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AFRICA'S JUMBO HIKE!

It's a four-day trek to find Uganda's cave elephants — but they are worth every step

by Caroline Phillips

TODAY you'll climb the ladders and cliffs known as the Wall of Death,' says Peter, chief warden at Mount Elgon's National Park office in Uganda. 'Nobody,' he adds, 'has yet died on them.'

My daughter, Anya, 22, and I look at one another. It's too late to turn back. We've already flown eight hours to Nairobi, then another 75 minutes to Entebbe. Next, a six-hour car journey — covering just 165 miles to East Uganda — past Lake Victoria, sugar cane fields and men sitting on pavement sofas, their roadside 'shops'.

Eventually we reach Mbale town, sleep six hours at Mt Elgon Hotel — with its panoramic view of Mt Elgon, a 24 million-year-old extinct shield volcano — then get up at 5am to start our expedition.

Our goal is to hike for four days in this little-explored area of Uganda, and then across to Kenya. We're searching for cave elephants. They're unusual because they tend to spend their nights in caves, scraping salt off the rocky walls with their tusks.

Soon we're bumping along a dirt track to Bumasa, the trailhead for the Sasa Trail. It's the park's most popular route, although a mere 908 people walked it last year.

Here we meet our ranger guides, cook and porters. The two guides sport army fatigues, rifles and wellies. Three porters carry sacks on their heads: our food, water, rented tent, sleeping bags and mats. One, Moses, clutches a live chicken.

'Dinner,' he explains. We start our



Epic trek: Climbing Mt Elgon in search of cave elephants is tough but the views along the way are spectacular

hike, clambering up a slippery, rocky path alongside sweet potato and cassava plots. Will the 32 miles from start to finish be as strenuous? Children and barefoot Bagisu tribesmen stagger down with sacks of 'Irish potatoes' on their heads. 'Mulembe [hi],' they say. Three miles on, we reach the 'ladders' ascending the 984-ft-high Mudange Cliffs — the 'Wall of Death'.

'People used to climb the cliffs by rope,' explains Alex, head guide. The terrain is so difficult that we take five hours to walk 3.4 miles on the first day. But despite that, you don't have to be super fit.

At Sasa River Camp, the first of our two overnight camps, the porters pitch our tent inside a hut. The chef cooks beans and rice over a big log fire, and the chicken lives to see another day.

That night, I shiver in three pairs of trousers, four T-shirts and an anorak in our lightweight sleeping bag. It's three degrees in June.

'Monkeys came when you were

asleep,' Alex tells us, over breakfast. It's possible to spy leopards, baboons and buffalo, too.

On day three, I get 'air hunger' — altitude sickness. We're now on our second night in Mude Cave camp. Anya charges up Wagagai peak to 14,177 ft — later declaring it her Sir Edmund Hillary moment.

OVER four days, we hike past subsistence farming (coffee, maize and bananas), tropical montane (orchids and ferns), mixed bamboo (dense forest above 2,000 metres) and heath (shrubby moorland).

Then there's Suam Gorge, dotted with coffee smugglers' caves and the five-mile-wide caldera with its Jurassic Park-style landscape.

Finally, we reach Kenya, Kitum Cave's location, where elephants and antelope go for their salt lick. It's pitch-black, the ground carpeted with elephant dung, the

air filled with fruit bats screeching. As we shine phone torches, a thousand yellow eyes gleam spookily from the ceiling.

We marvel at the 'tusk art', where elephants have scratched off the walls for salt. When these 'etchings' were first discovered, they were reckoned to be the work of ancient Egyptian gold diggers.

At last the rangers locate the elephants. After an hour's bumpy car ride, we scramble with 40 locals to the top of a rocky hillock. Soon Babar and family hove majestically into view 50 ft away, moving slowly, tearing down branches. It's an awesome sight — and a grand finale.

TRAVEL FACTS

WILD Frontiers (wildfrontierstravel.com, 020 8741 7390) offers a six-day Mt Elgon trek from £1,645 pp, with one night at Mount Elgon Hotel. Kenya Airways (kenya-airways.com) flies to Entebbe from £390.

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Africa's jumbo hike! Joining a four-day trek to find Uganda's CAVE elephants - and they are worth every step

- Cave elephants spend nights in caves, scraping salt off the walls with their tusks
The 'etchings' were first thought to be the work of ancient Egyptian gold diggers
These elephants can be found in little-explored areas of Uganda and Kenya

By CAROLINE PHILLIPS FOR THE DAILY MAIL PUBLISHED: 08:27, 29 September 2018 | UPDATED: 09:16, 29 September 2018

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Majestic: Cave elephants are known to spend nights in caves and scrape salt off the rocky walls with their tusks

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