

FURTHER AFIELD

The first record we have of activities further afield than the Alps is from Paul and Lin Jensen when in 1976 they joined a twelve-strong party to the Atlas Mountains in Morocco. This was a tough fortnight's trek which culminated in the ascent of four major summits, including the highest, Jbel Toubkhal (13,600 ft).

Staying with Africa, since visited by a number of members, we come to an attempt, sadly repulsed, on Mount Kenya by the Gilberts and Pete Payne (1979). The quotes are from "African Adventure", by Bryan Gilbert, in Magazine no.6:

"Five days before, we had set eyes on Mount Kenya for the first time. Sitting in the bar of the Naro Moro River Lodge, as the last light of the day was being quickly extinguished, Mike jumped to his feet and, pointing through the french windows, claimed he could see the twin peaks. Disbelievingly Pete and I looked on, waiting to see if the formation melted into cloud. The minutes passed by and the image grew stronger in the fading light".

The next day they arrived at a meteorological station after a seventeen-mile drive and a half-day trek with some assistance from a Park Ranger Land Rover. It was "a veritable township of rangers' houses, offices and bandas situated at 10,000 ft. After a quickly-cooked meal of maize and beans we sat down in the banda to spend the late afternoon discussing the route ahead with some retreating climbers. Altitude sickness was a serious handicap to every group we spoke to that night".

After a wet and trying day up to the next hut:

"The next day we rested, our wet clothes hanging round the eaves of the hut, looking like prayer flags blowing in the wind".

The following day, still not fully acclimatised, they continued their trek along the Teliki Valley, eventually reaching McKinders Camp, a ranger outpost and tented encampment. Above them the path rose steeply to the base of the Lewis Glacier and the Austria Hut at 15,000 ft. The next day they crossed the glacier and reached the summit of Point Lenana at 16,355 ft. The day after proved problematic and, ultimately, fatal to their ambitions, with the route not easy to follow and treacherous, with food running low. Reluctantly, they were forced to retreat from a difficult snowfield. Bryan concludes:

"The disappointment was heightened two days later when, retreating to McKinders Camp, we looked back at the snow field that had defeated us and wondered why this sparkling patch of snow had barred our way. Had the lack of food and the mental stress of high altitude impaired our decision-making?"

In 1982 John Huxley climbed Mt Kosciusko and Mt Porcupine in the Snowy Mountains of Australia, both very easy routes. He also climbed Ayers Rock and then joined Rob Payne in New Zealand for the slightly more challenging ascents of Mitre Peak and the Blue Range in the Tararuas (North Island). An account of the latter appears in Magazine no.14.

The first reference to the Himalaya/Karakoram appears in 1985 with Mike Gilbert's account of the first British ascent of Bergancho (5,650m) in the Karakoram. The expedition, though, was clouded by tragedies affecting other climbing groups in the region:

"The Japanese Kansai Karakoram Expedition climbed Masherbrum on 23rd July 1985 and Hidden Peak during August. Three of their members were lost on Hidden Peak. We travelled out with the remaining seven. Doug Scott's expedition was in fact attempting Nanga Parbat which was out of view to the south. Two members of a six-strong South Wales expedition were lost at Snow Lake towards the end of July. They were originally to be part of our party. No-one knows what happened to them and their bodies were never found".

In 1987 Mike found himself on the road to Ruwenzori, the "Mountains of the Moon". His entertaining article, "In the Spirit of Adventure" from magazine no.6, was written "with apologies to William Windham" (Mr Windham wrote an account of "the Glaciers or Ice Alps in Savoy", in 1744). Here is a sample:

"According to your desire I give you an account of our journey to the Ruwenzori. I shall give it in the plainest manner, without endeavouring to embellish it by any florid descriptions, although the beauty and variety of the situations and prospects that we observed in this little frequented part of the world would well deserve to be described by one possessed by great skill in painting and a lively and poetical imagination."

After a dodgy crossing of Uganda (the latest war not yet having come to an end) the party finally set out from Ibanda on 1st August, eventually reaching the Bigo hut. The night was wild and stormy, with hailstorms and in the morning the porters, some of whom went barefoot, demanded double wages. They came to the Bujuku Valley and Groundsel Gully and to a small pass where the porters left to cross to the Scott-Elliot pass in order to descend to Kitandara where the rest of the party intended to join them the following day.



