

better than Kilimanjaro?

Uganda's Rwenzori mountain range is Africa's top hiking destination, holding three of the continent's five highest peaks. The summits are spectacular, the routes are uncrowded and the high-altitude forests teem with life

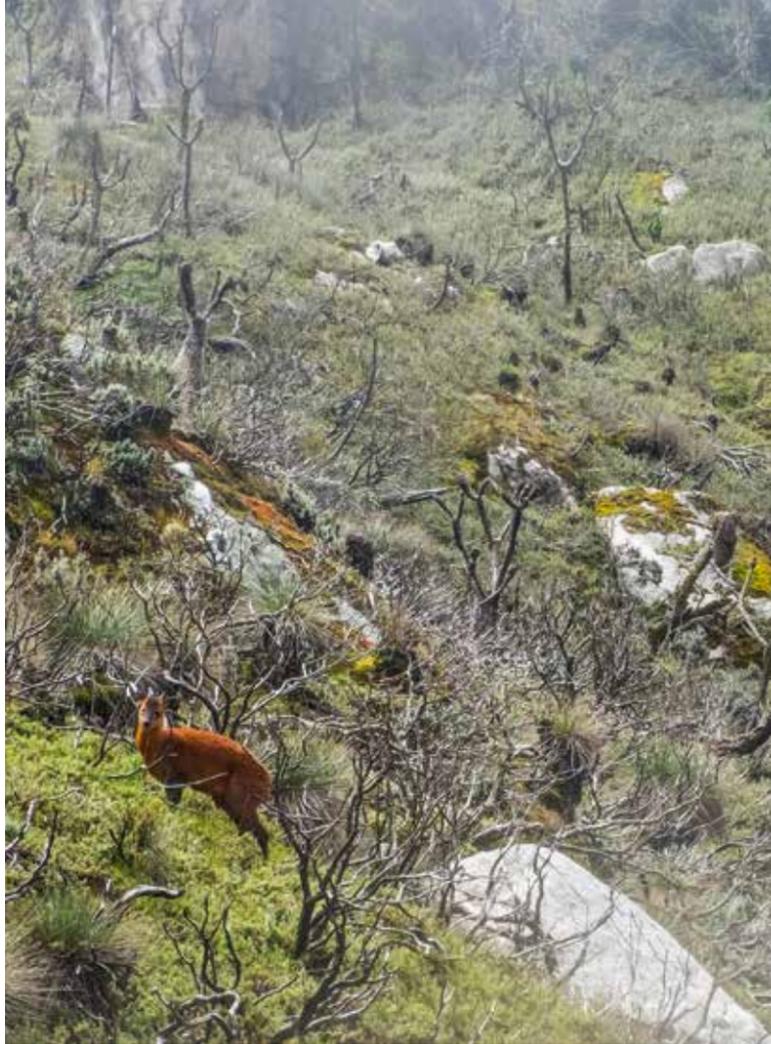
Mount Stanley emerges from the clouds in Rwenzori Mountains National Park, Uganda.

'Why do we climb mountains?'

As an avid climber, it's a thought I've had, and tried to answer, many times. 'What makes us crave cold, barren heights and push on ever higher?' Sometimes I think the answer is about escaping, or challenging oneself mentally and physically, or connecting to nature and an ancient version of spirituality. Sometimes I wonder if it's something else entirely...

In late 2015, my wife Tarryn and I began planning an expedition to summit Africa's five highest peaks. It was our first introduction to the Rwenzori Mountains that straddle Uganda and the DRC. Just reading about them blew our minds! Steeped in myth, these fabled 'Mountains of the Moon' are Africa's largest range and the source of the White Nile. Their home, the Rwenzori Mountains National Park, which is now also a World Heritage Site, contains six of Africa's 10 highest mountains, most of them higher than the tallest Alps. Yet to most bucket-list hikers they are largely unknown, overshadowed by Mount Kilimanjaro and Mount Kenya, Africa's two highest mountains.

