



Ngorongoro Highlands and Gol Mountains

Detailed Itinerary

Day 1 - Depart mid-evening from London Heathrow on an overnight flight to Kilimanjaro International Airport.

Day 2 - Arrive at Kilimanjaro airport around breakfast time (subject to which airline used). An East African Adventure representative/trip leader will be there to meet you and help with your baggage and transfer to Ilboru Safari Lodge (generally) on the outskirts of Arusha on the lower-most slopes of Mt Meru. This lodge is about an hour's drive from the airport and is comfortably appointed with characterful private thatched rooms set in large gardens of many colourful flowers and plants, a great place for resting after a long day travelling and for starting our adventure from.

Day 3 – Leaving the lodge after breakfast we set off for the drive to Ngorongoro Crater. This takes around 3-4 hours following a tarmac road to the Ngorongoro gate. As we drive away from Arusha we can look back for good views of nearby Mt Meru and if it is clear can see Kilimanjaro in the distance, with the summit glaciers shining in sunlight. On the way we pass through small villages, where we can see Masai shepherds tending their goats and cattle, and the small towns of Karatu and Manyara, which also provide real insight into the country and the people's way of life. We will have driven for over 2 hours through mainly flat plains when we pass through Manyara and climb up the escarpment before us. Until now we have been at the bottom of the Great Rift Valley, and the escarpment is in fact the edge of the valley and the result of converging fault lines. Stretching 5000kms from the tip of the Red Sea to Mozambique and South Africa, this is the world's largest valley system. On a more local scale, driving out of the valley we pass large baobab trees and have views down over Lake Manyara at the bottom of the escarpment, and its surrounding national park. From here it is a further hour or so to the Ngorongoro Conservation Area gate, where we leave the tarmac behind and the road changes to a graded track, which can be dusty in the dry season and very muddy in the rains. The road climbs through forest to the edge of the crater and after 45 minutes we come to a fork in the road and the first views of the amazing Ngorongoro Crater below, as we are now on the rim. It is the largest unflooded, unbroken caldera (volcanically formed crater - now inactive) in the world. It is 20km in diameter, an area of 265 sq kilometres, and crater walls over 600m high with no roads or settlements within it. As a result, it is a diverse and very special environment that is home to an abundance of African wildlife, and this viewing spot makes a superb place for us to stop for a packed lunch!



From here we continue our journey around the top of the crater into the Ngorongoro Highlands, to Empakaai Crater, to camp for the night on its crater rim (2700m) with amazing views across. Camping is only at permitted campsites in the Ngorongoro Conservation Area, this minimises the disturbance and impact through containing all the camping activities in the one place, but also means there have been basic facilities built at the designated campsites. The Ngorongoro Highlands in this area are on average between 2700m and 3000m above sea level. Days often start with some low cloud but are usually fine and as the sun comes up they dissipate and temperatures are usually comfortable-to-warm by about 9.30 – 10 am. As the sun goes down later in the day the temperature can drop quite dramatically and there can be a chill to the evening air, so fleeces and sometimes hats may be required to stay warm!

Day 4 – Empakaai Crater is situated on the northern edge of the Ngorongoro Highlands, near the edge of the Rift Valley escarpment. It is another caldera, though smaller than Ngorongoro at about 6km across, but it is a spectacular crater with lush vegetation covering its slopes right down to the bottom, over half of which is covered by a striking blue lake that is used by flamingos amongst other wetland birds.



After an early breakfast in camp overlooking the crater, we start our walk by dropping over the rim and then descend through the forest towards the crater floor for a very different perspective of this amazing place. There is a good chance, on the way down, of seeing some game drinking from the lake at the bottom of the crater. It is about a 2 hour return walk back to camp, from where our route to Olmoti Crater follows the edge of Empakaai at first, before heading roughly south-west through the forest and savannah of the Ngorongoro Highlands. If we are lucky today we may see some wildlife, including eland, bushbuck and buffalo. It is an undulating walk of about 5-6 hours to reach tonight's campsite at Nainokanoka, near the edge of Olmoti Crater, but there are no big height gains and the altitude we are at stays around 2500 – 2700m. There are some Masai Bomas (traditional villages) that we will see during the walk and probably some Masai shepherds grazing their herds on the grasslands, with the surrounding forested hillsides and small peaks as the backdrop.

