

# Climbing Mount Kenya

*16<sup>th</sup> August – 15<sup>th</sup> September 2016*

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# 1 OBJECTIVES

The main objective is to safely summit Africa's second highest peak, Mount Kenya becoming the first Imperial College expedition to Kenya. We aim to reach the summit via the North face standard route. We have chosen this mountain for its excellent location and amazing climbing. The Mount Kenya National Park is said to be one of the most beautiful places to visit in Kenya. Although Mount Kenya has been extensively explored there are still many areas that have been overlooked by both local and international climbers. Our secondary aims are to search for new route potential both within the National Park and in the surrounding regions.

## Main Objectives

- To summit Batian, the highest peak of Mount Kenya (5199m).
- To meet local people and experience a new and diverse culture.
- To return safely and in one piece.

## Secondary Objectives

- To search for potentially new routes within the Mount Kenya National Park.
- To explore the lesser known rock exposures throughout Central Kenya.
- To experience the diverse array of climbing in Kenya, from established sport routes to unclimbed multipitch.
- To document the expedition with photography and Gopro footage





## 2 THE TEAM

We are two 21 year old undergraduate students with a shared passion for the outdoors. We have been close friends for 5 years, climbing regularly together both indoors and outdoors since our first encounter. Both of us are accustomed to each other's company and climbing ability and have been tested in some of Britain's most extreme conditions including self-supported wild camping at 800m on Scafell Pike in  $-13^{\circ}\text{C}$  excluding wind chill.

### Noah Smith - Leader

3rd year Geology Msci – Imperial College London

- My main interests are climbing, snowboarding, mountain biking, kayaking and hiking.
- I started climbing 6 years ago and started trad climbing 4 years ago leading grades up to E1 and seconding up to E3.
- I have undertaken climbing, cycling and back packing expeditions throughout the UK in which I acted as the leader
  - I took part in the 5 week Imperial College Cycling Mongolia expedition
  - weeks winter mountaineering in Scotland up to grade II Scottish winter and 1 week winter mountaineering in Tromso, Norway
- I have many general outdoor skills gained through Scouting including the Queens Scout Award.
  - Field work First Aid
  - Instructed climbing at Chill Factore

- 6th place in the 2014 OMM
- 2.5 years white water kayaking including river leading up to grade 3 and minor rescues.
- Equipment officer (2014-15) for Imperial College Outdoor Club
- 5 week mapping project in the French Alps
- Completed a Conville Alpine training course and white water safety and Rescue course.

## Philip Skurok - Treasurer

2<sup>nd</sup> Year undergraduate Biochemistry - The University of Manchester

- My main interest is rock climbing, having climbed for 6 years.
- I have worked at Manchester Climbing Centre for 2 and a half years.
- I have done multiple multiday trips to Wales and the Lake District which involved hiking, climbing and wild camping.
- I undertook a 10-day camping and climbing trip to Llanberis with Noah in the summer of 2014.
- I am an accomplished climber having climbed multiple E3 traditional routes, 7b+ sport routes and bouldered up to V8.
- I've climbing at crags all over the world including Morocco, Greece, France and Thailand.
- I travelled for 7 weeks through South East Asia in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia and hope to travel to more countries with cultures different from my own.
- I am very keen to keep fit and in September 2015 I completed a sprint triathlon after months of intensive training.
- I have acquired many general outdoor skills and have a wide breadth of rock climbing experience and techniques developed through personal use and my job.



### 3 COUNTRY PROFILE

The republic of Kenya covers an area of 581,309 km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of approximately 45 million. Kenya shares borders with Uganda, South Sudan, Tunisia, Ethiopia, Somalia and the Indian Ocean.

