

MOUNT KENYA

“Through a picturesque depression in the range rose a gleaming snow-white peak with sparkling facets, which scintillated with the superb beauty of a colossal diamond.”

- Joseph Thompson, Scottish Explorer, 1883.

At 5,199 metres (17,058 feet), Mount Kenya is the second-highest peak in Africa (exceeded only by Kilimanjaro), and consists of two towering summits, Batian and Nelion, separated by an icy gash, called ‘The Gate of the Mists’.

Batian is the higher of the two – **Nelion** being only eleven metres (36 feet) lower than Batian. The third-loftiest crest, called **Point Lenana**, at 4,985 metres (16,355 feet), is the highest point normally reached by non-technical climbers.

Like most other mountains in East Africa, Mount Kenya was formed by volcanic action associated with the creation of the Rift Valley approximately three millions years ago. It’s last eruption is thought to have taken place about two million years ago.

Examining the fall-out from erosion, geologists have come to the conclusion that in its infancy Mount Kenya was a lot higher than Kilimanjaro, and might well have risen to over 7,600 metres (25,000 feet) – approaching the height of Mount Everest!

Mount Kenya is a volcano in an advanced stage of decay. What we see as the central peaks of the mountain is in fact the ruined stump of the original volcanic core – a plug of extremely hard rock that solidified deep down in the volcano’s vent. When the softer surrounding rock was eroded away, only the resistant core remained.

These seemingly impregnable summits, composed of a firm, coarse, granite-like rock known as *syenite*, afford some of the finest alpine-style climbing in Africa and demand a high degree technical expertise in both rock and ice climbing. The Diamond Couloir, for example (the ice runnel leading to the Gate of the Mists) is as challenging as the classic route on the Matterhorn.

The ordinary hiker, however, finds plenty to satisfy his tastes for there are many lesser summits that can be climbed, and the high alpine zone, dotted with glacial ‘tarns’ (small glacial lakes) and afro-alpine style vegetation, provides an endless variety of fascinating scenery. Indeed, there is the summit contour path, known as the Grand Traverse, which circles the entire upper region of the mountain. Below this, there are paths that lead through terrain that is as diverse as barren volcanic scree, as opposed to grassy meadows crowded with lobelias, tree-groundsels, and other strange gigantic mutations of plants (including the rare ostrich-feather lobelia) whose counterparts elsewhere in the world are small and unpretentious but which on Mount Kenya reach a height of two metres or more.

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A number of camps with community dormitories (which provide reasonable accommodation), have been built at strategic points along the trail. Or, if the hiker so chooses, he can pitch a tent and camp wherever he pleases.

The name, *Mount Kenya* has an interesting history. It is derived from the Kikuyu word *KeeNyanga* (sometimes spelt *Kiinya*), which means 'Mountain of Brightness', or 'The Mountain that looks like an Ostrich Feather' – the white of the glaciers, contrasting with the dark volcanic rock of the mountain, resembling the speckled plumage of the male ostrich. Even today the Kikuyu often refer to Mount Kenya as the 'Mountain of the Ostrich', and believe that their god, *Ngai*, lives among its high peaks and sleeps on a bed made of a very fine white powder called 'ira' – the snow. White is therefore the 'sacred' colour to the Kikuyu and is used by medicine men when adorning themselves on ceremonial occasions and by children during initiation ceremonies.

The tribespeople, living in the foothills of the mountain, traditionally build their dwellings with the front doors facing Mount Kenya; and bury their dead, not looking towards the sunrise, but rather at *KeeNyanga* – the home of their Creator. When Jomo Kenyatta, the leader of Kenya's independence movement in the 1960's, published his autobiography, he chose for its title the words *Facing Mount Kenya*, acknowledging the significance of the mountain in the lives of his followers.

A personal view

Mount Kenya is my favourite mountain in Africa!

In 1996 I was privileged to spend twelve days roaming the mountain with just a Swahili guide as a companion. Sammy helped to carry my pack, and showed me the way. Every night I pitched my tent in a different place - often alongside one of the mountain's emerald-green 'tarns'. In the morning I would wake to find the golden peaks reflected on the surface of the still water – a photographer's dream! And the 'dassies' (the mountain hyrax) were always there at the tent door to greet me, their noses twitching inquisitively as they sought out any morsel of food that might have left around the night before.

We did the trip in December, and during the morning clouds would build up and swirl about the high peaks, giving rise to a light fall of snow at midday. Then, in the late afternoon, the clouds would part, revealing the dark summit rocks dusted with snow. By evening, the sky was completely clear again, and a calm star-bespangled night would follow. This routine was repeated almost every day.

