

Saga Tours to Mount Kenya!

by Fiona Turner

“The important thing is that we all make it to the top. It doesn’t matter if we are a bit late and miss watching the sun rise from the summit” we stressed to our guide Steven the night before at Shipton Hut. We were fairly convinced that Steven and his assistant guide Alfred didn’t really expect our team to make the summit. As a group we were a bit on the aged side, ranging from 56 to a spritely 73 year old. Probably not the typical demographic that our guides were used to for an ascent of a 4985m mountain close to the Equator.

Twenty-three years ago I had been due to go on a trip to Mt Kenya to climb the twin summits of Batian (5199m) and Nelion (5188m), but unfortunately had to cancel. So when I saw a small ad in the spring AAC Newsletter for a holiday including a mixture of safari, touring and an ascent of Mt Kenya’s trekking summit Pt Lenana (4985m) I decided to take the plunge and promptly signed up.

The 6 of us met as strangers at Schipol airport but, by the time we were having breakfast at Nairobi airport the next day, “John and his 5 wives” had slipped into comfortable companionship.

After successfully completing a couple of training walks in Africa’s Rift Valley (Mt Longonot and the Menengai Crater) and having experienced a thoroughly bewitching walking safari in Laikipia, we arrived at Mount Kenya’s Sirimon Gate (2660m) feeling fit and healthy. At the gate we met our team of guides and porters who would look after us over the next 5 days as we (hopefully) traversed the mountain. We paid our park entrance fee of \$220 each, sorted out the packs for the porters and despite itching to set off up the mountain were promptly made to sit down and have lunch (luncheon meat and Blue Band sandwiches washed down by mango squash)! This day’s walk was only about 10km with a height gain of around 740m and the route followed a dirt road up to Old Moses Hut (3330m). While settling into the hut and waiting for the others to arrive, a shout went up that elephants had been spotted below.

Most parties go straight from this hut to Shiptons Camp (4236m). However, we had planned an extra night’s camp to aid our acclimatisation and set off instead to Liki North Camp (3990m) on a delightful path that wove its way gently up through stunning scenery offering glimpses of Mt Kenya ahead. By early afternoon the “Short Rains” had arrived and so a rather bedraggled party of porters and walkers settled down for a long, cold and uncomfortable night in leaky tents and sleeping bags that even Woolworths would have rejected. Thankfully, next morning the sun appeared and we all gradually dried off before setting off on the 4 hour walk to Shiptons Camp. Again this was a lovely path, weaving its way up through a rocky landscape past fascinating giant Lobelias and Senecio plants.

We were the only residents at Shiptons Hut and, after a brief acclimatization walk, we watched the rock hyrax playing by the hut before being called in for an early dinner. We spent an anxious night dozing, waiting for the alarms to go off at 2am. After a cup of tea, some popcorn and a few dry biscuits, we were off into a perfect starlit night. If all went well our porters would leave a few hours later, traverse a lower pass and meet us at Mackinder’s Camp on the other side of Mt Kenya. However, if we didn’t all reach the summit, we would have to return back to Shiptons and would then have to retrace our steps back down the same way.

With our guide Steven at the front and Alfred at the rear we set off at a snail's pace up a path of frozen scree and rock. Gradually we gained height sustained at intervals by cereal bars and jelly babies. It seemed strange to be so high and yet not be on snow. Global warming has certainly made its presence felt here. Maybe because there was no snow or because I had acclimatised so well, I felt as fit and healthy as I normally do walking up a mountain in Britain. Just below the summit I overtook the others to pick a slightly more interesting scrambling route to the summit of Point Lenana. We did miss seeing the sun rise but we didn't care, John and his 5 "wives" had all made it! The 360 degree views from the summit were fantastic. The sun was out and we all made the most of being at 4985m, an altitude record for some of the group.

We started down the other side of the mountain, passing the Austrian Hut, a base for climbers attempting the rock climbs on Batian and Nelion. The descent continued down scree slopes and then along the Teleki Valley until we reached Mackinder's Camp. After a rest and a welcome brunch we continued on down to Met Camp via the so-called infamous vertical bog keeping a wary eye out for buffalo in the lower forests. The next morning we walked out to the Naro Moru gate having successfully completed our traverse of Point Lenana, the third highest summit of Mt Kenya and the fourth highest summit in Africa.

I don't know if we were lucky, or maybe it's just because it isn't Africa's highest summit, but we had the mountain almost to ourselves and that was fantastic. I was so glad to have finally made it out to Mt Kenya and am already thinking about plans to return for that long overdue attempt on Batian & Nelion – before I get too old!



John and his 5 'wives' on Point Lenana - Fiona Turner