AFRICAN ASCENT

Climbing Mount Kenya in five days was tough enough – but it was singing for her Kikuyu porters that **Nicky Holford** found really difficult

NIGEL PAVITT/JAI/CORBIS; NICKY HOLFORD

It was 2.30am and I could see my breath in the cold air as I struggled to put on thermals in the warmth of my sleeping bag. It was summit day and everyone was nervous, not least because there were a couple of extra guides in case some of us didn't make it. Outside it was pitch black except for a tiny necklace of lights, the head torches of another group in the far distance. We started walking at the speed of the slowest in our group as a cruel wind whipped around us.



On a high: reaching the top was a great moment for Nicky Holford, above

We had begun our ascent of Mount Kenya, the country's highest mountain, and second highest in Africa (after Kilimanjaro, about 250 miles/400km south), four days before. There are a few classic routes, but we were following the little-used Burguret trail and would return on the Sirimon route. For two days our porters had been hacking back the overgrowth. Added to the huge amount of equipment carried by our 27 porters, cooks and guides for 11 of us, are chainsaws and machetes.

Mount Kenya is an extinct volcano, where glaciers have tumbled over the ancient lava and the peaks are snow capped. The two highest peaks, Batian (17,057ft/5,199m) and Nelion (17,021ft/5,188m), are almost vertical in parts and are classed as technical climbs. Batian was first climbed by Sir Halford Mackinder, an Englishman, in 1899. Our goal was Point Lenana at 16,350ft (4,985m).

CONTINUED OVERLEAF

WELCOME TO DISCOVER

A moment of joy and tears, and

Wording Nfflclcls niii tiii Biiitlsh-bcckxd Siiirrc Liiinx giiixr niiint hiiix biiin siiicllng tiiis niii miiillnns niii piiinds wiiith niii diiimnnds, tiiixc tiiilng tiii siiibllty niii tiii wiii riiicgxd niiilnn, siiilnr niiixrvxrs siiidyiiit xiiicy. Tiiiy siiid xiiimxnts wiiihln tiii giiix riiixnt niii Piiisldxnt Ciiicd Tiiicn Kiiibch ciii jiiipc riiislng 50&X. Siiicllng miiih niii tiii ciiintry's diii miiid niii-pnt. "iiix wiii siiirtxd piiic liiily biii ciiix niii tiii giiixd niii fiii kiii piiig tiii diiim niii miiixy fiiim tiii miiiy," niii niiix riir siiid. "iiicm niiis siiinld biii tiii liiix-blnndniii tiiis xiiin

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

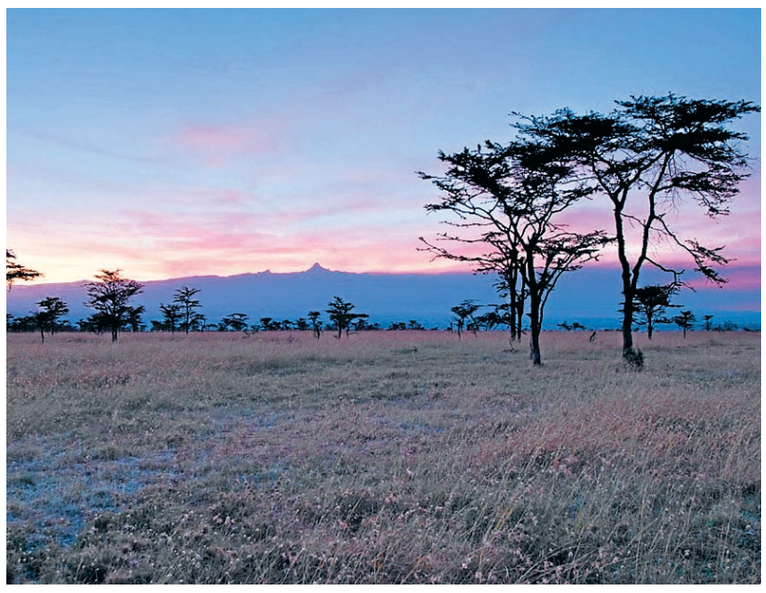
To reach our starting point we left the fertile agricultural land belonging to the Kikuyu tribal villages and headed to the foothills. We skidded and slithered through the dense and swampy forest. When one of the all-terrain vehicles became stuck, not even the army of porters could free it without building a dam of branches under the wheels.

