

Mount Kenya's Diamond Couloir

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AFRICA was about the last place I ever expected to find myself. Not because it lacks interest, but just to see all those elephants and tigers running around loose! I had heard of Mount Kenya and Kilimanjaro but neither of them had the lure of the Himalaya or even the Alps. One afternoon in the early fall of 1974 I received a phone call from Roger Brown and Barry Corbet of Summit Films in Denver. They asked me to join them and Yvon Chouinard in Yosemite on the making of a semi-documentary film. This led to an invitation from Summit Films to accompany the group to East Africa where we could attempt the Diamond Couloir on Mount Kenya. A superb 200-foot ice headwall was still virgin. Tom Frost, who was to do the high-angle photography, was also part of the group.

When we arrived in Kenya just about everything that could go wrong did. Our equipment was scattered all over the world; there were complications getting permission to film even though Roger had informed the local officials of our intentions months in advance. Making the best of it, my friend Greta, the lead actress, and I played tourist. Greta could have gone on like that for weeks but Yvon and I were anxious to get going. After four days in Nairobi most of the lost equipment arrived and some of us headed for the mountain.

It was a new and exciting experience hiking up through the various climate zones and listening to the strange sounds coming from the jungles along side the trail. The hike to Base Camp was long and grueling but the novelty made it interesting. Day after day passed and the porters brought everything but our climbing equipment.

After several "strolls" to fight off frustration we finally decided to try the third ascent of the Point John Couloir. We scrounged a few tie-offs, runners, and carabiners. We had our crampons, axes and a rope, and so started up. The ice was terrific and after a couple of hours of jury-rigging and long run-outs we were up.

The strolls were getting us into condition. The lead actor came down with pulmonary edema after one day at Base Camp and had to leave the mountain for a while. The upset gave us a couple of extra days and so we made plans to try the Diamond Couloir now rather than wait until we were through filming. Though I wasn't in favor of an early at-

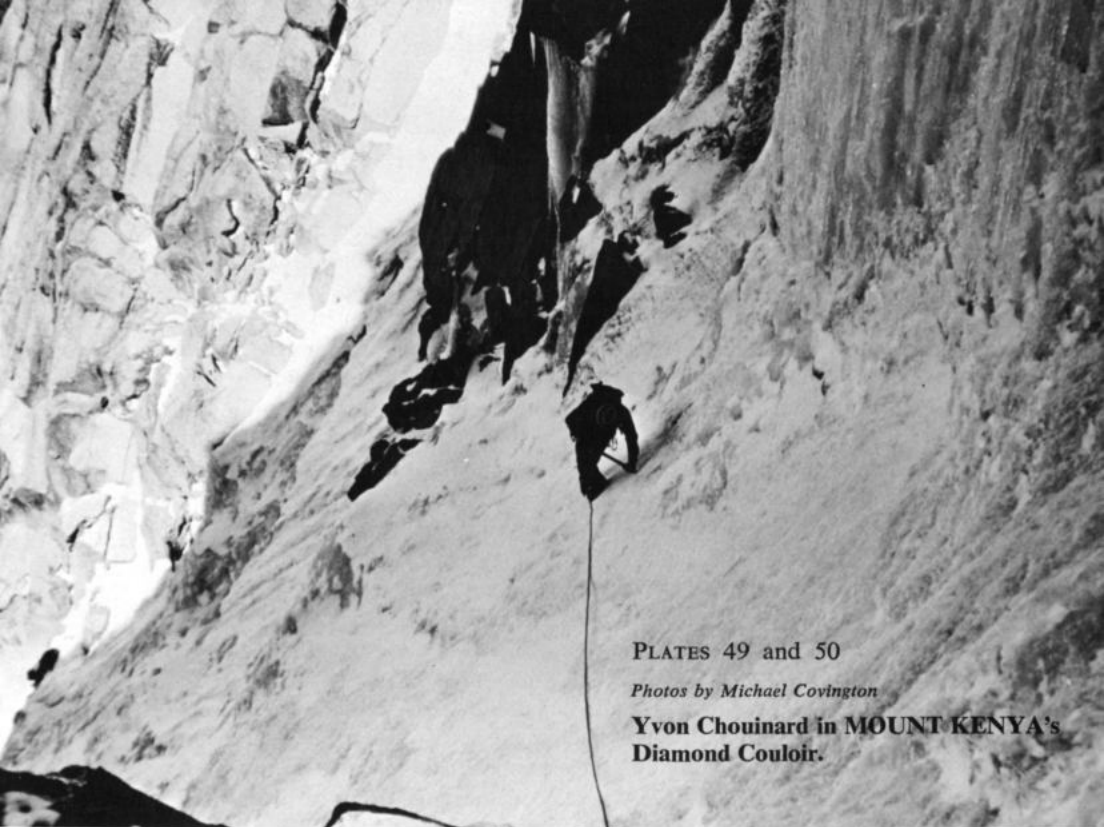
tempt, Yvon and I left camp late one afternoon and hiked up to bivouac nearer to the climb. When it came time to go the next morning, I couldn't be budged, but rolled over and lapsed into peaceful sleep. A few hours later I was awakened by yells from Brown, who was on his way up to take pictures from the Darwin Glacier. Although the Diamond Couloir had nothing to do with the film at this point, he wanted to film it anyway. After watching him climb the moraine to his camera position, I decided to see where Yvon had gone.

