

## The descent routes

### MARANGU ROUTE

#### Stage 1: Gillman's Point to the Horombo Huts

[Map 5, p183; Map 4, p181; Map 3, p179]

Few people remain at the summit for long: weariness, risk of hypothermia and the thought of a steaming mug of *Milo* at the Kibo Huts are enough to send most people scurrying back down. There are two main ways of doing this: the first is to follow exactly the course you took getting up here, carefully retracing every zig and zag like somebody who has dropped a contact lens on the way up but can't quite remember when or where. Curiously, it is precisely those people who are in greatest need of getting down fast who are the ones who usually use this method to descend.

The second way is to cut straight through the switchbacks and simply head vertically downwards in a sort of ski-style, using the now defrosted scree to act as a brake on your momentum. After the tedium of the previous night's heel-toe exercise, the sheer abandon of this method, and the rapid progress made – it takes just over 90min to travel from Gillman's to the huts this way – comes as something of a relief. Take care, however: far more people are injured com-



#### Returning via the Mawenzi Route

[Map 17, opposite]

This is the more interesting path between Kibo and Horombo, encompassing not only entire groves of giant groundsels (*Senecio kilimanjari*) and the Zebra Rocks, but also the best panorama of them all on Kilimanjaro. It is, however, one that is seldom used, mainly because the majority of trekkers will already have done a lot of it during their acclimatization day up to Mawenzi Hut.

From Kibo Huts the path descends once more to **Jiwe Lainkoyo**. Though there appears to be but one path from Jiwe, there is in fact another, much fainter path heading almost due east across the Saddle towards Mawenzi. If you cannot make it out at first don't worry, just aim for Mawenzi and you will soon notice a faint but distinct path etched into the earth bisecting the Saddle. Ten minutes after Jiwe a junction with the even fainter **Northern Kibo Circuit** is reached (a signpost is the only evidence that there is a junction here at all), and twenty-five minutes after that the path begins to rise and fall as it follows the contours of Mawenzi's lower reaches. After half an hour of following this undulating terrain you come to a summit of sorts, from where you can rest and gaze back over the finest **panorama** this mountain has to offer: the alpine desert of the Saddle, with a string of parasitic cones leading from the foreground to the foot of Kibo and with Mawenzi just over your shoulder. Spectacular.

From here, the path runs due south through heather past the path leading to Mawenzi Hut to the **Zebra Rocks** (a collection of rockfaces coloured by water that resemble the flanks of a zebra), then down between the groundsels until, one hour from the unforgettable panorama and two hours 35 minutes since leaving Jiwe Lainkoyo, the roofs of the **Horombo Huts** appear beneath you once more.

ing down than going up. Furthermore, do remember that every year at least ten thousand other pairs of feet tread on this part of the mountain and, at the risk of sounding like a killjoy, pushing down all that scree cannot be doing the mountain any good. If KINAPA are looking for a new problem to address now that they have finished constructing the Alternative Mweka Route, they should start by looking here.

Upon returning to camp, your guide should allow you to rest for an hour before moving on again to the Horombo Huts. Remember the advice given at the beginning of Stage 3 (see p179) and ask your guide to take you back via a different route to the one on which you ascended. This usually means returning via the Saddle on the Mawenzi Route, a route we have described in the box on p213. If you do return via the southerly route, expect it to take about three hours.

**Stage Two: Horombo Huts to Marangu Gate**

[Map 3, p179; Map 2, p177; Map 1, p174]

Don't be in too much of a hurry to finish your trekking, for today holds lots of treats for those who take the time to enjoy them. If you have come from the Rongai Route this is the first time you will have seen forest so thick and vast on Kilimanjaro, and it's worth taking the time to appreciate the different flora on this side of the mountain. But even if you ascended by the Marangu Route, it still warrants a second look on the way down. Much of the scenery may be old hat to you by now, but remember that you've still paid US\$30 for the privilege of walking in the forest today, so you may as well get the most out of it. And just as Lee Marvin in *Paint Your Wagon* sang that he'd never seen a town 'that didn't look better looking back', so most people will agree that the forest seems so much more welcoming when you're walking downhill through it; and the views of Kibo are that much more appealing from over the shoulder, knowing that you'll never have to climb it again.