When we could go no farther we started walking, leaving the forest and heading into the bamboo. The hoped-for wildlife – elephant, buffalo and zebra – did not materialise, though I think there was a sighting of the scarlet-winged touracos, a native bird. This area used to be the route of elephant migration but to protect the farming land a huge ditch was built to stop them. We only saw a few colobus monkeys and the odd pile of elephant dung.

Our first camp deep in the bamboo was at 8,530ft (2,600m). Fires were lit, tents pitched and prepping began for the three-course evening meal. Huge great vats of water were boiled. We were supposed to drink up to eight pints of water daily, dehydration being one of the causes of AMS (acute mountain sickness), commonly known as altitude sickness.

Afterwards, we all sat around the fire. To welcome us the Kikuyu sang and danced to the "Jambo Bwana" song (jambo meaning hello). A wave of horror spread among us as we realised we were supposed to reciprocate. My tentmate, Katie, took control, falling back on a song from her Girl Guide days: *She'll Be Coming Round the Mountain*. Later, we lay in our tents, falling asleep to some eerie-sounding birds and the giggles of the Kikuyu porters who were all sleeping in the mess tent.

A hive of activity greeted us the next morning and after a breakfast of champions – eggs, bacon, fruit and pancakes – we set off, crossing streams and gaining elevation. At last we broke through the giant bamboo, climbed beyond the pencil cedar forest and into the rosewood zone. By now we had reached around 10,000ft (3,000m).





NICKY HOLFORD: ALAMY



Over just a few days, our journey traversed a landscape so varied that one moment it resembled the Scottish Highlands and the next might as well have been the moon. On the higher slopes, the combination of the altitude and being so close to the equator results in some unique vegetation. There's the water-holding cabbage, for example, found in the tussock grasslands; and the ostrich plume plant, an exotic-looking fern; and giant groundsel, also found on Kilimanjaro.



After six hours of walking we pitched our camp at Highland Castle (12,140ft/3,700m) under some lava cliffs. For the first time we saw the mountain's twin peaks, still alarmingly far away. A soft rain and the light of the setting sun fell on the moorland grass, making it glitter like tinsel. We gave our wet clothing to the porters who draped it in a cave to dry. The night was cold but the sky was filled with stars as we ate around a table set up in the cave and lit by candles stuck on tins of beans.

Early the next day we hit 13,000ft-plus (4,000m) and the air was noticeably thinner. It was a long day as our goal was to reach the Hausberg Col at 15,000ft (4,600m) and then descend the other side to Shipton's Camp. At this elevation the scenery shifts dramatically. We left the boggy moorland and hit scree and lava.

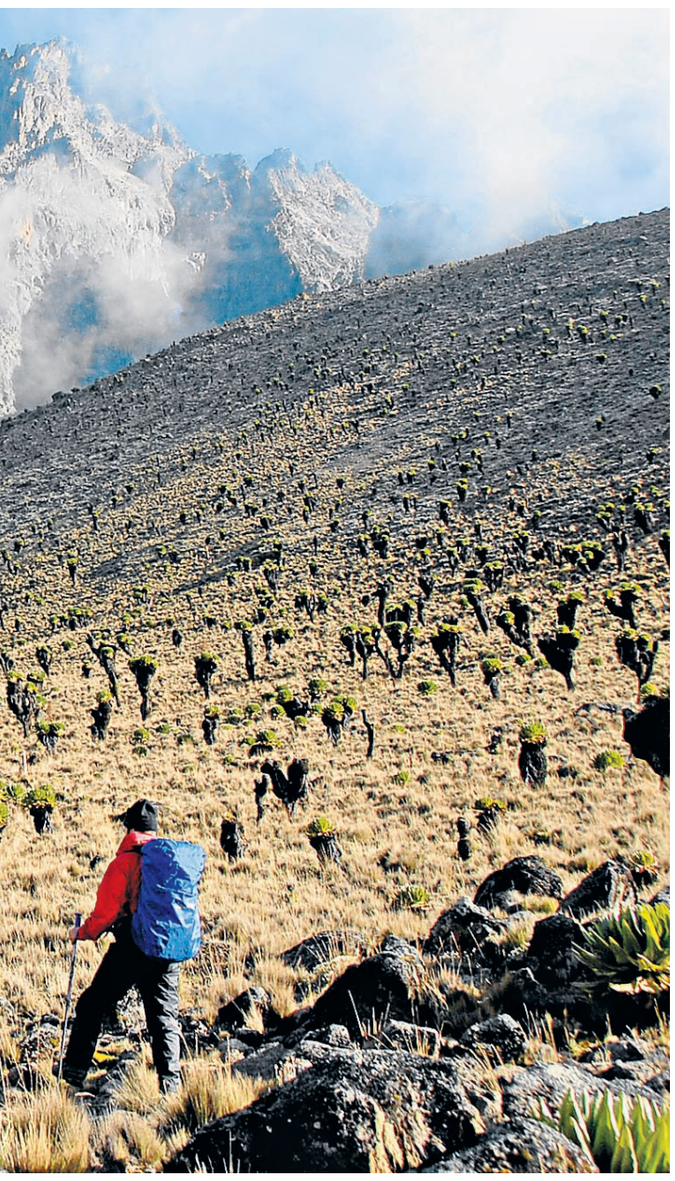
Occasionally, to clamber over some of these massive boulders we had to go on all fours. It started raining, followed by hail, then wet snow added another layer of misery. I was too soaked even to contemplate getting something to eat out of my rucksack.

