

KILIMANJARO

**ASCENT PREPARATIONS, PRACTICALITIES AND
TREKKING ROUTES TO THE 'ROOF OF AFRICA'**

About the Author

Alexander Stewart has been writing guidebooks for 15 years and is the author of six trekking guides around the world. He has a passion for wild places and is particularly interested in mountains. Throughout his adult life he has walked in them, written about them and photographed them. However, he doesn't often find himself on top of them, except on home soil in the UK. Kilimanjaro made a significant impression on him during his first ascent in 1999, and he has subsequently been drawn back repeatedly to the 'Roof of Africa'.

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by Alexander Stewart

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*For Rory and Merryn and Esme.
And for Katie, of course.*

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Front cover: Path across the Saddle (Marangu Route) (Martchan/Shutterstock.com)

Back cover (left to right): Resting porter (Machame Route) (photo: Alessandro Zappalorto/Shutterstock.com); Jubilant celebrations at the summit (Summit, Uhuru Peak); Camp on Shira Plateau (Machame Route) (photo: Potifor/Shutterstock.com).

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Warning

All mountain activities contain an element of danger, with a risk of personal injury or death. The treks described in this guidebook are no exception. Under normal conditions wandering the trails of Kilimanjaro will be neither more nor less hazardous than walking among big mountains anywhere in the world, but trekking involves physically demanding exercise in a challenging landscape, where caution is advised and a degree of stamina is often required, and it should be undertaken only by those with a full understanding of the risks, and with the training and experience to evaluate them.

