A new route up Mulanje

Helene Bovy

“If you think you know Mt. Mulanje, you don’t know it until you go up the Crater Path.” – Andrew Adkins

One of the greatest things about Mulanje is its diversity – no two routes offer the same sights, experiences or smells. So when our trusty trips coordinator, Drew, suggested a meet to Lichenya and South Peak using a brand new path, I was in.

This new trail, dubbed “the Crater Path”, is the brain child of Andrew Adkins, the PeaceCorps volunteer based in Mulanje. Since arriving in Mulanje, Andrew had been keen on creating more ways to get up the mountain. As he got to know the area, Andrew noticed that the two villages near the crater, Nkola and Chipoka, were traditionally neglected by the Mulanje community, and did not benefit from the tourism industry as there was no “official” way up the mountain from that area. By choosing that area, and hopefully creating more frequent traffic, the Crater Path would tackle two birds with one stone as well: by making the Crater a less attractive option to poachers and loggers.

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A new route up Mulanje (continued from p1)

After numerous talks with the village heads, and securing some funding from MMCT and MCM, Andrew and 10 local villagers started etching out the path in May 2015. The bulk of the work was done in five days, with everyone camping under the stars as they progressed up the steep slopes of the mountain.

And what a path! Our eclectic group (including a paraglider and a drone) set off early on Friday, 4th September. The journey starts in the tea fields, just outside of the boma, after the Mulanje Sports Club. From there, it winds up into the forest, with hornbills and turacos serenading us as we trudged on. The soil is at times quite loose, but this should settle as time goes on; also, Andrew and the others did a wonderful job at carving out steps and putting in make-shift handrails in the more testy areas.

The second phase of the climb is arriving on the ridge – and quite frankly, it is a magical moment. It truly is breathtaking and the views of the valley below unrivalled by those offered by the other paths going up the mountain. As you ascend the narrow ridge, Manga looms to your right, and perpendicular walls of the Lichenya Plateau to your left. It’s here that the real work starts. The rest of the way up is pretty unreleenting, with handmade ladders, and a lot of scrambling. But the reward is phenomenal: the arrival on the Lichenya plateau almost comes as a surprise as the ground abruptly goes from quasi-perpendicular to flat. We all stood in awe, looking out over the lip of the “crater”, congratulating ourselves on our excellent hiking, whilst munching on well-earned snacks.

The rest of the walk to Lichenya Hut is a lovely meander on the plateau, through patches of forest, (dry) streams, and unfortunately, at that time of year quite a few burnt areas (but fortunately, the firebreaks did their job!).

All in all, this is a great new path – but not for the faint hearted. It is hard - steep, narrow at times, and the final ascent makes Elephant Head seem like a walk in the park.

But for those who are interested, InfoMulanje will be able to put you into touch with the adequate guides – incidentally the same guys who built the paths!

If you need a bit more convincing, there’s some awesome footage shot by drone (which includes the paragliding!), as well as the album on the MCM Facebook page. ▲

https://youtu.be/9W7iLH1n8z4

Steep climbing up the ridge
Photo: Drew Corbyn
Club update
Maggie O’Toole, Club Chair

We have two great achievements to announce in this newsletter...

Drew became the MCM peak bagger champ on 16th October when he completed his ascent of the selected 15 peaks in style by climbing Manga Peak – it’s been some time since Manga Peak has been climbed (it is possible to use a hiking route to the summit) so it was a notable end to his challenge – well done Drew.

And while the peak baggers competition was being played out with lots of jostling for positions at the lead Thomas was quietly getting on with his own plans to climb the 62 peaks of Mount Mulanje. Way back 59 peaks were identified using a drop off of 60m all round to define a peak – with three more being ‘discovered’ more recently. Thomas’s plan was to get up there and climb them all as an almost entirely solo experience. In late September he headed up to Chambe with an enormous pack and a porter carrying another one – supplies for the challenge ahead. An MCM trip spent a couple of days with him in early October by which time he had climbed 22 peaks. He completed the 55 peaks that can be accessed from the plateau in 24 days, came down for a shower and a good meal (or two) and went back to complete the seven remaining peaks accessed from the base of Mulanje in four days. This is a truly amazing mental and physical achievement and Thomas recounted his trip at the Christmas social on 9th December.

The rains are getting going now so don’t forget to take a rope with you if you climb Mulanje during the wet season – it can make the difference between a safe crossing of a river and a long, long wait for the water level to go down.

Many members have reported the depressing sight of ever increasing numbers of cedar cutters and carriers on Mulanje. The forestry department has a new director and we can only hope he is able to find some way to stop the destruction.

Enjoy your (wet!) hiking over the next few months.

