



September 2017

Dear All,

This is part 3 of our journal and it describes our first few days in Tanzania at the Ngorongoro Crater and Oldupai Gorge. At the end of part 2 we had crossed the border into Tanzania and said goodbye to our Kenyan guide Nzuki and hello to our Tanzanian guide Ayoub.

Monday September 18th continued
We had switched vehicles too. Instead of the Toyota van we were now



traveling in a Toyota Landcruiser. Although it was superficially similar to the Landcruiser Troopcarrier we used to have in Australia, this vehicle began life as a flatbed (ute, pickup); the chassis was extended by about two feet and a large Tanzania-made safari body added. Like the van it had a roof section that could be raised for the clients to stand up and shoot pictures without any glass in the way.

We had about a four-hour drive via Arusha to Ngorongoro so we weren't going to see much of the park before nightfall. The road was quiet though compared to our drive out of Nairobi so Ayoub was able to keep up a commentary on Tanzania and the countryside we were passing through.

The countryside was dry, almost a desert, in the rain shadow of Mount Meru, an old and dormant volcano that dominated the skyline. At around 15000 feet, it was enough to block the trade winds coming from the southeast off the Indian Ocean.



It was too dry here for elephants and was only lightly populated by humans, mainly Masai. The Masai men are polygamous but the wives own the houses. If a man visits a wife, then it's normal for the kids to go away to another wife so he isn't disturbed. Children are shared. Brides are bought from their fathers, as many as a man can afford. Some men can't afford a wife until middle age.

We noticed that the fields were lined with what looked very much like Arizona's century plants, a kind of agave. After about thirty years these plants throw up an impressive stalk of flowers, which eventually turn into miniature plants and take root. And then the adult plant dies. Ayoub identified them as sisal, planted here for erosion control. At first I thought this was an outstanding case of convergent evolution but have since found that the sisal agave was introduced to Tanzania in the 1800s. There were prickly pears around too, also introduced. There is no native cactus outside the Americas, but aloes and euphorbias fill the same ecological niche in Africa.

We saw beehives hanging from trees. This is the beekeepers' defence against the honey badger, which stuns the bees with its skunk-like scent and takes their honey from ground-based hives.

There were baobab trees, similar to Australia's boab. And beautiful African tulip trees, also popular for Australia's gardens but very invasive in the wild.



I asked why the republic of Tanzania had changed its name from Tanganyika, its Swahili name at independence. Ayoub said that it was a merger of two names, Tanganyika and Zanzibar. A couple of years after Tanganyika's independence in the 1960s, the neighboring islands of Zanzibar, which had been a British protectorate, became a self-governing country. The population promptly deposed the Sultan of Zanzibar and the Arab government that had wielded local power for 200 years and formed a Revolutionary Council. In a rare move, the two countries merged to establish stability and mutual protection in a time of great unrest.

Ayoub took a shortcut around Arusha to avoid its traffic and we ended up at the Coffee Lodge, a gated hotel complex. We had a buffet lunch there in the gardens, surrounded by flowering shrubs and shaded by enormous trees. Ayoub ate elsewhere, a separation of guide and customer that we'd have to get used to. No different really from a guided trip in North America where the guides often prepare meals for their clients.

Inside the complex was a jewelry shop specializing in tanzanite. Luckily Sandie already has that gem in her collection. Ayoub said that the discovery in the 1960s of the first tanzanite, just 20 miles away from Arusha, has helped boost it from a small town to the country's third largest city. (Dar es Salaam is the biggest.)

We passed a market, chaotic to our eyes, but I'm sure all the locals knew who was selling and who was buying. The goods



were spread on the ground, not something you could do in our soggy part of the world.

We were passed by this van with the message "Trust No Body", funny as we'd just seen a similar van with the message "In God we trust". It wasn't clear though whether that message was religious or just a declaration of preference for American dollars over the local currency. Although we'd bought Kenyan shillings in advance nobody seems to trade in Tanzania shillings, which are currently around 2000 to the dollar. We were hoping to use dollars if we had to buy something.



The other vehicle in the picture is a tuk-tuk, a motor tricycle with an attached body. Most are

passenger vehicles but some have cargo trays behind the driver.

