

MOUNT KENYA NEW ROCK CLIMBING EXPEDITION
FEBRUARY 2019. SPONSORED BY;-
MONTANE ALPINE CLUB CLIMBING FUND,
BMC JULIE TULLIS MEMORIAL AWARD
AUSTRIAN ALPINE [UK] CLUB

Team members ;-

Nicholas Hurndall Smith [Co Leader]

Nigel Bassam

Steve Humphries

Neil Atkinson

Robyn Johnston [Doctor]

Richard Nadin [Co Leader]

Additional members coopted:-

Andrew Wielochowski [Logistics EWP]

Alex Wielochowski

Michael Mavrolean

Dickson Mutunga [local agent & Mr Fixit]

Julian Wright [local guide]

Inspired by numerous conversations with my good neighbour & friend Ian Howell last year I decided to form the germ of an idea to mount a trip to explore the possibilities of new routes on Mt Kenya, in early 2018. AC members, Ian Howell “ Mr Mt Kenya” & his friend John Temple had been feeding me information on the climbing in the national Park. Principally, there were 2 options for possibilities :-

1 On the South Face of Batian adjacent & to the L of the Diamond Buttress

2. On the East Face of Nelion where season & weather permitting there were lines open to explore between existing classics.

Neither face has had much attention in modern times, with the exception of a recent ascent of the famous Diamond Couloir by one of our coopted team members; Julian Wright with his South African partner Trystan Firman in October 2018.

A plan was made by RN & Nick Smith to make an 18 day trip to Kenya with 8/9 days spent in the Mt Kenya National Park itself with a “warm up” period of 4 days spent climbing the local basalt rock at Hells Gate National Park, adjacent to the idyllic resort of Lake Naivasha at Camp Carnelleys [one of the local campsite/bungalow/restaurant sites which surround the lake, catering to tourists. very convenient to the Park [15minutes].



Lake Naivasha at Camp Carnelleys. Idyllic is the understatement....



Untroubled hippos grazing metres away by the lake... [there is an electric fence...]

Hells Gate is a nature reserve & climbers paradise covering an area of about 68 sq km. & is home to many wild animals including Cape Buffalo, Gazelle, Zebra, Giraffe, Baboon, Monkey & Hippo at Lake Naivasha. It is also home to the local Maasei tribe whom we met with & took climbing as an encouragement to the local young people.

In addition to Mt Kenya, Andrew Wielochowski persuaded us of the benefit to visit one of his pioneering climbing sites north of MK. Camp Sabache is a community based eco-camp run

by the local Samburu tribe. It is adjacent to Ololokwe, along with Poi home of desert rock in Kenya. With massive gneiss walls towering over the plain & an abundance of wildlife to match!

It was explained to us, by Ian H & John T, that local knowledge was a key to accessing the delights of this forthcoming trip. One name came to the fore, in experience & reputation in the form of guru Andrew Wielochowski, who had lived in Kenya for some time as a teacher & latterly as a self appointed expert on all things trekking/climbing wise in East Africa. As an experienced mountaineer, Andrew was second only to Ian Howell & Iain Allan [guidebook author to Mt K & Kili] in his cv of 1st ascents in the area. His organisation EWP did all the logistics for the trip including camping, cooking, mess tent, transport, portering, waste management etc . His local expert Dickson Mutunga has been working with AW for 30 years since he was 14years old. Dickson proved to be a very able climber, affable host, liaison & Mr Fixit, with a contact list in every corner of the country. Very useful.....

As plans formed late in 2018 we were dazed by the news of Ian Howells death, completely unexpected, of pneumonia. Attending his funeral made me realise how important his contribution to the world of mountaineering was. A eulogy, by John Cleare, put that in to perspective in no uncertain way, citing his numerous 1st ascents [hundreds]not only in E. Africa, but here at home from Lundy to Scotland. Sarah, his daughter & Anne, his widow, asked me to take some of his ashes to the bivouac hut on top of Nelion; one of the 2 highest peaks of the massif. This duty I considered to be an honour we could not refuse.

