



Our Ruwenzori Safari

By Ian Michael Wright

Photos by the Author

It all started one warm and sunny afternoon in Nairobi, as Kitty and I were relaxing comfortably with the Hempstones in their garden over a cup of tea. During a lull in the conversation Kitty Hempstone looked over to the gentle Ngong Hills in the hazy distance and, surely dreaming, said, "Wouldn't it be lovely to go to the Ruwenzori!"

Filled with enthusiasm in that easy-going atmosphere a safari to the Ruwenzori, the fabled Mountains of the Moon, didn't seem to present any serious problems at all. We all nodded assent. Later, we were to remember that pleasant conversation often and wonder how it could have seemed so simple; especially as we slogged knee-deep through stinking bogs and rotting vegetation, or as we cut our way through the dense and slimy tropical rain forest (with the help of local Bakonjo porters, it must be admitted). I, at least, should have known better, for this was to be my second trip, but by then the decision had been made and there was to be no turning back.

In this simple way our mountain safari was launched.

The Ruwenzori lie along the western border of Uganda just to the north of the equator. Formed by a tremendous block sixty miles long and thirty miles wide which was tilted and thrust up during the development of the great Rift Valley system, the highest peaks rise almost to 17,000 feet, a good 13,000 feet above the floor of the valley. Unlike the other great mountains of East Africa, they are not of volcanic origin although numerous craters, of

a later date, are found in the surrounding countryside.

In the center of the range there are six main mountain masses, each carrying permanent snows and glaciers. No fewer than nineteen summits exceed 15,000 feet. As they are virtually on the equator and capped with snow the weather, to say the least, is almost always unsettled. Warm, moist air from the great Congo forests is swept up over the icy summits, resulting in one of the highest rainfalls recorded anywhere on earth. Climbers joke that it rains at least 366 days a year. If one is lucky enough to escape the constant downpours, thick mists usually make up for it. There are few dry moments in these mountains, even during the supposedly dry seasons, at the end of February and from mid-June to mid-August.

It is just this amount of rain, however, which makes the Ruwenzori as interesting as they are. One of the main attractions, besides the peaks themselves, is the plethora of fantastic giant vegetation which abounds in regions above 10,000 feet and which includes the giant forms of lobelia, groundsel and heather, the latter often growing as high as forty-five feet. This vegetation is almost prehistoric in appearance, and I, for one, wouldn't have been at all surprised to meet a winged pterodactyl at rest among the giant groundsel in the mist.

At lower levels the rain forest is the most luxuriant of dank, dark places imaginable. The rich variety of trees, ferns, and vines only rarely allows the sun to penetrate into the cool world below in

