

# Breathtaking hike to Wanale Mountain



A hiker enjoys the view atop the ridge. Below right, waterfalls on Mount Wanale. COURTESY PHOTOS

**GREAT HIKE.** Mount Wanale is a star attraction for visitors to Mbale Town. It offers a challenging climb through serene nature trails.

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Any visitor to Mbale will see it, standing tall with pride and grandeur, such an imposing beauty from a distance.

Mount Wanale is a great attraction; the ascent to its peak is exhilarating.

Located about six kilometres from Mbale Town, the ridge stands at a height of 6,864ft and can be viewed from all areas in Mbale and neighbouring districts.

Mbale Town lies beneath the ridge. On taking a closer look at the ridge, one will get a glimpse of four magnificent waterfalls pouring down from the mountaintop.

Wanale is believed to have been named after one of the

sons of Masaba, the patriarch of the Bagisu; it is thought to be the origin of Nabarwa, the Kalenjin woman who prevailed upon Masaba to get circumcised before they got married.

#### Caves and mystery

A hike through a trail at the western end of the ridge will lead one to Khaukha cave, which is the most prominent cave.

Khaukha cave has calligraphic inscriptions on the wall; mementos scribble in the cave by previous visitors. One such inscription reads, 'James Wambwa was here, remember me.'

The cave has unsaturated salt locally known as *magadi* in lumaasaba and *kisuula* in luganda or rock salt commonly eaten by animals and people.

Legend has it that Khaukha cave has an ill-fated water stream known as Mwausa, a tale supported by one of the residents.

#### Tough hike up the ridge

It is this imposing ridge that

my team and I ventured to climb at the end of September this year. On the agreed day of September 30, we assembled at the Mbale Cricket Grounds. With the majority being first time hikers, the excitement was clearly visible on their faces. This was indeed going to be as memorable as we envisioned it.

At around midday, we set off for the Mooni water tank the route where the hike began.

The first encounter proved easy under the clear blue skies. People were very excited, and some took long strides in the spur of the moment with the strong belief that it was going to be a walk over. Well, the 2,300 metre Wanale Ridge was not about to be conquered that easily.

The hike up the ridge is no easy thing as you have to climb through very steep rough rock formations, which was made

worse and harder by the rain. Some people could not help continuously falling and sitting down at stopover points to regain energy and composure. The strong ones tried to pull and carry the weak ones that had totally failed to climb.

Persistence was the only option as one could not stop and go back; the only option was to keep climbing.

In the end, people tried to hold onto the ground, trees, plantations and even crawl upwards but the ultimate goal had to be achieved, reaching the Wanale Ridge.

After three to four hours of a gruesome hike which left many panting and sweating, people could not walk anymore, some attempted to sit down along the way in order to regain composure and energy before proceeding up to the summit.

This was the clear definition of "no gain without pain".

#### Nature and simplicity

The hike took us through breathtaking nature and forest walks over water streams as the trail painstakingly wound its way through numerous homesteads with coffee and

banana plantations with barely-clothed and barefoot children among mud and wattle houses that stand proudly in the plantations.

#### Enterprising community

Community members can barely speak English let alone answer to "how are you?"

Some of the children will offer to carry bags, water bottles, foodstuffs and guide tourists in a bid to get paid at least Shs2,000 to take home to their parents to buy soap or salt.

There are no tourist stop posts. Some of the smart children with business acumen will sometimes sell bananas or pancakes to passersby as a source of income.

There are no other tourism related activities along this trail.

#### Grand finish in the rain

Midway through the hike, there was a heavy downpour and then all hell broke loose. The ground turned muddy and slippery but we persevered until we reached the summit amid all the pain.

The Wanale Ridge was the most beautiful sight to behold, standing proudly at the edge

of a cliff with a rocky formation surface so large that it can carry an entire school.

With four waterfalls flowing from each side, this ridge stretches across and covers a large portion of Bugisu land.

Some of the hikers could not help jumping into the natural "jacuzzi-like river" as a reward for conquering the Wanale Mountain, while other people ran over to the ridge in awe, it was a moment to behold, beautiful and magnificent.

Namatsyo waterfall, which is visible from the cliff drops two miles down from the mountaintop over 6,864ft, 2,092 metres down the sheer cliff rock wall onto the valley.

Once we got to the top, the photo session on the cliff lasted close to three hours. By then, the rain had paused a bit only to start again soon afterwards but rain as it did, the soggy weather did not dampen the mood.

After the rain, the hikers painfully found their way down the ridge on the now muddy trails but still made it safely down the mountain.

By the end of the hike, some people could barely walk as they were nursing severe body ache.

Jackson Opolot, a first time hiker could not hide his excitement as he confessed that the hike was thrilling and coming down from the mountain was the scariest.

The wet weather had bothered him but the climb was worthwhile.

The Wanale rendezvous was organised by Rhythm City Mbale, a networking, events and marketing hub in Mbale.

## TRAVEL

#### How to get there:

From Mbale Town, one can take a boda boda to the Mooni Water Tank. By taxi or personal car, it is a 30-minute ride. Local residents are very hospitable and can guide you up the summit.

If you book your trip through a tour operator or company, there are regular charges that you will be required to meet. If it is a group hike, then it is usually free of charge but you make a small contribution to the community wardens for the maintenance of trails, especially during the rainy season.