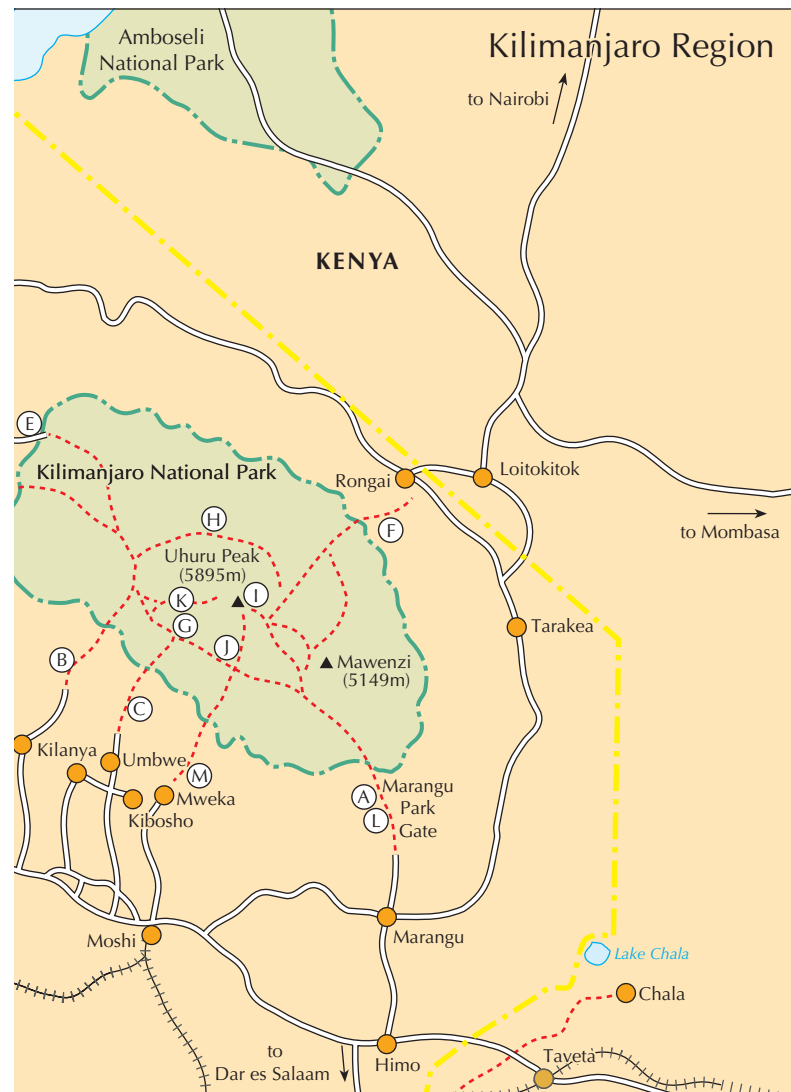
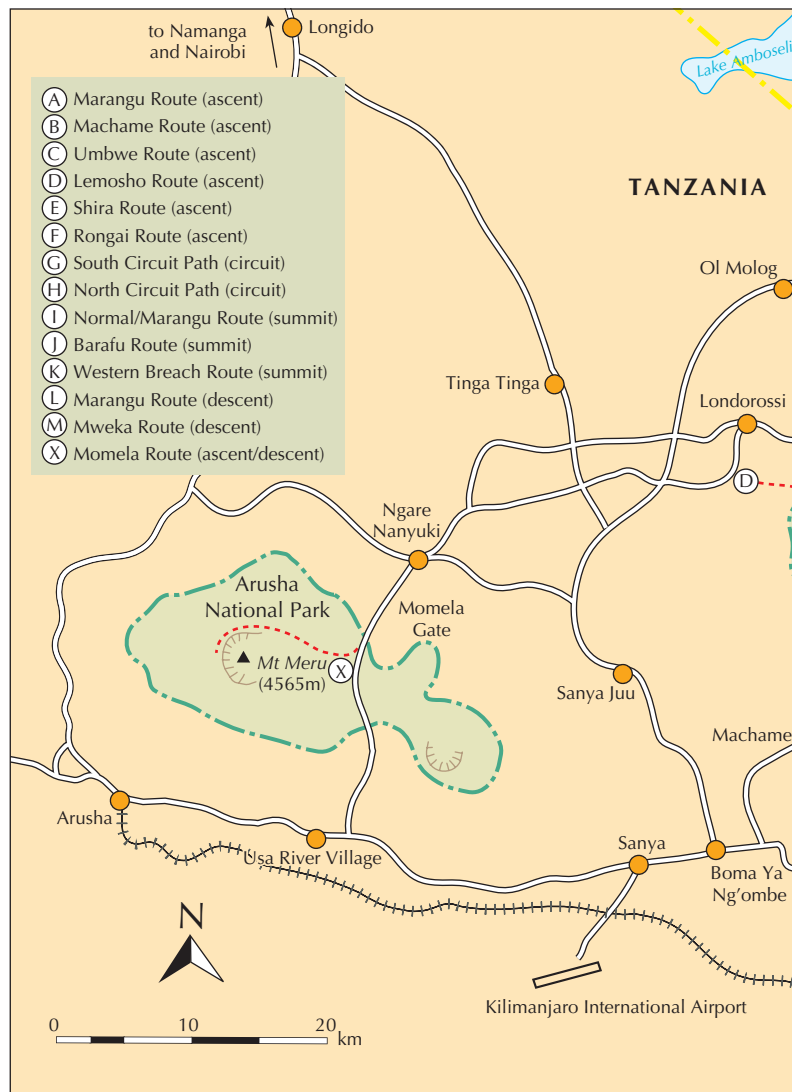
In particular it is important to be aware at all times of the effects of altitude, the need for acclimatisation and the risk of acute mountain sickness.

Trekkers should be properly equipped for the routes undertaken. While every care and effort has been taken in the preparation of this guide, the user should be aware that conditions can be highly variable and change quickly. Rockfall, landslip and crumbling paths can alter the character of a route, and the presence of snow and the possibility of avalanche must be carefully considered, for these can materially affect the seriousness of a trek.

Readers are warned that sometimes a few unfortunate trekkers die of hypothermia or acute mountain sickness, while some simply lose their balance and fall from the trail due to a momentary loss of concentration. Since there is no organised mountain rescue service in Tanzania, such as exists in some mountain regions of Europe, self-help may be your only option if an accident occurs.

Therefore, except for any liability that cannot be excluded by law, neither Cicerone nor the author accepts liability for damage of any nature (including damage to property, personal injury or death) arising directly or indirectly from the information in this guide.







