



The Mountains of the Moon

Of the three glaciated mountain areas in Africa the most exotic and extensive are the Rwenzori, "The Mountains of the Moon".

This World Heritage Site, set between the misty jungles of the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Lake Victoria plains of Uganda and stretching for 120 kms, is home to many indigenous species of plant and bird making it a naturalist's paradise par-excellence.

The Rwenzori Mountains have held a fatal attraction to explorers for centuries. They have been described as '*mysterious, unearthly and remote*' and are all those things and more. Many people have fallen under their spell and many a legend of what lay at the heart of Africa somehow found a home there.

Mohamed believed this was where the Garden of Paradise could be found. Everyone from Ptolemy to the famous explorer Sir Richard Burton were convinced that the source of the river Nile lay in what became known as 'The Mountains of the Moon'.

Botanists reported the existence of plants like heather and lobelia that grew to giant proportions. In the Hammer film version of Rider Haggard's She this was where Ursula Andress bathed in fire to stay for ever young in her lost mountain kingdom.

Ever since I heard of the Mountains of the Moon 20 years ago I felt compelled to visit them and climb to the summit. The accounts could not capture the true magic of this incredible mountain wilderness.

The approach through the savanna grass takes us through the giant rainforest and on to the area of high heather trees. This is the land of dreams.

Onwards, we scramble up the band of rocks and onwards - across the Stanley Plateaus - Africa's largest glaciated area and on to the snowy summit of Mount Stanley. At 16,761 feet - 5109 metres.

Several routes are available up the mountain, with huts and well-trained guides making a fully porter-supported trek here a unique experience.

Don't be misled though - this challenge is not for the faint hearted. But - the rewards are beyond imagination.



Margherita Peak - 8 day trek

Day 1

After arriving in Entebbe airport near Kampala, we transfer to Fort Portal for an overnight stay on our first night in Uganda. The following morning we make an early start from Fort Portal to drive to Kileleshwa - 1hr30min

DAY ONE

Steady walk with a steep climb for the last kilometre. Start at Trekkers at 1,450 metres and sleep at Sine Hut at 2,596 metres being a height gain of 1,146 metres

Guides will brief our team at the start of the trek or the night before.



The trek starts at Trekkers Hostel in Kyanjuki, which is situated 1,450 metres above sea level and 12 kilometres from Kasese. We will walk 2.2km to the UWA rangers post at 1,727 metres, which takes about one hour. Here we pay the gate entrance fee and the rangers brief us on the rules of the National Park.

Afro Montane Forest Zone. For the first two kilometres there is a steady climb through pristine forest with multitudes of birds and there may be the chance of seeing a wild chimpanzee or blue monkey scampering off through the forest. As we leave the rangers post we walk along a path through tall grassland and ferns which gives way to magnificent pristine forests. As this is a new route, the forests are untouched and carry a wide variety of trees and plants. Many species of birds can be heard and seen in this rich environment.

The first few kilometres climb steadily, crossing several small streams and rivers. Then we start climbing the ridge. As we climb, the trees become taller and straighter and it is common to see and hear many types of primates. On the left we may hear troupes of chimpanzee echoing around the valleys.

Typically around, our lunch spot at 2,570m it is possible to see troupes of 20 or more black and white Colobus monkeys or Blue monkeys as they dash through the trees.

This vegetation is really something, with a wide variety of species, and as if out of the film Tarzan, the swinging, lichen covered vines are awesome.

Enock's Falls are just 200 metres from Sine Hut and offer a splendid opportunity to capture a screensaver for your memories.

The wooden hut here is a set between tall forest trees on a narrow ridge, with ten beds and a large verandah where we may sit and enjoy the beauty of the Afro Montane forest while we look down at a fantastic waterfall crashing over the rocks far below. Sine is just below the bamboo zone and the area around has many different bird species.



