



ALAMY



much. The nausea and headache he may have been able to push on through, but this is the last moment (explains our guide) when going back will be all downhill.

Sorrowfully, he turns around. Cresting another ridge we see the guide's point. We are about to clamber down about 300m into an immense ravine at the base of which lies another lake, and our next campsite.

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

When the sun rises next morning it does so over a lake tinted orange in its glow. By then we are already climbing after a pre-dawn start, our torchlight glancing off the frozen stream. As the sunlight thaws the frozen grass, and paints the great walls of rock to each side of us red, "rock rabbits" (hyrax) shriek from their stony lookouts and our spirits soar.

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

It takes longer than that. After a packed lunch we begin the tiresome trudge along an unrelenting zigzag of pathway up through unstable volcanic gravel.

Well above 3900m now, we pass the height of the Matterhorn as the sun burns and the breeze freezes. Only once we do need hands to grip, as we scramble up a short iron ladder guided by a steel cable to the basalt citadel that is Point Lenana. At just short of 5000m we are higher than Mont Blanc. And we are alone. It is early afternoon, and we have not encountered a soul. Cloud parts and we glimpse the snowy top of Kilimanjaro, 340km away.

On a different path, the descent by the Sirimon route feels a bit dusty and exposed by comparison with the secret kingdom we've walked through on the way up. And the gradient beats hell out of my knees. But by sundown I am limping gratefully into a serene campsite by a river. And tea and cocoa. And an excellent meal — heaven knows how the porters carry or the cooks conjure up these feasts. And starlight. And sleep.

This is our fourth mountain night, and the end of our third day of walking. I wish there were more. But there is only a morning's gentle descent through bush to a camp reachable by road. On the veranda of Jack's Bar at Soames Hotel in Nanyuki at 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 feels 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 have been lucky intruders in a secret place where it almost felt we were not meant to be.

THE TIMES

Climbers approach Point Lenana in Mount Kenya National Park, top; Jack's Bar at Soames Hotel, above; malachite sunbird on a protea on the moorlands of Mount Kenya, below



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Checklist

Kenya Treks offers supported walking safaris on Mount Kenya for groups or individuals; itineraries are personalised and departures flexible. Mount Kenya is on the Equator, four hours' drive north of Nairobi. More: kenyatreks.com. • kws.go.ke

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