

SNOW ON THE EQUATOR

BY PETER BELLARBY AND RHONA FRASER

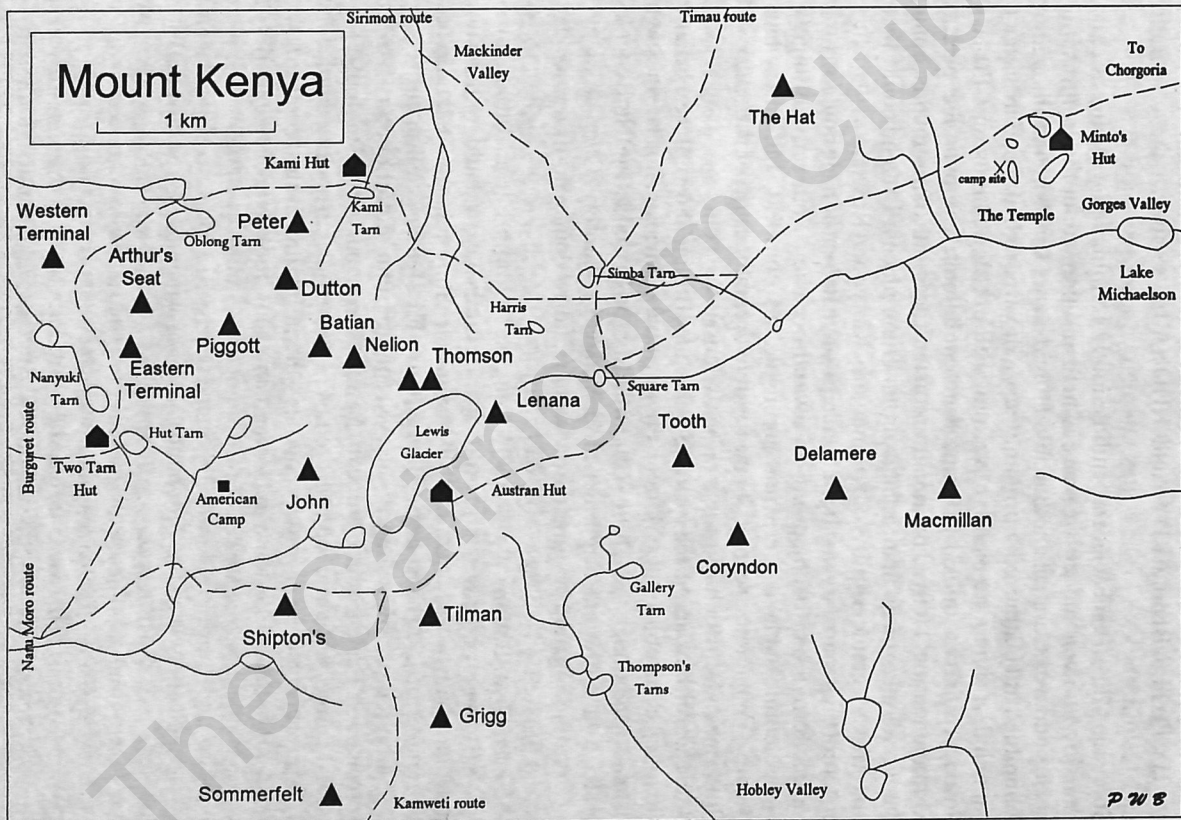
Some ideas lie in the back of the mind, slowly germinating without one really realising it. Then suddenly Spring is here and they are at the front. Action occurs and we are off on another adventure. I'm not sure when the thought of going to Africa occurred – probably just a dream originally and as likely to happen as a trip to the moon. Long ago, well not all that long ago, I (that is Peter) acquired a book by James Ramsey Ullman entitled “The Age of Mountaineering”. It fired the imagination with accounts of mountains around the world, tales of difficult ascents in far-flung places. Then he could write that Africa's greatest uplifts of Kilimanjaro, Kenya and Ruwenzori were little different then than they had been hundreds of years' earlier. He could say that Mount Kenya had been scaled on several occasions, but only by highly-skilled climbers. We were not highly-skilled climbers, but times have changed. What once seemed an impossible dream because of difficulties of climbing and difficulties of travel is now possible.