Marvellous Mount Mulanje
Pete Weston

I love that early morning drive from Blantyre, constantly looking ahead to get the first glimpse of Mulanje towering above the plains. I’ve done it many times, but the excitement is always there. This time I am with a group of students from the UK. We have been in Blantyre for a few days with our friends from Open Arms; some of them are joining us on the trek. Very soon we are all craning our necks to look out of the bus up at the impossibly steep face rising up out of the verdant green tea plantations.

A quick stop at Mulanje town to pick up bananas and other provisions and we continue on our way to Lujeri estate. We bump and bounce our way along the red earth tracks, clouds of dust billowing up behind us. We pass the tea factory and eventually arrive at depot to start our walk.

Here we meet our porters and guides and split into two groups, half heading for Madzeka and the rest of us going up the Ruo Gorge to Minunu hut.

The African winter always produces such amazing light; clear and sharp with not a cloud in the sky. The colours of the tea bushes against the backdrop of Mulanje make it almost impossible to take a bad photo. On this particular trip the weather promises to be perfect; nice and warm but not too hot.

Each time I come to Mulanje I try to go via different route. Having read Venture to the Interior by Laurens van der Post many years ago, I have always been keen to explore the Ruo Gorge. The route up past the Hydro Station was wonderfully cool. Towering trees and overhanging bamboo provided

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Marvellous Mount Mulanje (from p3)
dappled shade, which helped to peg back the
temperatures. The path was good underfoot, steep
but never too steep.

Sooner than expected we broke out of the trees,
crested the rise and there before us was Minunu hut.
Bigger than I had expected and very comfortable too.
A delightful evening was spent loafing around the hut,
while our trusty cook, Barton conjured up a veritable
feast of fillet steak and vegetables. As I and my
colleagues, Ian and Lesley, sipped Malawi's finest
brandy, our students struggled to get their meals
cooked on the terrace outside before the sun dipped
below the horizon. Night time comes on quickly and a
few students were still stirring their noodles in the
dark.

Exhausted teenagers were keen to collapse into their
sleeping bags, but I insisted on dragging them all
outside to lie on the grass and take in the wonders of
the night sky. And what a sky it was too! I'm glad to
say they were gobsmacked, more stars in one sky
than you would see all year in the UK.

Over the next couple of days we wended our way to
Chinzama and Thuchila huts, skirted below the squat
mass of Sapitwa and finally ended up at Lichenya hut.
We spent a memorable night here at what is my
favourite of all the Mulanje huts. Some of our
students decided it would be a good idea to sleep up
on the mezzanine below the cathedral-like window.
As temperatures plunged to near freezing overnight
they regretted their choice of bunk space.

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Cookery corner
Helene Bovy

Bananas. They're the best (or the worst, if you suffer from
bananaphobia – it's a real thing, look it up): high in water
and fibre and boasting three different types of naturally
occurring sugars, they are a great option when you're in the
need for an energy hit in the mountains.

Unfortunately, this berry (yes, it is a berry) suffers from
squishibility (this on the other hand is a made-up word)
despite its tough skin, making transporting it up the
mountain a tricky endeavour. Luckily, bananas lend
themselves well to baking, especially when they are overly
ripe. So here's a quick and easy banana bread recipe and
some ideas of how to spruce it up, in order to enjoy this fruit
and all of its benefits on your next trip up Mulanje!

Banana bread –

- 185g flour – use wheat flour, oat flour, or even throw in
some groundnut flour for extra protein
- 1 tsp baking soda
- 150g sugar *
- 1/3 cup plain yoghurt/milk/chambiko
- 60g butter, room temperature
- 2 eggs
- about 1.5 cups mashed bananas, as ripe as you can find

Mix eggs and butter together, before adding the sugar.
Add in the flour – without overmixing (this leads to dense,
tough cakes!)
Fold in the dairy and bananas.
Bake at 180°C. Depending on whether you bake it in a loaf
pan or as muffins, you'll have to adjust the baking time, but
usually loaf pans will take 30-45 minutes, and muffins closer
to 20-25 mins.

Banana lends itself well to quite a few pairings; try some of
these:

- Spice it up adding one, or all, of these: cinnamon, ginger,
cloves, cardamom, allspice, nutmeg...
- Make it a richer treat by adding chocolate chips, or
replace some of the flour with cocoa for chocolate
banana bread
- Nuts, nuts and more nuts!

* Depending on the ripeness of the bananas and on your
sweet tooth, you can bring the sugar down to 120g or up to
200g.▲
Marvellous Mount Mulanje (from p4)

Our final morning on the mountain was truly special. The ground around the hut was white with frost and the air was bitterly cold, reminding me very much of sunrise in the Alps. As the sun crept over the jagged peaks, the khonde was bathed in the most amazing sunny warmth. Meanwhile the other (shady) side of the hut remained frigid and cold.