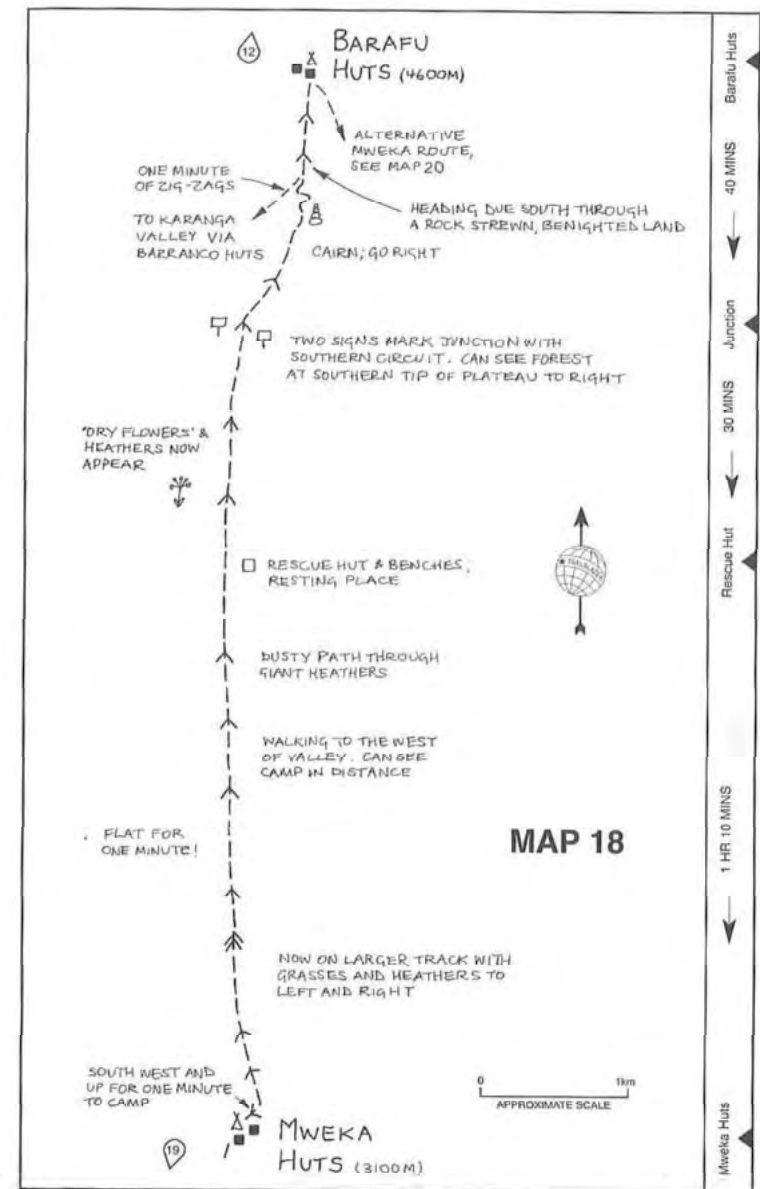
It takes about 2hr 20min to return from Horombo to the Mandara Huts which are, typically, the final lunch-stop of the trail. This is also your last chance to buy beer while it's still cheaper than water. From there, it's back into the forest and down to the gate, a journey of some 95 minutes. Name registered, tips dispersed and with certificate clutched close to your bosom, it's time to return to the land of hot showers and flush toilets. Your adventure is at an end, and civilization has rarely seemed so good.

**THE MWEKA ROUTE**

**Stage 1: Uhuru Peak to Barafu and Mweka Camp**

[Map 12, p197; Map 18, opp]

What goes up must come down, and that includes you. The path back to Barafu is little more than a retracing of your steps of the previous night (assuming you climbed this way), though there is a slightly quicker, if more hair-raising approach: walking past Stella Point, slightly to the north is the start of a straight ski-run down through the gravel that bypasses the zigzags of the regular route. Some people prefer to make it down as quickly as possible and so choose this





### Mweka and Alternative Mweka

Note that there are now two Mweka routes: the standard, original Mweka Trail as described below, and a new trail described on p218. There's little variation in the scenery: you are, after all, still passing through the same vegetation zones on both routes, from desert to heathland to forest before finishing on the edge of the cultivated zone. Be sure about which route you should be following before setting off from Barafu.

trail; others find it too taxing on both nerves and knees, and opt for the gentler descent. Before deciding which is for you, read the advice about erosion on p160 – and then take the gentler descent! Either way, the two paths reunite back near the foot of the cliffs above Barafu. The entire descent takes about an hour and twenty minutes (plus breaks) from Stella Point, less if you take the 'fast' route.

