East Africa 1989

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New Routes

Recently the numbers of mountaineers visiting East Africa has grown considerably. Many repeat the old classic routes on the main summits, but ever more are searching out more adventurous itineraries, exploring less well-known summits and venturing into more remote areas to sample the mixed delights of 'bush-climbing'.

On Mount Kenya a new line, Diamond Natasha, has been climbed on the Diamond Buttress. This beautiful rock wall has already provided some of the most magnificent, hard rock climbs in East Africa, and this route has been reported to provide more excellent pitches on perfect rock. The route starts up easy rocks at the right side of the buttress, crosses Southern Slabs, then tackles a line of cracks and corners forming a characteristic letter 'Z' between the Diamond Buttress Original Route and Southern Slabs. These provide several pitches of grade V–VI climbing. A bivouac was taken before tackling the upper section of the buttress; two pitches beyond this the Southern Slabs route was rejoined. The ascent was made in late February 1989 by two Polish climbers, Krzysztof Gwozdz and Zbyszek Wach.

The best time for climbing on the Diamond Buttress (maximum hours of direct sunlight) is in mid to late December. At this time it is also often possible to catch the Diamond Couloir in condition. In January 1990, an unusually late period of very bad weather over New Year allowed the Diamond Couloir to remain in good condition well into the month.

A few new routes have been pioneered on the minor peaks, amongst them a fine corner system on the nose of the Krapf Rognon.

There has been little recorded activity on Kilimanjaro. The glaciers continue to recede, but so far no good rock has appeared as a result! The Breach Wall Icicle, climbed by Messner, is still there. The Heim glacier, however, has suffered from recession; the lower sections are rubble-strewn and breaking up, but with a good snow-cover it could still be an excellent lower-grade snow and ice climb. Under good snow conditions an adventurous walking route up to the crater is by the Oehler ridge and Pengalski glacier; be careful to traverse right immediately after the Ravenstein to avoid ice cliffs.

Only one new climb has been recorded in the Ruwenzori. This is a suspected first ascent of the remote peak Rugendwara, 4300m, by N Woodward, M Wynne-Jones, A Rathmell and S Crofts. The major achievements of this ascent were the ability to find the mountain in the first place, and then to find a way up through the deep, vertiginous vegetation, slimy slabs and eternal mists.

The great cliffs of Poi in Northern Kenya have been revisited but not reclimbed. Attempts at new routes have so far been repulsed, and the East Face route has also repulsed several parties attempting a second ascent. A few bolts

have made the lower half of this route safer, and the short aid pitch has all the aid in place now. A few bolts would make the upper half of the route much more pleasant (no bolts were placed on the first ascent).

Bush-climbing cliffs ideally involve no climbing up bushes. Bad route choice can, however, result in this activity living up to its name. Not just bushes, but cacti, thorns and vines adorn certain cliffs which, together with the armies of ants, swarms of bees, snakes, scorpions, vultures and eagles defend fine lines from would-be first ascensionists. The name really comes from the location of the cliffs in bush country such as the Tsavo Game Park, where the bushes are obstacles mainly on the way up to the cliffs. After a particularly dry spell, walking in bush country is considerably easier along the many game trails which have been pushed through the bush – elephant are particularly good path-makers.

Kitchwa Tembo in Tsavo National Park has been visited several times and has had its reputation established as one of Kenya's best bush-climbing areas, with several excellent hard rock-climbs in magnificent settings on cliffs up to 300m high.

Nearer to Nairobi the outcrops at Lukenya have been revisited by axe-men and landscape gardeners. As a result some magnificent outcrop routes have been discovered in the modern style – top-rope inspections with bolts placed where considered essential. Slightly further from Nairobi the cliffs at Hell's Gate are now in a National Park with good camp-sites providing easy access to the climbs.

General

The rate of deterioration of the Tanzanian economy appears to be slowing, and some services are actually improving. Devaluation of the shilling has not made entry to Kilimanjaro any cheaper, as all park entry charges have to be paid at the Marangu Gate in foreign exchange.

On 1 January 1990 some of the park charges went up almost 300 per cent. Each day's camping anywhere on Kilimanjaro now costs $55 per person. Huts on all routes other than the Marangu tourist route are charged at this camping rate. Marangu route charges are $30 a day; these include hut charges. No adequate explanation for this strange charge system has been provided. During the peak New Year period overbookings were commonplace at Marangu route huts, visitors having to share beds or find floor or table spaces to sleep on. Others had to sleep out in leaky tents.

On Mount Kenya the growing popularity of the Chogoria route, combined with rains, has caused the track through the forest to vary from being a sea of mud, negiotiable only by amphibious land-rovers, to forming a scar of ridges and ruts requiring careful balancing acts from vehicles with low clearance. Rumour has it that the track is to have some hardcore put on it. The Naro Moru route provides a more reliable access route for vehicles. Park fees are due to go up, but inclusive of camping or hut fees they should not exceed $10 per day.

The political and economic situation in Uganda is improving rapidly, and

the Ruwenzori are gradually regaining their former popularity. A daily bus from Kampala to Kasese provides a reliable service. John Matte has stepped down, and porter and guide services are now provided by an efficient organization called 'Ruwenzori Mountain Services' based in Ibanda which he helped to set up. Various charges have been introduced, some to assist the local communities and some to help improve services in the mountains. Aid money has provided a new bridge across the Mubuku near the Nyabitaba hut. A more controversial project is the construction of a raised causeway of planks across the Bigo Bog (as yet 90 per cent incomplete, according to latest reports). Also there are plans for new huts and camp-sites. Porters are still paid low wages, but they must be provided with a variety of 'perks': food, clothing, blankets, pots and pans, cigarettes etc. As porters work on a rota basis, they might only go up with a group once a year, and these perks form an important supplement to their very meagre yearly incomes. The service they provide is excellent, but they will require double pay for rainy days or for travelling in snow. Be prepared to pay about 80,000 Ugandan shillings per person for all entry fees, porter and guide wages and perks. This is about $150, but it will vary depending on the exchange rates obtained. The huts on the Zaire approach have been refurbished. A standard trip costs about $40 in park entry fees, and a few extra dollars are needed for porter wages. Glacial recession on the western glaciers of Mount Stanley has been very marked.

Maps and Guidebooks

Recent additions include:
Map of the Ruwenzori (1989): three maps on one side (1:20,000, 1:50,000 and 1:400,000) provide detailed information on the central areas of the Ruwenzori, together with details of roads around the mountains. Guide printed on reverse side.
Map of Mount Elgon (1989): Similar design to Ruwenzori map and guide.
Map of Kilimanjaro (1989): The Ordnance Survey World Series. Updated version of the old 1:100,000 map. Information and peak area enlargement on reverse side.
Map of Kilimanjaro (1990): 1:75,000 map of mountain and access routes. On reverse: sketches, general information and enlarged maps of Kibo and Mawenzi.
The above maps are available through West Col Productions, Goring, Reading RG8 9AA.
The Mountains of Kenya (1989): A recently revised, comprehensive guide to all important mountains in Kenya. Only walking routes are described on Mount Kenya. Edited by Paul Clarke and published by the Mountain Club of Kenya. Available only in Nairobi.

Books

Mount Kenya (John Reader 1989): A 'coffee-table' book, well-illustrated, with general information and a description of personal experiences on his visit to the mountain. A follow-up to *Kilimanjaro*.

Africa's Mountains of the Moon (Guy Yeoman 1989): Few people know the Ruwenzori as well as Guy. This book is an account of his extensive travels, with excellent illustrations and beautiful botanical sketches. (The book is reviewed on p272 of this volume.)

I would be 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).