

Ruwenzori 1970 – an exclusive report

or

How I almost climbed to the top of the legendary, snow capped, remote, desolate, primeval, fabled Mountains of the Moon and failed to fall down a waterfall.

HAMISH NORBROOK*

The Ruwenzori are definitely still the hardest mountains in Africa to reach. Kilimanjaro is now considered generally to be quite a picnic – especially by people who have been up the Ruwenzori (though I gather that by about 18,000 feet most people consider that Epping Forest might have been a better choice of picnic spot). The whole process of organising an expedition up the Ruwenzori revolves not around the Uganda Mountain Club, who built the huts where you spend the nights, but on Bhimji's store in Fort Portal, where you buy the food, and John Mate, who organises porters and guide from Ibanda, at the end of the road.

Carelessly dismissing reports of two recent deaths from high altitude pneumonia ('You're sure you remembered to pack the Penicillin, Piriton, Chloramphenicol . . .') we set out at 2 in the afternoon. Seven minutes later we took a wrong turning and got lost. Three minutes after that we turned back – the car was unlocked. Meanwhile the porters filed past us. There were eleven of them plus one headman, by name Adoniyo. He spoke good English, though it was rather a problem that it consisted of only two sentences and the words Yes and No – normally in reply to the same question. Except for a slight habit of confusing hours with miles, which made little difference to the answers he gave about how far it was to the next hut, as normal speed was often one mile per hour, he was an excellent guide – quite up to Alpine standards. The pace he set was just right – seemed slow yet covered the ground very quickly but steadily. At the many times when we were in danger of falling he was excellent at sticking his ice axe into the rock and stopping us. We'll rejoin him in the middle of Bigo Bog.

A down-coming party told us they had taken seven hours to get up to the first hut, so we set off at quite a fast pace to get there before dark. At first the path lay through thick forest with elephant paths often visible.

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In this article, he describes an expedition he made with two friends, Marion Turner, a doctor, and John Harwood, a teacher.

Then after an hour, it sloped quite steeply, though steadily upward, through bracken till at last we came out on to a wooded ridge. After only $3\frac{1}{2}$ hours we arrived at the first hut – greatest surprise on the whole trip. It was built of aluminium, at 8,500 feet, and overlooked a deep valley rising up to a high mountain. One of the porters was made chief fire lighter and water bringer, and after supper we went to sleep – on bracken beds.

Next morning we breakfasted off bacon and eggs – not one egg was broken on the entire trip. Soon we turned right, down steeply into the valley, crossed a swing rope bridge, and rose steeply up. (I can guarantee that it was steep – I was carrying the rucksack at that point. We had one shared between John and myself.) Gradually the vegetation became more typical of the Ruwenzori – giant groundsel and lobelias began to appear. The last stretch up to the second hut, Nyamuleju, was over some large boulders. We met the Uganda Mountain Club secretary on his way down – he told us it would take 2 or $2\frac{1}{2}$ hours from Nyamuleju to Bigo, next hut. After lunch at Nyamuleju (the first hut is called Nyabitaba) we began to encounter that for which the Ruwenzori are most famous/notorious – thick, glutinous BOG. There are various adjectives to precede the word bog – select them according to which part of the climb you are on at the time. . . . freezing, 45 degree, 60 degree, ankle/knee/waist deep, etc. After a moss forest – in reality giant heather trees 20 feet high – we hit Bigo Bog. Two foot high tussocks stick out of it, and there is quite an art in using one's pole to vault from one to another without getting your feet wet. Unfortunately, the tussocks normally proved to be about four inches further away than one had estimated, so that you nose dived straight into the bog. Alternatively, your feet would touch down on the next tussock but then skid straight off again, in which case it was by no means exclusively your feet that got wet! It was pleasant finally to wade through a river and wash off some of the mud.

Bigo hut contained a cheerful warning not to leave food outside in case the leopards got it. At 11,500 feet we thought they must be joking, but later learned that they weren't. It was here we first discovered about water boiling at a much lower temperature at high altitudes. This is fine for making instant coffee, but awkward when one is trying to cook rice. During the night it rained hard, and the following morning the path lay up a surprisingly perpendicular stretch of bog over a small pass into the Bujuku valley. Adoniyo, who the previous day had got us from Nyamuleju to Bigo in only 1 hour 40 minutes, proved equally adept at getting us across the next stretch of bog – flat,

for a change. Then the bog (sorry, I meant to say path) reared up 45 degrees and it started to hail. We met a research botanist coming down, who informed us that there were two Englishmen who had flown on a package tour out from England up at Bujuku. One was suffering very badly from altitude sickness and was blue in the face. The next hour was pleasantly spent wading through thigh-deep freezing, shifting bog, in an icy hailstorm. And this on the sunny Equator! Finally we reached the rock shelter where the porters slept. They always had rock shelters near the huts. After de-freezing a bit, we squelched quickly up to Bujuku hut (13,200 feet). The blue-faced Englishman had toned down to a mottled pink by the time we arrived, and greeted us with a cup of tea, after which we sent down two of the porters. Roughly half the porters carried our food and clothes, the other half carried their own food - mainly dried fish and cassava flour. They carry 45 lb loads in sacks tied up with banana leaves - supported round their foreheads. They get 6s. per day and the headman/guide gets 11s. - and you would not get me doing it. They are all incredibly fit. Mind you, I think that we were pretty fit, too. We did the stages in very good times, and did not suffer from altitude while climbing. Living at 6,400 feet is a great advantage. It was only at night at Bujuku that we really first were hit by the altitude - nausea and a continual headache. It started snowing, and so finally we broached the bottle of brandy (medicinal purposes and all that) and I read a chapter of an Agatha Christie out loud.