Day 5 – Breakfast is around 7.30 most mornings in camp, where possible the tables are set up outside to make the most of the setting, and a leisurely breakfast is taken before leaving at around 8.30 - 9 am. After breakfast we walk from camp to the edge of Olmoti Crater, another of the calderas formed in the Ngorongoro Highlands volcanic past. The grassy crater is smaller and shallower than Empakaai and Ngorongoro, and is the source of the Munge River (which we are roughly following for most of the day), as it flows out of the crater as a waterfall through a notch in the rim and down to the Ngorongoro Crater. During the walk we have the comfort of a lodge on the crater rim to look forward to, as it is about a 6-7 hour walk from our camp via Olmoti Crater to the Ngorongoro Sopa Lodge.

We are walking towards the Ngorongoro Crater today and the concentration of game is increasing, with luck we should have a few sightings of bushbuck, impala and eland during the walk, and maybe others - you never know! Our route takes us through forested slopes, grassland savannahs and bush on our way to what many people describe as 'the 8th wonder of the world' – the Ngorongoro Crater.

We should arrive at the lodge around 4 in the afternoon. This gives us plenty of time to relax and enjoy the spectacular view spread out before us, and look forward to descending into the crater tomorrow for an extended game drive on the crater floor 600m below.



Day 6 – The crater rim of Ngorongoro is roughly 3,000m above sea level, making nights cool and crisp all year round. In the mornings, as the sun rises and starts to warm the air, cloud that has formed over the forested slopes around the crater starts to rise, and it is a common but always spectacular sight to see blankets of cloud falling over the edge of the crater and quickly evaporating in the already warm air within. We take breakfast in the lodge before heading down into the crater to spend all the morning watching game in this superb setting. The crater is a World Heritage site (designated by UNESCO in 1979), part of the Ngorongoro Conservation Area and part of an International Biosphere Reserve, as declared by UNESCO, and is home to over 20,000 large animals including lion, elephant, leopard, zebra, wildebeest, buffalo and hippopotamus. Some of the last remaining black rhinos in Tanzania can be found in the crater too. The Ngorongoro Crater is deservedly one of the world's most famous wildlife-watching destinations, and having one of the largest concentrations of game in Africa inhabiting this spectacular setting, we are sure to see some great sights and a lot of wild animals. We spend the day in four-wheel drive safari vehicles allowing us to view game via dirt tracks and to best negotiate the tracks into and out of the crater.

After the cool night-time temperatures and fresh morning, once the sun is up and we have descended onto the crater floor it can get very hot during the day, but we can find shelter in tree-covered areas, not forgetting to look into the low branches for a sighting of leopard of course! We stop within the crater for a packed lunch and it is soon time to carry on our journey. We must climb back out of the crater and head to tonight's campsite in the more isolated, western highlands ready to start our walk tomorrow. We leave the Ngorongoro Crater on the main Serengeti gravel road and drive through wonderful scenery including mountains and extinct volcanoes. There are Masai settlements with shepherds tending their livestock as we come down from the crater and into the furthest reaches of the Serengeti plains. We travel to the Serengeti National Park border before turning north towards the Loliondo Game Controlled Area and our base in the remote Gol Mountains, Sanjan camp. We should arrive in camp around 6 - 7 pm giving us time to sort out our gear and make ourselves at home. We

may even be lucky enough to hear hyena during the night as their laugh travels many miles in the right conditions.

This part of the Ngorongoro Highlands Conservation area is much less visited than those around the more popular craters (Ngorongoro and Empakaai), so we are guaranteed to see far less human interference, very few tourists, and experience an unchanged wilderness that has been home to Masai and used by them in a traditional manner for centuries. The terrain is rolling savannah and hillsides that the Masai use as grazing land for their animals, there are no real paths to follow and we will be using cattle and wildlife tracks mainly. The walk is supported by vehicles, which carry our luggage, provisions and equipment, and by our crew, who put up and take down all the tents and prepare all the meals too.

Day 7 – Experiencing the Gol Mountains with a local Masai guide, we really will see a natural Africa for the next few days, stunning unspoilt landscapes and scenery abound in this little-inhabited region. There is always the chance to spot game and local wildlife (there are no fences or boundaries to stop the free movement of animals from here to the Serengeti) but it is the landscape, the views, the open space and wilderness that are to be savoured, all of which giving the area a special feeling.

