

## FIRST UP TEMBO

JOHN ALEXANDER

The Southern part of Kenya is a varied country. Sometimes it is mountainous, populated by isolated tribes who cultivate only the highlands over 4,000 feet; sometimes flat and steppe-like, dry plains where the nomadic Masai drive their cattle from one grazing-ground to another; and sometimes covered with the mysterious "bush" teeming with big game, where people who stray from the main road are often never seen again.

Tembo Peak (Kichwa Tembo—the Elephant's Head—to give its full name) lies in the bush country, about 150 miles inland from Mombasa and in the Royal National Park of Tsavo. Fifty years ago the man-eating lions of Tsavo roamed the bush at the foot of Tembo, terrorising the labour gangs who were building the railway into the Kenya hinterland. Seventy men were eaten by lions before the terror was quelled.

The peak is part of the great Ngulia range, of which Ngulia, over 5,000 feet, is the highest point. Ngulia has been climbed about five times, and has thus lost its attraction for those who want the thrill of treading where no one has trodden before. It is an easier peak than Tembo, however, and we used it as a survey point, placing a cairn on its summit which could be seen from a distance of 50 miles. At the foot of Tembo runs the Tsavo River, full of crocodile and hippo and visited by great herds of elephant. The slopes above are covered thickly with thorns and tangled vegetation and the rocks higher up are very steep; altogether, the peak required some thought before one could tackle its first ascent with reasonable hope of the party's safe return.

I had often talked with two friends about making this first ascent. One Bank Holiday week-end in 1952 our arrangements were ready. We decided to do without African labour on the trip, for it is pleasant to escape from the ubiquitous survey "boys" once in a while. On Friday night we left the large survey camp which was our headquarters, and drove by Landrover from Voi to Mtito Andei, where we branched off the road into the bush. The National Park Warden, a friend of ours, allowed us to sleep in a lodge not far from the foot of our peak. We had with us food for the week-end, many water-bottles, large "pangas" (long knives to cut through the undergrowth), and a rifle; the last item was a necessary protection against night-marauding lions.



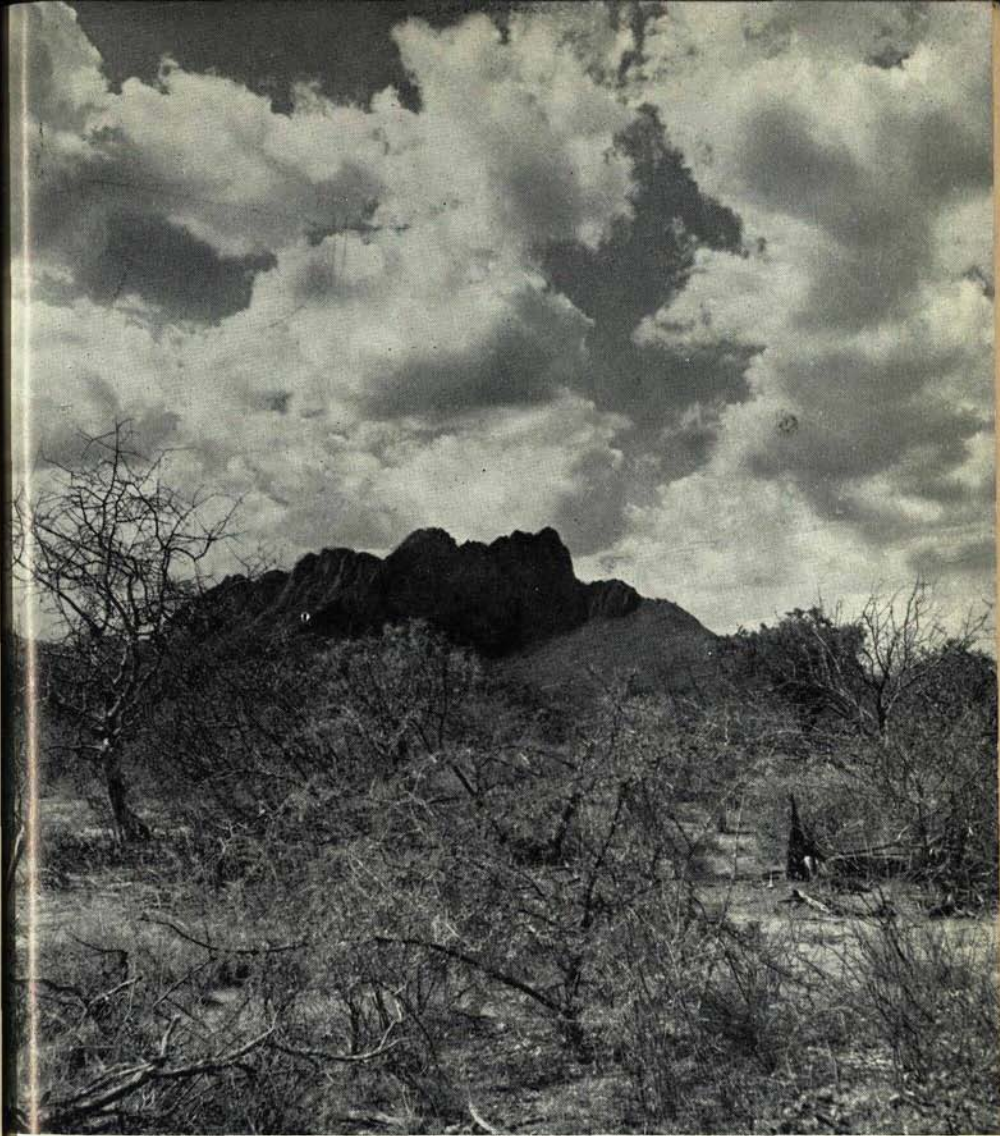
The roars of lion, as well as the cries of bush-babies, disturbed our rest that night. All three of us got up one after another to test the security of the hut door, with smirks intended to convey that we couldn't care less. But next morning we were on our way, Landrovering by dusty new-made tracks a further six miles towards our objective.