Now, almost two years later, here we are in Uganda, walking through the small dilapidated mining town of Kilembe to the trail head. We're joined by friend Immo Bartens. Our group of 21 includes three guides, Enock Bwambale, Richard Dramaza and Ochora Charles, and a small army of 15 porters. Around us are steep hills crammed with crops of bananas and potatoes clinging to near-vertical slopes, ignorant of Newton's law of universal gravitation. Ahead, dark clouds hang over the park boundary and cover the peaks, including the three we have come to attempt: Mount Baker (4844 metres), Mount Speke (4890 metres) and



Mount Stanley (5109 metres).

Soon we're trekking through dense tropical rainforest packed with weird and wonderful creatures such as Rwenzori turacos and bright-green three-horned chameleons. The foliage seems impenetrable but the trail is well maintained and after five hours we make it to Sine Camp, our first overnight spot. At 2596 metres it's still considered the 'lowlands', an indication of the scale that awaits us. Located on a ridge near a waterfall and surrounded by tall trees, the camp is a collection of bright green huts with bunk beds. Tarryn, Immo and I are used to sleeping in tents and bivy sacks so this feels like luxury. It's a trend that continues for most of the 10-day trek.

Another trend that kicks off that night is massive and amazing meals; spaghetti bolognese, fried chicken and chips, pancakes with chocolate sauce. It's as if our tour operator wants us to leave fatter than when we arrived. Added to that, our porters *insist* on carrying our Osprey packs and our guides provide hot-water bottles on demand. It's a lifesaver for Tarryn who, despite her excellent Montbell apparel, begins turning into an icicle as we inch higher.

On day two the rainforest gives way to otherworldly ericaceous vegetation, laden with lichen and wisps of old man's beard. The scene changes almost daily, the only near-constant being patches >

ABOVE One of the locals, a red duiker, eyes us from its home in Rwenzori's ericaceous zone. **RIGHT** A land that belongs to the fairies. Tarryn glances back, ecstatic to be in what she called 'wonderland', as Enock guides us on.



of increasingly thick, mucky bog. It's gumboot territory. Or, in my case, waterproof hiking boots and gaiters. We pass forests of senecio and giant lobelia, home to malachite sunbirds. We ascend further and the foliage starts to disappear.

On the fourth day, as we arrive at Hunwick's Camp we get our first view of Mount Stanley, framed perfectly by a throng of dissipating clouds. They drift further apart to reveal some of Rwenzori's other peaks: Weismann's, Luigi di Savoia, Baker and Speke in the distance, all standing tall, glaciated and proud. Logic says we can't possibly be in Africa. These must be the Alps! Yet here we are, about to attempt the Mountains of the Moon.

