

# CLIMBING RWENZORI: WHAT

By Irene Akurut

**N**othing ever really prepares a first-timer for the "mystical challenge" of the Rwenzori. You may read about it, watch documentaries and listen to stories about it, but nothing ever truly prepares you well enough.

A few weeks ago, my friends and I — all of us first-time climbers — decided that we should climb this mountain. Below, I share a few tips you should know before the adventure.

**IT HELPS TO BE PHYSICALLY FIT**  
The mountain will test your endurance in every way, with its innumerable 'high-altitude trails' as one of our guides called them.

We encountered ridges, valleys, ladders, swinging bridges, ropes, rocks and bogs — the perfect full body workout, made by nature. It helped immensely that for one year, we had deliberately engaged in a series of exercises.

We, among other things, walked from one end of the Northern Bypass to the other, walked the seven hills of Kampala, did a 20-kilometre hike in the Mabira Forest and participated in as many marathons as we could. It paid off!

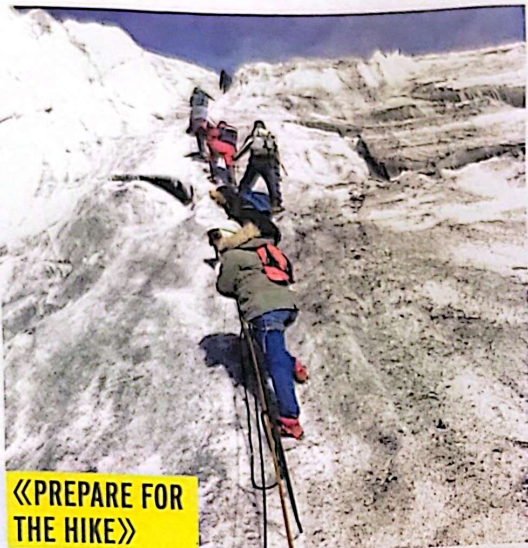
**BE READY TO TAKE THE SHOTS**  
Secondly, carry your sense of wonder and a camera with you. It is beautiful up there! Nobody can describe that

amply, so go up there and see it yourself.  
Have you ever seen the giant lobelia plant, walked along the beach of a mountain lake (yes, there are lakes up there) or seen the everlasting flowers? Do you know what a Rwenzori duker or the Rwenzori taraco bird looks like? Go up there and see it yourself!

This place is amazing. There are gardens of wild black berries tended to by nature herself, enchanted forests covered in old man's beard, stretches of virgin bamboo woodlands, picturesque peaks reaching out to the sky, gurgling streams and gushing rivers carrying some of the coldest and purest water, happy monkeys playing chase in the trees and colourful chameleons camouflaging among the plants. God's Garden is also up there (Okay, we just dubbed a particularly stunning valley that). But, seriously, you need to go see it yourself.

**THE GUIDES**  
A generally professional crew from Rwenzori Mountaineering Services were very keen to preserve the pristine beauty of the mountain, picking up polythene wrappers and empty mineral water bottles left behind by careless climbers. I implore you, too; when you finally go to see the everlasting flower, do not litter the trails. Rubbish bins are available in designated stopover points.

**MOVE AT YOUR OWN PACE**  
Beware of the temptation



«PREPARE FOR THE HIKE»

The writer and her friends ascending the Margherita glacier

to move at the speed of the fastest member in your group. Slow down! It is not a sprint; it is a hike. You are likely to lose your breath quicker at fast speeds. At high altitudes, this is not desirable, as it may

trigger altitude/mountain sickness.  
**ALTITUDE SICKNESS IS REAL**  
It occurs when your body fails to adequately adjust to the lower air pressure

and lower oxygen levels at high altitudes. I am reliably informed that the safest remedy to this is descending to lower altitudes.  
Local folklore, however, has it that altitude sickness

is a punishment from the mountain deities to those who in some way been ill-mannered. So, you may want to examine your conscience and repent any evil ways before you set out!

**YOU NEED SEASONED OPERATORS**  
Our tour operator, Jonathan Baguma of Uboru Adventures Ltd (bless him), proved to be the excursion. Our shopping lists, courtesy of him, read (Are we going mining?), winter clothes, snow goggles, sleeping bag, hiking boots, gumboots and walking shoes.

The personally took us shopping to make sure we got the right stuff, patiently procured our hiking gear and worked with every member of the team to make sure that all the essentials for the journey were obtained in good time.

**IT IS EXTREMELY COLD**  
Our school teachers were correct: the higher you go, the cooler it becomes. The night before we ascended the summit, the sub-zero temperatures got me thinking: "Maybe Antarctica had moved to the equator."

Be warned that such extreme weather conditions tend to bring on runny noses, dry flaky skin and frostbite. Pack some hankies/tissues and enough moisturisers. Good old petroleum jelly proved to be particularly good.

**THERE'S REAL SNOW AT THE TOP**  
So, eliminate the hassle of getting a visa to 'outside countries' and just catch the first bus to Kasese district.

# NOBODY TELLS YOU

Sadly, due to global warming, the glaciers are fast melting. We were informed by our chief guide, Joseph Bahuku, that in the past, climbers encountered snow on day two of their ascent, now they only do so on day five.

**WALKING ON GLACIERS IS A FEEL**  
In between perfecting your gait on crampons, balancing on an ice axe, looking out for crevasses on the snow and following your leader on the rope; it is tempting to ask for a helicopter down the mountain, as some colleagues did. Unfortunately, there is none and, maybe, for a reason because this experience is meant to be unforgettable.

**RAIN**  
Rain during a hike cannot be a good thing. First, it

## WELFARE

What will you eat, where will you sleep? Where do you go to answer nature's call? Do you take your stuff around? One question at a time. What will you eat? Wild black berries, of course. After all, they are plentiful. Bad idea! Keep your hands to yourself.

According to "Legends" makes the terrain slippery; secondly, it quickly lowers temperatures, and thirdly, it causes darkness to fall faster. And I was informed that depending on the altitude where you are on the mountains, rain could very easily turn into sleet.

**ACCOMMODATION**  
An important highlight of each day was arriving at the day's destination — a hut in which to spend the night, more accurately described

of the Rwenzoris" as told by our local guides, eating wild black berries induces rain. Our guides swore it was true and none of us had the courage to put it to a test.

Talked? Think of pit latrines way up the mountain! Our honest view is that much improvement is required on that front.

**ENTERTAINMENT**  
It is a good idea to carry some form of entertainment with you, to pass the long candle-lit evenings — a book, a board game, music, a good conversation, anything.

provided it does not require Internet connection or a direct power link.

**BATHING**  
Should you carry a bathing sponge? By all means, do, although after a few baths in an open air structure in the cold, you may want to rethink the whole bathing idea. Hot water is, however, available on request.

**THE PORTERS**  
We could not stop to marvel at the porters who moved our stuff from one hut to the other — sturdy men, seemingly with the energy of a 1,000 horses and the sure-footedness of mountain goats. They never seemed to tire as they sprinted across the mountains with apparent ease. Respect to them; they made the excursion a whole lot easier.

At the end of six days, I was sure of this: an equivalent experience cannot be obtained elsewhere. Don't believe me? First go up, see for yourself and then dispute me.



The team on the Margherita peak

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