



The Ngorongoro Crater - the largest intact volcanic caldera in the world

### Safaris into the Crater

Whilst the Ngorongoro's wildlife is stupendous, the reality of a safari here isn't always uplifting. The sheer number of vehicles in the Crater, combined with its open environment, can conspire to make it feel very busy. The Crater doesn't provide everyone's idea of a perfect safari: talk to us before you come here to make sure that you get the best experience possible.

## NGORONGORO CONSERVATION AREA

Originally part of a much larger Serengeti National Park, the present-day **Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA)** encompasses a range of largely extinct volcanoes on the west side of the Great Rift Valley, the Ngorongoro Highlands, and the southern section of the Serengeti's short-grass plains (including Ndutu).

The NCA's showpiece is the **Ngorongoro Crater** – a World Heritage Site and the largest intact volcanic caldera in the world. Measuring 16–19km in diameter, and with walls of 400–610m in height, it's a strong candidate for any list of the world's greatest natural wonders.

The mineral-rich floor of this spectacular bowl is largely flat, open and covered in nutritious grasses – much to the liking of large herds of zebra and wildebeest.

These extensive open plains are also home to herds of buffalo, Thomson's gazelle, Grant's gazelle and topi. You'll find East Africa's best population of black rhino here which, to confound the safari experts, are often seen in open grasslands. Breeding herds of elephant pass through the Crater rarely, but you will usually see a handful of the biggest tuskers alive in Africa today.

The Crater's predators are often highly visible. Its lion population shows a complete disregard for safari vehicles – hunting, eating and sleeping within yards of them. Spotted hyena are very common and there's a small but growing cohort of cheetah. Leopard are also around, especially in Lerai Forest – a small forest of fever trees notable for their yellow bark – whilst both the side-striped and the lovely golden jackal, and bat-eared foxes, are often seen trotting around.

If you spend more than two nights in the Ngorongoro area, then consider a day-trip to the nearby **Empakaai Crater**. Although on a smaller scale, it's just as spectacular: a lovely circular lake covers most of this crater's floor. Here you can get out and walk with your guide, and you'll often spot monkeys on the forested slopes of the crater, and flamingos from the lakeshore.

### RIFT VALLEY ESCARPMENT

Rising steeply from the shore of Lake Manyara, the escarpment of the Rift Valley marks the start of the Crater Highlands. This is a stunning region: lush cloudforests, cultivated valleys and a few bustling villages.

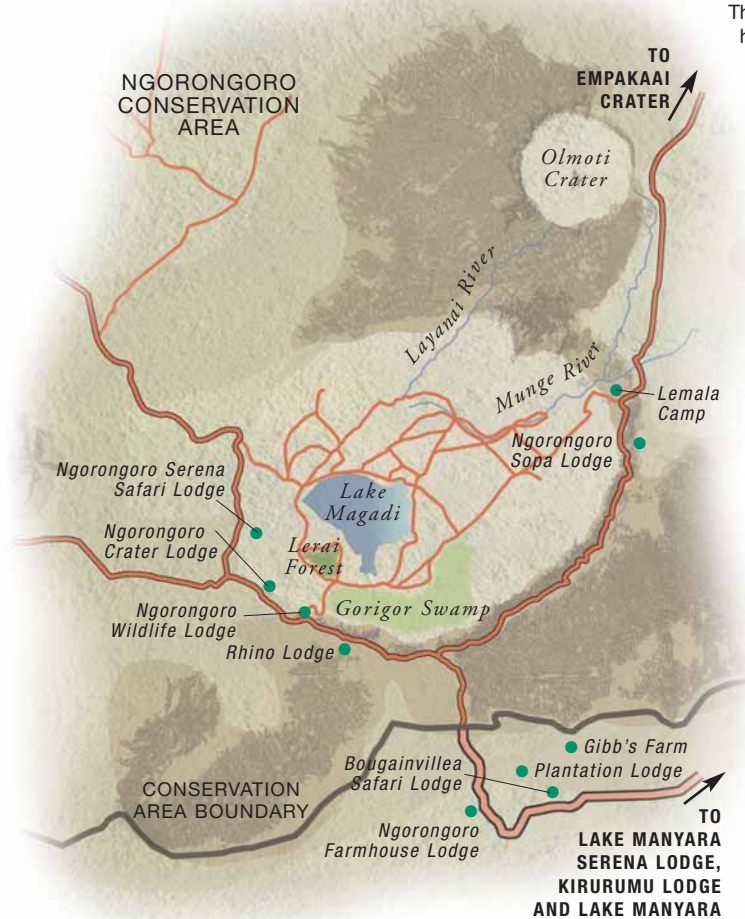
There are a handful of lodges here, any of which can be used as a base for trips to either Lake Manyara or the Ngorongoro Crater. Two stand on the edge of the Great Rift Valley, overlooking Lake Manyara: *Lake Manyara Serena* and *Kirurumu Tented Lodge*. A further four lodges – *Gibb's Farm*, *Plantation Lodge*, *Ngorongoro Farmhouse Lodge* and *Bougainvillea Safari Lodge* – are clustered about 30km to the west. These are less than 20km from the crater rim.

The **Lake Manyara Serena** has 67 rooms and a stunning location on the edge of the Great Rift Valley. Its panoramic views of Lake Manyara and beyond are stupendous, its service is good and its accommodation is comfortable. However, this is not an intimate place – and guaranteeing a booking here can be difficult.

