

## Africa

# Dodgy knees at altitude: my climb up Mount Kenya

Matthew Parris turned back from Africa's second highest summit twenty five years ago. Would he make it on his second attempt?

I hate turning back, and can count on the fingers of one hand the times I've given up and headed home. The count starts with Mount Kenya, more than quarter of a century ago. A friend and I had hired a car in Nairobi and thought we'd give it a go.

Ever since seeing the massif's jagged snowy peaks from the top of Mount Kilimanjaro across the African plains, I'd wanted to climb Africa's second highest mountain. Right on the Equator, Mount Kenya rises to just over 17,000ft (5,199m) — an impressive runner-up to Kilimanjaro's more than 19,000ft. The mountain dominates the landscape, creating its own micro-climate, forests and ecosystem. To travel round its base by road is 180 miles.

Our expedition was doomed. We were under-equipped and had no guide. The whole thing was plain silly. The rain came down and never stopped, and as rain turned to sleet and the air grew thinner and the path slimmer we accepted the inevitable, turned round, soaked and shivering, and slunk back down. The ignominy has nagged since. Three decades later, soon to turn 68, I decided to confront it.

Out went any idea of doing it all on our own. My knees are worn out, my Crocodile Dundee days are over. My partner and I and three friends would leave the arrangements to a first-class climb organiser. We found one. As independent travellers (I paid my own way throughout) we found a range of good outfits to choose from, but for us the advantage of Kenya Treks was that Lucy Booth operates out of the UK.

She fixed it. We'd go when the climate was dry (during English winter, praise be). We ourselves would carry nothing but light knapsacks. Everything — tent erection, cooking, lunchpicks, tea-making — would be done by an army of guides, porters and cooks that I blushed even to count. And we would take five days, giving us time to dawdle, rest, acclimatise to the altitude and appreciate the majesty of this mountain and its extraordinary vegetation.

“We passed the height of the Matterhorn as the sun burnt and the breeze froze

Maybe because Mount Kilimanjaro is the ascent that everyone talks about, Mount Kenya wonderfully surpasses expectations. It's unquestionably the more beautiful walk. Kili can feel like a stampede. This felt like a private adventure.

And it never rained! Clear, blue skies, warm days and freezing nights only left me sad that the adventure must end.

It's as well to relax for a couple of days after flying to Nairobi, itself at some altitude. Just beneath the mountain, to its northwest, the small town of Nanyuki is home to a British army base and several lodges where you can sip beer by the pool at dusk and look across to the still-sunlit peaks that await. Kongoni Lodge, where we stayed, gave us a comfortable start.

Nanyuki, too, is within an easy drive of Ol Pejeta Conservancy, the home of some of the last white rhinos in the northern hemisphere — a lovely place to game-spot, dine and prepare for the big climb. We soon felt ready.

There's a range of paths to the top, or what, for all but experienced rock and ice-climbers, counts as the top.

Point Lenana is one of a series of sharp little peaks in the dominating ridge, not quite the highest, but the only one you can walk up without equipment.

We ascended by the Chogoria path, starting in forest, then lush alpine pasture and through a breathtaking landscape of cliffs, gorges, canyons and waterfalls to the dry, red, rocky skirts of the highest ridges — and the breathless scramble to the top.

We descended by the other side of the massif, the Sirimon route, which is drier and less spectacular, but a fast and steady way down to the road head.

Early on a cool, clear dawn, we clambered aboard a 4x4 and began a rather lovely drive around the mountain. Mount Kenya feeds and waters many people. The journey of a few hours takes you past an unending string of prosperous villages, with their roadside stores, mechanics, bars, small businesses and children in bright uniforms. There are any number of evangelical churches in seemingly fierce competition, each advertising a more urgent message of repentance and salvation. We passed cornfields, ripening mangos, bright flowers and flaming thorn trees.

The road also winds through field and forest, passing over an elephant subway that takes migrations to the national park that surrounds the mountain. “They do know,” said an elephant expert to us after our climb, “that it's a sanctuary.”

It was into the national park that we

drove later to take the steepening dirt road that climbs through the wooded lower slopes, up into an extraordinary bamboo forest and finally out on to the meadow where our walk was to begin. We took a gentle late-afternoon stroll to acclimatise and slept at a rest camp, dozing off as the generator was stilled at nine and silence descended, with the stars blazing above. My mood (given my dodgy knees) was of excitement tinged with apprehension.

Oddly, I found our second day the hardest. It started along a track among streams, glades and meadows. There were glimpses of the raw rock peak that was our goal, but with its grasslands, heather and tarns this could almost have been Scotland — until the upward path became so unrelentingly upward, the sun so strong and my knees so sore that it began to feel imaginable that, if this was only the first day's climbing, the next two might defeat me. Banishing failure from my thoughts, I bashed on.

