

### Kilembe Trail

UWA plans to reopen an alternative route into the Rwenzori from Kilembe near Kasese. Check with UWA for developments.

### Health and safety on the trail

Hikers should familiarise themselves with the symptoms and treatment of hypothermia and the various forms of altitude sickness (see Osmaston's Guide to the Rwenzori). Above 2500m, altitude sickness can affect anyone, irrespective of age, fitness or previous mountain experience. The most effective treatment is descent to a lower altitude.

### Good behaviour at the huts and on the trail is appreciated

- The park operates a 'Leave no trace' policy. Collect all waste and make sure you or your porters take it out of the park.
- Please use the latrines provided at huts.
- Respect others in the huts by sharing space at the stoves and talking quietly.
- Observe the prohibition on wood fires which degrade the park's vegetation. Gas cookers are provided by RMS.
- During periods of bad weather, it may be necessary to wait more than one night at huts to ease congestion ahead.
- Minimise damage to the trails by following your guide closely and avoid making new paths.

### Further reading

Map and Guide to the Rwenzori. (Andrew Wielochowski)  
Guide to the Rwenzori. (Henry Osmaston)  
Rwenzori Mountains National Park: Map of Glaciers and Glaciation. (Henry Osmaston & Georg Kaser)  
The Bradt Guide to Uganda. (Philip Briggs)  
Africa's Mountains of the Moon. (Guy Yeoman)  
Ruwendori: A Range of Images. (David Pluth)  
Uganda's Great Rift Valley. (Andrew Roberts)  
Uganda's Mountains of the Moon. (Andrew Roberts) (in prep)

### Tariffs

For information on fees for park entrance and activities, please refer to the UWA tariff sheet.

20% of all park entry fees are shared with communities living in park boundary parishes in order to spread the benefits of ecotourism and generate local support for conservation.



### For more information contact:

#### Uganda Wildlife Authority

Plot 7, Kira Road, Kamwokya  
P.O. Box 3530, Kampala  
Tel: +256-414-4355000  
Fax: +256-414-346291  
Email: [uwa@uwa.or.ug](mailto:uwa@uwa.or.ug)  
Website: [www.uwa.or.ug](http://www.uwa.or.ug)

#### Rwenzori Mountains National Park

P.O. Box 188, Kasese  
Tel: +256-4834-44629  
E-mail: [rmnp@uwa.or.ug](mailto:rmnp@uwa.or.ug)

#### Rwenzori Mountaineering Services

Annex building, UWA Headquarters, Kamwokya  
Tel: +256-414-4355000

#### RMS Kasese Office

Saad Hotel building, Kasese  
Tel: 04834 44235  
Email: [rms@africaonline.co.ug](mailto:rms@africaonline.co.ug)

