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ADVENTURE

Alice Thomson: How I bonded with my family on a hike up Mount Kenya

When the columnist's son suggested a climb up Africa's second-highest mountain, it sounded like an adventure. But they got much more than they bargained for ...



Alice Thomson (bottom right) and her family at the top of Mount Kenya

[Alice Thomson](#)

Wednesday April 26 2023, 12.01am, The Times

Let's climb a mountain." It sounded so relaxed when my eldest son casually suggested it for our annual family holiday. Just a small one, nothing too challenging, no crampons or anything. I'm thinking *The Sound of Music* but somewhere hot. Why not Mount Kilimanjaro? It's in Africa, it must be sunny, so there'll be just a smattering of snow at the top. It's the one you see in *The Lion King*, he said, to encourage us.

To my amazement everyone agreed. Then my colleague Matthew Parris intervened. Kilimanjaro, he explained, was far too commercial and crowded, we'd be queueing all night to get to the summit. Mount Kenya was more beautiful, rugged and remote. The second highest mountain in Africa was only 600m lower than Kilimanjaro, at 5,200m; there were three peaks we could attempt, but Point Lenana was the easiest for naive novices like us.

Straddling the Equator, this ancient extinct volcano is so large, I discovered, it creates its own microclimate. In 1943 three Italian prisoners of war managed to escape their nearby camp to climb to the top. The book, *No Picnic on Mount Kenya*, is a minor masterpiece, as one of the trio recounts their laborious, food-obsessed mission to scale the summit and plant their flag. If they could achieve it in the middle of a war, it surely couldn't be that challenging.



None of us stopped to think whether we liked sharing tiny tents

My 95-year-old aunt added her advice. A keen mountaineer, she had climbed Mount Kenya in the 1950s. Easy for four teenagers, she said — she had taken her knitting to alleviate boredom. So Matthew put us in touch with Lucy Booth, who runs Kenya

Treks. Then the pandemic struck.

Two years later and even less fit, two of us still recovering from Covid, we resurrected the idea. Friends had tried but hadn't made it, overcome by altitude sickness. They said the landscape was stunning, but we should take it slowly and not go in the summer, when it might rain. But it was the August school holidays or never and everyone wanted to escape Britain even if it meant heading into a cloud.

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None of us stopped to think whether we liked climbing mountains. Or sharing tiny tents. And we were even vaguer about the kit. The children wandered off to supplement their own, based either on colour or comfort, ignoring Lucy's advice to buy warm, waterproof gear. We packed quantities of shorts and T-shirts but no hats, gloves or Gore-Tex trousers, convinced that if it was sunny on the Equator it must be warm: our first mistake.

Our guide John Karumba met us at Soames Hotel near Nanyuki, 100 miles northeast of Nairobi. He and his team looked bemused by our motley attire but not yet alarmed. When they handed us hot-water bottles I became mildly concerned. But we set off, rucksacks thrown in the back of a truck, with a team that was going to carry our tents and food. Our route would be the rarely ascended Chogoria path up the eastern side of the

mountain, which would take longer but allow us to acclimatise.



Mount Kenya's microclimate makes it home to some of the strangest flora on the planet

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After a couple of hours of mango fields and flame trees, the trucks suddenly veered off the main road into the jungle and immediately became stuck going up a muddy track. We started

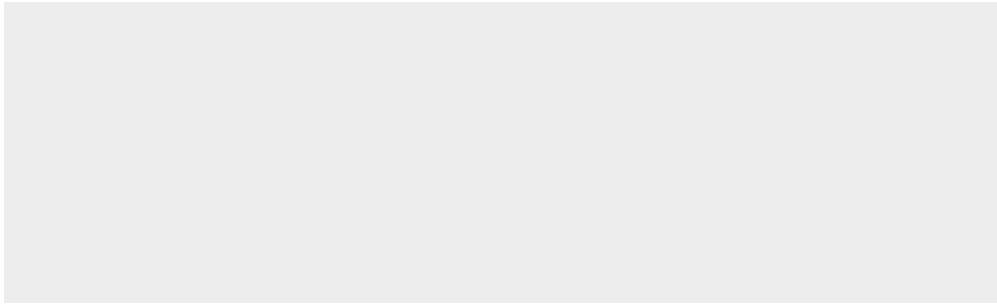
to skid and slip down ominously close to a crevasse — everyone jumped out to push in their clean walking boots or favourite soon-to-be trashed trainers.