John Temple, who had climbed the Diamond Buttress with Ian Howell back in 1976 succumbed to a terminal illness on New Years Eve 2018. This 2nd & double blow to our friendships with Kenyan connections left us all a bit dazed to say the least.

As part of our visit to Kenya, Andrew W had suggested we should if possible look in to our boxes of "retired climbing kit" for any contributions which could be made to the local indigenous climbing communities in Maasei & Samburu areas. Along with lots of shoes, hardware from our personal hoardes; the misfortunes of IH & JT deaths had provided a windfall of opportunities to gift a whole collection of gear from both houses. Both families were very happy that the gear was going to a great cause. Teaching & mentoring the growing local climbers with good gear.

Our team comprised experienced climbers from the AC ranks; mostly specialists in rock was joined by a doctor working in Edinburgh at the time, but conveniently coming to an end to her tenure. Robyn Johnston, our youngest team member, proved to another stroke of providence. She had been on Mt Kenya, just the September before & had failed to summit from the N. side, due to weather conditions. She was also friends with Julian Wright, local Kenyan guide, who could keep us abreast of local conditions. Robyns skills as a medic proved invaluable in the unfortunate events of illness that unfolded on th trip.

At the last moment, a month before our departure, Andrew W, who I had asked to join us, the year before, decided to join us, along with his son, Alex & Andrews friend, Michael Mavrolean [also local expert & new router]

Time flew quickly after Xmas & New Year & before we had time to catch our breath we were flying in to Nairobi, landing at 5am on 8th February to be greeted by the eponymous "Dickson" Mutunga & driver Steve to take us onwards to Lake Naivasha & our sojourn at Camp Carnelleys. First we had to collect Andrew W & Mike M from their overnight stop in

Nairobi, before doing battle with the morning rush hour traffic to cross the city, a feat which took several hours & lots of patience.

Arriving at Carnelleys about midday, we wasted no time before heading out to the Hells Gate National Park for a briefing on the climbing on the extensive crags lining the sides of the Rift Valley. As the sun dictates which crag can be climbed at a particular time of the day we opted for the 50m pinnacle of Fischers Tower as a “warm up” for later ambitions on the Main Wall, which only comes in to shade after about 1/2pm. The tower always has a shaded aspect as it like the gnomon on a sun dial. We selected 3 different lines to acquaint ourselves with the basalt rock which can be deceptively shiny, almost glazed in some primordial process. Cracks seem to offer the best ways of climbing along with interesting rock-overs on incut holds & ledges, sometimes with intimidating overhanging final moves to finish. We thought the grades a bit of a sandbag, tho’ Andrew pointed out that we had to “get used to” the rock surface. Never the less, we found them under graded for our puny English style.



The entrance to Hells Gate with local inhabitants..... The crags are up to 140m high & very steep. Basalt.

We had a tour of the other very extensive crags in the valley which extend up to a mile in length in the case of the Main Wall including an intimidating overhanging central section of up to 150m height with established classics from the 1970s up to VII- by legendary figures such as Ian Howell, Iain Allan, Andrew W. & Dave Cheesmond [I had met & climbed locally with “The Cheese” near Toronto in the late 70s, not realising his African climbing history & before his historic ascent with Barry Blanchard of North Twin N. Face in 1985.] Needless to say our sights with AWs recommendations were more modest, happy to aim at VS/HVS, as we found them hard gradings, certainly at the outset. Wildlife abounds in the park & we

explored the herds of baboon, zebra, giraffe, gazelle, antelope, friendly warthog & mercurial Cape buffalo to mention a few.

Our days here were spent cragging after noon & walking in the morning.

At the far end of the Park is a Masai reservation where one can explore one of the local geological phenomena the Ol Njorowa Gorge a water worn gorge with geothermal waters running along its riverbed. We had made friends with one of the local young men who are guides for this area, Dominic, and Andrew W & myself, had contracted a deal for the following day to take us on a guided walk in exchange for us introducing him to climbing. Looking out to the nearest cliffs we spotted The Central Tower, just a few hundred metres away, an early artefact of climbing in the Rift valley from the 70s with few routes or ascents, but convenient.



