

East African Safari

Kenya, Uganda, Zaire, Rwanda
and Zimbabwe

January/February 1994

Encounter Overland

Gorillas, the Rwenzoris & Turkana Safari

plus

Mount Kenya Climb (Ian)

Note: This is an edited version of the original manuscript with some personal stories and comments removed. Only first names of people are used throughout. Photographs have been added, mostly of campsites, the truck and the group. The story of the Mount Kenya climb is included for interest although it was not part of the EO trip.

Introduction

After my 22 week "Africa A to Z" trip with Encounter Overland in 1989-90, I was keen to go back to Africa principally to visit the gorillas in Rwanda/Uganda. Many trips that included the gorillas also visited the game parks of Tanzania, including Serengeti and Ngorongor, which I had visited and didn't really need to visit again. So it was with great interest that I found the "Gorillas, Rwenzoris and Lake Turkana Safari" in the latest EO brochure. It was a four week expedition from Nairobi through northern Kenya, into Uganda and finishing in Rwanda at its capital, Kigali. This included almost entirely new terrain for me, except for the Queen Elizabeth National Park in Uganda. It also included a trek in the Rwenzori Mountains which would be a good break from the truck travel. And, of course, the gorillas in Rwanda. So having checked dates, airline schedules and so forth, I booked three months in advance.

In conjunction with this planning I had also been reading about the possibility of climbing Mount Kenya. I know several friends who have trekked up this apparently quite spectacular mountain, but it is well known that to reach the real summit is a serious rock climb. Thus I made contact with a well known company in Nairobi, Tropical Ice, who run treks up Mount Kenya and Kilimanjaro. My fax elicited a return fax not from them but from an Ian Howell. At this time I didn't realise who he was, until I read some more books and discovered that there is a small hut set atop the summit called Howell's Hut - I figured this was more than a coincidence. Ian's fax indicated that I should be able to do the climb and contained his prices for guiding - which were nearly as steep as the rockface! I later rang him up and exchanged a few more faxes before we agreed on a fee and set some dates. A little later I confirmed my arrival date in Nairobi as well as the approximate date of the climb.

The month or so before departure was jammed packed full of too much work, lots of reading, Christmas and visits from family and friends. Not much preparation was required - just a Kenyan visa to obtain by return mail from Canberra. I needed to buy a few bits of climbing equipment - helmet, some larger boots (my other rockclimbing boots are deliberately so tight that I wouldn't be able to wear them over thick socks) and some good quality dehydrated food for my trek. Vaccinations were mostly up to date but I got the new Hepatitis A vaccine, had typhoid boosted as well as Meningitis and a supply of very expensive Malaria tablets (\$7 each!). When I walked out of the Medical Centre with a \$450 bill I realised that travel in third world countries isn't so cheap afterall.

I flew with my then partner from Sydney to Harare via Perth, intending to overnight in Harare before taking an Air Zimbabwe flight to Nairobi. However, we encountered a long delay in Perth when the aircraft developed some technical problem. This necessitated a Qantas funded overnight stay in a Perth hotel and a very late arrival into Harare by which time we had missed the connecting flight to Nairobi. There was utter confusion at the Harare airport where we were checked through customs and immigration, and collected our baggage despite effectively being in transit. It turned out that an Air Botswana flight from Francistown to Nairobi was being diverted to Harare to collect us and quite a few other passengers who were also going to Nairobi, but they'd forgotten to tell various people in the airport who thought there was no such flight! Anyway, we got to Nairobi that evening, ultimately only a few hours later than planned.

Nairobi - The Expedition Begins

Nairobi airport is a large and somewhat confusing place with a distinct lack of signage to assist! However, we found our way to Immigration which was quite quick, in contrast to the baggage which seemed to take forever to appear, just like Harare. It was 7.15 pm before we grabbed a taxi, having quickly changed a reasonable sum of travellers cheques into local Kenyan Shillings. The rate was KSh67 to the US dollar or almost exactly KSh100 to the A\$. The taxi was a genuine London cab and it chugged up the divided highway into the bustling metropolis about 15 km away. It was a typically mild night - Nairobi has a very pleasant climate for most of the year and we were in the middle of the short dry season, when day time temperatures are in the high twenties.

We arrived at the Milimani Hotel at 7.45 pm, which is where the pre-departure meeting was to have been held at 6 pm, We checked at reception - we were meant to have a booking for the night - but they hadn't heard of us – welcome to Africa! They said there were some people out in the beer garden. We parked our bags and headed that way. As we went through the door I spied an "overland driver looking type" coming towards me. He looked straight through us - we did not look like overlanders, still dressed in our neat and tidy flying clothes, but I stopped him and asked if he was "Allyn" (I knew his name because I had rung the EO office in London to ask a few questions and they had told me). He immediately looked relieved. "Great - we're all out in the beer garden", so we grabbed our bags and joined the others.

We were soon introduced to the surprisingly small group. There were eight passengers, which is small by EO standards as the trucks will take up to twenty. I recognised Linda and Michael - they had come in on the same flight as us from Australia. Laura and Delorese were from Argentina and only Laura seemed to speak much English. Then there was Alan from England - I could see he was a bit of "a lad" and seemed like he would be good fun. He had done a Safari South (Dar es Salaam to Harare) a year or so before so we had something in common. And finally there was Therese from Switzerland - I've ALWAYS had Swiss people on my trips and they are always great. Therese was no exception.

I took an immediate liking to Allyn - he had an organised way of handling things while being the usual down to earth overland driver type that takes everything in his stride. He's a Kiwi, despite his Welsh name, and before becoming a driver he was a Training and Development person with a large industrial plant in NZ. At various times we got into discussions about human resources and psychology issues and it wasn't long before we joked about the usefulness of having a J-type person in the group to keep things organised (I'm a J-type person on the J-P dimension of the Myers-Briggs personality type analysis, based on Jungian psychology). I also had much common ground with Allyn because he had previously done both Safari South and Tibet trips for EO and knew my previous drivers - Johnny Paterson and Mick Larkin very well.

We had some beers - Kenyan Tusker beer is very nice, and ordered some steaks for dinner. Allyn went through the pre-departure information, since the 6 pm meeting hadn't happened - he only had half the group then so was in a bit of a panic wondering why his passengers had disappeared. He explained that we would stay in Nairobi all the next day in

order to buy supplies, organise our visas and also visit the National Park, then depart first thing Sunday morning.

As we didn't seem to have a booking at the hotel and besides, it was full, Allyn said we could stay with the truck out at the "campsite" which is a large property owned by another overland driver. Linda and Michael would go also and we were going to drop Laura and Delorese off at some Catholic mission well out of town. The other two were staying at the hotel. So by ten o'clock we were piled in the back of the Bedford - an orange one just like Merv, but this one was called Felicity! (JNM 603V). We were tired and laid down on the seats and tried to doze as we bumped along the roughish roads on the outskirts of town - it seemed to take forever and Allyn commented later that he hadn't realised how far Laura and Delorese had wanted to be taken! It was 11.20 when we reached the "campsite" and we grabbed a couple of stretcher beds off the truck and headed into the homestead to sleep on the floor of the "rumpus room" together with Linda and Michael.

Sleep was difficult, partly due to jetlag and partly due to a stray mosquito that was annoying us. Out with the repellent! We arose before seven, more because of an inability to sleep and besides, it was a lovely sunny day. We did some element of repacking and before leaving for town, I rang Ian Howell. I had tried him the night before but he was out, but this time I caught him. He was about to leave for the mountain so we made a firm arrangement to meet at the top hut of Mount Kenya (Austrian Hut) on the afternoon of Thursday, February 17th. It was strange to make such an arrangement more than four weeks in advance, but it was likely we would not get another opportunity to speak in the meantime.

We were back at the Milimani at nine o'clock and grabbed a quick bite of breakfast while Allyn was waiting for the green grocer man to bring some supplies of fruit and vegetables. Then it was to the Travel Agent to arrange our visas for Rwanda and Zaire. We were surprised that everyone else had these visas, as we were told they could definitely be obtained in Nairobi at the start of the trip. They cost KSh3500 each for the two visas and all handling fees. This was much cheaper than some people had paid to get them prior to the trip. Allyn arranged to have our passports returned to us at Samburu Lodge where we would be in about four days time.

Next stop was the supermarket where we had a lovely time buying all manner of things including cereals, rice, pasta UHT milk and various sauces. And of course a few crates of beer. I hadn't had a chance to checkout what was already on the truck so we doubled up on a few things but were generally very well stocked. From there we went to the Boulevard Hotel to park the truck - you can only park in certain places where a few tens of shillings paid to the ascari (guard) will ensure security. It was midday and a very hot day - probably in the low thirties. We strolled back to the Norfolk Hotel where we would have a delightful lunch - this is a fairly classy place. The food was good, the beers cold and everyone was contented, if not a little subdued. The group was still quiet and getting to know each other.



It was almost two o'clock when we headed out of town to the Nairobi National Park where we would spend an hour visiting the Animal Orphanage. Enroute Allyn spied a butchery which had been recommended to him and we stopped to buy some beef and some cheese. At the orphanage, which is similar to a zoo, we saw cheetah, leopard, lions, and various other animals. It's a sad kind of place because you see these majestic animals in enclosures - and you know they are only there because they have been orphaned or injured, and just over the fence is the wide open spaces of the National Park where they could be roaming "almost" free.

We returned to the campsite by about four where Allyn showed everyone around the truck, how to pitch a tent and so forth. As I knew all this, we agreed to get on with cooking dinner. We ate as it was getting dark around 6.30 and chatted for a few hours before bedding down at nine, still sleeping badly due to jetlag and barking dogs.

Travelling North - Lake Naivasha

It was a fairly lazy start the next morning so I cooked bacon and eggs and we eventually got on the road at nine o'clock. We passed through town without delay and headed up the divided road heading north towards Uganda. There is a very long slow climb and at the top there is a lookout on the escarpment looking across the Great Rift Valley. From here you can see the Satellite Earth Station on the road to Masai Mara National Park and further north the distinctive volcano shape of Mount Longonot (2775 metres). I stayed on the truck and everyone was besieged by curio sellers who have set up their stalls at the lookout. We were soon to realise that Laura was going to buy anything and everything, and that she wasn't too worried about negotiating a sensible price!



The road climbed a little more across a pass which is around over 2000 metres and it was quite cool. Then the road descended steeply into the Great Rift Valley as we neared the township of Naivasha and the lake of the same name visible beyond. There are a myriad of lakes spread throughout the Rift Valley and while some are salt or soda lakes, this one is freshwater. We left the highway and skirted the edge of the lake to reach the quite nice campsite - "Fisherman's Camp" - by 12.30.

After lunch we relaxed for a bit and pitched our tents. Michael, who was acting as barman, even located a supply of cold beers from the campsite "shop". About three we headed off to visit "Elsamere", the house of Joy Adamson of "Born Free" fame. Now that both Joy and George have been murdered, the house is maintained as a museum, although it is apparently also possible to stay over and use it as a guesthouse. It's a lovely house, set among trees and lawns, and overlooking the lake. Colobus monkeys play in the trees and

birds abound. We wandered around, watched a short video on the life of this rather eccentric woman, and took tea and cake in the garden. Delightful stuff.



Back at camp we prepared for the next day when we would do a walk through Hells Gate National Park. There were quite a lot of other campers around and we chatted to one guy who had ridden his bicycle from Cairo! After dinner and several beers we got stuck into the coffee and local coffee liqueur, but bedded down by 9.30 pm amidst a raving swarm of mosquitoes. We somehow managed to keep them out of the tent. During the night we were, however, awoken by loud grunts, heavy footsteps and lots of munching. I peered through the mosquito net across the open door of the tent to see a huge hippo grazing just 5 metres from the tent!

We left camp next morning at 8 am after a less than impressive start - people were still fairly slow to get up and do their chores. The desire to leave early today was to take full advantage of the cooler part of the day as we walked through Hells Gate. As it was, we started walking from Elsa Gate at 8.30 am, and Allyn drove off in the truck with an agreement to meet us at the other end around 2.30 pm. The park is quite spectacular with precipitous rock walls and the rock spire of Fishers Tower, an old volcanic plug, in the middle of the wide gorge. Here we found a group of British army guys on "exercises" doing rockclimbing up the spire. I would have liked to have joined in.

Soon after the tower we diverged from the main track and followed a vestigial track, keeping the main road in sight. We saw quite a lot of hartebeest and impala, as well as a few zebra and giraffe. As we headed back towards the main road a local guide came over and told us ever so politely that we must keep to the road as there may be buffalo around in the scrub.



The walking was mostly flat along the road so was not demanding, although Laura and Delores were constantly complaining. We were certainly going through quite a lot of water as the day heated up. We were passed a couple of time by a group of cyclists - Germans I think. As we entered the narrow part of the gorge and an area where the scrub was thicker, it became really hot with little or no breeze. It was just after 11 o'clock when we reached the picnic ground and a sign saying "Hot Springs". Here there was a picnic shelter and everyone collapsed and we called it an early lunch.

We were in sight of the Central Tower (reminds me of the Central Pillar of Mordor from Lord of the Rings) and after eating my sandwiches, I wandered down through the creek, past the hot springs, and over to the tower. I climbed a bit of the way up but it was pretty messy and loose. However I could get a good view in the direction we were heading and could see we had to scale quite an incline before reaching the geothermal power station, quite obvious by the plumes of steam and many pipes.

All the others continued resting. Upon my return it was midday and we headed off. Soon enough we reached a steep climb of perhaps a hundred metres gain in about 500 metres, and Therese and I quickly disappeared out of sight of the others. It was clear who were the fit ones! At the top we reached the gate to the power station and entered - there was a guard there, but we are allowed to proceed through on the road. We waited for the others who arrived in due course - Laura and Delores bringing up the rear and complaining of being near to exhaustion!

From here we followed a tarmac road through the complex network of pipes and building that is this geothermal power station. It produces 15% of Kenya's power requirements. It's about a kilometre to the exit gate and then a long gradual climb up to a pass from where we could see the equally long and gradual descent down to the exit gate from the National

Park. It had become overcast by now and a reasonable breeze also helped in keeping us cool. I reached the gate about 1.40 pm with Allyn arriving in the truck half an hour later. By this time everyone else had arrived but Laura and Delores were complaining that they had never walked so far before in their lives - geez - it was only about 15 kilometres and almost all flat!

Back at camp I spent some time sorting through the stores under the seats in the truck, partly to find out what was there and partly to make it more accessible. Whoever had done the last truck cleanout and repack had done an appalling job as stuff had been tossed in with no care at all. It was all over the place. I wouldn't be able to fix it all now but I did at least sort out the canned goods and recovered quite a bit of space which could then be used for the bar! Michael and Alan had fetched cold beers and Alan was consuming them rather quickly!

By four it was cool and threatened to rain but just held off. A local man came by with some very small fish - Linda and Michael were cooking and had ordered these. We needed one fish each and they turned out to be very tasty. I assisted with the fire which was also being used to bake the spuds in foil. After main course we had a treat - icecream purchased from the campsite store! Then more coffee and liqueur and finally bed! Didn't hear any hippos that night - perhaps they were elsewhere in the camp or maybe I just slept extra well.

The plan for Tuesday was to travel north to Nyahururu, also known as Thompsons Falls, named after the high waterfalls just on the outskirts of this otherwise uninteresting town. This would take us just over the equator and then we would travel east towards the Sweetwater Rhino Reserve which we would visit the next morning. Theoretically this would be an easy day with only about 150 kilometres to travel, with plenty of time for shopping.

The start was slow and we were away at 8.30 am and in Naivasha township at nine to do some shopping. With a better idea of what was on the truck I went in search of some of the missing essentials as well as fruit and frozen meat. We pressed on after an hour up the main highway to the next town of Gilgil which, despite being dusty and windswept, showed signs of having an open bank. Allyn wanted to change some travellers cheques as did Alan and the Argentineans. However, the bank was hopeless - they wouldn't change money because they didn't have the daily rate, and they couldn't get through to the main office in Nairobi. TAB - That's Africa Babe. We eventually left after more than an hour - Alan got some money at the previous day's rate but they wouldn't change Allyn's - it was too large a sum to risk using the wrong rate!

We headed out of Gilgil and it was by now almost midday, very hot and a horrid wind blowing a dust storm at us. We needed to head north according to the map but after we had left town the road turned to absolute rubbish and it was covered in an endless stream of traffic, mostly trucks raising their own huge dust storms. I checked my map and the direction - we were clearly following the old highway, which now seemed to be the main highway (it turned out the new highway is still being built so the traffic was being detoured onto the old highway). I signalled Allyn to stop and I showed him the map and while he agreed, he said he would go ahead to Nakuru anyway - at least he would find a bank there that might work, and then we could take another road to Nyahururu.

We rejoined the new highway after about 10 kilometres and then it was relatively plain sailing into Nakuru, which is Kenya's fourth largest town (after Nairobi, Mombasa and

Kisumu). I saw an interesting road sign along the way giving distances to various destinations including Nakuru and Kampala, but the fascinating one was "LAGOS 5709" - I've done a good deal of that route to Nigeria and I'd hardly describe it as obvious! To get to Lagos one has to fully cross Uganda, Zaire, Central African Republic and Cameroun as well as much of Nigeria. I guess the sign is a symbol of the British attempt to colonise the whole of Africa - Lagos is the capital of Nigeria, an ex-British colony like Uganda and Kenya, but unlike the French and Belgian ex-colonies in between.

I saw the turnoff as we headed into town and Allyn soon parked in the centre of the bustling shopping area. He handed us each some money and told us to find our own lunch, taking turns so that the truck would remain occupied by someone. He went to one of the nearby banks and some of us headed off and found a "chicken and chips" place. It was almost one o'clock so we were pretty peckish. The service was friendly and the food seemed OK, and was certainly cheap - much less than the couple of hundred shillings Allyn had handed us.

Changing money was slow as were Laura and Delores with their incessant shopping, and those of us on the truck were constantly being pestered by street vendors selling cassette tapes of African music - really cheap so we bought one but it was awful. We got going out of town about two o'clock and the road to the north was indeed quite new and good tarmac. However it climbed much of the way and had one very long slow hill - all second gear stuff (which is about walking pace). It was almost four o'clock when we reached Nyahururu, having climbed to 2360 metres and crossed the equator, although no sign of a sign!

There is a pleasant reserve at Thompsons Falls with many curio shops, picnic tables and a bar. You can get a good view from the top but several of us made the walk to the bottom of the 72 metre waterfall. The climb out was invigorating as was the cold beer to follow! We sat for a while in the fading afternoon sun.

It was five o'clock when we headed eastward and soon picked up the narrow dirt road that heads across the high plateau towards Nanyuki and Mount Kenya. As the clouds ahead were breaking up I could just start to discern the vague outline of the peak of Mount Kenya from the surrounding cloud. We were still about 100 kilometres from the mountain, but what a sight! We pulled off into the thinly treed savannah just after six o'clock as the sun was almost set, and quickly decided it was too nice a night to put up tents - we would sleep out.

As the sun had set the beautiful silhouette of Mount Kenya became clear against the orange sky - a superb photograph. A herd of Thompson's gazelle wandered by a few hundred metres away. We had a good fire going and dinner was good. It was a crystal clear starry night with a half moon, and Mount Kenya could be seen dimly in the distance. We bedded down at 9.30 pm and all was well until about three in the morning when we awoke - it was FREEZING COLD. I had seriously misjudged the cold and we did not have our thermals out. I overlooked the fact that we were at about 8000 feet. It must have been just below freezing and that is not fun without a tent! We didn't sleep much from then until dawn.

My problems were just beginning though. Apart from being woken by the cold, I had stomach cramps and pains. I held off until 5.45 but then had to get dressed and disappear into the predawn light behind some scrub. I was not well, and so soon in the trip! I was

annoyed, but put it down to the take-away lunch the previous day. I didn't eat breakfast, and just some dry bread for lunch, and finally some bread and honey for dinner. I have always found that the best way to deal with "the shits" is to stop eating for a while, then gradually start up again after about 12 hours. Of course it's essential to keep drinking lots and I took a few drinks with gastrolyte to keep my glucose and salts in balance. I really wasn't all that sick on this occasion and was not sick again for the entire trip.



The view of Mount Kenya was superb with the sun coming up behind it. We got away at 7.15 am and reached Sweetwater Rhino Reserve at 8.50, and were soon cruising through this small park. We saw a few giraffe, oryx and eland as we headed to the enclosure where we stopped for a while. There we saw "Blue", a gigantic warthog, and "Morani" the male rhino who is guarded 24 hours a day from poachers. It was possible to stand beside and even touch this "tame" rhino.

It was getting very hot as the group headed to the hippo pool, but I was feeling a bit dehydrated with my sickness, so I stayed in the truck and drank lots of water. The others were away for about 20 minutes, having seen five hippos. I had a superb view of the now relatively close (about 50 km) Mount Kenya from the truck, although the heat haze was starting to blur its definition. We drove around the remainder of the park for a while looking for a herd of elephants which the guide thought he could locate, but he didn't succeed. It was right on midday when I saw the first lot of cloud start to obscure the main peaks of Mount Kenya, and soon after that we left the park and continued east to the town of Nanyuki.

Nanyuki was hot and dusty - quite unpleasant really. We spent over an hour there, mostly in the service station filling with both diesel and water. The water pressure was minuscule and it took forever. Meanwhile we were being hounded by a local idiot who wanted to cut the bungie cords off the truck, and it was a constant battle to drive him away. Some

shopping was done but the variety was minimal, something we would have to come to accept in this semi-desert northern part of Kenya..

We stopped for a late lunch at 2.20 pm in a quarry not far north of Nanyuki and then continued on the excellent tarmac road through to Isiolo by about 4.30 pm. I slept for much of the way but sat up periodically to inspect the even closer view of Mount Kenya.

Amazingly, it was still clear on top and I could see the main peaks and the Gregory Glacier quite clearly. At the closest spot we were still 30 km from the peaks. At Isiolo there is a police checkpoint where the tarmac road ends. The theory is that they hold you up just long enough for the myriad of souvenir sellers to do some business - they certainly surrounded the truck and did do some business. There was a strong Muslim influence here with a large unfinished mosque and women allwith covered heads.

The Lands of the Samburu

The road north from here is horrid - rough, rocky and corrugated and with a lot of traffic and associated dust, but the scenery is strikingly beautiful – arid acacia covered plains with low hills in the background. It took an hour and a half to do the 30 or so kilometres north to Archers Post and then the five kilometres along the road to our campsite near the gate to Samburu National Reserve. There is a Samburu village right near the gate and they followed the truck along the track to the campsite, which they have established, and showed us where to camp.



They were really friendly, draped in their traditional bright red wraps, adorned with jewellery and carrying spears. We had barely stopped when they had started gathering kindling and larger wood and in due course they started the fire for us. It was a quick dinner as it was after six o'clock when we stopped and thus the light was soon gone. The Samburu guard and the chief sat with us over dinner and we offered them some also (after all, I wasn't eating). In contrast to the previous night we were now at a lower elevation, and it was clear but mild, so we slept out comfortably with nets attached to a small acacia tree. The ascari wandered around with his torch during the night, and he reported to us in the morning that some elephants had wandered by.

It was Thursday - a week after our departure from Australia and we were about to do our first "real" game drive. It was a clear day and it would quickly become quite hot. I felt nearly 100% after a good night's sleep and had a good breakfast. The open air 4WD Toyota arrived soon after seven and we headed off at 7.20, a little cramped as we had been sent a six

seater when there were in fact nine of us. Within minutes we had entered the Samburu National Reserve and our local driver took us to various haunts seeking out interesting game. The smallish vehicle was good as we could all hear his expert commentary, and with its open roof some of us could stand while others sat.

We soon found oryx which are relatively common in Samburu, and then some gerenuk, the lightly built small antelope that stand on their hind legs in order to reach the lower leaves of bushes from which they get their moisture and nourishment. Next were some elephants wandering across our track, a small herd of waterbuck, and then some giraffe. It's desolate country - many rock outcrops and nothing much to eat but dry grass - not like the game parks we have seen further south, although rather like some of the northern parts of South Africa's Kruger National Park. All the while, huge rocky mountains form a superb backdrop, and in the distance to the south, the unmistakable silhouette of Mount Kenya was clearly visible some 100 kilometres away.

Our driver spotted something interesting and the pace of the vehicle quickened. "Ostrich" he said and sure enough I could see a male ostrich strutting across the grasslands. But there was more. Our driver could also see the female, as could the male ostrich, but we had to get much closer before our untrained eyes could see the significance of the situation. He manoeuvred close to the meeting of the sexes and we were treated to a mating dance - by the male of course - quite spectacular. The subsequent mating act seemed rather quick and insignificant in comparison.

Our drive continued and we saw several Grevy's zebra, which have narrower and more regular pinstripes in contrast to their close relatives, Burchell's zebra. There were many small animals around also - dik dik, always in pairs, as they mate for life, and ground squirrels. The odd family of scurrying warthogs were also encountered. We also saw, ever so briefly, a bat eared fox. The birdlife is also superb, and our driver knew the various species very well. Of particular interest were some pygmy falcons, the smallest bird of prey.

We reached Samburu lodge at 10.30 where we unloaded and entered this piece of luxury in the midst of the harshness of northern Kenya. We would spend more than five hours here, sitting out the heat of the day, taking in an enormous lunch as well, and being entertained by some Samburu dancers! We began with coffee, sitting in the open air lounge overlooking the mostly dry river. Here we could watch a number of maribou storks playing cat and mouse with the crocodiles as they tried to catch landlocked fish in the remaining puddles. The crocs just sit motionless near a pool, seemingly dead, and the storks creep up gingerly, one eye on the croc and one on the fish. All of a sudden the croc will come to life and the stork will recoil out of harms way.

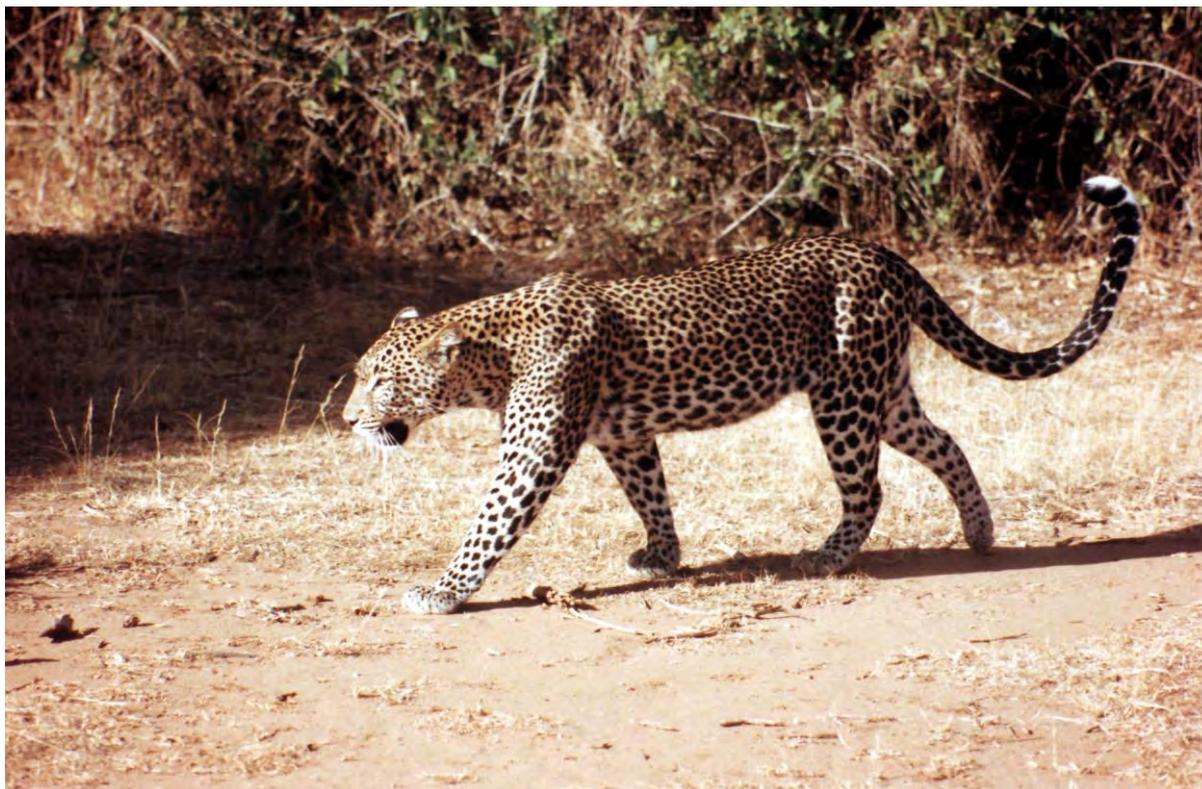
It was a long slow lunch - after all, I had a day's worth of eating to catch up on. It was a smorgasbord and most of us got our money's worth (EO's money actually), with numerous visits to the food table. To cap it off, the beers were nice and cold. The only negative was that our passports hadn't turned up so Allyn had to phone Nairobi and arranged for them to be at Lake Baringo the next day. By two o'clock we retreated back to the lounge to have some more coffee and to see if the crocs would score anything to eat. The game was continuing but this time a monitor lizard with an apparent death wish had joined the game and was trying to get fish from the pools, almost becoming crocodile food on several

occasions. A tortoise also wandered by, but didn't seem too concerned by any of the other participants in this river bed drama.



