Snow on the Equator

A memory of Kilimanjaro

CHARLES WARREN

(*Plates* 64, 77, 78)

Not quite on the equator, like Mount Kenya, Kilimanjaro is nearly there and is incomparably the highest mountain, with snow on it, near the equator, in Africa. From the mountaineering point of view it is by no means difficult to climb. Yet it is very high; and for that reason alone it poses problems for many aspiring ascensionists through mountain sickness.

We (William Spiers, Douglas Scott and I) made the ascent from the Kenya side in 1966 and, my word, what an entirely delightful experience it was. A last-minute dash to climb the highest mountain in Africa while still within reach of it. We were very fit at the time, having just come off Mount Kenya.

Seen from the plains of the Amboseli game reserve to the north, with the big game just wandering about in the foreground, what a splendid backcloth to the scene the great mountain makes. There is nothing really quite like it in the world. It is impossible to realize how high it actually is until you sit and tell yourself that that band of cloud is only half-way up.

Our launching-pad for the ascent was Loitokitok where we were hospitably put up, entertained and helped with advice as to how to get a pass through the forest on to the mountain by the Outward Bound establishment there.

How nice they all were. We were invited to watch one of their character-training exercises which now – looking back on it in old age – I can't help finding faintly ridiculous. However, I must admit that most of the young men seemed to be enjoying it all. But surely they must have been really glad to get up on to the great mountain itself!

Water is a problem on Kilimanjaro; it has to be carried up from low down. We had two porters and a boy who helped to take us up through the forest; and then up over the dried-up moorland to Kibo hut, where they left us.

How marvellous was the walk up through the forest zone. No game seen; but elephant spore everywhere. And birds chattering in the trees all around us. On Kilimanjaro there was no frightening bamboo zone to go through, as there was on Mount Kenya. So we reached with ease that marvellous bivouac cave, beneath a great sheet of volcanic rock, just above the forest zone. Surely the most comfortable bivouac site in the world! From here we had to go some hundreds of yards to get water from a spring and stock up for the next two days. And then, to bed; leaving the mountain pink in the sunset glow.

The next day we arose from our perfect bivouac cave to find Kilimanjaro white with newly fallen snow right down its slopes to the foot of the volcanic cone, but in bright sunlight.

Having packed up, we all then set forth for Kibo hut, a trek over an extensive volcanic moorland but one greatly enhanced by the beauty of the everlasting flowers. Arrived there at last, we let our porters go and were then on our own.

Kibo hut was a miserable place. After a short, cold night, we arose before dawn, having put on all our spare clothing. Then we stamped our way up the interminable but blessedly frozen scree slopes to the rim of the crater at Gillman's Point, having watched the sunrise above a sea of cloud below Mawenzi. Thence, in the warm sunshine, we walked the next mile or two round the rim of the crater to the highest point.

The summit of Kilimanjaro is not, scenically, a very inspiring place, but it is fascinating because you are above the world and because the glacial formations at the edges of the volcano's crater are so strange. It is marked by a plaque to commemorate the political event of *Uhuru*, which spoils the scene unnecessarily. It is a flat shaly platform. Here, in the sun, we lay for an hour or two above the clouds and remote from the world below. 'Alone on a wide wide sea.'

The crater of the great volcano is not of much interest apart from its curious serac formations, like *nieves penitentes*. But the mountain is still alive. Tilman descended amongst the seracs and moraine heaps there where he found hot holes. So the old mountain still only sleeps. But the great glaciers which flow from the rim of this volcano, almost on the equator, for thousands of feet are of much technical interest to mountaineers.

The journey back from the mountain and down through the wonderful forests to Loitokitok was uneventful. We had climbed our mountain; not a difficult one. And we had had it entirely to ourselves – something which it is almost impossible to achieve in these days of commercial tourism. So that is why I have written this piece.

Our party had now returned to Kenya, whence Spiers and I left for home, leaving Douglas Scott, a professional photographer, camped alone in the Amboseli game reserve to take photographs of big game. And perhaps to be eaten by lions!