Local Masai Guide Dominic showing us his bouldering skills [with plastic sandals!!] in traditional costume.....



Dominic at the top of Central Tower after his "First Masai Ascent" of Central Tower.



Fischers Tower with climbers Andrew Wielochowski & Steve Humphries visible. The trade proved beneficial for all with an intriguing walk through the gorge & a “first” for the Masai in a respectable VS which matched Dominics agility. This proved to be a part of AW program to promote climbing & its wider appeal to the native Kenyans.

Evenings were spent watching the hippos grazing the banks adjacent to the Camp, just metres away from the perimeter fence & sampling the local fair & beer at one of the very local hostelries in town.



The 13th February saw us embark on our journey to Mt Kenya National Park to the eastern entrance of Chogoria at 3000m . We had chosen this as our preferred path because of its gentle, verdant, but spectacular approach, via Mintos camp overlooking Lake Michelson & its 1000ft crags above it. Accompanied by many porters carrying our gear & supplies for the next 8 days under the supervision of Dickson we set off from the Rangers post at Forest Station Gate. We took 3 full days to acclimatise as recommended by Robyn , our doctor. [Mt Kenya has a reputation for some of the highest incidences of AMS, HACE & HAPE in the world.] The flora gradually changing from dense forest, with bamboo, where we always found fresh droppings from the feared Cape Buffalo through giant heathers, moorland, giant lobelia & giant groundsel making the landscape unique & foreign to our eyes.

Mintos camp proved to be a very overpopulated destination for lots of trekkers going to the easier pickings of Pt Lenana; so styled as “Mt Kenyas 3rd highest peak” with a billboard to match. The sanitation with just one very unsanitary lavatory for a large crowd proved to be a test of hygiene, as the days unfolding would prove to have a very negative impact for some. We pressed on during the 4th day since we left Naivasha to ascend via Pt Lenana the col to descend to our destination, The American Camp on the S side of the massif, with Midget Peak & Point John to hand, short walks of about an hour away to hand. These were some of our proposed warm up objectives before ascending Nelion & Batian for the 2nd taster round.



As we could ascertain that the Eastern side was not in condition earlier, we had to abandon any hope of scaling those walls. Logistics of relocating the camp for this area also proved too difficult without the necessary manpower & timeframe.

After enjoying ascents of Midget & Pt John by routes up to VS we moved quickly to acclimatise ourselves further by climbing Nelion by the regular SE face route grade IV Severe in our approach shoes. This normally takes about 5 to 7 hours if you know the way. Nick & Nigel had set off the previous day to stay the night at Baillies bivvy, about half way up the route, before pressing on to the top & across the narrow, but time consuming gap to Batian taking care on the snowy frozen surface. We met them on their way down on to the abseils, with big smiles on their faces.



Nigel Bassam at Baillies Bivy



The top of Batian from Nelion. Although only 150 m away, it takes 2/3 hours there and back.