We headed off in a different vehicle at 3.40 pm, this time an eight seater minibus. I think I actually preferred the smaller vehicle as it was more "open", although this one also had a "flip top" roof. We spent some time over in Buffalo Springs Reserve on the other side of the river, but it was extremely dry and rocky. The only game we really saw was along the river, including a large herd of elephants, and some oryx and zebra wandering about in the river bed. Back on the north side of the river we saw more elephants and plenty of other vehicles. Usually when we reached another vehicle they would stop side by side and the drivers would compare notes. It seemed there were some lions in a particular area and our driver took us through the maze of tracks several times but without success.

However, we were not entirely without luck. In the same area we came across a leopard and her cub, just strolling along and we were able to get within a few metres of them. They seemed unconcerned by us, and indeed within minutes a crowd of about five viewing vehicles were milling around as the pair continued on their stroll. It was the first time I had seen leopards in the wild and it was only slightly less than perfect when our guide said that the lodge puts out meat for them late in the afternoon so they are often seen strolling towards the lodge late in the day. Any lack of perfection was soon dismissed when we found yet another leopard, this time a big male sitting in a tree. No other vehicles bothered us this time and we all admired the great beast as he sleepily clambered down out of the tree and wandered slowly off into the scrub. Wow!



It was almost dark when we reached camp after a great day in Samburu. Allyn was telling us how expensive the day was to arrange - Kenya really knows how to charge for things. Because Kenya does not allow foreign registered vehicles into their National Parks, EO must hire a vehicle and there seems to be something of a monopoly on this trade such that it cost US\$1000 for the vehicle and driver for the day - I guess it's based on US\$120 per person or something like that.

The night was mild, almost warm, the fire was going well and we took our time with dinner as we were all still pretty full from lunch. With a few warm beers, the conversation was going well. Allyn was telling us about some of the silliest questions that had been asked by passengers during his several years as a driver. Perhaps the best was "will my mother be home if I ring her now?" to which Allyn cleverly answered "no, she's out playing bowls". Another good one was "will it be a problem if we run out of diesel?" to which the answer was "no, we'll just drive back and get some more!"

After dinner we were sitting around the fire when I shone my torch across where I had set up our beds, sleeping bags atop the camp stretchers. I saw two bright reflections and thought they were a pair of shoes with reflective material on their heels. I starting moving towards the bed and the reflections started to move - it was an animal which had decided that one of our beds was a very comfortable spot to relax. Soon enough it became nervous, stood up and headed off into the night. The ascari chased it for a bit and with the aid of one of our animal identification books, he confirmed that it was a civet cat.

Next morning we awoke at six to the usual cool clear morning and headed off at 7.20, stopping in the small town for about twenty minutes mostly to buy drinks and some meat. Allyn wandered back with a lovely "leg of goat". For some reason Allyn had done a U-turn before stopping in town - the road was actually wide enough to do so in the truck in one go!

However, when we headed off he started to head southwards out of town. Somewhat bemused at this strange behaviour I hung out the side of the truck and caught his eye in the rear view mirror and gesticulated at him. Suddenly he realised what he was doing - I think he was just in a bit of a daze! Another U-turn, back through town and we were away heading towards Ethiopia on the Trans East-African Highway - wide, dusty and not too corrugated.

It was a beautiful clear day and I just gazed out at the superb landscape - semi desert savannah with a backdrop of rugged mountain ranges. After 45 minutes we reached the completely unsignposted turn left where we would head westward - Allyn propped and examined his map but I was certain it was the correct spot just from the position of the mountains which were shown well on my map. From here we headed across a series of roads of varying quality through the heart of Samburu country. We passed small villages and terrain which varied from savannah to beautiful gorges with dry sandy river beds to rugged mountains. Occasionally we would pass some Samburi tribesmen, as well as camels and other wildlife.



Late in the morning we climbed a steep escarpment to reach the top of a pass with a superb view down into the gorge of the Ewase Ngiro River several thousand feet below us. As we stopped a few Samburu teenagers dressed in traditional clothing and jewellery appeared from nowhere. They wanted money for photographs.



After the pass we emerged onto a flat windswept high plateau and Allyn stopped for lunch next to the only tree that could be seen for miles around. It was a desolate spot but once again a few locals appeared from nowhere to watch our antics. We discussed the morning's scenery with Allyn who agreed it was the best African scenery he had ever seen. Midway through lunch along came a bus and we were expecting to get covered in dust but it turned out we had stopped next to the bus stop and the bus gently came to a halt with very little dust getting in our sandwiches!

Lake Baringo - Birds, Hippos & Crocs

We sat up front with Allyn during the afternoon. The terrain became less interesting as we headed westward through a few small towns, but the roads were somewhat better and we were making reasonable time. Then we entered another mountain range and the road became twisty and rough. In due course Lake Baringo came into view way below us. It is another one of the freshwater Rift Valley Lakes and is a similar size to Lake Naivasha. Our destination was on the west side so we had quite a lot more driving to do. It was about five o'clock when we reached the village of Loruk and turned left onto a tarmac road. It was a fast mostly downhill run for the 15 kilometres to the village of Kampi-ya-Samaki where there is a pleasant campsite on the shores of the lake in amongst some acacia trees. And our passports had arrived! It was a pleasantly warm evening and we could take a warm shower, get some laundry done by one of the locals, and get some cold beers from the campground shop. We bedded down quite late as next day would be a day of leisure! Like at Lake Naivasha, hippos were busy running around our tents during the night!

Next morning was a lazy start and we headed off on a boat trip at 9.30. After much debate we had agreed to take an hour long trip to see hippos, fish eagles and crocodiles, but not to actually stop on the island in the middle of the lake where there are springs. The major problem was that the drought had caused the lake's level to be very low and even at the very end of the small jetty the longboat was barely floating and had to be manhandled across the shallows to open water before the small outboard could be started. The hippos were indeed right next to the boat although they were grazing quietly and not showing any more than their eyes and nostrils. They can be a real hazard in the water - like a mostly submerged iceberg, and we very nearly collected one of them out in the middle of the lake. We reached the island in the middle of the lake where there is a small village. There we have to pay a small sum to buy some fish of a boy on a tiny makeshift craft. These are used to lure fish eagles to swoop down right near the boat. Further on we see a lot of crocodiles basking in the sun.



We then sped back to the campsite, with all the males having to get out of the boat and push it through the mud for the last ten metres to the jetty! We were back at 11 am and proceeded to just laze about. A discussion ensued about whether we should depart that afternoon and make a start on the long journey northwards to Lake Turkana, or stay here overnight and reach Lake Turkana the middle of the day after. We were about evenly divided, the Argentinians strongly wanting to stay here in the relative comfort of a campsite, me strongly wanting to get going and have a rough camp somewhere out in the desert. The wimps won out and we stayed.

At least this would give us plenty of time to do some shopping, and since Rita and I would be cooking the following night we would walk into town around four o'clock when it would be starting to cool off. After lunch we just lazed about and read, or took photographs of the beautiful and very timid birdlife that abounds at Lake Baringo. Some of the others went into the resort next door to use the swimming pool.



A Guerba truck pulled in mid afternoon and we headed up to the shop to buy a cold drink. Some of the Guerba passengers were there but they seemed a rather loud and ugly lot, perhaps because there were some Americans, so we chatted instead to a couple of guys from the Czech Republic who were travelling around on public transport. Linda and Michael joined us soon after four o'clock to walk into the village and do some shopping.

It's about ten minutes walk into the village and it was fairly quiet on a Saturday afternoon. It wasn't at all obvious what shops were about but a couple of young boys befriended us and started asking what we wanted to buy and then they would take us there. They were genuinely helpful, although the basic problem was that none of the shops really had very much to sell! We wanted some green vegetables but were told they were coming on the bus which would arrive soon. Sure enough, the bus roared into town in a cloud of dust, and after a few passengers alighted, someone climbed onto the roof and tossed a hessian bag onto the ground. In due course, it was carried to a nearby shop and we went there to buy some kooma something. It cooked up OK but was a somewhat bitter and stringy. Elsewhere we bought some tomatoes, onions, bananas and plums, all very cheap. We then stopped in a bar for a cold beer each and bought our helpers a coke each. On the way back we also found some cans of Blue Brand Margarine - always very reliable throughout Africa! Back at camp the "leg of goat" was being turned into a curry was served with the kooma after pre-dinner snacks of guacamole, chips and beer. It was a cooler evening and sleep was pleasant until 3 am when some hippos ran around our tent waking us!

Lake Turkana - The Jade Sea

We managed a reasonably early start and would have been away at 7.20 am except that Allyn couldn't find anyone to pay the camping fees to. The gateman eventually appeared and was happy to take the money but Allyn wanted a receipt, for obvious reasons. It would be unfortunate for the next EO group if we were accused of not paying! It was 7.40 when we eventually headed northwards up the tarmac, reaching Loruk at 8 am. From here the road quickly turns to dirt, dust and sand - really dusty and getting progressively hotter as the day progressed. We plodded on through superb but desolate country with very little sign of any habitation.

It was about ten o'clock when we reached the village of Kapedo where a river with some water was crossed by the road. Here we came across a flurry of activity - people bathing, kids swimming, goats and camels milling about, donkeys standing doing nothing. After a kilometre, the village was passed and we returned to the desolation and indeed the road deteriorated significantly as we entered some rotten sandhill country with rocky ridges as well. The going was slow but the scenery fantastic with high rugged mountains to our immediate west.

We stopped for lunch at 12.45 in what can only be described as "the middle of nowhere". The salient feature was a termite hill towering about twenty feet in the air and while we set up lunch in the searing heat of the day, Allyn lit a small fire with some twigs and boiled the kettle for a cup of tea - very civilised! As luck would have it, about fifteen minutes after lunch we meandered through a lovely palm filled valley where there must be a natural spring - Allyn noted it as a better spot for lunch "next time".



Two more hours of driving brought us to the village of Lokori which was a substantial size - it even has a World Vision office! From here the road improved, but about 10 km further on was a confusing road junction and Allyn stopped while we consulted all our various maps - each of them showed something different. In any case, we needed to refill our water bottles from the truck tank, even though the water was fairly warm! After duly consulting the sun which was by now slightly south of west, and my compass, we headed off to the WNW on what we hoped was the road to Lokichar.

The road became narrow and sandy with numerous creek crossing, although a complete absence of any water. We spied the odd antelope and a few goats, and closer to Lokichar, a couple of small villages. Lokichar was duly reached at 6.10 pm as the sun was starting to set - Allyn had wanted to get that far, and we quickly passed through the somewhat lively looking town, joined the good tarmac road and headed northwards with the intention of finding a rough camp a respectable distance out of town. We camped about 500 metres off the road amongst lower scrub at about 6.25.

The dryness of the adequate supplies of dead branches allowed me to have a roaring fire going within about 10 minutes and soon after everyone was getting stuck into cups of tea which seemed to be the most refreshing drink after a long hot day on the road. This was duly followed by a barbecue of T-bone steaks and snags, washed down with warm beer. It was a mild night, and we slept comfortably outside beside the truck. It was surprisingly light due to a nearly full moon. The only noise was the occasional passing of huge road trains on the nearby road which is the main arterial road from Kenya to the Sudan.

Even though this seemed to be a completely desolate country, we were awoken early by some locals wandering by - I wonder where they live and what they do?! We got away quickly, departing at 7.05 am and heading quickly northwards on the fast tarmac. The only hazards are the numerous dips through dry creek beds. The surrounds are incredibly dry but we pass the occasional camel or herd of goats, and some Turkana people clothed in distinctive red and black.

The large town of Lodwar was reached by 8.30 and we pulled up to do a bit of shopping, figuring there would be nothing available out at Lake Turkana. I stayed on the truck while other located bread, some vegies and soft drinks. A crowd gathered around the truck as street vendors tried to sell us Turkana style hats made from palm leaves. Some excitement was provided when two locals started up a fight.

After an hour we headed out of town, immediately deviating from the Sudan road and following good tarmac for about 15 km before turning eastward onto what could best be described as a grader scrape. This would take us to Eliye Springs on the shores of Lake Turkana, provided we took all the correct turns! The country is desolate undulating sandhills interspersed with flat silt covered areas with some low scrub. Sign posts are few and far between but we manage to go the right way.

As the lake was getting close we entered the final section of sandhills including a long climb to the top where we could suddenly see the Jade Sea stretched out before us about three kilometres away. From here the track descends through sandhills and we would surely not be able to return without fitting the 4WD shaft!

The village is spread out - after all, they have plenty of space so they'd might as well use it! Then we reached the final section of sandhills and we needed to follow a very sandy track through them in order to reach the abandoned resort where we would camp. The locals have laid palm fronds along the track to assist with traction, but we only managed about 20 metres before bogging down. The 4WD shaft would have to be fitted before we would go any further. It was eleven o'clock and pretty darn hot.

It was only a matter of minutes before a crowd of locals had gathered to watch and talk to us. Laura and Delores were buying things and taking photos, all at a price of course. I was helping Allyn with the drive shaft, keeping an eye on his toolbox while he laid on the scorching hot sand swearing and cursing at the bolts that never seem to want to line up properly. A clean cut guy of about fifteen years was talking to me and saying he would show me around - he seemed very friendly and I suggested he come by the camp later in the day and I would take him up on his offer. His name was Simon.

After about half an hour the shaft was fitted and we were ready to go. I was up front with Allyn now and he duly put into into low range and 4WD but we were still not getting traction. We could tell something was wrong so he stopped and crawled back underneath, returning a few minutes later to declare that a pin was missing from the 4WD shift linkage. This took another 10 minutes to fix and then we pulled away nicely. It never ceases to amaze me how well the Bedford can pull through sand or mud when it is in 4WD!



It was only about 500 metres through the dunes to the oasis that is Eliye Springs palm trees everywhere and an abandoned resort - just amazing! A German had set it up years before but it was never financially viable and now the locals have taken it over, charging a small fee and selling their crafts to the few tourists that venture into this incredibly remote country. A lovely cabana gave us good protection from the sun and it was handily placed about 5

metres from the fresh water swimming pool fed directly from the natural springs. And just visible through the palms was Lake Turkana, about 200 metres away, but not recommended for swimming due to the prevalence of crocodiles. This really was an idyllic place, although its attractiveness was no doubt accentuated by its remoteness!



While we prepared lunch in the shade, I tossed my thermometer on the sand in the sun, returning to it after a minute or so. Lucky I did as it was about to explode at 45°C, and I placed it back in the shade where it was a cool 35°C. Allyn had arranged an ascari who would guard our camp, mostly to keep the kids away. After lunch we wandered around, checking out the springs themselves and the wonderful shower in a thatched enclosure with a water pipe gravity fed directly from the springs. Mid afternoon the local craft co-operative set up its wares next to the camp and we all wandered by and bought a few things. It was very cheap and the basketwork is very good quality. I also bought a few photos of these beautiful people who have striking features and the blackest of black skin. The remainder of the afternoon was spent relaxing and swimming.



Around five o'clock the locals performed a dancing show, dressed in a variety of brightly coloured clothing, bells on their legs and led by an old man with a whistle. They seemed to be having a great time and we paid them KSh1100 for the show. Simon was there and was explaining what was happening. It was some kind of wedding dance and he pointed out that the women with bead neckbands were the married ones.



Afterwards, I wandered off alone with him back to the village. He was very friendly and introduced me to his mother and his goat, as well as showing me both his mother's and his own "house". Their houses are made of thatched palm leaves and generally have a walled area about 10 metres in diameter and two or three smaller rooms inside, one for cooking and one for sleeping. Simon's room was quite comfortable with a table, bed, posters and a board onto which he has pinned various letters and postcards from friends he has met. Obviously he is a good talker and I gave him a small donation towards his school fees.



He explained that basically the only income for the village comes from tourists, and perhaps some fishing. The goats are kept for eating but most fresh food must be purchased from Lodwar. It can take three days to walk to Lodwar, since none of them have any form of motorised transport. And of course the weather - he explained it was a cool day as there was some breeze. It's normally hotter. As for rain, he said they had a brief shower two years ago but the last substantial rain was over three years before. As a consequence even the lake is lower than usual. Lake Turkana has no outflow - only inflow from the intermittent rains, but it can lose as much as 25 feet of depth per year through evaporation, making it progressively saltier. It is no longer drinkable, and clearly if the fresh water springs ever dried up, these Turkana people would have to leave their homes.

Simon walked back with me and the view from the top of the sandhill of the setting sun on one side and the lake on the other was quite beautiful. Local women were walking back to the village carrying spring water in containers on their heads. Most go bare breasted most of the time. They were so friendly and always greeted me in their own language. Back at camp it was time for another swim - the water was such a delightful temperature, after dinner, Rita and I walked down to the lake in the moonlight. After some skinny dipping,

much to the horror of Delores, we headed off to bed under some palm trees at 9.30. The night was warm but our sleep was disturbed by some violent wind squalls during the night, and we awoke with a layer of fine sand covering everything!



Next morning seemed to be a competition to see who could stay in bed the longest. I weakened and got up first at 6 am. It was already warm but at least it was calm. After breakfast and a final swim, we got going at 7.45 following a long debate about half the village wanting a lift into Lodwar. In the end we agreed to take five adults and 2 kids. We crawled over the dune with ease and were in Lodwar two hours later dropping off the Turkana folks. Hoping to get a long way south, we pressed on but Allyn first wanted to remove the 4WD shaft so stopped just out of town to do so.

What should have been a fifteen minute stop started to extend when the prop shaft became jammed amidst much cursing from under the truck. Sometimes it stops with some tension on it and the bolts won't come out and even rocking the truck gently back and forth won't help. After much beating with a large hammer it came off with a thud. However, our problems weren't over as the rear left tyre seemed to be deflating so Allyn got out the pump line and tried to reinflate it. However, it was clearly leaking slowly as the pressure just wasn't going up. Changing the tyre took a while, and meanwhile Allyn noticed the diff leaking some oil. I was starting to think the truck was falling apart right before our eyes! The diff was topped up with oil and the tyre fitted with me assisting with the huge bolts both on the wheel hub and on the spare tyre carrier. Others organised some lunch as it was creeping towards midday so we'd might as well use the enforced stop to get that out of the way.

Southwards to Civilisation and Uganda

It was just after midday when we headed off again, a little more than two hours in all. By now it was very hot with quite a strong "sand blasting" wind blowing at us. However, it was from the side and we made good time on the fast tarmac reaching Akeriemet at 3.40 pm, a distance of 185 km at an average speed of 50 km/h. This country is more of the same semi desert with large rocky hills all around, and virtually no habitation evident anywhere. Beyond Akeriemet the road climbs through the beautiful Marich Pass following a swiftly flowing river as it climbs over the pass. Of course the climb itself was really slow with lots of first and second gear work. Beyond the pass we

South of the pass we remained at a higher altitude and Mount Elgon, the second highest mountain in Kenya, was visible vaguely to the west. Here the land is rich and cultivated with fields of sugar cane, bananas and other crops. Some pine plantations grow on some of the higher areas. We passed through the town of Chepareria and stopped briefly to buy some fruit and soft drinks. It was about five o'clock and we needed to find somewhere to camp pretty soon. However, the terrain was not suitable for a rough camp, being hilly and cultivated with a lot of habitation. I even looked optimistically up some of the roads leading into pine forests but to no avail. We were now within 30 km of the large provincial town of Kitale and it wasn't looking hopeful, but then a sign appeared offering camping and bird watching!

Allyn pulled just off the narrow road and he and I walked up the long driveway, not wanting to drive the truck in until we knew that the camp was available and that we could get the truck in and out. At the end of the drive was a typical homestead style house and as I approached the door a lady greeted me in a lovely English accent, while her numerous dogs rushed forward to lick me to death. It was six o'clock and certainly we could camp. There was an area for tents as well as hot showers and clean flushing toilets. A German couple were already camped there but there would be enough space. We had obviously stumbled across a piece of real civilisation, made all the more amazing given our several days in the wilds of northern Kenya.

I chatted to the German guy who was a keen fisherman and had been touring all the lakes. He wanted to know about getting to Lake Turkana where he wanted to go next. He and his wife had quite a nice tent and were travelling around in a small hired 4WD - a Suzuki I think. Meanwhile Allyn had brought the truck in and we all started to get tents pitched and dinner going. The establishment even sold us cold beers! Mosquitoes were not a problem because, as the owner said, it was very dry and we were also up quite high. The night was cool, clear and windy but we slept soundly in our tent after partaking of very hot showers!

The owners also explained that there were no vehicles available to do trips up Mount Elgon - they were all broken down, so we would certainly not be going up there, much to my disappointment as I'd hoped we might be able to do a day trek from the roadhead to the summit at 4310 metres. It is meant to be very beautiful with a huge old volcanic crater. In any case, after our late departure next morning we got good views of the relatively boring looking mountain stretched along the horizon about 50 km to our west. In fact we departed at 8.30 after the lady had us all sign her visitors book - they were such lovely people.

In Kitale we were to spend a couple of hours, including buying a lot of supplies, since it would be relatively expensive in Uganda. Several of us went with Allyn into a supermarket of sorts, run by Indians, and bought up big. As quartermaster, I of course had a list and even when I couldn't find it, the proprietors went out the back and found whatever I wanted. We spent ten thousand Kenyan shillings, or about US\$150, and it was all duly packed and carried back to the truck where I proceeded to stash it away under the seats. Having done our chores, I wandered off with some others to visit the Stoneham Museum which, according to the Lonely Planet book, was worth a visit. It was reasonably interesting but I wouldn't put it at the top of the list of trip highlights! Back at the truck some of the others were still shopping so we went into a nearby shop to buy a cold coke each. In fact Laura and Delores had each bought an extra carry bag just to carry all the souvenirs they were buying!

Next stop was the garage to fill up with diesel - again it would be much more expensive in Uganda but this fill would see us right across Uganda. We finally left town at midday and headed southwest, wondering whether Allyn would stop for lunch. Had he forgotten? We reached Webuye at 1.20 pm and turned onto the main Nairobi-Kampala Highway. The terrain was now mostly flat with sugar cane the predominant crop. Soon after we did stop for lunch on a vacant piece of land across the road from a school, so we were surrounded by a large crowd of mostly teenage kids. I made my sandwiches and then sat atop the trailer where I could keep an eye on everyone, much to the amusement of the onlookers.

At two o'clock almost all the kids disappeared - must have been time to go back into class. One older guy wanted to negotiate a payment for use of the land which he said was owned by his father, but when we said we were going he didn't press the point. Interestingly though, he asked for payment in sugar - I guess while the farmers grow sugar cane, they can't actually afford to buy back the sugar!

We continued westward but Allyn had told me he would head for the Bunia border which is about 20 km further south than the border on the main highway to Tororo. The Bunia border was the one I had used in 1990 when I had passed through the "corner" of Kenya enroute from Kampala to the Serengeti. To reach this border we needed to turn left at Bungoma and then turn right about 15 km later. The first turn was obvious and we headed south on a reasonably main tarmac road amidst cane fields, many villages and lots of traffic and people. According to my map the turn right was before the town of Mumias and I saw a minor road go off to the right which I thought MIGHT be it, but Allyn pressed on.

Perhaps he was looking at the map because we hit one of the many speed humps at considerable speed and everyone and everything was launched in the air and back down again! Actually, the speed hump was covered in sugar cane leaves which had fallen off trucks so it was hard to see. If you don't take the truck over these speed humps dead slow you are likely to break something, either in the truck or in someone's back. I was a long way forward, kneeling on the seat and looking outwards, and when I saw the speed hump I hung onto the rail at the top of the truck so was largely immune to the turmoil. Others weren't so lucky and complained of saw bums and jolted backs as we tried to get everything back in order. Allyn had stopped, of course, and was both swearing and checking around the truck to see if anything was broken. It wasn't.

In any case, I took the opportunity to point out to Allyn that we must have missed the turn, since we had just crossed the Nzoia River which confirmed the fact. He continued a short

distance before doing a U-turn and we found the turnoff easily from this direction - it had a sign! The road towards Bunia was mostly narrow dirt with a few very dubious looking bridges. Thus, it was very slow and we took about an hour and a half to do the 45 km to the junction with the main Bunia - Kisumu Road just a couple of kilometres from Bunia and the border.

There was meant to be a hotel at which we could camp in Bunia but as we drove through the bustling border town there was no evidence of it. Allyn drove up to the border, did a U-turn and checked again, but nothing, so he decided we would go through the border despite the fact that it was almost 5.30 pm and the border probably closed at six o'clock. There was a fair amount of stuffing around and Allyn was having a lot of trouble finding the customs man to stamp the carnet. Time slipped by and I wondered whether the Ugandan border would close also and we would be stuck in the short no-man's land overnight!

At six o'clock a whistle blew and everything stopped. There was a sudden silence spread across the whole area which, needless to say, was teeming with people and vehicles. Nothing moved and no-one spoke. Why? The flag was being lowered. Once down, everyone resumed what they were doing and about ten minutes later we were done and headed over to the Ugandan border and almost immediately went through the huge gate and parked just beyond. Allyn went off in search of officialdom and returned 45 minutes later with everything completed and nothing but praise for the polite and helpful Ugandans. It was just after seven o'clock and, having been entertained by a beautiful sunset, we headed off into the last of the twilight in search of this mythical hotel.

But it wasn't mythical, just in the wrong country, and it duly appeared a few kilometres down the road from the border - the Equator Inn! The biggest problem was that they had a big banner strung across the gate advertising the following night's entertainment, and the truck wouldn't fit under it. Or so we thought, but with much stretching and coaxing we got through without destroying their precious banner. The hotel had a small carpark where we could put up the tables and cook, while tents could be pitched on the lawn in front of the rooms. Allyn took a room so we could have access to a toilet - which had no water of course, so a bucket of water was provided.

We were helping with the cooking and so we didn't pitch a tent but decided to sleep in the truck. I think it was the only time we did so and while it was relatively cozy sleeping on the cushioned seats spread across the floor, it wasn't all that comfortable. I had slept in the truck a few times before but I usually did it alone and put one of the stretcher beds along the floor.

Kampala - Just Another African City?

The next day was planned to be relatively leisurely - travel to Kampala and have lunch at the Sheraton! It was a damp and dewy morning but we had breakfast organised before anyone else arose. We eventually got away soon after eight o'clock and followed the good highway all the way to Kampala by midday. I sat up front as I supposedly could navigate around Kampala and knew the favourite truck parking spot.