You probably feel, on returning to camp, that you have earned the luxury of a brief rest at Barafu, and indeed you have. But make sure it *is* brief, for you still have another two and a half hours of knee-knacking downhill before you reach Mweka Camp, your home for the night. A pretty monotonous two and a half hours it is, too, as you head off due south and down for the entire 8km. In its defence, the descent is both large (dropping from 4600m to 3100m) and fairly gradual, which can only be good news for both AMS sufferers and those with aching knees. There is also some interest to be had in seeing how the vegetation changes along the way: at first, only the incredibly hardy yellow everlastings are able to survive at the high altitude, but they are soon joined by their dry-looking cousins in the *helichrysum* family, and soon after that the heathers appear.

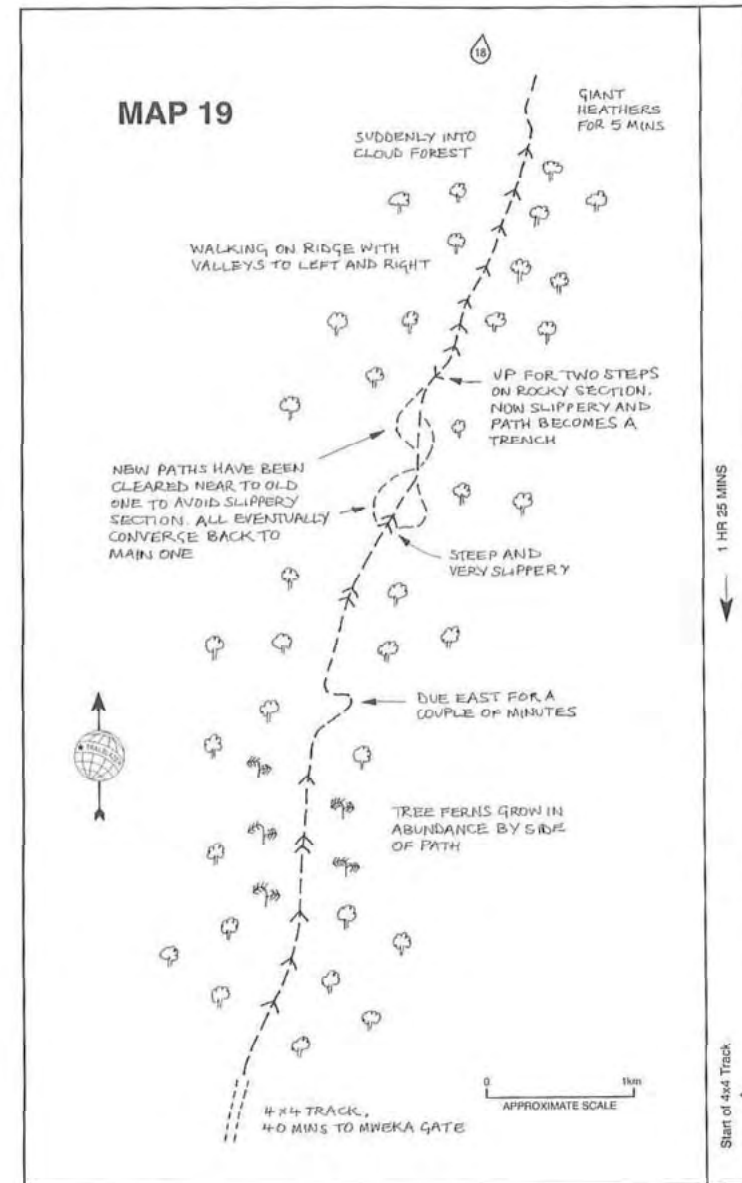
After forty minutes or so you come to a huddle of **signposts** collected around the path; to your left on the slopes you can see paths from the Horombo Huts on the Marangu Route, while to your right are those coming from the Karanga Valley. Your path continues straight on, however, towards the green-roofed **rescue hut** – a popular rest stop. Coke and other soft drinks are available here. Immediately to the south, giant heathers grow for the first time by the dusty path; further down keep your eyes peeled for the heavy yellow-white flowers of the **protea**. You first glimpse **Mweka Camp** (3100m) about 40 minutes before you actually get there as you descend on a ridge between two valleys towards a small heather-clad hill. Rounding this, the path widens and flattens before turning south-west and climbing for one minute to the camp – the only ascent of the entire walk from Barafu. By the way, you may wish to share out your tips at Mweka Camp before you depart on this last leg: as porters all walk at different speeds, this may be the last time the whole group is together.

