Changes on Mount Kenya

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In January 1991 Clive Ward, Magnus Karlsen and I made a successful ascent of Batian's SW ridge. The climb was pleasantly uneventful. We started at 7am and by noon we were standing on the summit. It was a good position to be in, for before us lay nearly seven hours of daylight, time enough for a relaxed descent of the Normal Route, and back to the hut for afternoon tea. We did make it back to the hut that day, but not in time for afternoon tea. We walked through the door at about 8pm. Descending from Batian had taken three hours longer than ascending it.

In the three years since I had last crossed the Gate of the Mists, a gap had formed on the Nelion side. From a point half-way across the original ice cornice, it was now necessary for us to descend about 10m of very steep ice on the S side of the Gate in order to reach the rock of Nelion. With crampons and ice-axes it would not have been a problem, but between us we were carrying two ice-hammers and wearing rock-shoes. It took us nearly four hours to cross, the climbing was serious, and in retrospect it was by far the most difficult part of our day.

Between June and October most parties who reach the Gate of the Mists will do so by having ascended one of the ice routes on the S face, and so will be properly equipped with the necessary gear. For them it will not be a problem, and it is quite possible anyway that the gap in question will not be there during those months. From Christmas to March, however, climbers should be aware of the increasing difficulties in the Gate of the Mists. Parties doing the Normal Route now should make crampons and ice-axes a mandatory part of their equipment. Obviously this situation is tough on those climbing the harder S face rock routes. Who wants to carry ice gear up the Diamond Buttress routes? Perhaps the time has come for us to think carefully about a good, solid, safe descent route down Batian itself.

In 1981 Alastair Stevenson and I guided seven inexperienced climbers up the South Face Route to the Gate of the Mists and then to the summit of Nelion. I had always felt that, given good winter conditions, this route offered the easiest way to the summit, and this ascent confirmed it. Conditions up the Lower and Upper Darwin glaciers were perfect and the climbing was easy. In 1972 Mountain Club of Kenya member John King was so impressed with this route that he wrote a glowing article in Bulletin 70. When I edited the *Guide to Mount Kenya and Kilimanjaro* in 1981, my description for the South Face Route on page 126 was 'In good conditions (ie when there is a good snow cover) the route does not exceed Grade 3'.

During the last decade, in the June to October season, the South Face Route has become one of the most dangerous climbs on Mount Kenya. The reason

why is a simple one. The Upper Darwin glacier has virtually disappeared leaving behind it blank, glazed rock slabs, which angle enough to hold a covering of snow. During these months, if viewed from the Teleki valley or even from the base of the climb, appearances are seriously deceptive. The South Face Route looks to be in perfect condition.

In September 1991 I attempted the route, expecting to find conditions similar to those I had experienced ten years earlier. The Lower Darwin was easy, and the narrow gully which links the Lower Darwin to the Upper Darwin was climbed without difficulty. I was with a relatively inexperienced climber from the United States, and the first pitch up rightwards onto the Upper Darwin gave no hint of what was to come. At a point about half-way up the second pitch I began to realise that I wasn't climbing up a glacier or icefield, but a thin veneer of verglas covered by about two inches of snow. The rock slabs underneath were so compact that protection was non-existent, and at the end of my rope-length I found a natural belay by pure chance. I decided conditions could only improve and continued, but found the next pitch identical to the previous one. As we carried only one rope, descent was not an option.

Up to this point I had found only one natural belay materialising by chance at the end of each rope-length, with no intermittent protection whatsoever. Our one rope, doubled for an abseil, could at best get us down 25m, and the only belays were about 50km apart. My partner lacked the necessary experience to down climb these pitches, and I doubted my own ability – they had presented me with some of the most frightening mixed climbing I had ever done. Our easiest way lay above. Six more pitches of desperate, protectionless climbing brought us to the base of the Nelion headwall. At this point I decided to abandon the route, and we traversed rightwards to the safety of Mackinder's Gendarme and familiar ground. My recommendation for future parties interested in the South Face Route between June and October is to stay away from it. It no longer exists in the form of the original route.[1]

