
A Glimpse of Africa

'When two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers!' - An African Proverb

The only woman to explore Africa in her own right was Alexandrine Tinné– described as young, beautiful and remarkably accomplished – a linguist and a horsewoman, as well as the richest heiress in The Netherlands.

In 1863, Alexandrine, her mother, an aunt and two scientists made their way up the shallow channel of the Bahr el Gaza. From Khartoum, they were pulled upstream in barges, as far as they could go, and where they were stopped by the schemes of an unscrupulous slave trader. Alexandrine's mother, aunt and one of the scientists died from fever in 1864.

In 1869, Alexandrine recruited two Dutch sailors to join her on a caravan bound for Lake Chad. Knowing the hazards of desert travel, she took two iron water tanks carried by the camels. A rumour soon spread that the tans were full of gold coins. At a camp in the Sahara, the guides killed her Dutch sailors, slashed Alexandrine with sabres, and left her lying the blazing sun where she slowly bled to death. She was barely 33 years old!

Africa accounts for a quarter of the land surface of the earth – and a rapidly increasing percentage of its population. Most of the African land mass is still hostile to man ... barren, arid deserts advance relentlessly toward oppressively humid equatorial forests. The second largest Continent after Asia, Africa consists mostly of high, monotonous plateaux which drop dramatically to narrow coastal plains, warm seas and sandy beaches.

The population of Africa was once balanced by the environments' own uncompromising and powerfully effective controls – Malaria, Bilharzia, Bubonic Plague, Yellow Fever, Typhoid, Typhus, Dysentery and Smallpox were all debilitating or fatal.

Man was considered fortunate to live beyond the age of 40 and the infant mortality rate, reaching as high as 70% in tribal conditions, encouraged ever increasing births.

With the advent of modern medicines, medical technology, healthier nutrition and improving hygiene, the population growth increased as more children reached maturity.

Even today's revitalised diseases, such as Malaria and its' virulent and multiple drug-resistant strains, or the emergence of TB, cannot suppress Africa's passionate fervour for breeding to sustain recent or future loses. Tomorrow's parents have already been born!

THE UPS ...

The two highest mountains in the African Continent are situated in East Africa – Kilimanjaro (19,340ft) was given to Kaiser Wilhelm II by his grandmother, Queen Victoria, following vigorous and childish complaints the he had 'no African mountain worth speaking o'. The highest peak in Africa then came into his possession – together with a fanciful distortion of the Kenya / Tanzania frontier.

Mount Kenya (17,057 ft) appeared at the same time as Kilimanjaro, 25 million years ago – a giant volcano on the edge of the Rift Valley. Whittled away by winds, rains and the passage of time, Mount Kenya is still the highest point in Kenya and accommodates a 195-mile National Park of heather, moss and lichen.

... AND THE DOWNS ...

The extraordinary feature of East Africa's geography, the Rift Valley runs roughly north and south across the East African plateau. Formed as a result of a 'fault' in the Earth's surface, the gradual build-up and releases of pressure along a parallel fracture in the Earth's crust, produced an unhealed wound of more than 9,000 kilometres down the face of Africa.

Continuous geological movement caused the land to slip below the level of the country around it, to form an immense valley – stretching from the Jordan Valley in Palestine, through the Red Sea down to Africa's third largest lake, Lake Malawi.

Between 40 and 60 miles wide, the Rift Valley is about 1,5000 ft below the level of the surrounding country, and in places the walls are acutely sheet. From its floor, rise 30 habitually grumbling volcanoes which may erupt unexpectedly – whilst deep beneath Botswana's Okavango swamps, the earth shudders like a subterranean cauldron, bubbling and burping in response to forces still mysteriously at work.