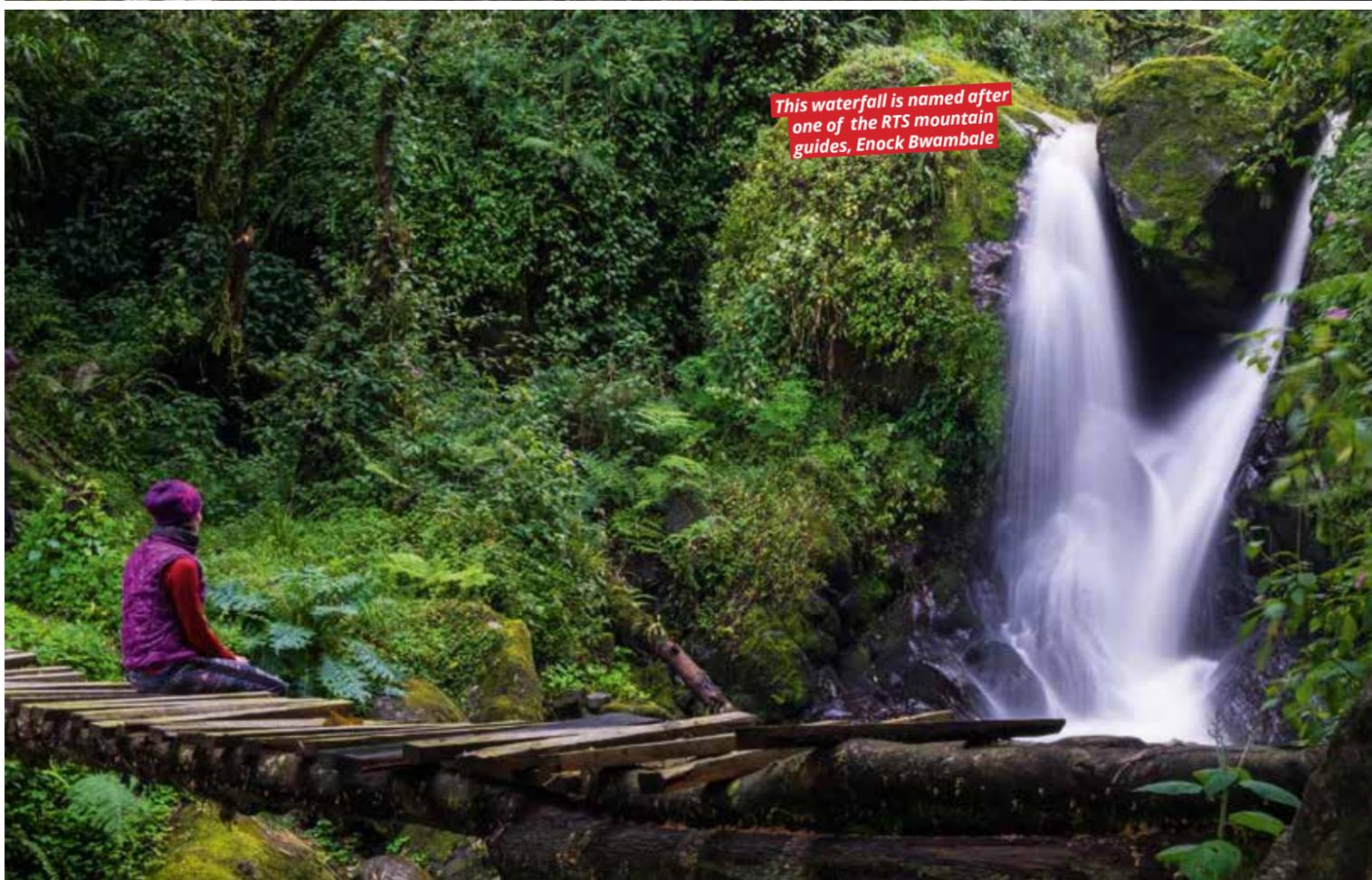
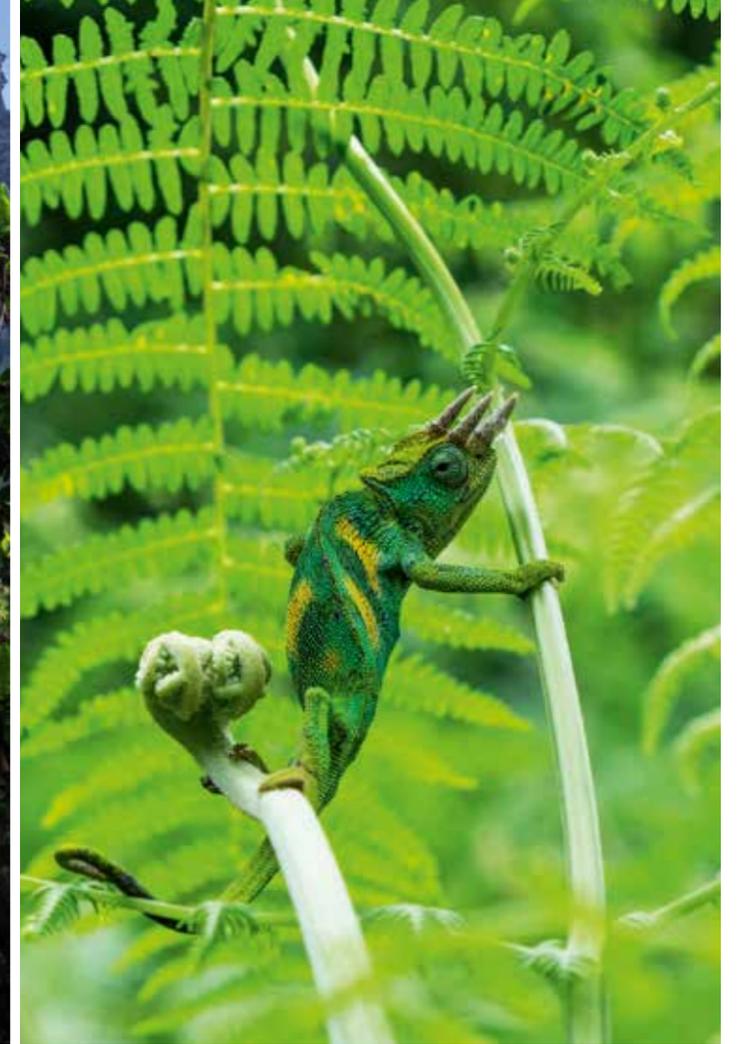
'Logic says we can't possibly be in Africa. These must be the Alps!'

