

Disclaimer: Climbing is dangerous. We are not responsible for anything. The information in this guide might not be accurate, if you get injured or killed it's not the fault of this guide's authors or the MCK. If you're having fun, we'll take some credit though.

Starting out rock climbing in Kenya

For anyone interested in beginning rock climbing anywhere in the world, it can seem a bit daunting. When you add in the wasps nests, tick infestations, bullying baboons and outdated guidebooks on offer in Kenya, it gets even more complicated!

Kenya is certainly an adventurous climbing destination, but it's one of the best climbing places in the world, and there's lots of resources available to beginners.

Here are a few tips for anyone interested in getting into rock climbing in Kenya, with a special view to those living in Nairobi.

Currently the main means of communications of climbers in Kenya is an informal whatsapp group (which is not affiliated to the Mountain Club). Ask a climber to add you, most of us are on there.

First step: Consider joining the Mountain Club of Kenya!

The Mountain Club of Kenya, (MCK) seeks to foster a community of climbers and develop the sport in Kenya. This includes liaising with landowners to make sure that climbers can freely access cliffs, organising training, buying gear to lend to members, contributing to safeguarding Mt Kenya, organising social events, movie projections etc.

This is a non-profit members club, so people volunteer their time to help others get into climbing. That means you can also volunteer your time! As a club, it's only as good as the efforts that its members want to put in.

The Mountain Club of Kenya organises beginner and intermediate climbing courses once or twice a year.

Don't hesitate to get in touch with club members or the committee (<https://www.mck.or.ke/contact/>) to know how you can participate. You do not need to be experienced to help out!

You can find all the info you need on how to do so here: <https://www.mck.or.ke/membership/>
Explore the website for more articles and information on the MCK and climbing and hiking in Kenya in general.

The MCK owns one of the best climbing areas in Kenya, called Lukenya, which is situated 45 min to 2 hours out of Nairobi (depending on traffic!). When you're a member of the MCK, you can enter Lukenya for free, otherwise you need to get a daily membership, which is 800 shillings / day.

When you join the MCK, you also get discount on entry at Blue Sky climbing wall on Wednesdays.

Learning how to climb

Get a taste for climbing at Bluesky in Diamond Plaza

If you've never tried climbing before and want to start in a controlled environment, on the sixth floor of the rear building at Diamond Plaza is Bluesky climbing gym, the perfect place to take your first steps on the (fake) rock. You can visit their website at:

<https://www.blueskykenya.org/climb> . Opening times and prices can be seen there.

They have all the equipment you need, including climbing shoes to rent. These are stiff, rubber-soled shoes which enable you to grip the rock and place your feet on small footholds. They are meant to fit snugly on your feet, so might feel a bit tight at first.

The staff also teach you how to use the top-rope climbing walls and how to belay (giving and taking in rope from the ground for your climbing partner on the wall, to keep them safe).

Most weekday evenings there will be a fair number of other climbers there, as well as experienced staff who can help you get started out.

See more info here: <https://www.rei.com/learn/expert-advice/indoor-climbing.html>

Climbing outside on rock, the real thing

Once you've decided you like climbing, getting outside onto real rock will be the next step! Climbing outdoors is a lot more varied than indoor climbing and many/most climbers think it's a lot more fun. Plus, you're outside!

The main rock climbing areas in Kenya are described here:

<https://www.mck.or.ke/rock-climbing-tips/>

The main piece of advice here is to go with experienced people – they will know where to climb, and most importantly can keep an eye on you and your safety as you begin. You can also learn a lot by reading books that explain to you the technical details.

Climbing can be a dangerous sport if you don't follow safety rules closely, and know what you are doing.

The beginner's catch

So you've been climbing indoors a couple of time, and you liked it! Now you want to move on to the real rock? How do you do that?

You need an experienced climber to show you the ropes. But here's the catch: from the perspective of this experienced climber, taking beginners out is quite a lot of work. He/she has to watch over beginners like a hawk to make sure they're safe, install top-ropes (which is not very fun), or do easy routes that beginners can climb. Because of that, most experienced climbers prefer to climb with other experienced climbers. But of course, for the beginner to become experienced themselves, they have to climb with experienced climbers first!

There's no easy solution to this conundrum. The Mountain Club is partly an answer to this as it seeks to teach new climbers, but that also relies on the willingness of experienced climbers to spend their weekends teaching others. At any point in time, there's not many experienced climbers in Kenya (maybe a dozen?) so it puts a heavy burden on them. Many climbers have learnt through a club, so it's fair that they give back (but many don't!).

You could also pay for training with a commercial venture, but at the moment, none of them offer courses that will allow you to become an independent climber.

