Lengai, Mountain of God

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(*Plate* 64)

It is common knowledge that none of the mountains of Britain have a permanent snow cover, and the entire African continent has only a few snow-covered mountains. Where there is such scarcity, lovers of the mountain scene have been known to indulge in make-believe with a substitute for the real thing.

Britain has its 'fake' in the form of the white quartzite screes of Beinn Eighe and in East Africa – although the resemblance is certainly no more than visual – there is the soda-ash cap of Ol Doinyo Lengai. In both cases the effect, like that of snow in summer, is to promote the stature of the mountain, make it more photogenic and enhance its allure through the distinctiveness bestowed on its upper reaches by the unfamiliar cover.

Viewed from the popular Nairobi vantage point of the Ngong Hills, 'Lengai' has other claims to distinction. It is the sole remaining active volcano in this part of the Rift Valley, and its symmetrical form stands in striking contrast to the mass of the Ngorongoro Crater Highlands behind, even from a distance of 170km. It is situated deep in Maasai country, in a remote site at the southern end of the alkaline lake Natron. The Maasai tribe reveres it fittingly as the mountain of God (Ngai). To the outside world its wild individuality makes it an obvious choice as an emblem of the Rift Valley. Its last major eruption was in 1966, when it smothered itself and the surrounding plains in inches of light grey ash. As an active carbonatite volcano it is unique and the relatively low temperature of its lava seems to result in less destruction than might be expected. The surrounding vegetation recovers quite quickly from an eruption, since it is not completely destroyed and re-emerges from its soft ash covering in a comparatively short time. Nevertheless, the lush appearance of Lengai's lower slopes during rainy seasons comes as a surprise, bearing in mind its recent history.

There are many sub-alpine mountains spread across East Africa which provide a great variety of interest to adventurous hikers and back-packers, but invariably involve route-finding through sometimes dense forest. Precipitation rises with altitude and results in rich forest cover on many hills in the region between 1600 and 3200m in height. Where not greatly disturbed, this forest is still the haunt of big game which can provide additional interest and excitement to hill-climbing here, to say nothing of the verdant beauty of the virgin forest itself. Due to its active volcanic nature, the vegetation on Lengai has not developed beyond grass, herbs and low scrub. Although the surrounding plains are at times brought to life by a rich and diverse fauna of migrating game (zebra,



64. Ol Doinyo Lengai from the Engare Sero River. (Peter Payne) (p 133)



65. Jonathan Preston on Mt Hunter W ridge, day 1. (Roy Ruddle) (p 145)

wildebeest, oryx etc) and birds, on the treeless, waterless slopes of Lengai you are unlikely to meet more than an occasional small antelope.

To the climber the mountain is enticingly visible from near Nairobi, but detailed maps of the area are virtually unobtainable and access involves crossing some 150km of dirt-track of uncertain quality. A visit has to be planned as an expedition. Not that this is is a major deterrent: at least one Nairobi resident has climbed the volcano 14 times to date (1989). As a sporting objective Lengai's shape and composition put any attempt on its summit in the category of dedicated exploration, with only a superficial resemblance to what is normally called mountaineering. From a base at about 1200m its slopes rise in an unbroken sweep to the summit on the crater rim which, since the last eruption, has stood at 2970m. It thus offers approximately 1800m of 'grind', initially in the inferno of one of the hotter parts of the Rift Valley close to the equator. Without the vegetation cover to give grip the slopes – which carry you, at a moderate but unrelenting and steepening angle, up into cooler, breezier air – would be acutely tiresome and difficult. With care it is possible to steer a viable course between dense, progress-impeding herb and scrub and the edge of one of the colossal erosion gullies that rend the volcano for most of its height. The scale of these gullies is difficult to appreciate from a distance and, once on the mountain and experiencing the extremely friable nature of its very juvenile rock, you find it difficult to believe that such formations, perhaps 60–90m deep, can endure without collapse. But the only slightly firmer chalk of Beachy Head is over 150m high and has offered climbing routes. Ultimately no rock formations are permanent and it is really a matter of the time-scale of their stability that decides our attitude to them.

Eventually the vegetation peters out and on the northern side you are brought out on to the white, soda-ash region which appears to feed, almost glacier-like, the gullies lower down. To the uninitiated this rather peculiar material is intimidating, but it is soft without being grossly unstable and brings you near the crater rim. Although not quite glissadable it allows scree-running in descent and is not as untrustworthy as it looks.

The exciting thing about volcanic cones that provides not a little incentive to endure the toil of their ascent is the prospect of seeing a new and hidden landscape once the crater rim is reached. On an active volcano no one can be quite sure what will be found. On Lengai anticipation is enhanced as you become aware of the build-up of sulphurous fumes as the rim is approached. Then, quite suddenly, the view ahead which had seemed depressingly unchanging for so many laborious hours is transformed. The 35m-deep crater is a grey-white sterile world, devoid of life but with steam vents gasping and sighing like some great aquatic mammal. Apart from the steam vents the crater floor, perhaps 300m across, is the level surface of welled-up lava waiting for the build-up of subterranean pressure to eject it, as it did 22 years ago. There is no fire and not much brimstone, but it is a dramatic and satisfying culmination to the climb. As with other free-standing mountains the views are stupendous, down to another mineral dominated landscape – the flamingo-breeding soda-flats of lake Natron and across, in the distance, to the genuine snow cap of Kilimanjaro.

Background Note

The mountains of East Africa that do not support equatorial snow or unique Afro-alpine vegetation because of their lower altitude – of which Lengai is one particularly striking example – comprise a diverse and fascinating resource which is still very under-explored. Sporadic attention by climbers since the 1960s has produced a few routes of outstanding quality in splendid, remote surroundings and has shown potential for much more. Botanically there is still much to be learnt. Although it is, of course, unlikely that there are any major secrets of natural history still to be uncovered, a large mammal – the Giant Forest Hog – of the Aberdare range in Kenya remained undiscovered until 1904 and the yeti-like phenomenon of the 'Nandi Bear' from the Nandi hills in western Kenya has yet to be explained. The literature, both technical and popular, is comparatively sparse and mostly out of date. Recent publications include a new, extensively revised edition of *The Mountains of Kenya*, and *Snowcaps on the Equator*, a generously illustrated book showing the scenic splendour of the East African hills and mountains.

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