It seems strange that crossing the border can make such a difference, but it really felt like a different country. Uganda also has lots of people but it somehow seems more tropical with many tracts of dense rainforest. The cultivated areas are also different, and the staple crop is cassava. Most of the tea and coffee, from which the country derives most of its income, is grown on large plantations which are owned by a select few, although they provide the majority of the employment. The other thing I remember was a variety of roadside billboards with very interesting notices about AIDS, which is understandably a major issue in Uganda which has one of the highest proportions of HIV infection in the world (over 20%). One sign was "My friend with AIDS is still my friend" - trying to overcome the ostracism of those people with AIDS who often die of malnutrition before they die of AIDS. It was encouraging to see the government openly attempting to do something about the problem.

Kampala was just as I remembered it from 1990. I did indeed remember the truck parking area and Allyn duly arranged for the attendants to wash the truck in our absence. We soon found our way to a Foreign Exchange Bureau - a new invention since 1990 when the black market was thriving. Then the black market rate had been US\$700 to the US dollar, now the official rate was about US\$1000 to the dollar. They had also produced some larger denomination notes - US\$500 and US\$1000, whereas in 1990 when the largest note was US\$100 we had needed a day pack just to carry enough money for lunch!

While walking through town we saw another EO truck and Allyn stopped to chat to the driver. They were headed westward also, but ultimately for London, the reverse of my 1989/90 trip. They had been in Kampala for about four days with a number of sick passengers. They also reported having problems in the Serengeti with Masai stealing stuff from their camp - an all too common occurrence nowadays.

After changing money we all headed for the Sheraton for an "as much as you can eat" lunch for a mere US\$8100 each, which sounds rather a lot but is actually it's only about US\$8. This was the relative lap of luxury, sitting in the beer garden of this "world class" hotel having a smorgasbord lunch with several Nile Special beers to wash it down. While relaxing there a familiar face wandered by between the food and his table - I instantly recognised him as Michael Palin of Monty Python, Pole to Pole and other such things. I glanced at Alan who looked equally surprised and answered my look with "Yes it is!". We couldn't resist, and a bit later Alan and I went and introduced ourselves and tried to find out why Palin was in Kampala. "Doing some research for a new project" was all we could find out.

After the very pleasant lunch we wandered back to the truck through the serene grounds of the Sheraton which also have a few expensive curio shops for the well heeled tourists. I navigated Allyn to our night stop at the Athina Club - a Cypriot club which has room to

camp in its grounds. I stopped here in 1990 when there was another EO truck there and we had to camp out on the street! This time we had the place to ourselves, although it's a bit cramped and we planned to stay only one night then go out to Lake Victoria at Entebbe for another night before heading off. We needed to meet two new passengers - Allyn had sent and received faxes at the Sheraton and had been informed that one would be arriving the next day (Friday) and another on Saturday at 12.30 pm, so we clearly couldn't leave until then.

We pitched tents, gave laundry to the local washer boys and sorted out luggage before the bar opened at 5 pm. After a couple of beers, I cremated some sausages and pork chops that we had bought frozen in Kitale the previous day. We planned "a night on the town" and so we showered and dressed vaguely respectably before two taxis arrived at eight o'clock. We were waiting in the bar over a couple of glasses of Cyprus wine. We had been recommended the "Half London" bar a few kilometres south of the city and we succeeded in getting there despite the crazy taxi driver who was overtaking trucks while there was oncoming traffic. It was a lively place with music, karaoke and dancing. We stayed until eleven o'clock and then all stood out on the roadway looking for a taxi or a mini bus. The latter came along and we all crammed into it together with a few other passengers. The others had decided to go to a disco - Pulsations, about a kilometre up the road so the minibus stopped there and let them out. We carried on into town and were dropped at some unidentifiable location. I was slightly concerned about being dropped in the middle of Kampala around midnight, but there were many taxis looking for business.

We quickly negotiated with a few of them and one young guy who I reckoned was barely at driving age (if in fact they have licences!) agreed to take us to the Athina Club for US\$3000. We got into his car - a dilapidated Honda Prelude! It barely went at all and starting it involved hot wiring it under the dashboard - the ignition key mechanism had long since failed or been destroyed. We headed south, much to my consternation, but basically to get some fuel a few hundred metres from where we started. I had to pay him some money so he could buy a couple of litres of fuel just so he could take us further! Meanwhile he lifted the bonnet and was hitting something quite hard, then jumped back in and we headed off - I think it may have been stuck in gear as he tried not to change gear at all and just did everything in third gear! I'd say the alternator didn't work either as it barely started on the battery and the headlights were extremely dim. All I can say is that it was an interesting experience, and when I commented to the young guy that I too drove a Honda Prelude he proceeded to tell me how it is impossible to get any spare parts and thus he just has to keep the car going with his own ingenuity.

It was nearly 2 am when the others returned to camp but they didn't disturb us much. Nevertheless, they were decidedly slow next morning as I cooked scrambled eggs, bacon and the remaining sausages for breakfast. We planned to leave by 1.30 pm so we could get to the airport to meet Matthew who was arriving at about 3 pm, so we had the morning free. Most people wandered into town, about a 15 minute walk across the golf course and through the "nice" area of town with many embassies and large houses. We did some window shopping, but little else, except buy a few drinks, as it was quite hot and sticky. We thought a cup of tea at the Speke Hotel - the second best in town after the Sheraton, would be nice but the tea was slow to arrive and like dishwater.

Back at the Athina club, Allyn was somewhat disorganised and it seemed unlikely we would leave on time. When it was time to go we had to take the trailer off and turn it around by hand so the truck could turn around in the confined space of the backyard of the club. All this chewed up time and I could see us missing Matthew. This seemed to become almost certain when we had to stop outside the Sheraton while Allyn checked for faxes from the London Office and then left a note at the Speke Hotel where Matthew was meant to meet us that night if we didn't catch him at the airport. Of course Allyn was working on the assumption that the plane would be late but we eventually didn't get to Entebbe, some 20 kilometres south of Kampala, until 4.15 pm. The plane had been on time and Matthew was gone.

The campsite at Entebbe is right on the beach of Lake Victoria - a pleasant enough spot except that the lake is teeming with Bilharzia and swimming is a definite no-no. The grounds are nice lawns with many trees, but minimal facilities - cold showers. The only problem was that there were swarms of small insects - the locals told us they were "lake flies" and that they don't bite. They may not have bitten but they certainly seemed to get into everything including one's eyes, noses and ears! We pitched tents and relaxed as we were planning to eat out at the Lake Victoria Hotel about 15 minutes walk back towards the airport. Unfortunately I was developing a sore throat which I could well do without, given we would be trekking the Rwenzoris in a couple of days time. Plenty of strepsils were consumed as I attempted to get rid of it. Michael had already had it for quite a few days and it looked like it was "going around the group".

We headed off to the hotel at about 6.30 pm as it was starting to get dark and we were able to cut across a golf course to shorten the walk. The hotel was fairly posh and we sat outside drinking G&Ts and then ordering some Ethiopian wine with dinner. The wine was expensive (US\$24000 !!), but we were a bit bored with just drinking beer. The dinner was excellent (it cost about US\$100,000 for the group) and after a wander round the pool, we headed back to camp around 10.30 pm. I lead the way as we cut across the golf course in the dark with others expressing concern about where we were going, but we popped out onto the road in the right spot and reached camp safely. We quickly cut our way through the masses of lake flies and retreated to our tents!

Next morning would be a major truck cleanout which, as quartermaster, I coordinated. It took a couple of hours and after I'd packed everything really efficiently there was loads more room and we could fit all the bar supplies under the seats as well. It was nice to have a clean truck and certainly lots of dust and sand had been picked up on our travels through northern Kenya. We headed off to the airport, just 10 minutes away, a bit after midday as Tanya's plane was due at 12.30 and we didn't want to miss it this time! Thus, we had lunch in the airport carpark while Allyn and others wandered into the fairly basic terminal building to see what was happening. Tanya appeared at 1.15 pm and was carrying the "mailbag" from EO to Allyn. Thus, he sat there reading letters for a while. We decided to wait for an Air Kenya plane to arrive at 1.15 pm and see if Matthew happened to be on it. It arrived late at two o'clock and Matthew was not on it anyway, so at 2.30 pm we headed back into Kampala in search of Matthew! There was also another problem - Tanya had no visa for

Zaire or Rwanda and despite her coming via the EO office, there was no explanation of how Allyn was meant to get these visas for her!

In town, we parked at the usual place and Tanya went off to change some money while Allyn went in search of Matthew, or the note at the Speke Hotel, and to send another fax from the Sheraton. I could feel frustration building in me as it became clear that we wouldn't be leaving Kampala that day, but I soon relaxed and accepted the inevitability of the situation. Tanya returned with money and Allyn with news that he thought Matthew had gone to Entebbe. Allyn decided to send Alan straight out to Entebbe in a minibus to try to catch Matthew and tell him to stay put as we planned to camp there again that night, but the staff there didn't know that, so Matthew would probably just turn around and come back to town looking for us.

Allyn wanted to find out some more about Tanya's visas so was waiting for a return fax from EO, but I think the office had closed (it was Saturday) and he didn't get an answer. He did however talk to some other guys in a Tracks truck who had some information on obtaining these visas in Kampala. While some people wandered into a nearby bar for a cold beer, Allyn made his plans to leave the next day and if necessary, he would return to Kampala by bus during the week to get the visas. We simply couldn't afford the time to stay in Kampala until Monday or Tuesday just to get these visas - it would throw our whole schedule completely out.

It was almost six o'clock when we left town and we stopped enroute at a small roadside market to buy some dinner - huge and delicious Nile Perch steaks which the man chopped from the fish with a cleaver. We pulled into the Entebbe campsite with some trepidation, but Alan and Matthew were waiting, so at last the whole group was together. If we had only made it to the airport on time the previous day we might have been well out of Kampala by now and Matthew would have saved himself a few minibus rides. Dinner was excellent despite the huge numbers of lake flies that were swarming around our lights by the trillions. I think most people went to bed early just to get away from the insects.



Westwards - Pygmies and Hot Springs

So the second half of our four week expedition began on Sunday morning as we headed off at a leisurely 8 am after cleaning the masses of dead insects out of everything! We stopped at a curio store enroute to Kampala but it was totally unattended despite the goods being readily accessible. No-one came to sell anything so we had to just leave. A little further on we stopped at a market to buy some food - veggies, eggs and meat. We soon passed through the edge of Kampala and picked up the good tarmac road that heads westwards towards Fort Portal. I remembered this road from 1990 at which time the section near to Kampala was being reconstructed. Indeed the tarmac now goes for 160 km just beyond the town of Mubende. Thus, we made good time, travelling through farming land, some swampy country and tracts of jungle, all on a fine and warm day.

We bumped our way along the rough and dusty road beyond Mubende for about an hour before stopping for lunch in a large clearing - it was difficult to find places to stop on this narrow road. The lunchtime entertainment comprised a herd of long horn cattle which wandered past with a young boy tending them. I sat up front with Allyn after lunch as we lurched along the very rough and narrow road - it was very slow going indeed. We passed a Bukimo truck coming the other way - one of those open cab German ex-military trucks. The female driver looked pretty stoned, as did most of the passengers, which is typical of that company.

The road climbs through heavily forested hill country with little opportunity to pull off. I thought I spotted our 1989/90 New Years Eve campsite but it seemed very overgrown. As the day wore on, we started to become more and more concerned about finding a campsite as we were either in forest or farmland and there was an increasing density of villages. After 5 pm we were becoming quite desperate. When we spied a vacant looking field beside a small village, Allyn stopped and went to check it out on foot. It turned out to be too rough to get onto it so we pressed on. Nothing for kilometre after kilometre but steep hills, villages and cultivated areas. It was after 6 pm and starting to get dark when we came through quite a sizable village and just beyond, a compound full of construction equipment for the road building. Just past that we spied a football field - aahhh! Allyn and I saw it simultaneously and there was little doubt in our minds. He quickly checked the entrance point on foot and we pulled into the middle of the field.

The only problem would be a fair number of locals, but fortunately it was late and they tend to not bother us at night. I counted about 30 of them standing around looking, and I chatted to some of them. One older guy told me that they have the construction equipment to build the new road but they have no fuel, so the road building has stopped. It was a lovely cool and clear night and apart from the fact that my sore throat had now turned into a nose cold, I felt terrific.

Next morning we needed some exercise so departed camp after packing up and breakfast and walked about 1.5 kilometres in 15 minutes before the truck caught us up. It was a cool (14°C) and somewhat misty morning but the sun was breaking through and it would be a lovely fine and hot day. We soon reached the tarmac road and were in Fort Portal after an hour. Here we did some shopping while Allyn went to the bank to change more money. The latter was problematic as they didn't have enough cash so he had to wait a while. He

eventually returned with a huge bag of money. We departed at 9.45 am after buying some samosas and chapatis for lunch from a passing salesman.

On the map it looked like only an hour or so out to the Semliki Valley where we would see hot springs and pygmies, but the road turned out to be much more spectacular and rough than I had ever expected. Initially it heads west from Fort Portal with the mass of the Rwenzori mountains ahead and to the south. The road climbs gently through banana plantations and small villages before emerging at a pass where you can see down a beautiful green valley all the way to Lake Albert in the distance. The road then meanders along the hillsides and over ridges before doing a long and tortuous descent through forest to the Semliki Valley.



Our journey was severely delayed soon after the first pass when we found a truck stopped in the middle of the road. There was a several hundred metre drop on one side and an embankment on the other, so there was no way to pass without moving the truck back a hundred metres to a wider spot. The driver and various passengers were sitting beside the truck asleep. It seemed it had run out of fuel. That was simple for us to fix so we bartered a gallon of diesel for a few loads of firewood that the truck was carrying. Then the driver declared he had no oil in the engine so Allyn bartered some oil for a huge bunch of bananas (which turned out to be not such a good deal as they never ripened properly!).

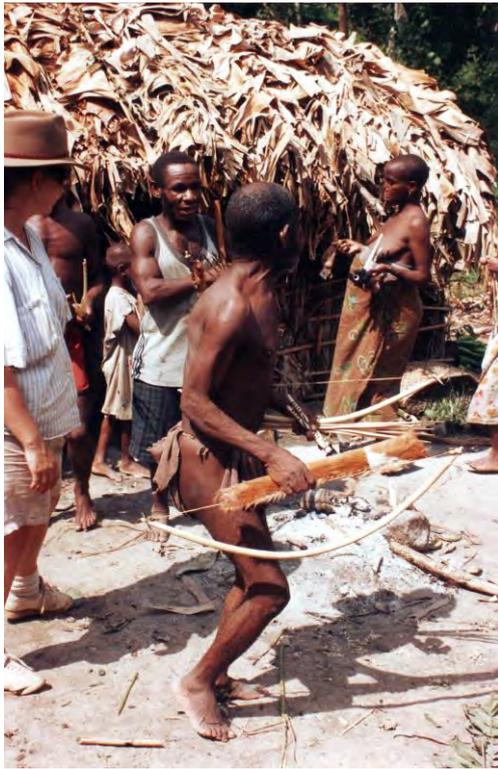
Now the interesting thing was that the truck has no brakes if the engine isn't going, since they are air brakes, and of course the battery was flat, so he would have to roll backwards to start the truck, and then hope to either have brakes or get it into a forward gear before toppling over the edge. We stood back and watched with amusement as they attempted to push the truck forwards so they could remove the rocks behind its wheels and after some time they succeeded, it rolled back, it did start and it didn't disappear over the precipice.

They duly reversed back to the passing spot and we were on our way - a delay of half an hour.

The remainder of the journey became tiresome as it was very rough and very hot. It was one o'clock before we reached the campsite near the hot springs, a total journey time from Fort Portal of over three hours. We soon found a shady spot and set up the tables for lunch. I then wandered down towards the hot springs but was stopped by an official looking guy who explained to me that you can't do ANYTHING around here without a guide. A number of guided walks were available, including to the springs, a waterfall and the pygmy village. He handed me an information sheet and I returned to the others to tell them what I had found out. There was much debate but we all agreed to go in the truck with the guide to see the pygmy village and then walk to the springs and waterfall.



The short drive to the pygmy village took us through some tracts of dense jungle as well as past other villages and missions. The small pygmy village was just off the road and was really a very sad situation. The small tribes of pygmies have been largely relocated out of the new National Park where they traditionally were hunters and gatherers. Dispossessed of their natural environment, source of food and tradable goods, they now rely on handouts and the small sums of money from visiting tourists like ourselves. Unfortunately they are treated as a curiosity, and indeed our guide referred to this as an "habituated" group of pygmies as if they were some kind of non-human life form. Equally sad is the fact that they spend the majority of the money on alcohol which combined with the abundant supply of marijuana that they grow, ensure they have a "happy" existence.



These pygmies were clearly in a desperate state and were not really like the ones I had visited in Zaire with whom we had gone hunting. These people looked malnourished and sickly, and it was evident that they live almost entirely on bananas or plantains. We were able to look in their small and basic huts constructed from tree branches and banana leaves. They were trying to sell bow and arrow sets and other trinkets of which Laura was certainly a purchaser. They also did a simple shuffling "welcome dance". Alas some of our group came away with lice which they had picked up off the pygmies or from their huts.

It was about four o'clock when we returned to the campsite and walked down to the springs. They were certainly very hot and sulphur smelling, but otherwise fairly boring. We then headed off separately to the waterfall, having convinced our guide that we could go there on our own. It was a short walk up the road and was a pleasant spot

indeed. This was our first proper wash for a few days and it was fortunately still quite warm as the water was very cold. Enroute back to camp we saw a troop of colobus monkeys scampering through the treetops above us.



After dinner that night Allyn spoke to the group about the itinerary for the next five days which was mostly about the Rwenzori trek. By reading some of the track notes from my

book it was clear that some of these people had no idea what they were letting themselves in for. Allyn had already decided that Laura and Delores would not be going on the trek, and that meant he couldn't go either. In any case, he needed to sort out Tanya's visas. We slept out that night with a local guy, part pygmy, guarding the campsite with his little bow and arrow. A couple of dogs were his companions and they wandered around sniffing at us from time to time! Monkeys could also be heard frolicking overhead.

We wanted to get an early start so we could get up that long hill before it became too hot. It was very damp and we had trouble getting the fire to go, but eventually left at eight o'clock. The road was much better going uphill - it never seems as rough as going downhill. It was misty and together with the smoke of some burning off, the haze was thick. We reached Fort Portal at 10.40 am and stopped for almost an hour to do some more shopping. Some people also wanted to change more money but the rate was bad. It turned out that some news about the coffee crop had actually sent the Ugandan Shilling up in value so it was only about US\$900 to the US dollar. Fortunately we had exchanged enough at the better rate in Kampala.

So we headed south planning to do more shopping in Kasese, and stopped for lunch on the side of the road about 45 minutes south of Fort Portal. It was a hot day again and we lunched quite quickly. Nevertheless, a small group of locals gathered and one of them was particularly drunk - he kept asking us for money for stopping on the side of road. Rather sad really.

The Rwenzoris - Africa's Mountains of the Moon (or where the world's mud is made)

After lunch we headed further southwards with the ever present bulk of the Rwenzori Mountains to our right. Not much could be seen through the thick haze which was mostly as a result of burning off being done at various spots across the plains. But I could also see large clouds characteristically building over the mountains. But even without the burning off, these huge mountains are rarely seen clearly, which is why they remained "undiscovered" by European eyes for so long. History records that the "discovery" was made by Sir Henry Morton Stanley in 1888. There is also little doubt that he also saw them during an earlier expedition in 1875, but only from a large distance. To quote from Stanley's autobiography:

"... my eyes were directed by a boy to a mountain said to be covered with salt, and I saw a peculiar shaped cloud of a most beautiful silver colour, which assumed the proportions and appearances of a vast mountain covered with snow. Following its form downwards, I became struck with the deep blue black colour of its base and wondered whether it portended another tornado; then as the sight descended to the gap between the eastern and western plateaus, I became for the first time conscious that what I gazed at was not the image or semblance of a vast mountain, but the solid substance of a real one, with its summit covered with snow..... It now dawned upon me that this must be the Ruwenzori, which was said to be covered with a white metal or substance believed to be rock, as reported by Kavalli's slaves ..."

So Stanley makes firm claim to the quaintly European concept of "discovering" the source of the Nile, for so long before that time considered to be the mythical snow covered Mountains of the Moon. Many earlier explorers had been in search of the source of the Nile, perhaps the most famous of which were Richard Burton and John Speke whose story has most recently been subject to serious abuse in the form of a second rate Hollywood movie bearing the title "The Mountains of the Moon". Yet the truth is that the pair went to Lake Tanganyika together and Speke later returned to circumnavigate Lake Victoria, and thus "discover" the classical source of the Victoria Nile. Yet we now know what the Egyptians have believed since the time of the Pharaohs - that the true source of the Nile lies in a huge range of snow covered mountains, paradoxically sitting almost on the equator.

The Rwenzoris (and I choose to use the local rather than European spelling) are completely within the catchment area of the Albertine Nile system. It is tempting to think that the third highest mountain in Africa (after Kilimanjaro and Kenya) should form a major watershed, but in fact the watershed between the Nile (Mediterranean) and Zaire (Atlantic) systems is further west on the ridge through the town of Butembo which I had travelled along four years earlier. The quantity of water that falls in the Rwenzoris simply dwarfs the other potential sources of the Nile. Huge rivers flow from the mountains feeding both the Albert and Victoria branches of the Nile. Quite simply, the Rwenzoris are the major source of the water that sustains life along the Nile, including the countries of Egypt and Sudan.

About 80 km south of Fort Portal, we crossed one of the major rivers, the Mubuku, on a long single lane bridge. On the south side, a road heads into the foothills to the small village of Ibanda from where we would base our trek. But we first needed to travel the remaining 15 km into the township of Kasese where we would pay our fees for the trek to the Rwenzori Mountain Service, as well as shopping for food. It was 2 pm when we pulled into the typically untidy western Ugandan town and headed straight for the RMS office.

Allyn parked near the market and in the street where the RMS office is meant to be and while he went looking for the office, some of us went to the market looking for appropriate food for the trek. The market was large but, perhaps because it was getting late in the day, there wasn't much to be found. There was a lot of fish, mostly caught in nearby Lake George, but the smell made it difficult to even approach these stalls, let alone actually contemplating buying anything! So we bought sweet potatoes and cabbage, both of which could be mixed with dehydrated fruits on the trek, as well as fruits in the form of mangoes and pineapples. I think we also found some acceptable tomatoes for use in sandwiches.

Back at the truck Allyn reported that he had found the RMS office but that the person who would collect his fees for the trek would not be back in the office until 4.30! So we would stay in town for several hours. First stop after that was the service station where Allyn filled with diesel, which apart from taking quite a while, required payment of about US\$230,000 which Allyn duly placed on top of the bowser. Allyn was getting rid of most of the small denomination notes (US\$ 50 and 100) that he had been given in Fort Portal, so the pile of money was enough to fill about two shoe boxes! We also tried to get water there but there was no running water and when a man arrived with a 44 gallon drum mostly full of rather suspect looking water, we decided to wait until Ibanda where we were certain of getting excellent water straight from the Mubuku River.

We then parked the truck in the "centre" of town and I completed the shopping, buying plenty of bread as well as a couple of chocolate bars for each trekker. As we took turns to remain on the truck, we spent varying times at a bar across the road having a few cold beers. Meanwhile, I walked to the next block to check out the Forex Bureau just past the Saad Hotel, the only real accommodation in town. I was surprised at the pitiful rate for US Dollars at the Forex - down to about US\$800 for notes and even less for Travellers Cheques. I was considering changing a little more just to cover tips for the porters and guides, but at that rate, I thought we would probably have enough either by exchanging small amounts with others in the group or by actually using small US\$1 or US\$5 notes for tips! As we talked to other people and subsequently checked the rate after the trek, it appears that there was a temporary surge in the value of the Ugandan Shilling against the US Dollar driven by a sudden oversupply of US Dollars and news of an excellent coffee crop! Strangely, the rate against the Pound had not been affected.

Soon after 4 pm Allyn took the truck back around to the RMS office and I went inside to examine the many interesting photos and maps on the walls. I purchased a copy of the large Rwenzori Map at an outrageous US\$10, although this was slightly better than paying the alternative price of US\$10,000! An equivalent map of Mount Kenya, from the same publisher, cost me the equivalent of US\$4.50 in Nairobi, but generally the prices in the Rwenzori have shot up as they see an increased demand for trekkers. The cost of our 4 day trek was about US\$200 per person, including US\$20 park entry fee, US\$10 rescue fee and

US\$5 for track maintenance. The remainder is for a guide and porters, all of which would be organised at Ibanda.

We left Kasese at 5pm and were soon back at the Mubuku River and taking the very scenic although slow drive up the narrow and rough road to Ibanda. The road is lined by small villages, banana plantations and other cultivated and grazing land. In fact we passed through Ibanda and continued through a couple of kilometres of dense habitation to the village of Nyakalengija where the RMS Headquarters are located. We were quickly "organised" by the lady who seems to run the place, and were setting up camp on the front lawn of the RMS Headquarters. A short walk down behind the buildings was the Mubuku River and Mike, Alan and Matthew soon ferried enough jerry cans of water to have fully replenished our water supplies with crystal clear mountain water. Some went and washed although we were cooking with Mike and Linda's help. We had decided to try out the oven and were doing a tuna mornay of sorts. I attended to getting the two fires going, which was pretty easy as the wood we had scored from the broken down truck the previous day was tinder dry and burnt quickly and easily. All I had to do was chop it up, so I got some exercise as well.



While dinner was cooking I sorted out our gear for the trek, which meant almost completely unpacking both packs. I planned to carry just my daypack with camera, wet weather gear and some food and water. My good pack would carry all our clothing, thermarest and our two sleeping bags could either be strapped to the outside or carried separately by the porter. Normally they put everything in large plastic bags inside big sacks which they then carry on their backs using banana fibre, stripped from the stem of banana trees. The bulk of the load is taken by placing the main strap around the porters forehead. In the case of my pack, I convinced the porter to carry it in the normal way, which was probably most unusual and uncomfortable for him, but he seemed happy enough with the arrangement.

We bedded down in our tents around 10 o'clock, hoping for an early start at walking the next morning, having been told the porters would gather at 8 am, but I suspected it would take quite a while to organise things and that an early departure would be unlikely. Not that it really mattered since the first day's walk is a relatively short 4-5 hours, so I figured that even with a late start we would get to the hut for a late lunch. The night was clear and cool, and as the sun had gone down we had had a beautiful view of the Portals, the nearest of the Rwenzori peaks, silhouetted against the then clear sky. The pattern of weather in the Rwenzoris is fairly predictable with clear nights and mornings, but rain and mist in the afternoons, although the rain and mist can easily become constant and many expeditions never get to see any of the peaks!

It seemed that no-one wanted to get up first the next morning and I eventually relented and climbed out of the tent at 6.30 and got the fire going. We were breakfasted and had packed our personal gear by 8 o'clock, but Linda and I still had to sort out and pack the communal food and gear - pots and pans, plates and cutlery, and so on. Around 8.30, what seemed like the local police contingent were doing their exercises in front of us - running on the spot, pushups, all to the yells and whistles of their commander. We wondered if they were our porters, but they weren't. Instead, the porters seemed to drawn from a crowd of locals who had gathered near our camp. They were a very well behaved crowd and at no time did we have any concerns for our belongings.

Around nine o'clock we were introduced to our guide, Reymen (or so it was written down - we thought it was Raymond) and another guy who was organising the porters. There seems to be a clear demarcation between guides and porters, and our only concern was that we had only one guide between eight of us. Meanwhile, the porters collected things from all the gear we had placed together, packed it into sacks and weighed it on a set of scales slung over a nearby limb of a tree. According to one guidebook, the porters only carry 12 kg plus their own stuff, but I think they can now carry about 18 kg each which is more reasonable. In the end, I believe we had about eight porters. The porters are all drawn from the local tribe - the Konjo. The following description is taken from Guy Yeoman's book, *Africa's Mountains of the Moon*, and pretty well described these people.

