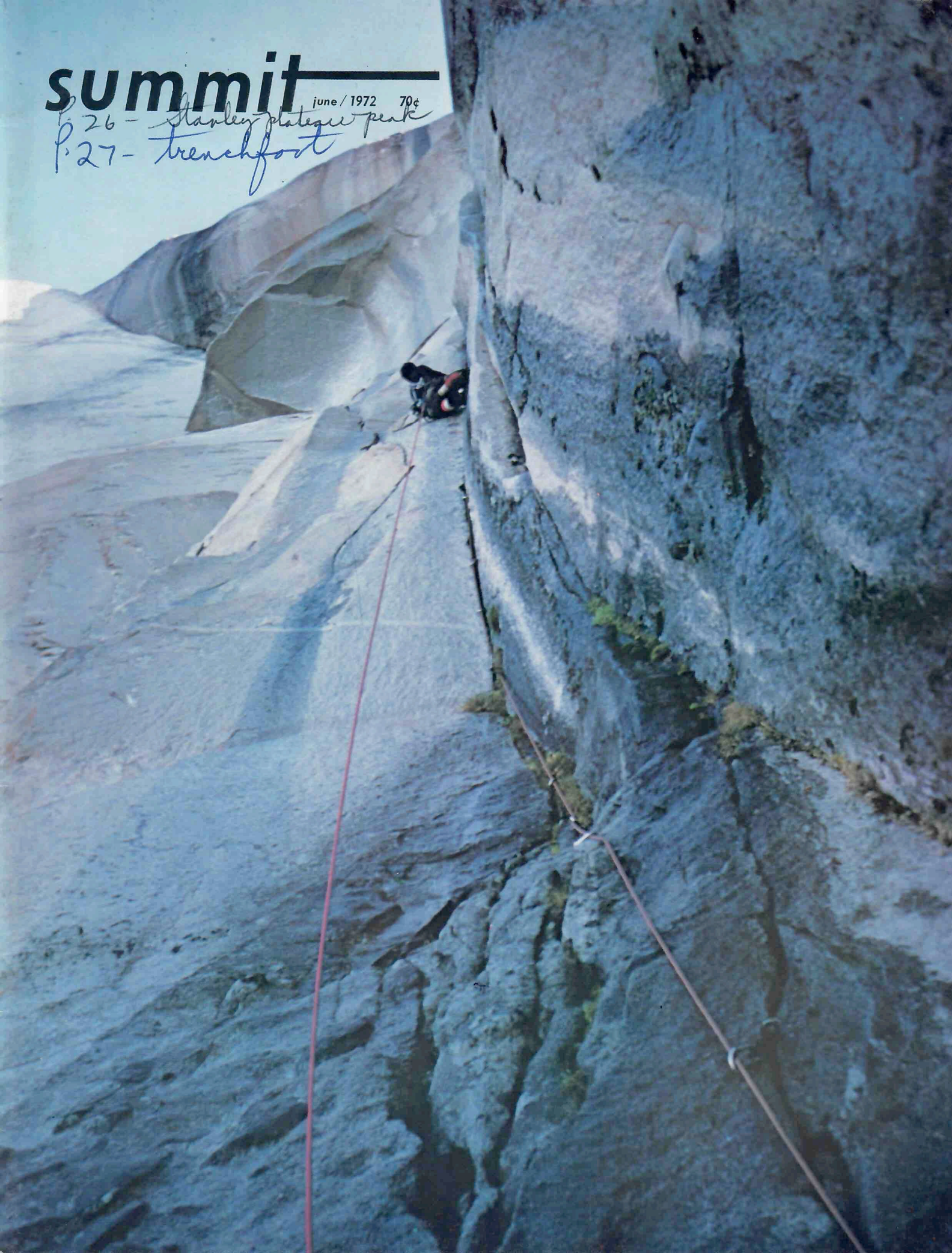


# summit

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p. 26 - Stanley plateau peak  
p. 27 - trenchfoot







*"The tropical plants looked somewhat peculiar under a thick coating of wet snow."*



# A Visit to the Ruwenzori

By Arlene Blum

*By your bonny crags and by your swampy quags,  
Where we tramp every day until we're flakers.  
You may trudge 'till you're blue,  
But the hills you'll never view  
On the long strong flanks of old Baker.*

— C. P. Sweet

Dear L.,

Although the Ruwenzori mountains of Uganda are among the most fascinating ranges I have ever visited, most descriptions, like the verse above, make it sound rather unpleasant. This is perhaps fortunate, for the delicate beauty of this mountain range has not been stamped out by hordes of visitors.

