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Tanzania's Other Mountains

(Plates 53, 54)

After years of stifling bureaucracy Tanzania's doors are opening to more and more visitors. The largest numbers of these are drawn to the major tourist circuit of Ngorongoro and Serengeti in the north of the country, but the greatest and most powerful draw has always been Kilimanjaro. The upside of this development is the improved communication and the greater ease of accessibility to Tanzania's other mountains. Yes, there *are* others apart from Kilimanjaro – a liberal sprinkling of ranges and isolated volcanoes split by the Rift Valley and dotted astride one of the most breathtaking and vast tracts of Africa that there is. This is the great sweep of mountains close to the Kenyan border which defines the perimeter of the Masai steppe. The northern mountains are reflected to the south by another crescent of high ground – the Southern Highlands. These start at Iringa and sweep southwards past the northern limits of Lake Malawi, crossing the bifurcation of the Rift Valley to follow its western arm to the shores of Lake Tanganyika.

Of the mountains to the north, Mt Meru (4566m) is the tallest and the most dramatic. This huge volcano is the fourth or fifth highest peak in Africa (the height of Ras Dashen in Ethiopia has not been established precisely enough to determine which of the two is the higher). Meru is a towering and impressively steep cone which sometimes supports a powdering of snow; its western wall was breached a quarter of a million years ago by a massive avalanche of liquid mud, exposing the crater floor and giving rise to an area of unusual and outstanding beauty which forms the basis of Arusha National Park.

Formerly climbed from Olkokola at the foot of its western slopes (a route which necessitated an ascent of over 2000m of steep volcanic scree), Mt Meru is now normally climbed in two to three days from the east. This marvellous hike, with stops at Miriakamba Hut and Saddle Hut, ascends through magnificent groves of hagenia forest to follow the sweeping crescent of the crater rim. The route affords superb views of the almost perfectly formed subsidiary ash cone in the centre of the crater and of the 2000m near-vertical ramparts of the wall behind it. The latter are unclimbable, as the volcanic rock is dangerously weak and comes away in the hands. The view from the summit extends hundreds of kilometres in all directions, but perhaps the most unforgettable sight from Meru is Kilimanjaro's ice cap in the setting sun.



53. Mount Meru, Tanzania: view of crater from northern rim showing the summit, 4566m, and subsidiary ash cone. (*Graeme Watson*) (p117)