I was so enthralled with Mount Kenya (the serrated skylines with their slender spires and pinnacles, crumbling buttress and tottering towers that seemed to touch the sky - not to mention the central core of the mountain with its dramatic two-pronged 'crown' that forms

the two highest summits, or the flowers and unique vegetation in the alpine zone) ... yes, indeed, so enthralled that I invited a group of friends to join me on the mountain the following year.

Then, in 1999, I lead the South African Centenary Climb on Mount Kenya, and ten of us stood at Point Lenana to witness the dawning of 13th September – the very day that the Scottish mountaineer, Halford Mackinder, had reached the summit of Batian (the highest point on the mountain) one hundred years before. The two central peaks above glowed in the morning light, with Batian shining like a beacon and proudly displaying her formidable flanks to the astonishment of us all. Far in the south, Kilimanjaro thrust its competitive summit into the sky above a bank of soft blue cloud that covered the savannas of Africa. A memorable occasion!

Twelve years later (during which time Summit Ventures had organized many climbs on Mount Kenya for clients) I was privileged to take a group of 22 people to witness the solar eclipse of 15th January 2010, which occurred at 8.30 in the morning. This eclipse was one of the longest experienced anywhere for several decades – 11 minutes – and the path of the eclipse cut right across the mountain ... an event, according to NASA, that won't be repeated for another six thousand years.

Again, we were perched on the summit of Point Lenana, and, remarkably, the morning was bright and clear! (Heavy rains had flooded much of Kenya for several weeks prior to this event, but we were high above the clouds!)

"Mountains, like men, have their history. They too are born, grow, decay and die. One cannot claim that, like men, they love, but it is true – and how true, that *they* are loved!" - Felice Benuzzi - *No Picnic on Mount Kenya*

Book a tour

Mount Kenya can be visited at any time of the year, but the months when one is most likely to experience good weather on the mountain are December and January.

We try to assemble a group for Mount Kenya for either of these two months each year. Enquiries welcome. Trips can also be customised for individuals, couples or groups, but because of the high cost of travel (there are long distances to be covered), the larger the group the better.

We recommend eight full days on the mountain (see Itinerary to follow), which allows plenty of time for acclimatisation; and for enjoying Mount Kenya's unique topography to the full.

The route we choose takes in the most of the **Summit Circuit Trail**, with the central peaks being viewed from every side. Ten glacial lakes ('tarns') are visited, and two occasions tents are pitched alongside *vleis* of water with beautiful views in the late afternoons and in the early mornings. We enter at **Sirimon Gate**, and exit on the far eastern slide of the mountain at **Chogoria**.

One night is spent at the **Austrian Hut** (4,709m / 15,711 feet) to experience the wonder of Mount Kenya's snowy heights and to explore the nearby **Lewis Glacier**. Next morning we climb to the summit of **Point Lenana** to watch the dawn, and hopefully, to see Africa's highest peak, **Kilimanjaro**, 300 kilometres to the south.

Participants in all our tours are thoroughly briefed on high-altitude climbing long before the event, and each person receives a copy of our comprehensive 28-page 'brochure' which covers every aspect of the trip.

Mount Kenya has a far more interesting profile than Kilimanjaro. Having been subjected to a lot more weathering over time (geologists estimate that Mount Kenya is two million years older than Kili), Africa's second-highest peak has a lot more to offer in terms of interest, variety and beauty.

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"All in all, it seems that the beauty of mountains
is proportional to the rate at which
they are being destroyed."

- Jerome Wyckoff, *Rock, Time, and Landforms*

Slide show

A slide-show, "**Mount Kenya – Monarch of Mountains**", is available for audience viewing. It features the mountain in all its splendour, with a great variety of scenes: early morning sunrises, rare and beautiful flowers, mountain peaks reflected in undisturbed water, calm sunny mornings, storms and blizzards, as well as days when pristine snow flakes drift lazily down from a leaden sky, coating the black rocks in a mantle of purest white.

Full of fascinating stories and personal anecdotes, the show consists of 200 slides collected on four trips to Mount Kenya, and is presented 'live' on two screens simultaneously.

Invitations to present the show are always favourably considered.

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"Sky and earth brimmed over with rollicking blue; the very wind blowing off the snow sped down on wings of light; the hills danced, and the heavens laughed for joy". - Vivienne de Watteville, *Speak to the Earth*, 1928.

