



**SPORTING MATTERS**

**BY PETER JACK**

**YOU** may have been reading over the last two weeks that I was in Kenya helping with a Limavady Rotary Club/Limavady Interact Club Projects and now eight days later it was time to start my next mission – to climb Mount Kenya!

Kelly drove me from the Blue Line Hotel (near the equator) to the gate at Naro Meru where I promptly filled up my water bottles from a tap whose pipe line came from the glacier at the top of the mountain and was therefore safe to drink. I saw four other mezungos (foreigners, usually white) who were going for a day trek only – faders! We set off for a nice three hour stroll going from 2,400 metres above sea level to 3,048 metres i.e. 10,000 feet.

Day one of a trek should always be a gentle acclimatisation day to get the legs stretched and the heart and lungs used to less oxygen. Our camp was a bandas (not to be confused with bad ass) where I had a nice doze in my new sleeping bag (Highlander – a third of the price of North Face and just as cosy). At 10,000 feet, it was fairly cool once the sun goes down. I sat outside my basic lodge (just bunks and mattresses for 10 people, but I was the only sleeper there). I was told to keep my door closed because the local monkeys had a habit of darting in and stealing not only food, but also anything that looked attractive i.e. wallets and passports! At 7pm it was nearly dark and there was just the squawking of lots of different birds in the equatorial rainforest to serenade me off to sleep.

The next morning our cook Patrick had prepared me a great breakfast of “chocolate porridge” (actually it was made of maize, millet and sorghum) as well as bacon and sausages, I have no idea how he made this with the basic facilities, but it went down a treat. We were meant to leave at 8.00am, but we were on the road at 7.30am. The schedule for our route was to take eight hours. I was determined to beat that time to show Cyrus that the big push was possible after the summit to get down a day early. We were in sub-tropical undergrowth for the first time, but it was nothing compared to the forest in Sabah, Borneo, that I had been in a few years ago also with Adventure Alternative. There, you couldn't see the sky and the canopy of trees was like a roof which was very oppressive and claustrophobic. Here, there was light and space – and no leaches! After the Afro-Alpine habitat, we moved onto the vertical bog for another hour. This reminded me of the Mournes, thankfully my boots were waterproof – so far! I met four guys coming down, they were the Rescue Service and had been up for a fortnight. No wonder they were smiling. They asked me if I was going up on my own as I had left everybody behind at this point. I replied “no – I've got my army with me”, they replied “the British Army?” (as they had a barracks nearby for training). I replied rather sheepishly, “no, just my own army...”. I realised then that there were only three things I could do for my army – a) make it to the top, b) get off the hill a day early so that they could go back home and c) give them a good tip!

**BASE CAMP**

The vertical bog finished and we were then on a rocky outcrop where I met a high school teacher from South Dakota who was taking his class up and down the mountain.

The class had been helping with a project in this part of Kenya – a bit like Rotary in the Light of Maasai or Limavady Grammar School in Kajiado. There was a wall there to signify that we were half way between the Met Office (last night's base) and McKinders Camp – our base for day two.

Cyrus let me lead which was good of him. When you are a bit tired, it can be easier being the leader than a sheep. We crossed a wee bridge over a river in the Beleki Valley, similar to many valleys I've been privileged enough to be in over the last ten years. Suddenly we could see the camp. We made it at 12.30pm i.e. three hours ahead of schedule.

After a very welcome sleep in the sun, I went for a walk with my binoculars looking for something... I spotted it – a rock pool in a nearby river which had water flowing into and out of it i.e. it should be clean and healthy. I went back to the hut to grab my towel and shower gel and stomped down the valley for fifteen minutes to find it. I'm not sure if you have ever had a bath in a glacial stream, but man, it feels good!

There were several animals and birds near the hut, none of them seemingly frightened of the world's most dangerous animal, Homo sapiens. One bird had really long tail feathers, a black body, but orange underneath its wings. The animal which I swore was an optical illusion,

# Mount Kenya - The only way is up!

was the size of a family cat, but looked a bit like a squirrel. It came within three metres of us. It was obviously after our food. It was apparently a rock-hyrax. We had seen buffalo before we had even entered the park, all lying down. Back home, that would mean only one thing – rain!

I was certainly not going to die of hunger or thirst as our chef kept us stoked up like furnaces with mugs of tea (did you know Punjana mostly comes from Kenya?) and also biscuits and at least three square meals a day. I had only one novel which had to last me five days so I tried to devour every word slowly. I kept glancing up from my comfortable rock seat up at the two peaks of Delion and Batian. They were named after Maasai Gods as they resembled the black and white tail feathers of an ostrich. Those two peaks however were for climbers and mountaineers, I was a mere trekker and hiker and therefore Lenana was my goal.

I didn't sleep much that night as I had a banging headache caused by the altitude and I didn't want to start taking Diamox in case I really needed it later. After brekkie, Cyrus and I went for a march. We were at 4,300 metres and the goal was to get to 4,600 metres and then back down to 4.3 to make it easier for the lungs on “race day”. There was a beautiful lake at the top called Touturn, I renamed it the green lake and as Cyrus said that no one else that he knew of had ever swam in it, I dived in and claimed it for Limavady! Total immersion was fair-

ly refreshing and what a scenic spot. Once again I had managed to get clean without the help of a shower. We then had our first descent of the entire trip. I am not great at going up, but I'm even worse at coming down, but a borrowed stick/trekking pole helped cushion the shock on the quads.