54. Tanzania: Kerimasi, 2614m, as seen from the summit of Lengai. (*Graeme Watson*) (p117)

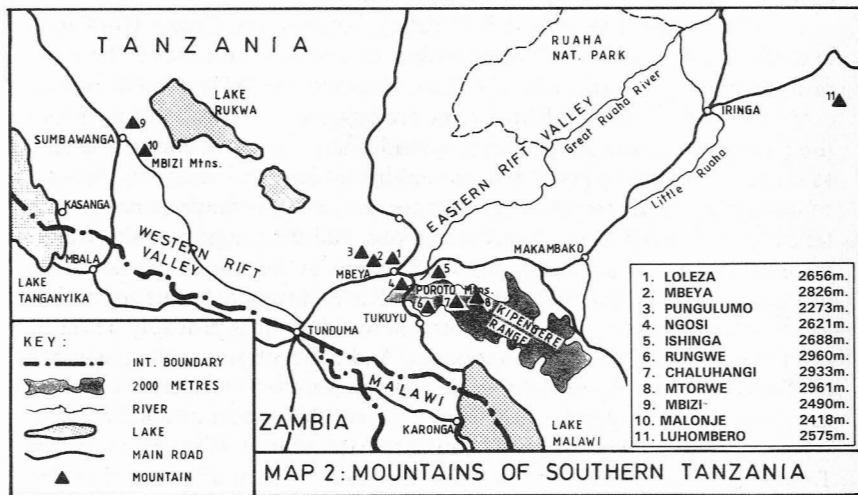
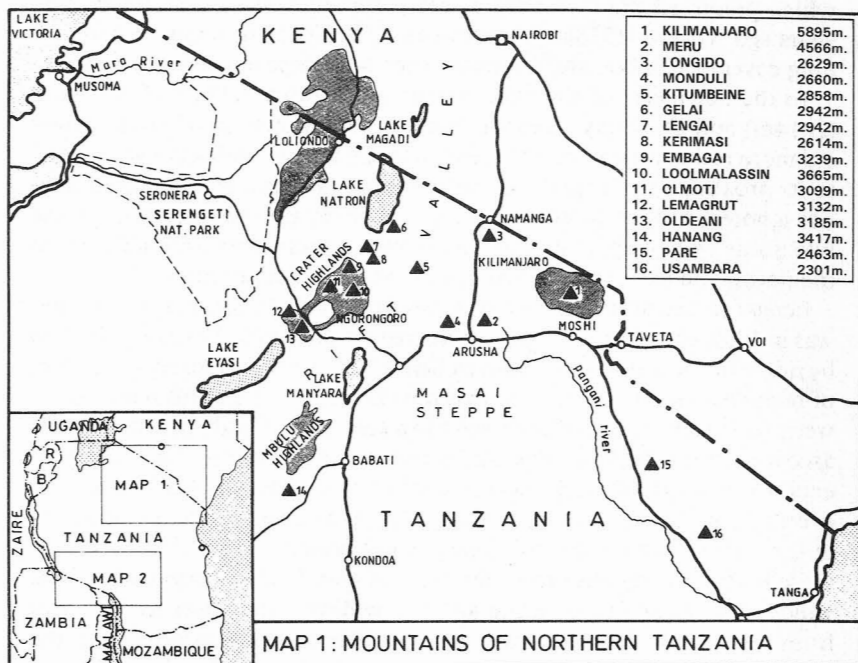
Immediately to the north of Meru is the distinctively shaped hump of Longido (2629m). This massive inselberg of basement gneiss sports, on its western summit, a magnificent tooth of rock whose 1000ft face has attracted a modest number of ascents over the years. Thick thorn bushes and elephants are two of the hazards to be encountered on the ascent; but the upper ridgeline of this hill provides a vantage point 1500m above the vast reaches of the Masai plains and the hot alkaline wastes of Lake Natron in the floor of the Rift Valley to the west.

The area west and southwest of Meru, straddling the Rift Valley itself, is studded with isolated volcanic peaks and ranges of volcanic origin of all shapes and sizes. Sometimes referred to as the Great Cauldron Mountains, these are dominated by the Crater Highlands, a mass of high ground reaching over 3650m derived from eight interlocking volcanoes. The most prominent, though not the highest, of these is Ngorongoro, whose immense caldera of some 20km in diameter is the focal point of the Ngorongoro Conservation Area and of the northern Tanzania tourist circuit. Many who visit Ngorongoro, though impressed with its physical splendour, cannot help but be put off by the depredations of modern tourism and, in hurrying on, fail to explore and take advantage of some of the glorious and isolated mountain walking just off the beaten track to the north and south.

Crossing Ngorongoro Crater to the north one enters a high triangular plateau, described to the west and north by the two huge craters of Olmoti (3099m) and Embagai (3239m) and to the south-east by the towering peak of Loolmalassin, Tanzania's third highest mountain at 3665m. Much of the plateau is wide open grassland, populated by dignified and courteous Masai, who have yet to learn the demeaning ways associated with tourism. It is criss-crossed with cattle trails dating back thousands of years to earlier peoples. The upper slopes of Loolmalassin and Embagai are cloaked with a uniform cover of stunted heather. Walks to these peaks are long and exhilarating though water is scarce.

The views are vast and there is always the added excitement of coming across wildlife, either on foot or prowling close to one's tent while camped at night. Nothing can set nerves tingling quite like a lion's breath a foot or two from the flimsy canvas of a mountain tent! Not to be missed on such a visit is the crater of Embagai, a huge feature 7km in diameter and 1000m deep. At its floor is an emerald green alkaline lake, around whose edge one can wander in peaceful isolation. This marvellous walking country is only tarnished by Olmoti, whose similarly immense crater offers little except the frustration of bashing one's way across boggy tussock, or getting an equal battering from the dense heather and stinging-nettles which cover the crater rim.