These Konjo, on whom we would be totally dependent in the remote vastness of the mountains, are of a dark chocolate complexion, with open frank faces, broad lips and nostrils and of only medium stature. They have a ready and genuine smile and a keen sense of humour. While they certainly are sturdy, they are usually spare and rarely carry any excess body weight. Their legs, which perform such wonders of balancing and weight-carrying over desperately difficult mountain terrain, can often be described as spindly. They live in homesteads of usually one or two houses and a few small store huts, widely scattered and perched on the lower ridges of the foothills. The houses are rectangular, made of a double skin of plaited bamboo which is filled in with clay and roofed traditionally with grass or banana thatch. Almost the only concession to modernity that I have seen over the last thirty years has been the widespread replacement of thatch with corrugated iron. In the foothills, coffee is the main source of wealth, while on the plains, it is cotton.

The Konjo are a large and important ethnic group: there are probably a quarter of a million of them in Uganda, and substantially more than this in Zaire. They are an

industrious and self-reliant people who, like the Swiss, have always been able to fall back on the mountains. Thus they have largely stood aside from the turbulent comings and goings on the plains - whether of historical ethnic movements, of the Arab slavers, or of modern politics and power games, To outsiders they may appear to have remained unsophisticated, but this is so only in the sense that they have not rushed to acquire the superficial trappings of Western culture - whether in the form of possessions or ideas - that have in fact proved so corrosive in Africa

The Konjo are mostly small scale agriculturalists, growing coffee, bananas, cotton and the staple crop, cassava, from which they grind the flour used to prepare their staple diet, a dumpling of sorts known as muhogo, supplemented by protein, principally from tilapia fish and some beef. Perhaps partly for our trek, we saw a cow being slaughtered just behind camp and large pieces of it were carried onto the mountain for the porters and our guide to eat together with their muhogo. The work as porters and guides brings valuable income to the valley where the women are mostly responsible for the cultivation and unemployment is high among the men.

At 9.30 there was a vague sense of order coming to the proceedings and sensing that there was little else we could do, I verbally grabbed most of the others, and set off. We didn't really need our guide as it was a simple matter of walking up the road as described in the guide book. Besides, Allyn and the two Argentineans were staying and would ensure that everything we needed was taken by some porter or another. In any case, Reymen joined the tail end of our party with me and Therese out in front, as was to become the pattern for the trek. It was good to get going, walking in pleasant sunshine with a clear view of the Portal peaks, towering more than 2500 metres above us. The day's walk would take us from about 1600 metres elevation up to Nyabitaba Hut at 2650 metres, with the majority of the climb being in the final 3 of the 10 km distance.

The walk starts along the road which runs alongside a large metal aqueduct built on a wooden supporting structure. The aqueduct is perhaps three metres wide and at a spot where a ladder is provided for the locals to climb up and fetch water, I climbed up to confirm that it was full to the brim with fast flowing water. It feeds a small hydro power station further down the valley which supplies power for the entire valley and surrounds. Beyond that the road crosses a bridge and reaches a small holding pond from where the aqueduct draws its water and then beyond that, the road peeters out at the unfinished Rwenzori Safari Lodge. From here the walking track meanders through banana plantations, fields of coffee and cassava, some stands of elephant grass and bamboo and at least one stretch of bog over which a small boardwalk has been built. A number of houses are passed and invariably small children will greet you as you pass.

After 40 minutes. Therese and I reached the National Park entrance where there is a gate of sorts and a small hut in which two guards reside. They were to check our receipts which Allyn had given to me. We of course waited for the others who arrived after about 5 minutes, and then set off again. From here the walking track descends briefly into thick forest beside the fast flowing Mubuku River, and then goes up and down through rocky and muddy gullies beside the river. It would be treacherous during or immediately after rain, but we were fortunate now and indeed for the entire trek to not encounter much rain at all - incredibly unusual for the Rwenzoris. After 25 minutes I had drawn slightly ahead and

came to a spot where you could walk out onto rocks beside the river for a drink, so I waited for all the others to catch up, before setting off once again.



A short way along was a really deep chasm of a creek crossing where you had the choice of crossing on a long fallen log, perhaps ten metres above the creek, or scrambling down then back up rocks, mud and roots. I chose the latter, although I wasn't convinced it was the best. As I was continuing the climb up the valley on the other side I encountered the rescue team coming towards me with a happily smiling young female patient in a stretcher. The manhandling of the stretcher down this track was nothing short of remarkable. It seems she had done some damage to the ligaments in her knee when she fell on a climb of Margherita, and this was her third day on the way down after waiting three days for the stretcher to arrive. This, as with a few other such incidents, really brought home to us how much "out on a limb" you are when trekking or climbing deep in the Rwenzoris, and that you could easily die before help arrives if you had a serious problem.

The track continues through incredibly dense forest, which can only be described as an absolute delight. I soon drifted ahead of the others and strode ahead comfortably in my own little world, looking around at the varied plant life and hearing the occasional calls of birds and monkeys. I knew I was setting a good pace, and despite the occasional stumble on the rough track with its many protruding rocks and roots, I felt great. It was just 30 minutes walk and I was at the Mahoma River, a small but fast flowing tributary of the Mubuku, which was somewhat difficult to cross with a number of quite slippery rocks and a lengthy jump at the end.

Again I waited for all the others to arrive, which this time took almost 20 minutes, although Therese and Matthew were not far behind me, Rita and Tanya perhaps 10 minutes and then Linda, Mike and Alan bringing up the rear with Ryemen. While waiting I had eaten some fruit and had a good drink, as did all the others, since this was an obvious spot for a

break, and given the time, we should have been prepared to have lunch. I made the mistake of not fully topping up my water bottle here, since the remainder of the climb is both steep and waterless.

I set off at 11.50 and immediately the track climbs steeply up the ridge. The climb is unrelenting, occasionally easing its grade just to make you think it might be over, then steepening again and again. To make it worse, the forest thins considerably on the ridge and the sun was beating down making the going quite hot. Therese and Matthew were walking just behind me now and we all stopped regularly to catch our breaths and take a small drink. I was having to conserve my water, wondering just how far it would be to the hut. All the while, there were superb views off the edge of the ridge into the dense forest below and an occasional glimpse of the Mubuku, perhaps 200 metres below. And the sound of the river was almost always present except when the track crossed to the opposite side of the ridge.

The last 20 minutes of the one and a half hours from the Muhoma to Nyabitaba Hut were easier and I came to the hut at 1.25 pm, just a few minutes ahead of Therese and Matthew. My immediate aim was the tap which supplies fresh mountain water, drawn from the Mubuku River somewhat further upstream towards Guy Yeoman Hut. My water bottle had been empty for about 30 minutes and I was parched! Next priority was to change my clothes since my tee shirt was thoroughly drenched with sweat. Fortunately the porter carrying my pack had arrived just before us, so I could change, and then I started to stake our claim to some space in the hut. I started to sort out some of our other gear and get a pot of water heating up for some soup. Richard, who seemed to be one of the more senior of our porters, was very helpful and seemed to do most of our cooking for us, although we had to prepare things first.



Nyabitaba Hut is a basic affair with sleeping space for about 16 to 20 on a simple wooden platform or the floor. There are plenty of mice and/or rats around, so there is some advantage to sleeping up on the platform rather than on the floor. There is a latrine down the hill behind, a small shelter for the warden beside, and further up the hill beyond the water supply is another hut for the porters. The whole area is on the narrow ridge and the view out from the hut is directly across the Mubuku Valley at the Portal Peaks, still over 1600 metres above us. The nearest to us is Rutara at 4282 metre, and its imposing southern wall looks like a challenging climb. Guy Yeoman describes a little more about the geological history of Nyabitaba.

The ridge at Nyabitaba is a vast glacial moraine, one of the largest moraines in the range, and it reminds us forcefully that the present glaciation of Rwenzori, splendid though it is, is but a token relic of the glory that existed in the last African ice age of 15-20,000 years ago. Then the whole central valley network - Bujuku, Murugusu and Bukurunga - were rivers of glacial ice which, combining and forcing their way eastwards, were joined above Nyabitaba by similar iceflows from the combined Mubuku and Kuruguta. It was this massive ice jam that deposited the material on which we were now camped, and the ice tongue had continued far down the valley up which we had passed, to terminate well below the 7,000 foot contour, not so far above our base camp (at Ibanda).

I was starting to wonder where the others were. The clouds had gathered and obscured the sun, and the Portals, by the time Rita and Tanya arrived at 2.30 pm and the other three brought up the rear at 2.45 pm. Alas, although the soup was ready, the porter carrying our bowls and cutlery had not arrived, but did so soon after the last of our party so that they could sit down on the makeshift seats and have some welcome soup. I think the last porter was unwell as he went back down and we were told the other porters would just have to carry a bit more each the next day. The climb had also taken its toll on Alan, who had been complaining of a cold, but he had now retreated to his sleeping bag in the hut and was feeling really exhausted and somewhat nauseous. I don't think he ate much at all but we made cups of tea for him to make sure he kept drinking.

The porters cook on charcoal, which is portered up from Ibanda. This practice was instituted at the suggestion of Guy Yeoman, the recognised patron of the Rwenzori, in an effort to stop the depletion of trees for firewood. The charcoal takes quite a bit of effort to get going and requires a lot of fanning to get the heat, but the porters are skilled at this. Nevertheless, it is quite slow and thus whenever one pot of hot soup, water for tea or cooked food was delivered we immediately gave them the next pot to heat up. In this way, our late lunch soup kind of slid into afternoon tea which slid into dinner followed by more hot tea.

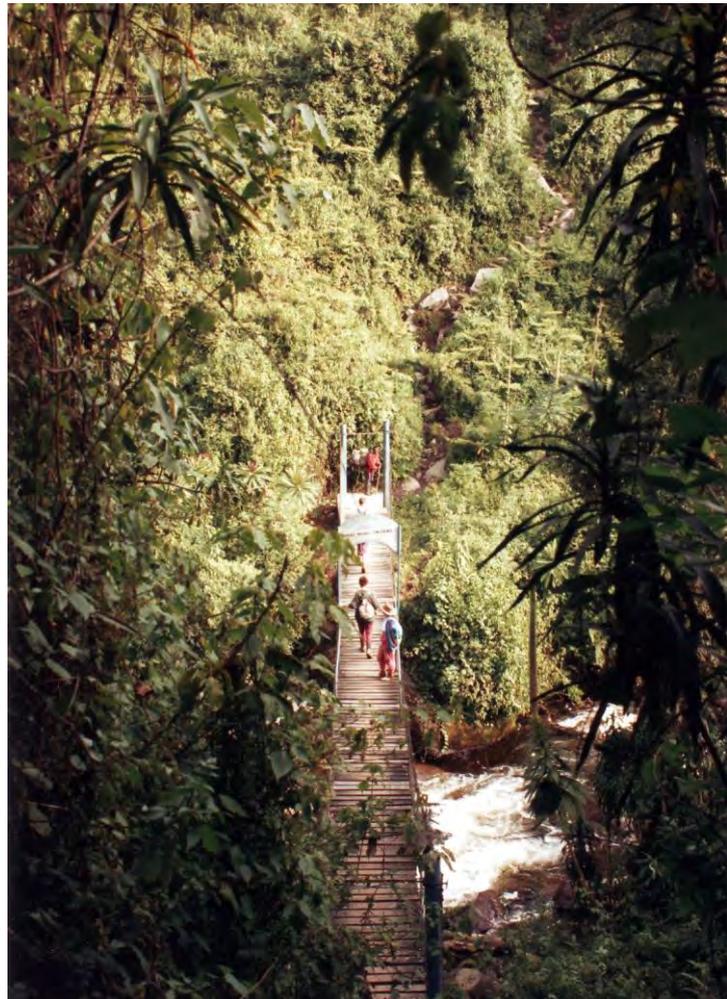
By this time it was twilight and the clouds had cleared to reveal once again the impressive mass of the Portal Peaks, tantalisingly close across the Mubuku Valley from which the constant roar of the river below could be heard. The lower and nearer peaks of Mount Baker were also visible up the Bujuku Valley in the direction we would be walking the next day. Our activities on the mountain were driven by the sun and once dark, there was not much to do. We had brought candles to provide some light in the hut, the other half of which had been occupied by a group of mostly Dutch people who were on their way down

from Guy Yeoman's hut further up the Mubuku Valley. There was also an English couple who had arrived quite late on the way up, because they had the other couple who were travelling with them turn back when one became quite ill. They were thus short of a few essentials like a can opener, but we were able to help them out.

Once the sun had finally set the temperature dropped quite quickly to around 12°C, not all that cold really, but enough to entice one into one's sleeping bag fairly soon. After getting our beds organised we gazed at the starry sky and then sat around the small charcoal fire with the warden and some of the porters for a while. It was 8.30 pm when we bedded down for the night.

I slept very well and arose at 7 am to a breakfast of weeta-bix, fruit and tea. We each made ourselves sandwiches for lunch and eventually set off at 8.20. It was again a fine and clear day, and even first thing, it had not been very cold. I brought up the rear of the group as we descended to Kurt Schaffer Bridge at the confluence of the Mubuku and Bujuku Rivers, 70 metres descent and about 25 minutes walk, or should I say slide and scramble down the slippery and rock/root strewn track. I would have liked to have gone a bit quicker but much of the track was so narrow that it was single file. Once at the bridge, I passed everyone and headed off at my preferred pace.

This bridge was only built recently with USAID money and is named after Kurt Schaffer, the Director of USAID in Uganda. Before the bridge was built, a number of earlier bridges were washed away in floods and trekkers had to brave the raging torrents in order to cross the treacherous river, which is about 20 metres wide. The high suspension bridge is perhaps 40 metres long and is a welcome relief.



I left the bridge at 8.50 am and started the steep climb through delightful dense forest which continues much of the way up the Bujuku Valley. The track is mostly narrow, muddy and full of roots. Occasionally there is a big rock outcrop or fallen log which must be scrambled over. And all the while it climbs steeply, although not as bad as the climb up the Nyabitaba ridge. After about half an hour I stopped for a breather and some water, and a few minutes later Therese caught me and said they wanted me to wait because Alan's pack

strap had broken and they knew I had some string which might be able to be used to fix it. After 10 more minutes, everyone had passed me, and I had made temporary repairs to Alan's pack.

The next stop was at the top of a small spur and many of the porters were stopped for a breather - an obvious resting place with plenty of space to sit. I had passed most of the group but I took a 10 minute break while most arrived. I can't recall if Alan had arrived, but he was certainly struggling and looking somewhat unwell when I left him earlier. I left that rest at 10.20 and soon after passed the Kyemera Cliffs, beautiful lichen and moss covered cliffs at the base of which the track runs for some distance. The track then climbed into slightly thinner forest but with many more large rocks and fallen trees which required a lot of scrambling. Therese, Matthew and myself were walking together and were making good time. Soon after we sighted a superb waterfall on the Bujuku up the valley ahead, we took a breather at a large collection of "sittable" rocks where the English couple were resting with their porter.

It was 11.35 and I had agreed that I would stop about now and wait for them to arrive for lunch. I spent 5 minutes scouting a bit further up the track for a better spot but the track became narrow and steep again so this would have to do. Rita and Tanya appeared at 12.05 and then Mike and Linda at 12.10, and we all consumed our sandwiches. But where was Alan, and our guide Ryemen? We all wanted to get going, but we agreed to wait for Alan in case there was some problem. One of the porters was also with us and suggested we should wait.

Alan arrived with Ryemen at 12.50 and he looked quite bad - exhausted and he had been vomiting. Everyone could see he had to go back - it was at least another two to three hours walking today, much of it steeply up or through bogs. I have to commend Alan on his determination, but in the end, he made the right decision to go down. The porter that had remained with us went with Alan and Ryemen had to take some of his load, which was mostly food for the other porters. We were all worried about Alan and knew that the final climb from Kurt Shaffer Bridge up to Nyabitaba would be sheer hell for him, and we learned later that he took almost six hours for the return journey, reaching the hut just after dark.

So at one o'clock, Therese, Matthew and me headed off together up the now steep and narrow path. After about 20 minutes we came first to a lovely view of the waterfall and then to a freshly flowing tributary with good water - it would have been a good lunch spot! After another 20 minutes we reached Nyamuleju Hut which is now in a state of disrepair and is rarely used. Like most of the older huts, it is located adjacent to a rock shelter which in days gone by, would have been used to accommodate the porters.

From here, the track descends to beside the Bujuku River and traverses a seemingly endless expanse of bogs. A guide, or even a porter, would pick a good route through it but there were none with us so the three of us just did the best we could. In some places we would come to a wide expanse of mud and pools of water, with dense vines on either side, and we would just have to try to stand on the vines or jump from one grassy spot to another. But the ground was like a waterlogged sponge and often you just disappeared up to your shin, or deeper, into goeey mud. It gets to a point where you just don't worry about your mud ensconced boots and you just plough on. Actually, my boots were keeping my feet

surprisingly dry, and it seemed that as long as I pulled my foot out of the quagmire quickly, the mud and water was not getting inside my boot.

There were many choices of route through here and I tended away from the river wherever possible, which I think was a mistake. Certainly when we returned and had Ryemen guiding us, he stayed close to the river and it did seem to be firmer and rockier. After a full hour of bog battling, we seemed to begin climbing away from the river up a spur and entered an area with lichen covered hagenia trees, giant heath trees and a lovely groundcover of grass. It is like an enchanted forest, and I would not be the first to have suggested that this was straight out of a Tolkien world. The steep climb up the spur took about 10 minutes and we soon reached the day's destination - John Matte Hut, located within the "Enchanted Forest" and a short scramble above the Bujuku River from where fresh water is obtained. The hut is named after the elder of the Konjo people who heads the Rwenzori Mountain Service.



It was three o'clock when we arrived and my first priority was to locate Alan's sleeping bag, clothes and other possessions, and to get together a small amount of food and other stuff for him. We quickly unpacked all the gear, got together stuff for Alan and sent a porter off to Nyabitaba with it. We learned later that this porter arrived at about the same time as Alan, so all worked out well. Unfortunately it meant we were now down to only four or five porters with us here at John Matte Hut, but we weren't really going anywhere and would be eating most of the food. Then it was the usual routine of getting the soup going, changing into dry clothes and getting those mud soaked boots off. It was already getting misty and quite cool, and the others arrived as a group at 3.35 pm, having made somewhat better time than us through the bogs under Ryemen's guidance.

John Matte comprises a relatively new timber hut for the trekkers, a timber hut for some of the guides and porters, and another corrugated iron shelter for extra porters. There is a latrine along the spur at the back about 50 metres from the hut and there is also plenty of space for tents. Inside our hut there is an open area with a table and bunks for seven people around it. At the rear are two rooms, each with bunks for four people. During my initial recce to figure out which bunks we would claim, it was hard to miss the German guy in one of the bunks near the table who was obviously quite ill. When he jumped out of his sleeping bag, naked from the waste down, slid on his gum boots, and purposefully ran out the back door of the hut, it was all too clear that he had little control of his bowels. It's a sure sign that you are really sick when you will run around naked in front of perfect strangers!

Matias, the German guy who seemed to be trekking alone, was indeed very sick, although we also learned that he was a doctor. Yet he was taking Imodium at regular intervals, which in my view was not the correct treatment. In one of the rear rooms were a young Australian couple who turned out to be a nurse and doctor from Adelaide. She reported that he too was quite sick although at that time they thought he may have malaria as he had fevers. It also turned out that the English couple were both doctors, so there was no shortage of medical expertise around! So all in all, we had stumbled across a small hospital in the middle of the Rwenzoris! I thus laid a claim to the second rear room where we might at least be a little isolated from the comings and goings of the sick people. Rita, Matthew and Therese joined me in there in setting up our sleeping bags, while the other three had to take bunks in the open area.

Soup was served at four o'clock and then Linda and Michael retired to bed, not so much because of tiredness but to keep warm. As the afternoon moved towards evening, the mist lifted and the temperature quickly fell to about 8°C, and Linda seemed to feel the cold more than almost anyone I have known! With the clearing of the mist, we now had good views back to the Portal Peaks, across the valley to parts of Mount Baker, and now some seven kilometres up the Bujuku Valley we could see the snow and glacier covered peaks of Mount Speke and Mount Stanley, although the highest point, Margherita, is obscured by closer peaks.

Over dinner we discussed the plans for the remainder of the trek. Linda and Michael wanted to start heading back down the next day while Therese and I were keen to go further up towards Lake Bujuku, being quite confident of making the descent from here to the truck in one day. I suggested we could split the food and gear although it would be tricky, mostly because we didn't have enough porters left with us. We discussed it with Ryemen around the fire although he wasn't very convinced. Michael, although he wanted to go down, was very supportive that Therese and I should go up to the lake and that they would sort out the gear in the morning. So it was decided, and Rita chose to stay with me and Therese, although she would stay at the hut all the next day rather than trekking to the lake. Tanya and Matthew decided to go down, Matthew mostly because his sleeping bag was inadequate for the conditions and he was feeling the cold.

We bedded down at 8.30, having sat around the fire for a while talking the the Konjo about their country and their language - Rukonjo, one of the many Bantu languages spoken throughout east Africa. They almost all speak Swahili as well, which is a common language

spoken throughout Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. It was a difficult night to sleep, interrupted by Matias running out the back door of the hut seemingly every half hour. The English lady also developed vomiting and diarrhoea, and the Australian doctor was still quite unwell. All in all, I felt like I was trying to sleep in the hallway of the casualty department of a hospital! It also became quite cold (it was 2°C in the morning) and Rita spent some time shuffling about putting on all the clothes she could find. Fortunately I was completely comfortable in my thermal underwear inside my sleeping bag.

After our chilly 7 am awakening, Ryemen, Therese and myself headed off at 8.10. Immediately after you leave the hut area the track becomes a wide expanse of bog interspersed with large tussocks, about two to three feet high and 12 to 18 inches wide. The Konjo call them "stools" and we spent much of our time jumping from one to another in order to avoid the messy task of picking our way through the underlying mud.



Fifteen minutes from camp brought us to the crossing of the Bujuku River, another set of precarious hops from boulder to boulder. Beyond the crossing, we entered the Lower Bigo Bog and the mud and tussock hopping continued for almost an hour. But the scenery is incredible - lichen covered hagenia trees border the bog and giant lobelia and triffid like senecios are dotted across the bog. Our route skirted the southern edge of the bog, periodically climbing out of and back into the flat boggy area. As we approached the old Bigo Hut we crossed a somewhat more solid area where the underlying grasses have formed a solid mat underfoot, and we could walk across this totally waterlogged area sinking only two or three inches down. This actually worked very well in that it washed all the mud from our boots!

At Bigo Hut a group of climbers and porters were just finishing breakfast and we took a 10 minute rest before heading off. The next 30 minutes of walking climbs up a rocky and rooted mud track through hagenia and giant heath forest before emerging onto the next plateau which constitutes the Upper Bigo Bog. These bogs have been formed by the depositing of huge quantities of glacial silt and in many places the river simply runs underground through the totally waterlogged mud and grasses. Huge crevasses exist in places and one can literally disappear into these if you choose the wrong path. Ryemen, however, was doing an excellent job in finding the correct route and would regularly stride ahead through the bog in his Wellington boots, probing with his stick to find submerged rocks and logs for us to tread on. The Upper Bigo Bog would be almost an hour of mud battling except for about 300 metres of boardwalk which has been constructed, turning that part of the bog into a stroll. By 10.20 we were at the end of the Upper Bigo Bog and our second crossing of the now somewhat narrower Bujuku River.



From here the track climbs very steeply and crosses the river, or parts of it, several times. The vegetation is unbelievable - giant senecios and lobelia abound. But despite the steepness, the ground underfoot is continually waterlogged and boggy, so we continued to find ourselves up to our ankles in mud or water. My boots were faring reasonably well but Therese was complaining of wet and cold feet. We took a break at an obvious rest spot after about half an hour then plodded onward, upwards. A further half hour and we needed another rest - we were now at 3850 metres by my reading of the map and we debated whether to go on. We had been going for almost three and a half hours and from the conditions, we would be unlikely to be much quicker on the return journey. Ryemen reckoned it was still over an hour to Lake Bujuku and that would mean we would not get

back until at least five o'clock. Besides, we had had good views of Mount Stanley, and already the clouds were starting to roll across the high peaks so further views were going to be limited. So we decided to make this our high point.

It took about an hour to descend to the river crossing at the boardwalk and we passed the English couple and several porters on their way up. We ate our lunch at the river, each of us donating half a sandwich to Ryemen. Another hour and we were at Bigo Hut and then almost another full hour before we were approaching the Bujuku River crossing. Here one of our porters approached, carrying Ryemen's lunch, so we stopped for 15 minutes while Ryemen ate his lunch and Therese photographed some of the bizarre flora. Another 15 minutes and we reached the hut, just before three o'clock. I was certainly fairly tired and this made me feel content with our day's exploration and our decision to turn back before the lake.

Rita was relaxed and rested, having seen the others depart around nine o'clock for their descent to Nyabitaba. Matias appeared a bit better but was still very weak, while the Australian doctor seemed to be almost fully recovered. Discussions centred on the rescue team that had been requested almost two days ago for Matias and the fact that it had not yet arrived - they turned up after six o'clock. Prior to that a huge group of Austrians had arrived and most pitched tents as did an Australian couple from Sydney. Newcomers in the hut were two Australian girls and two English guys, all of whom seemed incredibly unprepared. The Australian girls in particular had no proper warm clothing and only one sleeping bag between them! And they were planning to do the entire circuit. The Austrians seemed to be mostly doctors and, in contrast, they had the most fancy and new looking equipment. One huge pack seemed to just be their medical kit and perhaps not surprisingly, they had an IV saline drip which they gave to Matias, since he was unable to eat and was getting weaker.

We had soup, tea and then a curry for dinner, and headed off to bed at around 8.30 pm. We hoped for a quieter night but soon after we bedded down one of the English guys started vomiting violently. The Australian doctor tried his best to look after him, while his friend made amusing remarks and the Australian girls made stupid comments. Questioning revealed a common thread - all the sick people had eaten at the Saad Hotel in Kasese! Such were the advantages of preparing all our own food, as we were feeling just fine. Anyway, things seemed to quieten down after that and we did get a good night's sleep.

Once again, we arose at 7 am and were away at 8.20, proceeding quickly downhill towards the river and the bogs, with Ryemen leading, then Rita, Therese and myself. I was happy throughout most of the day's walk to bring up the rear and allow Rita to set the pace. Ryemen picked good ways around or through most of the bogs, although there were still a few spots where I went up to my shins in mud! Nevertheless, we reached the old hut after an hour. We reached the Kurt Schaffer Bridge at midday, taking a couple of ten minute breathers along the way.

The climb up to Nyabitaba was always going to be hard work and this being the fourth day of walking, I tested myself and went as hard as I could, leaving the others behind. I reached the hut at 12.20, taking just 15 minutes for the climb (which had taken 25 minutes on the way down). I felt very pleased with that and it gave me confidence that the forthcoming Mount Kenya climb would indeed be achievable. We relaxed at the hut with a few other

porters and our own, and ate our lunches of sandwiches and boiled eggs. It was a delightful day and we eventually departed at 1.20 pm with Rita setting the pace, then Therese, Ryemen and myself at the rear.

We stopped at one spot on the ridge to watch the Colobus monkeys playing in the nearby Symphonia Gloulifera trees with their beautiful scarlet blossoms. The next rest was at the Mahoma River crossing at 2.15 pm. We had taken less than an hour to descend what had taken the slowest of the group two and half hours to ascend. Another group of acrobatic monkeys provided some entertainment on the next section of track which lead to the deep chasm of a creek with the log across it. I decided to walk across the log this time, which was surprisingly easy provided you kept moving quickly and didn't look down. The others clambered down and back up the badly eroded sides of the creek. The next stop was the National Park gate at 3.30 where we chatted to the guards for a few minutes. From there it was back through the flat farming land, greeting many of the local people as we passed. Our porters had caught up with us and one of them stopped to chat with some children Ryemen explained that one of the children was his son. Ryemen also pointed out where he lived, up on the hillside to the right.