The day before summit day is always tense as all you can do is rest and wait. As I had finished my only book, it was a long wait. I played cards with two of the porters and checked and re-checked my gear for the morning. I was going to be dressed up like the Michelin man for the ascent. I needed nearly all my hiking clothes to keep warm in the cabin, but I knew I would be generating a lot of heat the next day. In bed at 7.00pm, up at 2.00am and away by 2.45am, sure what else would you be doing on the 12th of July?!

**SUMMIT DAY**

**Summit Day! When Joe Simpson, in 'Touching the Void', was crawling his way back with two broken legs down a mountain and over a glacier and back to base camp – and life – he was so delirious with pain, hunger and thirst that the sound track of Boney M's 'Brown Girl in the Ring' kept repeating in his head.**

I, for some reason, all night 'heard' the children's song, “Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes” as sung by Ivy Reilly and her choir of Rotarians and Interactors in various Kenyan schools! It was nearly a relief to wake up and pack away my kit

which the porters would carry to the other side of the mountain for us. Thankfully, they didn't have to go to the very top like Cyrus and myself and were able to cut down off the mountain after they hit 4,700 metres. In the meantime, Cyrus and I set off “pole, pole” i.e. slowly, slowly. I always remember that word from the climb of Kilimanjaro.

I was pleased that he felt I was capable of hitting the summit bang on sunrise at 6.20am by leaving at 2.45am. Some groups have to leave at 00.30. Later in the day he paid me the highest compliment, “Peter, you walk like a porter” (aww shucks, Cyrus I bet you say that to all your clients...). After forty five minutes of steady progress in the dark, we crossed a bridge and then we were onto the scree. It was now 3.30am. Anyone who has ever tried to climb up scree will know that it sometimes a case of one step forward, two steps back, but this was reasonably solid. The scree lasted two hours i.e. two Kilometres. We took a water break half way up. The stars were astonishingly clear. Some people ask why do other people get up at stupid o'clock to try to reach the summit at day break at high altitude – because the stars alone make it worthwhile. I was very conscious that my two sons Patrick and Mark were about to summit Mount Fuji outside Tokyo and I couldn't wait to swap notes with them, however I needed to get to the top first! There is very little light pollution in East Africa and one could see galaxies and constellations and it seemed as if we were climbing closer and closer to them.

**OH DANNY BOY**

I thought I would regale Cyrus with a few tunes, so he got ‘Danny Boy’ of course and also ‘Vincent’ by Don McLean (“Starry, starry night...”).

I couldn't see his expression in the dark, but he probably thought that this mezungohad completely lost it. I didn't find any of the climb particularly hard, probably because Cyrus sets a steady pace. We turned from the scree onto the short ankle biting section that reminded me of the top of Scafell Pike in the Lake District, then we were at the Austrian Hut, which has the highest toilet in Africa! We had a fifteen minute break and left at 5.30am. It was still dark although there was a hint of daylight in the distance. We had forty five minutes to get from 4,790 metres to 4,985. The head torch batteries were fading by this stage, but we shortly wouldn't need them. We were at the base of a massive rock which contained Lenana, one of the three mystical peaks of Mount Kenya. They have a religious significance for the Maasai in the same way that Uluru (Ayers Rock) has for the Aborigines in Australia which I walked upon many years ago. I noticed a glacier below me – any time you are above a glacier on the equator, you know you are fairly high...

I then noticed a section of Via Ferrata (steel cable bolted on to rocks to help you up the steeper bits). By this stage my gloves were white with ice and frost, but I took advantage of the steel cable. Cyrus just knew instinctively when to arrive at the summit even without looking at his watch. Suddenly we saw the solid Kenyan flag jutting out into the cold night air and we were within touching distance of the top. Cyrus magnanimously told me to go first, in probably the same way that Sherpa Tenzing told Edmund Hillary to take the last steps onto the summit of Everest in 1953 (strangely enough, neither of them later ever said who was first onto the actual summit).

I had to climb up seven or eight iron steps, then I was on my own at the highest point in Kenya (as there was no way anyone would be tackling the two slightly higher but technical peaks in the dark). I was soon joined by a couple composed of a Scottish lad and an Irish girl. They immediately asked me – who won Wimbledon? The guy was a childhood friend of Andy Murray's and neither of us knew the result. We had been without electricity, showers, toilets, internet, phone signal, heat or any other mod-cons for four days. Neither of us cared who the new Prime Minister was, we just wanted to know did Andy do it?! Strangely, this chap had even been to Limavady and played cricket there in the Under 17's European Championships a few years ago, small world.

We stayed 15 minutes on the summit as I watched the orange/black smudge of an equatorial dawn burst into a bright yellow fire ball. Why climb mountains? Those five minutes are worth it for that view alone. But despite planning and plotting this for months and trekking for days to reach this point, fifteen minutes is enough. Getting up is one thing – but when you're there, you're only half way there. Getting down is much more important. Join me next week for my stumble from the summit.



Cyrus, PJ's guide on the way to McKinders Camp. NCL32-22s