Two other large mountains are situated south-west of Ngorongoro. Lemagrut (3132m), a fine mountain with grassy slopes and clumps of woodland, provides a vantage point over the Serengeti plains and the Olduvai gorge. It was volcanic ash from a minor volcano on Lamagrut's flanks



which preserved the footprints of early hominids at Laetoli 3½ million years ago. Oldeani (3185m), a wetter and cloudier peak, supports a forbidding cover of bamboo and commands the landscape above Lake Eyasi.

To the north-east of the main massif are the two outliers of Kerimasi (2614m) and Ol Doinyo Lengai (2942m), the 'Mountain of God'. These are more recent arrivals on the scene, with Lengai still being active. Owing to its proximity to Lengai's dramatic crater, Kerimasi is more often than not ignored, though those who make the effort are rewarded with a fine hike some 1400m up its steep grassy slopes, usually from Loluni Crater to the north, and can enjoy a circuit of its wooded double crater.

Lengai to the north forms a near perfect cone. Its last major eruption was in 1967, but a minor eruption occurred in June 1993. Formerly climbed by ridges on its northern and eastern flanks, which necessitated some 2100m of relentless ascent, the mountain is now normally tackled from the north-west, where a vehicle can be driven to an elevation of 1400m, reducing the ascent to some 1500m. This shortened route allows time in the day to explore the crater, though there is a lot to be said for camping at the top overnight if possible. There is nearly always some minor action going on in the crater, with several subsidiary cones present on its floor. Some of these intermittently eject thin streamers of treacle black carbonalite lava, which oxidises and turns white after a few days. The views to the north from the summit over the crater to Lake Natron and westward over the Rift wall to the Crater Highlands are unsurpassable and the elixir of a potential eruption only serves to enhance them!

Located on the floor of the Rift Valley, between the Crater Highlands and Meru, are a number of other extinct or dormant volcanoes, the most prominent of which are Gelai (2942m), Kitumbeine (2858m) and Monduli (2660m). Both Gelai and Kitumbeine are huge mountains, towering above their surroundings and supporting upland islands of forest and permanent settlements. Walks up both these mountains are long and satisfying, though route-finding in the forest requires some care, and precautions need to be taken to avoid buffalo, which are numerous, and the stinging-nettles which must be amongst the densest and most vicious in the world. Monduli is a prominent forested beacon on the eastern Rift escarpment but its vegetation forms too dense a barrier for pleasurable walking. It is probably better to leave this mountain to the connoisseurs and concentrate on the pleasures of Tarosero to its immediate west. This is another mountain with fine open grassed ridges perched high above the parched plains of the Rift floor.

The most isolated of the Great Cauldron Mountains is Hanang, at 3417m Tanzania's fourth highest mountain. Located at the southern end of the Mbulu highlands in territory occupied by the Barabaig, a Cushitic people, Hanang has much of the feel of Meru about it, though on a slightly less immense scale. Approaching via Bahati and Katesh, the ascent is easiest from Gendabi to the west, or directly north up the rim of the crescent-shaped remnant of the crater wall from Katesh. A 1500m climb brings one

to a marvellous serrated knife-edged ridgeline leading to the summit, with massive views over Lake Balangida and the Malbadow escarpment. As with their Ethiopian counterparts, mountain tops are holy places to the Barabaig and holy men will sometimes be encountered on the upper reaches of this mountain.

Other interesting ranges in the north of the country include the Pare and Usambara mountains between Kilimanjaro and the port of Tanga. Like Longido, these mountains are metamorphic in origin. The high rainfall they attract has encouraged fine stands of forest and the evolution over the ages of numerous endemic species of animal and plant life. (The original African violet grown in pots worldwide came from these mountains.) Sadly much of this is under threat as the fertility of the hills has attracted ever-increasing settlement over the years and they are now densely populated. Despite the human numbers, both mountain ranges have much to offer, including some of the prettiest and most spectacular scenery, as well as aggressively winding mountain access roads.

