

The roof of the Rwenzoris

The mysterious Mountains of the Moon are among the most fabled places in Africa, yet they remain surprisingly unspoilt. And conquering the summit of Uganda's snow-encrusted highest peak is challenging to say the least. Words and photographs by **Morgan Trimble**



I clawed over a final bit of steep rock jutting out through crunchy snow. My guide Benard offered me a hand; crampons are treacherous on exposed rock and a fall here could be deadly. The final obstacle overcome, I clambered to my feet and struggled to catch my breath in the alarmingly thin air, one foot on the roof of Uganda and the other planted on the apex of the DRC. I was standing atop Africa's third-highest peak, Mount Stanley, a 5109m behemoth hidden in the heart of the equatorial Rwenzori Mountains.

If you've ever dreamt of climbing Kilimanjaro but are put off by the thought of marching between camps as part of a snaking parade of tourists, you should embark on a journey to western Uganda's Mountains of the Moon. Higher than the Alps and with unique flora and fauna, this remote region will appeal to travellers who appreciate solitude, wilderness and otherworldly scenery. While Mount Kilimanjaro receives over 50,000 visitors each year, just a few thousand venture into the 100,000-hectare Rwenzori Mountain National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. On my nine-day trek along the Kilembe Route, the main circuit of permanent camps and trails, I encountered just seven other visitors. Vincent (my climbing companion) and I felt as if we had the entire range to ourselves, apart from our grandiose entourage, of course, which included ten porters and two guides, Sam and Benard. →

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Our climb commenced in Kilembe (1450m), an old mining town in the terraced foothills. Once we crossed the park boundary cultivation gave way to montane forest clinging to steep slopes. The Rwenzori vegetation changes with elevation, and on the second day we began to pass through thick stands of bamboo. Next we entered the heather zone: a mist-veiled, fairytale forest of boulder-strewn streams and giant *Erica arborea* dripping with mosses, epiphytes and lichen descriptively called 'old man's beard'.

We slept at Mutinda Camp (3700m) in permanent tents nestled under a colossal rock ledge. Though I was lying motionless on a mattress, I felt as if I'd just sprinted the 100 metres, struggling to catch my breath due to the altitude.

On the third day, as my body acclimatised, we climbed higher into the Afro-alpine zone, an astonishing botanical wonderland where plants are prone to gigantism in order to survive the extreme temperatures, rainfall and ultraviolet and infrared radiation. Spectacular giant lobelias and *Dendrosenecio* (giant groundsel) trees dominate the landscape. Dominant, too, are the mountains' infamous bogs, which are fed by more than two metres of rain per year. Despite our Wellington boots the going was frustratingly slow: we battled through thick swampy mud that clung to us incessantly, leaping wherever possible between tussocks of endemic bog grass. We arrived at our next camp, Bugata (4062m), completely exhausted.

Similarly, on the fourth and fifth days, we wound our way through quagmires, over the icy Bamwanjara Pass (4450m), through more bogs and along forested lakeshores. Snow fell as we finally arrived at desolate Margherita Camp (4485m), from where we would take on the biggest challenge of all: Mount Stanley's highest summit, Margherita Peak. Before a short, restless sleep, our guides distributed some of the equipment we would need to reach our goal: crampons, harnesses, karabiners, helmets and ice axes.

When 2am struck we were woken, bleary-eyed but bursting with excitement. With our hearts thumping in our mouths we started to climb by the feeble glow of our headlamps. Eventually, in the dark and snow, we came to a sloping slab of ice-caked rock that needed to be traversed. Benard confidently attached a cord between my harness and a frozen rope fixed to the horizontal rock face. I was already weary, but I was fixated on reaching the summit.

Without much thought for the precarious situation, I stepped awkwardly onto the frozen lip of rock. I had taken only two steps before my rigid mountaineering boots slid from underneath me, straight off the ledge. My knees smashed into the rock without slowing my fall. "Well, this is it!" I thought. But suddenly, with a violent jerk, my harness abruptly halted my descent. With my legs shaking violently, Benard dragged me back onto the ledge. The speed at which I had gone from standing safely to dangling perilously from a weathered rope snapped me back into focus.

