

Short report on the Rwenzori centennial climb of the first top-climb

The author of this report was one of the participants of the centennial climb to the Rwenzori, June 13th to 20th 2006. These are some personal reflections concerning this commemorative climb in general, with focus on what could be done to improve the tourist attraction of the Rwenzori in particular. The report is critical because I wanted to emphasize the problems that need to be tackled. But as a whole the experience of the Rwenzori is positive. I would go again, but then I would do all the arrangements myself.

Introduction.

The Rwenzori mountains offers a fantastic opportunity for scenic walks, mountain treks and glacier and rock climbing. The mythical status of the mountains (“Mountains of the Moon”), the large and untouched area with the close proximity to areas still hosting wild Mountain Gorilla populations (“Mountains of the mist”), and the size of the mountains (“The alps of Africa”), are all factors that can help attract tourists and create a boosting tourist industry. But the tourists will not come by themselves, it must be advertised, and the services that modern tourists demand must be put in place. The few climbers that want to follow in the line of the climbers a hundred years ago will always come, but they are only a trickle compared to what the numbers could reach if a proper setting was created.

Approaching the mountain

The Rwenzori Mountains are remote and it demands an effort just to get to the foot of the mountains. On a national level Uganda needs to improve its view on the tourist industry, but that I will not deal with herein. For the Rwenzori what is needed is a better road sign on the road between Fort Portal and Kasese to direct the tourists (to Ibanda). Also along the dirt road to Ibanda signs are needed so that the tourists do not get lost.

Ibanda

The facilities at Ibanda, as I know them, include Holiday Inn and then also the Ruboni community camp. I did not visit the latter, so I can only say something about the Holiday Inn. The accommodation at Holiday Inn is adjusted for the low-budget, high-adventure type of tourists that today frequent the Rwenzori. As such it will do, but only as there are no alternatives. If more tourists are to come and visit, upgrades are necessary. The services at Holiday Inn are however to slack, which unfortunately is typical for Uganda. The typical sequence of events is that in the early morning the staff refurnished the canteen by dragging the chairs and tables along the floor and all the guests in the nearby rooms wake up. Then breakfast is served 30 to 60 minutes after it is supposed to be served. The lunch we ordered the day we came down was composed of chicken, rice and vegetables, and took 2.5 (!) hours to prepare. And then it was already one hour delayed because the kitchen staff and the managers did community via some errand-boy who did not manage to get lunch started (or thought lunch was not ordered – unclear which). With lunch 3 to 4 hours late, it is no surprise that dinner (which is exactly the same meal as the lunch) is not very popular. Then if

you happen to have your room next to the kitchen and want to use it, it will, because of the ventilation system, smell from all kinds of food. And the noise from the kitchen will constantly disturb you. Luckily I had ear-plugs, but I do not think nose-plugs exists. This type of service will definitely discourage tourists from coming to the Rwenzori. Next time I will go I will not stay at the Holiday Inn, but try the Ruboni community camp instead.

RMS

The Rwenzori Mountaineering Services is a community run organization. As this is the case I ask myself (as will other tourists) why it needs a fancy managing director with a suit and tie, one that also obviously do not know as much about the mountain as an educated tourists? There is a large risk in having such a management structure. It is typical for developing countries, but it discourages tourists who just will see it is a corruptive position. The tourists will be well behaved and say nothing to the Ugandans, but once back home they will remember and tell about it. Further, the RMS organization, in my view, is geared towards nepotisms and harvesting low volume incomes with minimum efforts. The demand for improvements and developed services that a higher number of tourists would require, will unlikely be met by the RMS. For this to happen a commercialization is probably necessary, but will be prevented by the tribal and family structure, and the ownership of the Mountain and its resources claimed by the Bukonjo and the RMS. There is a lack of commitment all the way from the directors, via rangers, guides and down to porters within the RMS. This is an enormous problem to be overcome.

Day 1

The first day of the centennial climb covered the route from RMS HQ to Nyabithaba hut. This is not a too long distance, but we had a late start from RMS. Given this, and that lunch was supposed to be served, the fact that we had no lunch whatsoever, that the kerosene stoves were not cleaned after the previous use, and that hence dinner had to be cooked on charcoal and was not ready until 8 pm, is just a failure on the part of RMS that should never happen. A European hiker from countries I am acquainted with (Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Sweden, Norway) would have carried a stove plus dried food for cooking anytime. A cooking effort that would have taken ten minutes from start to eat. I had brought all this equipment, including dried food, with me, however the promise of lunch and regular meals prompted me not to carry it myself, so it was among the porters, unavailable when in this urgent need.

While on the trek I noticed the occurrence of gaps in the forest, as well as banana plants. So I enquired from several of the guides about previous agricultural activities. But they all said there had been none. Then at Nyabithaba I learnt that there had been a tobacco-plantation at that elevation some generations ago. That indicates that agricultural activities despite all had been occurring inside what is today the national park. The ignorance of the guides and rangers then re-occurred several times during the trip, e.g. by different names given to the same species by different persons, and the same name given to different species.

Day 2

Day two was to go from Nyabithaba to Bujongolo Rock Shelter, as this would more truly repeat the climb by the Duke of the Abruzzi 100 years earlier. We were promised a light meal at Guy Yeoman Hut, with packed lunch consisted of a squashed banana, two biscuits and two boiled eggs. The light meal at Guy Yeoman was light indeed, a mushroom soup that had a visibility of at least the 30 cm of pot it was cooked in. I managed to get hold of my cooking utensils and did my own complementary hot meal in 5 minutes.

At Bujongolo Roch Shelter it again took 2 hours after arrival before dinner was ready (the kerosene stoves never worked). This time it was composed of pasta and potatoes, with perhaps three (not more) cans of sardines in Tomato sauce as the protein source for around 20 people. The food had to be eaten well after sunset.