In 1849 a German missionary called Krapf working in Mombassa became the first European to sight Mount Kenya. Snow on the Equator – impossible – was the response he got from William Desborough Cooley and Sir Roderick Murchison, President of the Royal Geographical Society. One can picture them sitting comfortably in the Athenaeum Club in London as they said: “It's no doubt chalk as we have at Dover.”

So he wasn't believed. It's true he only had a glimpse from 140km away on a hill top above the village of Kitui. For a few minutes he could see the white of Mount Kenya's glaciers and distinguished the two horns of Batian and Nelion – the two highest tops. Then clouds obscured the view again.

It wasn't until 1883, two years after Krapf died, that Mount Kenya was seen for the second time by a European, Joseph Thomson, a Scotsman. Born at Penpont, Dumfriesshire, he was the last of the major European explorers of Africa, making several lengthy journeys there. In 1882 at the request of the Royal Geographical Society he took a caravan to Lake Naivasha in the Rift Valley and to the south-west of the mountain. Although he got on well with the Maasai people there, he was prevented from getting close to Mount Kenya by inhabitants nearer the mountain. Krapf was vindicated at last and his description of the mountain confirmed.

A mountain of this stature just had to be climbed. This was achieved in 1899 by Halford Mackinder (in spite of the name he was born in Gainsborough) and the Italian guides, César Ollier and Joseph Brocherel. They went by boat through the Suez Canal and down the east coast of Africa to Mombassa, a standard method of travel to East Africa until aeroplanes arrived. From Mombassa they travelled by the newly-opened railway line to Nairobi. Bad weather, difficulties in finding supplies, warring locals, jungle vegetation and



wild animals combined to make it a formidable task just to reach the perimeter of the highest land. Mackinder was successful in reaching the summit of Batian, the highest point of Mount Kenya, and gave names to the tops. Batian and Nelion, the two highest tops, are named after two brothers, who were supreme Maasai chiefs in the 19th century. The third-highest top is called Lenana, who was the son of Batian and also supreme chief in his time.

Our party of Geraldine and Robin Howie, Janet Lambert and the authors assembled at Heathrow. Our journey to Africa was to be swifter than that of Mackinder, flying via Paris to Nairobi with exciting glimpses of the Alps around midnight. As dawn came we found ourselves over the parched northern parts of Kenya and then it was seen – definitely snow on the equator – although it seemed rather small and we wondered what all the fuss was about climbing Mount Kenya.

Nairobi was a new world we had not seen before – haggling for taxis, haggling for tee shirts, haggling for everything. We stayed at the Boulevard Hotel, comfortable and not too expensive. The Norfolk Hotel, however, became our choice for eating. At the time it was established, in 1906, there was little else in Nairobi besides the railway station. We could sit on the veranda in the warmth of an Africa evening as we ate. But we did venture farther to sample the delights of true African cooking at the African Experience and to drink coffee under the Thorn Tree which stands outside the New Stanley Hotel, a favourite meeting point for travellers in Nairobi.

Two of us planned to climb the easier Lenana and then make a circular walk round the summits. Three of us had ambitions to climb to the highest top of Mount Kenya, Batian.

We are not expert climbers, but thought we might have a chance of repeating the route taken by Shipton and Wyn Harris when they made the second ascent of Batian in 1929. The route lies up the South-East Face of Nelion, the second top, just slightly lower than Batian, over the summit of Nelion, down to the aptly named, Gate of Mists, and so to Batian. Through Andrew Wielochowski of Executive Wilderness Programmes we obtained the services of John Temple, who had much experience in Kenya, having lived there for some time, although now resident in England. With his knowledge and experience we had some hope of success.

So we left Nairobi by hired minibus, and travelled to Chogoria to the east of Mount Kenya. We had chosen the Chogoria route because of its reputation for beauty, though the approach to Mount Kenya this way is longer. Here we met porters and local guides, Lawrence and Charles, who had been engaged through the Chogoria Guides and Porters Association.

We used their four-wheel-drive vehicles to lurch 30km through the forest along the rough muddy approach track. Then comes the Park Gate where fees have to be paid. Shortly after leaving the gate one of our four-wheel-drive vehicles became a two-wheel-drive vehicle. All gear was piled in the other and we walked to the track-end for the night's camp by the Nithi North stream

at 3300m. Rhona was not feeling too good – too many mangoes for lunch! By now it was dark and cloudy – then in the twilight we caught a glimpse of the sharp outline of one of Mount Kenya's outliers and excitement mounted. Then came Peter's turn to be miserable as his stomach churned all night long – a result of the catfish we had bought at a wayside stall and eaten for dinner.