We'd seen some red bananas at the market Ayoub bought some bananas for us to try. The red ones are quite similar in flavor to the Cavendish bananas imported into North America, but the chubby little yellow ones, called apple bananas I think, are quite delicious with a hint of pineapple. We ate a lot of those!



We stopped at a Cultural Centre for a break. This is an impressive building with artisans working inside, surrounded by walls of masks and shields and art. This is a European-style shop for tourists who aren't prepared to go to the markets and haggle with the locals. Sandie was intrigued by the guy carving pieces of malachite, another mineral found in Tanzania, but we managed to escape without buying anything.

We skirted the edge of Manyara national park. Home to a large alkali lake and enormous flocks of flamingos, an interesting spot, but we couldn't go and see them all. There are over a dozen parks to choose from in Tanzania and even more in Kenya. With a lot of help from Elvira at Tano Safaris we'd picked five of them and squeezed our visits into a twelve day trip.

We filled up with petrol in Karatu at a busy service station. The locals were filling their tuk-tuks and safari guides were filling Landcruisers and similar vehicles. We passed a long line of tuk-tuks at the roadside, presumably for sale or rent.



Then we were climbing up through tropical forests. When we entered the Ngorongoro park, officially a conservation area, the road became gravel and steeper as we climbed up to the rim of the crater.

Ayoub stopped at an overlook of the crater for us to see where we'd be spending the next day. The crater was formed by the

collapse of a giant volcano that had blasted out most of its magma interior, so technically it's a caldera rather than a crater, but the world knows it as a crater so I'll stick with it.



The crater is at about 6000 feet and the crater walls tower nearly 2000 feet above it so we were standing at close to 8000 feet, and it was cool despite being almost on the Equator. From what we could see, the crater floor, about ten miles across, was a mixture of dry savannah, woodlands, and lakes, while the crater wall opposite was dense forest.

We arrived as dusk fell. Ngorongoro's Serena Lodge is perched on the edge of the crater, at around 7500 feet. The reception area is high above the rooms and the dining areas,



connected by a long and wide staircase. We couldn't see much in the dark, but my impression was of very solid construction, with massive wooden beams and of walls clad with dark, round rocks.

Our room had a balcony, with a view of the crater but we never got to see the crater floor in good light.

Just as we were going in for dinner a group of the staff gathered around a table to sing what was probably the Swahili equivalent of Happy Birthday. The singing was excellent, very harmonious, and definitely better than the Olive Garden's! We were very sleepy though, barely able to eat dinner. Sandie went to bed but, fortified by coffee, I did the usual downloading and updating, pausing occasionally to climb back into the chair I'd fallen out of.

Ayoub had told us that our permits to enter the crater were good for one entry only, so we'd be taking a packed lunch. If we wanted to see the animals' morning activity, and we did, then we should also take a packed breakfast and be ready to leave at 6 am.



Tuesday September 19th

With coffee and packed breakfasts and lunches we were off on time; it was still dark and a crisp morning. The entry gate opens at about sunrise and the exit gate, on a different road, closes at sunset. Outside those times anyone in the crater might be considered to be a poacher.



We followed a steep gravel road down into the crater. Our first viewpoint showed us a large elephant and an acacia tree festooned with weaver bird nests. About ten miles distant was the opposite crater wall; the mist was clearing and it looked like we were going to have a good day.

We were crossing a sloping open area when Ayoub pointed further down into the

crater at a distant pixel and said “lioness”. Sure enough we eventually could see the lioness heading towards us and as we got closer we could hear her too; a repetitive short roar. Ayoub thought that she was calling to other lions, possibly to let them know there had been a kill. She passed a foot behind our back bumper, ignoring us and the dozen or so other vehicles that were now surrounding us. She sat down but continued calling.



Ayoub had been busily scanning the crater wall above us and he pointed to another lioness and a group of cubs. He thought it



was possible that some of the cubs might belong to the calling lioness. There was a lot of cover, so we kept losing them. She came about halfway down and stood there in the bush, almost invisible except when she moved; the cubs were safely out of sight.



She seemed reluctant to bring the cubs all the way down to the line of vehicles. Eventually she led the cubs, at least four, back up the hill and they all disappeared into the bush. The calling lioness gave up and mooched back the way she'd come.



Up to now we seemed to have had little

impact on the animals in the parks, but this time it was likely that we, collectively, had been the cause of the cubs missing a meal.