Ascent route	Marangu	Machame	Umbwe	Lemosho	Shira	Rongai
Length	29km	35km	14km	23km	13.5km	33km
Usual time	3 days	4 days	2 days	3 days	2 days	4 days
Grade	Moderate/hard	Hard	Hard	Moderate/hard	Moderate/hard	Moderate/hard
Vegetation	Good forest sections and moorland sections.	Superb ecological mix. Good forest and moorland sections.	Outstanding forest section. Short moorland section.	Very good forest section. Interesting Shira Plateau section.	No route through forest section on moorland section. Interesting moorland section.	Poor lower slopes, deforested and cultivated. Excellent moorland section.
Interest	Lower slopes and forest very interesting. Tedious summit route. Must retrace footsteps on descent route.	Stunning scenery and exceptional views.	Good lower slopes. Excellent views of summit, Barranco Valley and Southern Icefields.	Good forest approach, excellent moorland section and fine traverse of Southern Icefields.	Good Shira Plateau section and fine traverse below Southern Icefields. 4WD access to high trailhead reduces acclimatisation potential.	Good quality route that provides exceptional access to Mawenzi. Tedious summit bid and descent on Marangu Route, which can be crowded.
Summit ascent route	Normal/Marangu	Barafu or Western Breach	Barafu or Western Breach	Barafu or Western Breach	Barafu or Western Breach	Normal/Marangu
Descent route	Marangu	Mweka	Mweka	Mweka	Mweka	Marangu
Total distance	70km	61km	48.5km	67.5km	58km	74km
Total time on mountain (minimum recommended time)	5 days	6 days	4 or 5 days	6 or 7 days	6 days	5 days

ROUTES COMPARISON TABLE

An aerial view of Kilimanjaro reveals a tangle of paths snaking their way across the slopes of the mountain. These paths are interconnected and in the course of a complete climb you will use an ascent route, a summit ascent route and a descent route, with the latter determined by the former. In total, there are six ascent paths that climb across the lower slopes of Kilimanjaro. Working your way clockwise around the mountain from the north-east, these are the Rongai Route (Route F), Marangu Route (Route A), Umbwe Route (Route C), Machame Route (Route B), Lemosho Route (Route D) and Shira Route (Route E). At around 4000m these trails all merge with a circular route that runs around Kibo cone, called either the Northern or Southern Circuit Path (Routes H and G respectively), depending on which side of the mountain you are on. Having joined this circuit path, you are faced with three ascent routes to the crater rim: the Normal/Marangu

Route (Route I) from Kibo Huts to Stella Point, the Barafu Route (Route J) from Barafu to Gillman's Point and the Western Breach (Route K) from Arrow Glacier to the crater floor. If you used the Rongai Route or Marangu Route you will climb to the crater via the Normal/Marangu Route. If you used the other paths then you will have a choice of climbing either the longer but easier Barafu Route, or the shorter but more difficult Western Breach. From each arrival point on the crater there is then a short section of trail to the actual summit at Uhuru Peak. Having reached the Roof of Africa, your return journey is pre-determined by the ascent path that you used. If you came up the mountain on the Rongai Route or Marangu Route, you will return via the Marangu Route (Route L). If you ascended by any of the other routes, you will use a dedicated descent path called the Mweka Route (Route M), which falls off the southern side of the mountain below Barafu Hut.

There are a number of ways to approach and climb Kilimanjaro. Six forest and heath/ moorland routes begin on the lower slopes and ascend to 3500–4000m. These routes then usually merge with the Southern Circuit Path before linking to one of three final summit ascent routes. From the summit there are two separate descent routes that are affiliated to each of the earlier climbs. The easiest way to make sense of this jumble is to study the Kilimanjaro region map.

Typically, when you sign up with an outfitter to tackle Kilimanjaro, you sign up for a particular combination of routes; the most common might see you undertake the Machame-Mweka Route, which would climb the mountain along the Machame Route and then return to its foot along the Mweka Route. The second most popular trek uses the Marangu Route as both an ascent and descent route. If you sign up for one of the other paths, you will agree to tackle a particular combination of ascent and descent routes in advance of your departure.