Mike descending from the summit of Alexandra peak
(Photo – Peter Payne)

"Some two hours from this point, suffering much from the thin air at these high altitudes, we came upon the Elena huts situated on the edge of the great Elena Glacier which descends from the plateau".

The following morning they set off up the glacier, roping up when the crevasses became snow-covered. They were forced off the subsequent ridge onto its side where:

"Had it not been for our axes and crampons, we must many times have gone down the precipice into the rain forests of Zaire"

The intrepid group eventually made it to the summit of Alexandra, 16,700 ft, the highest peak in Zaire. Less than a quarter of a mile away stood Margarita, at 16,760 ft the highest peak in Uganda and the highest in the Ruwenzori. There was a huge drop between the two so a retreat by the same route seemed the best option. Mike concludes, in best Windham style:

"This is the substance of what I can recollect of our journey. Though much can be said of the flora and fauna I have, for the sake of brevity, confined myself to the labours of our travels and the story of our climb".

In 1988 Mike returned to Mount Kenya with Pete Payne to ascend the mountain via the Ice Window Route (TD-) (magazine no.10):

"As I moved up the exposed rising traverse directly over the Diamond Couloir, heading for the Great Ice Cave, the mist descended and blotted out the view of Pt. John, Midget Peak and the Teliki Valley. The last step into the Ice Cave was steep but once inside the sense of exposure disappeared completely".

And:

"The window that had at one time to be cut through the frieze of icicles to gain access to the Diamond Glacier is no longer there - with the retreat of the glaciers the window has become a verandah. The icicles that are left hang precariously over the Diamond Couloir and will eventually fall as the snow and glaciers of Mt. Kenya disappear over the next 25 years. It seemed strange that routes such as the Diamond Couloir and the Ice Window which had only been climbed for the first time fifteen years earlier would in not as many years time have gone for ever - the final headwall of the Couloir is already disappearing".

On the summit of Nelion is Howell's Hut, a small aluminium shelter lashed to the rock:

"Pete had been here before but for me, standing on the summit after such a superb climb and especially having failed to reach this point nine years before was so overwhelming that all I could do was stand and look about me. The mist had begun to lift and I had views over a sea of cloud to what I like to think was Kilimanjaro on the far horizon. Gradually the cloud below us began to break up and the Teliki Valley, Point Lenana and the Austrian Hut ten abseils below us became visible. Eventually, all the cloud disappeared giving way to the fine evening weather typical of Mt. Kenya".

In 1989 Nuala Mulholland, John Conroy and a friend called Mike they'd met in southern India found themselves in Jiri after a nerve-wracking bus journey to the start of the Everest Base Camp trek:

"It took us seven days to walk from Jiri to Namche Bazaar; the regional capital of Khumbu, over three or four major passes at 10,000 ft, across rivers on scary bridges, around terraced hillsides and through numerous small villages."

Beyond Namche:

Over the next few days we walked shorter distances in order to acclimatise, as we were ascending quite quickly now. We were definitely in Yak country."

Then:

We made our base in Loubouje, the village down from Gorak Shep at the edge of the Khumbu Glacier. From there we spent a day walking to Kala Pattar, a small peak with excellent views across to Everest and the glacier. It was hard work slogging up to nearly 19,000 ft. The views were astounding, Everest with just a plume of spindrift, and its golden band shining in the sun".

Finally:



Mt. Kenya



On the Ice Window Route (Photos: Mike Gilbert)

"A few days later we walked along the glacier to Base Camp. It was incredible: huge ice seracs and ice-caves, boulders balanced on thin slivers of ice and the sound of cracking and movement all around. The Khumbu Icefall looked a formidable sight".

Nuala concluded:

"Nepal is just stunningly beautiful and very cheap once you get there. BOOK YOUR PLANE TICKET NOW!"

Also in 1989, Mike Gilbert was back in Africa, this time to do Kilimanjaro with Andy Chapman and Pete Payne. All went well until the Heim Glacier was reached. The lower section was ice, not the hoped-for snow, and as the group was only equipped for easy terrain they reluctantly descended to a bivvy cave at 3,900m and subsequently ascended the mountain via the Arrow Glacier route, taking some Diamox on the way. They reached the crater rim, crossed the Furtwangler Glacier, and plodded up the final slope to the summit, Uhuru, at 5,896m (19,340 ft).