When I reached the glacier, I looked around not quite ready to admit that Yvon was nearing the end of the first pitch of the Diamond Couloir. I sat down, put my crampons on and raced up the glacier towards the base of the climb. The thin air soon reduced my run to a slower more rhythmical pace. I glanced across to the ravaged figure of a monkey frozen onto the ice. Hm, only in Africa! When I reached the base I yelled to Yvon to throw the rope down. I tied in and started climbing.

The first pitch was about 120 feet and tilted to about 75°. For the most part the ice was pretty good, but there were sections which were not. "Just a stroll, eh? I should have guessed." "Hey, all right man! Glad you changed your mind. I never could have made it on my own, but I know we can do it." It was a good meeting. Now we were both pretty fired up and ready to go.

Above us the couloir leaned back to around 50° for several pitches. It was warm and friendly, almost too warm, too warm to be nosing about in couloirs. The clouds were gathering. It was spacy watching them rise from the rain forests into the Teleki valley below us. Eventually they get all stacked up there and then consume everything in mist. In the middle of the fifth pitch the angle rose sharply. We were nearing the end of the easy stuff.

Except for the first pitch we had been climbing on the left side of the couloir which seemed to offer protection from the obvious fall-line. Now the route lay to the right and so I led across to a sloping rock stance with a fixed pin to belay from. Just as I reached the stance, I heard a rumble from above. Terror raced through me. In the worst possible place and 75 feet above my protection, I looped a finger through the pin as a rock avalanche poured down the chute. It went on for ages. The whole summit seemed to be caving in. I could hardly believe I was still there. I yelled down to Yvon. He too had survived the pelting. Had the heat caused the slide? Then I remembered that Tom Frost and Roger Gossick were paralleling us via the Ice Window route, hoping to get some tight shots of the final bit. I yelled up and sure enough Tom replied. "Sorry about that. Are you guys OK?" My swearing would have raised the dead. Calmly he replied, "I knew you guys would be OK. You're the champs. We won't drop anything more." Just then, another much larger slide broke off. In all the excitement I had forgotten to



PLATES 49 and 50

Photos by Michael Covington

**Yvon Chouinard in MOUNT KENYA's
Diamond Couloir.**





PLATE 51

Photo by Michael Covington

MOUNT KENYA's Diamond Couloir.

clip in and so again I looped a finger in the pin, and again the slide passed over.

After reaching me, Yvon led an interesting pitch of mixed climbing. Although the headwall seemed to loom just above, I climbed almost a full pitch past his belay before getting to the base of the fragile obstacle. We were in the clouds now and the setting had changed drastically from a warm and friendly environment into a safer but more eery one. The climbing was steep and the visibility was usually less than a pitch. An occasional icicle fell or running water dripped from ledge to ledge. Otherwise the silence was all consuming. Peaceful, but spooky.

The final headwall looked uninviting. The right was barred by threatening thin sheets of transparent ice which tapered into a "Jaws" type setting of elongated icicles. The center had a short 40-foot rock outcrop surrounded with thin ice. The left had the best ice but it rose into the mist at an intimidating angle. We decided on the center.

Putting his tools in their holsters, Yvon climbed up, using hand-jams between the ice and the rock, to a small cave at the top of the outcrop. A thin sheet of ice separated him in his bomb-bay cave from the final difficulties. "Hang on!" he shouted, "I'm going to have to chop my way out of here." It took little to disengage the curtain. Two or three whacks and it departed the face, exploded onto the ramp near me, and then fired off down the couloir in the mist below. Spooky spooky! How to get back out onto the smooth, nearly vertical sheet of ice above? First he placed his hammer up inside the cave and then leaned out as if trying to reach over a roof. One swing with the axe and it was buried in the ice above. Then he removed his hammer and placed it up alongside the axe. Both tools gave off a precarious dull thunk. Although the curtain was not entirely gone, Yvon was too committed to come down now. I tensed, expecting a fall as he leaned way out and engaged a crampon inches above the lip of the curtain. Slowly he moved up onto the ice and then removed a tool and swung again. This time the axe found good ice and Yvon let out a welcome "Wha hoo!" There were still 20 feet of nearly vertical ice before the angle eased, but it was in the bag now. The ice was super, almost too good. It was harder to get the tools unstuck than make them stick.

It was a fantastic pitch to watch. Tom and Roger who were filming from a nearby shelf were impressed. I climbed up and joined Yvon. We just sat there and enjoyed the view which had improved while I was climbing. There was still a short vertical section to climb before we could really call it a day, but for now we were content just sitting there.

Eventually we pulled ourselves together to finish it off. I picked up my tools to start up. Even though the ice was still good, I had a hard time with it. I'd reached a ramp leading off to the right, which I followed until I was standing in the middle of the Diamond Glacier. Yvon

climbed up and we watched Frost and Roger exit via the spectacular Ice Window. Then they too joined us. Tom was anxious to do some more filming in a giant ice cave just above us and so asked if we intended to continue on up into the Gate of The Mist.

Yvon went to help Tom in the cave while Roger and I started looking for a way down. In all the excitement no one had bothered to find out the easiest way off this thing. Again I picked up my tools and headed off across the Diamond Glacier aiming for a rock outcrop barely visible in the mist.

Summary of Statistics:

ASCENT: First direct finish of the Diamond Couloir, Mount Kenya, Kenya, East Africa, January, 1975 (Yvon Chouinard, Michael Covington). Nine Pitches; 5½ hours.