Each of the six initial ascent routes – the Marangu (Route A), Machame (Route B), Umbwe (Route C), Lemosho (Route D), Shira (Route E) and Rongai (Route F) routes – are all detailed in the Ascent routes section (please see the Routes on Kilimanjaro map and the Route comparison table at the beginning of the book). There are also full descriptions of the three final ascent routes – Normal/Marangu Route (Route I), Barafu Route (Route J) and Western Breach Route (Route K) – to the crater rim in the Summit ascent routes section. There is a description of the Southern Circuit Path (Route G) and Northern Circuit Path (Route H) that circle Kibo at around 4000m in the Circuit paths section. After a full description of the summit, there follows descriptions of the two descent routes – the Marangu (Route L) and Mweka (Route M) routes – in the Descent routes section.

ASCENT ROUTES

ROUTE A

Marangu Route

Start	Marangu Gate
Finish	Kibo Huts
Distance	29km
Grade	Moderate/hard
Time	3 days
Altitude gain	2810m
Total time on the mountain	5 days
Summit route	Normal/Marangu Route; no option of Western Breach
Descent route	Marangu Route

The Marangu Route is the oldest and one of the quickest methods of ascending Kilimanjaro, typically taking 5 days in total to climb, ascend the summit via the Normal/Marangu Route and descend again, retracing your steps via the Marangu Route. It's also one of the seemingly easier and more popular routes on the mountain, at one time drawing over 80% of trekkers on Kilimanjaro. As a consequence of its mass appeal and accessibility, it came to be known as the 'Coca-Cola route'. It is also somewhat unfairly referred to as the 'tourist route'. This is to underestimate the ascent, which is in reality still a challenging undertaking. Much of the misconception about its simplicity stems from the fact this is the only route on the mountain where you sleep in huts rather than under canvas. Nonetheless, you must still gain a similar altitude to some of the longer routes, just in less time, which goes some way to explaining why there is a surprisingly poor success rate on this ascent.

Numbers on the Marangu Route have fallen with the improvement and promotion of alternative routes on the mountain. However, because it is also used as a means of descending the mountain, you are unlikely to ever feel truly alone or isolated in the huts or campsites along the track.

The Marangu Route ascends up the south-east side of Kilimanjaro through fine forest and moorland scenery. Although this is far from a genuine wilderness experience, the route is still very beautiful and the forest sections in particular are attractive. The route passes to the south of Mawenzi before it crosses the desolate Saddle heading towards Kibo Huts. The summit ascent is then conducted via the Normal/Marangu

Route on an arduous scree slope that culminates in the arrival at Gillman's Point on the crater rim. Uhuru Peak can then be reached from here.

The descent route for this particular trail is traditionally back along the Marangu Route. Steps are retraced from the summit to Horombo Huts, before you eventually walk off the mountain via the Marangu Gate.

Most people complete the route in only five days and as a consequence it has a surprisingly low success rate for getting trekkers to the top. Many people fail to acclimatise properly on the way up the mountain and as a result succumb to the debilitating effects of altitude on the final haul to the crater rim, or simply peak at Gillman's Point. In order to increase your chances of reaching Uhuru Peak, you should try to factor in an extra day for acclimatisation purposes. Ideally this should be taken at Horombo Huts, from where you can enjoy a number of fascinating side trips to explore various features of the mountain.

To the trailhead

The Marangu Route begins from the Kilimanjaro National Park Headquarters at the Marangu Gate. This is best accessed from the small town of Marangu, on the south-east side of Kilimanjaro, some 40km drive from Moshi. Most trekking companies will ensure that you are transported to the trailhead from where you are staying. On the drive to the Marangu Gate take the time to observe your changing surroundings.

From Moshi, follow the sealed Arusha–Taveta road towards Dar es Salaam for just over 20km. At the small, bustling town of Himo, the road turns left and heads north for 13km to arrive at the sprawling, unkempt Marangu. The fact that the road is paved all of the way to the town is a reflection of the economic impact that Kilimanjaro has had on the region in general and on Marangu in particular. In the centre of town, at the main junction, turn left again and follow the track uphill for 6km to the park gate. The journey from Moshi to the trailhead takes 45 minutes to an hour and represents a gain in altitude of almost 1000m.

At the park gate, all the formalities for entering the national park can be completed. This can be a laborious process and you should expect to spend up to an hour registering and paying the requisite park fees. Your guide ought to take responsibility for ensuring that you are registered correctly and that your park fees are paid in full. In addition to the registration office there is a visitor centre, toilet block, picnic area and souvenir shop. If you find that you're missing a piece of kit, you can hire various bits (including gaiters and trekking poles) from the Kilimanjaro Guides Cooperative, who have a small hut at the gate. This is also the headquarters of KINAPA, the Kilimanjaro National Park.