In 1991 Mike Gilbert, Andy Chapman, Bill Sutherland and Mal Lamb headed for Island Peak in the Everest region, a sort of reconnaissance for the 1992 trip. Bill S. suffered from severe altitude sickness and had to be escorted down by Mike and J.B. (their Nepalese Sirdar); Mal then accompanied Bill back to Britain. Mike and Andy went on to climb the peak, taking two days from base camp. They found the route more difficult than implied by the book description and were hit by a snowstorm on the way down.



A fine sighting of a silver back gorilla Mt Sabinyo in the Virunga Volcanoes

Later in the year Mike Gilbert, with Pete Payne, returned to the Ruwenzori, approaching the peaks via the rain forests of Zaire. Fresh snow and verglassed rock thwarted an attempt on Margherita, so the duo headed south to the Virunga volcanoes and trekked up Mt Bisoke to visit a family of mountain gorillas, one of only 20-30 groups remaining in the wild.

In November 1991 Andy Chapman set off from Heathrow to spend six months in India and Nepal, running up to the Club 25th Anniversary trip the following April. Andy had been to Nepal before and went to see Mr Shahi, our man in Kathmandu, re the Annapurna circuit which Andy was going on failing the long-shot of joining an expedition. He also wanted to speak to him about the trip the following April. On the Annapurna Circuit he bumped into Ros & Richard, who were prospective members for a while.

The 1992 trip itself is covered in the separate chapter

"The Silver Jubilee".

In 1994 Bill Sutherland decided to return to big mountains. Writing in Magazine no.10 ("Elbrus 1994") he said:

“Immediately after my altitude sickness problems on the GMC Island Peak trip in 1991 I never wanted to go near a large mountain again. The crucial help that I had received from my friends on that trip had allowed me to continue to enjoy smaller hills so I was in no mood to jeopardise that”.

However, he saw an advert in a climbing magazine for a trip to Elbrus in the Caucasus and was hooked. The party was to be four-strong, with four guides. They assembled at Heathrow (Bill, a fit 55 year-old called Nigel, and Gillian & Martin, a young couple with polar trekking experience). The journey took them to Moscow via Paris and then on to Mineraldy Vody, a large town to the north of the Caucasus. From there a three-hour minibus ride took them to Terskol in the Baksan Valley:

“Our hotel looked more like a military establishment and it seemed we were the first guests for a while. Showers were cold, electric installations looked distinctly unsafe and the total available beer supply was two cans. However, this was the nearest to luxury that we would see for the next fortnight”.

The group acclimatised for a few days on the ascents of Orubashi (4,369m) and Mestia Peak (4,058m) before heading for Elbrus itself:

“We arose about 3 a.m. and Yury was worried that it was too warm. We set off in darkness but it soon became light and we could see a few more clouds than normal.

Very soon, we split into three groups. We were roped in pairs, using ice axes but only wearing crampons for the steeper sections. I felt fine until the last thousand feet, which was a bit of struggle, like finishing the 14 Peaks”.

In November, 1994, Mike Gilbert and Andy Chapman returned to Nepal, this time for the ascent of Naya Kanga. They duly reached the summit in a severe snowstorm and:

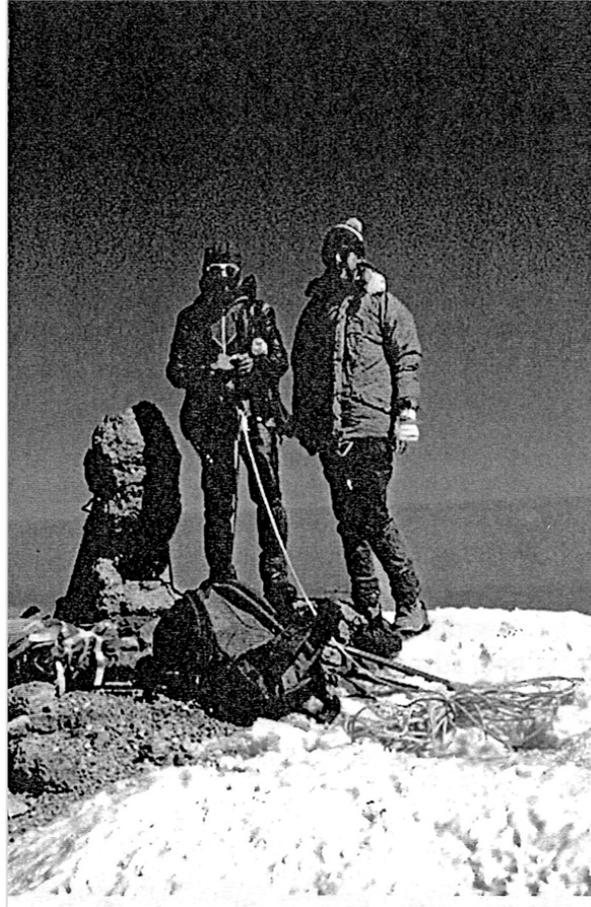
“Forty-eight hours later were back in Kathmandu, courtesy of a group of Japanese tourists and their old Russian helicopter. The bars and restaurants provided a welcome contrast to our struggles on the mountain”. (Magazine no.10, page 20).

