

THE AFRICA'S THIRD TALLEST MOUNTAIN RANGES

RWENZORI MOUNTAINS (MOUNTAINS OF THE MOON)

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Over three million years ago, the land that is now Rwenzori Mountains, thrust up as a block of crystalline rocks from the western arm of the East African rift valley to form Africa's 3rd. tallest mountain ranges the Rwenzoris which are also known as the Mountains of The Moon is located in western Uganda bordering with the DRC. The Mountains of the Moon rise above a burst of white breath which shapes clouds amidst acres of blue sky as they intercept the trade winds high up in the sky. These magnificent Rwenzori Mountains and their foothills sweep down like welcome mats and to those who seek adventure, it is a monumental fixture of Uganda's natural endowments.

Info about Rwenzori Mountains National Park

The size of the national park is 996KM² and its Geographical location is Western Rift Valley at Uganda's border with Democratic Republic of Congo. The coordinate location is latitude 0. The park was gazetted on 1st. July, 1991 and its altitude is up to 5109 m ASL with the length of 100km long and 50km wide.

The Rwenzori Mountains is spread across 5 districts in Uganda which are; Kasese, Bunyangabu, Kabarole, Ntoroko and Bundibugyo districts.

To the west of the Rwenzori Mountains in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are mineral deposits of unimaginable riches and to the south is the huge expanse of Lakes Gorge and Edward, flooded to the deepest blue coloring everything around you and becoming more and more intense the farther one gazes over the Congo.

There are six mountains on this Rwenzori massif some of which are snow-capped and it is the reason it is called Rwenzori mountains.

1. Mount Stanley (5109 meters (16794 ft.)). (This is also the highest of the mountains in (on) the block.)
2. Mount Speke (4890 meters (ft.)).
3. Mount Baker (4843 meters (ft.)).
4. Mount Emin (4797 meters (ft.)).
5. Mount Gessi (4715 meters (ft.)).
6. Mount Luigi da Savoia (4627 meters (ft.)).

The snow and ice formations on some of these Rwenzori peaks are remarkable.



Descending in the glacier from Margarita peak

History of the Rwenzori Mountains

For a long time, these snow-covered mountains generated a lot of mystery because many believed they were the source of the Nile River. People debated this for over 2000 years because every single expedition that was set to investigate from Egypt never succeeded. They all returned defeated, not until 1888, some thirty years after the “discovery” of Victoria Nile in Jinja by explorer John Hannington Speke, that explorer Henry Morton Stanley “discovered” the existence of the Snow Mountains in Uganda.

He had camped for months at its foot without so much as suspecting the existence of these vast glacier-covered mountains in his vicinity!

We can't blame Stanley, however.

Until 1906, the true nature of the Rwenzori Mountains wasn't fully known until the Duke of Abruzzi the Italian mountaineer and explorer led a great expedition to the region, climbing the highest peaks and constructing the first chain of huts on the Rwenzori Mountains.

Though the Rwenzori Mountains (formerly Ruwenzori) are not the highest on the African continent, Kilimanjaro and Mount Kenya are higher; they are Africa's most technical mountain ranges when it comes to mountain climbing. They are also the most important snow-capped mountain group on the African continent and what distinguishes the Rwenzori mountain ranges from Mount Kilimanjaro and Mount Kenya is that the latter are both single peaked volcanoes while the Rwenzori Mountains are six distinct mountains connected in one continuous ranges. Margherita 5109m and Alexandra 5083m are the highest peaks of the Rwenzori Mountains.

Unlike all other great mountains of East and Central Africa, Rwenzori Mountains are not volcanoes but they were formed by upward thrust during the formation of the Western Rift Valley in which they sit. At the first records in

1906, all the six highest mountains of the Rwenzori carried permanent snow and glaciers. By 2001, only Mountains Stanley 5,109m, Speke 4,890m and Baker 4,843m bore permanent snow and glaciers and these are also fast retreating. It is anticipated that in less than 20 years, all the snow will have melted away from all the highest mountains! The causes of these ranges from higher temperatures due to global warming and destruction of other natural resources like trees and wetlands.

The upper levels of the mountains have many bogs and marshes which were originally lakes but with time silted up. These marshes make the mountains like a giant sponge from which the peaks stand and are maintained in such a state by the perpetual moistness of the air. Hardly a day goes by without the all-covering mist blanketing the peaks with this moisture-laden air. Though these mists add to the complexity of climbing the ranges, they do add tremendously to the great beauty of the mountains. It is common for the peaks to be briefly hit by sunlight from above the clouds before quickly disappearing under the mist blanket.