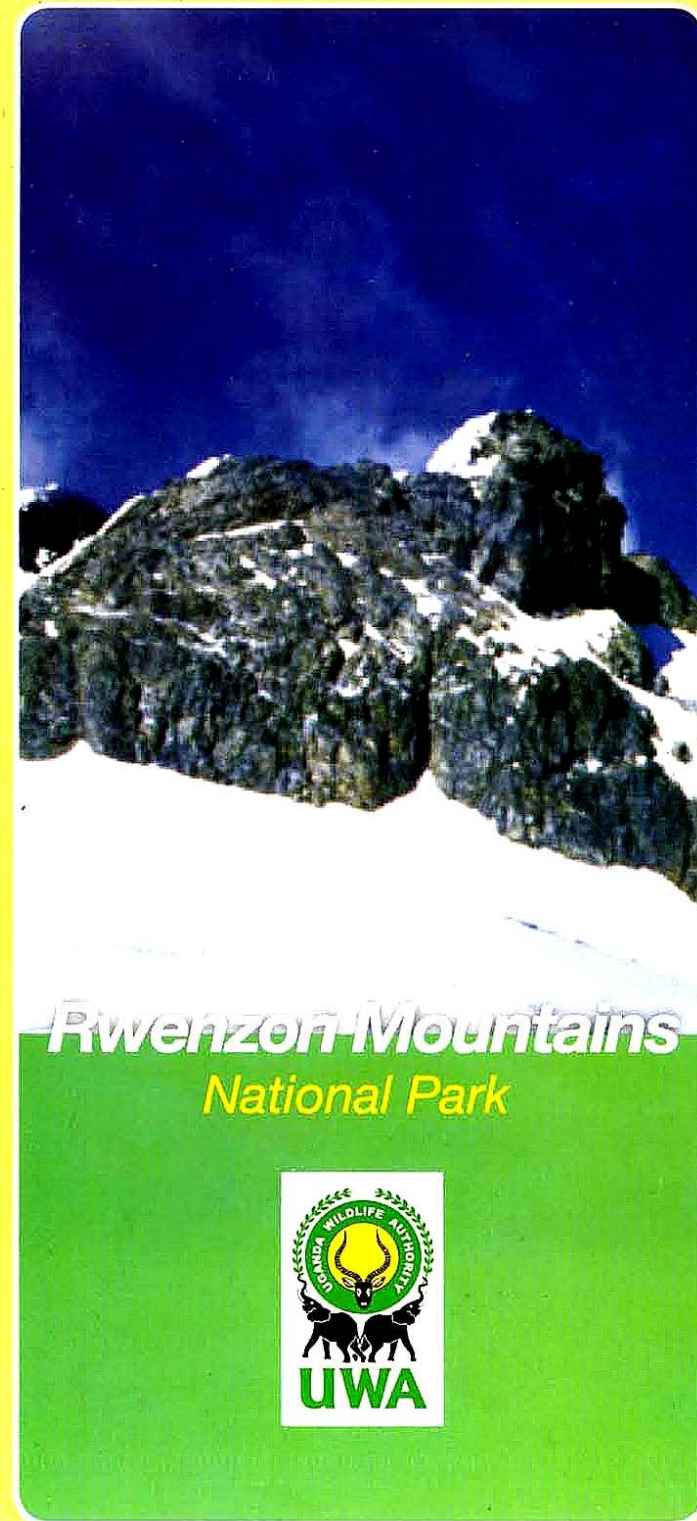
#### Tourism Uganda

Impala House, Kimathi Avenue  
P.O. Box 7211, Kampala, Uganda.  
Tel : 256-414 342196/7 Fax : 256-414 342188  
Website: [www.visituganda.com](http://www.visituganda.com) E-mail: [utb@starcom.co.ug](mailto:utb@starcom.co.ug)

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## Introduction

In AD150, the Alexandrine geographer Ptolemy wrote of a snow capped mountain range, deep in the heart of Africa that, he claimed, was the source of the Nile and which he called the Mountains of the Moon. Over the centuries this curious notion of tropical snow faded into mythology and, when John Speke found the Nile's exit from Lake Victoria, a place in fiction for the Mountains of the Moon seemed assured. But then, in 1889, Henry Stanley emerged from central Africa to announce that such a mountain did exist. He mapped it by its local name of Rwenjura – or 'rainmaker'.

In due course mountaineers explored Ptolemy's Mountains of the Moon. Though just miles north of the Equator, they found in the high Rwenzori glaciers and snow peaks whose meltwaters represent the highest springs of the Nile. These trickle downwards into U-shaped glacial valleys where, supplemented by up to 2500mm of rain/year, they saturate the broad valley floors to form great soggy bogs. Within these rain and mist filled troughs, loom specimens of Africa's bizarre high altitude vegetation and stunted trees enveloped by colourful mosses and draped with beards of lichen.

This remarkable landscape is bisected by the Uganda-Congo border which passes through Mt. Stanley the highest peak. The Ugandan Rwenzori is protected by the Rwenzori Mountains National Park and, in Congo by the Virunga National Park. The park can be explored along a 7-day trail that meanders along the Mobuku and Bujuku valleys beneath the highest peaks. Though distances are short, the terrain, altitude and weather combine to create a tough trek, the difficulty of which should not be underestimated.

After its sighting by Stanley, the weather confounded several attempts to scale (or even observe) the mountain's main peaks. In 1906, the Italian Duke of Abruzzi timed his expedition more carefully, making his attempt during June and July. He and his companions succeeded in scaling, mapping and photographing all of the main peaks and establishing the layout of the high Rwenzori.

## How to get there

The Rwenzori lies a few kilometres north of the equator, rising over 4000m above the floor of the Albertine Rift Valley. The park trailhead at Nyakalengija can be reached from Kampala from the north via Fort Portal (375km) or the south passing through Mbarara and Queen Elizabeth National Park (450km). Nyakalengija is 17km off the Kasese-Fort Portal road and 25km north of Kasese town. Charter flights to Kasese can be arranged from Kampala (Kajjansi) or Entebbe.