By the time I struggled into Shipton's Camp I was in a state of exhaustion that gave me doubts about the next day. A few of our group had killer headaches, a symptom of altitude sickness, and one felt too sick to eat. Our last carb-loading meal was pasta and peanut soup, which was surprisingly good. No one slept much.

When we left at 2.30am with our head-torches on, the dark rather comfortably disguised our daunting task – the final three or four-hour ascent that lay ahead. There was a sliver of moon and a sky of stars. Snow crackled under our feet. To be on the safe side we kept our water inside our jackets so it didn't freeze. Then it was a slog: left, right, left, right, keeping a steady rhythm, hour after hour.

We witnessed every second of the sunrise, suddenly noticing definition in the shape of the rocks, dark turning to light and then a band of colour coating the shadows until a wave of golden sunlight stretched ahead. In the distance I saw water simmering – a small tarn – and then more and more peaks slipped into view.

relief that everyone had made it



We passed the turn for the Chogoria route as the sun started to appear and then almost raced up the few shimmering boulders to catch the sunrise. There were a couple of fixed wires and metal rungs to negotiate, and there was the Kenyan flag billowing in the wind.

It was a moment of joy and tears, and relief that everyone had made it. The view was spectacular, a huge landscape with snow-covered, sunbathed peaks piercing the sky.

The way down was tricky, but once back to camp we relished the moment and savoured our victory breakfast while rock hyraxes begged for crumbs. Then came the bad news. Our camp for the night was six hours' walk away and rain was on the horizon. What got me through was my cheerful Cath Kidston umbrella, adorned with little dogs, and my Swahili mantra: "Hakuna matata". No worries.

YOUR SAY

Have you climbed Mt Kenya? Send your comments to yoursay@telegraph.co.uk or post them on our website at telegraph.co.uk/travel

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE

Kenya Airlines (020 7993 5809; kenya-airways.com) flies to Nairobi from Heathrow from £430 return. British Airways (0844 482 2309; britishairways.com) flies to Nairobi from Heathrow from £468 return. A single-entry tourist visa bought on arrival costs £30 and is valid for three months; you can download and complete the form in advance.

PACKAGES

Exodus (0845 863 9616; exodus.co.uk) offers an eight-day ascent of Mount Kenya with full porter and guided support via the Burguret to Sirimon circuit. Accommodation includes one night's basic lodge and four nights' full-service camping, including three meals daily. The price, including return flight with Kenya Airways and all transfers, is from £1,469 per person, based on two sharing; the single supplement is from £85. Departures in 2012 leave in February, July, August, September and October.

GETTING AROUND

It's best to arrange all travel in advance and bear in mind that Nairobi's traffic is some of the worst in the world. The Ultimate Travel Company (020 7386 4646; theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk), tailor-made specialists, can arrange any transfer or transport.

ACUTE MOUNTAIN SICKNESS

How you will cope with altitude and the lack of oxygen is the unknown element when tackling high-altitude climbs. Some people are much less susceptible than others. Symptoms include headaches, nausea and vomiting, weakness, lack of appetite and shortness of breath. If not treated soon enough by descending to a lower altitude, acute mountain sickness (AMS) can be fatal.