However, don't despair! Experienced climbers love to see new climbers take to the sport and progress with passion. Even if you're a beginner, it doesn't take much to become a valuable partner for someone more experienced. As a beginner, here are the 8 unspoken rules to get an experienced climber to take you under their wing:

1. Participate in one of the MCK trainings, and show that you're willing to learn and will apply those skills afterwards (some people are 'serial trainees' who get trained over and over and never actually apply their skills).
2. Become a good climbing partner. This means that you can belay a leader, climb as hard as them (which is not necessarily very hard), have your own gear (see #1 below), and know how to "clean" a trad climb and organize the gear. Don't forget, even in a day of cragging there's always something to do (flaking ropes, racking gear, etc), so follow the lead of your experienced partner and stay busy!
3. Make friends (e.g. at the climbing wall) and convince them to take you climbing outside.
4. Saying "thanks" at the end of the day goes a long way, buying a round of drinks or packing a nice lunch is always appreciated!
5. More generally, offering something in return, such as car transport or anything else puts you in a good position.
6. Don't be a pain in the ass. This is something few climbers will tell you upfront, but if you're complaining a lot, not being friendly, making car logistics complicated, spending your time taking Instagram shots, or taking people's time for granted - then chances are that nobody will want to take you climbing again (in fact then it won't really matter if you're experienced or not!).

7. It's okay to have multiple partners. Climbing is not a monogamous sport, so feel free to practice free climbing love and climb with as many people as you like. You'll learn different things from each of them and they're more likely to be willing to take a beginner every couple of months than every weekend.
8. Bear in mind that anyone organising training or trips out is giving up their own time to organise - the MCK is volunteer-based, and trips organised on the Whatsapp group are not professional tours. So feel free to give a hand in organising and don't expect everything to be done for you!

By the way, asking someone to lend you their ropes and climbing gear is quite a big favor, it's not like a car or a backpack. Climbers' lives depend on their gear, so it's not something that you easily lend to others unsupervised.

Once you feel like you've grasped the basics, don't feel like you have to be with experienced climbers at all times. When you feel comfortable climbing on your own, get out and be independent; either borrow someone's gear, or buy your own.

Everyone has different levels of risk they're prepared to accept, but it's good to know that some climbers have learned mostly on their own with books or through trial and error. Remember, all experienced climbers have made mistakes on the way. Just make sure you don't do anything silly and survive your early mistakes.

Most importantly: get out and climb a lot!

Equipment

The gear you'll need

You should really only consider buying climbing gear when you're quite sure that you want to pursue climbing and invest the money, as it is quality equipment, and as a result expensive.

The basics required are as follows (see below for the different styles of climbing):

1 - If you're **bouldering**, you'll just need:

- Climbing shoes: essential for anything but the very easiest climbing. They should fit snugly, with different styles available for different types of climbing. They cost \$40-\$180 (<https://www.rei.com/learn/expert-advice/rock-shoes.html>)
- Chalk bag: a small, closeable bag you attach around your waist and fill with chalk for your hands, which will give them better grip on the rock (<https://www.rei.com/learn/expert-advice/chalk-bags.html>). This costs around \$10 and you can even make your own

- A bouldering pad (usually several people share one). These are placed under the climber to cushion their fall, and cost around \$140-\$250.

Bouldering is a great way to go climbing outdoors as you don't need a lot of gear or technical knowledge. The Mountain Club will (soon) have bouldering pads that you can borrow.

2 - If you're going **rope climbing with someone** who has climbing gear, they'll probably expect you to have this personal kit:

- Harness: essential for any roped climbing. This is what you will attach the rope too, or attach the belay device to (<https://www.rei.com/learn/expert-advice/climbing-harness.html>). This costs around \$40-\$150
- Helmet: essential for outdoor climbing in Kenya, mainly to protect against loose rocks falling from above. Costs \$25 - \$150
- A belay device (<https://www.rei.com/learn/expert-advice/belay-device.html>). Costs around \$20-\$30
- A couple of locking carabiners. Cost around \$10 each
- A nut tool if you're going trad climbing, this is to remove gear stuck in the rock. Costs around \$15.

3 - If you want to be **independent rope climbing**, you'll also need

- Rope (either a single rope which can be used on its own, or two double ropes which is an advanced technique). Costs \$100-\$300
- Rack: this is a dozen quickdraws if you're going sport climbing, or cams, nuts etc if you're going trad climbing. Costs \$300 to \$1000

Where to buy climbing gear in Nairobi

Unfortunately, Kenya has a very limited selection of new or used climbing equipment. In Nairobi, Xtreme Outdoors in the Yaya Centre sometimes has some things (in Chinese brands), and Chris Temboh sells good second-hand hiking gear and the occasional pieces of climbing equipment at Temboh Mountain Wear and Equipment, on Muranga Road, next to KIE, just after Desai Road, in a little shop with lime green walls (0721377050 – best to call ahead to make sure he's there and what he has in stock).

The best option for equipment is to find someone coming into Kenya from Europe or the US, and ask them to bring what you need. Another source of gear is people leaving Kenya for good and selling on their equipment here. Second hand metal goods are safe if there is no visible cracking or deformation, so carefully visually inspect anything you might buy. You have to be very careful when you buy second hand soft goods like ropes and slings, because they are easier to damage with stray chemicals and UV exposure, making it hard to judge whether it is still safe; please ask someone more experienced.