The legendary "Mountains of the Moon" were first postulated to be the source of the Nile by Ptolemy. The thick mist behind which the Ruwenzori perpetually hide, prevented their "discovery" by Europeans until the late nineteenth century. Most of the peaks were first climbed by a large expedition organized by the Duke of the Abruzzi in 1906; many of these ascents have not been repeated. Three major glaciated massifs with many fine rock and ice climbs dominate the range. They are Mounts Stanley (16,763'), Speke (16,042'), and Baker (15,889'). During our eighteen day visit to the Ruwenzori, we climbed one or more routes on each of these peaks.

The contrasts in the Ruwenzori are extreme: steamy equatorial forests and expanses of cold snow and rock; warm bright sunlight rapidly alternating with mist, sleet and rain. The trails are unique to my experience — mostly mud. Thick oozy, red mud, squishy sticky black mud, goeey slimy brown mud, honest mud that just dares you

to step into it, and sneaky deep mud beguilingly covered with a deceiving layer of brilliant moss.

And the bogs. There are horizontal bogs, sloping bogs, vertical bogs, and indeed even an overhanging bog. And yet I don't want you to get the wrong impression. The same abundance of water that is responsible for the mist and the bogs also nourishes an indescribable profusion of weird and wonderful vegetation and fantastic ice feather cornices.

This we were yet to discover when we arrived in Kampala in early January and spent a few days buying food, insurance, blankets, and other supplies for the porters and one hundred and thirty-five pounds of food for ourselves. Uganda seemed incredibly lush and green after the arid Ethiopian plateau.

Eighteen hours of relaxing and cheap train travel through the fertile Ugandan countryside brought us and our four hundred pounds of equipment to Kasese, one hundred and eighty miles west of Kampala and quite close to the Ruwenzori. In Kasese, we dined for twenty cents on matoke, the national food, bland mashed bananas served with meat or nut sauce. Then to the market to buy over one hundred pounds of cassava flour, essential for any Ruwenzori expedition. Each porter eats nearly two pounds of cassava flour per day which resulted in three of our eight porters only carrying porter food.

Next morning we took a taxi fifteen miles to Ibanda where John Matte, the agent for the Mountain Club of Uganda, introduced us to William, our head porter. Three miles past Ibanda, at the end of the road (5,500'), William chose our other seven porters from a large throng of Bukonjo



who were most eager to earn the ninety cents a day that is standard salary for carrying fifty-pound loads up difficult trails. The porters secured their loads with banana fiber straps around their foreheads, we put on our Keltys, and set off slowly through the sticky heat.

The great weight of our supplies was partly a result of the low altitude gastronomic fantasies that had afflicted us after rather sparse rations in Ethiopian Semyen. We now had two and a half pounds per day of such goodies as paté de foie, marzipan, Swiss chocolate, dates, and cashews. We were going to face the Ruwenzori bogs well fortified!

After a pleasant night at Nyabitaba, the first hut, (8,700'), and a four-hour walk the next morning, we reached Nyamuleju hut (10,900'). We now entered the zone of giant groundsel, lobelia and mud. Encouraged by the warm sunlight, we bravely undertook the crossing of the notorious Bigo Bog. At first I was very cautious, awkwardly jumping from tussock of dry grass to tussock, but soon I slipped and was ankle deep in mud. "Well, at least I don't have to worry any longer about keeping my boots dry," I thought. I strode boldly down the center of the trail, certain that I could get no muddier. A moment later, I sank to my hips in sticky, icky, oozy mud. Oh, overconfidence!

Once extricated, I made my way more cautiously, tussock by tussock, to Bigo Hut (11,300'). The porters were already there, clean and dry. In some miraculous manner, these Bukonjo porters have the power to walk on the surface of the bog carrying fifty pounds suspended by banana fiber from their foreheads. I tried following one porter step by step by step. I obviously prayed to the wrong gods for where he would step dry, I would wallow in deep mud.

At Bigo Hut, we met a German climber who had a scratch earlier in the day and now infected so severe that he could not walk. Such virulent infections are one of the dangers of Ruwenzori. Pulmonary edema is another hazard. A third ostensible danger in these mountains is wild animals. The guide book warned us that food should not be left outside the hut because of leopards.

After a night at Bigo, we continued in three hours to Bujuku (13,050'), a palatial hut centrally located between the major peaks of the range. Six porters were paid and sent down and the other two remained with us. As we were planning to spend the next ten days climbing, the porters would occupy themselves hunting rock hyraxes, a small cute furry creature closely related to the elephant! (Of misadventures with hyraxes, more will be told later.)