## Flora and fauna

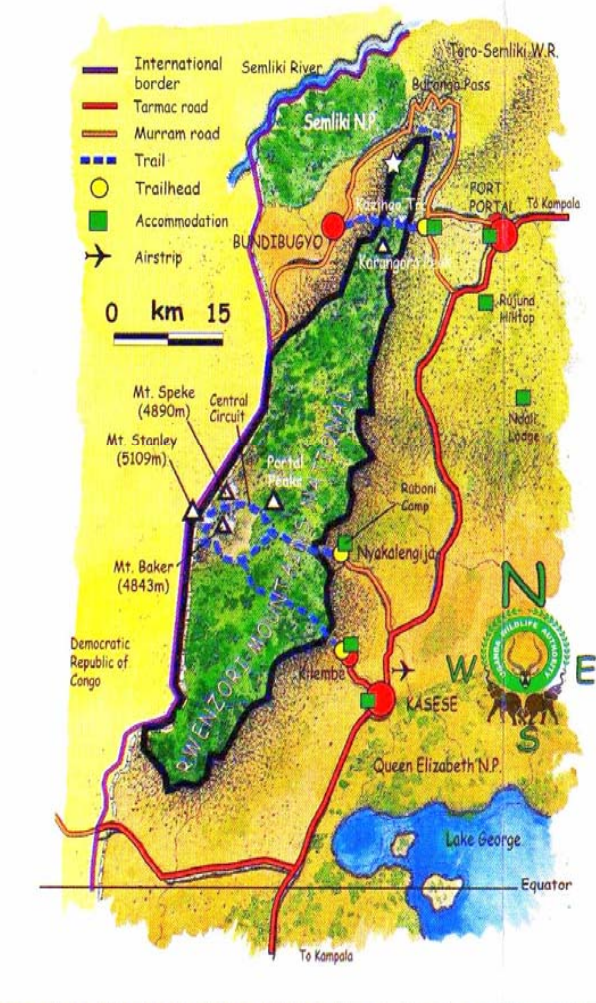
The Rwenzori today is remarkable for its flora rather than its fauna. Elephant, buffalo, giant forest hog, bushbuck, chimpanzee and leopard are present but are rarely seen. However primates such as black and white colobus and the blue monkey may be seen, as well as the hyrax, the elephant's diminutive cousin.

The Rwenzori is home to 241 bird species of which 19 are endemic to the mountain. Several birds are limited to just a few forests along the Albertine rift, notably the Rwenzori Turaco. In the alpine zone look for the Malachite Sunbird.

An ascent of the mountain passes through a series of increasingly dramatic vegetation zones. Above the Bakonzo farmlands, montane forest (1500-2500m) gives way to bamboo stands and messy tangles of *Mimulopsis* (2500-3000m). This is followed by the lovely Heather-Rapeneea zone (3000-4000m), which is characterised by giant tree-heathers (*Erica* spp.), garishly coloured mosses and drab beards of lichen. Spectacular forms of giant lobelia (*Lobelia* spp.) and groundsels (*Senecio* spp.) are first found in this zone. These plants persist into the highest, Alpine zone (3800-4500m) where they are joined by wiry but pretty thickets of *Helichrysum* or 'everlasting flowers'.

The Bigo Bogs in the Upper Bujuku Valley, are colonised by tussocks of sedge (*Carex* spp). These provide climbers with useful if disconcertingly wobbly 'stepping stones' with which to negotiate these notoriously muddy sections.

## Rwenzori Mountains National Park



Map: Andrew Roberts.  
Photos: David Pluth and Andrew Roberts.





## Accommodation

The mountain's Central Circuit is provided with basic mountain huts (you should take your own sleeping bags and sleeping mats). Camping and rooms are available at the Circuit's Nyakalengija trailhead at Ruboni Campsite and RMS Guesthouse. The trailhead for the proposed Kilembe Trail is served by Rwenzori Backpackers Hostel. Other options exist in Kasese, Fort Portal and in nearby Queen Elizabeth National Park.

### Planning your trip

While those with the inclination can scale the main peaks, most visitors are content to follow the Central Circuit trail to enjoy their magnificent setting. Time your ascent for the driest months which are July-August and December-February. Pack for an alpine expedition, taking a good quality sleeping bag and raingear, and a supply of spare warm clothes, especially socks. There will be little opportunity to dry clothes and equipment. Strong boots capable of being fitted with crampons are essential for the peaks. A pair of cheap gumboots are better suited to the boggy conditions of the Central Circuit.