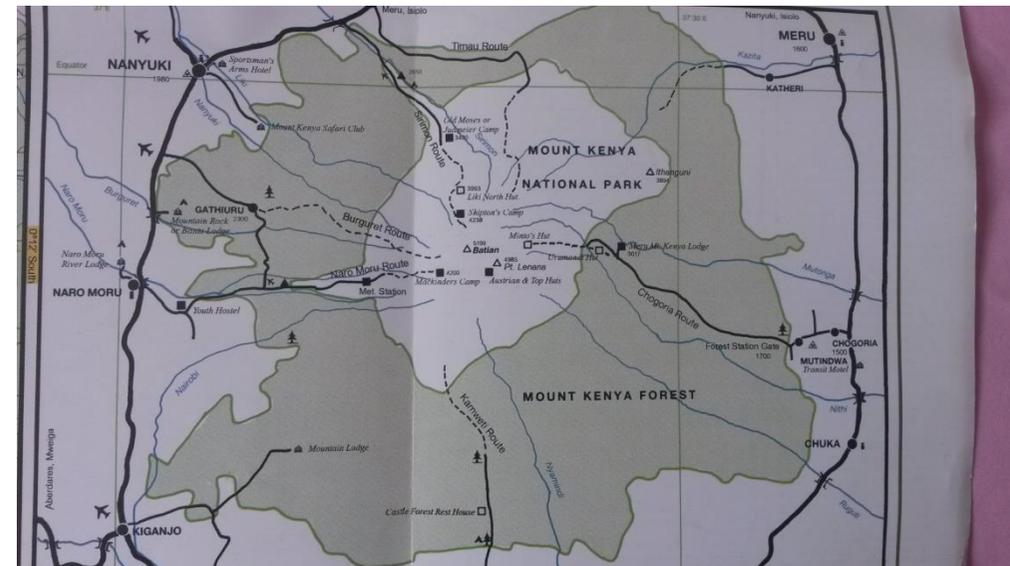
Kenya is a very diverse country with European and Asian influences throughout. The stereotypical dress of Kenya is that of the colourful Maasai people which actually accounts for a very small proportion of the population. There are 42 ethnic communities in Kenya each with their own traditional practices and symbols unique to them. The dominant languages are Swahili and English and the dominant religion is Christianity

#### 3.1. Nairobi

Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, is a large modern African city with a population of 2 million. The city is for the most part stable and safe during the day. It is advised against going out at night and never alone. Gov.uk advises against visiting the Eastleigh area in the North East of the city.

#### 3.2. Mount Kenya

Mount Kenya, located in the centre of Mount Kenya National Park is the second highest mountain in Africa after Kilimanjaro. Like Kilimanjaro Mount Kenya is of volcanic origin creating brilliant coarse grained igneous rock ideal for climbing. Unlike Kilimanjaro which is summited thousands of times per year Mount Kenya is only summited by on average 40 people per year. In comparison Mount Everest was successfully climbed by 658 people in 2013.



### 3.3. Wages and Tips

10-15% of the meal is a standard tip and it is recommended to verge towards overtipping. Wages being so low and tipping becoming an increasing means of essential income to locals. Guides, porters, guards also need tipping for their help and advice. Adventure peaks recommends £120 total tips for their 2 week expedition to Mount Kenya which is heavily dependent on local guides and porters.

### 3.4. Climate and Weather

Climate in Kenya is heavily dependent on altitude. At low altitudes such as the Eastern coast there is tropical climate with year round rainfall and dense forests. At higher altitude there is an arid – semi arid climate with less foliage. Areas of very high relief such as Mount Kenya influence their own climate responsible for the forested regions surrounding the mountain. There are two rainy seasons in Kenya; the long rains between March and June and the short rains between mid-October and December.

On the foot slopes of Mount Kenya temperature will be around 20°C but on the summit temperatures will be below freezing. Summer in the northern hemisphere freezes the southern face of the mountain whilst melting the northern faces. Thus from July to September the northern routes are in condition whilst the southern routes are in winter conditions.

## 4 EXPEDITION DIARY

### 4.1. Arrival

18<sup>TH</sup> – 20<sup>TH</sup> AUGUST

After a long day of travelling we arrived in Nairobi very late on the 18<sup>th</sup>. We took a taxi straight to the hostel where we immediately settled down for the night. We spent 3 nights in Nairobi, giving us plenty of time to buy food, take out Kenyan shilling, explore the city and organise transport and a Sherpa for the first stage of our expedition to Mount Kenya National Park.

### 4.2. Mount Kenya

21<sup>ST</sup> AUGUST

Finally we were on our way to Mount Kenya. We managed to share transport with an American and his friend from Gabon who were on their way to climb Point Lenana via the Sirimon route with a guide. Due to traffic and an excursion back to Nairobi after our travel companions left some belongings at the hostel we were forced to spend a night in Nanyuki, the largest town on the outskirts of Mount Kenya National Park. From the hostel balcony we could see the silhouette of Mount Kenya stretching up into menacingly dark cloud. It wasn't until almost 8pm that the summit emerged from the cloud.