The 20 green canvas tents and two timber suites at **Kirurumu Tented Lodge** are also on the edge of the escarpment. The tented accommodation is functional – painted floors, Zanzibari beds, cotton bed linen, palm mats, a trunk for safe storage and a tiled shower – but the view over the escarpment is mesmerising. Indigenous trees (most labelled) cover the property and activities focus on botanical walks with Masai guides.

On the forested slopes of the Ngorongoro Crater, **Gibb's Farm** is one of Tanzania's oldest and most charming guesthouses. It's a welcoming retreat on a beautiful working coffee plantation. Twenty rooms are spread around its peaceful gardens, which are alive with colourful blooms and birds. Almost all of these have now been converted from simple 'standard rooms' to very high-quality 'farm cottages'.

Virtually everything here is organically produced on site and the community is





Big game is abundant on the floor of the Ngorongoro Crater



Big tusker elephants are one of the highlights of Ngorongoro

closely involved. Activities at the farm include hikes to the Crater rim, 'spa' consultations with a Maasai healer and fascinating tours of the farm's vast gardens.

**Plantation Lodge** displays all the colonial charm and style evoked by its name. Emerald lawns are shaded by rubber and banana trees, whilst colourful hibiscus and cherry blossom surround the cottages. After admiring the bar's 'rogues' gallery' of black-and-white plantation photographs, head to the contemporary-chic banqueting table or the terrace for farm-fresh meals. All of Plantation's rooms are different, but each is simple and stylish: charcoal-coloured polished floors, natural palm mats, crisp linen, tasteful ethnic bedspreads and attractive artwork. There is a gorgeous honeymoon suite and a spacious, two-bedroom family cottage.

Built on a small coffee plantation, only 5km from the entrance to the NCA, **Ngorongoro Farmhouse Lodge** also has a distinctly colonial feel and 51 spacious cottages. The lodge is effectively split into two, with two thatched central areas for dining and relaxing – so it never feels that big. The food is mostly organic, the flowers are home grown, and the views from the pool are inspiring. Aside from trips to the Crater and Lake Manyara, you can visit local communities and walk in the nearby forest.

**Bougainvillea Safari Lodge** is unusual for us: it's not in a rural idyll, but rather is on the edge of the busy highland town of Karatu. Bougainvillea has a central lounge/dining area, which serves good meals with a distinct Tanzanian influence. Its 24 large semi-detached cottages are closely set in gardens; they are clean and surprisingly

spacious. Bougainvillea is great value as a base to explore Lake Manyara and the Crater, but don't leave without taking a stroll around town!

### THE CRATER RIM

There is no accommodation on the floor of the Ngorongoro Crater, but there are a few permanent lodges balanced on its rim, and sometimes also a few tented camps.

**Ngorongoro Crater Lodge** is the *pièce de résistance* of Africa's luxury lodges. It's a dramatic setting for a theatrical property that some see as divine decadence, whilst others view as gaudy glitz. The exteriors of the suites are Maasai-inspired mud 'manyattas' (homesteads), and the interiors are redolent of a *Phantom of the Opera* set in a wood-panelled colonial manor house. There are sensuous fabrics, vases of long-stemmed roses, petal-strewn bedcovers, heavy gilt mirrors, deep bubble baths, cut-crystal sherry decanters, roaring open fires, and some of the most engaging personal 'butlers' in Africa.

There are actually three very similar, adjacent sister-lodges here: **North**, **South** and **Tree** – each with its own lavish lounge and dining areas, and breathtaking views of the crater. What with the enormous bed, the stunning view and world-class cuisine, it can be hard to tear yourself away for a safari: though this you must, for it would be wilful not to let the excellent resident guides show you the Crater.

On the western rim of the Crater, only 8km from the descent road, is the busy **Ngorongoro Serena Safari Lodge**. Dense creepers cover its solid-stone buildings and log fires ward off the evening chill. All 75 rooms are air conditioned and decorated in brass, leather, timber and a little modern rock art; all have a private terrace. The bar and restaurant here buzz with groups of visiting tourists.

On the Crater's eastern rim, **Ngorongoro Sopa Lodge** is a large, dated hotel geared mainly to groups. Its 92 en-suite rooms are adequate and its food passable, but it is close to the quiet eastern access road into the Crater and does have good views. On

the opposite side of the crater, the 75-room **Ngorongoro Wildlife Lodge** is slightly smaller, but of a similar standard to the Sopa Lodge.

**Lemala Camp** is a luxury tented camp set in a beautiful patch of quiet forest on the hills of the Crater rim. It stands beside the eastern descent road, although doesn't overlook the Crater itself. With only nine tents it is a small camp with good food and friendly service. The large, walk-in tents have comfortable beds, welcome gas heaters, and en-suite facilities with bucket showers and chemical toilets. Lemala's mess tent is furnished with a long table for group dining, and sumptuous sofas where you can sit and read interesting coffee-table books.

Built in partnership with the local Maasai community, **Rhino Lodge** is the Crater's newest and most basic lodge. Aiming to offer a Crater-rim location at a moderate budget, the lodge's 24 spartan rooms are clean and great value, with good hot showers – making it perfect for more adventurous travellers.

Sometimes mobile tented camps are sited on the Crater's rim; these can be cold at night but can have a very authentic 'safari' feel. These are usually visited as part of a private guided driving trip, often on a private basis, although sometimes they can be shared.



Lions are used to the many vehicles in the Ngorongoro Crater