East Africa 1987

ANDREW WIELOCHOWSKI

New routes

The last few years in the East African mountains have been marked by a lull in major developments. The area is very popular and most of the obvious easier lines have been climbed; there is a lack of hard climbers living in the area with time for detailed exploration. Visiting 'hard men' tend to repeat classics: for example on Mount Kenya the Diamond Couloir is still the major attraction, even in late December and January when it is basically out of condition, with the bottom pitch collapsing. Fewer visitors sample the rock-routes on Mount Kenya, many of which rival Chamonix routes.

A major achievement in recent years has been the complete ascent of the SW couloir on Batian. In August 1985 Julian Mathias and Dan Donovan ascended this couloir to the Amphitheatre and then followed Tower Ridge and finally the S ridge to the summit of Batian. The ascent took 16 hours. The couloir when in condition, which is not too often, provides a superb, hard and technical ice climb; however, there is considerable avalanche and rockfall danger once the sun hits the slopes of the Amphitheatre above. The route was graded Scottish 5+.

During a period of very poor weather an Imperial College expedition spent a week camping by Two Tarn Hut and climbed on the near-overhanging walls at the base of Point Pigott. They put up two short, very hard rock climbs, both about E3/E4 and just over 100m long. There is now little potential for finding independent new lines on the overworked main peaks, but plenty of scope for hard short routes, on excellent rock, on the minor peaks. This could well prove to be a popular alternative in the future, especially for the modern rock gymnasts.

One fairly new route which has rapidly become popular on Mount Kenya is East Gate on the E face of Nelion. It was climbed in July 1980 by Ian Howell and Peter Brettle. The climbing is of a very high quality at a reasonable grade, VS+. It finds its way up a very steep and dramatic area of rock, with all its older neighbouring routes being considerably harder.

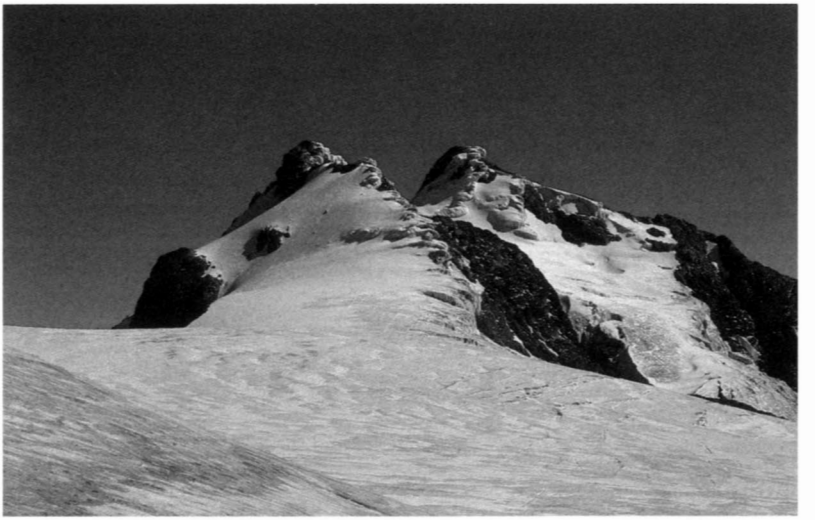
On Kilimanjaro there has been some activity in the exploration of minor lines amongst the shattered buttresses in the vicinity of the Western Breach and the Decken Glacier. The routes generally follow ice couloirs and offer major ice climbs.

There has been more activity on lower cliffs. As popular as ever has been Hell's Gate, which has recently become a National Park. Climbers should check with the MCK whether there are any restrictions related to nesting birds – rarely a problem.

In Tsavo game park the recently developed cliffs at Kitchwa Tembo have



82. Ruwenzori: the Stanley Plateau from near the Scott Elliot Pass.



83. Ruwenzori: Alexandra (5091m) and Margherita (5109m) from the Stanley Plateau.



84. Bowman Island, Makinson Inlet, Ellesmere Island, from the S.

become popular. The setting is certainly unique, with elephant roaming the lower slopes, hippo and monkeys sharing your camp-site, and vultures endlessly circling around you on the climbs. Several bolts, recently placed on the belays of Behemoth, make this fine climb much safer. Also it is now possible to abseil from the summit of Kitchwa Tembo, thus avoiding the unpleasant descent down South Gully.

In the Ndoto Mountains of Northern Kenya the great 600m walls of Poi have now one route on them. Attempts at further new ascents have hitherto failed, though there are lines to explore. The main problem encountered with these great desert cliffs is that the lack of rainfall and freeze-thaw action does not allow a good development of crack systems; instead, the great diurnal surface temperature variation results in friable, exfoliated rock.

General

For the climber, Mount Kenya is undoubtedly the most rewarding mountain in East Africa. Access to it is improving all the time. Unfortunately, at the same time the commercial exploitation of the mountain is increasing. The Chogoria Route now offers a much more pleasant, and almost as quick, approach to the mountain as the boggy Naro Moru route; very fine self-help bunkhouses have been built near the Chogoria roadhead. On the Sirimon Route two tented camps have been put up, one at roadhead and the other above Shipton's Cave. The Naro Moru Route now boasts a permanent bunkhouse in the Teleki Valley; it is run by the Naro Moru River Lodge and costs slightly more than the other commercial camps (about £7 per night), offering a bunk bed, some security, and flowing water. MCK huts are heavily used and are becoming very run-down. It is best to plan on camping. Park entry fees are reasonable.

There have been several changes on Kilimanjaro. The Arrow Glacier hut has been destroyed by rock fall; a new hut 300m lower down has been built at the Lava Tower. On the north circuit there is a new hut west of the Lent Group. Park entry fees remain high, despite recent devaluations in Tanzania; the fees for six nights for one person will not leave much change out of £100.

Access via Uganda to the Ruwenzori was very problematical in the early eighties. The situation has much improved, though the country has not yet settled down and parties approaching from Uganda must be prepared to make last-minute changes. John Matte still provides a good service on the Ugandan approach. Very little mountaineering exploration has taken place here recently. There is scope for new mountain routes, but the weather and access problems have kept activity down. The Zaire approach from Mutwanga has become much more popular; this involves a much drier route and is equally scenic, but access to Mutwanga is very difficult – about three days' driving from Kigali, which, if done by hired vehicle, could be very expensive, or a chartered flight from Goma – even more expensive.

Of interest are the major climatic changes which have made a dramatic change to the appearance of Kili and Mount Kenya. The glacial recession continues unabated. Hastenrath predicts that Mount Kenya's glaciers could disappear in the next 25 years. On the summit of Kilimanjaro the last remnants



50. Dick Renshaw heads up the 'freeway' of the Chodomak glacier on N Muztagh. The headwall is on L, below the ridge.



51. Ruwenzori: Lake Kitandara and McConnell's Prong.

of the ice-cap are rapidly vanishing; for example, the ice cathedral in the crater has melted away. The glaciers are also receding; the Heim Glacier has been particularly badly affected.

Maps and Guidebooks

Recent additions include:

Map of Mount Kenya (1987): the main map is 1:50,000, insets include a 1:400,000 map of roads around the mountain and a 1:25,000 map of the peak area. Available from West Col Productions, Goring, Reading RG8 9AA.

East Africa International Mountain Guide (1986): this is a climbers' guide to selected routes on the major East African mountains and on smaller cliffs such as Hell's Gate and Tsavo. Available from West Col Productions.

I would be very grateful if any comments, information about recent developments or changes in East Africa could be sent to me to help update guidebook information: A Wielochowski, 32 Seamill Park Crescent, Worthing, BN11 2PN (Tel. 0903 37565).