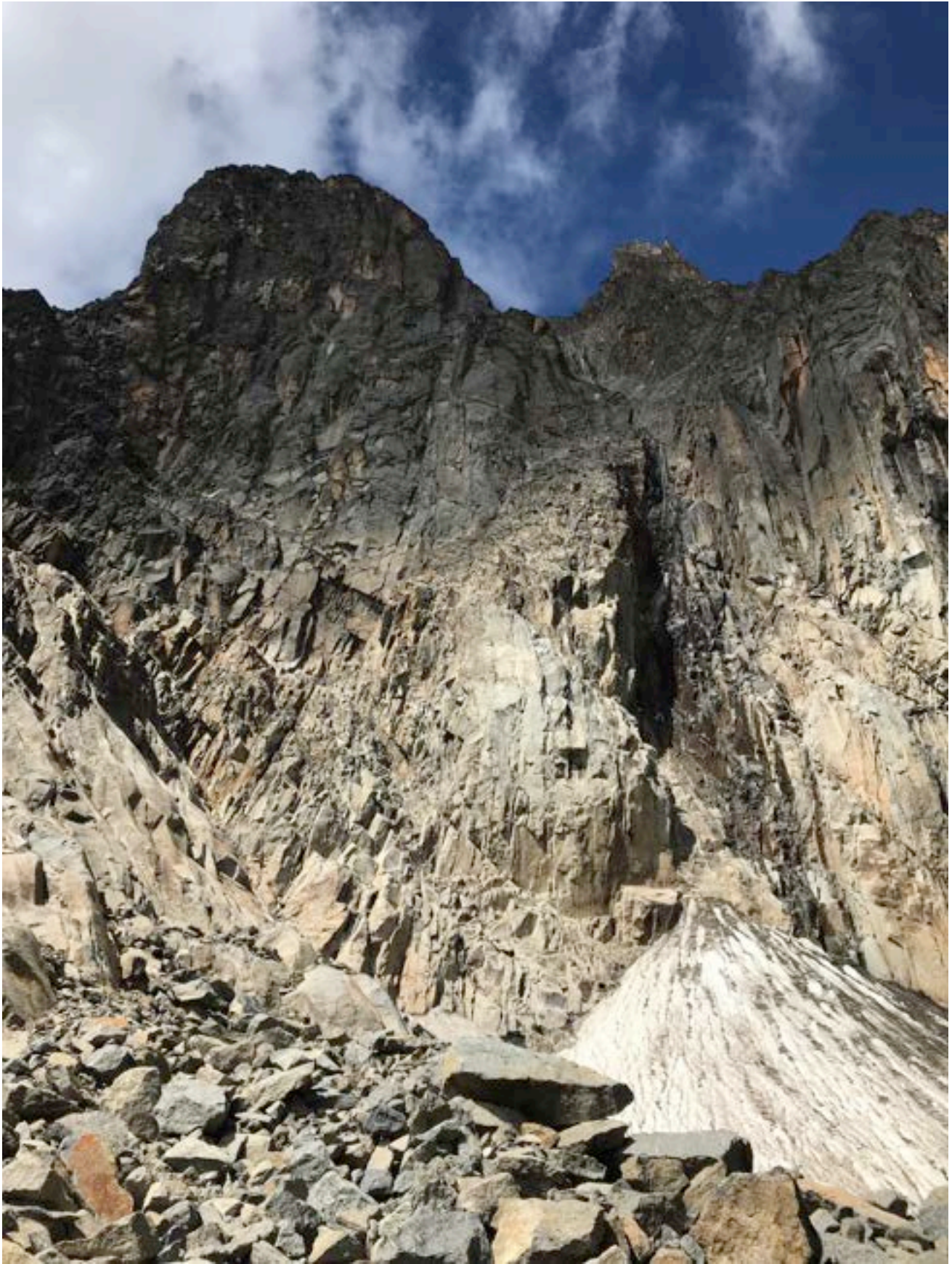
Robyn & Julian, the latter knowing the route intimately, lead away in record time to get to the top of Nelion in about 2 hours! Our friends Fish Shah & Emmanuel Freudenthal from the Mountain Club of Kenya lead away to a more leisurely pace of well within guidebook time as we had the intention to bivvy the night in Ian Hs hut on the top, prior to leaving a dedication plaque on its entrance side & casting Ian's ashes to the chances of the 4 winds.

We met Robyn & Julian abseiling down, just as we were about to climb the Severe section known as De Graafs variation, a groove which avoids choss; choosing solid excellent enjoyable rock, with a few points of fixed pro in it. The route proved to be very enjoyable with my old climbing partner, Neil Atkinson; proper mountaineering, but without stress at all. In spite of which we did feel the altitude at all times, most especially the walk in to the base of 2.5 hours from our camp 1000m below from the top.

