

# Rwenzori: the Mountains of the Moon

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## RWENZORI: THE MOUNTAINS OF THE MOON

The legendary “Mountains of the Moon” were known as the source of the Nile 2000 years ago and placed on the world map by Ptolemy. The map was known to the Romans, but its accuracy was not confirmed until the end of the 19th century when Stanley and other colonialists explored the area. They confirmed ancient reports that the white caps of the Rwenzori Range were snow. Stanley’s reports sparked the interest of European explorers, but challenging weather conditions, impenetrable vegetation, and the remoteness of the mountain frustrated their success for years. In 1906, a huge expedition led by the Duke Amadeo of Savoy finally succeeded in scaling the major peaks, documented the extensive glaciation, and produced accurate maps. The Duke named the highest peak after his Queen “Margherita Peak” (5109 m). Although the access to the upper reaches of the mountain is now incomparably easier than during those early times, its remoteness and challenging weather conditions keep the number of visitors in the hundreds rather than in the tens of thousands as on the popular Kilimanjaro.

The Rwenzori has been on my to-do list since 1974 when Walter Märki, Paul Brunner and I climbed Kilimanjaro. I finally got my chance to cross it off my list in 2019 when I convinced my son Markus to attempt the fabled mountain. By then, Idi Amin, Uganda’s dictator, had been replaced with a new dictator and the armed rebels, who in the past used the Rwenzori as a retreat, had gone elsewhere.

On the night of December 3, 2019, Markus and I travel from Zürich to Entebbe, Uganda, via Vienna and Addis. We know the plane is on course because we follow the meandering

Nile, which glints far below in the morning sun. The all-day road trip from Entebbe to Kasese, the regional hub in the foothills of the Rwenzori range, accustoms us with Africa, especially after having crocodile steak for lunch. We meet Robert, our head guide, to review logistics. My grey beard prompts him to ask: “How are your knees?” The next morning, our driver takes us to Kilembe (1450 m), the staging place for the “Southern Circuit.”

Kilembe’s copper mine threw at least 1000 miners out of work; now, they are trying to make a living by serving as guides and porters for the trickle of trekkers visiting the Rwenzori. The “Snow View Caffe” appears to be hurting for business and there seems to be a surplus of laborers. Snow is nowhere in sight, and it would take us four days before we get to see snow-covered peaks. Godwin, the second guide, two cooks and six porters complete our expeditionary corps. After a final equipment check, we sign an agreement stating that rescue would involve being carried out by porters for an extra \$100/day and would take up to eight days. Dismissing such unpleasant thoughts, we take off with a swarm of children in our tow. Our porters carry the supplies for 10 people and 11 days, including fuel, food, and gear, each carrying 30 kg. I swallow my pride when I hand my tightly stuffed expedition pack to Jackie, a mother of two. The porters quickly leave us behind and are not seen until we reunite in the evening at Sine Hut (2585 m).

While leaving the village, the precarious living conditions in the village and the increasingly severe impact of climate change become all too evident. Ruined bridges, destroyed houses, and a schoolhouse cut in half attest





Ascending to Mutinda Lodge through a forest of giant heather trees covered with lichens



Descending from Bamwanjara Pass to Bugata camp

to the power of the untamed Nyamwamba River, which runs smack through the village. The steep hillsides are intensely cultivated by small farms growing coffee, bananas, and sorghum (Hirse). Tiny houses populate the steep hillsides as far as the eye can see, right up to the crest and the border of the Rwenzori Mountains National Park. Just behind the park gate, we are greeted by a band of Blue Monkeys frolicking high above in the crown of huge fig trees. Soon we get a taste of things to come: in the afternoon, we find ourselves in an intense rainstorm the likes we rarely see in the Alps. Arriving at the hut, we are greeted by our porters with big smiles, hot tea and cookies, a ritual that is repeated for the next ten days. As it is early in the climbing season, we seem to be the only trekkers heading up.

The next day, we traverse the bamboo forest zone and reach Mutinda Camp (3688 m) which is surrounded by giant heathers. The trail is now getting increasingly steep and muddy. Rickety ladders help us climb moss-covered rocks, and boardwalks make it possible for us to traverse extended bogs and swamps. No wonder, it took the early explorers decades to reach the Alpine zone (3800-4500 m). A wrong step and we sink with our rubber boots knee-deep into mud. Missteps are "verboden" and would have very unpleasant consequences. The dense fog and the otherworldly vegetation, thick moss covering plants and rocks, and trees draped in grey-green lichens (white Old Man's Beard) create the feel of wandering through a mystical fairytale land. Sometimes, the spectacular scenery reveals itself during the night and mornings, but on most mornings dense mist moves in, engulfing us in fog or even rain. The muddy trails are getting more difficult to negotiate as the rain converts them into

creeks. The guides decide when to take lunch breaks based on their 20-minute weather forecast. Sometimes they hit it right and we eat lunch sitting down. Typically, however, we eat standing under our small umbrellas.

