There are two places in the world that have made my jaw drop. The first was on the top of a Greenland peak gazing at icebergs floating motionless in a frozen sea – and the other was from the top of Mount Stanley in the Rwenzori Mountains of Uganda.

Uganda used to be called the ‘Pearl of Africa’, but after independence in 1962 its shine was tarnished by decades of civil war and evil dictators such as Idi Amin. The Rwenzoris, covering a thousand square kilometres on the border with Congo, were closed for most of the 70s and until the end of the civil war in 1986. They were again closed between 1997 and 2001 when rebel forces from the Congo hid in the mountains. But with the fighting over, the Rwenzoris are emerging as one of the most beautiful trekking and mountaineering destinations in the world.

NILE SOURCE

Tales of snowy mountains forming the source of the Nile river go as far back as the time of the Ancient Greeks and Aristotle. They were called the ‘Mountains of the Moon’ by the Hellenic astronomer Ptolemy who predicted that an undiscovered mountain range was the source of the Nile river – and he was uncannily correct. In 1888 the existence of these mountains was brought to the attention of Europeans by the famous Welsh explorer, Henry Morton Stanley, who noticed what he thought was a cloud and later realised it was the slopes of a snow-covered mountain.

Explorers attempted to reach the peaks, but were always turned back from the highest summits by the thick vegetation, bad weather, disease, or lack of time. In 1889, G. W. Stairs reached 3000m on Mt. Emin and in 1891 Emir Pasha and Franz Stulman found that it was a range of mountains and not a lone peak. Scott Elliot came a few years later and explored the Mubuku and Bujuku Valleys. The glaciers were reached in 1900 by J. Moore and later the Stanley Plateau was reached by J. David. In June 1906, the Duke of Abruzzi climbed the six central glaciated massifs of the range. Noel Humphries of Mt. Everest fame made seven trips into the mountains around 1930 and Shipton and Tilman climbed a number of new routes in 1932. In typical ‘conqueror’ fashion, many of the mountain passes and the third, fourth and fifth highest mountains in Africa – Mount Stanley (5109m), Mount Speke (4890m) and Mount Baker (4843m) – are named as a testament to the early British explorers.

The local Bakonjo tribe do however have their own names for the three main peaks: Kiyanja, Duwoni and Ingomwimbi. They consider the peaks as the centre of the Bakonjo universe and the dwelling of a spirit god – Kitasamba – whose frozen sperm (the snow) fertilizes the land. Kitasamba means the ‘great one who does not climb, because there is no bigger one to climb to’.

Alun Richardson visits a mysterious range of mountains on the borders of Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo known as the ‘Mountains of the Moon’.

WORDS AND PICTURES: ALUN RICHARDSON

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Rwenzori Mountains

MOON WALKING

NINE SOURCE

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attribute the dwindling snow in the Rwenzoris to the lack of traditional customs upsetting their god. Over the last century the glaciers have reduced by 84% and if the trend continues, the glaciers will disappear within 20 years.

**MACHETE COUNTRY**

Travelling by road in Uganda is a risky business, as we soon found out. Monkeys, maize fields, banana trees, tea and coffee plantations passed by in a blur as the driver of our small bus bounced us along the rough pot-holed road towards the small farming community of Nyakalengija and the entrance to the National Park. As we entered the village, beautiful ebony faces of children peered inquisitively over fences, around buildings and from behind their mother’s skirts. That night, rain bounced noisily off the tin roof of the bunkhouse, but the prospect of the trek to the mountains was exciting and lifted my morning tiredness. We received a briefing from the Rwenzori Mountaineering Services (who have the sole guiding concession) and the Uganda Wildlife Authority. The seven-day central circuit trail around Mount Baker is the main trek and reaches 4372m at Scott Elliot Pass. It is also the access route for those wanting to climb the three main peaks.

Our small team of porters had gathered and we busied ourselves dividing our equipment into regulation 25kg loads. Using humans to carry equipment makes me feel uncomfortable, especially in Africa, where the porters are subsistence farmers or students. They don’t have the same traditions as Nepalese porters for whom carrying loads is a way of life from an early age. But the company of locals does provide a broader experience, as well as providing vital income for the locals. The destiny of many places like the Rwenzoris relies strongly on the support of the local peoples and hiring porters and guides is an important means of protecting these places.

