Laymen on Lenana

ANN VENABLES

(*Plate* 74)

Or Kenyan Kapers? With my penchant, indeed passion, for alliteration I can hardly be expected to resist this sort of title, and personally feel that all books on, say, Everest should have titles such as Everest Epic, Sagamartha Saga, I Chose Chomolungma, and so on; this might lead to Mad Moments on Menlungtse, Ruwenzori Raptures – the possibilities are endless.

To return to Mount Kenya, my title is entirely apt since neither my husband nor I are climbers, nor had we been to Kenya before, and the business of getting up this mountain appeared to be unnecessarily fraught with problems. From England, it appeared to be impossible to get the sort of information we wanted on costs, equipment, the best place to start from, how to get there and time needed. First we tried to arrange our 'expedition' as part of our package holiday but were told (although prices – exorbitant – were quoted in one or two brochures) that there was 'no demand' for a tourist ascent of the mountain at this time (July). I then wrote to the Mountain Club of Kenya, who answered that it could not help us in any detailed way. Their Secretary did send us a short printed leaflet containing what seems, with hindsight, quite adequate information on how to set about an ascent. However, at the time this didn't feel sufficiently reassuring and we were not told, for instance, whether one can just turn up at Naro Moru Lodge – probably the best-known valley base for tourist ascents – and be sure of finding porters and/or guides as well as camping space (at the lodge), or must one book in advance? And is Naro Moru the best or easiest starting place? Just how much equipment can one hire there? How likely are the huts on the way up to be full, or would it be better to camp? Which huts does one need? What are they like? Must food be brought from Nairobi, or can anything be purchased at Naro Moru – lodge or village? What choice of transport is there from Nairobi to Naro Moru? How cold might it be, and what sort of footwear does one really need? How complicated is the whole thing to organize once in Kenya, and how long will it take? We only had one week to spare; would this be enough to organize the thing and to get up and down the mountain? To all those seasoned travellers who are readers of the *Alpine Journal* this may seem an awful lot of fuss about rather little, but to us, arriving in a strange country, indeed a strange continent, it was hard to know where and how to start, given our shortage of time. Fortunately Dick Hedges, who was the organizer of our particular safari, was able to point us in the right direction. We found that there was a perfectly adequate bus service from Nairobi to Naro Moru, easily booked and full of all those people wanting to go up Mount Kenya – no demand? It was perfectly simple to buy adequate food in Nairobi, the only slight problem being to find paraffin for our primus. We had brought our own

tents and (warm) sleeping-bags, basic cooking utensils, walking boots, duvet jackets and the odd item of thermal underwear; all this was providential as it turned out.

So we – that is my husband Richard, son Philip, daughter-in-law Caroline and I – set off on an MSP (public) bus from Nairobi to Naro Moru Lodge on the W side of Mount Kenya and some 42km from the mountain. To call the bus full would be a gross understatement – it was packed solid in every nook and cranny with people and luggage. We were dropped some hours later at the entrance to the lodge, found the office and, in a leisurely way – thinking we had till the next morning – set about booking a guide (partly because it was impossible to buy a large-scale map of the area) and two porters. Strangely, the office manager tried to persuade us that we needed fewer days to make the ascent than I, personally, thought we required to allow for acclimatization. I say strangely, since it must be in the African interest for tourists to make the maximum bookings, so bringing in more badly needed revenue. However, he did persuade us against our better judgement that we could do the whole thing, up and down, in three days and nights. A cursory look at the equipment on offer for hiring was enough to make us glad that we had brought our own. The 'leisurely' bit stopped there and then as we found ourselves whisked away, within a quarter of an hour of arriving, in a van *en route* for the Met Station at 3000m which was to be our first night's stop. We picked up our two porters and young guide on the way. Since we were putting in quite a lot of motorized altitude gain (from 1800m to 3000m), we decided to walk the last bit in a half-hearted attempt at starting to acclimatize. This was no hardship on a warm sunny afternoon in a beautiful forest with occasional fantastic views. The Met Station, which is also the roadhead, is a large grassy clearing attractively situated with wood cabins for hire and plenty of camping space. We pitched our two extremely small tents and cooked a tolerable supper on the primus while it was still sunny. By dusk it was cold and we were glad of our good quality down sleeping-bags.