Huts and accommodation

The Marangu Route is the only route on the mountain to have sleeping huts provided at every night stop. A-frame buildings house communal dormitories, where basic bunks and sponge mattresses are supplied – note that although you can leave the thermarest or roll mat behind, you'll still need to bring a sleeping bag. The huts have solar

powered lights and cold running water. Basic toilet facilities are also present at each hut. Groups dine together in a large communal hut, resulting in a jovial, lively atmosphere and a great deal of interaction. It is often possible to purchase soft drinks, bottled water and even beer at the huts, although the prices increase as you climb higher up the mountain. Make sure that you carry small Tanzanian notes to pay for things bought along the route.

During the peak season, huts can sometimes be over full as a result of large groups altering their itineraries. As a result, the facilities can become overstretched. Each hut has a number of tent pitches in the immediate vicinity and it is possible to camp at each site. Those camping can take advantage of the toilet and water facilities provided but are forbidden from using the hut dining or communal areas.

The first night stop is at Mandara Huts. The lowest hut on the Marangu Route was originally constructed before World War I. It was christened Bismarck Hut, after the Iron Chancellor of Prussia in recognition of his significant role in the construction of the German Empire. The original stone hut has since been replaced by a series of comfortable wooden A-frame huts, built by a group of Norwegians as part of an aid programme. The largest hut comprises a communal dining area and an upstairs bunkroom. Smaller huts sleep up to eight people each. In total some 80 walkers can be accommodated here. There are flush toilets behind the main cabin. Water is retrieved from springs above the hut and is piped to the toilet block.

The second and fourth nights are spent at Horombo Huts. This was originally named Peters Hut, after Karl Peters, the German explorer and arch-imperialist. Similar to Mandara Huts, this vast complex comprises a number of wooden A-frame huts and

Horombo Huts and Kibo in the background



resembles a small village. Horombo is designed to support up to 160 people, making it the busiest overnight stop on the entire mountain. Groups both ascending and descending the mountain use the site. There are flush toilets to the south-east of the main hut, down the slope a short distance. Water is piped from a stream to the north of the huts. It is forbidden to access the valley that contains the stream in a bid to ensure that the water supply remains clean and uncontaminated.

Kibo Huts, the third hut visited, is set at the foot of the final push to the summit. The original hut was built in 1932 and contained four bunks and a small stove. This has been replaced by a larger stone blockhouse that contains a small dining area and a number of dorm rooms that lead off a main corridor which sleeps around 60. A series of long-drop toilets are set to the south-west, behind the hut. There is no water available at Kibo Huts and all supplies must be carried here from the last water point on the ascent.