As we left the busy comings and goings of Nyakalengija and headed into the rainforest, we passed multi-coloured coffee beans drying on mats and banana trees with their long, floppy leaves forlornly hanging down. It quickly became obvious that travelling anywhere off the track would have been painfully slow, if not impossible, without a machete. My admiration grew for the locals who had hacked a trail for miles into the heart of the forest in search of food and the explorers who had searched for the fabled mountains; an incredible feat. It is also a testament to the Ugandans that the park has not really changed since the first expedition.

**THE RWENZORIS**

Useful info on the Rwenzoris

- **NAMES**
  The name Rwenzori comes from the local name Rwenjura and the mountains have also been known as the Rwenzoris (until 1980) and also the Mountains of the Moon.

- **LOCATION**
  The mountain range is situated on the borders of Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Two national parks lie within the range – the Rwenzori Mountains National Park and the Virunga National Park.

- **ELEVATION**
  The highest peaks of the Rwenzori Mountains are permanently snow-capped, and the highest peak of the range, Margherita Peak on Mount Stanley (5109m) is the third highest peak in Africa, after Kilimanjaro and Mt Kenya.

- **FIRST ASCENT**
  Following expeditions by Henry Morton Stanley (1889) and John Edward Sharrock Moore (1900), the Duke of Abruzzi was the first to summit Mountain Stanley and its neighbours in 1906.
Rwenzori Mountains

“It quickly became obvious that travelling anywhere off the track would have been painfully slow, if not impossible, without a machete”

explorers; this is even more impressive when one considers that rebels had hidden here between 1996 and 2001, preventing any conservation work taking place.

The park is home to elephants, but even though few people visit it (according to the Uganda Wildlife Authority, only 416 people visited for more than one day in 2005), meeting larger animals such as an elephant is still unlikely. The lack of large animals is however, easily compensated for by the Rwenzori touracos, handsome francolins and olive pigeons that dart manically among the assorted plant life in flashes of yellow and blue. The trail dips and weaves across the small Mahoma River and gains height steadily through thinning air. Elephant grass as tall as a human gradually gives way to thick mountain forest reminiscent of Jurassic Park. Tripping over tree roots is a real hazard as you look upwards to catch a glimpse of the Blue Corobis monkeys leaping from branch to branch and to listen to the distant call of shy chimpanzees.

A park ranger accompanied us with an AK47 rifle slung over his shoulder to protect us from elephants, he told us, even though the nearest one was 150km away. The gun however told a story steeped in Uganda’s tragic history, and reminded me of difficult it is to get a grasp on a new country and its people in a short time.

After an easy four hours with a final long ascent we reached the Nyabitaba huts (2650m), set on a ridge above the confluence of the Bujuku and Mubuku rivers. Circling the huts are tall bamboo mingled with the trees like a collection of hunting spears. It was a calm, humid night, with the silence disturbed only by the one species that should be shot at birth, ‘snorers’. The following day the trail dropped sharply to the Kurt Shafer Bridge and ascended steeply to more than 3000m. The vegetation changed and giant heather, six metres tall, groundsel and the exotic giant lobelia took over. Similar types of plants can be found on Mt. Elgon, Kilimanjaro, Kenya and other high points in central Africa, but nowhere in concentrations so luxurient and abundant as here. After six hours we reached the John Matte Hut (3414m), named after the founding president of the Mountain Club of Uganda. It has a fine view down the valley to the Portal Peaks and at the head of the valley to Mount Speke, Mount Baker and the Stanley...
Another fabulous day of travel took us across the (fortunately) dry Lower Bigo Bog, a steep shoulder and over the Bujuka river to gain the Upper Bigo Bog. Progress in the bogs is via slippery and decaying boardwalks or jumping between sedge tussocks and wading through foot-deep (or more!) bog. A steep ascent through tree heather and giant groundsel led to the level upper corrie and the beautiful Bujuku Lake. Once past this an easy trail leads to a clearing and the Bujuka hut. A total of four to five hours with stops. The hut is nestled in a broad valley created by the bulk of Mount Stanley to the south west and Mount Speke to the north east – we were now in position to attempt Africa’s fourth highest mountain, Mt. Speke, named in memory of John Hanning Speke who explored central Africa with Sir Richard Burton in the 1850’s. We got up in the dark and just as the sun was hitting the tops of the giant lobelia, we reached the Stuhlman pass at 4160m and, turning right, gained the lower slopes of Mount Speke. Like most of the Rwenzori it is a long ridge with a number of summits including Johnson (4834m), Vittorio Emanuele (4890m) and Ensonga (4865m). Easy scrambling, with one short section requiring a rope, and an avoidable final small glacier/snowfield, led to the Vittorio Emanuelle summit. A carpet of trees and impenetrable jungle spread out as far as the eye could see.

