescue Hut. By the time we arrived at 4.00pm the temperature was already falling and it had been raining for three hours. Although this hut is small it is very well arranged and within no time Peter had brewed the first of many pints of tea we were to consume on the climb. Those devotees of winter reading will have noted the reference in the Kenya Guidebook (mountain medicine section) 'the lighter and

the larger the volume, the better the hydration. "Clear and copious", should be the watchwords. . . . the correct fluid intake also seems to aid the acclimatization . . . ' A good stew completed the meal, another brew and into our bags for the night.

We slept well. On Peter's advice we had a leisurely morning walking up the valley sides for a better view of the summit, which was clear and dusted with new snow almost down to the hut. Looking up at the Diamond Glacier, I began to wonder if we were not being too ambitious. Vivienne de Watteville, when she witnessed the second ascent of the mountain by Eric Shipton and Wyn Harris in 1929, referred to it as 'that wicked little Diamond Glacier, which seemed literally to hang between the two summits'.

At noon the clouds covered the peaks. We scrambled up to the small glacial lake at the base of Tyndall Glacier passing 'American Camp' and for the first time we carried full sacks. We continued to the bottom of Darwin Glacier, where we chipped open the door of the bivi shelter (a cave in the moraine), left the heavy gear, and traversed to Two Tarn Hut. This hut, though not as new or comfortable as the Rescue Hut, has attracted rock hyraxes, fearless little animals determined to survive on the rubbish left by the visitors. Another good meal with tea and into the bags before the cold penetrated too far. Peter suggested we sleep on the floor which has been covered with a layer of foam. A fine idea until awakened by the cold I was sure I could hear rustling close by. After anxious minutes of breathless contemplation I decided it had to be mice. I slept fitfully until the alarm roused us at 5.00am. Peter, a seasoned hut visitor, had slept through the invasion and found my breakfast silence puzzling.

A clear sky was encouraging. Using head-torches, we made good time across the rocks, following markers left by others. The first glow of the day appeared as we collected the climbing gear from the bivouac site. It was a beautiful sunny day and we were climbing for the first time, roped up and festooned with gear. Peter set off up the Darwin glacier, kicking steps in the surprisingly soft snow. We did not traverse diagonally into the right fork but approached the glacier on its right side and climbed straight up. It was strenuous work and I took over the lead up to the top of the lower Darwin. I belayed, determined to take a rest, while Peter led diagonally left across the upper glacier to the top left-hand corner where 'the old ropes' still hang down. Peter, being more experienced on rock, descended to the snow covered slab and climbed the ramp to a rock belay to the left. As I joined him he commented that he had expected these rocks to be clear of snow and dry.

I had been puzzled why this route was not climbed until 1973, whereas the much harder Diamond Couloir was being attempted by Ian Howell in 1971. It is not until this point on the Ice Window route when looking diagonally left that the hidden couloir becomes obvious. Peter's earlier description of the easy angled couloir which he had kicked steps up didn't fit the picture at all. What we were looking at wasn't generally too steep but consisted of a series of hard ice walls of various heights resembling a frozen waterfall. The weather was deteriorating rapidly and the narrow couloir was soon enveloped in cloud.

It was starting to snow when I traversed to the ice. I spent some time persuading an ice screw to bite into the hard material. I hadn't used an ice peg

for many months but this was ridiculous. With a runner on I climbed the first couple of obstacles. Peter struggled just as I had done, which at least made me feel better. He led on while the snowfall got heavier. When leading time seems irrelevant, it is only at belays that reality is apparent. The snow, fine balls of dry powder, hissed off the ledges, pouring over both of us. Peter's lead took us to the point where the S face route departs to the right. Out of the confines of the narrow couloir we could hear voices, but shrouded in cloud and snow we could only guess that the other party was climbing Point John.

Thunder rolled around the mountain as we briefly discussed the options. We were both aware that the conditions were unusual. Ahead we could just see the '6m ice wall'. It didn't look too hard when compared with the previous pitches, but seemed longer than Peter remembered. However, it is only supposed to be one pitch and it was a long way to have come to take the easy option, so we decided to go on.