First impressions of the Gol Mountains area is that you have arrived in the Africa you see in magazines and on television – huge sweeping plains with wildebeest, zebra and giraffe; acacia trees dotted throughout; kopjes (pronounced ‘copies’), the large, rounded, granite monoliths that rise up out of the plains (resembling ‘tors’ in an English landscape) – and all this set against a backdrop of smooth, mainly grassy, ridged mountains.

The whole region was formed through volcanic activity 2 million years ago due to being on the edge of the Great Rift, and this is much in evidence everywhere you look. There are a number of dormant volcanoes and caldera throughout the highlands that peak at over 3,000 metres above sea level that are now forest and grasslands, home to wildlife and Masai settlements.

The next few days are firmly in Masai homeland as the Masai are traditionally from this large area of East Africa that includes the Ngorongoro Highlands, Serengeti and the Masai Mara over the border in Kenya. It is a privilege to be joined by a local Masai guide for the next few days to show the special places within the Gol Mountains and find the faint tracks we will be following through this remote area of wilderness.

After a breakfast in camp we set off to walk into the Gol Mountains wilderness through rocky gorges, grassy slopes and ridges but also across areas of classic plains to visit Nasera Rock. This is a granite formation that rises 100m out of the Angata Kiti plains and is striped with blue-green algae running down its side that has given it its name of Nasera – ‘striped mountain’ in Swahili. For thousands of years this lone monolith has acted as a landmark for the Masai as well as being used for shelter by baboons and wildebeest during the wet season. The view of Nasera Rock is excellent as we walk towards it for the last part of the walk. We reach its base and climb up to the top to get even better views over the vast Angata Kiti plain stretching to the edge of the Ngorongoro Conservation Area to the east, the edge of the Serengeti plains to the west, with the Gol Mountains rising above them all. Lunch is prepared back in camp and there is some time to relax before the option of leaving camp to explore a different part of the Gol Mountains area or to visit a Masai Boma and see how one of the world's most well known tribes live in this remote area.

Returning to Sanjan camp early evening there is time to freshen up before a leisurely dinner is served around 7 o'clock.

Day 8 – We walk out of camp after breakfast heading east and make our way to the Olkarien Gorge, a deep rocky gorge cutting into the Gol Mountains. Masai shepherds bring cattle into this gorge to drink from pools dug into the stream flowing along the bottom, but it is the cliff sides of the gorge that are the main attraction. Olkarien Gorge is the main nesting and breeding site for a large number of Ruppels Griffon Vultures that live in the Serengeti, Ngorongoro area and even the Masai Mara in Kenya. These iconic birds can be seen wheeling above the gorge in the morning as they rise on thermals to carry them away to scavenge for food before returning later in the day. Ruppels Griffon Vultures can live for up to 55 years and in this time pair for life, raising one chick per year which is looked after by one parent at all times on the cliff until it is ready to fledge. These birds can use only a few suitable nesting sites and the Olkarien Gorge has one of the biggest concentrations in East Africa due to its size.



Leaving the gorge we continue through the vast area of open untouched wilderness giving us a real feel and appreciation of the place, and understanding of its conservation area status and of the way of life for the indigenous Masai people. We are met by the vehicles near the edge of the Gol Mountains and catch a lift in them for a few miles to the Mosonik Plain as it is too far to Lake Natron on foot, especially for those wishing to climb Oldoinyo Lengai tomorrow morning.

We leave the vehicles near the escarpment of the Great Rift because they have to detour to follow the road for a suitable descent to the valley floor and the lake. There is around a 4-5 hour walk to camp and there are some great views to see during today; from the edge of the valley one can see a long way, even as far as Kilimanjaro if the conditions are right. We stop for a packed lunch during the day as we make our way to Natron camp and re-unite with the vehicles and crew, and our tents already up and waiting for us! We should reach camp at around 2-3 in the afternoon and can visit the shores of Lake Natron, a short drive from camp. We are in the 'Gregory Rift' area of the Great Rift Valley and Lake Natron is one of the most important soda lakes in the valley, as it is the home of great flocks of flamingos that feed on the algae and small invertebrates found in the warm, saline water. It was designated as a wetland of international importance in 2001 for supporting a large number of lesser flamingos. It is estimated that 500,000 pairs annually breed throughout the lake and roughly 2.5 million flamingos in East Africa frequent it.

