

MEMORIES OF AFRICA

By Shelley & Andrew McKinlay

Shelley (Feb 8-9, 2003): In the pitch black of the moonless night the animal's eyes were two bright spots of yellow as the light from my headlamp reflected off them. He sat up on the rock band looking down, silently laughing at my dilemma.

We'd been woken by the sound of clattering rocks beside the tent. It was night number three on Mt. Kenya, East Africa. Andrew poked his head out the tent door and discovered that two packs and the tarp that had been covering all our gear were missing. We began searching and quickly found the tarp and his pack. My pack was still missing in action. Our porters got up to find out what the commotion was about and diagnosed the problem: Hyena thief!

After realizing the futility of searching in the dark we got back into our warm sleeping bags to wait for first light. I lay there trying to remember what was in my pack. My wallet – not much money and no passport thank goodness – but ID and a couple of credit cards, my rain jacket and water bag. Nothing too critical in the long run but in my mind I went over how my explanation for replacement cards would sound.

MasterCard Rep: "How did you lose your credit card, Ma'am?"

Me: "Well, you see, I was in East Africa and a hyena stole it."

MasterCard Rep: "Hmmm. . ."

The next morning we started searching again with Andrew and the porters going further a field. I kept coming back to the rock band where I'd seen "the eyes." I stood on top and looked down a path to the lake beyond. A small red patch on a black "tree stump" caught my eye. I'd found it! The water bag hose was chewed through and the top pocket of the pack, along with the fruit energy bar inside, had nasty big teeth marks in them. It was an exciting start to our five weeks on this amazing continent!

Andrew (Feb 6-8): Climbing is always a great excuse to go traveling. This trip to Mt. Kenya and Kilimanjaro was a change from our Himalayan trips, and also special because this was my first visit back to where I was born in Arusha, Tanzania near Kilimanjaro. I don't remember anything from Africa since I was only a year old when we left but my parents spent ten years there. I'd heard many stories and their love of the area is still evident. While growing up my mother would warn us in Swahili, "moto sana kabisa!" (very hot indeed) when we got too close to the stove and my father always held that "Man should not live where bougainvillea does not grow!" I don't think they ever quite got over the rude transition from East Africa to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan! My older sister Penny, who was also born there, joined us for the trip. She was six when we left Africa so she has some vague memories. Penny isn't a climber but we persuaded her to join us on the approach to Mt. Kenya.

After the overnight flight from Amsterdam we were picked up at the airport in Nairobi, paid the trekking company, changed money, bought some food and maps, and almost got run over crossing the road in a hurry as we were looking the wrong way. (Since Kenya was British, they drive on the "wrong" side of the road.) Then we were off on the drive to Chogoria. We picked up our four porters at a junction and, a few kilometers further, transferred from the van to a rather ancient looking four wheel drive jeep.

From there it was a very bumpy and rough 30 km to the Meru Mt. Kenya bandas (cabins). In the red clay mud the jeep often slipped off high ground into the ruts that were a good foot deep. Our hands got a grip strength workout from white-knuckled hanging on to the seats but this didn't stop Shelley from crashing her head into the roof of the jeep and receiving a nice goose egg during one particularly jarring bounce!



Even on this part of the route we noticed the changes in scenery. We passed through a dense bamboo forest. A monkey ran across the road and several more peered at us from the bushes at the side of the road. There were huge piles of dung on the road from tembos (elephants) and we could hear them crashing around in the bamboo before finally catching a glimpse of one just before arriving at the bandas. Its white tusks were a marked contrast against its skin, almost black in the light rain.

Shelley (Feb 8-10): Amazingly colorful red and orange sunrises greeted us each morning. The trekking days weren't long and we enjoyed the diversity of the landscape. There were a few



buffalo tracks and many different shades of green with bright splashes of colors from the flowers, some of which Penny recognized from her Canadian garden – bright red gladioli, blue scabiosa, yellow and white everlasting, red hot pokers and bushes of yellow flowers like potentilla. I loved the strange-looking senecio with tree-like stems and palm-type heads with one, two or three palms sprouting out from them. The Chogoria route is purported to be the most scenic on Mt. Kenya and we can see why. Beside the path is a long deep rocky valley, widening out as we got higher.