### Stage 2: Mweka Camp to Mweka Gate

[Map 19, opp]

By now you'll probably just want to get off the mountain as quickly as possible – which would actually be rather a shame, for this last section follows a very pretty forest trail alive with birdsong and flowers.

This ten-kilometre stage begins in similar fashion to much of the previous one, by heading south and down. Less than five minutes after you start walking,



you find yourself in cloud forest, the border between this and the giant heather forest so definite and distinct that you could almost draw a line in the ground between the two. Once again walking on a narrow ridge between two valleys, look around and notice how the trees now grow in height and girth, how the moss that grows upon them is thick, green and hearty where before it was stringy and limp, and how flowers such as the *Impatiens kilimanjari* once again make an appearance on the trail. It's a lovely walk, marred only by the fact that the path is in patches *extremely* slippery and, if it has been raining heavily, very muddy too. In places the trail is so worn through overuse that it has become a two-foot deep trench. New paths that avoid the worst of the mud have been created along the way though all of these detours converge on the main trail eventually and it is hard to get lost on this section. Tree roots encroach to try to reclaim the path once more, and tree ferns appear in abundance; look out for armies of ants crossing the trail too.

Less than ninety minutes after breaking camp, you'll find yourself walking on the start of the 4WD track down to **Mweka Gate** (1500m), a further 40 minutes away. At the gate you can buy a souvenir T-shirt to advertise the fact you reached the summit (curiously, there are no T-shirts suitable for those that did not). You must also sign the last **registration book** at the nearby park office, from where those who were successful can collect the appropriate certificate. If you're with a company that has four-wheel drive vehicles you might be met at the gate (Roy's, I notice, is one such company); the rest have to walk ten minutes further down the hill to the lower station, where there are a couple of shops and a bar, the *Tobit Kilimanjaro View Centre*. Those who succeeded in reaching Uhuru Peak can usually be seen standing around, their golden certificates held casually yet deliberately so that they catch and glint in the sun, in much the same way that Ferrari owners are wont to display their car keys. Your mountain odyssey is almost at an end: from here, it's a 30-minute drive back to the land of power showers and flush loos.

### ALTERNATIVE MWEKA (KIDIA) ROUTE

In September 2001 the park authorities closed the Mweka Route. As anyone who has walked down this trail in the last few years can testify, this was no bad thing. Simply put, it was in a terrible condition, with the passage of thousands of trekkers over time creating a foot-deep trench where once a path existed.

It is not surprising that the track fell into such a parlous state: originally the numbers on the Shira, Umbwe and Machame routes (Lemosho had yet to be created) were limited to just 16 trekkers on each trail per day, thereby limiting to no more than 48 the total number of trekkers on Mweka in any one day. With the abolition of those limits, however, and the soaring popularity of Machame, that figure has been nearer 200 trekkers per day for the last couple of years; that's an extra 304 feet treading on poor Mweka every day – not to mention the feet of all the attendant porters and guides – and the path was simply unable to cope with this increased volume.

In its place KINAPA have created – and are to be applauded for doing so – an alternative Mweka Route, which they have called, rather imaginatively, the **Alternative Mweka Route**. At least that is the name KINAPA, as the proud parents, have christened it: among the porters, guides and trekking agencies who actually use the path it has already become known as the **Kidia Route** after the village that lies at the end of it.