Part of the idea with the centennial climb had been to climb several of the peaks, and I also had a particular interest in visiting mount Baker. When the climbing team acquired about this, the guides did not have the authority neither to accept a climb outside the stipulated program, nor were they allowed to tell the costs for such a climb, had it been allowed. The situation was confusing, but to be prepared if the occasion to climb would open up, I packed all the equipment needed for the next day (including food and gas-kitchen as I knew I would otherwise starve).

The following morning several members of the party had stomach problems, including me. I artificially forced a vomiting of the stomach content and then cooked my own oat-meal porridge as breakfast to stabilize the stomach.

Day 3 Bujongolo to Kitandara

Day 3 carried with it pleasant weather, and took us from Bujongolo to Kitandara. The delay in getting a clearing about whether or not we could climb Mt Baker, my heavy load of packing if that would happen, and the stomach problem, made the day less pleasant than it would otherwise have been. Lunch was the same as previous day; only the banana was now exchanged for an un-ripe mango. But the weather was really pleasant as the sun was shining almost all the time, through the evening and afternoon at kitandara. Even food then had time to be served during the light hours, even if I did some of my own cooking just to replenish the protein when it was mostly needed.

On this beautiful day of hiking in the Rwenzori, I wondered why in all the written material the hardship is always put so much forward? To put the hardship as the flag of the Rwenzori Mountains might improve of its rumor as being remote and inaccessible. Certainly the peaks are not easy to reach, but the foothills, and even the central circuit is not too difficult for a moderately active and fit person to do. The volume of tourists will not be climbers to the peaks, but those who can manage to walk along the foot hills, perhaps only as day trips, and those that want to do the central circuit. This luckily also reflects the level of sustainability of the different ecosystems that the tourists will use; the lower forests being much more resilient than the upper alpine vegetation. To attract some of those millions of tourists that walk around the mountains of Europe every year, the Rwenzori Mountains, there beauty

and the sunshine you often have must be better known. The mud and wetness I met over my 7 days was less than I would expect to have during the same period in many mountains in Northern Europe. Do not exaggerate the difficulties.

Day 4 Bujongolo to Elena Hut

Another beautiful route, but by the 4th day you get rather tired of boiled eggs and biscuits for lunch. Luckily I could revert to my own well planned menu and have some other sources of food during the walk. Also this day there were fewer streams to get water from, and the guides and rangers would have needed to tell where to fill in order not to lack water over the passes and other stretches without streams. The knowledge that the guides and rangers have on the geography is surprisingly restricted. When a European asks how long is the distance, it is the difference in km (or meter) that is interesting. I want to know at what altitude a certain pass or peak is, or how far it is to a certain point. Then I want the answer in km, or height above sea level, not as hours of walk or climb, that I can guess myself (and it is often not correct). The level of knowledge need to be increased, but I do not see the commitment to learn such things on the side of the guides and rangers. The favorable weather made the days climb into a pleasant exercise. We did hurry some in order to be more safe at Elena Hut in case of rain. Large parts of the central circuit will be rather slippery (and dangerous) in wet conditions. If larger volumes of tourists are to be attracted some safety measures will be needed, included fastening rails (iron-wires) for assisting the ascents and descents over steep and slippery rocks.

Day 5 Elena to John Matte

On this day I went from Elena Hut, up on the glaciers, down via Margherita glacier to Bujuku hut, where I discovered that my luggage had been carried to John Matte hut. I hence pushed on to reach John Matte hut just before sunset. As the path from Bujuku to John Matte is fairly easy, and no rain had been falling for several days, the trek was easy. Reaching John Matte I was happy to have made the effort, but for those who came after me, their luggage had to be brought back from John Matte to Bujuku hut. To change the plans without communicating it to the tourists involved is also not recommended, it introduces uncertainty and cautions the tourists not to trust the RMS arrangements.

The descent on Margherita glacier was not easy, and I am happy I did it when I had a full strength. It is also stated as a dangerous route in the "Guide to the Rwenzori". I would suggest only taking experienced climbers down this route. However, the scenery around Irene lakes and its small hut, is fantastic, probably the most beautiful spot on the whole trek.

Day 7 John Matte to Ibanda

Finally we had some rain, so we got a bit of the Rwenzori-feeling described in all the guide-books. Because you know that at the end of the day you are going to reach a hotel and a bed, you can push yourself a bit extra.

Back at Ibanda things were a bit chaotic, because the climbers returned in small groups, rather than as a joint team. The arrangements for transport and accommodation were unclear. The scariest part of the whole mountain tour was the ride in the ambulance between RMS head quarters and Holiday Inn at Ibanda. If it had been a motor speed competition, it would not have been possible to go any faster.

As no one had ordered lunch, I did these arrangements, but it took Holiday inn 2.5 hours to prepare chicken and rice, so lunch was served at 16.00.

Day 8 Stuck at Ibanda

The next day the last climbers came down from the mountains, and we were supposed to get a bus to Kampala. The bus however arrived too late and we stayed an extra day at Ibanda. It did not bother us very much (the official Italian team had already left for Kampala the day before). But in general it is not a good idea to leave tourists stranded in Ibanda.

Day 9 Bus to Kampala

When the bus finally arrived and was loaded, it turned out it had no fuel. Hence, we first had to go back to Kasese and the closest petrol-station, before we could get started towards Fort Portal and Kampala. The bus was stopped twice on route to Kampala, and it turned out that neither road-tax, nor third-party insurance had been paid. We however arrived safely in Kampala towards the late afternoon.

As said above, I want to go again, but then I will make all the arrangements myself.