Recommended itinerary

- DAY 01** : Fly to Nairobi. Overnight Nairobi.
- DAY 02** : Travel to Sirimon Gate.
Afternoon Sirimon Gate to Old Moses Camp.
Sirimon Gate: 2,650m / 8,692 ft.
Old Moses Camp: 3340m / 10,955 ft.
Height gain = 690m / 2,263 ft.
Distance = 8 kms. Time = 3 hours.
- DAY 03** : Sirimon Route: Old Moses to Shipton's Camp.
Shipton's Camp: 4,230m / 13,874 ft.
Height gain = 890m / 2,919 ft.
Distance = 13 kms. Time = 7 hours.
- DAY 04** : Cross over Hausberg Col (4640 m / 15,220 ft.) to Two Tarns and American Camp.
Two Tarns: 4,490m / 14,727 ft. Time = 5 hours.
Height gain = 410m / 1,346 ft.
Distance = 6 kms. Time = 5 hours.
- DAY 05** : American Camp (4,300m / 14,104 ft.) to Austrian Hut.
Austrian Hut: 4790m / 15,711 ft.
Height gain = 490m / 1,607 ft.
Time = 5 hours.
- DAY 06** : Climb Point Lenana – descend to Hall Tarns.
Point Lenana: 4,985m / 16,355 ft.
Hall Tarns: 4,300m / 14,104 ft.
Height gain = 195m / 639 ft. Time = 1 hour.
Height loss = 685m / 2,246 ft. Time = 3 hours.
- DAY 07** : Day to explore Lake Michaelson, Vivienne Falls, etc.
- DAY 08** : Descend from Hall Tarns to Chogoria Camp.
Chogoria Camp: 3,000m / 9,840 ft.
Height loss = 1,300m / 4,264 ft. Time = 6 hours.

DAY 09 : Descend to Chogoria Entrance Gate
Height loss = 1,500m / 4,920 ft. Time = 4 hours.
(Forest extraction by Jeep after 3 hours.)
Return to Nairobi. Celebration Dinner.

DAY 10 : Return Flights.

Recommended reading

Snowcaps on the Equator - *The Fabled Mountains of Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Zaire*, by Gordon Boy and Iain Allan, photographs by Clive Ward. Published by Bodley Head, London, 1989. Excellent chapter on Mt. Kenya.

On God's Mountain - *The Story of Mount Kenya*, by Mohamed Amin, Duncan Willets and Brian Tetley. Published by Camerapix Publisher International, Nairobi, Kenya, 1991. Outstanding publication, beautifully illustrated.

Mount Kenya, by John Reader. Published by Elm Tree Books, London, 1989. Good introduction to Mount Kenya, with useful background information.

The First Ascent of Mount Kenya, by H.J. Mackinder. Published by Hurst & Company, 1990. Describes in detail Halford Mackinder's epic journey to Mount Kenya in 1899, and the first ascent of the mountain.

No Picnic on Mount Kenya, by Felice Benuzzi. Published by Readers Union, William Kimber, 1953. Recently re-published by CDA : Turin. The classic story of three Italian prisoners of war who escaped from the Second World War camp at Nanyuki on the 24th January 1943, and, with very little food and protective clothing, attempted to scale the west ridge of Batian (a severe rock-and-ice climb) with crude ice-axes and crampons (which they had fashioned from old cans, car parts and bits and pieces found around the camp!) Having failed to reach the summit of Batian in atrocious weather, they climbed Point Lenana – a meritorious achievement under the circumstances. At the end of their adventures, they gave themselves up, and were re-incarcerated in the prison camp. The book is written by the leader of the expedition Felice Benuzz.

Kenya Mountain, by E.A.T. Dutton. Published by Jonathan Cape London, 1929. One of the classics of mountain literature, with lyrical descriptions of the scenery and the surrounding plantlife ... perceptive insights ... delightful humour.

Upon That Mountain, by Eric Shipton. Published by Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1943. Chapters III and IV contain graphic accounts of several first ascents in the early 1930's of some of the most difficult routes on Mount Kenya, undertaken by Eric Shipton and H.W. Tilman - two of Kenya's top mountaineers who went on to achieve fame in the Himalayas in later years.

That Untravelled World, by Eric Shipton. Published by Hodder and Stoughton London, 1969. Several of Shipton's classic climbs are described in this book.

Speak to the Earth, by Vivienne De Watteville, a naturalist, who, in 1929, spent two months on Mount Kenya close to the Gorges Valley, studying the topography and the flowers. Her charming book is still considered a classic today.

Trekking in East Africa, The Lonely Planet Walking Guide, by David Else. Published by Lonely Planet Publications, 1993. Excellent tourist guide to Kenya in general. Contains general information and detailed descriptions of the various routes on Mount Kenya.

Guide to Mount Kenya and Kilimanjaro, edited by Ian Allan. Published by The Mountain Club of Kenya, P.O. Box 45741, Nairobi. Telephone: Nairobi - 501747. (1:50,000 Map and Guide also available.)

Kilimanjaro & Mount Kenya, by Cameron M. Burns. Published by Cordee, 1998. The most recent authoritative guide to Kilimanjaro and Mount Kenya, with all the technical climbs fully described.