As mountains go I have always felt Mount Kenya to be comparatively safe. Few of the natural factors which are responsible for the vast majority of fatalities in other ranges exist on the peak, such as crevasses, precarious seracs, or areas exposed to avalanche danger. Severe weather problems are not encountered; rain, yes – and lots of it, but none of the marathon storms which strike most of the world's other mountains of similar altitude. If one looks closely at the number of climbers killed on Mount Kenya, very few deaths have resulted from unforeseen objective dangers. I might be right in saying that, with the exception of the tragedy involving three British climbers who were killed by an avalanche down the Diamond Couloir during the early sixties, pretty well all the others can be attributed to some form of human error, such as careless abseiling or poor belaying. I have climbed 17 major routes on Batian and Nelion and, up until now, I have felt that only one was dangerous (North Gate, 1980). Even a line like the Diamond Couloir is usually safe, and the majority of people who have climbed it in the past have experienced little or no stonefall. It is my opinion that this situation is changing.

It is not uncommon these days to hear climbers speak of encounters with rockfall on many of the major Batian and Nelion routes. A visiting British party

abandoned their intention of climbing the Diamond Couloir last August when, from their bivouac the night before, they heard a massive avalanche hurtle down their proposed route. Two friends of mine were killed on the S face in September from a point in the vicinity of where the Ice Window Route splits from the South Face Route. There is no way of knowing for certain the precise cause of their fall, but an avalanche cannot be discounted. I found their bodies in the bowl at the top of the Lower Darwin, surrounded by rock debris. During my described attempt on the South Face Route last September I was unable to traverse rightwards on the Upper Darwin onto what appeared to be easier ground, owing to the amount of rockfall which I occasionally saw sweep the area.

Why is Mount Kenya suddenly becoming a more dangerous peak to climb upon? Perhaps we need look no further than the rapid shrinkage of its glaciers. The ice masses on the mountain have been receding slowly for decades, but in recent years the pace of shrinkage has quickened to the point where trekkers who make frequent excursions to Point Lenana and the circuit around the main peaks can now see obvious changes from year to year in the shapes of the main ice masses like the Lewis, Tyndall and Gregory glaciers. Climbers can see the changes in the described Gate of the Mists, the fact that the Diamond Couloir rarely forms nowadays between Christmas and March, and in the way that the W face has virtually become a rock route for half of the year. It is possible that, for centuries, the hanging glaciers, such as the Forel and Heim, and the steep ones like the Diamond, Upper Darwin and Northey, have contained large amounts of rubble beneath their surfaces. Now, with their galloping pace of shrinkage reaching a climactic stage where most will no longer exist in 30 or 40 years' time, there is only one place for the rubble deposits to go – screewards. Anyone attempting either the Diamond Couloir or the Ice Window Route between Christmas and March is stretching the limits of calculated risk.

At the risk of making this article unduly depressing, it might be worth addressing the weather situation on Mount Kenya. Miserable afternoon weather, in the form of thick cloud, drizzle and snowfall, has always been part of the normal weather pattern on the peak. However, in recent years climbers have noticed a marked increase in the intensity of afternoon storms. Last September I witnessed the worst storm I had ever seen in 25 years of climbing on Mount Kenya. Mark Savage, a Nairobi-based guide who spends much time on the mountain, had a similar experience in August. It is worth mentioning that these storms still have a long way to go before they reach the level of those which frequent most other high peaks of the world, but, for Mount Kenya, they represent an obvious change.

The shifting mood of Mount Kenya has not yet reached a stage where direct warnings are necessary, and it is my hope that this article is more subtle than that. If it alerts future climbers to factors that once were not worthy of consideration, then it has been of some use. The mountain is changing and we should be aware.

NOTES

1 For an excellent idea of the current state of the Upper Darwin glacier, it is worth looking at the photograph on page 118 of John Reader's *Mount Kenya*. The grey area to the left of the existing glacier is where the route ascends – a section that was glacier only ten years ago.