We descended via the very direct and steep Boma path to Mulanje. Our brilliant team of porters and guides were always on hand in just the right place to provide a bit of support and reassurance to nervous and weary walkers. Our final steps once more took us through the tea plantations, this time ending up with a well earned hot shower and comfy bed at Kara O’Mula Lodge.

There can be few places in the world so perfect for mountain walking as Mulanje. Gently meandering paths, towering rock faces, impossibly steep and inaccessible valleys interspersed with shady, wooded glens and crystal clear streams. The scenery is superb, the huts are charming and the porters must be the most cheerful and helpful you could hope find anywhere.

I will be back in Malawi again next July. I am already poring over the map, planning my next Mulanje adventure.

Pete Weston is a former teacher at SAINTS (2000-2003) now at Queen Elizabeth School in Cumbria, UK. He visits Malawi every year with a group of students who help to raise funds for Open Arms Children’s Home. On this most recent trip to Mulanje, QES students were accompanied by Sam, Eric, Ephraim, Angness and Chickondi from Tsekwe House, a foster home run by Open Arms.

October on fire
Sophie Borgstein

We last climbed Mulanje in mid-October, setting off around 7.30 to avoid the worst of the heat. Leaving from Nessa, we nevertheless sweated up through the pineapple fields, reaching the welcome cool of the forest by 9.30. Parts of the path were however so ravaged as to be almost unrecognizable, even to familiares of this route. Some places have been burnt by the fires that have swept up the sides of the slopes. Other places have been widely hoed, leaving the loosened soil ripe for erosion; the last steep ascent before the fringe of forest is reached promises to be a spectacular mudslide come the rains.

Within the forest, the scents, sounds and birdsong soothed our spirits. We spotted one brown snake as it headed speedily for the undergrowth, and another bright green one which was happier to hang about and be photographed.
October on fire (from p6)
Only on reaching home and checking in the snake-bible did we realize that we might have been somewhat more vigilant in this close encounter with Monsieur Boomslang.

The rainforest on the plateau had – again – burnt in places, giving witness to the extreme dryness of the mountain. From Mandala the outlook across the Lichenya forest was cheerless: plumes of smoke rose from twenty, nay thirty different places.

The fires that raced across the grasslands had nibbled into the edges of every patch of woodland, and were smouldering deep into the leaf mould and roots.

Tearing it out merely seemed to allow fresh oxygen into the fire, and repeated stamping and trampling did not seem to be enough to quash its hold.

A walk down to the river took us through such devastation that it was hard not to compare it to a post apocalyptic scene. Vast fallen trees lay smouldering, underfoot was deep in ash and all around was the smell of burning.

From across the river the sounds of woodcutters at work and chattering ceased as they heard our approach. Only as we climbed out of the valley an hour or so later did the noises resume.

At night we awoke often, as fresh wafts of burning reached us; we sat up to scan the dark around, checking for approaching flames. By daylight we watched fire literally run along the side of Simpson’s Peak.

Twice the skies darkened with clouds, but despite our entreaties no rain came to stop the horrors all around, it took all one’s faith in the healing powers of nature to believe that the mountain can and will overcome this year’s onslaught.

Mulanje Peakbagging Competition: 15 for 2015

Drew Corbyn

Mulanje was a frenzy of activity in 2015 as a few slightly obsessive club members scrambled to be top of the peakbaggers. Competitors were aiming to summit 15 of Mulanje’s highest and most notable peaks.

Peakbagging is not a new phenomenon, fittingly born in Scotland between competing hikers set on being the first to reach the top of the country’s 282 mountains above 3,000 ft – the Munros. The Mulanje peakbagger competition was dreamt up by myself and Amy Ransom – two mountain geeks with a penchant for lists, who funnily enough ended up being the two most stubbornly fixated hikers.

The Mulanje competition list comprises of 15 peaks, the complete selection in Frank Eastwood’s guide – from Manene at one end of the horseshoe to Manga at the other, and including the most difficult scrambles up Sapitwa, Matambale and Chambe.

The competition was hotly contested, and the front-runner position changed hands repeatedly during the peak trekking months between May and August. Helene Bovy was the (continued on p7)
Peakbagging (cont. from p6)
early leader before getting distracted with wasted holidays away from the mountain. Gordon Benbow and four compatriots popped onto the table after completing five tough peaks in a day on the Kupweteka traverse. George Margesson was ahead as of July, though lost his place after repeat climbs of Chambe, Namasile and Sapitwa – making the disastrous mistake of choosing to spend time with friends instead of bagging new peaks. Amy’s determination was absolute, and she surely would have been the champ were it not for the baffling boulder fields protecting Chagaru.