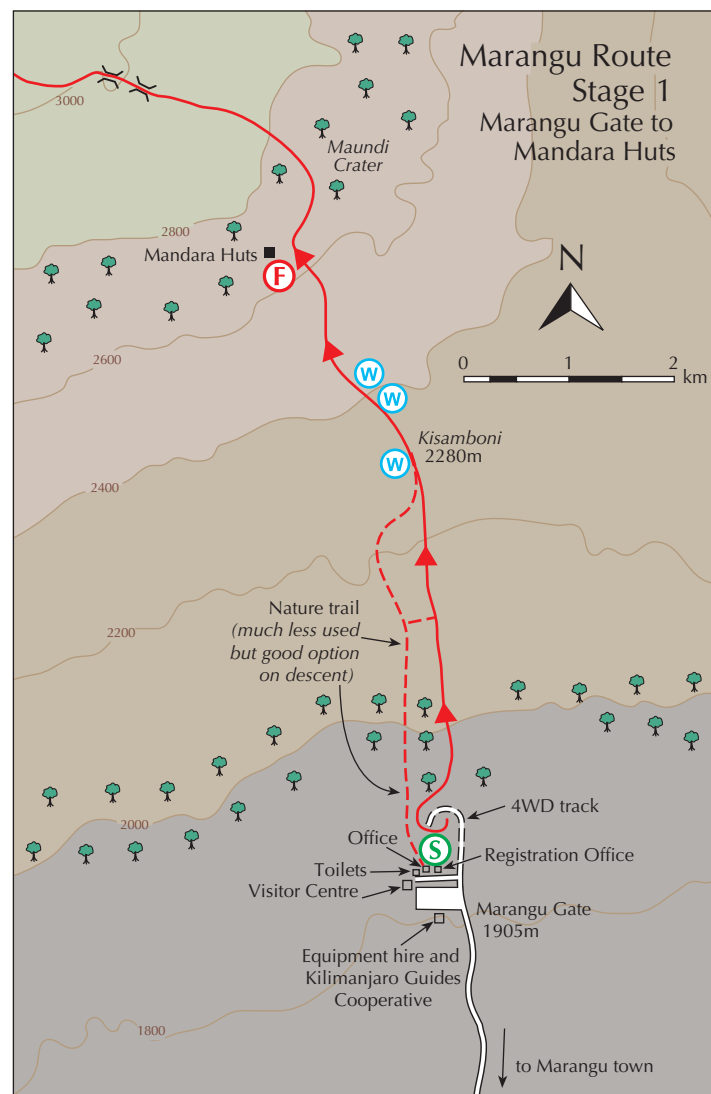
STAGE 1

Marangu Gate to Mandara Huts

Start	Marangu Gate (1905m)
Finish	Mandara Huts (2720m)
Distance	8km
Time	3–4hrs
Altitude gain	820m

This is a deceptively gentle introduction to the climb that may lull you into a false sense of security despite the fact that you are ascending almost all the time. The trail is clear and well maintained, and so you should be able to maintain a steady, gentle pace through the lower forest sections, ensuring that you arrive at Mandara Huts after three to five hours. If there have been quantities of rainfall, the going may be wet and slippery underfoot and the approach to the night's accommodation may take longer. You ought to aim to begin the route in the morning since the forest zone is prone to showers in the afternoons. Birds also tend to be more active first thing in the morning. This way you can enjoy a leisurely stroll through the forest and still have the afternoon spare to explore your surroundings.

The ascent begins by following the broad, well-maintained track that leads north behind the booking office into the forest. Just beyond the gate, on the left-hand side of the track, is an archway that marks the start of the trekker's path to Mandara Huts.



MARANGU GATE

Your guide ought to take responsibility for ensuring that you are registered correctly and that your park fees are paid in full. The process is protracted and slow and can take up to an hour to complete. In the interim, relax, stroll around the gate area and visit the small shop located here. Admire the vast spreading *Albizia schimperiana* tree that supports the signboard at the trailhead and prepare yourself for the first stage of the ascent.

Near to the Marangu Gate is a short detour that visits a beautiful river gorge. Take the trail that leads to the left of the booking office and follow it west into a valley. Here there is a small seasonal waterfall, some tree ferns and a number of splendid trees whose huge oval leaves shade and shelter the smaller plants beneath.

Note also that there is a more westerly 'nature trail' that leads north from the car park and registration office that joins the main track about 2.5km further up. This path is much less frequently used and consequently much more overgrown, but makes for an interesting variation when you're descending the mountain, rather than simply retracing your steps. See Route L for details.

A broad **4WD track** leads straight ahead. This used to be the main route up the mountain, but in response to overcrowding and erosion, the path has been re-routed slightly. The original 4WD track is still used by porters to help accelerate their ascent and to ease the footfall on the forest path.

The forest path, for trekkers only, is a narrow clearly defined trail that provides intimacy and interest as you pass through this beautiful, chaotic aspect of the mountain. The path climbs steeply but gently, passing beneath huge *Macaranga kilimandscharica* trees and on into denser, more verdant forest that limits the amount of light that penetrates to the forest floor. The path is well graded and has drainage channels cut alongside it.

The trail sides are brimming with **plants and wildlife**. Overgrown and the cascading vegetation hides quantities of scarlet and yellow *Impatiens kilimanjari*, violet *I. pseudoviola* and the sweet-scented white *Begonia meyeri-johannis*. Away from the main gate you may see, or more likely hear, blue monkeys or black-and-white colobus monkeys moving through the tree tops as they search out and feed on fruits and leaves. Keep an ear out for the loud thrum of wings as Hartlaub's turaco flaps clumsily through the forest.