We were away next morning by 7.30, having sorted out what we would need over the next two or three days into two porter loads and four small loads for ourselves. Anything spare we left at the Met Station until our return. We set off on a fine sunny morning through the bamboo forest which soon gave way to the most amazing giant heathers – I mean giant, they were three-metre trees. Part of this Heather Zone consists of a region aptly called the Vertical Bog where wellingtons would have been more appropriate than walking boots. By lunch-time I was flagging slightly and was glad to see the terrain levelling out into the long gently rising Teleki valley. What I did not then know was that 'long' was the operative word! By this time the sun had gone and rain looked likely. Our guide, Stephen, was continually urging us on to beat the expected afternoon shower. I was past urging and was only too glad to stop frequently to examine the giant cabbage-like groundsels (*senecios*) and lobelias which lined our way. The notion of a more-than-head-high 'cabbage' is surely worthy of contemplation. Indeed, the almost surreal vegetation more than compensated for my increasing weariness. Richard seemed less affected by the altitude, though Caroline was in little better shape than I was. The only one totally unaffected was Philip, bouncing ahead with increasing contributions from my



74. *Giant groundsel* (senecio) *near Mackinder's Camp.* (p 162)

rucksack. It took us a fairly gruelling seven hours to reach Mackinder's Camp at 4300m. I, personally, was certainly tired enough to realize that I was unlikely to be getting up at 2am to go to a 5000m summit, so we simply told Stephen that we needed an extra day at Mackinder's to acclimatize. Because he agreed to this so readily, it was obvious that the length of booking was a pretty fluid affair. At Mackinder's, wooden platforms are provided for tents. There are also, at a fairly modest price, the ropiest, smelliest, most moth-eaten scout-type tents for hire, and at a far-from-modest price a half-finished hut (1985) not yet equipped with bunks so that the inmates had to put their bedding straight on the concrete. (This hut must be the permanent bunkhouse mentioned in *AJ93*, 225, 1988/89.) Having paid a small camping fee, we were allowed to use the hut for cooking and eating. By this, I mean only as shelter (draughty and cold) in which to put our primus and food. At the lowest price we were certainly, in our tents, far warmer and more comfortable than the tenants of either scout tents or hut. There was an outside tap with running water; running, that is, until dusk when it froze until well beyond sunrise. Mackinder's, though rather a dump, was quite an entertaining place with constant comings and goings of a variety of types. Perhaps the best were the Spaniards with their brand-new camping and (extensive) climbing equipment, who appeared never to leave the camp even for a short walk. There was an enormous variety of fascinating bird life (though there was even more variety at a lower altitude) and very tame hyraxes (a sort of giant guinea-pig) were everywhere, presumably in search of food. And the nearest relation to the hyrax is. . . ? Yes, the elephant!

We must have adapted very readily to high camp life, as supper at 5.30pm didn't seem at all odd. Our aim was to finish by dusk (6.30–7), to be in bed before the temperature was much below freezing. Next morning I felt distinctly under the weather and decided to rest as much as possible, hoping I might recover sufficiently to attempt the summit the following day. The other three went off with Stephen to Two Tarns, small lakes 270m higher, to limber up for the morrow. Later in the morning I went for a short walk along the beginning of the route to Lenana (our summit), noticing Point John towering above me and knowing that it was a lot lower than Point Lenana. The route, though set in this rather arid valley-head, was very attractive with giant groundsels lining the path. There were slight flurries of sleet, but the usual afternoon rain never materialized. I slept quite a lot and suddenly, at 4pm, I felt different and knew I was all right. I don't know if this is usual, but it wasn't at all a gradual effect, just a sudden feeling of having acclimatized. Supper was early again. Our delicious (?) freeze-dried sweet-and-sour was spurned by Caroline, who found eating at 4300m difficult: at least, eating what was on offer; what was more serious, she tended not to drink enough.