Top is typical of the vegetation on the trail climbing to Sine Hut which cross below Enock's Falls. Above is the falls we see as we sit on the verandah of Sine Hut

Margherita Peak - 8 day trek

Day 2

DAY TWO: Bamboo-Mimulopsis Zone - to Mutinda Camp

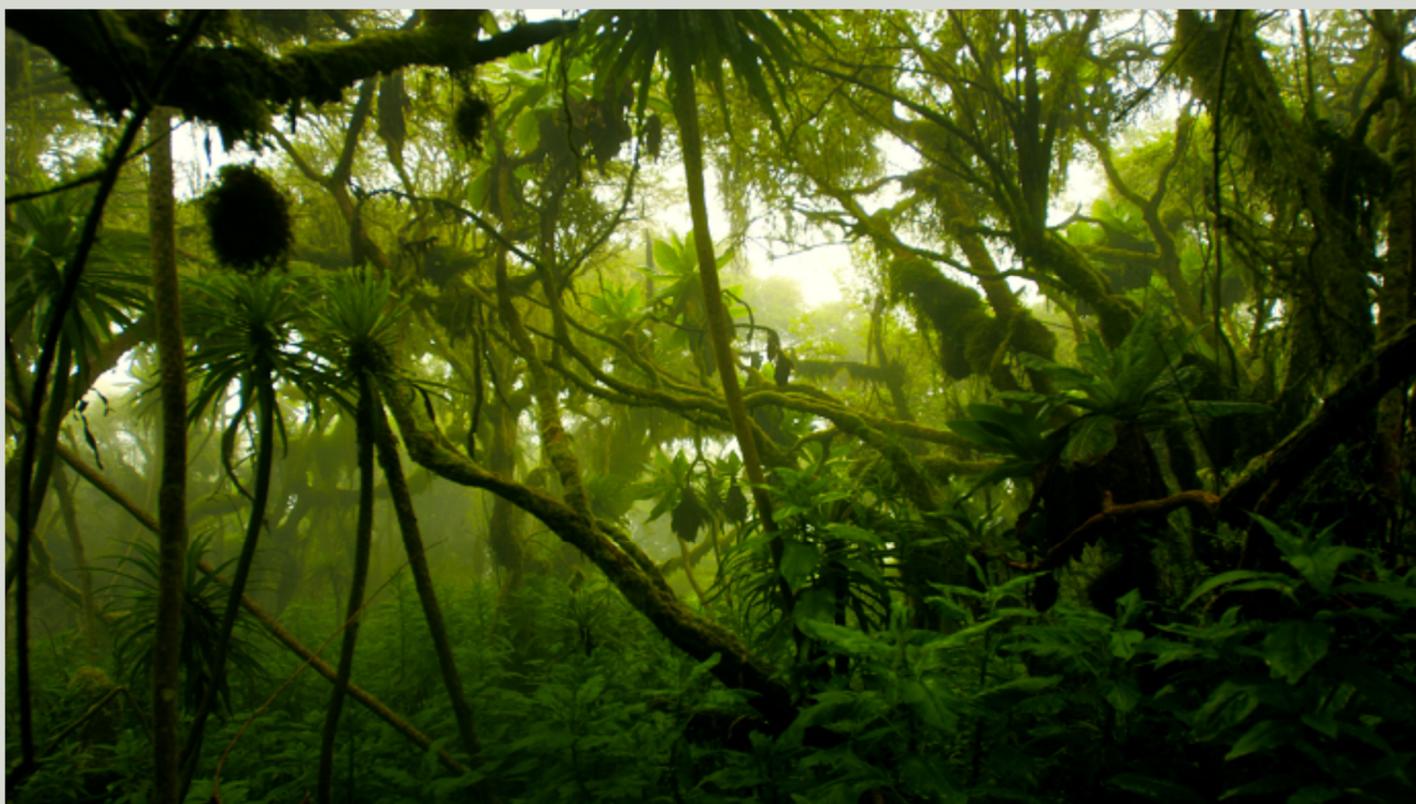
After a good breakfast, trekking starts at 8.30am and we soon enter the **Bamboo-Mimulopsis Zone**, which is a steep climb with many high steps. In the wet season the bamboo area is rather muddy and slippery making the going slow. However, the atmosphere and the forest is beautiful as we climb 551 metres altitude and a distance of 1.8km to Kalalama Camp at 3147 metres. We are now in the Heather-Rapanea Zone where we can take a rest and a quick cup of tea or coffee before heading on to Mutinda Camp.