The best starting point for exploring the huge choice of mountains on offer in the south of the country is Mbeya, located at the point where the eastern and western arms of the Rift Valley diverge. Though similar in scale and with the same geological mix of metamorphic and volcanic rocks, the landscape here has a distinctly different feel to that of Northern Tanzania. This is partly due to the higher level of sedentary agriculture in the highlands, as opposed to the less obtrusive cattle keeping of the Masai pastoralists in the north. But it is probably more the result of the distinct changes in the seasons throughout the year. While the north generally enjoys two wet and two dry seasons each year, the south experiences one long wet season (November to April) and one long dry season. The contrast between the two seasons is marked, the wet season being typified by crystal clear views, muddy roads and difficult access, whilst the dry season comprises long, hot dusty days and culminates in huge grass fires whose clouds of smoke obscure the landscape and reduce everything to a grey haze. In between times the countryside is subject to marvellous changes of colour, the miombo woodlands of the plains turning like trees in a European autumn, whilst the flowers and purple grasses of the chilly uplands give them the feel of heather-clad Scottish highlands.

Forming a dramatic backdrop to the town of Mbeya is the Mbeya Range, rising to over 2700m. The peak immediately north of the town, Loleza (2656m), is now unfortunately surmounted by a radio repeater station and it is no longer possible to climb to its summit. However, there is some fine walking to be had on the upland grassland of its flanks within easy reach of the town. Mbeya peak (2826m) itself is some 6km to the west and can be approached either from the spectacular escarpment road to Chunya to the north, or by a more demanding hike from Mbalizi in the floor of the Rift to the south. From the summit the jagged ridgeline can be followed by eye to the lower summit of Pungalumo (2273m) at the end of the range, beyond

which the glint of Lake Rukwa can sometimes be made out far away to the west. The Mbeya range provides marvellous ridge-top walking with ground orchids and other flowers underfoot. An eye has to be kept on the weather, however, as hailstorms can be sudden and violent.

Standing on the opposite side of the Rift Valley, south of Mbeya, are the Poroto Mountains and Kipengere Range. The former are generally forested volcanoes, whilst the latter is a huge area of frequently bleak moorland. Perhaps the most dramatic of the Porotos is Ngosi (2621m), a huge brooding mountain subject to some of Tanzania's heaviest rainfall and whose summit and crater are often enveloped in dense cloud. When this lifts, an eerily silent lake is revealed in the depths of the crater and the atmosphere is haunting.

South-east of Ngosi is another huge volcano, Rungwe (2960m), which occupies a great tract of forested land and dominates the staggering scenery of Unyakyusa at the northern end of Lake Malawi. It is a toss-up whether Rungwe or Mtorwe is the highest mountain in Southern Tanzania, though nominally Mtorwe (2961m), the highest point of the Kipengere range, is the higher by one metre. Together with Ishinga (2688m) and Chaluhangi (2933m), Mtorwe is located on the Elton Plateau, named after the explorer Frederick Elton who crossed the area in 1877. This huge expanse of rolling grassland is famous for the extraordinary variety of flowers which proliferate, particularly between October and April. The humped form of Chaluhangi is on the southern periphery of the plateau overlooking Lake Malawi, whilst Mtorwe and Ishinga tower above the headwaters of the Great Ruaha River and the Usangu plain.

West of Mbeya the long road can be followed to Sumbawanga located on the high plateau of the Mbizi Mountains sandwiched between Lakes Rukwa and Tanganyika. Surrounded by extensive forest, Mbizi peak (2490m) stands on the escarpment 1500m above the remote and mysterious Rukwa, whilst Malonje (2418m) is a lower and more accessible hump on the road south to Mpui.

Other fine ranges add to the huge variety of scenery and hiking potential to be found in Tanzania and these include the Nguru and Uluguru mountains, in the vicinity of Dodoma and Morogoro. On two other ranges, which have recently been declared wilderness national parks, only walking is allowed and no vehicles are permitted. Accessible only by lake steamer, the Makari mountains, on the shores of Lake Tanganyika, are the home of large numbers of chimpanzees, while Luhombero is a secluded and little visited massif south of the Ruaha gorge. Reaching these less accessible mountain areas can be a task requiring more than a little ingenuity, but the result may be the discovery of some marvellous unspoiled wilderness with the atmosphere and challenge of genuinely remote exploration.