

Far Horizons

by Randy Keck

Kenya and Tanzania

Amboseli to Ngorongoro

(Second of three parts)

My tour of Kenya and Tanzania in late February 2011 continued with my flying from the Masai Mara back to Nairobi, where I had lunch at the *Carnivore Restaurant*, known far and wide for its meat-on-a-spit selections which are hand carved at tables by roving waiters.

Reunited with my guide Nickolas, we departed on the rather uneventful four-hour drive to Amboseli National Park, noted for its vast herds of elephants. On arrival, I discovered the park to be rather flat and to have, other than the plentiful elephants, a much smaller variety of wildlife than any of the other parks and reserves visited on my journey.

Amboseli reveals Kilimanjaro

Amboseli does have the advantage of providing spectacular views of Mt. Kilimanjaro, even though the famous mountain is located across the border in neighboring Tanzania.

Strategically located in the national park, **Amboseli Serena Safari Lodge** provides great vistas of "Kili," as the mountain is often referred to by locals. The best clear-view photo opps tend to be found just outside the front gate of the lodge in the morning, when there is the greatest likelihood of the peak's being cloud free.

After one night, we departed Amboseli on a two-hour drive to the Tanzanian border, during which mesmerizing views of Kilimanjaro provided a continuous feast for my lens.

At the border, without any wait, I paid the visa fee of \$100 (ouch) required of US citizens arriving into Tanzania, then said good-bye to Nickolas and met my Tanzanian

guide, William.

I also switched from a minivan with a pop-up top, common in Kenya, to a true safari vehicle, one favored and virtually exclusively used in Tanzania, an extended Toyota Land Cruiser, also with a pop-up top.

The road improved immediately on the Tanzanian side as we cruised to Arusha, the jumping-off city for the string of popular northern Tanzania game parks and reserves explored by most international visitors.

After lunch, we continued on to Lake Manyara National Park for two nights.

Lake Manyara National Park

Lake Manyara National Park is

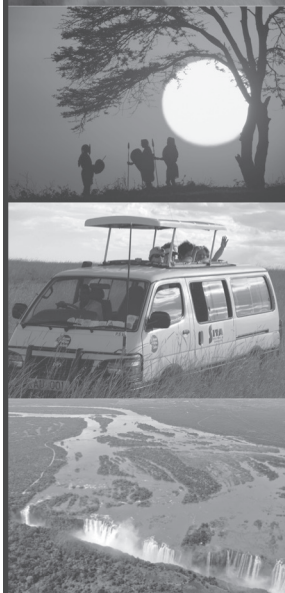


Any shade will do. Lion in Ngorongoro Crater game reserve.

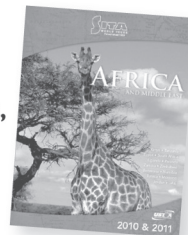
a modest park of 125 square miles, much of which is consumed by an expansive salt lake featuring flocks of colorful flamingos. The park is home to more than 350 bird species.

Manyara's wildlife diversity is impressive, and the densely wooded park's popularity has been consistent since the early days of safari travel. It also is strategically located en route to the famed Ngorongoro Crater game reserve, which is included in almost all Tanzania safari itineraries.

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Manyara is perhaps best known for its tree-climbing lions, which I had been advised are rarely spotted on game drives. We, however, were most fortunate to score on our second venture into the park, spotting two cubs perched high in an acacia tree.

Located outside the national park, **Lake Manyara Serena Safari Lodge**, at 4,068 feet in elevation and perched on a ridge top, provides expansive views over the parklands, lake and beyond. I recommend second-floor rooms to enjoy the best views.

The lodge has a deck with an inviting view, a pool and an outdoor pub. At all the Serena properties I visited there was excellent-quality nightly entertainment — music and dance as well as gymnastics — provided by local performers.

My final morning, I went on a one-hour nature walk with lodge naturalist Yotham Sulle. He greatly expanded my awareness of the local flora and fauna and provided a detailed geological history of the two arms of the Great Rift Valley of which Lake Manyara National Park is a part.

Ngorongoro Crater beckons

I had been forewarned that all visitors to northern Tanzania descend on the famed Ngorongoro Crater game reserve and there can be, at times, in excess of 200 safari vehicles on the 100-square-mile crater floor.

