

Peak hour in Africa



Success, at last, on a climb of Mount Kenya

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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 5200m, an impressive runner-up to Kilimanjaro's more than 5790m. The mountain dominates the landscape, creating its own micro-climate, forests and ecosystem. To travel round its base by road is 290km.

Our expedition was doomed. We were under-equipped and had no guide. 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 decide to confront it. Out goes 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 will leave the arrangements to a first-class climb organiser and we find one in Kenya Treks.

We'll go when the climate is dry. We will carry nothing but light knapsacks. Everything — tent erection, cooking, lunch packs, tea-making — will be done by an army of guides, porters and cooks who I blush even to count. And we will take five days, giving us time to dawdle, rest, acclimatise to the altitude and appreciate the majesty of this mountain and its extraordinary vegetation.

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 feels like a private adventure. No rain, warm days and freezing nights only leave me sad that the adventure must end.

But first, it's as well to relax for a few days after flying to Nairobi, a city 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 with views across to the peaks that await. Kongoni Camp, where we stay, gives us a comfortable start. Nanyuki, too, is within an easy drive of Ol Pejeta Conservancy, the home of endangered white rhinos and a lovely place to game-spot,



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dine and prepare for the big climb. 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 climbing equipment. We will ascend by the Chogoria path, starting in forest, then lush alpine pasture and through a breathtaking landscape of cliffs, gorges, canyons and waterfalls to the rocky skirts of the highest ridges, and the breathless scramble to the top.

Our descent will be 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 clamber aboard a 4x4 and begin a rather lovely drive around the mountain. Mount Kenya feeds and waters many people. The journey of a few hours takes us past a seemingly unending string of prosperous villages, with their roadside stores, mechanics, bars, small businesses and children in bright uniforms. There are evangelical churches in seemingly fierce competition, each advertising a more urgent message of repentance and salvation.

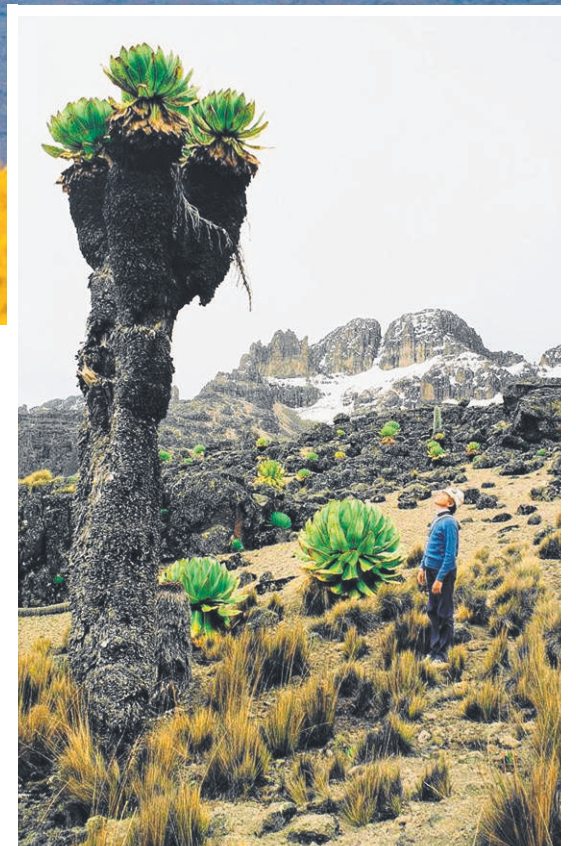
We pass cornfields, ripening mangoes and flaming thorn trees. The road also winds through field and forest, passing over an elephant subway that takes migrations to the national park that surrounds the mountain. "They do know," says an elephant expert to us after our climb, "that it's a sanctuary."

It is into the national park that we drive 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 is to begin.

We take a gentle late-afternoon stroll to acclimatise and sleep at a rest camp, dozing off as the generator is stilled at 9pm and silence descends, with the stars blazing above. My mood (given my dodgy knees) is of excitement tinged with apprehension.

Mount Kenya rises above canola fields, main; lake near the summit, above; giant groundsel, above right

We pass the height of the Matterhorn as the sun burns and the breeze freezes



ALAMY

Oddly, I find our second day the hardest. It starts along a track among streams, glades and meadows. There are glimpses of the rock peak that is our goal, but with its grasslands, heather and tarns this could almost be Scotland. That is until the upward path becomes so unrelentingly upward, the sun so strong and my knees so sore that it begins to feel imaginable that, if this is only the first day's climbing, the next two may defeat me.

But the landscape is changing. We brush by giant heather then giant groundsel (*Dendrosenecio*), strangely primeval, like monster cabbages perched atop bare tree trunks. Everywhere the "everlasting flowers" (*Helichrysum*) spangle the scrub with their daisy-like yellow petals.

Volcanic rock walls rise around us, we pass a rushing stream and stop at the throat of a vertiginous waterfall. Behind, the hills and plains of east Africa open out. My spirits begin to lift as we crest 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 awaits. The stars are very bright that night.

Sleep at altitude spawns strangely vivid, turbulent dreams, but with a cloudless, frosty dawn comes confidence and, from our ever-eager cook, porridge. This next day, only our second walking day, brings a mounting awe at the terrain and the tundra we are passing into.

Towering triffid-like plants (*Lobelia telekii*), metres high, populate the mountainside. "Populate" because they are more like presences than vegetation. Thousands of them, thin, green poles clad in what looks and feels like a cascade of fur, home to sunbirds that seek out their flowers. These weird plants are sentinels. "This is our kingdom," they seem to say. "What are you doing here?"

The air is getting thinner. Nursing my knees up the slope I silently bless 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 years old — the altitude proves too