I was told it would be improper of me (as competition designer) to mount a serious challenge for the peakbagging crown. Indeed my initial intent was only to provide a bit of healthy competition, but then peakbagging addiction took hold of me - I found myself on clandestine solo trips and even hijacked a group trip to the remote and unremarkable South Peak. I summited number 15 – Manga Peak – on 17th October, completing in eight separate hikes onto the mountain (including one failed attempt of Manga). On three occasions I summited three peaks in a visit, a memorable trip being Chinzama, Chagaru and Nakodzwe from Lujeri – covering 72 km and 6,000 m of ascent in a three day weekend. Finishing on Manga Peak via a climbing route up the South West ridge was particularly satisfying, not least because the precipitous cliffs had forced a retreat on an earlier attempt. Amy came in an honourable third a few weeks later, finishing with Nakodzwe.

An article on peakbagging on Mulanje wouldn’t be complete without mentioning the extraordinary achievement of Thomas Libuda. Frank Eastwood’s 15 peaks weren’t enough for Thomas; he set his sights on the long list – the 62 peaks on Mulanje with a prominence of at least 60m. In October Thomas spent 23 days straight on Mulanje, bagging 55 peaks (averaging two a day) without a guide or companion. The next week saw him tackle the seven outliers that can only be reached from the plains below, thus completing all 62 peaks in one month! Thomas joins Maggie and Brian in the peakbagging hall of fame as the only people to have stepped foot on all 62 of Mulanje’s peaks.

It could be argued that fixating on an arbitrary list is a sure-fire way to spoil the peace and relaxation of being on the mountain. But whether you choose to attempt them all in one visit, or over a span of years, completing the list will give you a profound appreciation of Mulanje.

Many thanks to Kara O Mula for sponsoring the first prize – a night at their lovely hotel – and Mulanje Pepper the second prize – a tasty round meal for two. www.peakbagger.com hosts the Mulanje peak lists. You can tick them off as you go. And compare progress with other peakbaggers.

And finally, the Committee are busily thinking of new challenges for 2016. Watch this space! ▲

Camping trip to Malosa pools
Maggie O’Toole

It’s become an annual event for MCM to organise a camping trip in September or October just before the rains. Last year we camped at South Peak pools. This year during the first weekend in October a group of nine of us headed for the Malosa River with the intention of camping out under the stars on a sandy beach close to the fabulous Olympic size swimming pools in the river just before it plunges over the eastern edge of the plateau and into Mozambique.

The ‘MCM trip mix’ had it all – Willie who had arrived in Africa the day before the trip and couldn’t believe he was camping on a sandy beach on Mulanje on day two of his travels; Alice also not long in Malawi and her (Continued on p8)
Camping by Malosa (cont. from p7)

first trip up Mulanje; Grahame more commonly seen on bike trips but fulfilling his wish to start his Mulanje expeditions; Peter Moons on his annual trip back to Malawi, this time from Suriname; Thomas part way through his extraordinary attempt on the 62 peaks of Mulanje; and Janet, Amy, Kristian and myself.

After a very hot ascent from Fort Lister we reached the pools by mid-afternoon and took a refreshing (chilly!) swim. The sky was clear and all was boding well for our starry camping... except that the beach that we have camped on several times before seemed to have been washed away. No worries – hoping we would find a suitable place to sleep down river a bit, we set off in search of a camp site. And we were not disappointed – very soon we came across an amazing, huge sandy beach perfect for our night. Willie quickly displayed his ‘drift’ wood collecting and fire building skills and kept a wonderful fire going through the evening. Normally I would be very wary about having a fire at this time of the year as the grassland is tinder dry but given that we were in the middle of this huge beach it seemed safe enough.

So it doesn’t rain until mid-October at the earliest right? So it’s perfectly reasonable to suggest that the trip should be ‘tent-less’ right? Hmm – Mulanje can always surprise and we were not too happy when we had a heavy downpour at about 7pm and we were forced to huddle under raincoats and a small tarpaulin. But it didn’t last and we were soon back around the fire drying out and enjoying our long evening of eating, drinking and many stories before finding spots to bed down for the night.

Soon after dawn a number of us became aware of a background chattering sound and opened our eyes to realise we were being observed from the river banks by a substantial number of people. The cedar cutters and carriers are early risers and it seems we had chosen to sleep on the route they take across the river! After some discussion (the ‘chattering’) they decided they could proceed on their way by making a small detour around these strange multicoloured slug-like objects and there were lots of early morning greetings. Sadly that crowd of carriers was just one of many we met during the weekend. For the first time I saw young girls carrying planks.

After breakfast and packing up the team was keen to climb a peak (and Thomas had to climb at least one to keep up with his gruelling schedule – he considered only one peak in a day something of a day off). So we headed up Namasile – Grahame being particularly delighted to climb his first Mulanje peak – and took in the spectacular views afforded by this wonderful mountain on such clear days. Great trip – thank you all.

Merry Christmas and a happy New Year in the mountains!