We now began to realize why the Bukonjo were so eager to brave the Bigo bog and the Bujuku snow for ninety cents a day. The custom here is for each man to have several wives who work on the shamba (farm) growing enough matoke for them to eat. Working as a porter is like a subsidized hunting trip — a chance to go off with the boys, hunting hyraxes and making a bit of spare cash while the little women stay home on the farm.

Bujuku hut is warm and dry, with bunks for about twelve people lined with two inch thick foam. Our food supply was immediately inspected by a tribe of fearless and athletic mice that inhabit the hut. What a pleasant place to wait out the predicted Ruwenzori rains, though in the three days we had hiked in it had been warm and sunny. Would our luck hold?

Next morning we set out to climb nearby Mt. Speke — and the rains came — and the hail — and the snow. The groundsel and other tropical plants around Bujuku looked somewhat peculiar under a thick coating of wet snow.

A pattern developed. If we wanted to go walking, it was clear and sunny. As soon as we tied our crampons to our packs, the mists closed in and the storm began. A few minutes of snow would be followed by rain, then hail, then clear, then mist — over and over again. The only thing certain was rapid change.

Next day the sky was blue at 7:00 a.m. "Let's try Mt. Speke again." We left at 8:00 in a hail-storm. "We might as well try anyhow." Well, we climbed Vittorio Emmanuel, the highest summit of Mt. Speke, though we did not see it that day nor much else.

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*Peaks of the Mountains of the Moon.*



*Nyabitaba,  
the first hut, at  
8700 feet.*



The three-thousand-foot climb was distinguished by the variety and excellence of the bogs we encountered. In particular, one popularly acclaimed as "the overhanging bog," a steep rocky area covered with mud and slime, dripping with moss, and held together with tree roots. At noon we were on top, eating paté in the mist. A slosh down the snow, a rappel down the bog, a mud glissade down the trail, and we were back in camp watching the sky finally clear unveiling a beautiful view of Mt. Speke.

Next day, we walked in the warm sunlight for a couple of hours to Irene Lakes Hut (14,700') to try and climb the ENE ridge of Margarita, the highest peak in the range. That evening we sat snugly in the hut, an eight-foot square aluminum A-frame, watching an impressive lightning storm on the steep west face of Mt. Baker.

After an attempt to climb the ridge in a blizzard, we spent a day eating and reading entrees from the hut books that are the equivalent of summit registers in this wet range. Some of the entries were a bit discouraging:

"The whole track is a bog except where the so-called bog was, and now it's a quagmire."

"I have been to the Ruwenzori five times, and this is the first time I've seen the peaks."

Next day it was hailing at 7:30 as we moved from cairn to cairn up a six-hundred-foot slippery scree slope to the ridge. We roped up and climbed five rock pitches which were quite easy once the ice was chipped off the holds. Straightforward snow led to the summit ridge. It would mist and clear, revealing the delicate summit cornices leaning out many feet in improbable ice feathers.

At noon, we were on top of Margarita (16,763') watching the mist swirling in from Zaire (the Congo), and the magnificent cornices on the nearby peaks. We traversed across the border to Albert (16,690'), probably the highest peak in Zaire. On the way down, Joel and Toby, still energetic, went over to climb Alexandra (16,703'), while I took pictures comfortably sacked out on three summit packs. Two rappels and some interesting down climbing brought us to Irene Lakes and a huge prawn curry dinner.

After three days of mostly rain, we were at the Elena Hut (14,900') near the edge of the Stanley Plateau. The "trail" to this hut was memorable. First level bog, then sloping bog, and then the most awful fifth class mud chimney. (Well, hard third!) Finally traverses on very slippery snow-covered rock brought us to the hut. Of course, the porters had scampered up with fifty pounds on their foreheads.

From Elena hut, the route to the Stanley plateau on a clear day is straightforward. Unfortunately, the mists frequent this area, and under the normal conditions of three-foot visibility parties as strong as Tilman and Shipton have spent hours trying to find their way to the peaks. Less experienced parties have spent days trying to find their way down again.

During the next three days we made the twelve thousand-foot slog to the Stanley plateau three and a half times through mist, snow and clouds. We climbed Moebius (16,134'), an insignificant bump in the center of the plateau, and made numerous attempts on the interesting and seldom climbed peaks in the southern plateau. However, bad weather and poor snow defeated these attempts tantalizingly close to the tops.