PREVIOUS PAGES: The snow-blanketed peaks of the Mountains of the Moon **THIS PAGE, FROM TOP:** A precarious descent from the roof of Uganda; camping in the rainforest **OPPOSITE:** Forgotten rivers and waterfalls in a fairytale landscape en route to the summit







Our steep route levelled out at the Stanley Plateau. Here we put on our crampons and the guides tied us together on one long rope, with Benard in the lead, then me, followed by Vincent and Sam. Meanwhile, Benard gave us a worryingly brief description of glacier crossing: “Follow the leader, keep the rope taught and if someone slips, everyone else sprawl onto your belly and thrust your ice axe into the snow with a two-hand grip.” I forced Benard to repeat those final instructions again and felt woefully unprepared.

Crossing Stanley Glacier in the dark was very eerie. All I could hear was the harsh, whipping wind and continually crunching footsteps. I couldn’t even see Benard; I just followed the rope, which trailed off through the thick mist in front of me. His crampon-clad boots were leaving huge, monster-clawed prints in the crisp powder. I might just as well have been tracking the abominable snowman, I thought.

When we reached the steep Margherita Glacier, walking became much tougher. My calves and ankles were screaming and my desperate lungs heaved to keep up with the group’s pace. Though we couldn’t see the sunrise through the mist and snow, the sky lightened. After what felt like days, but in truth was just five hours, we crested Margherita Peak, the summit of Mount Stanley and the roof of Uganda. Just then, an arctic-cold wind swept away the clouds and the glaciers below glistened like icing in the blazing equatorial sun. For the first time we saw our surroundings. Under an impossibly blue sky, jagged peaks and snow-covered valleys encircled us – in one direction stretching into Uganda’s Rwenzori Mountains, in the other sprawling into DRC’s Virunga National Park. Our deep footprints, snaking across the glacier, were the only sign of humanity for miles.

Tears of joy, relief and awe melted the ice crystals that had accumulated on my eyelashes. Vincent and I congratulated one another and giggled like children. It was the happiest I’d ever felt. And best of all, we still had four days, on the descent, to relish the magic of the Mountains of the Moon. 

 To read more about the diverse flora and fauna of the Rwenzori Mountains, visit travelafricamag.com.

DID YOU KNOW?

When Greco-Roman scholars speculated on the source of the Nile two millennia ago, the geographer and mathematician Ptolemy claimed it was located in a snow-covered range called the ‘Mountains of the Moon’, which he located in the vicinity of today’s Rwenzoris. It wasn’t until the 1870s that explorer Henry Morton Stanley became the first European to venture here. His expedition proved Ptolemy’s early conjecture to be surprisingly accurate: the range is now recognised as the highest and most permanent source of the Nile. In 1906 Italian Prince Luigi Amedeo, Duke of Abruzzi, led the first scientific expedition here, completing the first ascent of Mount Stanley’s highest peak, which he named Margherita after his queen.

SAFARI PLANNER

■ **Getting there** The best way to reach the Rwenzori Mountains National Park is by car from Entebbe Airport to Kilembe (about a seven-hour drive) or by public bus to Kasese. The writer booked her hike through Rwenzori Trekking Services. Besides the Margherita Peak there are other shorter routes available, catering to different interests and fitness levels.

■ **Where to stay** Visitors stay in permanent camps along the routes.

■ **When to visit** The Rwenzoris can be cold and rainy at any time but the drier months are January, February, July and August.

■ **Health** Mount Stanley is considered a more difficult climb than its higher neighbours Kilimanjaro and Mount Kenya. Comprehensive medical and evacuation insurance is vital, as is taking suitable high-quality equipment and clothing. You should also consult a travel clinic or your doctor about antimalarials, altitude sickness tablets and any necessary vaccinations.