22<sup>ND</sup> AUGUST

Early in the morning we were introduced to our porter then set off in a Toyota minivan to the Sirimon trail head. We had some difficulty trying to fill up our fuel bottles for the stove but were able to explain why we needed the petrol. The first days walk was a beautiful trek through the rainforest perimeter that surrounds Mount Kenya's base. The morning weather was an immaculate blue sky without a cloud insight. As we reached the upper edge of the rainforest we were treated with our first taste of the rains we had witnessed the previous day. The torrential rain continued from 1.30pm well into the evening until at last we could see the silhouette of the summit against the starlit sky. We shared the camp with a Kenyan guide, Patrick and his client. Patrick was incredibly friendly and helped us plan our route and shared valuable experiences of the climb.



23<sup>RD</sup> AUGUST

After a quick dehydrated breakfast we set off on what appeared to be another beautiful day with not a cloud in the sky. However, by 10.30am the heavens opened up yet again. The rain was followed by a thick mist and the biggest hail stones I have ever seen. After a gruelling day we arrived at Shipton's camp where we took shelter until the weather was clear enough to set up our tent. That night we were treated to an exceptional sunset behind the summit of Mount Kenya. The fresh snow on the barren cliff faces gave a Himalayan feel. By this point we were starting to realise the trend in the weather pattern: Rain during the day with clear evenings through to the early morning. The clear skies at night meant that temperatures went as low as -10 to -15C which made for pretty uncomfortably nights.



## 24<sup>TH</sup> AUGUST

We took a rest day at Shipton's campsite where we discussed our plans for the summit attempt and compared our options. The general itinerary for summiting Mount Kenya involves setting off from Shipton's at roughly 4am from which the ascent and descent should take 12-15 hours. From observing the weather pattern we decided the only way we could reach the summit would be to climb through the night and reach the amphitheatre before sunrise. We would make camp at Kami tarn almost 300m higher than Shipton's camp. From here we could enjoy an early night and an even earlier start at 1am. Our plan seemed as solid as it could be until the 5 hours of heavy snow obliterated any summit attempt the following day. Miserable and bored we strolled over to Shipton's hut to await the return of Patrick, Peter (his fellow guide) and their client whom had made an attempt for the summit that day. Around 5pm three shivering climbers walked into the camp. The comments on the route from both guides were the icing on our cake of disappointment.



Peter, "I have never seen the route in worse condition, I feel lucky to be back at camp."

The North face of the mountain was covered in ice and the melting snow was lubricating loose boulders and channelling them into the gully below the amphitheatre. Were we to set off at 1am or earlier we would climb in a dangerous gully full of loose blocks and were we to set off later we would be caught in the inevitable daily storm without cover. Had we taken winter gear with the intention of a bivi on the mountain, I have no doubt we would have achieved our goal. But as it was, we were prepared for the rock route that all research of the route had led us to believe with only emergency bivi equipment.



25<sup>TH</sup> AUGUST

Another beautiful morning sun uncovered the still snow covered mountain. The bad weather set in earlier than the previous day following the now predictable trend. Conscious that every day waiting was costing us \$60pp we decided to call it. Defeated we headed to Simba tarn, stopping off to say thank you and goodbye to Peter and Patrick, the two Kenyan guides at Shipton's hut. At Simba tarn we spent the night camping alongside an English led tour group who confirmed we had made the correct choice as the guide said the company had only made 3 successful ascents this season.



26<sup>TH</sup> AUGUST

3.30 am and we were already on our way to the summit of point Lenana, the highest trekking peak. Both keen to reach the summit in the black of night to enjoy the full extent of a Kenyan sunrise from 4895m. After 5 days of acclimatisation we rocketed to the summit, overtaking and thereby angering a Kenyan led group who attempted to convince us we were lost (perhaps telling them to pick up their litter didn't help).

At the summit we enjoyed the majority of the sunrise isolated from all human contact. It wasn't until the sun was all the way up that we found ourselves on a crowded summit. From Lenana the summit of Nelion looks tantalizingly close and in the deep blue, cloudless skies of the morning we wondered whether we made the correct decision.

Come 11am however, our doubts were cast aside as the rolling dark clouds appeared from the North West and it continued to rained on the



North side of the mountain most of the day. On the East side of the mountain however it was beautiful sun as we made our way down the Chogoria route. The Chogoria route is commonly described as the most scenic route up Mount Kenya and it did not disappoint. The incredible Nithi gorge spans the length of the valley soaring almost 200m up from the valley floor in places. The valley offers great climbing especially if it were bolted as the blocky igneous rock looks loose in places and difficult to protect with traditional gear. We did not attempt any of the routes here due to the size of the valley and the constraints on our time and funding. It is a shame for such a large piece of rock to go undeveloped due to the extortionate entry fees.