As fortune would have it I was stricken overnight with acute gastro enteritis, necessitating many visits to relieve myself during a long cold windblown night. Armed with copious quantities of Immodium, I & the others were able to execute our obligations to Ian's memory as planned. I felt very honoured to have been asked by Sarah & Anne Howell to take the ashes up to his bivouac. Everything went smoothly according to plan I am happy to say. Fish, Emmanuel & Neil Atkinson fixed the plaque with drill & rivet expertly. [see enclosed image] Descent went smoothly for the 4 of us down 13 abseils, using a leapfrog technique of 2 active ropes; each of up to 30 m. We were at the base of the climb in 2 hours & 20 minutes. We met Dickson, Michael & Alex making a last ascent of both peaks on our descent; their intention to bivvy up there too.



South Face of Batian after the storm.



The South Face of Batian on a reconnaissance trip to explore new route potential. On the R is the huge gully of the Diamond Couloir, continuously ejecting heavy stonefall. to The L of it

is the Diamond Buttress where the light & shade meet. To the L of this is a face & arete with future potential.



Departing from our camp on our last day; view of the S. Face of Batian & Nelion with Diamond Couloir in centre L. Midget Peak & Point John on R.

In the meantime Robyn had been back at the American base camp to deal with Steve Humphries who had an acute case of gastro enteritis; diarrhoea & vomiting being the symptoms along with acute dehydration. Robyn took the best decision evacuate him out immediately with Nigel & 2 porters to help. Steve ended up in hospital for several days being fed intravenously & fed antibiotics before being released on our return.

To say the least, this along with my internal state changed the game play. We had also had a storm on the S side plastering it & making it out of bounds for a day at least. We had run out of time too, but not before we had a final chance to recce some lines adjacent to the Diamond Buttress on the L. from below for future sorties. The last afternoon was spent exploring this dimension with many stonefall rattling down the adjacent Diamond Couloir in its out of season state. Feb 20th was our last night in our mess tent with our wonderful cooks & assistants Leonard, Jeffat,

Early morning saw us walking down to exit via the Naro Moru route, past the MCK hut & Mackinders Camp [named after the first ascentionist in 1899 accompanied by 5 Europeans, 66 Swahili, 2 tall Masai, & 96 [naked] Wakikuyu; a remarkable feat in colonial style typical of those times.]

5 hours later we were at the Park gates & on our way to our next rock destination; Ololokwe. We had a fine send off from our portering friends with a rendition of "Jambo Bwana, Hakuna

Matata....” in harmony lead by Leonard.