There are three main mountains in the Ruwenzori - Stanley, Baker, and Speke. At 14,900 feet up on Stanley a little hut is perched just below a glacier. In normal weather it is a 2½-hour scramble up to it, but it took us 4½. The route lay first up Groundsel Gulley, which becomes steeper and steeper till the last twelve feet are vertical - with a stream of mud and slush pouring down. I took one look, shut my eyes and made a mad scramble after the guide. We then proceeded up some 45 degree frozen shifting bog through snow till we hit a steep scree slope, where I put on my climbing boots for the first time on the whole trip; (rest of trip in gym shoes/baseball boots). Up to this point they would have been of little use on account of the bogs. On the few occasions when the clouds cleared, we had impressive views of Bujuku lake and Mount Speke. After a steep snow climb we emerged on to a ridge. Half a mile away we could see Elena Hut, but it took an hour and a half to cover the distance - scrambling across 45-degree slabs covered with melting snow and moss. A party from South Africa had spent three days there in bad weather and were just leaving - they borrowed our

porters to take their kit down to the Scott–Elliot Pass, from where they continued to Kitandara, the next hut, and our porters returned to Bujuku. Elena consists of two chicken coop size huts perched on the rocks. After cramming the equipment inside we shut the door, cooked supper, piled on all available clothing and went to bed at 6 p.m. It was a very cold night.

Next morning we put on crampons and set off up a steep ice gully. At the top were some distinctly vertical rocks, and as I was feeling none too secure on the ice, I decided it would be better not to embark on a rock climbing career at that particular moment, and so John and Marion went on ahead. Marion got on to the Stanley Plateau and John got up Moebius, one of the peaks of Stanley. By the time they had got down, the porters had arrived and we set off down to the Scott–Elliot Pass and then on to Kitandara hut. On the way we passed beneath the vertical cliff face of Baker – an amazing sight. I have never seen a solid piece of rock so enormous. One of the most striking things about the Ruwenzori is just their immense size – it is difficult to take a photograph of any of the mountains unless you are far away.

Kitandara is in a beautiful setting – almost Swiss – set beside a lake. Only the primeval vegetation belies its country. The path up from it mounts very steeply through bog, matted tree roots, and thick bushy vegetation. It was a tricky and tiring scramble out over the top to the Freshfield pass at 14,000 feet, where it started to rain/hail/snow. This was the most tiring day's walk – 9 hours, mostly through thick bog and on steep slopes. After 5 hours we stopped for lunch in a rock shelter – a piece of dry ground underneath a cliff face. Gradually the path began to descend more and more steeply, till at last, near the end of the day, it followed the track of a waterfall which flowed extremely steeply, though not quite vertically, downhill. The path crossed it several times in its upper levels, then veered away as it became steeper and steeper. However, it then crossed it again. Adoniyo was away helping a porter at this point, and I was left to lead across the waterfall, which was not very wide – only about 15 feet – but very steep and slippery. I climbed two thirds of the way over successfully, then felt myself slipping on the mossy rocks, so flung myself over onto a ledge at the far side sideways and managed to cling on while I watched my stick career off down the waterfall. The others informed me afterwards that it was quite spectacular. Kwichuchu rock shelter lay below, but to reach it we first had to worm our way down a crack at the side of the cliff.

The overhanging cliff face keeps the rock shelters free from rain,

so we spent a dry but uncomfortable Hogmanay night before setting off through our final day of Ruwenzori forest – a fantasy world of prehistoric vegetation, where you would scramble over a tree trunk and see a gaping chasm filled with more trunks and boulders 6 feet below. It was rather a surprise to us that we failed to see any Hobbits. After a fast march through bamboo forests we reached Nyabitaba, the first hut, again, having done a round trip of all the huts. At this point we decided to arrange all the porters' wages. I had been more or less in charge of that side of the arrangements, and we got on extremely well, which made for a nice atmosphere. Some parties had had trouble with their porters. At any rate, I sorted out exactly what to pay each of them before we arrived back at Ibanda, taking into account double pay on snow, etc. The final stretch down to Ibanda was a simple slide through the mud, with the vegetation becoming more normal.

After paying off the porters, we packed up what was left of the food, put the worst smelling of the wet clothes in a sack on the roof, and motored back to Fort Portal in time for tea with Marion's cousin Robin, who is doctor there. All his family and relations were there in their best New Year clothes, and after a certain time we detected that, though people were still interested in what we had to say, they showed less inclination actually to sit next to us. Finally we realised why, when Robin and his wife started reminiscing about their own trip up the Mountains, . . .

'How we remember the smell of those Ruwenzori bogs. . . .'