The clouds come in the afternoon and usually bring rain with them. So far we'd been lucky to stay dry! We were also lucky to see very few other people on this route. On the way to Mintos Camp, where we met the hyena, Penny struggled with the altitude, throwing up several times. Andrew patiently reminded her to go "pole, pole" (Swahili for "slowly, slowly"). Despite feeling quite miserable, she persevered and they arrived in camp not long after I had the tent set up and the first pot of water on the stove. Penny decided she'd gone high enough and the next day took a break while Andrew and I continued on.

We both felt pretty good in the morning but I've recently developed the annoying habit of throwing up at altitude so I was a bit apprehensive. The terrain to the Austrian Hut was considerably steeper than what we'd traveled on the past couple days and as we got higher I could feel my stomach getting closer to my throat. "Pole, pole." I tried to hold it down as long as possible and managed until we were about 1/2 hour from the Austrian Hut. I marked my territory again just as we got there.



Inside the hut, our porters had reserved a room for us since we'd left the tent behind with Penny. There was a radio and music was blaring – Andrew laughed and joked that we'd just arrived at the Austrian disco! There were lots of people around as they converge on this site from various routes. I laid down while Andrew boiled up some water for tea. My stomach was still pretty queasy and my head was thinking about joining in. I asked Andrew to hand me a plastic bag in case I had to throw up again. He also gave me a Graval that I tried to take with a sip of water. I immediately threw up into the bag. When I said I didn't think the gravol had stayed, Andrew picked up the bag, inspected the contents, and declared that he couldn't see a pill so I'd probably kept it down. It's amazing how quickly the gross-out factor goes down with the rise in altitude!

Andrew (Feb 10-11): Why do I love these mountains so much? What is it in creeping up the side of a mountain one slow step at a time under the creak of loaded pack straps? Is it for the views? But what makes this bleak landscape of rock and ice so attractive? Or is it for those brief moments of bliss, rapture, and enlightenment? Which are, at the same time, so small as to be insignificant, and yet so big they fill the world. Moments over a cup of instant oatmeal, where joy rises to fill every corner of your being till it forces tears from your eyes. It is not something that can be chased, yet it is something that must be sought.

There are three peaks on Mt. Kenya – Batian, Nelion and Lenana. We brought our technical gear to climb Nelion via a 20-pitch 5.6 rock route. We rested a day and, depending on how Shelley felt, we'd go up the next day. It was definitely warmer in the hut than tenting, but the downside was the noise of all the people getting up before dawn to trek to the top of Point Lenana to see the sun rise. I got up when the sun started coming up and took some pictures of the sunrise. I could see people on top of Lenana. It was good light for scoping out the route up Nelion. It didn't look too bad, which alleviated much of my usual nerves. There were two people on the route. I think the worst part would be how cold it is. The rocks were slippery with frost and my hands were freezing just holding the binoculars. The sun was glorious. Haze was covering below but it was clear above.



Later in the morning Shelley managed an instant breakfast but her stomach was still shaky. We did the scramble up Lenana and Shelley was slow but determined, vomiting near the top – we still made it under the guidebook time of 1 hour. Fantastic views from the top! We could see



Mackinder's camp at the head of the Noru Moro and Shipton's camp on the Sirimon route. We watched the guide and client summit Nelion. The client's wife was on the top of Lenana with us and borrowed my binoculars to watch her husband. It was a beautiful day - sunny and no wind, although the rock was still cold.

We descended back to the hut and organized gear for the route on Nelion but it seemed pointless. Shelley had barely had anything to eat or drink. Oh well, at least we got up Lenana. I think both of us were wondering how she'll do on Kilimanjaro.

After lunch I went and explored to find the way across the glacier to the bottom of the route. It looked okay, albeit icy. Not too steep though, and fairly dry (no snow) with minimal crevasses. When I got back Shelley was sick again. I unpacked the rock climbing gear - it was obvious the only place we were going was down.

