



African wildlife at its best

An extraordinary safari in Tanzania's Ngorongoro and Serengeti game reserves

• By IRVING SPITZ
Special to The Jerusalem Post

Tanzania, a country situated in East Africa, has dedicated over 30% of its land area to national parks and safaris play a vital part in its economy. In fact, the word "safari" derives from the local Swahili language and means journey.

Of all Tanzanian wild life sanctuaries, pride of place goes to the Ngorongoro crater which has been described as the eighth wonder of the world. This crater is situated on the Great Rift Valley which is a giant 6,000-mile geological fault in the earth's crust. It begins in Lebanon, and continues south through the Sea of Galilee, Jordan Valley, Dead Sea, Arava, Red Sea, eastern flank of Africa and finally ends up in Southern Africa. Volcanic upheavals accompanied the formation of the Rift Valley. One of these volcanoes subsequently collapsed into a depression or caldera resulting in the Ngorongoro Crater.

This crater is one of the largest in the world with a diameter of approximately 19 kilometers. The crater rim supports evergreen forests whilst the crater floor, some 500 meters below, is dominated by grasslands, small patches of trees and a lake called Lake Magadi. The descent to the crater floor takes about 45 minutes.

This is a natural sanctuary and is the permanent home of up to 25,000 animals. The abundance of grass supports the numerous herbivores including wildebeest, gazelle, zebra and buffalo. There are 25 endangered black rhino in the crater. Because of the commercial value of their horns, these magnificent animals were poached to the brink of extinction in the 1980's. There are also numerous hippos.

After the malaria carrying mosquito, the hippo represents the biggest danger to the tourist. This animal, weighing close to a ton, will charge anyone getting between it and the water which is its natural habitat.

In addition to herbivores, the Ngorongoro Crater contains one of the largest concentrations of predators in the whole of Africa. These include lions, leopards, cheetahs, wild dogs, jackals, spotted hyenas and servals. The latter are medium-sized wild cats which share common traits with the cheetah. These slender animals possess long legs and a head small in relation to their body. The serval specializes in catching rodents. Cheetahs are well suited to hunt in open grasslands and are the fastest land animal capable of speeds of 110 kilometers an hour when chasing after a potential victim.

It has been estimated that Ngorongoro lions obtain up to 80 percent of their food from hyena kills and they are thus predominantly scavengers. Despite its dominance and power, the lion is not critical for the Ngorongoro ecosystem which would not be altered should lions disappear. When lions mate, the activity lasts for four days and copulation is repeated once every 25 minutes. The lion is not known as the king of the beasts for nothing! The gestation period for a



SUPER SAFARI: Maasai warriors and animals, including wildebeest, crocodiles, hippo, cheetah and lions, at Ngorongoro and Serengeti. (Irving Spitz)

lioness is about three and a half to four months and the average litter size consists of two to three cubs.

The diversity and abundance of wild life in the Ngorongoro Crater is extraordinary. On one occasion when our vehicle was stationary overlooking a pool with a baby hippo and mother, there were two male lions lying on the other side of the road. Just ahead was a hyena and our ever vigilant guide, Martin, spotted a python on the branch of a tree.

Close to the Ngorongoro Crater lies another geological fissure, the Oldupai Gorge. This world famous site is home to some of mankind's earliest ancestors. Hominid fossils dating back millions of years were discovered there by the paleoanthropologist, Mary Leakey.

The Crater and its immediate surroundings constitute the Ngorongoro Conservation Area which was created to conserve wildlife and the ecosystem, promote tourism and safeguard the interests of 60,000 indigenous pastoralists who are members of the Maasai tribe. These people originated in North Africa and migrated to the fertile plains of East Africa several hundred years ago.

The Maasai live in peaceful coexistence with the wildlife whilst maintaining their tribal traditions and dress code. They have, however, to a large extent abandoned their

nomadic life style.

Their livelihood depends on the ownership of cattle, sheep, goats and donkeys. The welfare of their cattle is one of their major concerns. Herds are protected at night from predators by being kept in an enclosed area. Young calves sleep in the family huts. Older boys lead the herds to grazing areas in the highlands. Grazing is only permitted on the crater floor in the dry season.