Our first peak is Mount Baker, which we summit the following day. It's the easiest of the three but still a challenge, with two sections of roped scrambling and some fairly intense black ice.

The following day we turn our attention to Mount Stanley. Its highest point is Margherita Peak – the apogee of this mighty range. As we trudge towards base camp, I ask Enock about the glaciers. 'In the nine years that I've been guiding,' he says, 'I've seen the glaciers disappear before my eyes. Each year they run away further. Watching our glaciers, I can even cry.' He's right. In the next 10 years, scientists predict, they could be gone altogether.

Climbing Stanley's glaciers, it turns out, makes us almost want to cry too. The following morning, in freezing pre-dawn darkness, two stand between us and the summit. The second is more technical than we expected. It's a steep river of ice that requires axes, crampons, ropes, muscles and sheer will. Climbing it wrests almost every last bit of energy from our bodies. At the end Tarryn collapses, just 50 metres from the summit. Richard and I help her up. Together we struggle to the top. Her small frame and rock-hard tenacity lead our guides to dub her 'Suzuki' – a likeness to the

CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP This is the wall on Mount Speke that nearly sent us packing; the bright green cabins were a new kind of camping comfort; this three-horned chameleon looked like it came out of the Jurassic Period; armed and ready for action, Ochora sets a belay on Stanley's final glacier; Enock's Falls near Sine Camp on our first night; my boots after tackling a 'normal' portion of trail.



This waterfall is named after one of the RTS mountain guides, Enock Bwambale



hidden power of our small Jimny, Badger, that we're travelling in. Dynamite really does come in small packages.

Standing up there, on the highest point of Africa's most fabled range, with Tarryn and Immo, I ask myself that question again, 'Why *do* we climb mountains?' There's no single rationale. Like the peaks of Rwenzori, the reasons are legion. Mountains test us, they dare us, they scare us and they fill us with joy – the kind you only feel later, but that stays with you forever. And sometimes, such as here on top of the Mountains of the Moon, the reasons transcend the physical and you find your spiritual centre.