We slept fitfully until 2.30am when Stephen woke us. He had brewed some hot sweet tea for which we were all very grateful before setting off at 3. There was a full moon, so we didn't need torches. An easy track winding along the valley gave way to a steep scree-slope up which we zig-zagged. Stephen set a slow pace which was easy to follow. In fact, Philip found our pace too slow and went on ahead with the army, in the shape of three very charming young men whom we had met on and off since leaving Nairobi. They, lucky chaps, were

paid to climb Mount Kenya, in the name of Adventure Training. After a second scree-slope and a short rocky snowy section which was almost level, we reached Top Hut at 4790m. I had thought this would be our top camp – and for those who would rather rise at 5.30 than 2.30 and still be on Lenana by dawn, it would of course seem preferable. We were given no choice in the matter. I imagine that the guides and porters prefer the lower altitude and greater space of Mackinder's. For us it was also much cheaper, as we could not have camped at Top Hut. We had made such good time that we were too early if we wanted to reach the summit at dawn, so we had a half-hour rest at the hut, trying not to disturb its sleeping inmates.

As it started to get light we set off over rocks which were followed by a gentle snow-slope. Next came a much steeper snow-slope (part of the Lewis glacier) where we followed steps kicked by Stephen, occasionally using a hand to help the balance. The last section was a very short steep scramble over rocks on to a broad rocky summit – Point Lenana (4985m). Sunrise was at 6.30 bringing with it, on this perfectly clear morning, views in all directions which can only be described in clichés. Peaks, valleys and, far below, cloud. There was a wind and it was very cold but I, in my ample clothing including a duvet jacket, could have stayed there for hours just . . . looking (I daren't say 'savouring the view'!). It was wonderful but Stephen, totally inadequately dressed and to whom it was just another day's work, couldn't wait to start down. So, after about 20 minutes' 'savouring' and taking photographs, we set off again. The descent was easy and, though we obviously had to tread carefully on the top part, we went fast and were back at Mackinder's in time for a late breakfast. We could have gone on down to the Met Station but not to Naro Moru, as transport only comes up to the Met in the late mornings and we would have been too late for this; so we pottered at Mackinder's for the rest of that day, reading a bit, sleeping a bit, talking to the camp inmates.

Next morning we were up at 6.30, to a much colder start than at 2.30 the previous day. The tents were so solid with ice that we couldn't pack them properly, so we just draped them on top of the pack-frames. The fine sunny dawn deteriorated into a cool misty morning. It had clearly rained lower down and the Vertical Bog was even boggier than three days earlier. The journey down from Mackinder's to the Met took us 3¼ hours without hurrying or effort, allowing time to stop and look at the spectacular bird-life. Our truck eventually appeared and took us back to the lodge where we basked in the warmth of its mere 1800m as we set up our tents in the perfectly adequate and very reasonably priced camping-field. After our exertions we felt justified in eating at the lodge itself where the food was good, plentiful and fairly cheap, as opposed to the accommodation which was very expensive. Since it was very difficult to be in any way sure if and when a bus might pass the lodge on its way to Nairobi, we opted for a Matatu which is a sort of taxi – with emphasis in every way on the 'sort of'. The driver tried to cram nine people and their luggage into his vehicle, at exorbitant cost. In our opinion this particular quart just would not fit its pint pot, so Philip and Caroline left us to make their own way back to Nairobi. The remaining seven were somehow squeezed in, though the nerves, had they not been toughened by two weeks in Africa, might have

become a trifle frayed by the African style of driving which was as exciting and unorthodox as we had been led to believe.

In between the onslaught on our nerves we had time to reflect that we now had answers to all those questions about cost, equipment and what to do when and how. Our week had cost in total, for four of us, exactly the same as the advertised cost for one person that we had seen in an English brochure. If any reader would like more detailed information I have it all, with costs (for 1985). Rather more interestingly, I have a list of all the numerous different birds we saw, and I could easily be persuaded to go into rhapsodies over the vegetation, but not here as I have already exceeded the space I am allowed as a mere layman in this august journal.

(*Editor's Note*: Laymen – and laywomen – who write as well as Ann Venables are allowed as much space as the most accomplished tiger.)