Ngorongoro's large animals looked to be much the same as we had seen in Amboseli: elephants, lions, wildebeest, zebra, buffalo,



baboons. But the birds that morning were quite different. Ayoub rattled off the names as we saw them but of course we promptly forgot and we've had to pore through pictures to guess at what they are.

We think the raptor is a martial eagle, possibly immature. The cute little bird on the



branch amongst the thorns of a whistling acacia is a winding cisticola and the chicken-like bird is a Hildebrandt's francolin. Who picks these names? The young bird, also amongst those



fearsome thorns, we weren't able to identify.

The vulturine guineafowl we were familiar with. We'd seen a few in Australia, escapees from someone's farm most likely.



The guineafowl gather in large flocks, forming complex and confusing patterns just like the zebras do.

We stopped for breakfast at a picnic area, one of the few places on this trip where we

could get out and walk about. We pooled our three breakfasts and all ended up with plenty of what we liked.

We had time there to look at the surrounding vegetation. The picnic area overlooks this swampy area, great wildlife habitat. The acacia trees grew much larger here, not great for shade but beautifully shaped. Fig trees grow in weird and wonderful shapes like this banyan. We also found this somewhat gaudy shrub, a candle plant, a type of senna so we didn't snack on that one!



Between there and the toilets we saw this dead buffalo, recently dead by the lack of smell. Ayoub thought it odd that no scavengers had found it; he wondered if it had died of anthrax, as that keeps scavengers away.





Surprisingly, the concentration of vehicles and people didn't keep the wildlife away from the picnic area. Ayoub had to warn me not to wander



along what looked like a trail, as some of the wildlife is not friendly.



On the slope behind the toilets, a mixed herd of gazelles, Thomson's and Grant's, were grazing. We could see zebras and wildebeest and warthogs nearby, and an elephant came down to drink. This buffalo was showing off its horns, a real deterrent to any predator; big game hunters used to reckon the Cape buffalo as one of the most dangerous animals to hunt, particularly if it was wounded.



As we were leaving the area we saw a large troop of baboons making their way across the picnic area, also



ignoring vehicles and people. See the baby riding its mother. By this time Ayoub had got used to Sandie's erroneously calling them "bamboos". He had a lot more trouble with her calling impalas "malibus" until I explained the Chevrolet connection.

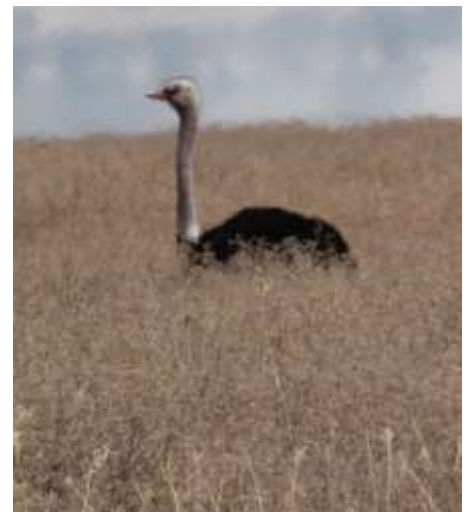


On the open plains we saw the large herds, mostly wildebeest and zebras, but sometimes with elephants and warthogs and gazelles in the mix.

Often there would be gatherings of birds in the waters beyond the herds, adding to the diversity.



We found more birds too, a fiscal shrike and a superb starling.



The twitchy nose belongs to an African hare; they are famous for their exceptionally long ears, but they are laid down in this picture as if the hare was expecting to run.

The kori bustard is a big bird but only half the size of an ostrich. The ostrich isn't sitting down, just standing in long grass.



Up to now the only spotted hyenas we'd seen close up had been all business, looking for prey or carrion. This one must have already eaten as it was completely relaxed and not the least concerned about us a few feet away.

The green reptile is a female agama lizard, similar to the more colourful male we'd seen in Amboseli.



What looked like one of Australia's stone curlews turned out to be called a spotted thick knee in Africa.



We saw this solitary hartebeest, similar to the three we'd seen in Amboseli but at least we got a picture of the front end this time. Sometimes they form herds of thousands but we have yet to see that; this one may be a solitary hermit.