The others were mostly doing chores like laundry when we arrived at the truck at 4.15. We relaxed for a while before heading down to the river to do some washing of ourselves and our clothes, many of which were putrid. The fast flowing Mubuku River below the camp provided plenty of clean water and we were careful to use bowls to wash in, emptying them well back from the river so as to not pollute it with detergents. Washing one's self was a chilling experience of course - lathering up and then pouring a bowl of freezing cold water over each other! But it was nice to be clean. Back at the camp we hung out our washing, which would partly dry during the night and complete the process the next day, and repacked much of our equipment like boots, thermarest and so forth that would not be required for several more days.

Just before seven o'clock, we wandered down the road to the Mubuku Valley Restaurant, run by a women's group headed by an American Peace Corp worker. She was interesting to talk with, having been sent here to do environmental education, but when it became somewhat difficult, rather than get frustrated, she started a women's group and opened this restaurant. She loved trekking though and had been to Margherita twice, including on Christmas Day! Felix was the only man in the organisation and he served at the table. We had guacamole, then garlic soup, chicken curry and banana fritters. The table was set up under a pergola like structure with a thatched roof and only half height walls. The evening was pleasantly cool and the calmness was interrupted by an almost constant beating of drums from some distance way. The American girl explained that they were funeral drums which would continue all through the night.

We got to bed at 9.30 pm with most others not far behind. We were back in the tent which we had left standing while we had been on the trek - in fact Allyn had used it, but he was now sleeping out next to the truck. About 11 pm I was awoken by a slight earth tremor. I asked Rita if she had felt it but there was no reaction - she was fast asleep. I didn't give it any further thought and returned to sleeping. The next time I awoke it was because of a loud roar coming down the valley as if someone had let off a huge explosion. Rita awoke this time and within seconds, the ground was shaking. It takes a while for you to realise just

what is happening and neither of us said much until it stopped, after maybe thirty seconds. I think our first comments were about the funeral drums, which had stopped, and then they started up again after about a minute, as if to indicate that everything was back to normal.

I checked my watch and it was 2.40 am. We tried to return to sleep but it was difficult especially when there were aftershocks about every twenty minutes, three or four in all. One of these aftershocks was almost as large as the main shock and also lasted about thirty seconds. Each time, the thing that amazed me, having not been in an earthquake before, was the loud noise which seemed to arrive several seconds ahead of the actual shaking. Obviously the epicentre was up in the mountains somewhere and we were at least thankful that we were not up in one of the huts.

Next morning we started slowly and compared notes with the others on their experience of the quake. Matthew said he thought he felt something but basically hadn't woken up! The American aid worker appeared on the scene and brought home to us the severity of the quake - two people had already been reported killed by falling boulders and one of the walls of her group's restaurant had collapsed outwards fortunately, because some of the women were sleeping inside. She said she thought it was about 6 on the Richter scale and she was surprised that I had no idea how severe it was. They get a lot of quakes she said, but this was by far the biggest she had experienced during her almost two years in the valley. Her views were confirmed in the following report which appeared in a daily newspaper in Australia:

The strongest earthquake to strike the Great Rift Valley in Uganda since 1966 killed 12 people and injured 200 others. The predawn quake also rocked eastern Zaire, and was followed by many aftershocks. (The accompanying map listed the quake at 6.2 on the Richter scale.)

Trust my parents to find this and thus be concerned for our wellbeing! We, of course, saw no news of almost any kind, either local or international, so I didn't find out about this report until I spoke to my parents from Nairobi several weeks later.

Some laundry we had left before the trek with the local lady was returned to us in a bundle and we paid them. This had been done the previous evening but when I looked at one of my tee shirts, it had a big cut in the back which had definitely not been there before. I wouldn't have minded that much but this was my best tee shirt, bought four years earlier at Epulu in Zaire. So before we left Allyn complained to the lady, who subcontracts the work to others, and retrieved the payment for washing that article! This was about US\$150 or about twenty cents! Certainly cheap laundry, but not if your clothes are destroyed in the process.

And so we headed out of the Mubuku Valley at about 9.30 and reached Kasese at 10.30 to do some shopping. I also got my tee shirt gash sewn back together by one of the many street side tailors with their quaint peddle operated sewing machines. I think this cost me about US\$500 or about fifty cents! Others also managed to get plenty of good fruit and veggies - it's always much better to arrive at the markets early in the day unlike when we were here before the trek.

Queen Elizabeth National Park

It was sunny and hot as we headed south out of Kasese at 11.00 am. I kept a lookout when we had gone about 30 km as the Equator was about to be crossed and since we had missed it back in Kenya, everyone wanted to see it. We reached it at 11.30 and it is well marked with a symbolic circular structure on each side of the road, plus a white line across the road. We all posed for a group photo before continuing southwards towards Queen Elizabeth National Park. This would be one of the few attractions of this trip which I had "done" on my previous trip four years earlier.



We reached the park entrance at 12.30 and then headed into the main lodge area where we stopped under a tree and organised lunch while Allyn went to organise the boat trip. It was pleasantly warm without being stinking hot. The launch was due to go at 2 pm so we hurried lunch and then headed down in the truck to the small jetty. The launch trip left late but went for two hours, and it was much as it had been in 1989 - numerous hippos, lots of birdlife as well as monitor lizards and buffalo. Highlights included the tortoise sitting on top of a hippo, and the fish eagle that was swimming because of the huge fish it had caught which was too heavy for it to take off.

After the launch trip we headed to the campsite which was somewhat improved since 1989 - now it had several showers instead of just one, and it also had a nice gazebo structure with a concrete floor. We put the tables up and prepared food in here, although the fire was obviously outside. Some of us also slept in the gazebo despite it being a very windy night and the mozzie nets were blowing all over the place.

Dinner was a lovely beef curry followed by bananas with caramel sauce, thanks to Michael and Linda. Then we all walked to the lodge to have a few beers. It was about a ten minute walk in pitch blackness but I had my headlamp and some others had torches. A hippo was nonchalantly grazing on the front lawn of the lodge! As we returned at about 10.30 pm we could see many eyes glowing in the dark just off the track - they were hippos grazing around the campsite but they didn't seem to be very interested in us.

The plan for the next day was to see a bit more of the National Park then head as far south west towards the Zaire border as possible. It had the potential to be a long day but no-one woke up until 6.30 am and I had to get the fire going. Fortunately we still had some of the good dry wood that we scored on the road to Semliki so it was not a problem. We eventually got away at about eight o'clock.

We took an alternative route that basically follows the Kazega Channel eastwards to the main road. This wound around the undulating scrub country up above the channel and we saw plenty of game. Most people didn't seem that interested in the various sub-species of antelopes found in the park, especially the Ugandan Kob and the rather hairier variety of waterbuck. We also saw a bushbuck and a forest hog, the latter being distinctively different from a warthog.

It was 9.45 when we reached the exit gate and it was starting to warm up into another fine and sunny day, having started out rather cool and hazy. We were soon heading southwards again on the main road, ignoring the direct route through Ishashsa River because Allyn had been advised it was in very poor condition. Thus, we would follow tarmac all the way to the large town of Mbarara then turn south west and head to the equally large town of Kabale.



After crossing savannah country, the road climbs into some greener hilly terrain which is covered with a mixture of banana, tea and coffee plantations. Some of these are huge and

extend as far as the eye can see. Many had hundreds of workers in among the tea or coffee crops harvesting these valuable commodities which form the backbone of the Ugandan economy. For some it was a boring day and they slept or read, while I was just taking in all this wonderful countryside, including the people walking or cycling along the road, the small villages, the schools and roadside markets. Lunch was on the roadside just before Mbarara at 12.30 pm then we stopped in Mbarara to shop at 1.20 pm, but only for twenty minutes as they were very little worth buying! From here to Kabale is more of this lovely country, although it is a long way and took nearly three hours. Just before Kabale is a really steep and very slow hill which was seemingly endless, but the views were good.

We didn't dawdle in Kabale but instead continued through onto the dirt road that would wind through the mountains to the small border town of Kisoro. The first part of this road meanders up a delightful valley with terraces all across the hillsides and cattle grazing or other crops growing on the rich lowlands. As we climbed ever upwards out of the valley I noticed the burnt out frame of a bus way down below the road - it can be a risky business travelling on public transport in Africa! About midway to Kisoro we passed the delightfully picturesque Lake Bunyonyi set among rugged pine covered hills - it was more like a scene from Europe than Africa!

We wondered whether Allyn would camp along this road but there were precious few opportunities. As time marched on and the light began to fade, it became apparent that he wanted to reach Kisoro. The road must have been hard work, and indeed he looked very tired when we eventually arrived. Just as it was getting dark we came up behind two huge semi-trailers carrying food to Rwanda for the World Food Programme. They were crawling along even slower than us and we wondered whether we would be able to pass on the incredibly narrow winding road with a huge drop off one side. Fortunately Allyn has some very nice air horns fitted to the Bedford and we managed to gain the drivers' attention and in each case managed to get past without too much delay.

It was well and truly dark and after seven o'clock when we entered Kisoro and Allyn was trying to find the Travellers Rest Hotel. I had camped here in 1989, but I couldn't exactly recall where it was. However I knew it was pretty much in the middle of the small town so when Allyn was heading out of town and stopped, I was at least able to tell him "it was back there somewhere!" Indeed it was, and we duly pulled in and quickly set up camp. I chopped the firewood, got the fire going and pitched the tent while Rita prepared the dinner. It was 8.30 before we ate and then we headed into the bar for a beer. A number of other travellers were there, as this is the base for gorilla viewing both in Uganda and Zaire. One of the girls was from the Encounter Overland office in London so Allyn knew her. Small world?

Three Countries in One Day

We planned a 6 am start with the intention of getting to the border when it opened at 8 am. I was the only one to awake at the right time - it never ceases to amaze me how my internal alarm clock works! It was very dewy so I first concentrated on the fire using the wood I had cut the previous night. Alan was soon up and helping as always. We eventually got away close to time and reached the border at 8.05. There were quite a few trucks ahead of us, and there was the usual feeling of chaos that is found at borders. I had been through this border in 1989 and it was ever so quiet then. The closure of the Ugandan-Rwanda border has apparently increased the traffic through here significantly.

The two trucks from the World Food Programme soon arrived also and proceeded to completely block the road between us and the border gate! I was in the cab and sat reading a book. One local came by trying to sell Zairian currency, but apart from the fact that we didn't need any, I also knew that it was virtually worthless! Another local was selling cases of Primus - that great Zairian beer. Now this was a better deal, but still, the price seemed too high and we could probably buy it in western Rwanda anyway. Allyn had the passports stamped quite quickly but the customs man wasn't there yet - must have slept in! So Allyn couldn't get the carnet stamped.

So I sat and watched the nearby volcanoes emerge from the morning mist, Muhabara and Sabinyo clearly visible to our left. It was incredible that where we wanted to be was a mere 10 kilometres away over the Virunga range, but it would take us two days to get there. Our frustration at the delay was slightly heightened at 9.20 when a group of backpackers arrived and went straight through - they didn't need a customs stamp because they didn't have a truck! Time passed. At 9.45 another group of tourists arrived in a matatu and headed through the border on foot - they were going to Djombo to see the gorillas in Zaire. It's quite a common way to see the gorillas - by just slipping into Zaire for a day or two, but it can be hard to organise bookings without going to the National Park office in Goma.

Allyn appeared with his stamped carnet at ten o'clock - the customs man had been there for an hour and a half but was just very slow. This, our slowest border post, hadn't quite finished with us. We still needed to negotiate the traffic jam. Allyn backed the truck up somewhat then headed onto the grass and almost ran over the office building but reached the gate, which of course was closed. A few minutes later and an official came over to open it.

It's just a few hundred metres to the Zairian border post where we immediately gained an hour due to the timezone change. We were there for fifty minutes and upon his return to the truck Allyn said they were all surprisingly helpful and friendly. We then had the usual problem - no-one to open the gate. This time it took ten minutes to find someone to open it, and we headed off at 10.10 onto the unbelievably rough road through to Rutshuri. I recall this road from 1989 when it was wet and muddy, although it is rarely impassable - it's made of volcanic rock! But the potholes, ditches and washouts are continuous and huge. The area is very heavily populated with mudbrick cottages and fields covering every inch.

It took us nearly two hours to do the 30 kilometres to the junction at Rutshuri where we understood we could turn onto a new tarmac road to Goma. Certainly it was not tarmac in

1989 and back then, it took us most of the day to go from Goma to Kisoro. The road was tarmac, but the junction also had a police checkpoint. These roadblocks are rife throughout Zaire, a country with a broken economy and a worthless currency. The police and other officials who have some "power", and this lot had a local human gorilla holding an AK47, make up their income by demanding thinly disguised bribes from passing foreigners, payable in US dollars of course. The usual excuse is that you must have road insurance for the truck, but since you can't buy such insurance, you obviously can never provide evidence. Their solution, of course, is to insist that you buy some on the spot, and they always have another guy who steps forward ready and willing to sell a policy. Sometimes they have been known to get many hundreds of dollars.

Allyn was playing it pretty cool. The language barrier is always a good lurk, and Therese had already been told not to speak any French! Eventually Allyn called their bluff and told us to have lunch - in the middle of the road! They don't like this! Other drivers have called such a bluff by having the group set up their tents. This usually brings matters to a hasty conclusion. In this case, Allyn was allowed to depart after paying only US\$10 - what a bargain! The group were a bit nonplused at having to quickly repack the lunch, but we weren't hanging around any longer.

I suggested to Allyn that we could have lunch at the Rutshuri Waterfall - we had camped there back in 1989, so all I had to do was remember how to find it. The trouble was that the road had been rebuilt and everything looked different. However, we came to a turnoff and there was a sign to the falls, vaguely pointing up what looked more like a firebreak than a track. A house was being built on the corner - I remember this was all virgin jungle in 1989, but now it's all banana plantations - so Allyn asked directions from a local, confirming that the firebreak was the track to the falls. I recalled that it was about a kilometre. Well that was about right but it was extremely overgrown, not to mention the huge ditch hiding under the grass which launched the truck into the air!

We reached the spot but the grass was really long. Still, we were at the falls, and I pointed out where they were for all to see. Most people seemed pleased to see them although some couldn't see the point. It was really hot in the sun, so we ate lunch quite quickly, packed up and visited the falls. Some locals had appeared from nowhere, such is their want, and we donated the leftover lunch to them, including a couple of empty tin cans which they just love.

It was 1.45 pm when we reached the main road again - having tried to avoid hitting the huge hidden ditch! I was in the back of the truck now and as Allyn proceeded to drive down the left side of the road, I leaned out and gesticulated to him to drive on the correct (right) side of the road! He had this problem again after we went through the Rwandan border - guess he's not done much driving on the right, despite the fact that the truck was left hand drive.

The new road has basically been built on top of the old road, which meanders among the volcanic hills gently downhill for the 50 kilometres to Goma. There are quite a few nasty bends on it and Allyn was making quite a good pace. The day was becoming overcast but we still had a good clear view of various of the volcanoes, Misenko and Kirisimbi to the east and Nyiragongo to the west. We rolled into Goma at about 3.20 pm and immediately

headed for the border post. As we pulled up, right on the shores of Lake Kivu, it began to drizzle.

The Zairian border crossing took about an hour, culminating with the customs man actually visiting us in the back of the truck - no problems and he seemed friendly enough. We headed through the two large gates across the 100 metre no mans land to the Rwandan post. Here we needed to get a visa for Tanya but they were friendly and helpful and all went well.

Postscript - it's impossible to not point out that Goma and the road into it from the north were the scene of the "largest refugee camp on Earth" some five months later. I'm sure the whole civilised world has seen the horrifying news footage of a million or more people along and in the fields beside the road, as well as in Goma where they were getting highly contaminated water from Lake Kivu, which was full of dead bodies. Having been along this road three times, and visited Goma twice, including for Christmas 1989, it is almost impossible to comprehend the incredible tragedy that occurred just months later.

Rwanda - Gorillas in the Mist

It is sad that I have had the image of the Rwandan border post at Gisenyi reinforced in my mind by seeing it in several pieces of news footage many months later as millions of Rwandan refugees streamed through the border in flight from the Rwandan Patriotic Front. Little did we know what violence and carnage would erupt in this tiny country just a few months later. Many people ask me to explain to them what is occurring in Rwanda and I admit to not being able to provide a truly accurate definition of who are the "goodies" and "baddies". Let me start by quoting a passage from Dian Fossey's book, "Gorillas in the Mist", where she explains a little of the two main tribes in Rwanda:

The porters were mainly Bahutu people of the Bantu race, the main agriculturalists of the area. More than four centuries previously the Watutsi people of the Hamitic race came down from the north and subjugated the Bahutu who were living in the region that came to be known as Rwanda. A type of feudalism developed as the Watutusi, who owned the cattle, took over the land. The Bahutu then had to pay in services or goods for the right to use the cattle or the pastureland. In time the Bahutu became the serfs of the Watutsi kings. The two castes remained distinct throughout most of the German and Belgian colonial period until 1959, when the Bahutu overthrew their Watutsi masters. Rwanda became independent from Belgium in 1962 with the Bahutu in power. The revolution and its aftermath lasted well into 1973 and caused the slaughter of thousands of Watutsi and the exodus of many thousands more. To this day some bitterness remains between the two races.

That last statement is of course a serious understatement. Tensions have built between what the press refer to as the Hutu and Tutsi, with serious outbreaks of civil war first in 1991 and then soon after our visit in 1994. Many Tutsi live in south-west Uganda and it was from here that the Rwandan Patriotic Front was building its strength for the 1994 assault. This explains why the border near Kisoro was closed and that there was a substantial military buildup throughout northern Rwanda.

However, the above might lead one to think of the Tutsi as the bad guys, yet this is clearly not so. In fact, while the centuries of history cannot be wiped aside so easily, it must be realised that as a result of the Tutsi being the "upper class", the majority of well educated Rwandans are Tutsi. The Hutu government was well known to be dictatorial and repressive, and openly promulgated propaganda to the effect that the Tutsi were "the enemy". Over a period of decades, this has led to this view being accepted as the truth by the majority of Hutus.

Despite this, following the 1991 civil war, the UN stepped in and tried to get the Hutu government to move towards democracy. It is difficult to fully understand why the Hutu government would see this as a threat, since the Hutu have a substantial majority, but it seems there was a lot of dissent within the Hutus as well because the government was full of corruption and nepotism. It was clearly some of those whose powerbase was being threatened that shot down the President's aircraft at Kigali airport in April, and the rest is history.

The Rwandan Patriotic Front were ready to move, well organised, and with support of both Tutsis and some Hutus, but no-one could have predicted the bloodbath that resulted when the Hutu military and secret militia groups started to murder all Tutsis and any sympathetic Hutus. As I write this we can only hope that the Rwandan Patriotic Front lead government will at least bring some stability to Rwanda and that the country can start the long climb back to some semblance of civilisation.

So back to our story

We soon turned away from the Lake and headed for the market area and the nearby Presbyterian Mission where we would be staying. This part of town was in stark contrast to the large mansions near the lake - lots of dumpy shops, the usual chaotic market, litter ridden streets with broken pavements, and people everywhere. Once inside the relative seclusion of the mission, we organised changing some money on the completely open and obvious black market. The guy came into the mission and most of us changed some US dollars into Rwandan Francs - RFr190 to the US dollar. Those with only travellers cheques would have to wait until the next day and try a bank.

It was dusk as we headed out of the mission to explore the town a little more. There was no need to pitch tents, as we were going to sleep in one of the dormitories. Just a hundred metres from the mission we found a restaurant of sorts, and we agreed with Allyn to meet there by seven o'clock for dinner. Everyone seemed to disperse quite quickly and we explored some of the shops. We bought some chocolate but there wasn't much else available - it was too late in the day for the market. We then headed into a small bar just near the restaurant and the owner was so friendly as he brought us a Primus to share. It was good to have some Primus - one of the best beers in the world, and it was selling for RFr 100 for a 720 ml bottle! The owner had very little English but we managed a minimal conversation.

After finishing our drinks we headed over to the restaurant where most of the others were in the adjacent bar. We ordered another drink and fairly soon moved into the spartan restaurant where a lady brought out bowls of chicken and chips. I wondered about the cleanliness of the place, and thought back to Nakuru, but no-one was sick. We headed back to the dorm after another round of drinks and it was entertaining to see everyone sleeping in the same room. Laura and Delores were so prudish - they slept in all their clothes! Meanwhile Michael was running around stark naked with a pillow being held in front, just to stir up Delores! What a circus!

It was a slow start next morning with us planning to do some shopping, go to banks and so forth before heading out of town. After breakfast, several of us wandered down to a small group of craft stalls that we had seen on the way in. We then all assembled as agreed back at the truck by ten o'clock, and after the usual hassles of reversing out, we headed up to the service station to fill up with diesel and water. This all took quite a time with us having trouble getting near the diesel pump and then near the water tap, with people and vehicles spread chaotically all over the place. We eventually departed at 10.45 with me up front with Allyn. We only went about three hundred metres and we came to a military roadblock, the first of many we would see in Rwanda, and were told we had to take a different road. That one must have gone past a military camp. In any case, we wandered through some back streets back to the market then took the other road nearer to the lake.

It was after eleven o'clock as we eventually escaped Gisenyi, passing a fast flowing river with rapids and waterfalls. There had obviously been a lot of rain in the hills as the water was very brown. From Gisenyi the good road climbs steadily for much of the journey to Ruhengeri, a distance of 70 km. The going was understandably slow, and on one very long hill, a local on one of those wooden bicycles grabbed hold of the back of the trailer and hitched a ride all the way to the top of that hill - very enterprising! There were a number of military checkpoints along the way, basically one at each village. Some were well fortified with sandbags half way across the road and serious looking guns set up behind them. Yet it appeared to be quiet during the day and few of them wanted to talk with us and they were all very friendly.

We reached Ruhengeri at 12.50 but Allyn and I decided we should head out to the National Park office at Kinigi as soon as possible, so it looked like we wouldn't get lunch for a while, if at all. It was important to sort out the arrangements for the gorilla visit so we could sort out our flights, if indeed that was possible. The road from Ruhengeri is very bad - rough and rocky for the most part but with one section quite muddy. Allyn had not put the 4WD shaft on yet so it was a bit dodgy. It took about 40 minutes to reach the village where we were stopped. A park official was there and he seemed to know what we wanted - he knew we had a booking for ten people for Friday. He wanted to go to the Park office anyway, so he jumped in the cab with me and we headed off there, a further 10 minutes away over more narrow and rough tracks. All the while there was a superb view of all the volcanoes, from Kirisimbi in the west, then Visoke, the usual shaped Sabinyo quite close to the office, and Muhabura further to the east.



It was clear that we could not change the Friday booking - it was fully booked out. He confirmed however that we could climb Visoke the next day - just turn up at the Park office at eight o'clock and a guide would be allotted. After a difficult U-turn on the grass in front

of the office, we headed back to the village to drop the guy off. It had now started to rain, and the motivation to stop for lunch had dissipated! So we continued back to town on the now quite boggy roads. It was downhill, so the risk was mostly of sliding off the track into a ditch. Allyn was thus taking it very steadily. It was almost four o'clock by the time we reached our campsite - another church mission where we could pitch tents on a small patch of lawn. At least it was sunny now that we were away from the mountains a little.

After a bit of debate, we decided to head into town to try to find a telephone where we could ring the airlines in Kigali and try to find another flight. We knew Tanya was booked on a flight departing Saturday night so that seemed the best bet. Telephones in Rwanda are available at small "kiosks" on the roadside where they also sell soft drinks and beer - quite a social meeting place really. We soon found one and using the directory I found the Air Kenya office. The lady was quite helpful but said that they couldn't endorse our ticket for use on another airline. She gave me the number to call to book on the Saturday night flight which turned out to be Air Cameroun. Air Rwanda act as agents for Air Cameroun. This lady was similarly helpful, although the language made it difficult and slow as I had to spell out our names which were duly put on the waiting list for that flight. She told us to call back on Friday to confirm and that we would have to be in Kigali to pay for and collect the ticket by 12.30 on Saturday when their office closed.

With that all arranged, we took the opportunity to have a cold beer in the bar across the road, where some other tourists were sitting. We then headed back to the mission, about ten minutes walk from the middle of town. There were soldiers everywhere, and obviously this was now essentially a military town due to its close proximity to the Ugandan border. Someone had kindly put our tent up for us so we basically relaxed over another beer and watched a lovely sunset with Misenko, Kirisimbi and Visoke silhouetted against it. I cooked some custard to have after our main course and we all headed off to bed about 9.30 pm after many bottles of Primus and a few glasses of white port that someone had picked up in Gisenyi.

It was cold and damp when we awoke well before dawn. We needed to depart about seven o'clock to get up to the Park office for eight. The firewood was damp and the fire was understandably slow. We still managed to depart at 7.10 am after reversing the truck out of the narrow space without the trailer. Allyn still hadn't put on the 4WD shaft so we slithered up the muddy road, and almost got stuck. We were at the Park office just before eight and it was a scene of chaos and confusion. A variety of trucks including a Guerba and some Belgians were milling about organising their gorilla visits. We had to wait around for 45 minutes while all the others were processed, then could put our names in the book and get two guides allocated.

It was a fine and sunny day as we headed off towards Mount Visoke, about ten kilometres to the west. The views of all the volcanoes were superb in the crystal clear morning weather. The narrow track runs westward through continuous farmlands, mostly pyrethrum planted at the suggestion of the EEC to solve Rwanda's economic problems. Not only has it not solved their problems but it has eaten into the gorilla habitat of the Volcanoes National Park which is now but a few kilometres wide. The track is mostly constructed of the underlying volcanic rock and it took fully an hour to reach the drop off point.

Here we would split into two - Rita, Tanya, Alan, Michael and Linda were going to Lake Ngazi, reputedly a fairly easy mostly flat walk. Allyn, Therese, Matthew and myself were climbing the 3711 metre high Mount Visoke, renowned for its beautiful summit crater lake. From the first dropoff Allyn tried to take the truck the extra 300 metres up the hill to the end of the road but the traction gave way and we just started sliding off the road. He gingerly reversed back and we parked at the start of the Lake walk.



We headed off 10.10 am. A short excerpt from Guy Yeoman's book will help set the scene:

These Virunga are like the pyramid mountains that children draw, and the transition from the comparative flatness of the saddle to the uniform steepness of the slope is sudden. Within a few paces one is grappling with a despairingly steep tangle and progress is largely made by hauling on vegetation. You soon learn what you can trust; there is nothing sturdier than the ericas, root or branch; senecios and hypericums can usually be relied on; but oh! - never put your trust in a lobelia. Such ascents have little appeal to the simple mountaineer, but to the naturalist and to those seeking to explore their environment, they have much to offer. I have never tired of the uplifting transition from the hot plains of Africa to the ethereal heights. With every step upwards, be it never so weary, something changes, as the familiar plants give way to the afro-alpine world, and with every breath the air becomes more delectable.

Beyond the end of the track, a fire trail is followed uphill for a few hundred metres before we peeled off to the left to follow a very slippery red mud walking track steeply uphill towards the saddle. While it was warm and sunny, there is virtually daily rainfall here and it was really hard going, especially given the horrid stinging nettles which get you whenever you stray your hand into the bushes beside the narrow track. We were making good

headway though and reached the saddle at 10.50 and took a ten minute breather. This is where the track continues on to Mount Kirisimbi and just a kilometre along there is the Kirisoke Research Centre where Dian Fossey was based for her gorilla studies. It continues to operate to this day.

However, we were about to head steep uphill on the ridge of the classically volcano shaped Visoke. The early stages are among dense foliage which seemed to be mostly stinging nettles, and as we gained altitude, the foliage gradually thinned to a hagenia and senecio "forest". It became really steep and we had to tread carefully up the waterlogged tufts of grass. We passed a Dutch couple with their guide - it was a young guy and his mother - she was doing well to be getting up this slope at all! Towards the top the cloud was starting to encroach upon us and our view began to disappear. Light drizzle began to fall and the temperature had fallen to about 12 C°. It was 12.30 when we reached the top - quite a quick time, although Allyn was pretty stuffed - overland drivers don't get enough exercise!