The trail heads towards and then runs alongside a small stream. After an hour, the path passes a small pool to the right that is backed by a waterfall. If there has been recent rain this can be a very attractive spot. There are also good views out over the

plains to the west of Kilimanjaro here.

Crossing the stream on a small bridge, the path comes to a junction where you continue straight on. The smaller path crosses a wooden bridge to Kisamboni, a picnic table and lunch area that lie adjacent to the 4WD track used by the porters. At this point you are approximately halfway between Marangu Gate and Mandara Huts.

The trail continues its consistent climb, passing another side path and bridge as well as a couple of small waterfalls. As the path becomes a little rockier it bridges another small stream and steepens slightly. This marks the final ascent to Mandara Huts.

The dense **Podocarp forest** becomes increasingly damp and bearded lichens, old-man's beard and other

mosses become increasingly apparent, hanging from the trees like tattered lace, as you move into the alpine heath and moorland. *I. kilimanjari* continue to be visible amid the tree roots and buttresses.

Half an hour after crossing the bridge, the forest gives way and you emerge into the clearing that houses **Mandara Huts** (2720m).

This **collection of huts** is named after the legendary local chieftain who terrorised so many of the early western explorers as they sought to access and ascend Kilimanjaro in the late 19th century. The huts themselves are modern wooden A-frame buildings that have cold running water and flush toilet facilities. They can sleep up to 60 walkers. Surrounded by dense forest, they are frequently shrouded in mist during the afternoon and often have a peculiarly spectral air.

Excursion to Maundi Crater

If you arrive early and have the energy left to explore your surroundings, it is possible to stow your packs and clamber up nearby Maundi Crater. Or if your guide allows,



Typical montane cloudforest on the early stage of the Marangu Route



consider a detour so early at the start of the second day's trekking as the route to Horombo Huts passes quite close by.

From Mandara Huts the path heads north through the last vestiges of forest and emerges onto the heath and moorland after 500 metres. Beyond a small bridge is a junction, signposted to Maundi Crater. This small parasitic cone on the south-east flank of Kilimanjaro is an interesting geological feature, rich in wild flora and home to both colobus and blue monkeys.

The path climbs 500 metres to the top of the small grass and shrub-cloaked amphitheatre and affords you spectacular views on a clear day, both of the main peaks of Kibo and Mawenzi to the north and of lakes Chala and Jipe to the south-east, as well as the distant Pare Mountains. The trip there and back, to the top of crater, takes 1hr in total. See Marangu Route Stage 2 map for an outline of the route.

STAGE 2

Mandara Huts to Horombo Huts

Start	Mandara Huts (2720m)
Finish	Horombo Huts (3720m)
Distance	12km
Time	5–6hrs
Altitude gain	995m

This is an attractive day's walking that enables you to clear the confines of the forest and secure your first inspirational views of Kibo and Mawenzi. The steady climb through the more exposed, bleaker heath and moorland, past the unusual groundsel and *lobelias* found here, is relatively gentle although you ascend almost 1000m. The path is clear and even, ensuring that five to six hours of gentle walking should see you arrive at the village-like Horombo Huts complex.

From Mandara Huts the trail leads north through the remaining stretches of the forest zone.

In this section you will notice that the **vegetation** begins to change with Podocarps giving way to giant heath trees (*Philippia excelsa*) and bushes of *Hypericum* and *Erica*. Keep an eye and an ear out for monkeys active in the morning.

After 500 metres the trail emerges from the forest, crosses a wooden bridge and forks. A side path leads right to Maundi Crater while the main trail curves north-north-west and heads towards the Saddle. If you didn't explore it the previous evening, it is possible to detour to Maundi Crater and then cut across the scrub to rejoin the main path 500 metres further up the trail. It skirts the base of Maundi Crater and progresses towards the higher reaches of Kilimanjaro. Crossing a further two bridges over frequently dry waterways, the path winds gently between a series of thickets where the trees are festooned with lichen, before crossing several small bridges and ascending into the open moorland. The orangey-red path, visible between the tussocks of grass and heather, stretches into the distance enticingly.