'Mountains test us, they dare us ... and they fill us with joy'

That afternoon as we trek towards our final peak, Mount Speke, the notorious Rwenzori rain hits, drenching us to the bone. We reach Bujuku Valley, the only tented camp of the trip. Unfortunately the rock overhang here provides almost no respite from the deluge. We hang our sodden clothes on the rocks above a smoky fire and retreat into our wet tents. The next day on Speke is tough, including a section Immo dubs 'gnarly', and our guides are instrumental in getting us to the top. Somehow we all make it. We've completed three of Africa's five highest mountains in 10 days. We're stoked. And utterly exhausted. We took the tough route, but that's not the only way to explore this magical place. That's the beauty of it; the potential for climbers and hikers is near-endless. I sneak in an extra peak on the journey back (Weismann's at 4 620 metres) and can't help but think, 'Forget Kilimanjaro, this is the best hiking destination in Africa!' 

Cold, barren and steep. The final glacier of Mount Stanley is a worthy adversary.

Plan your trip

GETTING THERE

We drove to Rwenzori Mountains National Park from Joburg on our Suzuki Africa Sky High Expedition (see the route on teamtane.com) but, for most travellers, flying is the best option. Immo's return flight from Johannesburg to Entebbe was R8 200 (saa.com). From there he took a minibus to Kampala (about two hours, R150) and then a bus to Kasese (about eight hours, from R110). Transfers between Kasese and Kilembe can be arranged with your tour operator (we used RTS, see below), and cost from R135 each way.

WHEN TO GO

The best time to hike the Rwenzoris is between December and March or from July to September.

NEED TO KNOW

South Africans require a tourist visa. Applications can be done online and usually take a few hours to be sent to you via email. Print and present at your point of entry, pay \$50 (USD currency only) and you'll receive a three-month entry. For those driving, other fees are applicable. visas.immigration.go.ug, aa.co.za

WHAT IT COSTS

R1 will get you about 270 USh (Ugandan shillings). Expect to pay about 3 000 USh (R10) for a beer and about 15 000 USh (R55) for a *mzungu* (tourist) dinner. Local cuisine is far cheaper. Be sure to take US dollars too (new notes only) as you'll also need to pay the \$35

per night for your permit into Rwenzori Mountains National Park. ugandawildlife.org Immo's 14-day trip (including return flights from Cape Town and all transfers, dorm accommodation, visa, permits, food and a 10-day hike to summit three peaks) cost him just under R35 000. For comparison, an all-inclusive, six-day Kilimanjaro trek is from R30 950 pp (including flights) with Getaway Travel.

HIKING THE RWENZORIS

Hikes must be organised through a tour operator. We chose Rwenzori Trekking Services (RTS) because of its positive reputation. Numerous standard options are available, from easy three-day jungle hikes (from R4 200 pp for three or more people) to a tough seven-day summit of Mount Stanley (from R13 000 pp for three or more people). We opted for the longest standard expedition: a 10-day hike to summit the three highest peaks, which costs R20 000 pp. It required early morning starts, navigating treacherous ice, tolerance of frigid temperatures and the effects of high altitude. Guides are highly trained and will get you through the tough sections but good fitness is imperative. rwenzoritrekking.com



STAY HERE

 **Backpackers Hostel** in Kampala is a vibey spot. There's a bar, clean warm showers, free Wi-Fi and great wood-fired pizzas. Rooms from R195 for two sharing and camping from R52 pp. backpackers@infocom.co.ug **Humara Resort** in Kampala is more luxurious, with fine dining and spacious rooms. Deluxe doubles from R2 155 B&B. humarauganda.com  **Trekkers Hostel** in Kilembe is the base for hiking with

Rwenzori Trekking Services. There are cold beers and warm showers. Rooms from R328 pp sharing B&B and camping from R105 pp. Breakfast is included. rwenzoritrekking.com **Hotel Margherita** in Kasese is a great option if you are interested in visiting the Queen Elizabeth National Park or the chimpanzees in the Kibale Forest. Standard rooms are R1 400 for two sharing B&B. hotel-margherita.com

**Prices and conversions correct at time of going to print*

Follow Team Tane's Suzuki Africa Sky High Expedition live @ [teamtane.com](https://www.facebook.com/teamtane) or find them on Facebook