The trail meanders up and over several small knolls along a ridge top then drops down the side of the valley before climbing again. In doing so, we cross several small streams and pass close to moss covered waterfalls. We then climb steadily along the side of a beautiful mossy river which tumbles down over the rocks under the Giant Heather trees whose trunks are covered in green moss with old man beards hanging from the branches.

The trail twists and turns as we climb up the deep valley, which has an enormous variety of plants and flowers. This valley is unique with many Giant Heather trees creating a beautiful atmosphere often shrouded in mist.



Eventually we get to **Mutinda Camp** which is set near a small river which drops off a waterfall and offers a chance to wash and refresh and relax. You may wish to climb up to the top of the **Mutinda Lookout** (one and a half hours up and one hour down) The view and the atmosphere is amazing as we stand on moss covered rocks at 3,925 metres with views across the Rwenzori Mountains and down to Kasese town and Lake George.



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DAY THREE: Alpine Zone

4.9km starting at 3,688 metres climbing to 4,062 metres to Bugata Camp

Day 3



Alpine Zone. The trail here is boggy particularly in the wet season, but with a little skill we can step from tussock to tussock to make the going easier. We cross the Mutinda valley through the tussock grass and everlasting flowers interspersed with many Giant Lobelias before we climb a steep section up to the Namusangi Valley (3,840 metres), which ends abruptly with sheer waterfalls and fantastic views of Mutinda Peaks.

The Namusangi Valley is a wide valley with many ups and downs and crossing several bogs as the trail climbs steadily to Bugata Camp at 4,062 metres. Bugata Camp is situated part way up Bamwanjara Pass high above Bugata Lake with views across Lake Kopello to Weismann's Peak, which is often covered with snow then down the valley views of Lake Africa and Lake Kanganyika and the many small peaks towards Mutinda Camp.

The area is covered with tussock grass, everlasting flowers (St John's Wort) giant groundsel and Giant lobelia. There are many Red Forest Duiker (which are a sub-species only found in the Rwenzori Mountains.)

In the past Duiker have been very hard to see due to the thick vegetation but since the fire, which burnt across the alpine region of the Rwenzori Mountains, they are now more easily seen in the new shorter growth.

From here we can choose to walk directly up the valley, or take a more scenic trail meandering along the hilltops with fantastic views of Lake Nusuranja from Plozza Rock. From Plozza Rock we also get amazing views down the valley of nine lakes ringed by rugged peaks and ridges.

Bugata Camp has good facilities, solar lights, good toilets and bathrooms where the guides may prepare some warm water in a basin for us to wash. Bugata also has a heli pad in case of the need for rescue by helicopter.



Margherita Peak - 8 day trek

Day 4

DAY FOUR: 6.2km starting at 4,062 metres climbing over 4,450 metres sleeping at 3,974 metres - Butawu Camp

We start by descending to pass through Bamwanjara Pass to Kachope Lakes - a trail that offers spectacular scenery of the main peaks ahead. On a clear day you can see Mt Stanley, Mt Speke in the centre and Mt Baker.

On the right one can see McConnell's Prong The Kachope Lakes area is one of the three known areas where on a misty day one may catch a rare glimpse of the Rwenzori leopard. Little research has been done on this animal. It is more rare than the snow leopard, which has gained so much attention in recent years. After passing Kachope Lakes we climb to Camp four at 4,006 metres

The area is covered by everlasting flowers and Giant groundsel with the bogs being mainly tussock grass and Giant lobelia. The nectar of the lobelia is the main food source of the Scarlet-tufted Malachite Sunbird (which is common in this area and epidemic to the Rwenzori Mountains).

As we climb we look back to see the glacial lakes far down in the valley. On reaching the top of Bamwanjara Pass, we get excellent views of all the main snow capped peaks where we have a small shelter to rest and enjoy the scenery.