The next morning the porters were ready to go early. I carried day stuff for both of us and gave Shelley both ski poles. She did pretty well on the downhill, just slow on the uphill parts. She was still feeling on the verge of being sick but when we got down to Mintos and brewed up a pot of tea she managed to keep a little down. Then we headed down the long stretch back to

the bandas. It went okay except that it started to rain about half way down, lightly at first, but increasingly harder, with hail and sleet mixed in. This was the dry season? We got to Nithi Camp about 1pm - by this point it was bucketing down and we were all drenched. We'd have loved a break, but no one wanted to stop in the monsoon-like deluge so we kept going. The road was running with two or three inches of water. Our boots had long since filled with water and even after the rain finally stopped I could hear Shelley squelching along beside me. When we finally reached the bandas it was good to see Penny was okay, but we were soaked, and unfortunately, so was a lot of our gear.

Shelley (Feb 14-15): Poor Andrew! He felt great up high and instead of climbing the planned route he spent his time looking after me! I hope things go better on Kilimanjaro.

A couple of days later we were off on a long crowded bus ride to Moshi and the Marangu Hotel. On Kilimanjaro you are required to have a guide. They insisted we needed an assistant guide as well. And of course the guide needs his own porter! The extra cost was minimal so we gave in but, being used to carrying our own loads, it seemed a bit ridiculous to have a guide, an assistant guide, and three porters for just the two of us! They're also not used to people climbing Kili the "hard way." We'd brought our own tent, stove and other gear and planned to cook our own food.

We had a good chuckle when we learned our guides' names - Gaudens and Seraphim (Latin for "joy" and "angels"). Andrew's mom would be happy to learn we were in good hands!

As we loaded our packs into the van, Penny got ready for another bus ride. She'd planned a home-stay with a Girl Guide family in Arusha. It was fun for her to get a closer look at the local culture and lifestyle.

At the Machame Gate we were surprised by the number of people around when supposedly only 10% of climbers go via this route. It was quite a warm day and we were thankful for the trees and shade on this part of the route. It was very muddy!

Goey, sticky dark brown and black mud; we have to be especially careful on the slippery logs and tree roots. But Seraphim says oh no, this is not very muddy at all - often it is much worse!

Five hours later, as we arrived at Machame Camp, it started to monsoon-like rain again and by the time we got the tent set up we were once again totally soaked.

Andrew (Feb 15-18): Cooking supper, wet, awkward, and cold, you'd think I'd be question-

ing why I was here! But I wasn't. I was happy and contented to be there. In fact, the climb, the goal, didn't even seem that important. What was joyful, was just to be there, to be alive. To be reduced to the basics of warmth, shelter, food, sleep. We were wet, but we were okay. We had constructed our shelter, beat the rain.

We put wet clothes back on in the morning - yuck! It was sunny as we packed up though and the tent dried a little. We got to Shira Camp in about three hours, passing most people on the



way up as we did yesterday. The clouds were swirling around us, but we had sunny patches too. No rain until later in the afternoon. The vegetation levels aren't as distinct as on Mt. Kenya but still lots of different plants and trees to make the hike interesting.



We were getting up in altitude again and there was a hard frost that night. The next day we made steady and mostly gentle progress stopping for lunch at the Lava Towers after branching off from the south circuit trail that most people take to Barranco Camp. We were happy to be leaving the hordes of people!

It was extremely windy on the last stretch to the Arrow Glacier Camp. We anchored our tent thoroughly and it was solid but the porters' tents sounded like they were going to blow away.

(We found out the next morning that they had to take one down and all five of them crowded into the other.) Although we'd made it to camp by 1 p.m. we had "supper" right away in case Shelley didn't feel like eating later. She said she felt "not bad". Tomorrow will tell. At least she wasn't throwing up! Our acclimatization from Mt. Kenya should help. Regardless, it will be a long day up the Western Breach and down the other side to Mweka Camp.

A bit later in the afternoon Gaudens and Seraphim came over to talk about summit departure times. They wanted to leave at midnight to see the sunrise from the summit. (It takes most people 6-8 hours to reach the top.) We argued that it wouldn't take us that long and we preferred to have some light. We finally compromised on a 2 a.m. start.