We took in the view, Mikeno in the background, Karisimbi to the left, and the beautiful lake right in front of us, perhaps 80 metres below. The real summit was further around to the right but our guide suggested we couldn't go there - it was in Zaire. This is garbage of course as the summit is on the border, but we didn't really want to go anyway. We ate our lunch in the light drizzle and then headed downhill. This was arguably even harder work, certainly on the knees, and as we got down into the muddy part, very hard on the bum as we slipped over multiple times. It was also raining quite heavily.

Just after we turned left at the saddle our guide stopped us and told us to be quiet as there were gorillas. We had all been hearing their calls as we had been descending, and just then

Matthew saw one scurry across the track in front of him. We had the cameras out and waited. The guide wanted US\$20 to show us the gorillas, and he did try for a while, but he didn't have a panga (machete) so couldn't cut a path for us. Still, we saw one inquisitive youngster in a tree about 10 metres from the track and we could certainly hear the silverback roaring. This was so thrilling and in retrospect, these were definitely not a fully habituated group!

We gave up trying to reach the gorillas after about ten minutes - it was no point without a panga. So we headed on downhill, now on the slipperiest section of the track, and it was the closest thing to skiing without actually having skis on! Several falls were taken by most of us, no matter how careful we were. The funniest part was Allyn who made a loud and long "aarrrrrrhhh" as he fell over on his bum. We also had caught up with the Dutch couple and the mother seemed to be falling over more than she was walking! It was just like ice! It was a relief to reach the fire trail and then the main track and downhill to the truck. It was 3.25 pm and the others had been back for almost an hour and were hiding in the back of the truck for shelter. We were all drenched, especially our boots and socks, as well as our goretex jackets.

It was a long slow drive back to Ruhengeri, dropping our guides off in Kinigi, as well as several passengers, some of who wanted rides to town. We reached the mission at 5.25 pm and we cooked soup - quick and very welcome for the cold and tired trekkers, followed by biryani rice. It was fine and mild down out of the hills. However, we had an even earlier start the next morning so bedded down at nine o'clock for a night's sleep which seemed to be interrupted many times by barking and fighting dogs!

So it was the barking dogs that awoke us at 4.45 am - still dark as well as cold and damp. Allyn was soon putting on the 4WD shaft - the heavy rain the previous evening would probably mean we wouldn't get up the road this time, and we could not take risks today! We departed at six, and had to wait for about 15 minutes at the checkpoint on the outskirts of town. The chief guide had asked us to pick him up there at 6 am but he wasn't to be found. He turned up eventually and off we went. Thus we were at the Park office at seven o'clock, to find another Guerba truck and a Dutch truck. Many of them did not have bookings and were camped there getting one or two people to see the gorillas each day.

There was considerable stuffing around, much as the previous day, but we departed just after eight o'clock with a very full truck - seemingly numerous guides, guards and four of the Dutch people who were going with part of our group. We were told that the walk to Group 9 was long (2 to 3 hours) and arduous so all the fitter ones agreed to go there. That was Therese, Matthew, Linda, Michael, Tanya, Rita and myself. Alan, Laura and Delores would go with the Dutch to Group 11 which was described as an easy one hour walk. Allyn ended up with the latter group because their dropoff point was further on so he had to drive the truck! In retrospect, this was unfair, as Group 11 is larger and more interesting, being the group used for the filming of "Gorillas in the Mist", whereas Group 9 is small, with just six gorillas and no juveniles.

Some background on gorillas is appropriate at this point, and for this I quote from Dian Fossey's own book:

Just as there are separate subspecies among the orangutan and chimpanzee, there are separate subspecies of gorilla, also with morphological variations related

primarily to habitat. In western Africa there remains some 9000 to 10000 lowland gorilla (Gorilla gorilla gorilla) in the wild. It is this subspecies most frequently seen in captivity and mounted in museum collections. Some 1000 miles to the east within the Virunga Volcanoes of Zaire, Uganda and Rwanda live the last surviving mountain gorillas (Gorilla gorilla beringei), the subject of my field study. Only about 240 mountain gorillas remain in the wild. None are found in captivity. The third subspecies is known as the eastern lowland gorilla (Gorilla gorilla graueri). Only about 4000 graueri remain in the wild, mainly in eastern Zaire, and less than two dozen live in captivity.

While this was written in 1983, the facts remain largely accurate, although the discovery of some additional groups of mountain gorillas in Uganda have now lead to the belief that there may be as many as 500 of them surviving - still not exactly a substantial population and still definitely an endangered subspecies.

We reached the dropoff point for Group 9 at 9.05 am and it was at the same spot as the start of the Lake Ngazi walk the previous day. For Group 11 they continued along the park boundary road for another kilometre or so. Our walk took us through the fields for about a kilometre, mostly uphill to the park boundary where we stopped and received a lecture from the head guide. His English was scant so Therese translated his French for us. The rules are simple - leave no litter or food, no eating or smoking near the gorillas, don't touch them, and any human excrement must be fully buried, This is all for the protection of the gorillas who can easily pick up human diseases for which they have no immunity.

Thus we headed off, with relatively easy going through lots of bamboo forest and some dense foliage but on a well beaten track. The bamboo forest is superb - dark and quiet, almost mystical, with the huge bamboo shoots about six inches in diameter at the ground and disappearing out of sight above. The dense foliage, in contrast, is head high with lots of stinging nettles and the occasional hagenia tree. After a while we were going down more than up and after perhaps an hour and a half we reached the edge of a small escarpment where we could see far across into Zaire. I could see Visoke back on our left and Sabinyo was out of sight to our right. That meant we were roughly on the border of Zaire. I asked the guide as we stopped for a breather but he claimed the border was several kilometres away - I knew he was wrong. It is sad that the size of the Volcanoes National Park in Rwanda has been reduced to a sliver of land along the border, and now the only substantial tracts of gorilla habitat are in Zaire and Uganda. No doubt the Rwandan gorilla groups do range into Rwanda, but that day Group 9 were definitely in Zaire!



From here it was steep downhill along narrowing tracks and into a dense area of scrub with occasional tracts of bamboo forest. It was almost 11.30 when we found the first sign of gorilla nests. We spent the next 45 minutes seemingly going around in circles - I was first right behind the head guide who was wielding the panga to clear a tract - most of the time through completely virgin scrub. We were walking on the scrub for much of the time rather than the ground. All the while the guide was making the customary call, like a low coughing sound, and from time to time there was a response which allowed him to home in on the group. Apparently the group is visited every second week and this was the first day of a new week so they had to locate based on where they had been a week earlier. But they did and suddenly there were gorillas all around us.

Over the next hour we moved perhaps 20 metres through the foliage as the group slowly moved. The silverback was first visible sitting in a small glade and then he sauntered off along a vague track with the rest of the group following. One of the females was sitting up in tree and I could stand right beside her. One of the black backs (teenage males) clambered up into a small tree beside us and sat on top of the dense foliage. He was hard to photograph through the branches and a while later as I was creeping a bit closer, he just climbed up the small branch and crashed down to the ground at my feet!



After the full hour the guides called an end to the visit and we headed off for about ten minutes before they stopped and allowed us to eat our lunches. We still had to find our way out - this required the guide to keep cutting a pathway until we eventually emerged onto a vague track that the guides recognised. They cut lengths of bamboo to mark the spot so they could find it again the next day. It took two and a half hours to reach the truck, including the long climb up the escarpment. The stinging nettles were vicious - I had my gloves and my goretex on to provide protection. One particularly nasty species even pricked my arm through the goretex although it didn't seem to leave a lasting sting.

It was just starting to rain as we reached the truck at 4.15 pm - we were lucky because it had started raining much earlier the previous day. The thunderstorm brewing over Mount Visoke was dark and threatening and as we drove back towards town there was almost constant rain. We had quite a truck load of locals who were hitching a ride, and in the end, I had to ask Allyn to stop them getting on - their idea of a fully loaded truck is when everyone is standing with no spare space! We were not running a bus service. Fortunately the Dutch had returned to their own truck as the other half of their party had been climbing Visoke so were parked at the same spot.

It was six o'clock when we reached the mission in Ruhengeri - a twelve hour day of rough roads and trekking through dense jungle just for one hour with a small group of gorillas! There was some feeling of anti-climax about the whole day. For me, the greatest disappointment was that the small group of gorillas we saw virtually did not acknowledge our presence. It was as if they saw us arrive, yawned and then continued with their everyday activities of feeding, grooming and moving slowly through the forest. I suppose hearing that the others had seen the larger Group 11 with several inquisitive juveniles also added to a tinge of disappointment.

We had been hopeful of being back sooner so I could call Air Rwanda. I quickly walked into town anyway but the telephone kiosk was closed. A friendly enough guy asked me what I was looking for as I wandered across the road and he said I could call from a hotel in the next street. It was worth a try. We went there but we couldn't figure out how to call the number! So I left it and decided to try again in the morning. As I walked back to the mission it was very dark and there were only soldiers on the street - I learned later that there is a dusk curfew so I shouldn't have really been out, but they didn't bother me.

Back at camp it was soup for the weary trekkers, satay beef and quite a few beers. The laundry we had left from the previous day was done and not only was it ever so cheap but it was all ironed - including Alan's hat! Laura and Delores were apparently exhausted from their "long" walk and went to bed very early. Allyn told us it was a doddle of a walk, so one can only wonder what would have happened if they had been in our group on the almost three hours each way trek. The rest of us bedded down about 9.30 on a cool and overcast night.

We needed to get an early start the next morning so that we could be sure to be in Kigali well before 12.30 to fix up our tickets. The 100 kilometre drive should only take less than three hours, but we wanted to leave town by eight o'clock. Indeed we managed to leave just on eight after a cold shower and a stop in town to unsuccessfully try to call the Air Rwanda office. The road was good tarmac but there were plenty of hills through this rugged country. There were also two accidents to contend with and numerous military checkpoints.

We entered Kigali at 10.40 am and I navigated Allyn to a spot where we should be near the Air Rwanda office. Indeed we were, but we didn't see the tiny little office and instead headed towards the "other" office, which turned out to be the Head Office and apart from a caretaker, did not appear to be manned. Instead, we decided to go into a travel agency just across the road and here they were very helpful and were happy to sell us new tickets on the Air Cameroun flight. They also said we should be able to get the Air Kenya tickets endorsed so we went over to the Air Kenya office just 100 metres away. The lady there was the one I had spoken with on the phone a few days earlier and she once again confirmed that they would not endorse the tickets. We would have to cash in the ticket when we got home to Australia (and we did). So back to the travel agency and we handed across much of our remaining travellers cheques to pay for a new pair of tickets. We then still had to go to the original Air Rwanda office to confirm the flight. All in all, we did quite a bit of walking around town and certainly got our daily exercise!

Enroute back to the patisserie that we had spied opposite the travel agency, I stopped at a phone kiosk and rang Nairobi to make sure we would have a booking at the Milimani that night. At the patisserie we had a mini pizza and a pastry and sat with Allyn and some folks from a Guerba truck that was on an overland from London. They had a weird group and the crew were telling us some bizarre stories of a Japanese girl who had, to all intents and purposes, gone mad! The patisserie was a lovely spot with seats and tables out the front under a verandah. The food was delicious although somewhat expensive. The place was run by an Indian lady and next door was an Indian restaurant which had a good reputation. Before we departed, Allyn booked us in there for the evening meal!

We wandered back to the truck by about 12.30. Kigali was a pleasant enough town, not dissimilar in some respects to Kampala, but set among rolling green hills. There was of course a distressing presence of military, including local government troops and so-called UN troops. The latter seemed to consist of Americans driving around in jeeps with machine guns being held between their legs. It's incredible to think back to that time as I now write this. Less than two months after we were there the president's plane was shot down and all hell broke loose. That "pleasant" town with its seemingly gentle people erupted into violence and carnage as the majority Hutus pursued the systematic massacre of the minority Tutsis. Perhaps what annoyed me the most about this situation was the attitude of the west which had propped up the repressive regime and when the situation became too hot, the so called UN troops were the first to leave.

I navigated Allyn to our campsite at another mission in the southern area of Kigali, but had to do a U-turn when we found that one road was blocked off by a well armed soldier. They seemed to have blocked off any road that went anywhere near a military camp or installation. Soon enough we found the mission and after lunch, the others began setting up tents as we spent an hour or so sorting out our luggage ready for the night's flight. Mid afternoon we wandered out to a nearby kiosk and sat having a beer in the street. The kiosk is a natural social meeting place as it serves drinks and supplies the only telephones!

Our camp was gradually taken over by locals late in the afternoon as a wedding was being held in the chapel of the mission. Many well heeled Rwandan's arrived in their modern and no doubt expensive cars. One can only imagine what has happened to these people since. Perhaps the wealthiest would have been well connected enough to have escaped the country when the fighting broke out. By five o'clock, the overcast and warm day turned to drizzle and then heavy rain. The wedding guests were all running around in the mud with umbrellas as they tried to get to their cars and then extricate themselves from a mini traffic jam. We, on the other hand, were all packed, dressed and ready to go, and sat in the relative comfort of the back of the truck watching the action.

It was after six when we departed for the restaurant and we still had hassles getting through the milling cars of the last of the departing wedding guests. Again, I navigated Allyn to the restaurant where we locked our baggage in the cabin and headed in for dinner. It was an excellent meal, aided by quite a few bottles of Primus, and a good time was had by all - our last meal as a complete group. We needed to depart by about eight o'clock to allow plenty of time to reach the airport. Navigating on a dark, wet night in a truck with minimal headlights in a strange city with all the road signs in French was a recipe for getting lost! However, I managed to navigate us reasonably successfully onto the road to the airport and we didn't take any wrong turns despite the fact that I was often not certain whether we were on the right road or not. It was so dark and bleak outside and there were still people, animals and slow moving, often unlit vehicles out there that it was a precarious journey. There was, of course, an accident somewhere along the way and the damaged vehicles were sitting, totally unlit, in the middle of the road, just waiting for an even bigger accident to occur. I think my nerves were just a little frazzled when we reached the large and well lit airport terminal about 12 km out of town.

We made our farewells with the others and headed through the customs check - they weren't interested in pulling our luggage apart, then checked in. Upstairs and there was

passport control and we waved goodbye to the others, still watching us from below! The number of passengers in the spartan waiting area gradually grew to about 40 as we waited for about 40 minutes. I could hear the aircraft arrive and looked out the window into the bleak night to see the Air Cameroun B737.

We boarded at 10 pm and we moved quickly as there was no seat allocation. We had to identify our baggage on the tarmac as we walked to the aircraft - standard security procedures in Africa. As it was a through flight from Doula to Nairobi, many people were already on board, including what seemed to be a complete soccer team - perhaps they were the famous Cameroun team. Tanya had disappeared a few rows further back. People kept streaming in and we developed a theory that they were coming in the front door, going out the back and around again. Eventually every seat was taken, they shut the doors and we took off at 10.25 pm, or 11.25 pm Nairobi time. The flight was 1h 10m during which time we managed to doze a bit.

Nairobi - Take Two

We landed in Nairobi at 12.35 am and quickly headed through immigration to the baggage area. Amazingly, the baggage came out quite quickly and we were in a taxi by 1.10 am and at the Milimani at 1.30.

We'd agreed to meet Tanya for breakfast at nine o'clock as she needed to get going on her taxi/bus journey to Moshi where she would start her Kilimanjaro climb. The hot showers after we awoke soon after eight o'clock were absolute bliss - the first hot showers since the campsite north of Kitale in western Kenya almost three weeks earlier. Breakfast was ordinary and then we waited with Tanya for a taxi to arrive. Having bid her farewell we returned to the room and I tried to contact Ian Howell but only succeeded in getting his partner - Ian was away doing the filming of "The Ascent", the story of the two Italian prisoners who escaped and climbed Mount Kenya, described in the book *No Picnic on Mount Kenya*. I wanted to get some information about porters so I tried Iain Allen, but he was "away on safari" and while his wife was exceedingly friendly, I didn't really get the information I needed. I would just have to work it out when I got there.

Around midday we wandered off towards the centre of town - a walk of about 15-20 minutes. It was our first opportunity to wander around this city, often described as sleazy and dangerous, but on a Sunday afternoon it was sleepy and tame. We checked out the bookshops and I bought myself a map of Mount Kenya. We lunched under the famous Thorn Tree at the New Stanley Hotel - expensive but pleasant. We then went to check out the bus situation to Mount Kenya which required walking up the more sleazy end of town. It was typical bustling Africa - people and vehicles going in all directions. We found the spot where minibuses go from and also found a sign on a tiny office that claimed to have a real bus to Chogoria. We went in there and talked to a pleasant little man, Silas, who said he came from Chogoria and he said to come back in the morning and he would find me a bus.

Back in the quieter part of town we found the African Heritage gallery, and listened to an excellent band playing in the café. Then it was back to the hotel which we made just as it started to rain. We spent some time packing - deciding what I was taking to Mount Kenya and what I was leaving at the hotel. All very complicated but we sorted it out in the end. The rain didn't last long and we had dinner and beers in the garden around seven o'clock then retired to our room to read.

We arose early on Monday morning with much to organise and a full day of travelling ahead of us - me to Mount Kenya and Rita to Harare, Victoria Falls and Australia. After breakfast I called Ian Howell's secretary to try to get a message to him confirming that Thursday afternoon's meeting was on. It kind of worried me that I had never met this man, and hadn't spoken with him for four weeks, yet I had this tenuous agreement to meet on the top of a mountain one afternoon! I also tried to call Chogoria to organise a porter but the phones weren't working so I was still going to have to organise it when I got there.

With my Mount Kenya baggage on my back, we check out of the hotel at ten o'clock and walked into town, stopping at a supermarket where I bought a few basic supplies - tea, sugar, weeta-bix, chocolate bars and UHT milk. This was all crammed into my now bulging two packs. I had both my large pack and my day pack, as I intended to walk only with my

small pack, but had to carry both as far as Chogoria, together with my sleeping bag which was easily strapped to the outside of my large pack.

We headed into the small office to see Silas and donated him some tea bags - I had had to buy twice as many as I needed! He then took me out to the a minibus which was headed to Embu where, he explained, I would need to change to another minibus to Chogoria. I could have figured all this out for myself although the most useful information he gave me was the price I should pay for the two sectors. The minibus was mostly empty so I climbed aboard and took up the back left window seat. We made our farewells and I felt rather sad and lonely as Rita headed off into the crowd on her walk back to the hotel and then to the airport, but I quickly concentrated on the challenge ahead of me.

Mount Kenya - Trek and Rockclimb

The minibus was soon crammed full - 18 people plus the driver. I was in the back row - four across, and beside the window so at least I could get some air and a view. My sleeping bag was stashed under the seat, my day pack between my feet with such valuables as my camera. My larger pack had been forced under the seat from behind when the drover opened the rear door, which was bolted shut! A man outside collected money from us through the window - KSh345 for the journey to Embu, a distance of 137 km. Others sold newspapers and food. At 11.40 the door was slammed shut and we lurched off, but not far. The first stop was the petrol station they can't fill up until they have collected the money!

Eventually we headed off through the busy Nairobi traffic and soon picked up the main road northwards which is a freeway for about 20 km before we went through a seemingly endless mass of roadworks with sidetracks and detours. The advantage of this minibus as against a matatu was that this was an express with virtually no stops until we were almost to Embu. The driver was not totally insane either, although they do travel rather quicker than I would like. The road toll in Kenya is horrific, and is largely attributed to the improvement in roads which allows the largely inexperienced and untrained drivers to go too fast for their own good. Rollovers and head-on collisions on fast sweeping corners are common. But in the back of a fully loaded minibus, one has no control over such matters and thus it is best not to think about it!

We reached Embu at 1.45 pm and as soon as the minibus stopped a young guy came to the window and said come with me and I will put you on the minibus to Chogoria. Obviously they have an eye for business and they know that anyone white is probably heading for Mount Kenya! It took a while to convince the driver to open the back so I could get my pack out and then I headed across to the other similar minibus which only had about three passengers. We then proceeded to drive around town for about half an hour, stopping at various spots and trying to find a load of passengers. We found two or three more before we headed back and got some petrol then, eventually headed out of town. It was after two o'clock and the "conductor" collected my KSh 80 for the ride to Chogoria.

This was a real "stopping all stations" journey. We regularly stopped to drop off or pickup. It seemed that whenever we weren't totally full they would pick up anyone, even just to carry them a couple of kilometres. At the next major town, Emco, almost everyone got off and we then proceeded to wait for ten minutes until we had a few more passengers, then off again. This was repeated at the next town, Chuka, with a twenty minute stop, leaving this time jammed full of people like a sardine tin. The road is now fortunately all tarmac to Chogoria although they speed along these roads like there is no tomorrow and apparently they frequently come to grief on the fast sweeping corners. Today I was lucky, and we turned off and then reached Chogoria at almost four o'clock, just as it was starting to drizzle.

I had a plan in mind to walk the six or so kilometres to the forest gate and camp there after having arranged for a porter to meet me next morning. Unfortunately I did not fully understand the layout of Chogoria or the fact that there was not one, but in fact about four separate portering companies vying for my business. Well I have to give Morris his due - he met me as I got off the bus, complete with blue reflective sunglasses and looking incredibly

"cool", and immediately said "come this way and we will arrange for a porter and guide." I could see most of the village from the bus - just a row of low buildings including several restaurants and guesthouses, and various dhukas lining the roadway mostly selling fruit and vegies. Soon enough, with Morris carrying my pack, the minibus roared off on its journey northwards to Meru.

Morris quickly lead me into the small courtyard and office of the Kenya Mountain Scenes Club. Another guy joined us who was introduced as Kim. Both were aged around twenty and were quite friendly. Morris immediately tried to organise me, quoting prices for porters, guides, equipment, park fees and so forth. I stopped him and told him I already had a plan - "Ahhh - you have a plan?" he replied. "Yes", I said, "I just want one porter and that's all!" "But you shall need transport and a place to stay tonight" replied Morris but I explained that I had planned to camp and then walk up to the park gate and camp there. I proceeded to explain that I would meet Howell at Austrian on Thursday afternoon and that I only wanted the porter for three days.

Morris was now getting the drift. Always flexible, he now proceeded to explain that from Chogoria to the park gate counted as a two day section even if you could do it in one and thus I would have to pay for the porter for four days up and four days down, plus his park entrance fees. This was a stretch of reality because my porter could easily walk down from the park gate in a day and the day from Mintos to Austrian would also allow the porter to return to Mintos, so the porter would be away for just five days. So paying for eight seemed a bit excessive. He then proceeded to explain that it was much better to pay for a land rover to carry us half way up to the park gate, which would save one day of porter fees and would reduce what could otherwise be a long and tedious walk.

So we got down to basics, that is to say, prices, and after some haggling, we agreed on the land rover and the porter to Austrian for KSh3500 which is about US\$52 (Park fees for me are separate to this and very expensive). And I could camp in their courtyard for KSh50 and make use of the hot showers of the associated guesthouse. That all agreed, I asked where the cold beers were and with my pack locked in their office, we headed next door to a bar behind the guesthouse called the Cool Inn. So Morris had a cold Pilsner, myself a cold Tusker. After that I walked around town, which took about five minutes! Having not had any lunch, I grabbed a couple of samosas from a street stall and gobbled them down. Kim wandered by and joined me and showed me through one of the restaurants.

I then returned to the courtyard and put up the tent. Kim assured me that everything would be safe and although I carried my day pack around with my camera, everything else was in my tent and indeed turned out to be safe. This town certainly had a very friendly feel to it and I could believe him that security was not a problem. I sat beside the tent and chatted to Kim for about half an hour, covering aspects of Kenyan culture, politics, his schooling and so forth. Another older guy came by and commented that my pack was quite heavy. Kim explained that this was Anderson, and he would be my porter.

Back in the Cool Inn I took up residence at a table out in the "beer garden" and had a beer with Kim. Morris joined us a bit later and then someone resembling Anderson wandered by and said "Hi". This was Anderson's brother, and led to a conversation about how everyone here was related. It seems the Kenya Mountain Scenes Club and the Cool Inn are all essentially family businesses. Anderson was Kim's and Morris' Uncle. After the beer I

ordered chicken and chips for dinner. It arrived quite promptly and was unquestionably the best chicken and chips I have had for a long time, either in or out of Africa! Another young relation joined us - Nicholas, and we talked about their culture and language. These people are from the Meru tribe which surround Mount Kenya. Their language is, of course, Kimeru, but they also learn Kiswahili and English in school.

About 7.30 pm I glanced into the main part of the restaurant and saw a white girl - kind of catches one's attention when you believed that you were probably the only white person in town! "Tourist", commented Morris, and I wandered in and introduced myself and asked her of her plans. She was Mary and her delightful Irish accent made her country of origin quite obvious. She was from County Kerry, and had just arrived from Nairobi in a share taxi. She hoped to do some trekking on Mount Kenya but clearly had no idea what she would actually do. I suggested that she come and join us and we could make plans.

After settling into one of the spartan rooms of the Cool Inn, Mary joined me and the three or four young Merus. Morris was part way into his sales pitch when Mary started to reveal her main problem - she had very little money! Upon further investigation we learned that she had been staying with friends in south-west Kenya for some weeks and she was due to board a plane home to Ireland on Sunday. She had, as she put it, about twenty quid left to spend, excluding her twenty US dollars departure tax. With the Mount Kenya National Park entry fee being US\$28 per day, Mary clearly could not afford to spend much time there! She also could not afford a porter. The final straw was that she had no tent, but also insufficient funds to stay at the Meru Mount Kenya Bandas.

Realising the predicament she was in, I launched into my "Knight in Shining Armour" routine. As I had the Land Rover booked, Mary could surely join us, walk up to the park gate, camp there in my tent, and provided we got an early start, we could go for a walk up to Lake Ellis in the afternoon. Mary could then walk back down to town the next day while I would continue on to Mintos. So the plan was agreed and Morris charged Mary some relatively small amount to share the Land Rover. Another round of beers ensued and then we headed off to our respective beds at 9.30 pm. The town was dark and quiet as I wandered out onto the street then into the fenced courtyard next door, half expecting to see my tent, or at least my sleeping bag and other goodies, stolen, but all was well.

It was amazingly warm at this relatively low altitude - about 1500 metres. It rained during the night and was generally very humid and somewhat uncomfortable for sleeping. I awoke at 6.15 am and breakfasted on my weetabix, then boiled water for a cup of tea. I had a wonderfully hot shower, even daring to leave my camera in the tent, but all was well. In fact it was after seven o'clock and all was still and quiet. Where was Mary and the others? An eight o'clock start had been promised so I duly took down the tent and packed my pack. I wandered next door and found Mary waiting, then we went in search of some fresh fruit at the dhukas. I found plenty of small bananas, tiny mangoes and a nice small pineapple that looked like it would keep for several days. All this was packed into the top of my pack which was by now starting to reach the limits of a reasonable load.

Upon returning to the office, Anderson had appeared and started to repack my pack and attach all his stuff to the outside. It was now after eight o'clock but there was no Land Rover. Morris had reportedly disappeared on his bicycle in search of the errant vehicle. He

returned with the said vehicle at about 8.30 am and we exchanged pleasantries before we all boarded and chugged off towards the mountain.

The Land Rover was one of those "never say die" ones, seemingly held together by chewing gum and sheer determination. It was a utility model with no covering on the back except for a frame, onto which we held. It was more comfortable to stand as the track was ridiculously rough. The young guy driving seemed like he was only about fifteen, and the drivers seat was just a cushion sitting atop the petrol tank. There was no passenger seat, and indeed no dashboard as I recall! Nevertheless, it did go, albeit quite slowly.

It's a couple of kilometres from town to the turnoff to the mountain but we headed straight ahead. Anderson, in contrast to his younger relatives, was a man of few words, but indicated "petrol". A few kilometres further, including a downhill section where the driver switched off and coasted, we reached the filling station. After returning to the turnoff the road heads quickly up through a series of steep switchbacks before entering the forest. At a small village we stopped and picked up another porter - don't know where his customers were! Then we reached the Forestry Gate at 1613 metres and all signed the book. It was by now 9.20 am and from there we headed constantly uphill on the narrow red dirt track, passing a couple of other 4WDs coming the other way. Colobus monkeys could be seen from time to time as we chugged along.