The walk down to Kacholpe Lakes is steep and often very muddy but offers fantastic views of the lakes and McConnell's Prong - named after a British explorer and geologist.

Butawu Camp (3,974m) is set on a ridge high above Butawu River which flows down from Scott Elliott Pass through Kitandara Lakes and has excellent views of the snow capped Mt Baker.



Margherita Peak - 8 day trek

DAY FIVE: 4.2km Starting at 3.974 metres climbing to 4.485 metres - Margherita Camp

Day 5



We walk back along the ridge before crossing several wet areas and small rivers coming from Mt Baker to join Butawu River. Today is a relatively easy walk past Kitandara Lakes and we will climb through Scott Elliott pass to our camp situated right on the pass with fantastic views down the valley to Lake Bujuku and Mt Speke.

To the south we see Kitandara Lakes and Wiesmanns Peak. The walk up Scott Elliott Pass is enjoyable as we climb up over the rocks and up to Margherita Camp at 4,485 metres, which is below Elena Hut.

The area is sheltered with a ring of high rocks and the original camp used by the Italian Prince Luigi Amadeo di Savoia, Duke of the Abruzzi, who mounted a very powerful expedition in 1906, composed of biologists, surveyors, a geologist and a photographer. The Italian led team, between June and July 1906, climbed the mountains, opening a new page in the history of mountaineering and exploration in Africa, and providing an answer to the most unresolved geographical questions in the region for centuries.

Some of the peaks still have the names, which the Duke chose to honour the Italian Kingdom and Queen Margherita hence our naming this camp Margherita Camp. From here we have great views of Mt Baker, Scott Elliot Pass and some of the high glaciers on Mt Stanley.

The camp is in a flat sheltered position covered with moss where we can get a good sleep before climbing Mt Stanley including Margherita Peak the following day.



Day 6

Margherita Peak - 8 day trek

DAY SIX: 3.5km Starting at 4,485 metres and climbing to Margherita Peak at 5,109 metres then descend for 2-3 hours to Butawu Camp at 3,974 metres.

We wake up at 4am, have a quick snack and start climbing so as to get on the Stanley Glacier before sunrise. The climb up from Elena can be difficult if covered in snow and ice but it is classed as a “difficult scramble”.

You reach the edge of the glacier at 4,765 metres where we will need to put on crampons and harnesses at set distances. Although there are few crevasses the guide will lead the way to safety.



The scenery is spectacular and as we start to reach the upper areas of the glacier and the saddle between the two peaks Alexandra and Margherita the sun will just be peeping over the horizon giving the chance of fantastic photographs of the two main peaks tip with sunlight.

We then reach the upper weather station (4,830 metres) where we climb down to a ladder (4803 metres) onto the upper glacier leading to Margherita Peaks. Rwenzori Trekking has recently installed a new fixed static rope with bolts every two metres leading down a ledge to the top of a six-meter aluminium ladder.

This route is much safer than the original ladders and clients may attach to the fixed static rope with twin lanyards from their harness. There is a couple of steel steps or rungs on the tricky bit to assist when icy, all in all this is a safe route and anyone with reasonable fitness is able to manage this route. It is not classed as technical and it is easy in dry conditions.

The climb up Margherita glacier is steep with the first part around 30 degrees but the toe of the glacier is much steeper and requires effort. Generally we walk across the newly exposed rocks to the other side of the glacier where it is less steep.

First we climb up the glacier to a small saddle between Alexandra and Margherita Peaks at 5,025 metres where you scramble up a steep rocky climb to the main peak. At times the rocks are covered with snow and ice and may be slippery but mostly it is firm rock.

The exhilaration of reaching the top is enormous as we look across Albert Peak to the DRC (Congo) then east across the spectra of the Rwenzori Mountains. After enjoying the scenery and signing the book, we descend using the same path down to Camp 5

On getting near to the top of the glacier, we then need to climb around an exposed section, which is also bolted and roped, to get on the ridge running up to the top of Margherita Peak. On a clear day, the views from Margherita Peak are awesome and your goal is achieved! After summiting we then descend directly to Butawu Camp or in the case of bad weather, we may need to stay in Margherita Camp but the following day it will be necessary to pass Butawu Camp directly to Bugata Camp.