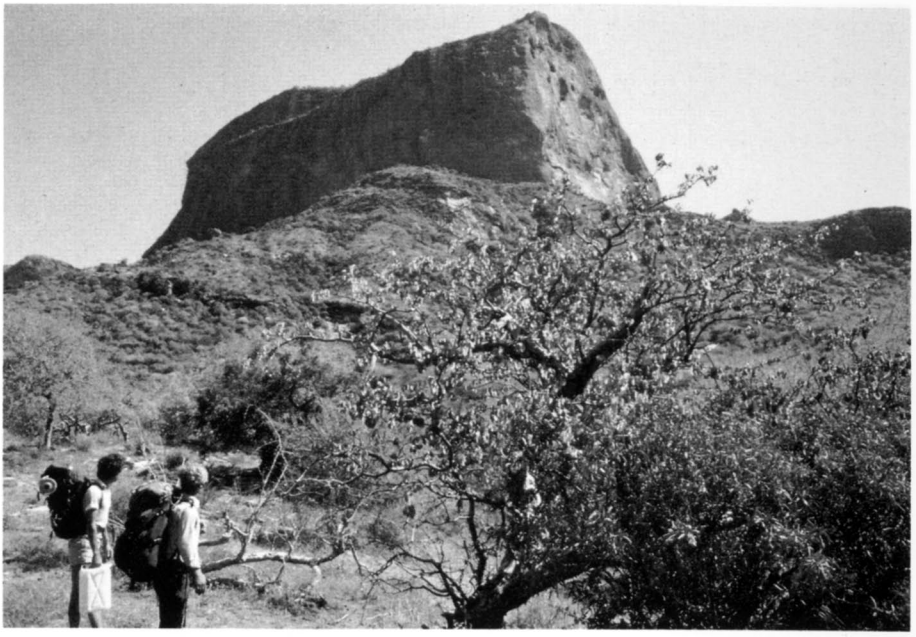
I believe that this ascent of a great mountain possibly gave me more pleasure than most things in my mountaineering career, even those in the Himalaya. But what was it that I liked so much about it? Well, it was the mountain's isolation in the heart of a continent. To find Kilimanjaro, 'Snow on the Equator', way out in Central Africa, is a unique experience even for a sophisticated mountaineer, unless he has no romance in his soul.



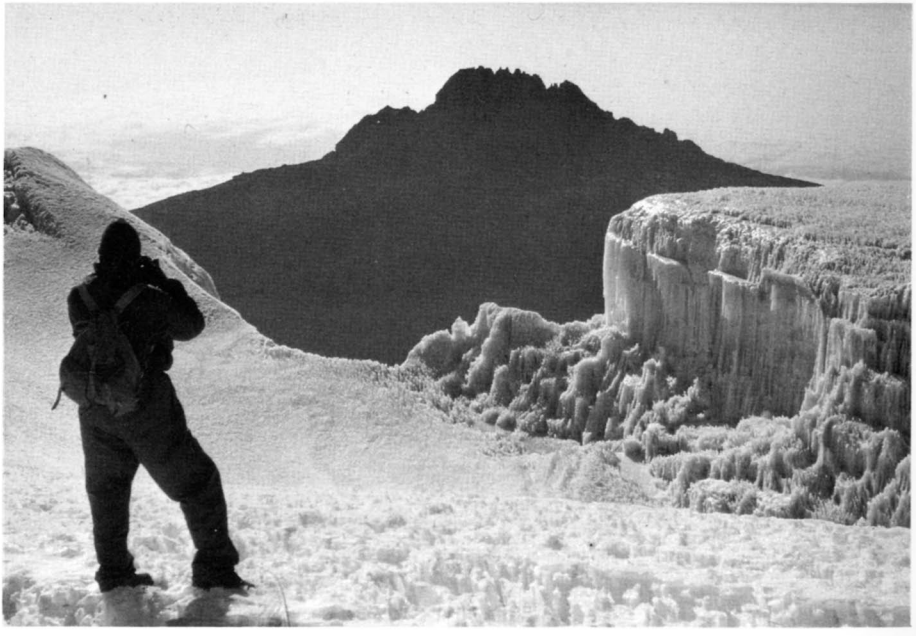
63. *Approaching Pioneer Peak (L) from Bogdanovicha glacier.* (p 101)