“From the top I could see the curvature of the earth floating above the jungle of the Democratic Republic of Congo and, for the second time in my life, I stared with my mouth wide open.”
and the mass of Mount Stanley with its spectacular twin tops, Alexander and Margarita, stood majestically across the valley.

After a refreshing night in a tent away from the snorers, we skirted the head of the corrie to the Elena hut. We crossed the Scott Elliot pass and dropped down to the Kitanja hut on the shores of Lake Kitandara. We passed through giant heather and small trees covered in scraggy green and white beards of moss and lichen. Birds flitted from tree to tree, monkeys called from the canopy and with the euphoria of having stood on Africa’s third highest mountain it was one of the most beautiful mountain huts in the world.

The following day I sat round a blazing fire with some of the porters trying to discover more about their lives. At first they were suspicious of me and wondered why I was asking questions about their lives, but after sharing their lunch of ‘wallpaper paste’ and the foot of the mountains. Each of these takes the better stages of maturity - from small pot plants to

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REAL ADVENTURE

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- The best access is from Uganda, but you can also enter from Congo.
- As of April 2003, however, Virunga National Park is closed for tourism.
- Public transportation from Kampala to the Ruwenzori, although cheap, is rather difficult to take advantage of. From Kampala, there is a major route to the south through the beautiful town of Fort Portal, then south to Bwindi, and a southern route through Kasese that crosses the equator twice. Each of these takes a part of a day to reach the huts above the foot of the mountains.

- The circular trail finally descends into the amazing kabamba valley and after about six hours reaches the Guy Fosman hut (3450m), with confusious forest and giant Lobelia, at all stages of maturity - from small pot plants to 4m tall monsters flank a tiny river that flowed lazily down from the peaks surrounding it. The air was hot, so I sat and watched a scarlet-tufted malachite sunbird, with its long thin tail and matching beak, feed on the Lobelia’s myriad of flowers. Rest your knees and sleep well before the arduous final day because the path is criss-crossed by tree roots and the final descent to Nyakalengija is down steep rocky gullies.

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THE RWENZORIS

THE KNOWLEDGE

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- HOW HARD
- The central trek is not technical, but the sections of bog can be a bit demoralising and if you are unlucky you may see very little of the peaks. To climb Speke and Baker requires a sense of balance and some scrambling skills. Mount Stanley will require experience of glacier crossing and some scrambling techniques and a head for heights on the summit scramble.

- WHERE TO STAY
- There is no specific hotel, but some basic huts and cabins are available. You can book through a local or European trekking organiser or you can book directly with the guides. All you need to do is walk to UWA headquarters in Kasese. Trekking starting point in Nyakalengija and book a day earlier with the Ruwenzori Mountain Huts: The best access is from Uganda, but you can also enter from Congo. As of April 2003, however, Virunga National Park is closed for tourism. Public transportation from Kampala to the Ruwenzori, although cheap, is rather difficult to take advantage of. From Kampala, there is a major route to the south through the beautiful town of Fort Portal, then south to Bwindi, and a southern route through Kasese that crosses the equator twice. Each of these takes a part of a day to reach the huts above the foot of the mountains.

- WHEN TO GO
- The dry season is December - February and June-August. It can still rain, but the wind is usually stronger, blowing the clouds away and giving better views. The trip can be done in 10 days, but two weeks is better.

- ACCESS AND COST
- A climbing/trekking permit is necessary and a guide is mandatory. This can be organised through a local or European trekking organiser or you can book directly with the guides. All you need to do is walk to UWA headquarters in Kasese. Trekking starting point in Nyakalengija and book a day earlier with the Ruwenzori Mountain Huts: The best access is from Uganda, but you can also enter from Congo. As of April 2003, however, Virunga National Park is closed for tourism. Public transportation from Kampala to the Ruwenzori, although cheap, is rather difficult to take advantage of. From Kampala, there is a major route to the south through the beautiful town of Fort Portal, then south to Bwindi, and a southern route through Kasese that crosses the equator twice. Each of these takes a part of a day to reach the huts above the foot of the mountains.

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Rwenzori Mountains

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