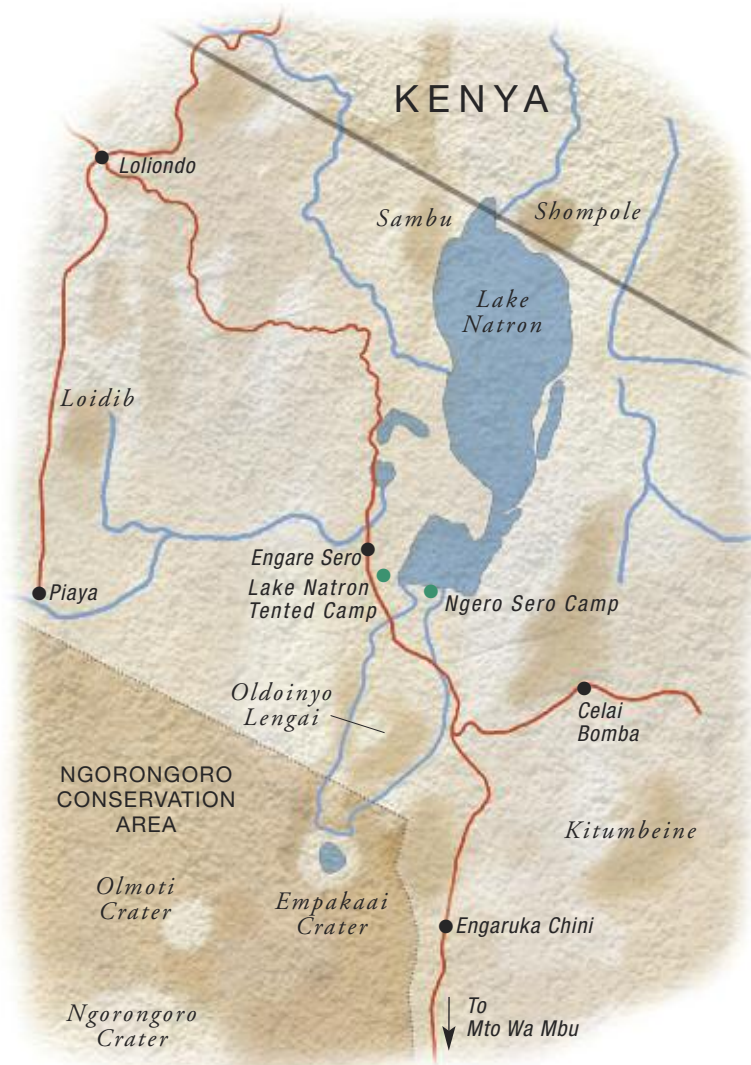


LAKE NATRON

Lake Natron is part of Africa's immense Great Rift Valley, and a spectacular area just north-east of the Ngorongoro Crater. Nestled between rolling volcanic hills and deep craters, Lake Natron sits at the lowest point of the Rift Valley – 600m above sea level – and is probably the world's most caustic body of water.

This area is often hot, dry and dusty, but intrepid travellers who reach Natron are rewarded by an area with little tourism and some of the most dramatic scenery in Tanzania. Activities here focus on walking. Walk out across the baked mud to the shores of the great soda lake itself, where algae and zooplankton attract the flamingos that often line the lake's shore. Look back at Oldoinyo Lengai – a mesmerising active volcano that makes a distinctive silhouette between the rolling hills and the escarpment of the Great Rift Valley.



Walking on the soda flats of Lake Natron

Another walk leads up through a deep, rocky gorge to the Engero Sero Waterfalls. This involves some gentle scrambling and waist-high wading, before reaching a beautiful natural swimming pool, surrounded by steep rock walls – showered by cascades of spring water and overlooked by palm trees.

In theory, travellers could also attempt to climb the area's active volcano, Oldoinyo Lengai. Such a climb would usually start at midnight, taking about six hours to reach the top by sunrise. However, note that this is a very tough climb on an active volcano, and high risks are involved. As a result, *Expert Africa* does not recommend this walk to any of its travellers.

Another reason to visit this area is to bypass the main route between Lake Manyara and the Serengeti, through the Ngorongoro Conservation Area. This road can be busy to the point of congested and you will pass other vehicles very frequently. However the road via Lake Natron is far less travelled and it is unlikely that you will see more than a handful of vehicles during your few days exploring the area.

Lake Natron isn't for everyone. Although it does have wildlife, this shouldn't be your main reason to visit. Instead come for the remoteness, the scenery and some great walks. There are two permanent safari camps here. Anything luxurious in such a barren landscape would feel alien, so both offer basic but comfortable accommodation, and act as good bases from which to explore.

Sitting on the unsheltered grassy flats beside a spring and close to the lake, **Ngero Sero Camp** is one of the most unusual camps in Tanzania. The seven slightly worn tents are very simple and functional, with comfortable beds, a standing fan and a private open-air toilet



and bucket shower. From each tent you can wander down to the spring and swim in cool water – very refreshing after a few hours of walking. The central mess tent has cushions on the floor, Bedouin-style, and the dining table is made of a beautifully rustic piece of wood. Most unusual is that each tent, and also the main mess area, is enclosed under thick camouflage netting. This offers great shading, even if the results look a bit like a desert army camp.

Ngero Sero Camp is rustic with few frills, but the food and service are good and the camp has a great atmosphere. The owners are environmentally aware, and take great care to have as little negative impact on

the area as possible. There is also an automatic levy of US\$20 per guest per night (included in the cost) which goes into a community fund that supports education for the local Maasai village.

Equally rudimentary, **Lake Natron Tented Camp** offers comfortable tented accommodation which is very different in style to that of Ngero Sero. Nestled in shady woodland at the foot of the Rift Valley Escarpment, it's a welcome retreat in the arid heat.

The nine tents here feel quite permanent, with polished stone floors, a large bed draped in mosquito netting, a side table,

luggage racks for your bags, and electricity. Through a curtain at the back, each has a rather garish en-suite bathroom, with a cold shower and a flush toilet.

Sandy pathways lead from these tents to the main dining banda, which is an open-sided building under thatch. The furnishings are simple and functional, and the fireplace is a welcoming place to relax. Lake Natron Tented Camp is quite a simple camp and, though the service is friendly, it isn't hugely efficient. However, in an area that is blisteringly hot throughout the year, this camp's real draw is its shady location.

The stunning view of Oldoinyo Lengai