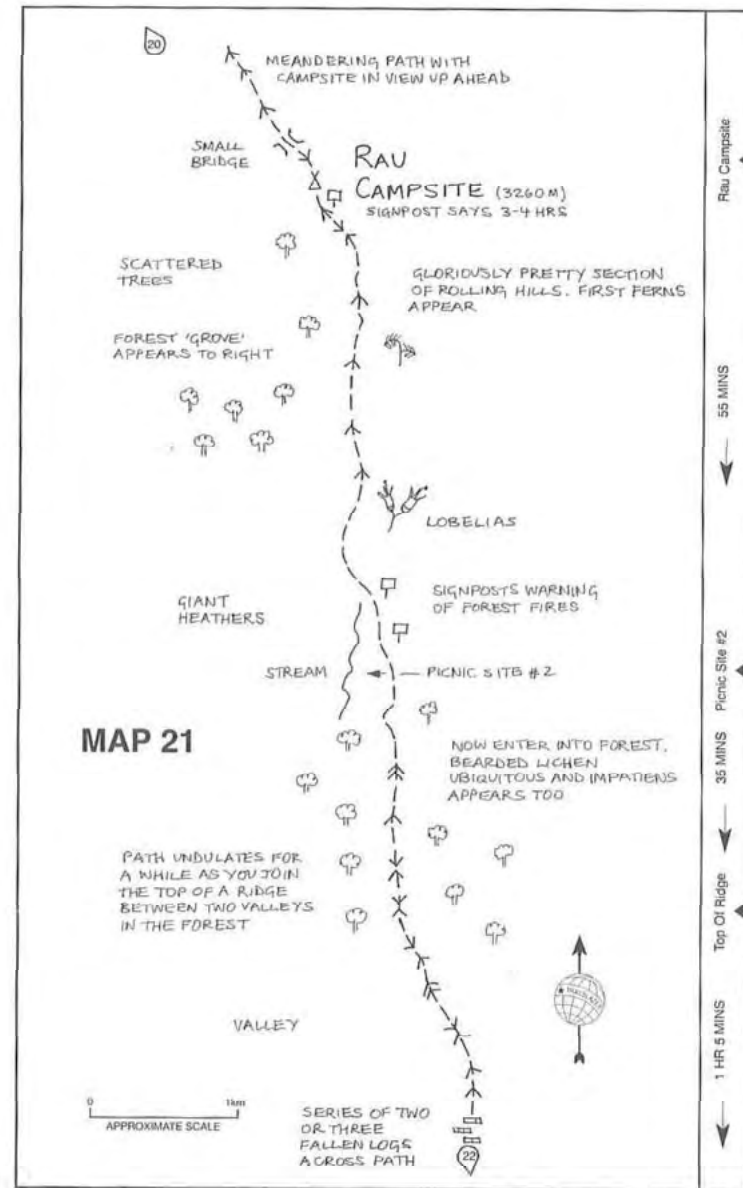
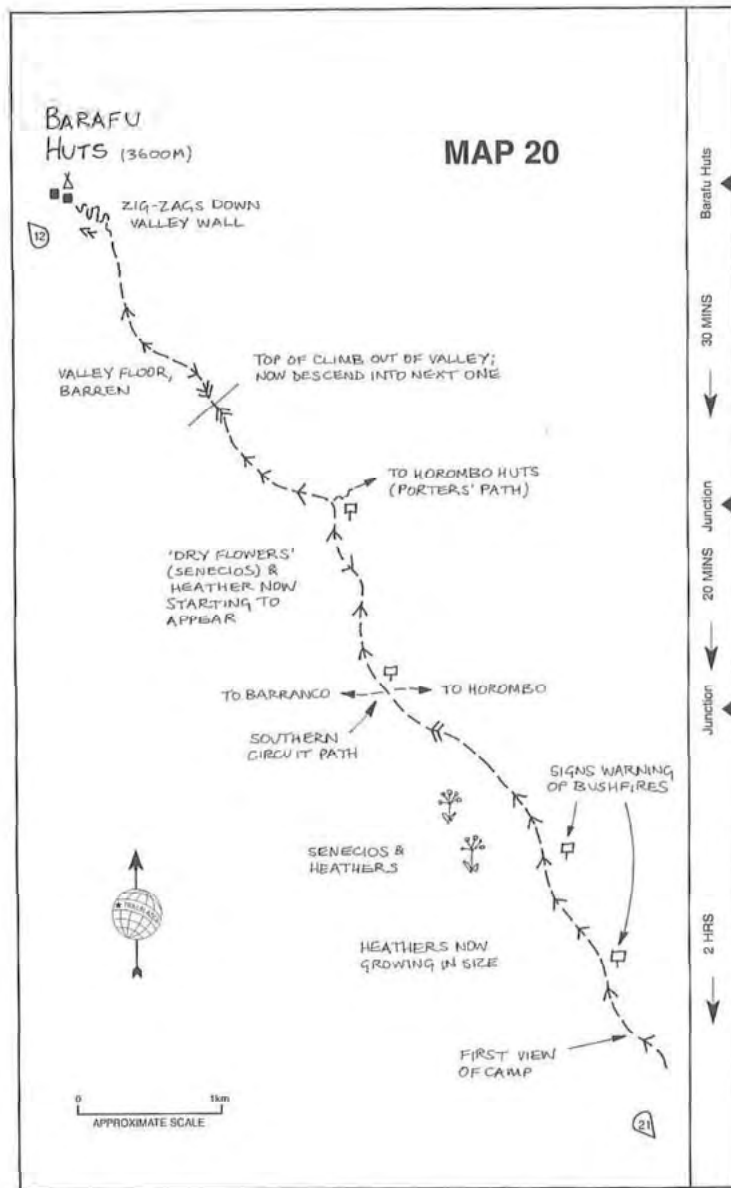
KINAPA are at pains to point out that they still regard Mweka as the main descent trail for those coming from the Machame, Shira, Umbwe and Lemosho routes, and its closure is but temporary, with estimates as to when it will reopen varying, depending on to whom you speak, from six months to five years. But there is strong speculation among many that this new trail is here to stay and that, if and when the original path does begin receiving trekkers again, the Alternative Mweka will remain open to ease the burden upon it. I note, too, that the Keys Hotel already has a campsite complete with bar and restaurant at the end of the path and appears to be testing the water with regards to establishing a hotel there – which they would surely do only if they felt that the new path was going to be permanent.

