



Central Highlands

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Why Go?

The Central Highlands are the fertile, mist- and rain-fattened breadbasket of the nation and the green-girt, red-dirt spiritual heartland of Kenya's largest tribe, the Kikuyu. This is the land the Mau Mau fought for, the land the colonists coveted and the land whose natural, cyclical patterns define the lives of the country's largest rural population as they tend their *shambas* (small plots) in its valleys.

The prime attraction here is Kirinyaga, the Mountain of Mysteries (or Ostriches, depending on who's translating). Better known as Mt Kenya, this icy massif dominates the small towns scattered in its shadow and looms large near some of the nation's most stunning, and least visited, national parks.

Southwest of Mt Kenya, some of the oldest mountains on the continent, the dramatic Aberdare Range, help bolster the region's reputation as Kenya's premier trekking destination.

Best of Nature

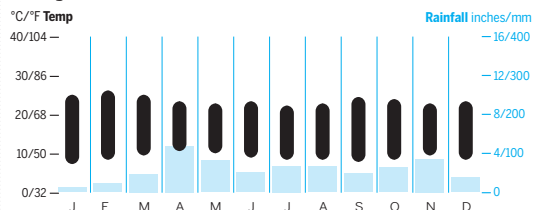
- » Meru National Park (p189)
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Best of Culture

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When to Go

Nanyuki



Mid-Jan–Feb & mid-Jul–Aug

Your best chance of favourable weather to bag Mt Kenya.

Mar–early Jun

The long rains fall everywhere – even in the dry zones near Thika and Kamburu Dam.

Oct & Nov

The short rains make a brief appearance.

THE NINE-MONTH COUP

During the colonial period, the appointed leaders of tribal Africa were headmen and, by and large, men they were (and, usually, remain). But there's one exception from the history books, a woman who both reversed the constraints of her sex and, if the unusual story behind her removal from power is to be believed, fell prey to the pitfalls of gender in a way only a woman could appreciate.

These are the facts as we know them: Wangu wa Makeri was a Kikuyu, born in the second half of the 19th century. In 1901 she was appointed headman of Weithaga, becoming the only female ruler in colonial Kenya. Accounts agree she was a rigid and authoritarian ruler, but whether or not this was a good thing seems to have been a matter of opinion. Wangu made a point of literally using men as furniture, discarding traditional Kikuyu stools for the backs of Kikuyu males. Perhaps unsurprisingly, stories suggest her rule was warmly approved of by Kikuyu women.

And so the wily (and, more pertinently, fertile) men of the Kikuyu tribe hatched a plot, one of the most unique coups in history (disclaimer: we are now leaving the realm of history and entering the more entertaining, if less reliable, space of tribal folklore). They all did their husbandly duty and impregnated their wives, including Wangu, more or less simultaneously. This ensured that in nine months, the chief and her supporters were either in labour, nursing or too heavily pregnant to prevent the re-ascendancy of male Kikuyu-dom.

History

After most likely arriving from West or central Africa, the ancestors of the Kikuyu, like the *wazungu* (white) settlers who arrived in the 19th century, recognised a good thing when they saw it: the incredibly fertile soil of the slopes of Mt Kenya. Hunter-gathers and pastoralists became farmers who lived fat off the land.

Said land became the ripest plum for colonial picking when European newcomers filtered into East Africa. Failing farms in other parts of Kenya magnetised *wazungu* into the highlands, and in the 1880s the Kikuyu were displaced from their homes to make way for white agriculture and the Mombasa-Uganda railway.

Having borne the brunt of colonialism's abuses, the Kikuyu shouldered much of the burden of nationalism's struggle and formed the core of the Mau Mau rebellion in the 1950s (see p296). That struggle was largely fought in highland valleys, and the abuses of the anti-insurgency campaign were largely felt by highland civilians. While even the staunchest patriot cannot claim the Mau Mau won the uprising, the movement, combined with the general dismantling of the British Empire, forced colonial authorities to reassess their position and eventually abandon Kenya.

It was a Kikuyu, Jomo Kenyatta, who assumed presidency of the new country, and the Kikuyu, widely recognised (even by

grudging rivals) as one of the hardest-working, most business-savvy tribes in Kenya, who assumed control of the nation's economy. Incidentally, they also reclaimed their rich fields in the Central Highlands, a move that has been a source of tension in Kenya to this day. Many *wazungu* farmers remain, and their huge plots can be seen stretching all along the highways between Timau, Meru and Nanyuki.

ABERDARES

The cloud-kissed contours of the brown-and-grey slopes of the Aberdare Range, dubbed Nyandarua (Drying Hide) by the Kikuyu, are deceptively round and inviting. But with an average elevation of 3350m, the Aberdares are no soft foothills. Stretching 160km from South Kinangop, east of Naivasha, up to the Laikipia Escarpment north-west of Nyahururu, the Aberdares form the solid spine of western Central Province, and were a popular base for Mau Mau fighters during the independence struggle.

The tallest regions of this range can claim some of Kenya's most dramatic up-country scenery, packed with 300m waterfalls, dense forests and serious trekking potential. The fuzzy moors in particular possess a stark, wind-carved beauty, wholly unexpected after driving up from the richly cultivated plots of the eastern Aberdares. In contrast,