Next day the real effort began as we walked up the path westwards. Down on the left we could see the Gorges Valley with the striking plunge of the Vivienne Falls and Lake Michaelson. Ahead, our objectives could be clearly seen – Batian, Nelion and Lenana – no cloud for a change. In spite of the catfish I was doing well. We reached Minto's Hut (the porters' home for the night) and shortly afterwards Hall Tarns at 4270m. This was an idyllic campsite with giant groundsel, some as tall as a man. The mirror smooth waters reflected every detail of the peaks we had come so far to climb – and the sky was blue. It was Hogmanay 1991. After half-an-hour Janet and Robin began to suffer greatly from altitude sickness. In retrospect, it would have been better to have spent at least one more day on the ascent to help with acclimatisation.

Rhona continues the story.

Next morning, Robin and Janet seemed much better, but not fit enough to climb, so Peter and John left for Mount Kenya. The remaining group followed the base of the sheer cliff called the Temple which supports the large plateau containing the Hall Tarns down to the circular Lake Michaelson 300m below. The descent was steep and bouldery, and the lake nestling among the cliffs reminded me of the Seanna Bhraigh lochan (Loch Luchd Choire), with Macmillan Peak to its south like a very large An Teallach (from Toll an Lochain). The 300m drop made a tremendous difference to those suffering from the altitude. Unfortunately, we were doing the opposite from what is normally recommended (climb high, sleep low), ascending to sleep back at Hall Tarns.

The next day was to be the climb of Lenana. The weather, as usual, was excellent in the morning but deteriorated in the afternoon with the return of good conditions in the evening. We set off at 8.30a.m. The route, at first, went across the flat area called Temple Fields, the scenery rather like a desert except the cacti were giant groundsel. Above this the vegetation all but disappeared and the obvious footpath led up steep zigzags on orange-coloured scree towards Square Tarn (4600m). The angle eased a little and our first snow was reached before Tooth Col. The route then descended a little before crossing scree slopes beneath the South Face of Point Lenana. I was starting to feel the altitude now and having to slow my pace in order to remain comfortably breathless. To the south-east, Gallery and Thompson's Tarns sparkled green in the sunshine, sitting at the head of the immense Hobley Valley. To the east stretched the jagged outlines of Delamere and Macmillan Peak, and to the valley's southern edge the softer lines of Tilman and Sommerfelt Peaks. We reached the Austrian Hut at 11.30a.m.

However, little could be seen of the cliffs of Nelion, the clouds swirling round the upper Lewis Glacier which lies between the hut and the cliffs. The glacier itself bore the scars of recession, wrinkled with debris and cracking ice, the collecting pool at its base, the Curling Pond, grey and stagnant.

Lawrence, our guide, did not give us much time to rest at the hut and appeared to want to rush us up Point Lenana. Was he aware of the approaching bad weather? The climb was 200m up on the South-West Ridge – easy scrambling on a shattered ridge. At 4900m I abandoned trying to keep up with the others and went into Dead Woman's Pass Mode – learned on the Inca Trail, Peru – 10 paces . . . stop for breath . . . 10 paces . . . stop. What a difference it made to the enjoyment of the climb. I stopped feeling exhausted and could relax and enjoy the scenery around me. I reached the summit (4985m) just before 1p.m. to hear (music!) Peter's voice drifting over the Lewis Glacier from the top of Nelion. They were safe!

The clouds were starting to roll in. Even so, as far as the eye could see there were rocky ridges, tarns and cliffs. A patchwork of geology lay beneath our feet and I could have stayed for a long time. However, the day dreaming was abruptly stopped by a hail storm. We had to move.