The staple diet of the Maasai consists of milk and maize. On special occasions, they drink fresh blood taken from cattle. In this ceremony, a cow is caught and using a bow and arrow, the jugular vein in the neck is pieced. The blood is collected into containers and is avidly drunk by members of the tribe. The neck wound is closed with dung and the cow runs off, none too worse for its harrowing experience.

GUEST LODGES are situated on the rim of the crater.

Our touring arrangements were made by &BEYOND, a company offering 5-star luxury accommodation in their Ngorongoro Crater Lodge. In this lodge, there are a total of 30 bungalows divided into 3 camps. To maintain intimacy, each camp has its own viewing decks as well as guest sitting and dining areas.

Inspired in design by the Maasai mud home-

stead, each bungalow is a stilted mud and thatch suite and represents the ultimate in luxury with wood paneling and decorations of African art. The bedroom, sitting room and ensuite bathroom boast chandeliers, a fire place and floor-to-ceiling glass windows overlooking the magnificent Crater below. Personal butlers tend to guests' every need, bringing tea in bed and stoking fireplaces.

&BEYOND's Ngorongoro Crater Lodge has been listed in Conde Nast gold list of world's best places to stay and rated as one of the top 100 hotels in the world. It is without doubt one of the most architecturally spectacular safari lodges in Africa.

Another world famous tourist attraction in Tanzania is the Serengeti National Park. Serengeti means "Endless plains" in the Maasai language.

This 15,000 square-kilometer park is situated in the northern part of the country and is contiguous to the Maasai-Mara Park in Kenya. This area is most noted for the annual migration of over two million animals including one and a half million wildebeest, 200,000 zebra and 500,000 gazelle. The migration is driven by the search for water.

Beginning in June and continuing through July, animals move north in a clockwise direction initially crossing the Grumeti River

in the Serengeti. In August, the animals arrive at the Mara River, cross it and end up in the lush plains of the Maasai Mara Game Reserve. They remain there through September and October.

In November, when grazing pastures in the Maasai Mara become scarce, animals migrate back to the short grass in the south eastern Serengeti plains which by this time have received adequate rainfall. They remain there from December to March. During this time, the wildebeest give birth and over 400,000 offspring are born. The wildebeest slowly move north-west in April and May to the Serengeti's western corridor which has received abundant rains. When the grass withers, the animals move north once again and a new cycle begins.

This is the largest migration on earth and the animals cover over 1,600 kilometers annually. River crossings represent their greatest threat where the weak and injured fall prey to predators including lions, cheetahs, wild dogs, jackals and crocodiles.

To follow the migration, &BEYOND has established two mobile luxury tent camps each containing eight tents. There is a comfortable bed and bathroom with a bucket shower. Each tent is furnished with Indian rugs and polished brass decorations. Electricity is supplied by a generator. Dinner is served under the stars. A personal butler is assigned to each tent.

These seasonal camps move round the Serengeti to follow the migration. It takes 3 days to dismantle a camp and another 4 days to establish a new one. This is done in designated areas. None of the &BEYOND camps is fenced in and animals are free to come and go. For this reason, it is only permitted to wander about after dark under the watchful eye of a ranger. Despite being isolated in the bush, it was still possible to watch the World Cup being played out in South Africa on a giant television screen.

One evening when we were having dinner in the open under a campfire in this tent camp, a hippo charged across the open area 5 meters away from us. Later when we were being escorted to our tent by our ranger, we were again accosted by a hippo. "Freeze," whispered the ranger. We readily complied and after a few anxious moments, the hippo wandered off aimlessly. At night we could hear hippos bellowing outside our tent.

Because of their unique nature, both Ngorongoro and Serengeti Reserves have been recognized as World Heritage Sites. One disturbing piece of news is that the current Tanzanian government is considering building a highway across the northern part of the Serengeti through the migration route. If carried out, this could represent an ecological disaster since it could potentially interrupt the migration.

Irving Spitz, Emeritus Professor of Medicine, is an avid traveler and photographer. He writes, reviews and lectures on medical topics, music, art, history and travel. Additional pictures, articles and reviews can be seen at www.irvingspitz.com