

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 during the day in open grasslands. Breeding herds of elephant pass through the Crater rarely, but you will usually see a handful of old bulls, including some 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.

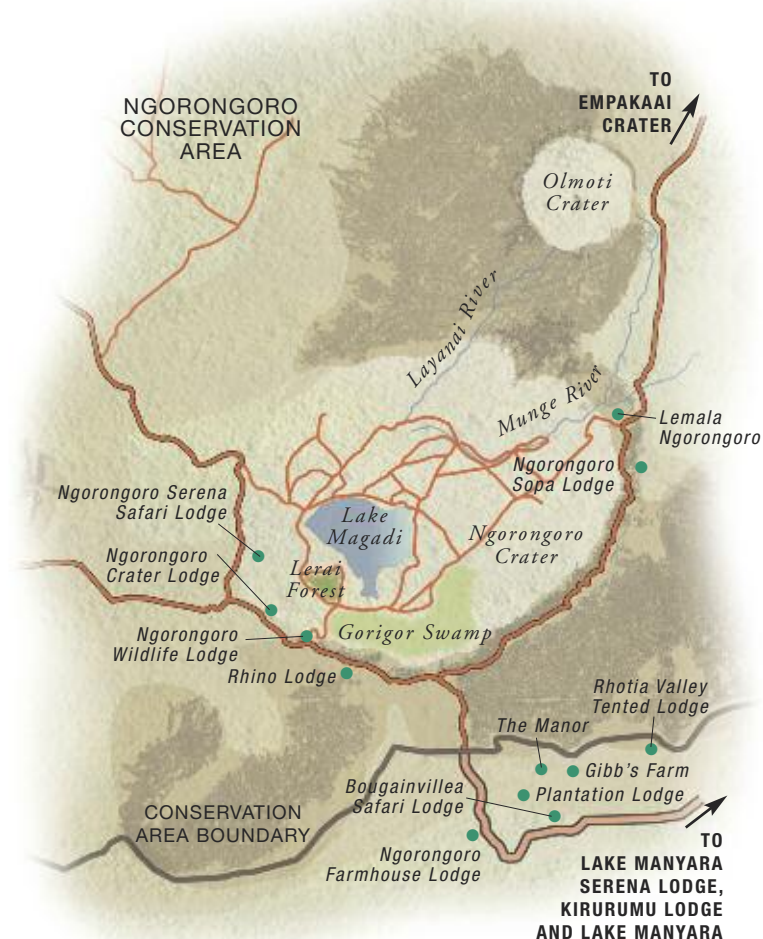
RIFT VALLEY ESCARPMENT

Rising steeply from the shore of Lake Manyara, the Rift Valley Escarpment 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 Lake Manyara and 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 six lodges – Gibb's Farm, Plantation Lodge, Ngorongoro Farmhouse Lodge, The Manor, Bougainvillea Safari Lodge and Rhotia Valley Tented Lodge – are clustered about 30km to the west and less than 20km from the Ngorongoro Crater rim.



Zebras can weigh up to 340kg



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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.



Ostrich resting

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

The 20 green canvas tents and two timber suites at **Kirumu Tented Lodge** are also on the edge of the escarpment. The tented accommodation is functional – painted floors, Zanzibari beds, cotton bed linen, palm mats 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 Maasai 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 cottages are spread around its peaceful gardens, which are alive with colourful blooms and birds. Virtually everything here is organically produced on site and the community is 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 gardens.

New to this area, from experienced owners, **The Manor** is a beautiful lodge built in an elegant Cape-Dutch style. The 20 rooms are spacious and luxuriously fitted, with open fireplaces, private deck area, bathtubs and rain showers. With a snooker room, wine cellar, grand piano and silver service, this lodge is smart and stylish, but the informal and welcoming atmosphere helps it remain unpretentious.

Ngorongoro Private Mobile Camp

As with the region's other main parks, we can arrange for an exclusive private mobile camp near the Crater. This would be largely identical to our Serengeti Private Mobile Camp (see page 211). It would have its own guide, chef and 4WD vehicle for game drives; the tents are small dome tents, using proper mattresses; and there's a small mess tent, a friendly campfire and separate, shared short-drop toilet and bucket shower. Such camps can feel very 'authentic', but note that the Crater's rim can be very cold and damp, especially at night.



Lions are used to the many vehicles in the Ngorongoro Crater



Crowned crane congregate at a waterhole

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: polished stone floors, 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. Although fairly large, the central areas have a welcoming feel - particularly in the evening when you can watch the chefs prepare food in the show kitchen. The food is mostly organic, the flowers are home grown, and the views from the pool are inspiring.

Bougainvillea Safari Lodge is unusual for us: it's not in a rural idyll, but 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 34 large semi-detached cottages are closely set in gardens around a swimming pool; they are clean and surprisingly spacious. Its sister lodge, the neighbouring **Country Lodge**, has 22 rooms which are slightly more modest, set around a central grass courtyard. Both Bougainvillea and The Country Lodge offer a great value base to explore Lake Manyara and the Crater – and for a real taste of local life, don't leave without taking a stroll around town!

Rhotia Valley Tented Lodge is a small and welcoming lodge which we discovered only last year. Perched high on a hill overlooking an agricultural valley, each of its 15 canvas tents is suspended under a thatched roof above a raised wooden platform. These are furnished simply rather than with luxury, but they're comfortable and many have stunning views from their wooden verandas. This friendly lodge stands out for the contribution that it makes to the local community; this includes using a proportion of its income to fund the children's home which the owners have built on the opposite hill – and which guests can visit for an enlightening experience.

THE CRATER RIM

There is no accommodation on the floor of the Ngorongoro Crater, but there are a handful of lodges balanced on its rim and a few seasonal 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 manor house. There are sensuous fabrics, vases of long stemmed roses, petal-strewn bedcovers, heavy gilt mirrors, bubble baths, cut-crystal sherry decanters, roaring fires, and some of the most engaging personal 'butlers' in Africa.

Crater Lodge actually consists of three adjacent sections: **North**, **South** and **Tree** – each with its own lavish lounge and dining areas, and breathtaking views of the Crater.

What with the enormous beds, stunning view and world-class cuisine, it can be hard to tear yourself away for a safari: though 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 and often African entertainment.

On the Crater's eastern rim, **Ngorongoro Sopa Lodge** is a large hotel with excellent views, geared mainly to groups. Its 92 en suite rooms are a little dated but very spacious and it is close to the quiet eastern access road into the Crater. 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 Ngorongoro is a comfortable 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, gas heaters, solar power and en-suite facilities with bucket showers and flush 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 most basic lodge. Aiming to offer a Crater-rim location on a moderate budget, the lodge's 24 spartan rooms are clean and great value, with hot showers – making it perfect for more adventurous travellers.

Big tusker elephants are one of the highlights of the Ngorongoro Crater