Margherita Peak - 8 day trek

Day 7

DAY SEVEN: Descend to Bugata Camp

10.1 kilometres - 5 to 7 hours. Start height 4,460metres walking down to Camp 4 at 4,006 metres where the trail drops a little more to pass just above Kachope Lakes at 3,985 metres and then over Bamwanjara Pass (4,450 metres) then dropping to Camp 3 at 4,006 metres

Late breakfast at 8.30am and start trekking by 9am. The climb up Bamwanjara Pass is steep and in wet weather can be rather slippery making it slow going.

While crossing the pass we get the chance to see hyrax sitting at the entrance to their rock shelter warming in the sun.

The hyrax's main predator is the Rwenzori Leopard which is rarely seen, but occasionally people do get a fleeting glimpse. The leopard has been heavily poached for it's skin in the past and there are few left. However on a rare occasion on a misty or overcast day, we may be lucky to see one briefly as they move between the rocks.

Sleep at Bugata Camp and descend direct to base Camp in one day.

OR we can get an early start, take lunch at Bugata Camp then descend to Mutinda Camp. Sleep at Mutinda Camp then the following day descend to Base Camp but generally it is better to sleep at Bugata and descend all the way down the following day.

Day 8

Margherita Peak - 8 day trek

DAY EIGHT: Descend from Bugata to Base Camp

We start down the Nyamugasani valley across open moorland and large areas of tussock grass. As this is a valley floor it is relatively flat and boggy. We cross an open pass to gain the Mulyambuli valley.

After passing several small waterfalls and moss-covered valleys we reach the Mutinda with fantastic views of Mutinda Peaks directly ahead.

We turn left just as before the river drops over a sheer cliff to the Mutinda valley to walk down several steep slopes until we reach the valley floor. Here we again cross the river and continue down the valley to Kalalama. As we near Kalalama Camp we pass through a beautiful valley dotted with Giant Lobelia. Some say this is one of the most beautiful sections of the entire trip.

We continue directly down the ridge through the bamboo forests along a steep ridge. As we leave the bamboo the ridge steepens through mountain montane forest the Mulyambuli River.

Now the going eases to the Rangers Post 1,727m. After lunch and signing out of the park we walk down to Kilembe and stay over night in Fort Portal.



Day 10 R & R in Fort Portal

Day 11 Transfer to Entebbe. Flight home.

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Schedule

SCHEDULE

Outward Journey to Uganda

Departing LHR at 0630hrs on 10th January
and arriving EBB at 2230hrs on 11th January 2017

- Day 1** Arrival & transfer to hotel in Entebbe. Sleep at the Boma Guest house. (11th January)
- Day 2** Transfer to Kasese, sleep at Margherita Hotel. (9hrs transfer)
- Day 3** Transfer to starting point, Brief and start hike, Sleep at Sine Camp 2596 metres (20 minutes transfer to the starting point)
- Day 4** Hike to Mutinda camp 3688 metres
- Day 5** Hike to Bugata Camp 4062 metres
- Day 6** Hike to Butawu Camp 3974 metres
- Day 7** Hike to Margherita Camp 4485 metres
- Day 8** Summit Margherita peak 5109 metres and Sleep at Butawu camp 3974 metres
- Day 9** Hike down to Bugata camp 3,518 metres
- Day 10** Hike down to Samalira camp 3174 metres
- Day 11** Hike down to base camp, refresh and then transfer to the airstrip for your afternoon flight to Entebbe. Arrive Entebbe at 1555hrs. Check in at Lake heights hotel.
- Day 12** An option of Kampala city tour or relaxing by the beach before you fly out later in the evening. (21st January)

Return Journey to the UK

Depart EBB at 2330hrs on 21st January
and arrive LHR 0740hrs on 22nd January.