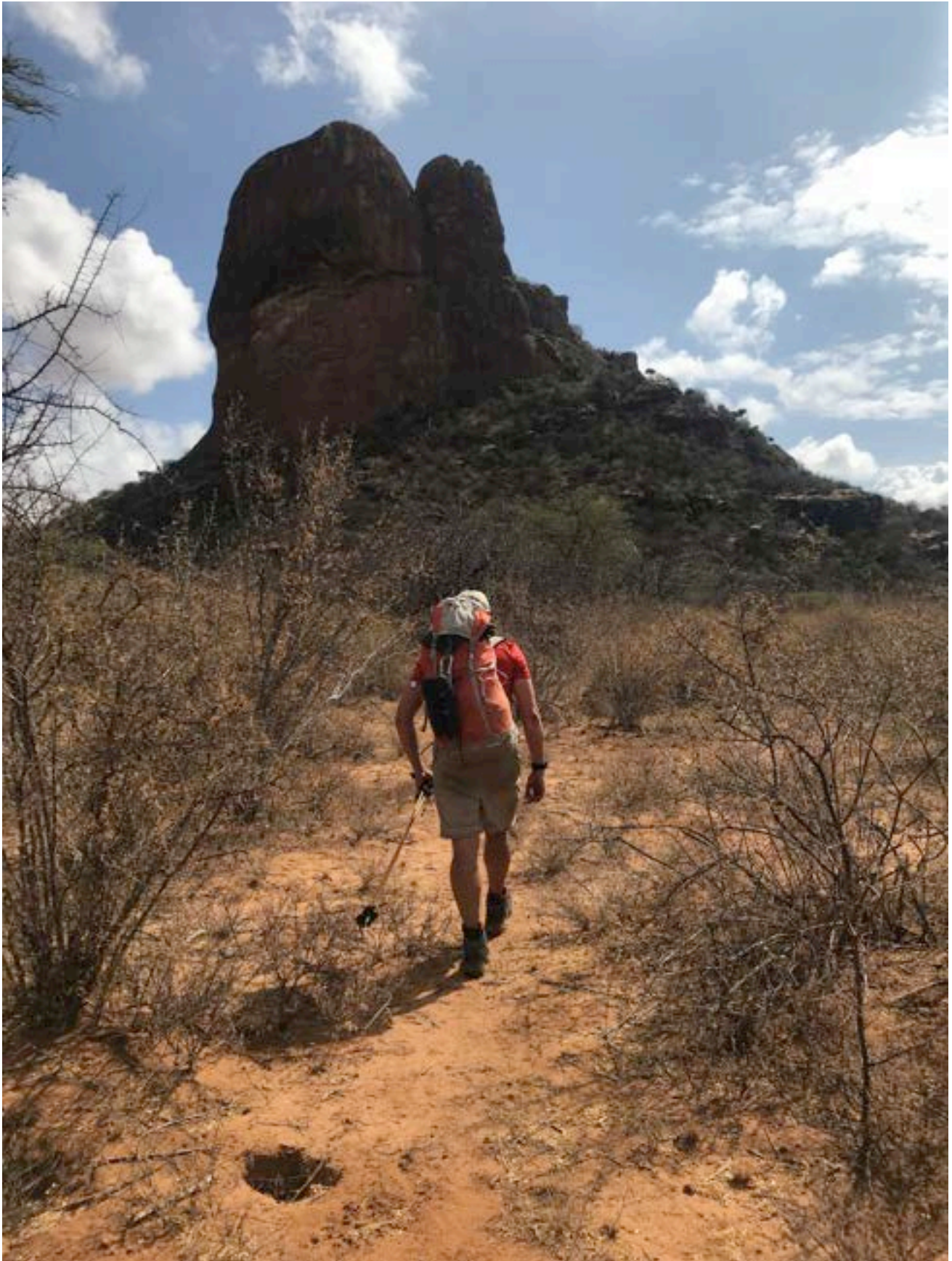
Ololokwe Main Massif with road leading to Camp Sabache on right in shadow. 1000m from base.

A long drive via Nanyuki lead us to Camp Sabache at the foot of the Ololokwe gneiss massif, a sleeping giant with its friends Cat & Mouse next door to it. The summit is at 2000m+ & the face look like a pair of giant overhanging eyebrows with few possible lines from downstairs. The Cat & Mouse features erupt starkly from the surrounding plain of ubiquitous acacia trees & scrub covering the space in between. We soon learnt that this scrub is a real threat to any approach & needed to be treated with caution. The “wait a bit” thorn bush [caterer] with its hard fishhook like talons needed to be spotted well in advance to avoid its snare like embrace. I still have the marks to prove it.

Camp Sabache is an eco-tourist destination run by the local community tribe of Samburu. There are options to camp with tents as half our team chose. The other option is to have one of the “luxury” tents or bands [huts] with beds/linen/showers/bathroom & the communal eating areas nearby with bar facilities. Andrew had prearranged a very favourable deal with the owners in exchange for our supplies of climbing gear [courtesy of Ian Howell & us]& teaching expertise. The setting nestles under the Ololokwe massif with many subsidiary crags & slabs nearby. Darkness comes quickly in the tropics, so we had a candle lit dinner under a warm sky of tropical firmament.