Then we saw this amazing character, the secretary bird, so called because it looks like it has quill pens tucked behind its ears. The bird hurries through the grass looking for snakes and lizards. When it finds one it stomps it with its big feet and then deals the death blow with its dagger-like beak. Looking at this bird I wondered why it took scientists so long to see the connection between dinosaurs and birds. Or why dinosaurs were thought to have dull and boring skin colours; this bird out-dresses Jurassic Park's velociraptors.



We came across a couple of hippos mostly submerged in a small pond, just their backs on show and they can hold their breath for a long time so we moved on. Ayoub said there was a hippo pool with many more and we headed in that direction



On our way we spotted a lioness harassing a small group of buffalo. They were trying to get down to a stream to drink and she was just confronting them and stopping them from getting there. It looked like no more than schoolyard bullying, as there was little chance that a solitary lioness could bring down a buffalo.

But then a magnificent male lion came into view and this changed the odds considerably. It seemed to give the lioness some courage as she made an attack on one of the buffalo, getting her claws into its rump and getting kicked in the gut in response.



She made a couple more attempts, always attacking from the rear to stay away from



those dangerous horns.. The male looked interested and he sat down to watch, but made no move to help her.



To add to the drama, another male lion arrived, passing right in front of us and settling down to watch the other pair. Ayoub's guess was that the lioness was in heat and her companion male lion was more interested in sex than eating. They moved along the stream bed leaving the buffalo to drink in peace, albeit with a sore rump.



The new male looked to be younger and smaller, and he made no attempt to challenge, instead settling down to where he could watch. Eventually the pair moved out of our sight and we left our voyeur lion in peace.



These vultures had also been watching the action, occasionally spreading their wings and appearing to cheer the lioness along. They were, after all, more interested in violence and gore than a love story.



We moved on to have lunch by the hippo pool and sure enough it was almost full of hippos, about forty of them, mostly submerged. It looked like you could cross the hippo pool by jumping from back to back, an opportunity for YouTube glory, posthumously of course.

Most of the hippos were inert but some were moving about, including this mother and calf.



The luxuriant rushes around the pool were alive with birds: herons, egrets, pelicans, storks, and cranes. There was this gathering of blacksmith plovers, and another of egrets. The yellow billed stork was showing off its bill and its sense of humour, while this squacco heron was displaying its beautiful neck patterns.



The pelicans were cruising and occasionally fishing and the crane was showing off its crown.



Of course, the source of all this luxuriant growth was the digestive systems of those forty hippos, so this was a rather smelly spot and we moved away for our packed lunches. We were looking out further across the plain and saw this eland in the distance, a big antelope and very shy and it came no closer than the one we'd seen in Amboseli.



Beyond we could see open water and a line of flamingos, recognizable by their faint pink colour. In front was this bundle of sticks that Ayoub identified as a crested porcupine, looking to be larger and having more disordered quills than its North American cousin.

Ayoub heard a message on the radio that a rhino had been sighted. Most of the safari guides share what they are seeing on their radios, so there's a constant chit-chat in the background, incomprehensible to us as we don't speak Swahili. Ayoub zoomed back towards the picnic area as the rhino had been seen amongst the wooded area there. We gazed into the bush but saw

nothing. Then came a report that it had been seen on the other side of the bush so we zoomed there, and then zoomed back again.



All this zooming to and fro was wearing out the passengers! The Landcruiser's roof is higher than the van's, just a little too high for shooting pictures so we had been standing on the seats, which have loose cushions. This was perfect when we were still, but perilous when in motion. Sandie was able to quickly sit down when a zoom started, but with my back problems it was easier for me to stay up and cling on to the roof brackets. However, I need both hands to use my long lens so when I was taking pictures in mid-zoom my ribs were taking a beating. No criticism of Ayoub; it was my choice.

There are about thirty rhinos in the park but they are seldom seen; they have the knack of staying just inside the forest. We'd given up on this rhino and Ayoub was about to leave the picnic area when he spotted a lion just below us in the bush.

Our pictures show just a tiny piece of lion body, but there were actually three lionesses in there.



Just across the marsh a few dozen people had got out of their vehicles and they were looking at that dead buffalo. Ayoub barked a warning into the radio and there was a flurry of guides herding their clients to safety. The lionesses came out of the bush and calmly strolled off in the other direction, looking like three sisters on an outing.