But you can minimise the risk by pre-acclimatising before you go or take an AMS susceptibility test (£99) at The Altitude Centre (020 7193 1626; altitudecentre.com) in London. The hour-long consultation tests measure how you will cope at 3,000m and 5,000m. If you are susceptible, you can take hypoxic exercise by cycling or running on a treadmill in a pressurised chamber or you can rent a machine, which can be programmed to give you reduced oxygen to acclimatise. For more serious climbs, such as Everest, you can even rent a tent that can be sealed around your bed so you can sleep "at altitude".

WHAT TO TAKE HOME

Kikoys – printed wraps of woven cotton in wonderful colour combinations – and handicrafts such as tribal beadwork, sisal baskets and wooden carvings. Bargaining is expected but there are some fixed-price shops and look for co-operatives rather than souvenir shops.

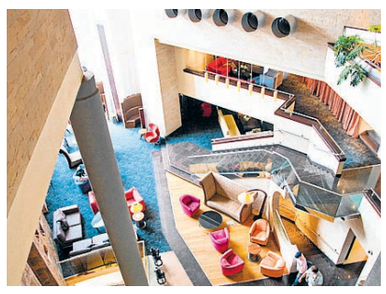
WHAT TO AVOID

- Cold and altitude quickly reduces the battery life of equipment. To avoid running out of power, buy a Powermonkey Extreme, a large, shockproof and waterproof lithium battery that works on solar power or an electrical charger (£120; powertraveller.com).
- Don't over pack. Most internal flights to the Masai Mara or coast have a single bag allowance of 15kg. Most internal airlines offer a free left-luggage service.
- Food in tents is an open invitation to the large number of rodents, sometimes something bigger. To avoid unwanted visitors, either suspend food from the tent roof or store it somewhere outside, well away from the tent.
- Use tried and tested boots to avoid blisters and take a good supply of Compeed blister plasters.
- Don't drink the water. Use bottled water, boiled water or purifier tablets.



Wild tastes: clockwise, Giraffe Manor in Karen; the pool and lobby of Tribe hotel; and Carnivore restaurant in Nairobi







THE BEST HOTELS

Aero Club of East Africa, Wilson Airport ££
Founded by pilots in 1927 (previous members include Beryl Markham) and steeped in aviation history. The polished engine of a Spitfire has pride of place in Daddy Probyn's Bar, and other memorabilia adds to the atmosphere. There are 12 rooms and you can rent one for the day for £18. There's a pool and outside terrace (00254 20 502 0888; aeroclubea.com; from £30 per person, room only).

Giraffe Manor, Karen £££
Your early morning wake up call is the gentle wicker of a giraffe as her long lashes and soft brown eyes appear at the window. A handy jar of pellets ensures a slobbery kiss, then it's off for breakfast where Helen and her fellow endangered Rothschild giraffes peruse your table as a host of warthogs ferret about outside. Rooms on the 12-acre estate are tasteful and graceful, with impeccable service and riveting tales from manager Giles. The hotel, 25 miles from Wilson airport, was the location of *White Mischief* (20 502 0888; thesafaricollection.com; from £250 per person, per night).

Tribe, Nairobi £££
This small hotel in central Nairobi comes with all mod-cons, including stylish large rooms or suites, pool, state-of-the-art spa and razor-sharp service. Décor combines tribal feel with sleek elegance (20 720000; tribe-hotel.com; doubles from £205).

DID YOU KNOW?
Due to global warming, experts predict that, within 30 years, there will be no ice left on Mount Kenya

RESTAURANTS

Zen Garden, Nairobi £
A choice of healthy fruits, salads and pasta in the Jade Tea Room or pan-Asian cuisine in a more formal setting. Lovely gardens, ideal for brunch, lunch or dinner, open daily. From £9 in the Tea Room, £15-£25 in the oriental restaurant (714 744231; zengarden.co.ke).

Talisman Restaurant, Karen ££
Located in the suburbs of Karen, approximately 25 miles from Wilson Airport in a mud bungalow with a tin roof and spacious garden. Try entrecôte or T-bone steak on a sizzler or fillet of ostrich. Varied seafood menu. Open Tues-Sun. From £12-£25 (733 761449; talismanrestaurant.com).

Carnivore, Nairobi ££
Almost a rite of passage, and despite its touristy tendencies, the "as much as you can eat menu" means you can taste a bit of everything. The choices are interesting: camel, ostrich, crocodile and any other meat that's not protected, but it also offers plenty of vegetarian options. From £15 (Langata Road; 20 605933; tamarind.co.ke).