The high winds howled all night. The alarm went off at 1 a.m. and we made a hot drink. Even cooking in the enclosed vestibule it was so windy it took forever. Dust and sand got everywhere in the tent and pot and cups. We packed up as much as we could inside the tent and then emerged to take it down. The plan was for us to go up with Gaudens and Seraphim while the porters carried all the gear around and met us on the descent route.

Both Shelley and I felt pretty good this morning and we set off at exactly 2 a.m. as planned. The moon was bright and we didn't need our head-lamps. There was a trail of sorts all the way up. We crossed a few snow patches on vague icy steps and tread carefully, feeling out the footsteps in the dim light. It got significantly colder as we got higher, especially with the wind blasting us. In the infrequent lulls you could actually start to warm up, but the lulls never lasted. The scrambling itself was quite pleasant; big blocky steps, nothing tricky, quite secure, not too icy. There were a few cairns along the way but I suspect the route would have been harder to follow in the dark without Gaudens leading the way. He set a good pace and we gained altitude steadily. I found myself breathless a few times after more energetic moves but oth-



erwise didn't feel the altitude too much. We took few, brief breaks, not pleasant in the wind and too cold to stop longer. Near the top we overtook the three guys and their guides who had come up with us yesterday. They must have made the traditional midnight start. They were the only other group we saw on this route that day.

We reached the floor of the crater at 5:30 a.m., meeting the full force of the wind. The edge of the glacier was a bizarre vertical wall, 10 or 15 meters high, rising straight up from dry ground. I followed Gaudens who was setting a fast pace. Shelley and Seraphim were behind us, but all of a sudden they weren't there.

Shelley (Feb 18-19): I started out the morning feeling pretty good. I kept up the pace even though, after a couple hours, my stomach once again moved closer to my throat. When we stopped briefly before the crater I unwrapped a hard candy, ridiculously hoping it would provide me with some added energy.

Andrew and Gaudens raced away across the flat crater floor towards the final summit slope some distance away. I had to stop. I turned my back to the wind which was doing its best to topple me over, spit out the candy, and threw up. Seraphim held onto my arm and my pack, helping to keep me upright.

Andrew and Gaudens came back and Andrew quickly got a Graval out of the top of my pack, I gulped it down and away we went again. It was almost comical.

By the time we started up the final 200m slope to the summit ridge the sky was starting to lighten in the east. The slope was a mix of snow and scree. A trail switch-backed up, but wasn't well defined and was quite icy. Finally we topped out on the ridge, only a few hundred meters from the summit. We could see the summit marker and people who had come up the standard route on the other side. We dug out our cameras for the first time that day and there was barely enough light to take a few photographs. We reached the top at 6:30 a.m. – a pretty good time of 4.5 hours. We all looked around at the incredible reds, yellows and oranges of the sunrise, shook hands and hugged but didn't linger in the blasting wind.

We descended quickly, passing the procession of people coming up the normal route, kick-



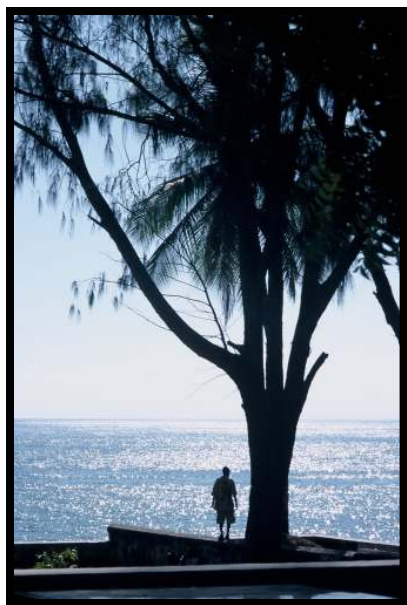
ing up dust in the shallow scree of the Barafu switchbacks. We were glad we hadn't come up this way - it would be an endless slog. The wind eased off and the sun got warmer as we descended. We stopped several times to remove layers of clothes, as we went from -20 to +30 in the span of a few hours!

After waiting an hour at Millennium camp, we rejoined our porters and continued down to Mweka camp. Descending 2800 meters (9200 ft) from the summit made my legs feel like quivering jello!