At the very summit, the impenetrable fog is replaced by a sudden and complete clearing. Far below, in the valleys, you will see the land bathed in sunlight with the intense green below contrasted superbly with the crags surrounding the juniper known as everlasting flowers.



Everlasting flowers in the Rwenzori Mountains

Vegetation

Vegetation Zones you will meet in the Rwenzori Mountains are;

- Grassland zone 1000m – 2000m
- Montane Forest zone 2000m – 3000m
- Bamboo/ Mimulopsis zone 2500m – 3500m
- Heather / Repanea zone 3000m – 4000m
- Afro – Alpine moorland zone 4000m – 4500m

Another unique and delightful feature of the mountains is its vegetation. The park has 994 recorded plant species; some of which cannot be found elsewhere in the world.

This vegetation is remarkable in many ways. Indeed, those who climb the Rwenzori Mountains must transverse the bamboo zone. These bamboos can attain a height of over 25 feet forming a closely packed canopy. Just over the bamboo forests there are some remarkable floral conditions associated with the perpetual humidity.



The bamboo zone in the Rwenzori Mountains

There are numerous lobelias which when in flowers are always visited by flocks of unique mountain sunbirds that probe the pale-blue tubes of lobelia blossom. These tree-like lobelias can attain a height of over fifteen feet. Once these lobelias have reached the stage of bearing flower spikes, then they have reached the end of their lives. For they soon wither and die after the entire flower spike has finished blooming. Slowly, probably over a period of many years, the moss chokes it up as it rots. Above 11000 feet, most of the ground and the trees are covered under thick moss growth.



The Giant Lobelia of the Rwenzori Mountains

Another delightful and interesting characteristic of the Rwenzori Mountains is the ever-present cloud cover that forms early every morning and covers the upper regions in obscurity and moisture. It usually disappears at sunset, the mountains being always clear of this cloud at night-time. It explains why these mountains remained unknown to European travellers for so long.

These clouds form at about 9000 feet before drifting upwards. So by 10:00am, the mountain top is concealed. Before they were finally discovered by Europeans in 1888, Sir. Henry Morton Stanley and his men had spent close to seventy-two days within visual distance of the mountains without suspecting their presence due to the cloud cover. Until one day, when this cloud cover parted, they saw the mighty snow-capped peaks. In fact, many explorers before him had been travelling in the neighborhood of the Rwenzori Mountains without suspecting their existence.

At an altitude of 10,000 feet, you will encounter a fantastic tangle of rotting vegetation—giant groundsel, lobelia, and giant heather all thickly covered in moss, which is everywhere. So much so that the air seems tinged with an eerie green light as all the streams and streamlets are hushed. This vegetation diversity makes Rwenzori Mountains the perfect mountain climbing place in Africa.

One of the things to put into consideration before climbing these mountains are the perpetual Rwenzori rains which are famous for curtailing many climbing attempts. During these rains, the bogs and marshes get heavier making ones climb harder and requiring super human effort. No wonder the locals call the Rwenzori Mountains “a rain maker.” with rain forest.

The best way to climb up the massif is by way of the valley of Mubuku on the Central Circuit trail manned by [Rwenzori Mountaineering services](#), along the crest of the Nyabitaba moraine.

Animals in the Rwenzori Mountains

The park boasts of 70 species of mammals; 217 species of birds- 19 species of which are endemic to the Albertine rift; 78 butterflies and big moths' species and over 195 species of trees and shrubs. (source: RMNP by Henry Osmaston, joy.T, Charles B. & Jockey Nyakana 1999 pg. 25).

The park has over 21 small mammal species, 6 of which are Albertine Rift Valley endemic, 3 of which are rare, while 4 of these species are endemic to the park. Reptiles and amphibians have also been recorded in the park. Of the reptiles in the park, the three horned chameleon is the most surprising and it plays a great role in local superstitions. Though scary looking, these chameleons are not dangerous. They can be handled with the same freedom as you would with other hornless chameleon species.



The strange looking Rwenzori three horned chameleon, a common resident of the lower levels of the Rwenzori Mountains easily encountered on the way during warm weather.

Some of the species identified in Rwenzori Mountains National Park include: Chimpanzees, Rwenzori duikers, Rock hyrax, African forest elephants, Tree squirrels, Forest Hogs, Bush pigs, Blue monkeys, black and white colobus monkeys, Rwenzori leopards, White dotted otters, Cane rats, Vervet monkeys, Olive baboons, Wild chicken, Rhinoceros and Chameleon.