Peter kicked up to a good belay and having joined him I took off my sack. The crux didn't look as easy as it had from the previous stance. The pitch was stepped like those below. I got over the first wall with the moral support of a good runner, climbed up to the second and screwed in another peg before fighting that wall. I was tired and the sack hauling emphasised the altitude and my lack of acclimatization. Peter came up quickly, his natural ability shining through. He led the next pitch, which although not as sustained was as hard as the previous pitch. We had taken eight hours to get this far and we were not going to get to the top that day. One more steep wall on the third pitch and we could see the ice cave directly above. The couloir peters out and the right wall merges into the rock face which leads up and forms the right flank of the ice cave. The other wall drops away revealing the headwall of the Diamond Couloir which suddenly dominates the view to the left. We crossed under the rock face on deep loose snow and I asked Peter to lead the last pitch into the cave. The pitch was steep, a combination of poor ice and rock.

It was 4.30pm, we had been going for 11 hours and both of us were tired. The prospect of a further five or six hours' climbing to arrive at the top in the dark did not appeal and we decided to stay in the welcome sanctuary of the cave. The floor of the cave was flat, the back wall dry rock, and a curtain of icicles protected us from the elements. The stove was lit for a quick brew but before it boiled we were asleep in our bags. Three hours later we awoke, changed the cylinder and finally drank our hot tea. We obviously needed food but our tiredness, queasy feeling and slight headache deterred us from eating. I had unwisely failed to put my boots in my bag during our first unintentional rest. The weather improved after sunset and under a clear sky we settled down for the night, wearing our wet clothes. We drowsed fitfully through the night. Sleeping with 'two old boots' is no fun!

In the morning, still not relishing food, we had more hot sugared tea and were ready to leave. The exit, described in the guidebook as a window, is no longer in the roof but is now at floor level. There is a long knotted sling attached to an ice peg screwed into the floor adjacent to the hole. Peter climbed down about 2.5m to an ice shelf in a very exposed position above the Diamond Couloir. Traversing to the left, round a curtain of icicles, Peter was at the

bottom of the Diamond Glacier. He climbed up the poor ice trying to make a suitable belay. Eventually in desperation he pushed his two axes and a deadman into the snow. Listening to the noises amplified in the ice cave I could not imagine what he was doing. A distant shout advised me to 'come on but do not fall off!' I removed our peg and slithered inelegantly out of the hole, down to the shelf, and cautiously climbed up to join Peter.

Sir Halford Mackinder climbed diagonally across this steep little glacier on the first ascent in 1899. On the second ascent Eric Shipton decided to climb the face of Nelion direct, later admitting to Miss V de Watteville that they would have tackled any kind of rock rather than go across the glacier. With modern crampons and two short axes we made steady progress straight up the centre of the glacier, leading through four long pitches. We front-pointed the last pitch on hard ice into the warming sun. The temperature changed instantly, the ice became soft snow and I was soon looking over the Gate of the Mists. It was a relief to have reached the ridge. I was reminded of the Brèche Zsigmondy on the Meije, a snowy gap between two rock summits with a spectacular view on the other side, perhaps more satisfying than actually reaching the summit. Peter had last crossed the Gate in PA's! Feeling more at home on rock Peter led off over the snow covered rocks, placing two good runners before moving onto a snow slope to regain the ridge. We were both more tired than we realised. Peter fell, sliding some distance but obviously thankful for his rock runner. After a brief rest he moved to better ground and we climbed to the summit, arriving at 11.40am. Throwing off all our gear we moved over to the hut.

Howell's hut is situated only a few feet from the top of Nelion. For Ian Howell to have carried all the pieces from the Lewis glacier seemed an incredible achievement. Sitting by the door of the hut we protected our stove from the wind and brewed up. Having proved the 'clear and copious' rule we set off down the ordinary route, as the clouds and predictable snow rolled in. Our ropes were wet and our abseiling slow. Fortunately Peter was on familiar ground and found all the stances. Five hours and ten long abseils later, having passed Bailey's Bivi which appeared wet and inhospitable and de Graff's variation, we reached the moraine. Another two hours took us to the Rescue hut by which time it was dark and even the mice did not disturb me that night.

I had been advised that Mount Kenya should not be under-estimated. The relative ease of access to altitudes in excess of 4500m often leads to acclimatization problems. I had been lucky only to have experienced mild headaches, nausea, numb toes and fingers and an occasional tendency to feel faint when the blood rushed to my cold extremities.

We had climbed a classic route in unusual conditions which had extended my experience far beyond that previously achieved in the Alps.