Our first halt was at a water-hole where we proposed to breakfast. As we approached it, scattered herds of buffalo rapidly converged into an aggressive phalanx and charged towards the Landrover. The track was just car-width between bulldozed banks. Even a 180° lock on the steering wouldn't have saved us, for in the frantic hurry of turning we stalled the engine. But fortunately, just as we got ready to bale out and run, the whole herd—about fifty strong—wheeled away. It was a pity, we felt, that they should disappear in the direction we ourselves had to take.

The water-hole was too muddy to drink, so with a last swig at the water-drum in the car we piled out with our packs to breakfast among the great rocks, while our African driver took the car back. He was to meet us at the Tsavo River on the following evening.

Our fire needing wood, I went some way up the dry bed of the water-hole to find some. As I turned the first big rock I came face to face with an enormous buffalo. I only saw him for an instant, for I went into reverse at once, leapt down the gully, and bounded clean over the embryo camp-fire and up another big rock before my friends could ask what was happening. There was no sound from the buffalo, and when I peered round the corner again he had disappeared into the bush.

Having eaten, we started off on foot at 7 a.m. Two miles of hard going lay between us and the great rock tower of Tembo. The sun was beginning to warm up in the usual cloudless sky, and the small scented shrubs of the bush crackled dryly as we pushed through, giving off the characteristic pungent smell as they were bruised. We made a mile, and began to enter rhino country. The weight of our packs, to which we were just getting used, was a danger to us in the event of meeting a rhino and having to run for it, and this thought was never far from our minds. But that did not prevent us receiving a distinct shock when we came suddenly upon one. Fortunately he decided to run for it himself. There was a tremendous crashing in the bush, a thunder of great feet, and that was all. After this incident we met no other big game, for we had reached very steep ground.



TEMBO PEAK  
(Kenya)

*John Alexander*



It was necessary now to use hands, pulling ourselves up by the boles of small trees and climbing through the cactus-like Sansavera. Sansavera has large spikes capable of inflicting severe wounds; the danger of falling back on to these was no light one. There were small rock-faces to scale now, cutting across the face of the mountain like *schrunds* on a glacier, and of quite difficult standard. About half-way up we had to cross a narrow gully. Across it one could almost have reached an outstretched hand to a companion, but it was very deep and steep and choked with vegetation. It was necessary to cut a hole with our pangas, through which ourselves and our packs could crawl. Several times, in hewing a way out through the dusty tangle to the gully side, I slipped and fell. This work took an hour and a half, and we were somewhat exhausted when, at 2 p.m., we stopped for lunch. The sun was beating down now, but we dared not drink too deeply of our scanty water-supply. How steep this section of mountainside was may be imagined from the fact that we had to wedge in behind projecting trees in order to free our hands for eating. Somehow we managed to snatch a nap before going on, and it was needed.

I think I can truthfully say that from this point onwards was the toughest journey I have ever done. By now we had developed a fanatical determination to get up Tembo, and that was the only thing that kept us going. The steepness increased. So did the vegetation, for out here the coolness and moisture high up causes our summits below 9,000 feet to be densely clothed in green "rain-forest." At times our feet could not touch the ground, owing to a very thick and tough bindweed which now formed the whole undergrowth at a very steep angle. Our pangas bounced off it when we tried cutting, but on the last stretch below the summit-cliffs it had to be cut. Chop, hack, hew, until our eyeballs almost dropped out, was the order of the day.

At long last we laid hands on some steep rocks. They were covered with straggling prickly Xerophytes and gave great difficulty. Huge clouds of dust shot down as we climbed, and only the presence of a few trees growing horizontally out of crevices enabled us to get up safely. Above this barrier was paradise. There was a large cool cave, where we enjoyed a very fine tea of tinned peaches and water. Big trees grew here, with towering rocks rising from them, and there was a magnificent view out over the endless bush. But it was now 5 p.m. and we were still 500 feet below the summit, with a really terrific cliff to get up. As soon as we were refreshed we began to seek a break in the cliff's defences.

We found a gully. I can best describe it by saying that it very closely resembled Great Gully on Craig yr Ysfa. We tried every means of assailing the big chockstone pitch in it, and only succeeded when I got up beneath the chockstone and found a small hole through which the rope could be pushed to hang down outside the stone. We hauled ourselves over, and some very nice climbing in the upper gully followed. It brought us into dense rain-forest, but we found a delectable ridge with the forest on one side and space on the other. And this led us at last to the untrodden summit.

On every side the immensity of the bush stretched away. The view had the added pleasure that we were the first to see it. We built a cairn; but it was not for us to spend long on the summit, for nightfall was at 7.30 and was almost upon us.

Down we went to our cave, and spent the night there, sleeping fitfully and listening to the call of buffalo. A gang of friendly monkeys woke us, perching above our cave-door and enlivening breakfast with their antics. We left them to guard our peak and scrambled down—twelve hours of panga-slashing, intense heat, and battling with spiny plants. We reached the Tsavo River at 6 p.m. and there salved the wounds made in our legs by Sansavera spikes. When the African driver found us we were naked by the river, alternately splashing in its heavenly water and drinking large mugs of tea.

Tembo has other and smaller summits, all unclimbed. And some day we are going back.