Stages of Rwenzori Mountain Climbing

It takes between 7 and 9 days to climb and descend the highest peak of the Rwenzori Mountains from the Ugandan side. You have to go through the five distinct vegetation zones and bamboo forests to reach the snow-covered peaks of Rwenzori Mountains. 3000 m is usually the altitude beyond which

you start noticing altitude sickness and the only cure is to descend immediately to lower altitudes.

You can do a shorter 2 – 3 days foot trail from the park entrance of Mihunga to Lake Mahoma which is near after resting at [Rwenzori Mountaineering services](#) camp – Nyabitaba hut for a night.

Accommodation facilities in Rwenzori Mountains National Park

There are huts of [Rwenzori Mountaineering services](#) at the camps on the mountain and also Rwenzori Mountaineering Services Safari lodge in Mihunga out of the mountain near the park gate and there are other neighboring lodges for convenient accommodation out of the park.



A Mountaineers at the John Matte hut of [Rwenzori Mountaineering services](#) which was named after John Matte the Co-founding president of the [Rwenzori Mountaineering services](#) and an Agent for Mountain Club of Uganda.

INTERESTING FACTS ABOUT THE RWENZORI MOUNTAINS

- The oldest person to reach its Margherita peak was Ms. Beryl Park, she was aged 78 years.
- 500 B.C. was the first historical reference to the Rwenzori Mountains when Aeschylus, ancient Greek tragedian, wrote of Egypt being fed by the distant snows from the mountains.
- R.H the Duke of the Abruzzi and his expedition were the first ones to climb up to glaciers of the mountains in 1906. In the same expedition they were able to explore the summits of the highest peaks for the first time.
- The Rwenzori ranges are astride located in less than a geographical degree from the Equator and yet have permanent glaciers and snows.

- The locals around the Rwenzoris call the mountains Ruwenzoris meaning “rain maker.”
- The Rwenzoris are the highest source of the Nile River.
- They are the third highest mountains on the African continent.
- The Rwenzori Mountains have Africa’s 3rd, 4th and, 5th highest peaks in Africa.
- The Rwenzori Mountains are the tallest mountain in Uganda.
- The Rwenzori Mountains are one of the only three places in Africa with unique high-altitude wetlands.
- [Rwenzori Mountaineering services](#) has been the long serving community based organization (CBO) in providing hiking services to tourists on the Rwenzoris.

Activities to do in Rwenzori Mountains National Park

- a. **Birding:** There are 217 bird species registered in the Rwenzori Mountains National Park, a place declared as a RAMSAR site in 2009. The park is home to 19 Albertine rift endemics like the Rwenzori Turaco, Shelly’s crimson wing, Rwenzori nightjar, red-throated a Lethe, and others.
- b. Hiking:
- c. Rock Climbing:
- d. Nature walks – loops

How to get to the Rwenzori Mountains

[Rwenzori Mountaineering services](#) will take you up the mountains on the Ugandan side through Mihunga gate and the Central circuit trail which is the shortest and easier trail to reach the central and main peaks of the mountains.

The Central Circuit starts from the headquarters of [Rwenzori Mountaineering services](#) through Mihunga Main Gate after taking the eastern road of Kasese – Fort portal branching off at Nkenda (Masanyarazi) a 40 minutes’ drive from Kasese town and it is the best trail with lots of vegetation and shorter to the peaks of the Rwenzori Mountains.



Preparing for the hike at the Rwenzori Mountaineering services headquarters – Nyakalengijo.

You can also fly to Kasese airstrip from Entebbe Airport and then continue by vehicle for 40 minutes to the trail headquarters of Rwenzori Mountaineering Services.

The Rwenzori Mountains are a captivating unfolding of a fantasy that started millions of years ago. It is a storybook vision of pristine beautiful glacier lakes, snow covered peaks, shrouded by mist, and clouds alongside flaming sunsets. In this geologically magical zone, the serenity turns the area into a mountaineering tourist mecca. It is supremely wonderful and challenging while rising to your every expectation. So come and book with us so we can take on this dreamy climbing adventure up into the Rwenzori Mountains where the real seems surreal and the wild is tamed by a steady beauty.

There are also shorter full day, two and three days hikes that can also be organized up the Rwenzori mountains by Rwenzori Mountaineering Services to suit your interest of those not intending to reach the peak. To get these included in your safari itinerary in Uganda, please get in touch with our safari team and reservations at;

Rwenzori Mountaineering services Reservation office,

Whatsapp: +256-784308425

Email: rwenzorims@gmail.com

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“Proceeds from your visit benefits the local community around the park”