Almost unexpectedly we stopped and the diminutive driver announced that this was as far as he was going. How could I argue? We were supposedly 10 km from the gate and it was about ten o'clock when we started walking. It was certainly pleasant to be walking through the dense forest, the occasional sounds of monkeys but little else. Mary and I walked together, mostly a hundred metres or so ahead of the two porters. It was overcast by now, in contrast to the sunny weather lower down. As we climbed the cloud became quite low indeed. I cannot describe the forest as well as John Reader in his book on Mount Kenya:

The lower levels of the Chogoria forest are distinguished by the tall white bare trunks of the mutati, and the spinach-green leaves of the Meru oak; next in elevation comes the zone of the giant camphor, massive, rough black-barked trees rising 45m from the forest floor; then comes the yellow-wood zone, slim, coniferous trees which thrive in the lower temperatures that exclude the camphor and oak from that elevation; the next zone comprises vast stands of bamboo - not a tree, or even a shrub - but a grass growing 12-15m high, and so dense that hardly anything else grows in its midst. The bamboo flowers but once every 100 years, when entire stands will flower simultaneously. Until then, it reproduces vegetatively, and flourishes, but every stem dies after flowering. Then other vegetation takes over - wych hazel, cedar, and a profusion of ground-cover plants while fresh bamboo stands are established elsewhere.

After an hour we took a ten minute break and met a German couple coming down. They told us they had left the gate less than an hour before, thus giving us some idea of where we were. They also said they had come down that day from Mintos and had not gone higher because of altitude sickness. It seems they had taken transport all the way to the gate and had then walked straight up to Mintos - a sure recipe for altitude sickness and not a very satisfying way to see the mountain.

A little way further on the road began to climb quite steeply and I soon pulled ahead of Mary who was herself ahead of the two porters. Pushing myself, I soon reached an obvious sharp bend which I could relate to the map and thus pinpoint my position and altitude - 2700 metres. I estimated that we had been dropped off at about 2100 metres. I rested here on a rock and waited for Mary, chatted briefly then continued for about another kilometre during which the road rose another 200 metres, and I stopped once again beside a sign saying "Beware of Animals". Mary wasn't far behind and we took a few photos. We walked together from here, as the road seemed to reduce somewhat in grade. The forest was starting to thin and we walked past a wide area of moorland typical of the mountain above 3000 metres. John Reader again:

*The forest landscape opens abruptly above the bamboo zone, presenting vistas of thick grassland, laced with brooks and studded with rocky outcrops around which magnificent specimens of East African rosewood (*Hagenia abyssinica*) grow - massive trees, with broad trunks and a spreading umbrella-shaped crown. The rosewood grows only in the 2850m to 3000m zone. Above that, the heathland gradually takes over, to be succeeded in turn by moorland, alpine grassland and finally, the nival zone, where only lichens, some everlastings and senecios capable of withstanding freezing temperatures are able to survive.*

Shortly after passing the turnoff to the Bandas, which can be seen a few hundred metres off the road, we reached the park gate. It was 12.30 pm and fine but overcast. The guard was friendly and jovial, and suggested we lunch then he would sort out our fees and camping arrangements. The sign explained all the fees in great detail, as well as the altitude which was supposedly 3017 metres. Lunch was bananas and some chocolate. Water is plentiful here, and indeed in most places on the mountain, even if it is frozen. I refilled my bottle from a tap and added a Micropur just to be sure. Unfortunately the water on the mountain is polluted in a number of places, especially at Mintos.

My fees for the park would be five days at US\$12 plus four nights at US\$8, making US\$92, plus KSH50 to camp at the gate (not in the park). The fees are actually US\$20 per day plus US\$8 per night, but the reduced fee is for climbers, presumably to further encourage a slow ascent and thus reduce the incidence of altitude sickness and accidents. Mount Kenya has the dubious honour of claiming the most victims of Acute Mountain Sickness due to its quick access - about sixty lives have been lost to this condition over the years.

Mary and I headed off at 1.30 pm with just my day pack to carry cameras and water. The track from here to the roadhead is through moorland and some patches of hagenia trees. The views across to the Giant's Billiard Table to the north and the "The Gates" to the west, are quite spectacular. The low cloud was obscuring any views of the main peaks. We had decided not to try for Lake Ellis, due to lack of time, but rather go to the roadhead and investigate some waterfalls just nearby. We reached the roadhead, seven kilometres from the gate, at 2.45 pm, to find quite a few tents but no people. The peacefulness of the mountain was being destroyed by someone's 4WD car alarm blaring - most inconsiderate!

From here we wandered through a maze of tracks down towards "The Gates", finding a delightful waterfall in a lush gully with huge senecios lining the banks of the stream. Looking down the gully it was obvious there must be a larger drop so we crossed the stream and followed a track to the top of a huge waterfall. A narrow and slippery track descended to

the bottom - an even more lush gully with a constant roar of falling water. Mary was thrilled to find these waterfalls, just as I was, and so pleased to have had this albeit short walk into the Mount Kenya National Park.

We climbed back up to the plateau and then cut across through the moorland to the road and headed back. It soon began to drizzle and just as we had donned our goretex, it really poured down on us. Then it stopped, a glimmer of sun came out, and the light across the moorland to the Giant's Billiard Table was just superb. Then to top it off, behind us was a clear view of some of the main peaks, although I later realised that we were looking at McMillans Peak at about 4650 metres, rather than the actual summit peaks. As we approached the gate we saw what looked like a cat cross the track - perhaps a civert or serval.



Back at the gate just before five o'clock and we had to sign out of the park. They keep a very tight control on people's movements, expected times of departure and so forth. With limited light, we quickly got the cooking gear going - with two stoves we could be cooking soup and main course in parallel and then cups of tea. Mary provided mushroom soup, while I provided Shrimp and Pasta. We were certainly eating well! Anderson, who was staying over at the Bandas, came to visit us at about 6.30 and we agreed on a 7.30 am start. Mary and I cleaned up, and then took turns to prepare our sleeping bags - the tent really is very tiny! The night was cool (about 5°C) and windy, with bright stars and a four day old moon peaking through the patchy cloud, although it became wild and rainy at one stage during the night.



It was still windy, but not so cold, when we arose at 6 am. The peaks were clear in the distance, some fifteen kilometres away, with slight traces of white visible on them. After breakfast we packed and said our goodbyes, then headed in opposite directions, me with Anderson, and Mary on her own. It was just before eight o'clock, fine and sunny, but with a very cold wind. Nevertheless, while I had slept in my thermals, I was not walking in them, preferring to save those for when it would really be cold higher up.

Anderson and I walked together for the most part, although we didn't make much conversation. At the roadhead at 9.15 am we found quite a few others preparing to depart

and some visible on the track just ahead of us. There is no water from there to Mintos so I filled my bottle from the river, slipping over and spraining my thumb in the process. Not very clever, so I spent most of the rest of the day continually flexing it as it clearly wanted to seize up!

The track climbs relentlessly up an open ridge after crossing the stream just below the roadhead at 3300 metres. Mintos is at 4297 metres, almost 1000 metres to be climbed in a distance of about seven kilometres. Counting a short lunch stop, that would take me just under four hours. In fact most of the climb is done in the first half, at which point you reach a superb spot overlooking Vivienne Falls and the Gorges Valley, with the main peaks visible behind. Here I stopped with some others, and sensing the beginnings of a headache, took a Diamox with lunch. I was feeling good, now above 4000 metres, and although I was breathing evenly (two steps in, two steps out), I was noticing the steep bits (one step in, one step out).

John Reader describes the Gorges Valley:

The Gorges Valley, on the high northern rim of which the Hall Tarns are perched, might seem to have been named for its topographical features, but in fact was named by Halford Mackinder, the first man to reach the summit of Mount Kenya (in 1899), after Captain E.H. Gorges, who was District Commissioner at Naivasha at the time, and had helped Mackinder's expedition when they ran into some trouble with the local people.

The Gorges Valley is indeed a spectacular sequence of gorges, lines with massive cliffs and pitted caves. The headwaters of the Nithi River flow through it, cascading over a series of splendid waterfalls which mark the step-like geological structure of the valley itself.

After midday the cloud closed in and it became cold and bleak. I wondered how much further as Anderson started to pull ahead. The track seemed to climb over ridge after ridge, descending into small volcanic craters in between. Then, just as it was starting to sleet, I came over the last ridge to see Mintos Hut, derelict looking as it is, just a few hundred metres away. With the afternoon weather settling in I was happy to get inside the small hut with a myriad of other trekkers and porters, and claim my sleeping spot up one end on the upper level. The hut is infested by rock hyraxes and a few mice, both of which seem to scurry through the holes in the floor in search of food scraps.

I needed to get water, which is from the small tarn a short walk around a ridge behind the hut. This was unpleasant in the increasing snow storm, but a necessary prerequisite to making a nice warm cup of tea followed by minestrone soup. Almost equally difficult was elbowing my way in to get a small section of bench on which to put my stove. Some Germans that I passed arrived soon after, then a group of three Britons, one of them a Nairobi resident, arrived having spent the previous night at Lake Ellis. While I was lazing in my sleeping bag during the afternoon, a headache started to surface so I took a couple of painkillers.

It was still snowing at five o'clock when five British army guys arrived wearing shorts - only the British! They took up residence on the floor underneath the sleeping platform that had been taken by me and about four or five porters. The others had pitched tents around by the tarn. Soon after their arrival I cooked my dinner and then wandered around outside - it

had stopped snowing and the clouds were clearing to reveal the main peaks. What a glorious sight! I could climb up the few metres to the small ridge behind the hut and see a panorama from Macmillan Peak to the south, Lenana and Nelion to the west and The Hat with its jagged ridge to the north. A short stroll to the south and I could look into the main Halls Tarn. I should have walked the several hundred metres to The Temple and the view of Lake Michaelson but I would see that next morning on the climb up to Austrian.



Having refilled my water for the night, I settled into bed soon after seven o'clock. I was feeling fine, in contrast to some of the army guys who were complaining of altitude sickness. They were also complaining about the porters who had a radio hanging from the wall of the hut picking up some local radio station. Around eight o'clock, with the radio still blaring out some unintelligible noise, one of the army guys asked if they passed up an ice axe, would I put it through that bloody radio! Then one of them stood up, tapped one of the porters on the shoulder and said "Jambo, switch off the radio, NOW!". Silence ensued!

I slept well despite two toilet expeditions, an unavoidable consequence of taking diamox. I took another around midnight and would take one more twelve hours later. Those three diamox seemed to be just enough to avoid any real altitude sickness. Porters stirred at about 3.15 am to join their trekkers - people wanting to climb to Point Lenana to see the sunrise. We had agreed to depart at seven o'clock and I was up at six o'clock, eating breakfast and boiling water for tea. Anderson didn't get out of bed - his back was hurting, but I supplied him with a cup of tea. It was 0°C outside and quite windy but clear, and we headed off at 7.15 with the army guys still asleep.

The walk from Mintos is initially quite easy across high moorland. It's best early in the morning as the ground is frozen, otherwise it would be quite boggy. After about half an hour we reached a small stream where I filled with good clean water, then we began the long climb up the slopes beside Point Lenana. The surface is all volcanic scree but it was surprisingly solid in its frozen state. Part way up we met an American girl coming down - she

had come from Shiptons Camp to Point Lenana for sunrise and was now descending to Mintos. The climb continues up with Point Lenana on the right and a superb view to the left down the Gorges Valley. Upper Simba Tarn is passed and there are patches of snow all around. We eventually reached Simba Col at 4700 metres. From here it is mostly a contouring route across to the next ridgeline a kilometre away, over which is Austrian Hut. Anderson pulled ahead a little as I stopped to take a few photos, but I arrived soon after him at 9.35 am.

A variety of people were milling around the hut, most on their way down having been up to Lenana for sunrise. The ridgeline route up to Lenana was clear but I was happy to wait until the next day when I would climb the even more awesome mass of Nelion, now dominating the view to the north-west. I soon sussed out the Hut, which is bigger than Mintos, and has three separate rooms. A couple of American guys who reported that they had been up Nelion the previous day in very bad weather were moving out of the end room, so I took up residence there. I paid Anderson a tip and then he headed off back towards Mintos.



What a superb day it was! Sunny and crystal clear. There was an English guy there with his son - they planned to climb Nelion, which obviously interested me, since accommodation in Howell's Hut is limited. However, his son was suffering from bad altitude sickness and decided to descend with his porter. The father was going to climb Lenana just for the hell of it and then head down also. I wandered down to the Curling Pond, which was frozen, and checked out the large ice cave in the Lewis glacier. Three guys, two of them Australians, were wandering around having been up to Lenana for dawn. We chatted a bit. Then I spotted the film crew - cameraman, sound recordist and reporter. The latter was James Schofield and they were doing a segment for the Australian show "Foreign Correspondent". It was focussing on the Kenyan who had climbed to the top of Nelion in 1963 to raise the new Kenyan flag at midnight as the country gained independence. He was there, now an

old but still quite fit trekker. I was a bit annoyed when I saw the segment on TV as it filmed him at the top of Point Lenana and tried to claim it was the summit of the mountain!

Having not found water in the Curling Pond, I just grabbed a pot full of snow and melted it for a cup of tea. The Metho powered Trangia stove was working fine at this altitude. I then sat on the rocky ridge near the hut, guidebook in hand, and examined the climbing route up Nelion. Even without binoculars, it was quite clear, as was Baillies Bivvy half way up, and Howells Hut could just be seen glinting in the sun at the top. Unfortunately I didn't have my telephoto lens and photos even at 70mm do not pick up these details very well.

The glaciers of Mount Kenya, of which the Lewis is the largest, deserve some special mention, and I quote from John Readers book:

The total volume of the Lewis Glacier is about 10 million cubic metres, and it covers an area of about 300,000 square metres of the steep slope between Point Lenana and the main peaks. These dimensions are minuscule by global standards, but location alone makes the glacial zone of Mount Kenya unique. It lies just 17 km south of the equator. The glaciers have formed where the fierce heat of the equatorial sun is countered by low ambient temperatures and enough precipitation to create ice - but their existence is a precarious affair. As summer and winter alternate between the hemispheres, the northern and southern glaciers of Mount Kenya are alternately struck by and shaded from the equatorial sun - and they grow and diminish accordingly. During the northern summers, little or no snow accumulates on the northern glaciers, and a good deal of melting occurs, while the southern glaciers can become deeply covered in snow. The situation is reversed during the southern summer. In some years the snowfalls may consolidate and replace the ice that melted during the previous summer, but the trend this century shows an overall decline in the size and volume of the glaciers - winter snows do not match the summer thaws.

Back in the hut I took my next dose of diamox and painkillers, heated some soup for lunch, then laid down for a while, not really sleeping. A few people came by but no-one seemed to be stopping for long. The five UK army guys arrived about two o'clock and three of them decided to climb Lenana, the other two crashing out in the hut. By three o'clock it had closed in and was snowing heavily. Nelion, less than a kilometre away, had disappeared from view. The temperature had fallen below zero. I stayed in the hut sorting out my gear for the next day, only venturing out when the three trekkers returned from Lenana and then all five headed off, planning to reach Shiptons Camp by the end of the day. The snow was stopping and the weather was brightening up again.

By four o'clock it was almost clear again - just a few low swirling clouds. I had calculated that if Ian Howell, with whom I had this somewhat vague arrangement, was walking in from the Met Station in one day, he should arrive by about four o'clock, so I was now starting to get anxious. My anxiety was not helped by the fact that no-one else was around - I had the hut completely to myself. In an attempt to break the monotony, I strolled across to the edge of the Teleki valley where you can get a clear view all the way down to Mackinders Hut. I scanned the desolate scree for moving bodies and eventually spied two people - ahh - that must be Ian and a porter. I returned to the hut, figuring they would arrive in about half an hour.

About half an hour later I saw a porter go past the hut and head for Mintos. He was gone before I could ask him anything, then the other one called by and said he and his partner were indeed carrying some supplies to a group at Mintos. No news of Ian. Now I was really starting to wonder what I would do if Ian didn't turn up! I guessed I would have to walk down to Mackinders the next day, where I could make enquiries via their radio. I started a brew of tea to keep myself busy. Just after five o'clock I looked out the window to see another porter arriving. I went out to greet him and he said "You must be Ian" and I was greatly relieved! He explained that Ian Howell was following but would be about another half hour. The porter was Francis and he had a massive load - probably at least 30 kilograms. I gave him half my tea as some kind of feeble reward!

It was beautiful now - the low sun throwing an almost eerie light on Nelion, little wind and really quite mild. Eventually the sun disappeared behind the range to the south of the Teleki Valley, and almost instantly the temperature plummeted. Ian arrived at 5.40 pm, obviously very tired after the demanding climb up from Mackinders. I had a hot cup of tea waiting for him. He was older than I expected, but very well organised, if not a bit fussy. Between us we got dinner cooked, mostly my pasta. Francis disappeared into the other end of the hut and cooked his own dinner - a strange kind of segregation but he seemed happy with his own company. The sunset was superb, the clouds had all disappeared and a beautiful starry night augured well for a good climbing day. Ian fetched more snow for the morning and we melted some for our water bottles. We got to bed about eight o'clock and a few hours later I had to venture out for the usual diamox induced piddle, to find the wind had gotten up and a few clouds were swirling around.

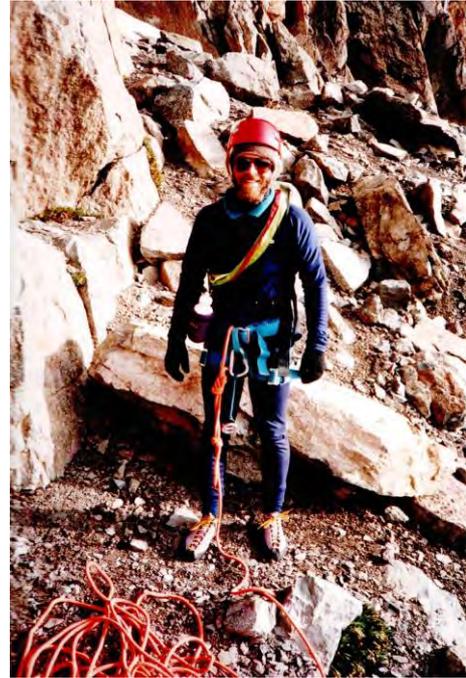
We had planned to depart predawn to get the most advantage from both the frozen glacier and the clear morning weather. However, we didn't awake until ten to six, and a quick look out the door revealed swirling clouds and a temperature of -6°C. It didn't look too good, but we brewed some tea and I had some weeta-bix and cut up a couple of mangoes. I was feeling good - fit, no headache, not even cold, although the weather outside certainly dampened the spirits a little. After eating, we dressed, completed organising our packs, then called Francis in and gave him instructions. As his stove wasn't working we told him to stay here until three o'clock then go down to Mackinders. That way, if we had to turn back and try again tomorrow, Francis would still be here. Besides, he could watch our progress from the hut.

At seven o'clock we ventured outside and made our way down towards the Curling Pond and then across the rocks onto the glacier. Ian had given me one of his ice sticks to help balance on the ice although it wasn't really necessary. There was more or less a well beaten path across the ice which was quite rough and not very slippery at all. At one spot we had to jump a crevasse of sorts, but it wasn't very deep. Obviously Ian didn't think there was much chance of any real crevasses or he would have roped us together. It was clearing somewhat as we reached the far side of the glacier and although still very cold and windy, it was nowhere near as unpleasant as it had seemed when we had first awoken. Beyond the glacier it is a hard slog up horrid scree and then over boulders to reach the start of the rockclimb. This was the worst part of the entire climb!

We reached the bottom of the first pitch at 7.50 and spent 10 minutes organising ourselves. I removed my hiking boots which Ian hid in a small cave together with the two ice sticks. I

tried to take a photograph but my camera jammed - "Oh no", I thought. But I knew the batteries were getting old and I cursed myself for not changing them earlier. So I got out the spares and fitted them, but it still wouldn't unjam. Even the new batteries must have been too cold, so I put them in my pocket and decided to worry about it a bit later.

We then roped up in conventional fashion - me with a figure-of-eight, Ian with a bowline - Ian's an old fashioned kind of climber! This was also reflected in the limited quantity of protection he was carrying - lots of slings to place around boulders and outcrops, and a small selection of nuts to place in cracks. No fancy friends or camming devices! The first several pitches are very easy and Ian wouldn't be placing any protection and I just fed the rope out to him to avoid snagging. I will quote the description from the guidebook as I go through the climb.



Start climbing up a wide groove about 55m left of the obvious Brocherel Couloir. 18m of easy climbing brings one onto a wide, boulder strewn terrace, at the left end of which is a gully (Donkey Walk) leading up to the left. Scramble up the gully for 25m, then a mounting traverse back to the right up a series of easy ledges on the face. A move around the corner leads to the foot of Mackinder's Chimney.

We did this in three easy pitches. The first was good clean rock with plenty of holds. At the top of the 18 metres I was panting but the climbing itself was not a problem. Ian asked how it was and said "well done", as he did at the top of each pitch! The second pitch started with a walk along the "boulder strewn terrace" to Donkey Gully which was largely filled with snow. I was about to find out that my rock boots had no grip on snow or ice! I had to carefully pick my way up the exposed pieces of rock and tried to avoid putting my feet into the snow which rendered the boots wet and slippery! The third pitch was an easy traverse across a series of steps with a tricky move around a corner known as "the Keyhole". Here I gazed up Mackinder's Chimney, which looked do-able but Ian said it got messy at the top so we would follow the standard route.

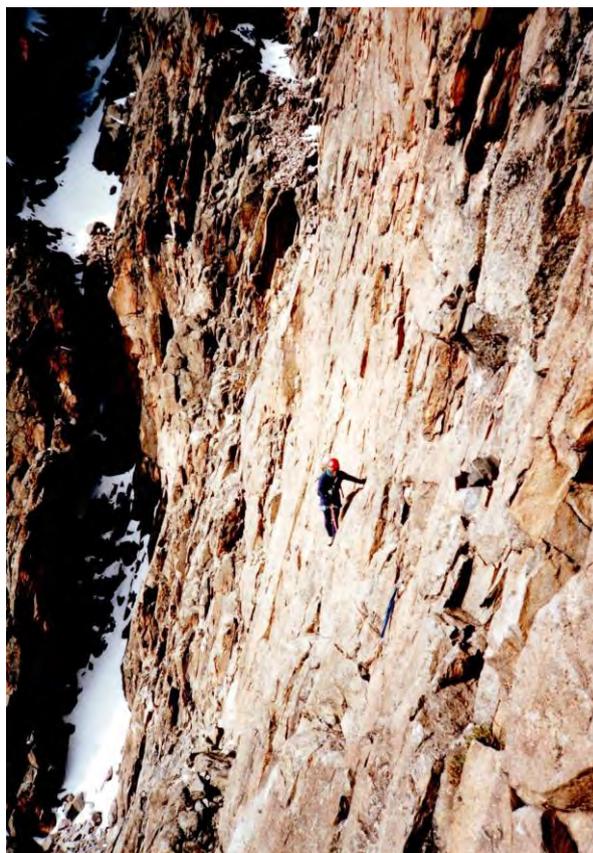
Instead of climbing the chimney, descend 2.5m and traverse right for 6m to a platform below the Rabbit Hole, then climb a rib immediately right of the Rabbit Hole and follow easy rocks to a platform at the top of Mackinder's Chimney.

This was the first of several occasions on which I had to traverse or downclimb without any significant protection. It can be a bit unnerving but in reality the climbing was fairly easy. We did this in two pitches, first to the bottom of the Rabbit Hole, and then up to the right to the top of the Chimney.

One O'Clock Gully (quite easy, unless ice filled) now leads up right for 40m. Where it steepens, mount the left wall then traverse back right to reach block steps leading up to the crest of the main ridge. When it appears obvious, make a long traverse right across slabs then up towards the base of Mackinder's Gendarme. A tin shelter

(Baillie's Bivvy), is found just below the notch beneath Mackinder's Gendarme on the main ridge. This is approximately half-way up Nelion.

One O'Clock Gully was quite a nice pitch despite there being a fair bit of snow and ice on it. The traverse was straightforward and I felt no pain as a result of the lack of protection, although the picture Ian took looks impressive. The rope was not quite long enough to reach the Bivvy so there was another short pitch to complete the traverse and climb up above the shelter. It looked like a pretty inhospitable place to stay, with no door and plenty of holes to let the wind through. We stopped on the ridge for about fifteen minutes and had some chocolate and drink. I put the batteries back in my camera and got it going again. The views both across the glacier to Point Lenana and the other side down the Teleki Valley were superb. We were already almost at the height of Lenana. We had been climbing for two and a half hours and set off once again at 10.45 am.



Turn the gendarme on the left by first descending 7 to 10m and then up a large gully. Most parties nowadays follow the DeGraaf's Variation, which is the easiest and most direct route. Avoid Shiptons and Ricketty Cracks by a traverse left for some 12m out of a large gully, following the ascent of a square-cut groove for about 20m, and straightforward climbing up the ridge leading to the Amphitheatre.

This section was unquestionably the hardest - DeGraafs would probably be a grade 13 in Australia, slightly harder than the most difficult part of "The Three Sisters", but not difficult considering I had been climbing up to grade 18. Everything up to the Bivvy had been about grades 8 to 12.

Ian lead off, descending somewhat inelegantly then traversed around a wide arete into a gully hidden from my sight. I had him on the Sticht plate and after a while, he called to find out how much rope was left. I shouted back five metres, and he only went a few more paces before setting up the next belay. I then descended easily and got onto this wide arete which was virtually a slab which I needed to traverse and descend slightly. The trouble was that it had areas of snow on it. I needed to lower myself so as to get my foot across the snow onto solid rock below, but there were no hand holds - just smearing with both fingers and boots. Without the snow this would be easy but the snow and absolutely no protection had me worried. If I slipped I would certainly take a nasty fall into the upper reaches of the Darwin Glacier, spread out 20 metres below me and strewn with large jagged boulders. Beyond the boulders the five hundred odd metres of exposure was not something to dwell

on. Eventually I worked it out and got into the large gully where it was easier going, albeit full of snow and ice.

Because Ian hadn't actually reached the base of DeGraafs, we would need two pitches to reach the top. The first was mostly easy scrambling over snow and ice covered boulders and then up the first part of DeGraafs to a suitable belay point. I soon followed. Here Ian took off his pack, attached it to the second rope and climbed the next pitch (the hardest on the route) without his pack. From the top he hauled his pack up. I decided to keep climbing with mine. DeGraafs was quite hard and at one spot I slipped because I had been standing on a snow covered ledge and when I went to climb my boots slipped off the rock. The rope wasn't really used as I only fell about a foot back onto the ledge, but I cut one of my fingers and sat there sucking it until the blood stopped! I then reattempted that move somewhat more carefully, and eventually reached the metre wide ledge at the top of DeGraafs, collecting quite a bit of protection along the way. Here we walked about 5 metres right to the main line of the ridge. One more pitch of easy climbing up the ridge brought us to the edge of the Amphitheatre where we looked back down onto the Lewis Glacier and to Point Lenana, now well below us.

Belay at the edge of the Amphitheatre and climb down for 8m to the right. Work round the back wall of the Amphitheatre to cracks leading up left into the bed of the gully. Ascend the gully, much loose rock, for two pitches to a platform.

The descent was easy enough and Ian had thoughtfully placed some protection to give me a better feeling of security. The traverse around the Amphitheatre involved one tricky move where Ian had left a new sling attached to an older sling on an old piton. I was now only 5-6 metres from where he was belayed and he shouted to hang off the sling so I could reach the next foothold. I could see it OK and was confident enough that I didn't really need the new sling, so remove the rope from the protection and collected the sling. The move was OK and soon enough I had completed that traverse.