The Central Circuit hike is organised through the Rwenzori Mountaineering Services (RMS) and starts from Nyakalengija. RMS will provide a guide, cook, and sufficient porters to carry your heavy equipment and food, leaving you to carry a small pack with raingear, spare clothes, camera, water bottle and snacks. UWA will provide a ranger escort. You will be responsible for providing your own food, cooking equipment and fuel, first aid kit, and sleeping bag and mat. Some equipment, such as crampons, ice-axes, ropes and harnesses, can be rented from RMS. Food can be purchased in Kasese or Kampala but specialised, lightweight dried meals should be brought with you to Uganda. Note that park fees are paid separately to UWA.

Expeditions with technical mountaineering guides and quality equipment can also be arranged through several companies internationally or, if in Uganda, the Adrift Adventure Company.

### The Central Circuit Trail

#### Day One: Nyakalengija (1615m) – Nyabitaba Hut (2651m)

The Central Circuit starts at the RMS offices at Nyakalengija. You should arrive in the morning to allow ample time to rent equipment and meet your guides and porters. The trail begins by passing through farmland to the park boundary beyond which it follows the Mubuku river, crossing its Mahoma tributary before starting a long, steep climb up onto a massive ridge to reach Nyabitaba hut. The hike takes around 5 hours.

During this part of the trip you may hear chimpanzee and see black and white colobus, blue monkey and the brilliantly coloured Rwenzori turaco.

#### Day Two: Nyabitaba (2651m) – Mubuku River (2600m) John Matte Hut (3505m)

This involves a demanding 7+ hour trek up to John Matte hut. The Central Circuit 'proper' starts a few hundred metres beyond Nyabitaba where the trail divides. The right fork leads to the peaks up the Bujuku valley while the path on the left is used for the subsequent descent.

The trail leads to the Kurt Shafer Bridge which crosses the Mubuku valley just below the river's confluence with the Bujuku valley. Beyond the river, a muddy, slippery trail climbs steadily up through bamboo forest.

After a five hour trek is the start of the giant lobelia and groundsel zone, a vegetation type limited to East Africa's highest mountains. The final hour's walk to John Matte hut passes through a challenging bog full of extraordinary plants.

#### Day Three: John Matte (3505m) to Bujuku (3962m)

The route fords the Bujuku River as you cross the Lower Bigo bog. A steep climb follows to reach the Upper Bigo Bog where a boardwalk has been constructed to assist walkers. In clear weather, there are superb views of Mt. Stanley at the head of this cavernous, glacier-carved valley. Above the bog, after a long steady climb over glacial moraine, criss-crossing the river, the trail reaches the lovely Lake Bujuku.

The last stage of the 3-5 hour hike to Bujuku Hut past Cooking Pot Cave is perhaps the muddiest stage of the expedition. The hut is well placed for parties climbing Mt. Speke.

#### Day Four: Bujuku (3962m) – Scott Elliott Pass (4372m) Kitandara (4023m)

From Bujuku hut, the trail crosses more mud before climbing steeply through a forest of giant groundsel, climbing a short metal ladder to ascend the Groundsel Gully. Above the gully, a branch in the trail climbs directly to Elena Hut (4430m) for the ascent of Margherita peak on Mt. Stanley (5109m). This climb needs an ice axe, mountain boots, crampons and ropes.

The main trail continues up a steep scree slope over Scott Elliot pass, the highest point on the circuit. The pass provides fabulous views back down the Bujuku valley and of Mts. Stanley and Baker towering above. Beyond the pass, the route runs downhill beneath the massive cliffs of Mt. Baker. After passing Upper Lake Kitandara, the 3-5 hour hike ends at the hut beside Lower Lake Kitandara, a beautiful site surrounded by towering peaks.

#### Day Five: Kitandara (4023m) – Freshfield Pass (4282m) - Guy Yeoman (3505m)

Freshfield is a long flat traverse through tracts of fabulously colourful moss (and more mud), beyond which the long descent to Nyakalengija begins. The hike to Guy Yeoman hut takes around 5 hours. The hut enjoys a lovely location close to the Mubuku River with terrific views of the looming Mt. Baker to the north.

#### Day Six:/Seven: Guy Yeoman (3505m) – Nyabitaba (2651m)

The descent to Nyabitaba takes around 5 hours but with an early start it is possible to make it all the way down to Nyakalengija. Below Guy Yeoman, the route descends the cliffs of Kichuchu. Beyond Kichuchu the muddy path crosses the Mubuku River twice before climbing upwards to Nyabitaba to complete the circuit.

#### Day Seven: Nyabitaba (2651m) - Nyakalengija (1615m)

The descent from Nyabitaba to Nyakalengija takes 2-3 hours.