An option for tomorrow is to climb the nearby volcano of Oldoinyo Lengai (2,878m), for those of us wishing to do this we need to sort our gear out, have dinner and get to bed early because we need to get up around midnight to get to the top for sunrise and avoid the heat of the day.

Day 9 – To climb Oldoinyo Lengai we will leave camp around 1am to climb roughly 1600 metres to the crater rim at the top. This can be a demanding climb as the steep slopes and gullies of ash and crumbling rock make it hard work, but it is well worth it. It is the only active volcano in Tanzania, on average erupting roughly every 7 years, last in late 2006! If you are lucky one can actually see lava frothing out of cracks in the ground, almost as if it were a geyser. It is possible to walk right up to

recent lava flows and really feel the heat in the crater - a fascinating experience. We aim to arrive at the summit for sunrise so we are climbing when it is cool, as the climb would be no fun in the heat of day. Summiting at this time we can enjoy the views and have the sun warm us and light the way back down. The view from the top is of Mt Meru and Kilimanjaro in the distance, the Ngorongoro Highlands, western escarpments of the Great Rift Valley and Lake Natron stretching away, making it a unique experience and achievement. We can take photos and marvel at the volcanic activity before we descend back to camp to meet the group for a well-earned early lunch. Climbing an active volcano might not appeal to everyone, and for those choosing not to, the morning is not just spent in camp waiting for the climbers to return (though it can be if you wish)! We are at the foot of the northern slopes of the Ngorongoro Highlands now, and the western edge of the Great Rift Valley - a short walk from camp is an impressive waterfall we can go and see as it cascades down off these higher areas. This river, with its source in the highlands near Empakaai Crater, is channelled through a steep valley and down the cliffs of the escarpment on its way down from the wetter highlands to Lake Natron, making an impressive (and surprising) waterfall in the otherwise dry habitat. The walk straight from camp to the falls makes a very pleasant and interesting excursion, like Oldoinyo Lengai it shows another aspect of the diversity of the area and its natural environment. The group meets up again in camp and lunch is served before we leave for the drive south, travelling along the foot of the escarpment on dirt roads towards Lake Manyara National Park, and the Manyara Serena Lodge. Arriving at the lodge around 3pm (on top of the escarpment once more) one of the first things to strike you is the view down over the soda lake below and along the edge of the rift. We will have time to clean up in the lodge and for those that wish we can take a game drive in Lake Manyara National Park this afternoon from roughly 4pm. This is a great place to see wildlife, including hippo and flamingo in the lake, elephants shading under large baobab trees and the famous 'tree climbing' lions of this particular park. The park is home to a large number of different species of animal due to the wide range of habitats found in the park, from acacia woodland, grasslands, the rift wall, lakeshore and swamp, ground-water forest and the lake itself. This is the last night of the trip, and arriving back at the lodge in time for a shower and dinner we can reflect on a full and varied time in some stunning places.

Also for this evening, as an optional extra, we can offer a guided night game drive in an open game drive vehicle inside Lake Manyara National Park (in fact, you will probably be the only vehicle in the park!). This is the only national park in Tanzania where you can enjoy game viewing at night, and see nighttime behaviour and the many different nocturnal animals that are not seen during the day (for example leopard, hippo, civet, porcupine, bush baby, genet). Under the stars of an African night sky, the sights and sounds are a real treat for the senses, and the night drive is around two to two and a half hours. For this special night game drive, the national park does charge a relatively high additional park fee, which is included in the price. If you are interested in the night game drive experience, please [Contact Us](#) or show this clearly on your booking form – it makes for a very memorable experience and a great last night.

Day 10 – Breakfast in the lodge is at around 7.30 am so that we can check out and leave around 8.30 for a morning game drive in the national park. Morning is the best time to see game so we should be rewarded with some good sightings as we look out for wildlife. We can stop for packed lunches in the

park before leaving the park gate around 2pm for the drive back to Arusha. It is about a 2-hour drive and we should arrive at the Ilboru Safari Lodge (generally) late afternoon for dayrooms so we can shower and arrange our luggage for the flight home tonight, we will aim to leave the lodge early evening for Kilimanjaro airport.

Day 11 – Arrive at Heathrow airport mid morning.

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