Most people will say that buying second-hand is only advisable for shoes or chalk bags, while others have safely used mostly second-hand gear - as with most of climbing, it comes

down to personal choice. The safest option with second-hand gear is usually buying from a trusted source such as directly from another climber leaving Kenya. In any case, remember: don't be too cheap with climbing gear, you rely on it to keep you alive. NEVER try to use non-climbing gear for climbing (no matter how strong you think it is).

The different types of climbing

There are essentially four types of rock climbing. They are:

Indoor climbing: this is climbing on an artificial wall. You can do this at Blue Sky climbing gym in Nairobi. The wall offers either bouldering or top-rope climbing. It's a good way to get a taste of climbing, and increase your strength to prepare for outdoor climbing. See more: <https://www.rei.com/learn/expert-advice/indoor-climbing.html>

Bouldering: climbing without ropes on relatively low walls, with pads to fall on for protection. Each bouldering route is called a "problem". Part of the fun of bouldering is figuring out the solution to the "problem" by deciding where you'll put your hands and feet, and in what sequence.

Indoors: Bluesky has a large bouldering area, which is fun for beginners as the only equipment you need is rock shoes (and maybe a chalk bag). Each problem is marked according to difficulty on the first hold (from the easiest V0 up to V6, the hardest at the gym). You start with both hands on that hold, and both feet on holds of the same colour below you on the wall, and climb up using only holds of that colour. The aim is to reach the top hold of the colour with both hands, in a controlled manner, before climbing back down (down-climbing). See how to fall safely indoors

here: <https://www.climbing.com/skills/learn-to-climb-safer-landings-for-bouldering/>

Outdoors: Kenya has a huge wealth of bouldering that is still being "discovered". In Lukenya, there's lots of boulders. You can see some here:

<https://sites.google.com/site/kenyabouldering/problems>

Top-rope climbing: top-roping means climbing on a rope fixed to the top of a climbing wall route. While bouldering is quite close to the ground, top-roping allows you to get higher, from 15 meters, or even 60 meters off the ground. It's probably the safest type of climbing.

You are attached to a rope which goes to the top of the cliff; the other end of the rope is controlled by your climbing partner: this is called "belaying". Belaying means clipping the rope into a belay device, and taking rope in as your partner climbs up the wall. You can see how to do it here: <https://www.rei.com/learn/expert-advice/belay.html> , but you'll need to seek advice from someone experienced to make sure you're doing it right. You do hold the life of your climbing partners in your hands, literally.

Indoors: At Blue Sky, the difficulty is marked at the bottom (from 5.7, the easiest, up to around 5.12 d at the gym). You climb using the same colour holds with your hands and feet as for bouldering, until you reach the top (though there is no shame in not being able to!). You'll need to pass a belay test – the staff there will show you the ropes until they are satisfied you are able to safely belay and climb without supervision. It is absolutely essential that you ask for this training, and never hesitate to ask to be shown again, or for somebody to check you have done everything right.

Outdoors: to top-rope outdoors, you'll need to go with someone who knows how to set the ropes. You can also go to Hell's Gate national park where there are a couple of guides that allow you to top-rope on a spire of rock called Fisher's Tower.

Sport climbing: also climbing with a rope, but in this case the end of the rope is not fixed above, but attached to the 'lead' climber who starts from the bottom. As they climb up a route, they attach safety clips called quickdraws to metal bolts drilled into the wall. Near Nairobi, there are some sports routes at Lukenya and Frog. Sport climbing is mostly about the physical ability to scale the rock and learning the technical skills to do it can be done quite quickly. It might take you an hour to get the basics.

Trad climbing: the most common form of outdoor climbing in Kenya. The principle is the same as for sport climbing, except there are no fixed bolts in the rock. Instead, you carry protective pieces of equipment with you on your harness, which are then jammed into cracks in the rock. The rope is then clipped into these pieces.

This requires more technical know-how than for sport climbing because you need to know how to jam the pieces into the wall, and you depend on those for safety. You also then need to learn other skills such as how to set up an anchor point at the top of your climb, or how to rappel. Getting the basics might take you a couple of days, and then years of practice.

To learn to trad climb, don't rely on the internet; buy or borrow a book, and learn from experienced climbers.

There are some excellent places to practice your climbing around Nairobi. You can have a look at this guide to Lukenya to see how to progress:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1TLbsk82nciVLyUDYEJAa_tSYnS1CaUepDb7k3i9j_8/edit?ts=58ebad97

See more about what trad climbing is here:

<https://www.thebmc.co.uk/getting-started-trad-climbing>

Grades

Kenya use many different ways to grade the difficulty of climbs. If you're confused, so are we. But you can use this chart to convert the grades:

<https://www.rockfax.com/publications/grades/>