The next day saw us meeting our keen local “apprentices” Ian, Jackson & Paul. Some of us decided to take on a large area of gneiss slab called the “Waterslide” [S 4b]up about 300m from the camp & very visible as a naked sea of rock with a couple of tree/scrub islands serving as possible belay points. We thought this would be a good bedding in introduction for our hosts to learn “trad” climbing. Although agile, it soon became apparent that teaching the necessary skills would be a long term process. Andrew W has incepted this laudable program as a way to include local potential for developing the skills of placing safe protection

on lead. We trust this will continue after we have left this amazing climbing area.
We donated a huge quantity of gear including many pairs of rock boots, harnesses, hardware
& ropes; many of which came from Ian Howells & John Temples family as bequests to
encourage & engender an indigenous climbing culture for future generations.
Later we



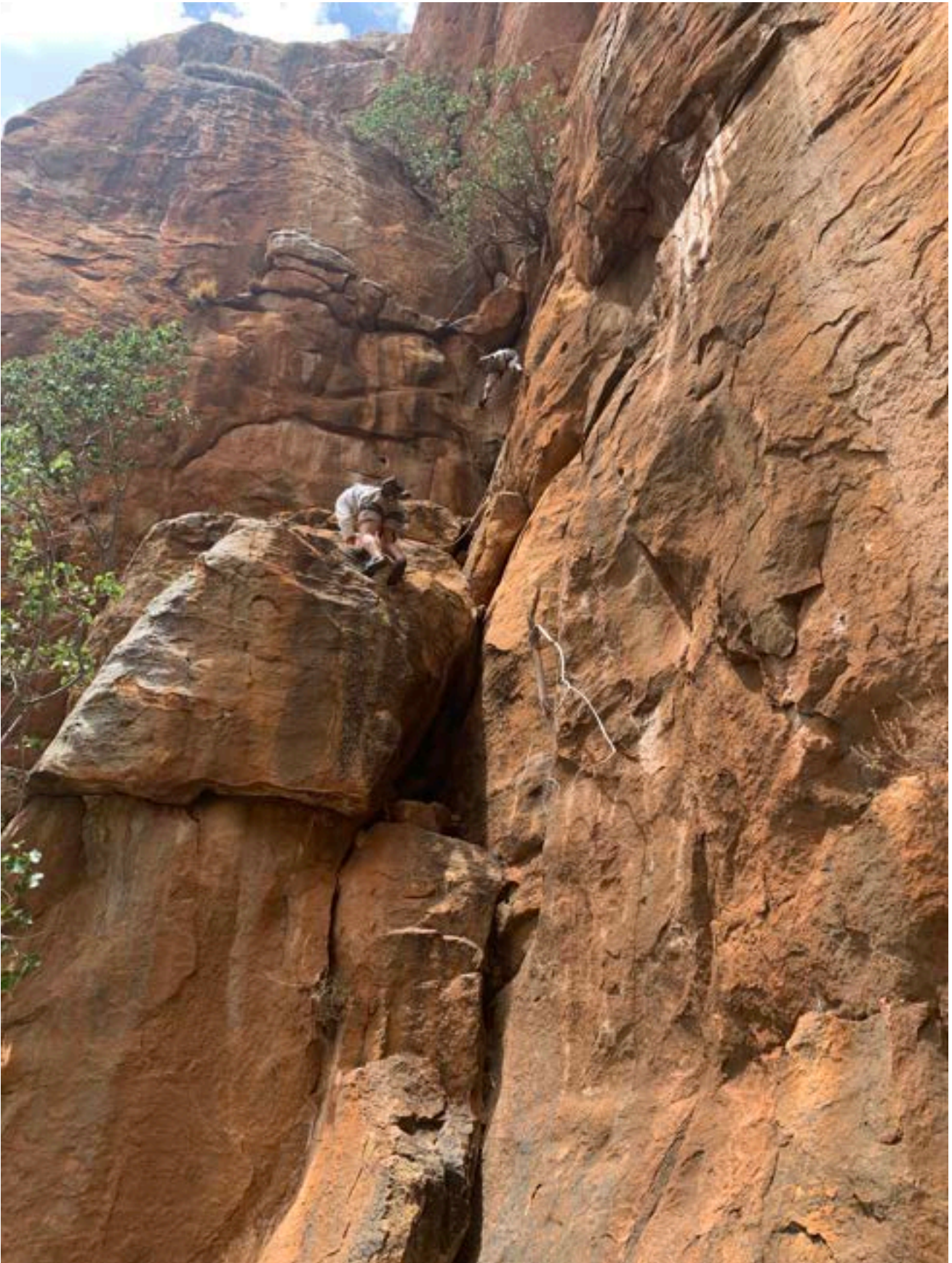
Walking in to the "Cat". Gneiss desert climbing with lots of potential...