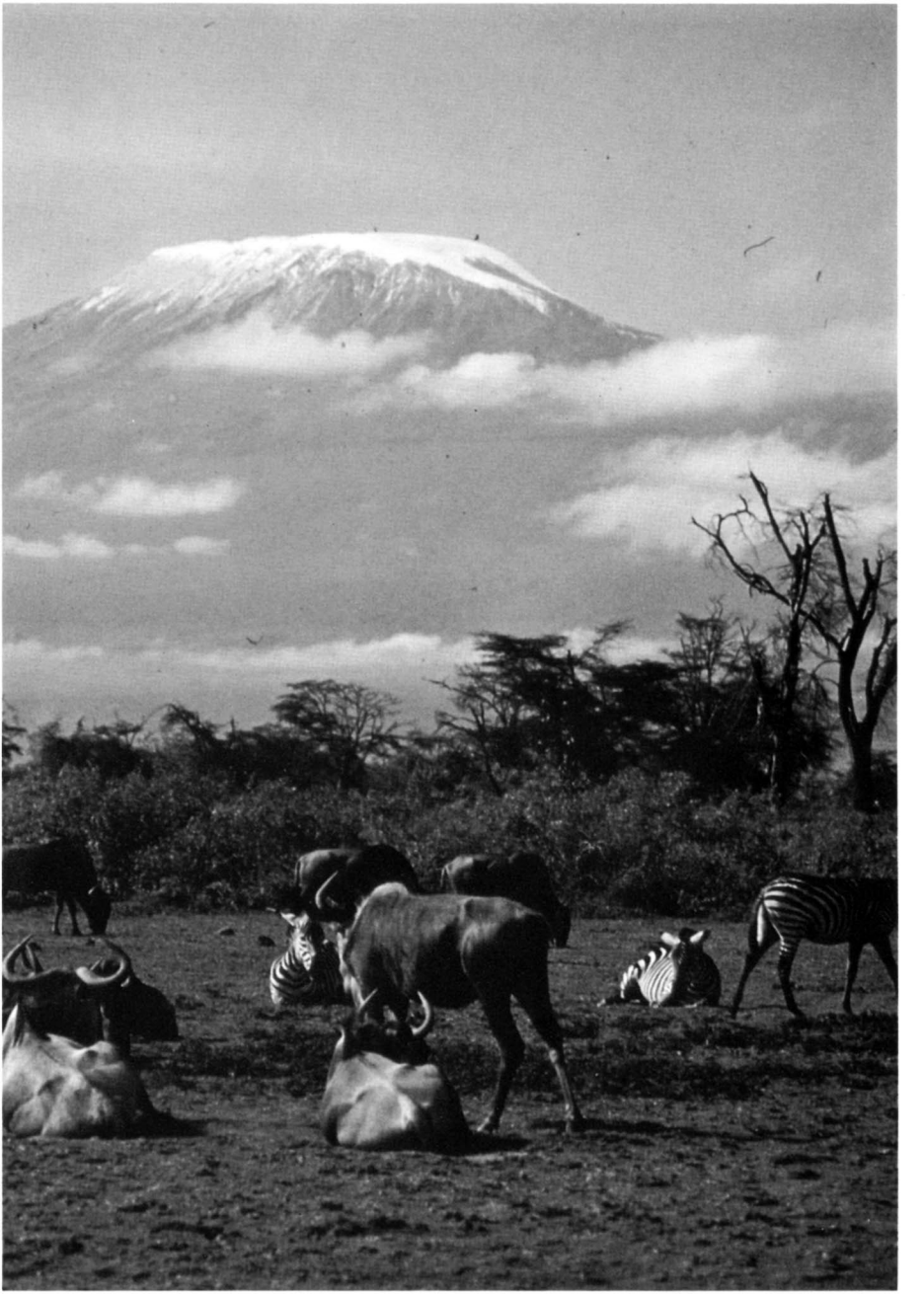
64. *On Gillman's Point, early morning.* (p 175)



76. *Mount Poi (Kenya), S crack approach.* (p 167)



77. *Looking E: Mawenzi from rim of crater.* (p 175)



78. Kilimanjaro from Amboseli. (p 175)