The next pitch was indeed messy and quite a bit of rock came tumbling down as Ian climbed. I was belaying out of the line of fire behind a rock face. I waited for ages here for the call to climb, as Ian was out of sight. The clouds were now swirling around us and the views were coming and going. I hoped there were only a few more pitches to the top as it was getting colder and windy. I was thus not thrilled with the delay which Ian later told me was because he had a "call of nature." I then climbed that and the next pitch to the very large platform, complete with a small cave.

A 5m wall is climbed by a shallow chimney, followed by a scramble over loose rock to a col overlooking the Diamond Glacier. Turn sharp right and up easy rocks to the summit of Nelion.

We both took off our packs for the 5 metre chimney, which Ian climbed easily, and then hauled each pack up in turn. He set up a belay some distance beyond, then I climbed the chimney easily as well. From here it was just a bit far for a single pitch so Ian belayed after about 30 metres. This was climbing over boulders with just a few difficult moves on large slabs or up tricky corners. The last pitch was similar but shorter and from the top belay Ian directed me to walk about 20 metres to the hut where we would stay.

It's quite a large area with a number of terraces, one of which has the hut on it. We unroped and I took off my pack and explored a little. It was obvious that the top was where there was a small metal cross, maybe 10 metres from the hut and 3 metres higher. I scrambled easily up there and could occasionally see Batian, 140 metres away and just 11 metres higher. Mist was swirling through The Gates of the Mist. It was not possible to look directly down onto the Diamond Couloir but I could look out into the Teleki Valley to the south-west and the Mackinder Valley to the north west, but the cloud was hiding many of these views. Thus, I returned to the hut and Ian was getting his gear organised and I did likewise. It was just after two o'clock and soon enough we were sitting in the hut with a brew of snow being turned into soup.

Howell's Hut was built by Ian Howell in 1972. It's rather like an aircraft cargo container, but smaller - about a metre high at one end and maybe half a metre at the other, wide enough to sleep four at a pinch, and adequately long for me to stretch out comfortably. The skin is all aluminium on a frame of steel shelving material. It has several small perspex windows. The floor is thick foam on an aluminium skin, but lumps of ice have appeared where people have spilled drinks! Nothing stays liquid up here for long!

I asked Ian how he funded it and he explained that he built it in his backyard in Nairobi from materials donated by local businesses, then it was parachuted onto the Lewis Glacier as a military exercise. He then did thirteen solo climbs to carry it and assemble it atop Nelion - an incredible achievement. He told me he used to be able to make the climb in a couple of hours and could descend, downclimbing rather than abseiling, in just thirty minutes. These days, at the age of 58, he is rather slower and less agile!



The afternoon drifted by, just as did the clouds. After soup we had tea and after that we had cheese and biscuits, then mackerel on crispbread, then more tea with chocolate. It was

comfortably warm even with the door open. Around five o'clock the cloud cleared a bit and I measured the temperature at 5°C - quite warm indeed. Within an hour the sun had sunk to the horizon and the temperature quickly fell below freezing. Back into the hut and we closed the door, left the stove on for a few minutes to raise the temperature, then dozed off to sleep. I awoke about 11 pm with a full bladder and clambered out into the now relatively clear and crisp night. The lights of Nanyuki and Nyeri could be seen to the north-west and south-west respectively. I didn't stay out for long though.

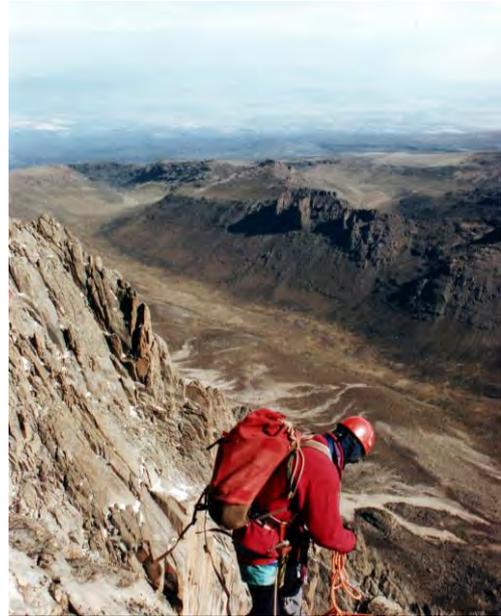
I next awoke at six o'clock and peered through one of the mostly fogged up perspex windows. There was some light in the east and I ventured outside to see what it was like. Well it was clear and cold, but sunrise was still a way off, so I went back inside. The real sunrise was soon after seven o'clock and I got a nice photograph of the hut, sunrise and the Gorges Valley. Meanwhile Ian was getting a brew of tea going and we munched on a few biscuits and cheese. We had hoped to get going by eight o'clock but Ian was having a lot of trouble with his hands. He had suffered frostbite on a trip to Mount McKinley some years before and said he always has trouble with the cold. We ventured over to the north side of the rocky peak only to be hit by the freezing cold and blustery wind. Ian had to retreat - his hands were not working yet.



We eventually tried again about 8.30 and I lead the 40 metre downclimb to the edge of "The Gates of the Mist". It was a relatively easy climb except for the large patches of ice and snow over which I had to clamber. One slip and I would pendulum some distance! Near The Gates I could place a sling around a large boulder and wait for Ian to join me, all the while with the freezing wind battering me, and Ian constantly complaining about the cold and lack of feeling in his hands. Ian then found a belay a few metres down the north face and began to abseil down a particular spot which he likes to use to descend into The Gates. He had gone down a few metres, almost out of sight, when he stopped and called back. "It's

too icy" he shouted. I was almost unable to hear him over the howling gale. He attached his jumars and clambered back up.

"We'll have to try the traditional route but it will be very difficult to come back up" he said, so we worked our way over to the lee side of the ridge where we could set up an almost completely vertical 40 metre abseil into The Gates. Appropriately attached, I peered over the edge - it was pretty nasty and The Gates were full of snow and ice, as was the next climbing pitch over the other side. Ian asked me how I was at jumaring (reclimbing on a single rope), and I had to admit I had not really done it before. He then asked me that vital question: "Do you really want to go to Batian?" That was one of those moments when you have to balance one's desire to reach "the top" with the risks. Although the risks may not be that great, it would take us at least another two hours, and it was already about 9.30, which would mean we would be descending off Batian well into the afternoon, probably in bad weather and certainly in a tired state. I think Ian was relieved when I decided not to go any further.



So we sat on a ledge on the leeward side with a superb view from south-east to south-west. To our right was, of course, the tantalisingly close, snow encrusted rocky outcrop which is Batian. To its left we could see the entire Teleki Valley and Ian pointed out Mackinders Lodge, the Ranger Station and the so called Rescue Hut where we would hopefully spend that night. Above that view was the Aberdere Range spread along the horizon, its highpoint (Oldinya Lesatina 4001 metres) clearly visible. Then I scanned further to the left and through the haze I could see a white mass in the distance. I immediately knew what it was: "Ian, look there. It's Kilimanjaro!" "So it is", he replied. It's 330 kilometres away, almost directly over the top of Nairobi. While it doesn't really show on a photograph, it was certainly a magical sight. There aren't many places on the Earth where you can see something that far away!

After perhaps 10 minutes and some chocolate, Ian climbed back up to the top of Nelion, then I took myself off belay and followed - once again, a treacherous ice and snow covered pitch. At the top we gathered the rest of our gear and packed our packs - I had not taken mine down to The Gates but had carried my camera around my neck and under my jacket. We were ready for the descent a bit about 10.30 am. Fortunately the



descent basically follows our climbing route up the south east ridge so we would be completely sheltered from the freezing northerly wind.

The first pitch is a downclimb as it's not steep enough to abseil, and of course I went first with Ian belaying me from above. Just above the small chimney that we had hauled our packs up, I was told to head right and belay on some abseil slings. From here it was a series of three long abseils to the base of De Graaf's Variation, bypassing the Amphitheatre altogether. I think it was on the second abseil that the rope snagged badly when we were retrieving it and Ian had to free climb up and fetch it - quite nerve racking!

At the base of De Graaf's we landed in the horrible snowed up gully and kind of waded across among the boulders towards a reasonable belay, precariously sited above the Upper Darwin Glacier. From here we had to retrace the difficult traverse back to the main ridge line just above Baillies Bivvy - the same traverse that I found so tricky on the way up. This time Ian placed about four pieces of protection and I had no difficulty. It's amazing how some protection on a traverse can increase one's confidence!

Above Baillies, we clambered out to the end of the small spur for the next abseil which took us down to the middle of the long traverse. It was here that we first sighted another two climbers on their way up. One of them crossed the traverse below us and the other wasn't far behind. They were running pretty late, as it was by now about midday, but the weather looked like it would hold. We did most of the traverse in reverse, then we diverged from the ascent route, taking an abseil direct to the top of One O'clock Gully.

Another abseil then took us to the top of Mackinders Chimney where Ian did some repairs on the abseil anchor, donating one of his pieces of protection to back up a rather dodgy looking piton. Then down Mackinders Chimney, bypassing the Rabbit Hole, then another abseil straight down, avoiding Donkey Gully altogether. At the top of the first climbing pitch, Ian was getting frustrated with the continually tangled ropes and told me I could abseil if I wanted. The ropes were getting badly twisted because we were both use figure-of-8s, whereas at home I normally use a rappel rack. Nevertheless, I abseiled the last pitch, untangling the rope as I went, with Ian preferring to downclimb.

It was 1.45 pm at the bottom and the weather was still holding! We retrieved my boots and Ian's ski poles, changed footwear, repacked harnesses and ropes, and set off on the tortuous descent over boulders and scree. This was really hard on the tired legs, especially the knees. Ian led the way, and contoured around to the right, rather than to the glacier. Across the glacier I could see someone atop the rocks near Austrian Hut and he was waving - it was hard to tell if it was a signal or just a friendly wave. After about half an hour we neared Lewis Tarn at the head of the Lewis Glacier and the going became a little easier. I stopped for a few photos and I told Ian to keep going - he was going a little slower than me downhill as his knees were in even worse shape than mine!



After the tarn there is a long contouring trek across deep virgin scree, intermixed with the odd boulder. To the right are superb views of the waterfall below Lewis Tarn and further across to Point John, Midget and Hut Tarn. Gradually Nelion disappeared from sight behind Point John and the Tyndall Glacier and Point Piggott came into view. Soon after, we reached the crossing of the Naru Moru River and entered the domain of the giant groundsels. The track was now solid, and after only a further short descent we reached the Ranger Station then, just a hundred metres behind it, Rescue Hut. This is a hut owned by the Mountain Club of Kenya and thus Ian has access to it. They keep equipment there both for rescues and the general use of their members. We arrived at 3.30 pm and the weather was still quite pleasant. Francis unloaded our gear and headed off to Mackinders Lodge where he would stay the night, instructed to return for a 9 am departure next morning.

As Ian started a brew of tea, I sat on the step of the concrete slab on which the hut sits, and took in the weird surrounds. Behind us was the towering main peaks of Nelion and Batian, with the Diamond Couloir directly in line between them. In front of the hut is the meadow like expanse of the upper Teleki Valley, mostly grasslands, but interspersed with some patches of rock and some clumps of senecios. It was similar to the moorlands of the Rwenzoris above John Matte Hut. Beyond the meadow was the barren range stretching from the north-east where the scree disappeared up a valley towards Austrian Hut, around to the south-west along the south side of the Teleki Valley.

The landscape was magical, and the fact that we were still at 4,200 metres, just as high as Mintos, was hard to believe. Here we were on a wide flat valley, and the peaks seemed far above us even though we had been up there just six hours earlier. Certainly altitude was no longer a concern. The hut, like Mintos, is surrounded by rock hyraxes, although the round

metal hut with its concrete floor is in perfect condition and so there is no easy opportunity for small animals to enter. Of course that didn't stop the hyraxes or many small birds from trying, and they continually hovered around the door looking for any food we might choose to discard.



We had a "lunch" of biscuits and cheese with our tea and then I wandered across towards Teleki Tarn to get a clear photo of the peaks, without the Ranger Station and its radio mast in the foreground. The wind was still howling, but at least it was keeping the peaks mostly clear of cloud. As sunset grew closer, the light on the peaks was superb and some excellent photos were obtained. Dinner was at about seven o'clock, with the availability of hurricane lamps removing the urgency to eat before darkness. Nevertheless, we were tired and bedded down soon after eight o'clock. I slept extremely well!

When I awoke at 6.30 am and ventured outside it was clear and cold (-3°C). Once the sun hit us it soon warmed into a beautiful day, with a light cooling wind. A few clouds drifted by the peaks but they were otherwise clear - perhaps I would have had better conditions had I climbed a day or two later, but one can never tell! We were taking our time packing and after a real breakfast of bacon and eggs, Francis duly arrived and we set off at 9.30 am. I had packed some stuff in my small day pack which went inside Francis's large pack, and I took a full load in my larger pack. Ian took my sleeping bag in his pack, which had some space since he left all the climbing gear in the hut.

The track is flat for about half a kilometre. crossing boggy moorland and several small rivulets. Mackinders Lodge is passed, some distance off our track. Then the track dips down to the left to recross the Naru Moru River before a gentle climb up onto the other side of the Teleki Valley. It was about 10 minutes up here that I paused for a photo stop - a lovely view back to the main peaks with many senecios in the foreground. As I was taking the shot

my open pack fell over off the track and I thought nothing of it as I recovered it. I set off again with Ian having gone some distance ahead.

I caught up with him again then another photo stop then continued until we reached an obvious rest spot at some rock outcrops where several porters on the way up were resting. We too rested and for some reason, I wondered if anything had fallen from my pack earlier. I checked for all the films I should have had and found that one was missing - it a film which had some gorilla shots and then the shots from Chogoria to Austrian Hut. All the other films were all present. I had transferred the film from my day pack to my camera bag that morning, so I know I had them at the start of the day's walk. So the only place it could possibly have disappeared was when my pack had fallen over.

Trying not to panic, I told Ian of my problem and said I would go back the 45 minutes or so to where I had taken that shot. He said he would follow, but I set off at a frantic pace, being really annoyed with myself. It was about 10.45 and I reckoned I had found the correct spot at about 11.30 am. I searched and searched in the grass but to no avail. I was torn between spending more time looking and heading down. Ian had not turned up - I guessed he had continued on. After about twenty minutes I conceded defeat and glumly set off, still furious and still making a cracking pace. I was back at the porter rest spot at 12.30 pm.



This spot is still up at about 4000 metres and from here the route descends with increasing steepness down a grassy spur which is often sodden and knee deep in mud. It's known as the "Vertical Bog", but I was privileged to see it bone dry. I was racing now, diving between grass tussocks and over the odd rock outcrop. After a short distance a huge rock outcrop known as "Picnic Rocks" is passed. Here the track virtually disappears and a sign warns you

to go further to the right. I passed a group of trekkers coming up, but they were further to the right and did not see me. Then the "track" is marked by periodic red and white striped poles. You can just see the next one from the previous. Along here I came across another group ascending the mountain and they confirmed that Ian was not that far ahead of me.

I was starting to enter clumps of hagenia forest - this had been evident up at the top of the spur but the bog itself was largely devoid of trees. Soon enough the trees had thickened as I had entered the forest and the track was now obvious - well worn, rough and rooted. Not far down here I caught Ian who was going very slowly with his dodgy knees. I slowed to walk with him. We reached the roadhead at 1.30 pm which is where there is a Police signal post and from there it's another twenty minutes steep downhill on a road to the Meteorological Station where the road is gated. This is at 3050 metres altitude. I had descended almost 1000 metres in 1 hour 20 minutes.

Our gear was dumped beside Ian's Subaru wagon and Francis was over with a group of porters. Some sightseers were about, although I can't imagine why - you can't see Mount Kenya from here because of both the forest and the intervening "hills". Signs warn of not proceeding onto the mountain without proper clothing and equipment, and not unless medically fit. They also warn not to feed the monkeys. This was proven to be good advice since as we were sitting having a semi cold beer and some chocolate, one monkey snuck up behind Francis and stole his food right from his hands! Cheeky little bastards!



Homeward Bound - Nairobi and Harare

We headed off at about 2.15 pm on the very rough, rutted and somewhat dusty road that winds down the ridge between the Northern and Southern Naru Moru Rivers. About three kilometres down we reached Percival's Bridge, a dilapidated looking structure over a deep gully, and Ian commented how he always worries that it will collapse one day when his car is on the mountain side! We also passed some trekkers there - it is generally recommended that you walk in from the park entrance to the Met Station - driving up to the Met Station and walking from there is likely to induce altitude sickness. From the bridge the road becomes wider and straighter and in about six kilometres we reached the National Park gate where we had to sign out, the official checking my permit to see that I had paid for the correct number of days.

Another twenty minutes brought us to the outskirts of Naru Moru where we dropped off Francis at the Porters' Association, then out to the small village itself on the main tarmac road (the A2) where we turned southwards towards Nairobi. Apart from seemingly numerous stretches of roadworks, this is a good fast road but with altogether too much traffic - trucks, minibuses and Sunday drivers, all heading for Nairobi. Looking back at Mount Kenya, the peaks were well and truly obscured in cloud. We duly entered Nairobi and reached the Milimani at 5.20 pm, about 2 hours 20 minutes from Naru Moru. I checked in, dumped my gear in the room, and then we retired to the beer garden for some cold beers. I settled my account with Ian and chatted about climbing, travel and Kenya. After about an hour, Ian headed off, looking forward to getting home for the first time in two weeks.

I was still in essentially the same clothes I had been wearing for nearly a week and I was pretty grotty. Thus, it was bliss to have a lovely hot shower and don fresh clothes from the bag I had left at the Hotel. Then I washed a few things and hung them out to dry on the balcony, as well as spreading the damp tent across the coffee table in the room. Next was dinner back in the beer garden. After dinner I mostly packed and bedded down, planning to leave the next day. Of course I couldn't sleep, so read a bit since there are no televisions in hotel rooms in Nairobi!

I awoke early and after breakfast I called Air Zimbabwe to change my booking from Thursday to that afternoon - no problems. After checking out and leaving my bags at reception, I headed into town, principally to buy some books - big picture books of Mount Kenya and the Rwenzoris at very cheap prices. I was back by 11.30 and as it was a typically hot day, I downed a coke then a beer before grabbing a cab to the airport at midday. The aging Galant taxi seemed to only just go, but then the driver was correspondingly aged and seemed to also be only just going. He tried to tell me it was KSh800 when we arrived but I knew it was only about KSh600, so I gave him all the Kenyan currency I had - KSh680. Customs were at the checkin counter and looked in my bags briefly - it's curious how every airport has a different arrangement, although this was similar to Kigali. After checkin you pay the US\$20 departure tax then get the passport stamped. It was by now a bit after one o'clock and the flight wasn't due to go until 2.30, but in any case, there were no signs, no monitors, in fact, nothing at all to tell you which gate it would go from! Someone else on

the flight found out the number and I sat outside the lounge, which was displaying a sign indicating a flight to Zanzibar.

The number of people for the Air Zimbabwe flight were increasing and by two o'clock there was quite a crowd outside the lounge and all available seats were taken. Still no aircraft, no sign and no announcement - TAB (That's Africa Babe). There was no doubt we were in the right place - just the strength of numbers, yet many passengers were becoming anxious! I just relaxed and read. At 2.30 they announced the flight would depart at 3.10 pm. True to their word, they moved us into the holding area (not the lounge) at 2.45 and soon after three we did in fact begin boarding. It was another case of collect your bags from the trolley and hand them to the baggage handler who was putting them on the conveyer up into the 737's hold.

I had a good window seat on the right side, and after takeoff to the east at 3.50 pm, I had good views as we tracked down the Great Rift Valley over Masailand. Kilimanjaro was visible out the left and I could just get glimpses as people moved their heads about. We actually got fed and sure enough, just as they were serving the tea and coffee, we entered an area of big towering cumulus with associated turbulence. This was just the first of several such areas as we headed south through the many thunderstorms. Even coming into Harare, where we flew right over the city centre, there was plenty of low cloud and it had obviously been raining just before we landed after th two and a half hour flight.

Harare airport was kind of familiar as I arrived for the second time on this trip. I was soon through immigration and the baggage was a bit quicker than my previous encounter. In the arrivals area I soon caught sight of a guy with a Con-X-Shons T-shirt and he was asking me if I wanted a backpackers before I could say I knew who they were. There were no other backpackers on the flight so we headed off in the "yellow submarine" (a yellow VW microbus) to the backpackers, only about 10 minutes from the airport.

Sometimes I think all "Backpackers" places are essentially the same - a degree of casualness verging on chaos, people going nowhere, lazing about drinking and smoking, and a lot of talk about how to do something or buy something for the cheapest possible price. This place was no exception, although set in an old country estate, it was very comfortable and moderately priced. It's run by a couple of brothers and I checked in with Russell who gave me a bit of a rundown on the place. I had a 4 bed room to myself, at least for that night, and I quickly settled in. You could buy drinks, and they had a good selection of local and South African beers. The barman also made good G&Ts.

You could buy a big dinner for almost nothing and I certainly partook, then chatted to some of the inmates. Like most backpackers travelling independently, when you ask where they have been they quote towns and never "sights". It's a bit sad that many of these people never get to see the National Parks and many other sights because they choose to travel so cheaply on public transport or cheap truck trips. Yet many of them seem to be travelling endlessly, almost aimlessly. It's just a different scene to what I am used to.

Next day I learned that it wasn't a good idea to shower too early in the morning as they run out of hot water! Breakfast is made by the cook "on demand", again for almost nothing. The domestic staff are all blacks of course, and I guess they get paid very poorly, but they are very helpful and friendly. The owners, the two brothers and the girlfriend of one of

them, give orders, collect the money, run people into and out of town and do the shopping. The three of them are all around thirty - not a bad life I guess.

I caught the 8.30 "jeep" ride into town - Russell said it was an ex UN vehicle he bought - French made, and has seating in the back for about 8 people. They drop off and pickup at the Lido Cafe in the middle of Harare which is pretty convenient, considering it's about a 20 minute drive! I first went to Barclays bank to get some Zim dollars - there is really no black market now compared with my visit in 1990, so I just got some cash on my Visa debit card at the going rate of about Z\$8 to the US dollar, which is TWICE the 1990 black market rate and FOUR TIMES the official 1990 rate. I then wandered back to the Lido for morning tea - they do good cappuccinos and cakes!

I spent the remainder of the day seeing the sights - some of which I had done in 1990. The museum was new to me and quite interesting, and then the art gallery. For lunch I stopped in at the restaurant where we had had our "end of trip" dinner in 1990, and I had a big steak for which Zimbabwe is relatively famous. The place was busy with many professional people, both black and white, taking lunch. I quite like the seemingly easy way in which black and white mix in Zimbabwe although all may not be as it seems if one digs deeper below the surface. The food cost me Z\$38 and a bottle of wine Z\$25 - pretty cheap really. Being totally stuffed with food, I needed a long walk so I went up to the Botanical Gardens and wandered around for an hour or more. It's a very peaceful place.

While I was sitting near one of the "duck ponds" a young local came and talked to me - he was very friendly and it turned out he was an aircraft engineer who works for Air Zimbabwe. We chatted for a long time about his travels - he had been to Sydney once when he was on assignment to British Airways and had to help fix some problem. We walked together back towards town and went into the Bronte Hotel for a few beers. It was a pleasant sunny afternoon and the garden of the Bronte is a good place to pass the time of day.

I returned to the Lido by five o'clock to meet the "jeep". A couple of Australian girls appeared complete with huge packs, but they knew the arrangements and had obviously been to the backpackers before. They turned out to be doctors who had been working in UK and were now travelling through Africa. Upon further enquiry I established they had been at Victoria Falls before this but they had been there for about three months! What on earth they were doing I shall never know - they said they just liked it there so they didn't bother moving on. They were weird people.

We were taken back to the backpackers via the "Balancing Rocks", a kind of park on the outskirts of town where there are lots and lots of huge rocks, including the ones depicted on the Zimbabwe currency. We had a quick look and saw some rock paintings, then returned to the backpackers for a G&T, beers and another big dinner. A new guy had arrived that day - an American called Joe, and he had a real interest in mountain climbing so I had someone to chat to that evening!



Quite a few people had departed the previous day so, even though I arose just as early, I got a hot shower this time. I decided to go and check out Mbarara Markets, supposedly where you can get the best deals on souvenirs anywhere in Africa! It was a fine day and getting hot again and I took the 8.30 "jeep" and was dropped near the markets, some 2 km south of the central city area. I wandered across a soccer field and down some bustling streets and found markets of all kinds - food, souvenirs, clothing, in fact, almost anything. It was pretty much like any African market, just pretty big, although the souvenir area was not that impressive and in fact the stuff was pretty tacky. I continued down to the bus station - a Dutch girl at the backpackers had asked me to check out bus times to Blantyre in Malawi - there seemed to be at least two each day!

Having bored myself with the markets I walked into town, went and used the unbelievably sparkling clean toilets at Meikels Hotel (this is THE hotel in Harare and costs about US\$150 a night) and bought a few gifts at one of the souvenir shops. I continued window shopping, mostly in book shops. It was interesting to find a "Guide to Emigrating to Australia" in one of the shops. I was back at the Lido for an early lunch then took the 12.30 "jeep" back to the backpackers.

I spent the afternoon relaxing and reading. Later I grabbed a beer and went out into the garden to talk to Tony (who picked me up from the airport) and Claudia and Caroline, the two Australian doctors. Tony is from South Africa and was pretty disturbing to talk with. He was very negative about majority rule there and didn't really want to go back. I found him pretty objectionable and the two doctors didn't impress me much either. Meanwhile a Phoenix truck arrived with about ten overlanders and they proceeded to infest the place. I'd never heard of this company and I went and checked out the truck which was very basic. It's amazing the number of small, cheap and incredibly basic overland travel outfits that have sprung up in southern Africa. Most of them are nothing more than glorified buses and often don't go to anything that isn't on a main road.

Dinner was a treat - steak, except they ran out due to the unexpected arrival of the Phoenix truck, and there was a bit of a riot which severely upset Enoch the cook who was always so friendly and well-mannered. I felt sorry for him as it was not his fault, but this truck load of idiots were really pushy. Two New Zealand girls had also arrived that day and had moved into my room, spreading their paraphernalia around and hanging washing to dry all over the place. It didn't really bother me and they were interesting to talk with. Next morning I stayed in bed while they got packed as they were leaving that day also. I then packed, breakfasted, paid my bill (with most of my remaining local currency) and did some reading before taking the 10.30 "jeep" to Balancing Rocks.

I wanted to checkout the rocks, just for something to do, as I didn't see much point going into town again, and sitting at the backpackers all day was not my idea of fun. They would pick me up on the way back at 12 midday so I had about an hour to wander around and try a few climbs. The rock is all conglomerate and very rough surface, but no holds or cracks to speak of. Thus, its mostly "smear" climbing. I found some pitons at the top of some climbs so the local climbers obviously do use the area.

Back at the backpackers I had some pancakes and honey for lunch while two local guys (whites, I must emphasise) were standing at the bar partaking of the cheap beers. They seemed to be salesmen and appeared to come here to ogle at the young female travellers. They were absolute dorks and incredibly rude. All they did was drink, smoke and make smart-arsed remarks. I spent the remainder of the afternoon reading before leaving for the airport with quite a few others at five o'clock.

I went straight to the checkin counter, although it took a while, then I had to pay departure tax. We all boarded about 6.30 pm but the departure was delayed for quite a while due to problems closing the cargo door and we eventually took off at 7.50 pm. A 1h 20m flight took us to Johannesburg where many passengers got off or got on, and in any case, I dozed on the aircraft during the unexpectedly long stopover of almost two hours. We eventually took off again at 11.05 pm, which was suddenly 5.05 am Perth time, and then we were about to be served dinner! I was awoken at midday for breakfast and landed at 2 pm exactly after the 9 hour flight. In the terminal building I ran into Matthew who had joined our trip in Kampala - he had travelled somehow to Jo'burg and joined the Qantas flight there.

We reboarded after an hour and took off at 3.25 pm or 6.25 pm Sydney time and we arrived at 10 o'clock. While it's always nice to come home, I could not help but feel that the six weeks was far too short for a real holiday.