Finally we were in the Mount Kenya National Park, but it was so misty we wouldn't have seen any animals unless they were right in front of the windscreen. It was dark and drizzling when our base camp suddenly materialised out of a bamboo forest. The guides lit a fire and brought avocados to smash on toast; we could have been back in London, except that even at the bottom of the mountain we needed to wear all our clothes in the sleeping bags.

The next morning we awoke to the sound of rain as monkeys scampered over the tent roof. We set off up the hill on foot, our planning failures already the subject, for some family members, of a running joke that kept going for hours, even despite altitude-related breathlessness. But eventually the sun came out and we began scrambling down the side of a spectacular 30m waterfall into a hidden valley. Surrounded by giant heather and everlasting flowers with their scrambled-egg bloom, it felt like a prehistoric Scotland. We arrived hot and sweaty at the vast Lake Ellis, its still turquoise waters circled by huge cabbages, and were soon huddled round the roaring flames, counting the stars, feeling like pros.

The next day's hike under a deep blue sky soon became strenuous, and after climbing 6m we were all wishing we'd taken the advice on fitness a little more seriously. The guides pointed out the nearby peak where Prince William had

romanced Kate Middleton, and we wondered how he'd had the energy.



We'd had no phone reception for three days, and Britain now seemed on another planet. One son said he already knew he preferred sea level. The guides were all marathon runners, the women as fast as the men; they sprinted along, thoughtfully pausing to offer snacks and water when we were wilting (pretty much the whole time).

We still hadn't seen any other climbers and after a rapid afternoon descent found ourselves inside the volcano that was to be our base camp. Lake Michaelson glinted before us like an infinity pool at the crater's edge. It was astonishingly beautiful and empty, except for the marmot-like hyrax sunbathing on the rocks with us. We spent the next day fishing for lunch, playing cards, swimming and reading, and the next two nights having vivid, altitude-induced dreams.

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In the photographs we look feral, but we felt calm, cocooned on

our own. The guides, using string and baited hooks, caught dozens of trout. My husband and youngest son, who had carried up their fly-fishing rods, were less successful. We supposed William had had similar luck; in the guestbook of the mountain hut where he and Kate apparently became engaged, she wrote “sadly no fish to be found”.

The next morning John, our guide, woke us at 3am — today we would reach the summit. I broke the ice on the tea I’d left outside by mistake and we layered up with borrowed gloves and bobble hats. All of us wore head torches as we began the ascent. I was so light-headed in the rapidly thinning air, I thought I was going to faint and disappear into the darkness.





Mantled Guereza in Mount Kenya National Park

ALAMY

Mount Kenya's microclimate makes it home to some of the strangest flora on the planet — we finally arrived at a lunar landscape covered in truffid-like trees. For the first time in four days we spotted another group, a procession of lights wending its way up to the summit, four hours ahead.

The kind guides asked if we'd like to take a shortcut around the summit. But no one wanted to admit defeat. My husband quietly reminded me he suffers from vertigo. Slightly too late — since he'd taken on the role of expedition leader, he couldn't back down now. But he couldn't look up either.

Then suddenly we were at the top, sprawled out on our own, lying in the sun, looking across the cloudless continent of Africa to Kilimanjaro. We ate a celebratory ginger biscuit. It felt like the opening scene of *The Lion King* but also raw and extraordinary being on the top of the world.

We descended by the steeper, faster Sirimon route. The scrabble down over volcanic gravel was treacherous. At times it felt more like skiing. Shattered, we skidded into Shipton's Camp on the west side, where our celebration meal consisted of samosas and beans while we fantasised about our favourite foods, and followed the river down another stunning valley to find the perfect late-evening camping spot.

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There was frost on the ground again when we woke. With only another five hours to walk, we were almost nostalgic now, except we needed a change of clothes. The cook generously volunteered to create a late last lunch once we'd made our way back to the Old Moses Camp near the entrance to the park and were hugging each other goodbye. We politely said we were fine, that despite the exciting prospect of more lentils, we might order from the menu back at the hotel in Nanyuki. After five nights of camping and no washing, we were given a table outside, well away from the other guests. We each ordered two courses and two puddings, then felt overwhelmed by all the food and fell asleep before we'd opened a bottle of wine to celebrate.

We'd done it, and none of us will ever forget it. But never again. Or perhaps a flatter slope, a wider pinnacle or a beach included next time. I realised that we hadn't had an argument in a week — everyone was too focused on reaching the summit. My daughter summed it up: there's so much advice about conquering mental mountains but sometimes it's more satisfying to climb a physical one.

Alice Thomson travelled independently. Seven nights' full board, five camping and two in the Soames Hotel, from £1,600pp, including transfers, guides and park fees (kenyatreks.com). Fly to Nairobi

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