tackled something more technical which challenged our young friends quite a bit more at

HVS. It was classic type 70m granite climb with a technical unprotected 5a start on small precise holds leading to a tree belay & 5a crack above. We saw from the copious baboon droppings that it was less of a challenge for our simian friends; their “home crag” too! A new direct finishing line was established by Nigel & Nick adding spice to an adventurous crag. Bushwacking at the top to the abseil from a remote tree was just as challenging as the climb.



Our Team & Guests. From L to R Standing :- Dickson, Ian, Andrew W. Alex W., Jackson, Neil Atkinson AC, Paul, Nigel Bassam AC, Moses, Richard Nadin AC, Julian Wright [local guide], Robyn Johnston [Doctor], Front row:- Stephen, Nick Smith AC, Michael Mavroleon, Steve Humphries AC.



The following & last day we decided to split up, some seeking new routes on nearby crags & others wishing to sample the pleasures of the extraordinary features of the Cat & Mouse. Everything takes longer than anticipated & the approach with the last km on foot through

sometimes dense bush took over 1.5 hours to include a recce of the likely lines. Heat from a direct sun was a final consideration & eliminated our choice to a crack line with 4 Fig trees growing within; one of which would serve as a belay station for the first pitch. An exciting manoeuvre past a very hollow flake/boulder, seemingly stuck in the large crack with nothing but a prayer, proved to be the crux. Over & done with to everyone relief.

Our 2 day visit to this more remote area served as a taster for future forays to climb established, but more importantly new routes, some of which were done on our short sojourn. This area of monoliths & Poi further north would be a good adventurous holiday on its own.

Our journey back to Nairobi, none of us was looking forward to, I believe. It involved, a long fully laden, haul back up a large part of the My Kenya surrounding escarpment. This drive of many kilometres, proved too much for Steves Toyota minibus which suffered from terminal overheating. A 5 mile walk to the nearest roadside cafe proved entertaining. He had to return to the nearest town for repairs involving a transfer of gear in a major tropical hailstorm to another vehicle magicked up by Dickson at short notice. Nairobi, our final destination, was reached at about 9pm that night. The hotels cold beer was more than welcome.....

Summary:- An expedition by Alpine Club members to Mount Kenya in the hope of exploring new alpine rock routes under the mentorship of Ian Howell, who unfortunately died before the trip. Due to illness, local weather conditions & time constraints the focus of the objectives had to be adjusted. We had the privilege to honour our colleague & friend Ian Howell, by going up Nelion to scatter his ashes. It was also a tribute to John Temple AC member recently deceased too.

We were however successful in putting up 4 new routes in the Ololokwe massif region. There is still huge potential in this locale with the help & support of the local climbers whom we are active in training "trad" techniques. The equipment donations we see as an essential ingredient to forging a future of climbing in the Samburu Sabache community. This is not only as a recreation, but more importantly as an economic factor to aid employment for these warm & friendly people. We have made a vow to return to expand on route finding in Ololokwe with the intention to publish existing & new routes online in the future.

We would like to thank the invaluable support, logistics, advice, local knowledge & friendship of Andrew Wielochowski & his EWP team.

We are happy to share all our experience & invaluable contacts gained during this trip for anyone who wishes to climb in East Africa.

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The Montane Alpine Club Climbing Fund

The BMC/Julie Tullis Memorial Award

The Austrian Alpine Club[UK]