27<sup>TH</sup> AUGUST

We made our way to the park gates and found transport to the town of Chogoria 30km from the trail head. From Chogoria it was easy to find cheap public transport back to Nairobi where we returned to the hostel to recover. The Toyota minivans used as intercity buses were of variable quality and usually cost a mzungu (white person) 500-600KSH. Buying one ticket however did not mean one seat. The 15 seater minivans at one point had 25 people and a chicken within it.

### 4.3. Hell's Gate National Park

28<sup>TH</sup> AUGUST

Rested and fresh we decided to try Nairobi's exclusive indoor climbing centre. Here we met up with members of the Mountain Club of Kenya who were very helpful by sharing knowledge of various climbing areas within Kenya. In the evening we decided to try nyama choma (Roast beef), a Kenyan favourite. You choose the piece of meat you would like roasting before sitting and an hour later a man with an oversized machete comes to serve up the meat in front of you... Delicious!

29<sup>TH</sup> AUGUST

After 2 nights of rest in Nairobi we headed to Hells gate National Park, one of the most developed climbing areas in Kenya and with a much more agreeable entry fee of \$30 per day per person. As usual transport took much longer than anticipated and despite an early start we arrived at the National park in the dark so





made our way to our campsite. We camped outside the park at Camp Carnelley's as it was cheaper and nicer. We were located right by the lake and in the evening could watch the hippo come out to eat.

### 30<sup>TH</sup> AUGUST

The sight of the two of us emerging from our cramped tent must have amused our neighbour so he shouted us over for some coffee. Our neighbour, Greg, was camping with 6 children from his orphanage, his friend, Weldon and his son, Peter. After a delayed start we headed into the park where we had a very successful days climbing. The basalt columns were worse than slate for smearing providing no friction at all. Hand jamming our way up any route that took our fancy we were able to tick off a few satisfying routes before moving onto the partially bolted Firmin's Tower. This striking volcanic plug provided solid climbing over 2 pitches with spectacular views of the zebra filled plains from the top.

## 31<sup>ST</sup> AUGUST

We attempted a route on the main wall, a striking 100m high vertical cliff face of columnar basalt. From a distance the cliff looked like a great piece of climbing rock but up close it was clear to see just how loose some blocks were. The 4 pitch HVS route we embarked upon was meant to be of the better routes up the main wall. The first pitch was a tiring, pumpy off width crack with the poor smearing for feet on each side. The second pitch was a short but pleasantly exposed section up to an old peg and bolt. Our 3<sup>rd</sup> and final pitch was a horrible bushwhacking experience. By the time Noah (leading) found solid rock he was looking at a good 15m swing directly onto the belay. Neither of us was enjoying the climb as we were both climbing for the sake of climbing. The route wasn't fun and posed a greater risk to us

than the "fun factor". So we called it a day and abseiled down.



## 1<sup>ST</sup> SEPTEMBER

We packed up and said our goodbyes to Greg and his companions after spending the last three nights sharing their campfire with them. Greg, as hospitable as ever, invited us to his orphanage if we ever ran out of rocks to climb. The orphanage was described by Greg in such a way we decided we couldn't miss such an amazing opportunity. But first we had to return to Nairobi.

#### 4.4. Masai Mara

2<sup>ND</sup> – 4<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER

We headed out on a three day safari to the Masai Mara as a break from climbing. Phil managed to barter the price down from \$360 to a very reasonable \$280pp all-inclusive and it was worth every cent. Three days spent in the park revealed lions, cheetah, elephant, crocodile, zebra and giraffe and much more. It was also a great opportunity to see the Masai culture and the ways modern Kenya has affected them.

5<sup>TH</sup> – 6<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER

We spent 3 nights in Nairobi partly so we could resupply for our final excursion and in part because Phil, the lazy sod that he is wouldn't wake up on time. The plan for the final week was to travel to the orphanage in Kericho



before continuing on to a remote crag by Lake Baringo in the North West of Kenya. We planned to stop over as from experience we knew it would take more than a day to reach Baringo and we did not want to be caught out travelling at night.