As we enter the Alpine zone on our way to Bugata Camp (4062 m), we cross extended bogs, hopping from one tussock grass bundle to the next, doing our best not to miss. Branches and logs placed on the trail are meant to reinforce the ground. Naturally, they are covered with mud and are invisible. We probe the mud with our poles to find a rock or branch to step on. We soon find out that it is easiest to follow in the guides' footsteps; they seem to have mud-penetrating vision. Nevertheless, pulling our boots out of the mud is unavoidable and an awful waste of energy. The thought that the thousands of planks needed to construct the trail were schlepped all the way from Kilembe is mind-boggling. At Bugata Camp, night temperatures drop well below zero. In the middle of the night, when nature calls, we have to navigate icy foot paths but are rewarded with spectacular views of the peaks illuminated by the starry sky.

Pushing onward to Hunwick's Camp at 3974 m, we head up to Bamwanjara Pass (4450 m) where the clouds clear just long enough to get a glimpse of the Stanley Range including Margherita Peak. They are further away and higher than hoped. The porters who catch up are hurrying down the slippery trail seemingly unbothered by their heavy packs. Wind and heavy snowfall abruptly end our lunch break. Following the porters, we gingerly descend to the Kachope Lakes 500 m below where the trail dissolves in a vast bog. We turn westward and enter a heavily vegetated cliff. The route is equipped with numerous



improvised wooden ladders we alternately scale or descend. Leaving Hunwick's and heading to Margherita Camp (4485 m), we pass the stunningly beautiful Kitandara twin-lakes with Mount Baker looming high above. We are in the afro-alpine vegetation zone, which is characterized by bogs, forests of 8m high giant heather plants, giant lobelia, and groundsel. Large swaths of vegetation in the narrow valley leading up to Scott Elliot's Pass suffered during the 2012 fire but are slowly recovering. Amid heavy snowfall, we climb the rocky path to the camp where we huddle with other climbers around the oven to dry our clothes. What a luxury in this corner of the world! Tomorrow is the sixth day and our only chance to summit.

We leave at 2am after gulping down a plate of porridge. The camp was originally situated at the edge of the Elena Glacier, near Duke Amadeo's base camp. Now it takes a two-hour scramble up a rocky gully to reach the edge of the glacier. In complete darkness and thick fog, we cross the Stanley Plateau and repel into the adjacent canyon to the end of Margherita Glacier. Finally, dawn dispels the spookiness of night. Further up, the sun breaks through and reveals the Margherita Peak, which now seems within reach. We ascend a steep snowfield to the bottom of the unsurmountable cornice that extends to the ridge. Secured by ice screws, we follow the cornice to the ridge, doing our best to circumvent the huge icicles that are hanging from the cornice's roof. What is left is an easy scramble to the top. Nobody would give a hoot about standing on top of the highest mountain of Uganda, but after all Rwenzori is the third-highest mountain in Africa. Sheer luck strikes. A rare breakthrough of the sun treats us to a spectacular view of

the surrounding peaks and, way down, the jungles of the Congo. We take a few pictures and briefly visit the DRC behind the sign "Welcome to Rwenzori." Robert and Godwin are just as happy as we are. Few parties reach the top in sunshine, and, of course, they may expect a well-deserved bonus.

Facing a long descent, we keep our celebration short, and as fast as we can we return to the base of the Margherita Glacier. As we scramble the ravine to the Stanley Plateau, it starts to snow and the visibility diminishes to near zero. Fortunately, the guides know their way blindly. We leave the glacier and descend the gully over the soapy rocks. Finally, we reach the camp which we left 14 hours ago. With the peak day in our bones, we begin our five-day trek back to Kilembe. Markus picks up a signal from a Congolese provider and texts to family that all is well. The Rwenzori shows his true face one last time when we cross Bamwanjara Pass in heavy snow. In Kilembe we say goodbye to our team and meet up with our driver, who takes us to the Queen Elizabeth Park to admire the increasingly rare elephants and hippos. On a visit to the Kibaale forest, we visit a chimpanzee clan, our nearest relatives, who demonstrate their superior climbing skills. Finally, a day spent in bustling Kampala prepares us for our return to civilization. Since spring 2020, floods and the pandemic has made the lives of the folks living in Kilembe even harder. On May 10, 2020, the Nyamwamba River, angry about the changing climate, once again obliterated a portion of the town including Godwin's house. The porters and guides have since begun to rebuild the trails, hoping to restore their livelihood.

*Martin Reinhard*

Ascending Margherita Glacier



Geologie-Exkursion (Foto Hans Wäsle)





**WISSEN**