

LONG JOHNS ON THE EQUATOR

Eric Arnison

This little adventure began, as do so many good things, in the bar of a pub: but unlike that pint on a Sunday morning, it was not anticipated.

Sitting at the bar was a young English schoolmaster, who, I subsequently learned, was earning an honest penny or three in his holidays, by guiding parties up Point Lenana.

He said to me—'Have you been out long, Sir?'

Me — 'Oh, it is only about four days since I left England in thick snow.'

Him— 'Which part of England, Sir?'

Me — 'The Lake District.'

Him— 'You don't happen to know a family in the Lake District called Arnison?'

Me — 'What christian name?'

Him— 'Tim.'

Me — 'He is my younger son.'

It turned out that Keith Smith and Tim had been at school together at Rannoch; later on I was able to borrow a sleeping bag and ice axe from him, but forgot a karabiner and sling.

This was at Naro Maru River Lodge, whither I had come with Malcolm Milne in his Cessna 'Golf Whisky 140.' After a search he had found the so-called airstrip, landed with care lest there should be grazing wild animals on it, and departed, on an arrangement to pick me up at Nanuki in five days' time.

I had read in *Climber* that Willy Curry, the manager of the Lodge, organised 'foot safaris' by providing transport, porters, tents and food to take you up Point Lenana. I gathered this was only a fairly long walk without very much snow or ice work and that at 16,355 feet one could expect a wonderful view.

Well, from Keith Smith, I learnt that there was a safari going out next morning, consisting of two American doctors and a French Ambassador. Not being too fussy about the company I keep, I wished myself onto this party, at a price.

For his memorable first ascent of Mount Kenya in 1899 Sir Harold Mackinder, with his Courmayeur guides, Cesar

Ollier and Joseph Brocherel, and 157 native porters spent several weeks forcing a way through the dense forest and driving off hostile natives. Our party went up through the forest in a Land Rover and trailer, until it petered out, as also did the road, at about 10,000 feet. There was then about half an hour's walk before coming into the extraordinary country of giant heath, giant lobelias and groundsel, which seem to flourish on this peculiar terrain. As you know, Mount Kenya and also Kilimanjaro are the remains of ancient volcanos, where the firm lava rock has remained, and the cinders deteriorated or crumbled away; it may be that the volcanic nature of the soil is specially suitable for the growth of what normally are quite small plants, but here they are impressive as Eric Shipton's photographs show in *Upon that Mountain*.

The Naro Maru Lodge management provided one porter to each individual, plus a head porter and a cook. The cook was a magnificent fellow, a splendid cook of rice and, perhaps I should add, tea. We had rice for every meal—sometimes decorated with sardines or stew or curry or jam—but always rice; indeed, progression was in a ratio of one grain of rice to one foot of altitude. These porters, despite the heavy loads they carried, were ahead of us at the tented camp in a beautiful alp and we were greeted with the first of very many cups of hot, sweet, strong tea.

On the second day we walked up to Top Hut, reaching there in time for a meal of rice; and then, because we were in good form, we went up Point Lenana—which is the normal third day trip to 16,355 feet. It was very cold that night: water froze inside the hut, and I was glad to have my Long Johns, with a woolly vest I had been wearing under my tropical suit when we left the cold of England.

The two American doctors, Bruce Mayer and Al Straner, had had Himalayan experience, but that evening the latter developed mountain sickness. This is pretty prevalent on Kenya, because people are rarely properly acclimatized. On a walk onto the glacier that night, Bruce and I discussed the prospects of getting up the mountain. We decided to team up.

An Alpine start at 4 a.m., across the Lewis Glacier, and at the foot of the scree slope of the mountain at 5.30, onto the rock at 6.00. The climbing was comparable to Bowfell Buttress, 4 or 5 pitches up to V. Diff. standard on sound rock, and between were sections of scrambling comparable to Jack's

Rake. Route finding was at times tricky, but when in doubt there were fixed loops to give a clue: the ridges were dramatic.

On the way up one could make out Kilimanjaro, particularly when the sun glistened on the permanent snowfield 280 miles away. We celebrated our arrival at the top of Nelion at mid-day by draining the gourd, then we considered the way down.

Abseiling down seemed to be the order of the day; possibly Bruce felt that this was safer for the old gentleman, although, with hindsight I would have preferred to have climbed down many of the easier pitches. Also, through not having a karabiner and sling I had to rope down in the traditional manner with consequential wear and tear to the posterior (although encased in said Long Johns and khaki shorts). However, the result was that we got down off the rocks just as darkness clamped down, but we had no great difficulty in crossing the Lewis Glacier and the moraine to Top Hut. Perhaps this is not strictly true, for there was the difficulty of tiredness—the present generation have a word ‘flaked’ and this certainly fitted my condition.

In the hut three things occurred:—

1. Al Straner had recovered, or recovered sufficiently to produce a wonderful half-bottle of Tanzania Gin, which fairly sizzled down;
2. I could not face up to that rare delicacy—rice, and
3. the chaps did not believe me when I said that, although a modest fellow, I and my Long Johns were entitled to credit for having climbed the mountain in my 69th year.