Robin, Geraldine and Janet ascended in snow showers back to Hall Tarns. I was left alone with the other guide, Charles, at the Austrian Hut, with no functioning stove, to make the circuit of the peaks. The hut was better than expected, consisting of three small rooms with elevated sleeping platforms. The environs were not particularly pleasant – grey and bouldery like the Ben Nevis plateau but its location was breathtaking. It sat at the foot of a giant amphitheatre, the towering cliffs of Nelion to the left, curving down to the shattered pinnacles of Point Thomson, and back up to the broad South-West Ridge of the now snow-covered Point Lenana. The tatty Lewis Glacier nestled in the bowl of the corrie. That night, tea consisted of a cup of coffee begged from Germans and a bowl of soup from a Japanese couple.

I slept well that night, the altitude headache receding. We set off at first light on what turned out to be the most interesting walk I have ever done. Almost with each step the scenery seemed to change. It was like circumnavigating the Cuillins in one day with extra lochans thrown in, just in case you got bored with pinnacles, 300m-plus cliffs and rocky spires.

I had been fearful of my usual hesitancy down steep scree slopes but the overnight snow had consolidated the ground. Charles, however, was struggling and slipping frequently. I looked down in horror to find him wearing normal leather shoes with no grip and holes in the soles. Even with money, apparently, walking boots are impossible to buy in Kenya outside the capital. The route led down the edge of what used to be the Lewis Glacier. Across the glacier valley Nelion's south ridge, leading to the fin-shaped Point John, basked in the orange of sunrise. We contoured round the top of the Teleki Valley to reach the American Camp, littered with brightly-coloured tents. I looked up at the steep untracked boulder field directly ahead. It was my route

to Hut Tarn (4490m) and the first climb. It was an effort, mainly due to the awkward terrain, but I was surprised to find how quickly we got to the top. The view from Hut Tarn was awe-inspiring – a tranquil lake set among 300m cliffs, the cathedral-like spire of Point John reflecting in the water. Hut Tarn was small with no windows and six sleeping platforms.

Within yards of turning the next corner Nanyuki Tarn appeared, like a large Pool of Dee set in tundra-like terrain. Emerald Tarn was next. This could have been a Scottish scene. No dramatic cliffs but gentle grassy slopes surrounding the lake. However, the traverse around its upper edge to reach the Arthur Seat/Western Terminal Col required the only scrambling of the circuit on easy, but snow-covered, potentially slippery rocks. Of all the breath-taking views of the walk, the one from the Western Terminal Col to Oblong Tarn was the most awesome. All around me appeared cliffs and apparently vertical snow-covered slopes. I gazed down at the snow-speckled valley floor and the grey Oblong Tarn reflecting the clouds in the sky.

To my right the north cliffs of Point Pigott loomed jagged, dark and menacing. We had our second breakfast (cheese and bread) at Oblong Tarn, eyeing suspiciously the clouds sneaking in from the north. The climb to Hausberg Col (4591m) was surprisingly easy and consisted of a zigzag ascent up a steepish snow slope, the limitation not being the altitude but the heat. We were now over halfway round and it was only 10.30.a.m. We were doing very well!

The descent to Kami Tarn, and its tin hut, involved another long scree slope ending in a boulder field. The brightly-coloured buildings of Shipton's Camp were visible in the Mackinder Valley below, the greys of the screes being replaced by the olives and browns of the vegetation lower down the valley. I was looking forward to the final pull up Simba Col (4620m) but had to first try and keep up with Charles on a bouldery contour back up to the footpath leading to the col. We started to ascend up the east side of a little corrie, the Gregory Glacier with the spires of Point Thompson silhouetted on the skyline. I felt old and tired having to occasionally stop for a breath. Afterwards I discovered why. He was taking me to the Harris Tarn area at 4750m, in an attempt, I believe, to reascend Point Lenana via the North Ridge. I could see no point in doing the hill when no views would be visible and I felt knackered. From the top of the col the terrain was similar to Coire a'Ghrunnda in Skye – a small lochan among bleak barren slabs of rock.

It started to sleet as we descended back to the Hall Tarns area. The two miles back seemed long and tedious. I arrived at 1p.m. Now the wait for Peter and John. It seemed a long time, not helped by having to watch increasingly heavy snow showers from the comfort of the tent. What was I to do if they did not appear? The local hyrax (small marmot-like creatures related to elephants) got quite used to my company and squabbled and squeaked around my tent

as the hours passed. Then at 5.30p.m. John appeared, followed by Peter looking very cold and completely exhausted. Hot food and fluid were forced down his unwilling throat.