I seem to have accidentally taken a picture of a bushbuck, rarely seen as they are very shy. I think I was aiming at what I thought was a rhino movement and the bushbuck came into view. Not a great picture, but this was the only one we saw here.

We began to make our way towards the exit road, and spotted a



cheetah at a kill. The cheetah's stomach was enormous! Cheetahs are not big enough to defend their kills and can't haul them up a tree like a leopard does, so I guess they eat as much as they can when they can. This one was looking in all directions as if it realized it was vulnerable.



By the time we had driven around the hill, the cheetah had struggled to its feet and had left the kill.





We saw two jackals hurrying in the kill's direction, eager to help with the clean-up.



Our last animals of the day were these vervet monkeys, similar to those at the lodge in Amboseli.



The road out of the crater is steep and narrow but nicely paved with plenty of traction. We were climbing in the shade but the crater floor was bathed



in sunshine and we were trying to get a last view of Ngorongoro. We made it back to our room at dusk and I walked out from our balcony to an overlook just as darkness fell and the crater disappeared.

Wednesday September 20th

We had a lie-in, not up until 6. It was a foggy and wet but breezy morning, so perhaps we were just in the clouds. The resort has open walkways so everywhere was soaking wet, and, despite being almost on the Equator, it was cold!



We were off in the Landcruiser soon after dawn, around the crater rim. Our first surprise was this giraffe. We'd seen none on the crater floor but they love the dense forest around the crater rim. I never expected to be getting a picture of a giraffe in wet fog. We saw more giraffes along the road, including this mother and calf, still in the fog, but it was clearing.

We were headed for the Serena lodge in Serengeti national park, a few hours away by road. Originally we were going there directly but I'd noticed that our route passed quite close to Olduvai Gorge, so I'd asked Elvira if we could add it to our itinerary. She said that was no problem, with no extra charge, so that would be our first stop.



Along the way we passed a tourist-focused Masai village, an included stop for many tours, but I'd read reports of visitors being pressured to buy handicrafts at high prices. Understandable, given the disparity of wealth, but not an experience we wanted. I'd told Elvira we were mainly interested in animals, flowers, and scenery, so we passed it by. We also passed a couple of Masai men with camels; Ayoub said we should keep going as they were waiting for us to stop and then they'd charge us for taking photos. He did, however, stop for these kids; he said they were very well spoken and polite, so they got water bottles and some energy bars.

By the time we reached the gorge the weather was clear and windy. The sign proclaimed "Oldupai Gorge Reception". The staff there are trying to correct the name. Over a hundred years ago a German scientist asked the Masai the name of the gorge. They thought he meant the wild sisal-like plants that grow there and said "oldupai". He misheard or miswrote it as "olduvai" and a typo was born. I wish them luck; they are outnumbered ten to one on Google.



Oldupai Gorge was made famous by Louis and Mary Leakey, paleoanthropologists who discovered the fossil remains of Australopithecus, Homo Erectus, and Homo Habilis, all ancestors of today's Homo Sapiens and all more than a million years old.



From up on the rim it looks more like volcanic chaos than a well-defined gorge. We were actually at the junction of two gorges, an easy place to get lost



in, but it's off-limits to tourists unless accompanied by an antiquaries guide.

There is, however, a small museum on the rim, telling the story of the Leakeys' finds, and showing stone tools, replicas of early hominin skulls, and fossils of their contemporary animals.

The prize exhibit for me was this replica of the Trackway, sets of footprints left in volcanic ash by hominins over three million years ago. The big deal was that the footprints show foot arches and straight big toes, characteristics of humans rather than the other primates.



Lastly we had a talk from one of the scientists. He told us more about the Leakeys' predecessors, the German scientists who were investigating hominin fossils in the gorge until their work was interrupted by the First World War and then terminated when Tanganyika came under British control. The Leakeys were sufficiently intrigued by their fossil finds to make their own trip to Oldupai.

After the talk, Ayoub set off across country, following rough tracks that threaded through the trees. He said it was a short cut towards the entrance to the Serengeti, quicker than going back to the road. The road had been mostly washboard so this was more comfortable for us as well as quicker.

We were now leaving the Ngorongoro conservation area and heading into the Serengeti, so this is a good time to end part 3 of the journal.

Ayoub shot this picture of us at the Ngorongoro Crater lookout.



Love to you all from Pete and Sandie