As to the relative merits of the two, while both have their attractions I have to say I still prefer the former, if only because the new trail is so exasperatingly long. Where the original sets off due south like a bullet from a gun towards civilization, and continues unwaveringly in that direction nearly all the way to Mweka Gate, the new path tends to dawdle somewhat; and after spending the entire night walking to the top of a very big mountain, dawdling will probably not be on your list of preferred activities at that moment. This criticism is particularly applicable both to the first day, which goes on for at least one eternity across valley after valley of heather and *helichrysum*, a repetitive and unvarying landscape that offers little to distract you from the screaming pain in your calf muscles; and of the latter part of the second day, where the path joins a 4WD track that twists, curls, loops and snakes all over the slopes like a python on its stag night.

In compensation, there is a brief section on the morning of the second day which is just divine: on the one side, meadows dotted with lobelias between which **malachite sunbirds** flit in search of nectar and insects; on the other, a slender grove of bearded forest following the course of a bubbling mountain stream, while looking over your shoulder all the while are Kibo and Mawenzi, posing for one last photo before ducking for good behind their lower slopes. If I should ever die on this mountain, I can think of no finer send-off than to have my ashes scattered here. (Although I hope whoever's responsible for the scattering will let them cool first: as many of the notices en route point out, wildfires can be a problem here.)

### Stage 1: Barafu to Rau Campsite [Map 20, p220; Map 21, p221]

To begin: from behind the twin green huts of Barafu the trail plummets down the western wall of the neighbouring **South East Valley**, crosses it in a south-easterly direction, then climbs up and out and into the next valley to the east. It



is a pattern that is repeated for much of the rest of the day. After a while the heathland become a little monotonous, with dullish greens growing out of soil a dullish grey-brown colour. At first this landscape is merely boring; but as impatience and tiredness set in, the unchanging scenery becomes downright aggravatingly, aggressively tedious. Cairns pick out the way, and signposts have been placed by the junctions with other paths (namely the **porters' path** to Horombo about thirty minutes after leaving Barafu, and a junction with the **Kibo Southern Circuit** twenty minutes further on).