Peter takes up the story.

John and I went up to the Austrian Hut just as the others would do the next day. Spirits were high. John remained at the hut while I made the ascent of Lenana. I wanted to be sure of reaching at least one of the tops. I looked across the Lewis Glacier to the cliffs of Nelion where mist came and went, accentuating the steepness and giving it an air of impregnability. Could I really climb it? Back at the hut we met Gordon and Robert, two lads from England, and agreed to climb together so we had two ropes of two.

In the cold light of early morning, we crossed the Lewis Glacier and went up the screes to the base of the cliffs, the South-East Face of Nelion. It wasn't as steep as it seemed from afar and we climbed some of the early pitches unroped. We climbed up easily to a broad ledge, traversed left, up a gully, a long traverse right ending round a corner at III-. Then there's a choice – Mackinder's Chimney or the Rabbit Hole or a crack up a steep wall at IV-. The first has hard moves high up. The Rabbit Hole is awkward with a rucksack, also high up. We used the crack – delightful climbing on small holds which I enjoyed. By now the rock was warm. Above there were several more pitches to reach the ridge and a sensational view down the South Face. We climbed Mackinder's Gendarme, John urging speed. John's ploy was to overtake other parties who were taking the more usual line to the left of the Gendarme. And so to de Graaf's variation – up a corner to a ledge at IV and the crux of the climb. This I found hard and I was glad not to be leading – I'm a bit short on the leg and find some moves difficult.

By 1p.m. we reached the summit of Nelion where my shouts were heard unbeknown to me on Lenana below. Safe so far. Very near the summit is an amazing sight – a hut. Ian Howell carried it up in sections in several solo ascents. There is room for four, rather squashed, so this was why John was keen to get up front. We left gear here and continued. But things were different. Where was the warm rock? Instead, suddenly, we were in a Scottish winter climbing situation. The temperature plummeted. It snowed. The rocks were snow covered. Here we had the advantage of having two ropes. We abseiled down a snow slope using one rope to the Gate of Mists, leaving it there to facilitate the return. From here we went round the north side of a gendarme, then on to the south side and up walls at III+ to easier ground to the top of Batian (5199m). The dream of long ago had turned to reality. I was only sorry that Janet and Robin, who should have been there, were not.

No time to stand and stare. Quick photograph. Must get back. The ascent of the snow slope was slow. Between us John and I had one pair of crampons and a small ice axe – to reduce the weight. I was getting cold – too much gear had been left in Howell's Hut. Nelion to Batian and back took somewhat more

than five hours, compared with a guide book time of three. I dived into sleeping bag to try to get a little warmth and a fitful night followed.

Next morning we started down – my eyes were watery with the cold so I couldn't see very well, and I yelled at John: "I'm going to fall off."

We were not roped and the drop was long. His only concern seemed to be speed – but he was right. We had to get down before the afternoon storms. Several long abseils (another advantage of the two ropes – they were tied together) and we traversed the glacier to the Austrian Hut.

We rested in the hut while the snow billowed as it fell outside. Then the long slow descent to Hall Tarns. If Rhona was knackered towards the end of her trip then there seems to be no word left to describe how exhausted I felt. The trouble with the catfish meant that I had not eaten or drunk as much as I should have and I suffered.

We spent a day in Nairobi "between mountains", and then travelled south by bus to Moshi in Tanzania. Our climb of Kilimanjaro involved a west to east traverse across the south side of the mountain at altitudes between 3600m-4000m on the Shira route. This way gave us a good chance to acclimatise and also a remote and interesting route.

We camped, usually with the clouds obscuring the highest peaks in the evening. Next morning we awoke to see high cliffs leading up to steep glaciers which surround the summit area. We then joined the upper Mweka route and spent the fourth night in the Barafu Hut. We left at 1a.m., climbing the South-East Ridge to Stella Point, halfway round the summit ridge.

What a thrill it was as the sun rose and we glimpsed the glistening icy walls at the nearby glacier. There remained the short, but slow walk, round the rim of the caldera as we gasped for breath and struggled to reach the final top, Uhuru (5896m). At 7.30a.m. we had all reached the roof of Africa, its highest point, and were elated with our success. The ascent was the normal tourist path.

So we had a very successful trip. There was, indeed, snow on the equator.