Also in 1994 Mike Dagley went to Tanzania with the charity "Health Projects Abroad" to take part in the provision of three new dispensaries in the Tabora region. Raising much of the cost of the trip by a sponsored crossing of the Irish Munros in twenty-four hours, he had of course seen the opportunity to climb Kilimanjaro, which he duly did before rounding off with Christmas in Zanzibar (Mike's epic account of both adventures is in Magazine no.10 page 22).

In the autumn of 1995 Bryn Roberts and Chris Schiller went to look at the huge rock walls of Wadi Rum in Jordan. Bryn became quite poetic when writing about the trip in the Spring, 1996 issue of "The Gwydyr" (no.12):

"The Great Sculptor stopped awhile here and played with his medium, then set the wind and water to work to create the sort of formations that you only see in your dreams. The area was settled by a proud people, the Bedouin, who eke a simple existence out of the land....."

They did a number of routes, including Black Magic (D+), and Hammad's Route (AD+), *"more an expedition than a climb"*, but the epic of the trip was the ascent of Pillar of Wisdom (TD-):



Bill Sutherland with guide Sergei
On the summit of Elbrus 1994
(Photo: Bill Sutherland)



On Ruwenzori (Mt. Stanley), 1987 (Photo: Mike Gilbert)

"Several blind alleys later we located the introductory chimneys which took us onto the pillar proper; a soaring line up onto the Jebel Rum plateau".

Beautiful climbing for a while, then:

"I reached an impasse on the penultimate pitch, a blind traverse around an unprotected, wildly exposed wall. Retreating, we abseiled down into a corner crack which was duly climbed, followed by a protectionless slab to the haven of two friends in a crack".

With Chris watching anxiously, Bryn tried, with the aid of a torch, to find the way to the top:

"It was difficult climbing, with the route above vague and the belay unknown; we resigned ourselves to a hanging belay on the friends and I was lowered down to our bivvy spot. A long night, twelve hours of shuffling, huddling together in a shared down jacket, checking gear in the soft rock and waiting for the glorious sunrise over the Nassrani Towers".

Finally:

"The morning sun baked the rock and I teetered up steep slabs with sparse protection to reach the familiar domed summit plateau".

In 1996 Andy Chapman was offered a job leading a group of thirteen students from a school in Northern Ireland to climb an extinct volcano in Ecuador. They acclimatised in the Paschocha National Park to 3,500m before heading down the Pan American Highway to El Chaupi, from where they would attempt Iliniza Norte:

"Most of the group were O.K. and slept well at 4,600m. Ten of the group made steady progress to the 'Death Pass'. We continued through hard scrambling, using the rope, to 5,050m where I decided to turn back because of strong winds and the icy scrambling ahead".

The group also visited some Inca sites during which some of them climbed Avilahycu (4,198m).

Also in 1996, Mike Gilbert visited the Pamirs with OTT Expeditions (the group that ran the Aconcagua expedition), reaching 23,000 ft on Korzhenevskoya. The ascent was a multicamp affair which involved helicoptering into the base camp at 14,800 ft and then using the standard expedition technique of ferrying loads and climbing fixed ropes. The excitement of the climb and epic descent was equalled by the journey through Tajikistan during a lull in its bloody civil war.

In late 1996 and early 1997, Helen Beddows climbed Mt Cameroun (4,070m) and Kilimanjaro during her tour of Africa.

In 1997 there were trips to America and to Kilimanjaro to mark the Club's Thirtieth Anniversary. The third trip, to Aconcagua, took place in 1998. Details of these three expeditions are in a separate chapter dealing with the Thirtieth Anniversary celebrations.

No doubt future Club magazines will contain more accounts of activities Further Afield.

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