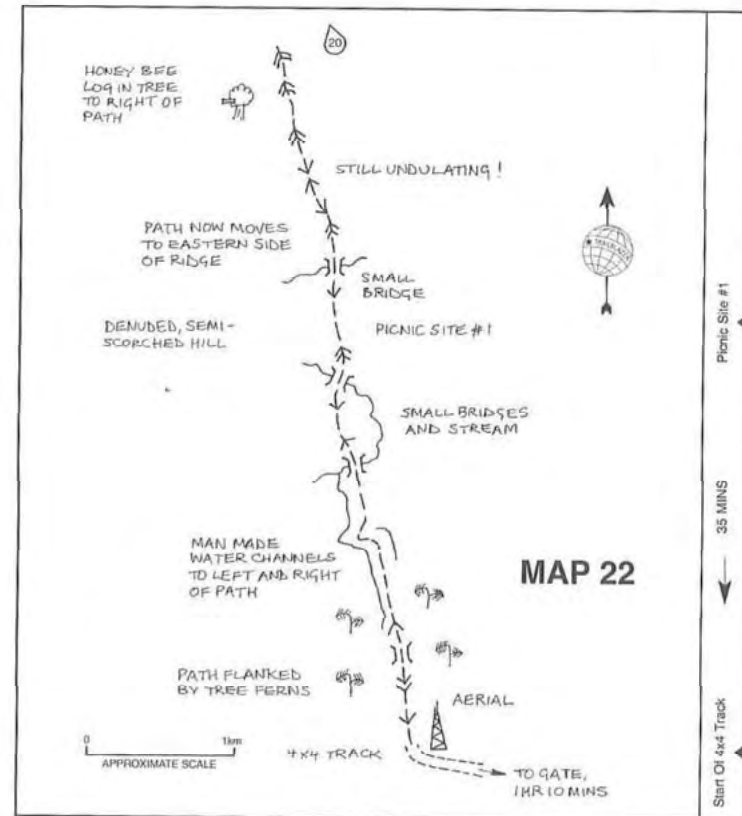
Eventually the **Rau Campsite** (3260m), your home for the night, moves into view, though even this provides little cheer, being both far away (about 35 minutes from the point where you first see it) and clearly located upon a hill, thus requiring yet more work for those screaming calf muscles. But reach it you eventually will, there to sit and soak your feet in the bucket of water provided by your kindly porter, followed possibly by a trip to the tourists-only toilet, noteworthy insofar that they are of the sit-down variety; this is probably the first welcome piece of news your tired legs have received on this very, very long day.

#### Stage 2: Rau Campsite to Kidia Gate [Map 21, p221; Map 22, opp]

The sign at Rau Campsite says that the end of the trek is but a three to four hour walk away. This is pushing the truth a bit. It probably did take the park warden (or whoever was responsible for arriving at this estimate) three or four hours to walk from the campsite down to the gate, but then you have to ask if he had spent the previous four or five days walking up to the summit of Kibo and back? I think not. Still, as mentioned in the introduction to this route, this final day has some glorious sections to it, the first of which, and the most spectacular, lies just fifteen minutes south of the Rau Campsite. It's not just I who thinks this section is worthy of greater attention: the authorities have decided to locate the first of two **picnic spots** here on the route in the forest on the edge of the fields, and a more perfect spot to munch on a chicken drumstick it is hard to imagine. Be careful of the path along this first section, however: many small trees and bushes were uprooted or chopped down to make way for the trail, and their stumps and roots continue to protrude along the path, causing many a trip and stumble. Take care in the **forest** too, which you will enter an hour after Rau, for creepers and vines also pose potential hazards.

Having entered the forest, the path undulates as it first climbs to and then follows the top of a narrow ridge between two deep valleys. The **second picnic site** (called, confusingly, Picnic Site Number 1) is about 90 minutes or more into the forest, and cannot compete with the first; indeed, the forest at this second site looks rather bare and sparse, and the deep, steep drops on either side give this spot a rather isolated, lonely feel.

After this the path crosses and re-crosses a number of mountain streams and, later on, a couple of man-made water channels. It then descends along a pretty path lined with tree ferns, before climbing up a short hill to a large **aerial tower**. The 4WD track begins about now, and meanders on for the next few



kilometres. Every time you come to a bend in the path you think the gate is just around the corner; time and again, however, you will be disappointed. Eventually, after well over an hour from the aerial, the path descends for the final time and you reach **Kidia Gate** (1500m), where a nice man sits in a little cabin to the right of the gate and doles out certificates to those who deserve them. The trek is at an end, and all that remains to do is sign your name in the registration book, dish out the tips (if you haven't done so already) and catch your lift back past waving kids to your hotel, a warm shower and a cold Kilimanjaro beer. You've earned it – though if you do plan to celebrate in Moshi, please take more care than Meyer did upon his return to town:

*In the evening, to show there was no ill-feeling, I treated the natives to a display of fireworks, in the course of which a spark from a rocket set fire to one of the men's huts.*