Finally, we gave up and crossed the valley to Mt. Baker, from which we at last saw the elusive southern peaks. The impressively steep north and west faces of Mt. Baker have mostly been neglected by climbers. Though there are many good lines on the two-mile long, two thousand-foot wall formed by these faces, only three routes have been climbed. Joel and Toby climbed one of them, a long ice route up the northwest ridge. Meanwhile I climbed the south ridge, an easy snow and rock scramble, by myself. The crux of the former route was two pitches of sixty to seventy degree brittle water ice; the crux of the latter route was one thousand feet of heavily overgrown, seemingly vertical mud referred to in the guide book as the "trail." Above these hazards, we all encountered pleasant snow slopes and rapid alterations between hailstorms and warm sun with magnificent views of the huge cornices on the Stanley plateau.





*A ski descent by Joel Bown.*

Then down to Kitandara hut (13,200'), one of the most scenic spots in the Ruwenzori. This luxurious new hut has a superb garden of wildflowers, lobelias and brilliant-hued moss and lichen, two large lakes in the front yard, and a magnificent view of the peaks from the porch.

Hiking from Kitandara out the Mubuku valley took us two and a half days with our fifty-pound loads. First we scaled the trail to Freshfield Pass, occasionally swinging from branch to branch. Then, we plunge-stepped down the slippery mud



*Toby Wheeler rock climbing in a rocky area covered with mud and slime.*

trying not to sink more than knee-deep on each step. The vegetation all the way out the Mubuku Valley is particularly fine: forests of wierd and lovely giant lobelia and groundsel festooned with dripping moss and vivid lichens, myriad delicate wild flowers, the ground covered with thick soft yellow, green, orange moss.

We spent a night at Bujongo, a rock shelter which had been the base camp for the Abruzzi expedition. One area of the shelter contained an

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# THE RUWENZORI

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amazing collection of coprolites. Perhaps some had been left by H. R. H. himself.

Another night at Nyabitaba and then we left the Ruwenzori, just as we had come in — in bright sunlight. Our trip had been quite successful; we'd seen the mountains, climbed a few, and not gotten very wet. Our only affliction was the mild cases of trenchfoot Joel and I got from continual cold wet feet.

On to Mt. Kenya!

Sincerely,  
Arlene

## Trip Information

If you want to visit the Ruwenzori, write the Mountain Club of Uganda, Box 2927, Kampala, Uganda. For about \$1.00 plus postage they'll send you the typed manuscript of "A Guide to the Ruwenzori," which answers most questions about organizing a trip there. Also an excellent 1:25,000 topographic map of the area can be obtained from the club. This is the only topographic map I've ever seen with climbing routes on the peaks indicated with dotted lines.

Our eighteen-day trip to the Mountains of the Moon cost \$80.00 each including transportation from Kampala, an almost excessive quantity of excellent food, sixty porter days including double pay for snow, food, some equipment and insurance for the porters and hut fees (about seventy-five cents per night each.)

The best weather is usually found between December and February or between mid-June and August. Our weather was quite good — for the Mountains of the Moon.

## RECENT BOOKS

*A CLIMBER'S GUIDE TO THE NEEDLES in the Black Hills of South Dakota by Bob Kamps. Published by the American Alpine Club, 113 E. 90th Street, New York, N. Y. 96 pages includes many sketches, maps and pictures.*

The Needles are clustered spires and rocky outcroppings surrounding 7242-foot Harney Peak, the highest mountain east of the Rockies, and provide climbs ranging from boulders to airy 200-foot pinnacles, and from mere scrambles to the most difficult routes a climber cares to take on. A tradition of free climbing has become established in the Needles. Where summits are many and the climbs are short, the challenge is to climb to the top — not to reach the top. There are still some spires that have not been climbed. The feeling among the Needlers is that they should remain so until a climber comes along who is equal to their challenge without "nailing them up."

*BACKPACKING: One Step at a Time by Harvey Manning. Published by the REI Press, Seattle. Cartoons by Bob Cram. Photos by Keith Gunnar. Foreword by Jim Whittaker. \$7.95.*

A well-written, cleverly illustrated book on backpacking, material which has been gleaned from the experiences of staff members of Recreational Equipment, Inc., who have individually hiked in many parts of the world, including Everest.

The book is in three parts: Off and Away on the Trail, Everything You Wanted to Know About Equipment and Then Some, and Elaborating the Art. There are over a hundred photographs, including twenty-five in color. The twenty chapters cover a variety of subjects under the three parts above including the basics of how to walk, selecting equipment, food, etc., to travelling with children, travelling in winter, route finding. An appendix and list of recommended reading is included. Intertwined throughout the book are suggestions for travelers to place the least impact upon the wilderness with a complete chapter on the subject entitled "New Ethics."