

Witt's Wanderings

by John W. Witt

Just outside the Tarangire park entrance, the dusty road meets the highway. Reversing the direction we came the day before, we drove generally northward to Makuyuni, where we took another road toward the Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA) and the famed Serengeti. "Makuyuni, (Place of the Fig Tree) . . . is small and unprepossessing but it has significance," says Graham Mercer in *Globetrotter Tanzania*. "For the road which leads from it, across the Rift Valley, takes travellers through a sector of Maasailand, past Lake Manyara and its adjoining national park, up the steep western wall of the Rift and across the rolling, fertile Mbulu Plateau. Beyond rises Ngorongoro, encompassing its famous crater. And beyond Ngorongoro the track descends to the Serengeti plains through some of Africa's most superb scenery." Mercer, *Globetrotter Tanzania*, London, New Holland Publishers (UK) Ltd (2007), p. 63.

From there, the newly paved and striped road climbs uphill, through a village called Mto Wa Mbu, 62 km. (38¾ mi.) to Karatu, which just happens to be where Ami, our driver/guide, lives. He said his son would be waiting by the side of the road and asked if we would mind if he stopped briefly to give the boy some money. We answered that we not only had no problem with the stop, but we'd like to meet his son, as well.

Lonely Planet, in its guidebook on Tanzania, describes Karatu as a "small, scruffy town . . . surrounded by some beautiful countryside . . ." Lonely Planet *Tanzania*, 4th ed. (2008), p. 224. Americans might describe it as a "wide place in the road," but it was busy with traffic, of both commercial and passenger sort, with lots of pedestrians moving about. The 13 year-old boy was standing on the left side of the road as we pulled up. I jumped out, introduced myself and took a couple of pictures of Ami and his son. Ami gave him an envelope, presumably containing some money, and we were off again, heading for Ngorongoro.

Later in the trip, Ami told us how pleased he was that we consented to the stop and spent a little time with his son. That's one reason he likes driving Americans on safari. He said that few Europeans would allow the stop and even fewer would greet his son and take pictures of the occasion.

From Karatu it's a very short drive through the Lodoare Gate to the NCA Headquarters. It's not much farther up the hill to the Ngorongoro Serena Lodge, where we checked in for the night and went to lunch in the dining room, at a table with a panoramic view of the famed Ngorongoro Crater below. I can't remember much about the meal. The Lodge and the scenery are memorable, however.

It perches on the edge of the crater, with a couple of layers of the building spilling over the rim, so that you do a lot of stair-climbing from the Lodge

entrance down to your room and back up to the bar and lounge and, then, down again to the dining room. If that sounds complicated or confusing, it's both. I was frequently confused as to which feature was on which level, but then, I'm easily confused.

After lunch, we met Ami, got into the Cruiser and started down the narrow dirt road into the crater. It switches back and forth, with cuts and fills supplying steep rocky walls on one side and sharp drop-offs on the other. I was afraid Lenora might freak out when her side of the car was next to the edge, but she seemed undaunted, outwardly, at least. > > >

Mercer describes the crater better than I can: "[T]he Ngorongoro Crater [is] arguably the most famous wildlife refuge in the world. From the lodges on the crater rim, at about 2400m (8000ft), you look down upon the near-circular crater floor, an expanse of flat, open grassland, forest and lake 14km (9 miles) across. Around it stands a ring of extinct volcanoes with Maasai names, . . . The crater (more accurately caldera) is a remarkable natural amphitheatre which properly takes its place as one of the highlights of East Africa." Mercer, *Globetrotter Tanzania*, 3d ed. op. cit., pp. 66-67.

When we reached the bottom, I'm sure Lenora breathed a sigh of relief, though the required ascent still lay ahead of us. The floor of the crater is the home of thousands of animals, some apparently migratory, others permanent residents. Zebras, giraffes, elephants, wildebeests, cape buffaloes, ostriches, and warthogs were there and the edge of the lake was lined with the pink color of flamingos. Wherever there's water deep enough to wallow in, there were hippos, of course.

The crater once belonged to the Maasai, who grazed their livestock there. In the early 20th Century, German farmers took over. After World War I, British farmers replaced them. In 1954, the last of the farmers, many of whom were probably squatters, were evicted. The Maasai released their right to the land in 1958, though they still bring their animals down to the lakes occasionally. The Conservation Area was established in 1959.

We spent the afternoon cruising around the crater floor, watching the animals, as they either gazed back with disinterested stares or ignored us completely. They seem to have no problem, however, sharing the territory with curious tourists riding in Land Cruisers.

During the crater drive, I think I got one of the best, if not *the* best, photos of the trip—an elephant heading right at my camera. The animal wasn't charging me, but one could get the impression, looking at the result, that it was doing just that. Maybe I'll tell folks I put my life in danger to get the picture, . . . but I really didn't.

The largest number of animals present in the crater appeared to be zebras and wildebeests. As I mentioned in the last *Logos*, they travel, more or less together, on their annual migration from north-central Tanzania to southern Kenya, beginning in the "dry" season (June through September), moving in a

clockwise oval, which brings them back to Tanzania during the “wet” seasons (short rains in October and November; long rains, March to May). The reason for this curious pattern is the availability of grass for feeding.

The reason for the grouping together of zebras and wildebeests is a bit more complicated. We were told that the zebras are smarter than the wildebeests and have much better eyesight. The wildebeests aren't terribly smart, but they have a better sense of smell. When there are predators in the area, the wildebeests smell them before the zebras can. When the zebras sense the wildebeests have smelled approaching lions or other predators, they're smart enough and see well enough to pick out an escape route both species can use.

Next month, I'll describe our three days on the Serengeti Plain, possibly the best known safari area in Africa, and the famous Olduvai Gorge, where the British anthropological husband and wife team, Louis and Mary Leakey, located the earliest physical evidence of the existence of our direct ancestors, *homo erectus*, living in Olduvai 250,000 to 1.6 million years ago.