There was a bit of a jam-up at the reserve entrance, but William advised that we could take a longer route around the unbroken crater rim and descend from the north end. It was a brilliant strategy, as we traversed the rim alone for about five miles, then descended solo into the giant wildlife Shangri-la below.

From the time we hit the crater floor to our ascension back to the rim some four to five hours later, in all directions we were engulfed in a sea of animals, including many

cats. The Big Five are present there, as is virtually every species of wildlife in East Africa.

Residing in the giant crater, the estimated 25,000 animals of Ngorongoro are unable to migrate as do many animals in East Africa. The crater's self-sufficient microsystem operates with a unique set of checks and balances, assuring visitors a wildlife-viewing experience with a "Wow!" factor off the charts.

Zooming in from the rim

The **Ngorongoro Serena Safari Lodge** is located high on the crater rim at 7,560 feet. It has the look and

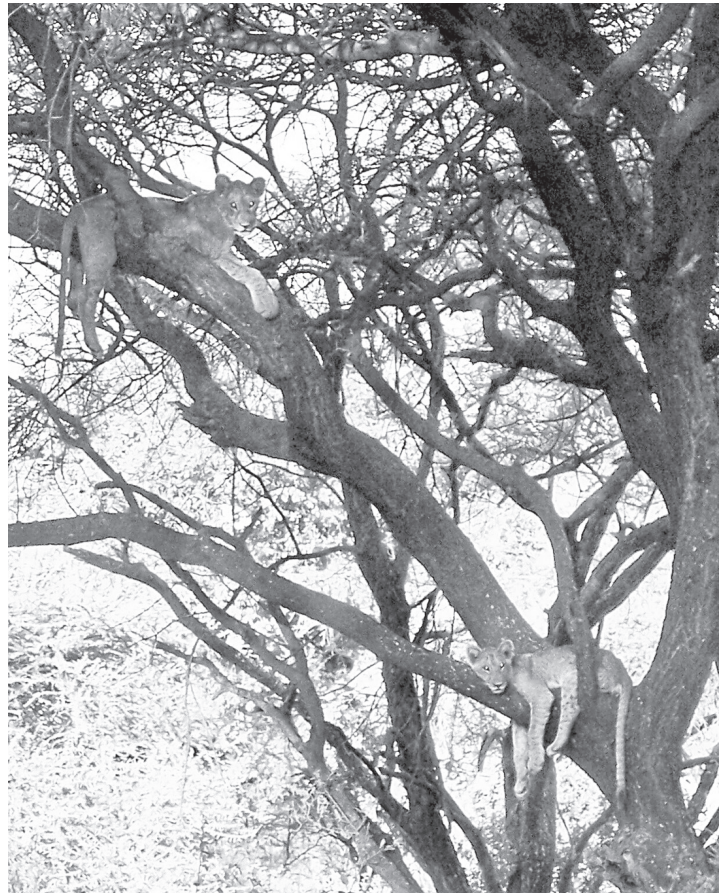
Keck's BEYOND THE GARDEN WALL

“If humans could have but a single experience of the magnificence of nature's wild kingdom, it must be the panacea that is Ngorongoro.”

— Randy reflecting on the giant-fish-bowl wildlife-viewing opportunities present at Ngorongoro Crater

feel of a mountain lodge in every respect, melding into the surrounds seamlessly without intrusion.

The large dining and lounging area in the main lodge was particularly inviting, and a range of educational and entertainment programs was available for guests.



Lake Manyara National Park is known for its tree-climbing lions, but sightings are uncommon. Photo: Keck

The air on the rim is crisp and invigorating, and most rooms offer a bird's-eye view of the crater floor below. Again, my binoculars received a cardio workout from my second-floor balcony. Second-floor rooms should be requested in advance. Departing the lodge after only one night was difficult, as it is a world-class environment in which to simply relax and luxuriate.

In the last part of this series, I explore the vast plains of the Serengeti and the bustling city of Arusha.

My journey to Kenya and Tanzania was partially hosted by **ITN** advertiser **Sita World Tours** (Encino, CA; 800/421-5643, www.sitatours.com), with travel itineraries for Africa and destinations worldwide. *ITN*

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