

Tails Of Africa!

(Another in the continuing series describing a group of Tryon residents' recent visit to Africa.)

After the hair-raising encounter at Lake Manyara there was a tendency to think the next destination might be tame by comparison — and in a way it was. To leave it at that, however, ignores the unique character of the Ngorongoro crater and its several distinctive eco-systems. Located 50 miles south of Lake Manyara in the Highland Forest Country, this is one of the worlds largest craters — or more accurately, calderas — with a nine mile diameter.

The setting of the Ngorongoro Lodge is not unlike that at Lake Manyara in that it too perches high above the crater floor at an elevation of 8000 ft. providing awesome vistas of the Tananian landscape. Typical of the tribe's Modus Operandi, the members skulked into this new camp hot, dusty, and somewhat roadweary, but these afflictions were easily cured by food, drink, and showers, leaving everyone ready for the hunt. As a descent into the crater bowl requires special vehicles and a full day, the afternoon was at leisure followed by an evening of shared reflections and anticipation.

Even in Africa dawn at 8000 feet is invigoratingly chilly, so when the tribe gathered the next morning awaiting word to board the 4-wheel drive rovers, all the shivering was not from excitement. The first rays of sunlight creeping over the horizon warmed both the body and the spirit through and the little caravan snaked out of the compound towards the crater entrance.

The steep, serpentine route into the crater is, itself, an experience which sorely tests your trust in the designers and manufacturers of automotive braking systems. This mile or so of road drops about 1600 feet from a saddle on the crater rim to the floor, and any one of the several switch-backs would be disastrous for a vehicle travelling over 15 miles per hour. (Ask your driver if anyone has ever gone over, the side and he'll just laugh, shake his head and say "Noooo way" — which is probably swahilli for "I'll never tell!")

Safely delivered to the crater floor we were treated to the opportunity to photograph some Masai cattle herders. Well —

actually we were allowed to PURCHASE the opportunity to photograph some Masai men who said they were there to herd their cows. But there weren't any cows. No but they're coming. By themselves? No some women and children were bringing them. Then the women and children were herding the cows? Yeah. Then what are you guys doing here? Pictures! But we can't be here unless we got cows and they're coming. You wanna take pictures? So we paid our money — not very much as I recall — and took our pictures. As far as I know the cows are still coming.

The road system within the crater is not as extensive as those of other parks and reserves so close encounters of any kind are left somewhat to chance. After viewing a large herd of cape buffalo — the thin black line on the horizon — a trio of rhino at about a half mile and assorted other area residents at distances ranging from medium to far the crater was in danger of losing its luster. As this rush to judgment was barely in its infancy out of the grass strode simba the black maned lion for which the crater is famous. As though briefed by the local tourist board he sauntered directly towards us and beyond to a near-by waterhole where he lapped a short drink before yawning and curling up for a siesta and looking for all the world like Dorothy's cowardly lion. A roll of film or so later we were on our way with spirits and expectations renewed.

Though the day unfolded into a nearly continuous succession of wildlife sightings some near some far one would have to say that the place itself is the event. The tortuous trail into the crater the apparant tranquility of the ever so gently rolling plains the lake fringed with flamingos the wide variety of bird and mammal species... all these are components of a truly unique natural tapestry.

In the waning afternoon we began our grinding ascent of the even more precipitous exit route from the crater and headed home. Later when the dust of the way had been washed away we sat on the crater rim watching the grey curtain of dusk slowly descend upon the land. He remembered and felt grateful for being in this place. — Reporter, Joe Hamlin

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