Andrew (Feb 19-March 4): An early start and another 1500m of descent brought us down to the end of the road where our vehicle was waiting. We met back up with Penny who had had a wonderful time with the local Girl Guides. It was neat to look around Arusha and see where my parents had lived and where I'd been born. A few days later we headed out on "safari". We



had imagined that driving around in a vehicle looking at animals would be a relaxing rest after climbing. We hadn't counted on the searing heat, the invasive red dust and the jarring roads. Nevertheless, the animals were amazing and a trip to East Africa wouldn't be complete without seeing them. Shelley's favorites were the twigas (Swahili for giraffe), while mine were the warthogs, especially the families with little ones. We finished off our trip with a week on Zanzibar, an island off the coast of Tanzania. Zanzibar has a fascinating history starting with being an Arab trading post 500 years ago. It also has beautiful beaches and fantastic snorkeling and diving. Our last week flew by and too soon we were on our way back to much less tropical climes, with another fantastic trip to remember.



LOGISTICS

It's quite feasible to organize your own climbs of Mt. Kenya and Kilimanjaro rather than joining a commercial group, especially these days with the internet and email. Here are the prices we paid (USD) in February 2003 (your mileage may vary), along with descriptions of the routes we chose to take.

MT. KENYA

Arranged through Mountain Rock - <http://www.mountainrockkenya.com>

- Airport pickup \$30
- Nairobi to Chogoria town \$100
- Chogoria to Meru Mt. Kenya Lodge \$100
- Chogoria gate to Chogoria town \$100
- Chogoria to Nairobi \$100
- 4 porters x 8 days x \$12 = \$384
- Park fees: 3 people x 6 days x \$14 = \$252

Total \$1066 (for three people)

We chose the Chogoria Route on Mt. Kenya, one of the most scenic routes on the mountain and because it requires camping it gets less traffic than the standard Naro Moru route which has huts all the way up.

- 4 hour drive from Nairobi to Chogoria town
- 30km by 4wd to Meru Mt. Kenya Bandas 3000m
- 2 hours to Nithi Camp 3300m
- 5 hours to Mintos Camp (also known as Hall Tarns) 4300m
- 3 hours to Austrian Hut (also known as Top Hut) 4700m (campsites also)
- 7 hours from Austrian Hut back to bandas

Mt. Kenya has three summits Batian (5199m), Nelion (5189m), and Lenana (4985m). Batian and Nelion can only be ascended by technical climbs, Lenana has a scrambling route. We had originally planned to climb the Normal (Shipton) Route on Nelion (400m, 20 pitches, 5.6), but due to sickness only did Lenana.

MT. KILIMANJARO

Arranged through Marangu Hotel - <http://www.maranguhotel.com/>

- 1 Guide and 1 assistant x 5 days x \$10 per day = \$100
- 3 Porters x 5 days x \$9 per day = \$135
- Transport from Marangu Hotel to park gate return: \$160
- Arrangement fee: 2 people x \$50 = \$100
- Park fees: 2 x 5 days x \$68 = \$680

Total: \$1175 (for two people)

We chose the Western Breach route on Kilimanjaro which is a moderate scramble (depending on snow and ice conditions). We took the Machame route up and the Mweka route down - one of the more scenic combinations, and again somewhat less busy than the standard route.

- 1 hour drive from Marangu Hotel to Machame Gate (1800m)
- 5 hours to Machame Camp (3000m)
- 3 hours to Shira Camp (3800m)
- 5 hours to Arrow Glacier Camp (4900m)
- 4.5 hours up Breach Wall to main summit (5895m)
- 5 hours to descend Barafu route to Mweka Camp (3100m)
- 2 hours to Mweka Gate (1600m)

These are our actual times, yours could vary substantially.

Note: There are a wide variety of trekking companies that can provide similar services. Most of them would prefer to sell you a "package" trip but it is usually much cheaper to get just the services you need. It's worthwhile to shop around and do a certain amount of bargaining, but to a certain extent you get what you pay for, so if you push too hard for low prices you're liable to get low quality services. Don't let them talk you into too many guides and porters - a smaller group is a lot easier to deal with.

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