And now the landscape was changing. We brushed by giant heather, taller than a

man, then giant groundsel (*Dendrosenecio*), strangely primeval, like monster cabbages perched atop bare tree trunks. Everywhere the “everlasting flowers” (*Helichrysum*) spangled the dry scrub with their papery, daisy-like yellow petals.

Volcanic rock walls of cliff rose around us, we passed a rushing stream and stopped at the throat of a vertiginous waterfall. Behind, the hills and plains of east Africa opened out. My spirits began to lift that afternoon as we crested a saddle to see a glassy lake and around its shore the green and orange dots of our tents, smoke rising from the cook's fire. Cocoa awaited. The stars were very bright that night.

Sleep at altitude spawns strangely vivid, turbulent dreams, but with a cloudless, frosty dawn came confidence — and, from our ever-eager cook, porridge. This next day, only our second walking day, brought a mounting awe at the terrain and the tundra we were passing into. Giant trifid-like plants (*Lobelia telekii*), metres high, populated the mountainside. “Populated”



in before sundown. And what a sundown. Nestling in a steep descending glacial valley, the lake was perched on the brink of a step down that valley. From its shore the view was over a natural infinity pool.

When the sun rose next morning it did so over a lake tinted orange in its glow. By then we were already climbing after a pre-dawn start, our torchlight glancing off the frozen stream. As the sunlight thawed the frozen grass and painted the great walls of rock to each side of us red, while “rock rabbits” (*Hyrax*) shrieked from their stony lookouts, our spirits soared.

And now, out of the canyon and on to the lower skirts of the final ridge, the landscape changed again. The ghostly legions of giant lobelia still marched across the skyline, but beautiful *Protea* bushes with stiff flowers of pink and cream were all around us. And above us towered the final ridge and the barren crags of Point Lenana, no longer distant silhouettes, but right before us, surely only an hour away?

It took longer than that. After a packed lunch we began the tiresome trudge along an unrelenting zigzag of pathway up through unstable volcanic gravel. Well above 13,000ft now we passed the height of the Matterhorn as the sun burnt and the breeze froze. Only once we did need hands to grip, as we scrambled up a short iron ladder guided by a steel cable to the basalt citadel that is Point Lenana. At just short of 16,400ft we were higher than Mont Blanc.

And we were alone. It was early afternoon, and we had not encountered a soul. Cloud parted and we glimpsed the snowy top of Kilimanjaro, 213 miles away.

On a different path, the descent by the Sirimon route felt a bit dusty and exposed by comparison with the secret kingdom we'd walked through on the way up. And the gradient beat hell out of my knees. But by sundown I was limping gratefully into a serene campsite by a river. And tea. And cocoa. And an excellent meal — heaven knows how the porters carried or the cooks conjured up these feasts. And starlight. And sleep. This was now our fourth mountain night, and the end of our third day of walking. I wished there were more.

But there was only a morning's gentle descent through bush to a camp reachable by road. Shortly before we got there we encountered a group of Gurkhas from the base at Nanyuki, on their day off. They'd climbed out of their 4x4 and were taking selfies. They asked where to find the best views. We pointed up our path. “A few hours,” we said. They climbed back into their vehicle and roared down the mountain, air-conditioned in a cloud of dust.

So we had gone where Gurkhas fear to tread. On the veranda of Jack's Bar at Soames Hotel in Nanyuki that sundown, with a warm wind blowing across the plain, Mount Kenya on the skyline and a glass of cold Tusker beer in the foreground, our triumph felt complete. Such feelings fade. But what will never fade is the memory of the beauty of that walk — and the feeling that for just a few days we had been lucky intruders in a secret place where it almost felt we were not meant to be.



Kongoni Lodge, near the base of Mount Kenya



The slopes of Mount Kenya. Left: rhinos at Ol Pejeta Conservancy

## Need to know

A six-night trip including four nights camping on the mountain, two nights in a hotel in Nanyuki, transfers, park fees, all meals and the services of a mountain team costs from \$1,800pp (07843 273873, kenyatreks.com). Gatwick-Nairobi British Airways flights are from about £400

because they were more like presences than vegetation. Thousands of them, single, thin, erect green poles clad in what looked and felt like a cascade of fur, the home to sunbirds that seek out their flowers. These weird plants were sentinels. “This is our kingdom,” they seemed to say, “what are you doing here?”

The air was getting thinner. Nursing my knees up the slope I silently blessed our guide for telling us so insistently that we must all slow down and breathe deeply to maximise oxygen intake. However, for one of us five — super-fit and hardly 40 — the altitude proved too much. The nausea and headache he might have been able to push on through, but this was the last moment (explained our guide) when going back would be all downhill. Sorrowfully, he turned around. Cresting another ridge we saw the guide's point. We were about to clamber down about 1,000ft into an immense ravine at whose base lay another lake, and our next campsite.

It was tough on the knees, but I limped