## 4.5. Kericho

7<sup>TH</sup> – 12<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER

We set off early to the orphanage and 3 mutatu's, a motorbike and 8 hours later we arrived at the orphanage to everyone's surprise. The hospitality we received upon arrival was second to none. We had never felt a more warm welcome. Within minutes a beautiful bedroom had been prepared despite our willingness to stay in our tent. The next morning we were properly introduced to the children and given a grand tour. The orphanage was a beautiful place in an amazing part of Kenya. It was surrounded by tea plantations and green rolling hills. On the first day we were set to work chopping wood. After only an hour of splitting wood Phil managed to hit his finger which immediately bruised. It was this that ultimately led to our decision to stay at the orphanage as Phil's finger remained swollen for 4 days. Climbing on what we have heard is loose rock with an injury is no fun and we would ultimately gain less by leaving. The orphanage had so much more promise and in staying we were able to hopefully give something back.

In the afternoon of the first day we were given the job of flattening a new patch of land recently acquired by Greg. The land was intended for the children to play football but the 30x20m pitch was tremendously hummocky with tree and Napier grass stumps throughout. Although the orphanage was very well organised and maintained the football field was a labour intensive low priority task. This made it ideal for us to commit to. We also had a lot of help from 30 or so very eager children. By the end of the second day all of the tree stumps had been removed leaving only the Napier stumps to be hoed out.

By the end of our final days work we were happy to say that the field was as good as it could get without compaction and rain.

13<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER

On the morning of our departure we were given a surprise goodbye ceremony by the children and received gifts from Greg and his family. Our time at the orphanage, although completely unexpected was the





most memorable part of the expedition. We both have full intentions to return in the future to meet the friends we made in Kericho.

The return journey to Nairobi was one the most uncomfortable we made. 5 hours in a cramped matatu with our bags on our knees. We arrived in Nairobi and made our way back to the hostel to enjoy a relaxed evening.

### 14<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER

We had one last walk around Nairobi before heading back to pack. In the evening we visited the nyama choma restaurant with 2 new companions from the hostel. Our plan that evening was to stay up until early morning before

heading off to the airport to avoid paying another night at the hostel.

### 15<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER

Early flight from Nairobi and a 5 hour layover in Amsterdam and we were home!



## 5 WILDLIFE

We were lucky enough to observe a great variety of wildlife. Sadly our photography skills were not always up to standards, especially with bird life. In Mount Kenya national park we saw monkeys, rock hyraxes, lizards, mice and a great variety of birds. In Hell's gate national park we were fortunate enough to see warthog, baboon, zebras, giraffes and an ostrich. In the Masai Mara we observed all of the above and lions, cheetahs, all manner of deer, mongoose, crocodiles, hippo's and elephants. We also saw what might have been a baby black mamba on the patch of land we were working at the orphanage. Never were we in any danger from wildlife and there were much fewer snakes than I expected to find. Mosquitos were never a problem in any of the regions we visited. I used mosquito spray only a few times as prevention.





<b>total</b>	1188	1691.41									
Phil Gifts		53.34776									
<b>Total phil + Noah</b>		<b>3246.168</b>									
<b>Remainder for food, transport, tips, entry and scams</b>		<b>278.6322</b>									
<b>Remainder PP</b>		139.3161									

## 9 EXPERIENCES

This expedition has given us both life changing experiences and life long memories. Although we failed our main objective we endured the hardships of the harsh high altitude environment. For the first time we have both felt the humility of surrendering and turning back from a challenge which is a great life experience in itself. Now we know what is necessary to create a successful expedition and although we over planned in some areas it is clear more organisation and planning is required in others.

Climbing in Hell's Gate created an entirely new dynamic between the two of us with Phil not quite feeling it and Noah's eagerness to prove something after our failure on Mount Kenya leading him to perhaps push his abilities on rock that just wasn't worth it. We now know more communication is key and we are glad we managed to deter from turning climbing into a box ticking hobby. Climbing is about the enjoyment of being outside, pushing yourself and having fun. If a route isn't safe, fun or exciting, what is the point in climbing it other than for the sake of it?

Our unexpected stay at the orphanage was possibly the most magical experiences we have ever had. I have no doubt that we will both return at some point in the future to visit our friends at the Dow Family Home.

## 10 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Imperial College Exploration Board for providing vital funding of £750 and even more vital support without which this expedition would not have been possible. Many thanks to Chris Green for assisting with our finances and dealing with our general tardiness.

We would also like to thank all of our friends in Kenya particularly to the Dow family home for their most gracious hospitality. Our short stay with this family was a truly life changing experience.



