

VIEW FROM THE GALLERY



MOHAMMED ARFAN ASIF photographs the world's largest crater, Ngorongoro

TODAY, AS IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN, AFRICA IS A haunting continent. Its rich landscape of soaring mountains, lush green valleys and rugged savannahs, mixed with a combination of wildlife and exotic vegetation, create a vision of colour and beauty that is truly unforgettable. For the nature photographer it is paradise, for nowhere on Earth can you expect to find such an incredible amount of wildlife and geographical diversity.

From Arusha — the town where most of the Tanzanian safaris begin — I left for Ngorongoro with friend and photographer Shanta Weerasinghe from Abu Dhabi. We stopped in Lake Manyara Park and Serengeti on the way. All of these places lie in the Great Rift Valley, part of a fault in the Earth's crust stretching 8,000 kilometres from Turkey to the mouth of the Zambezi River in Mozambique. The fault is so massive that it is clearly visible from the moon.

I stood on the rim of the vast Ngorongoro crater, created two-and-a-half million years ago after the collapse of a volcano the size of Kilimanjaro. It is nine miles in diameter and 20,000 miles in circumference, the largest unbroken caldera on the planet.

Within its 102 square-mile basin there is an unbelievable variety of wildlife and habitats. At last count there were more than 30,000 animals living within Ngorongoro's walls. Its beauty spot is Lake Makati at the centre of the crater. I saw and photographed hippos in playful mood, a rhinoceros with her calf, a solitary lion among the tall savannah grass, and a cheetah hunting Thomson's Gazelle.

With about 120 tour operators in Arusha itself, there is tough competition to provide the best facilities and packages. The seasons are from July to September, coinciding with the annual migration of the wildebeest, and January to March, the dry months. You must book long in advance for the high seasons. The guides are no novices in natural history and our guide, Maluta, was an experienced animal tracker.

As I took my last shot at the crater, the resplendent sun rising over the rim, I realised that I could not possibly provide a fair description of this place — the 'eighth wonder of the world' — for there is nothing with which to compare it.



■ Send your comments to Mohammed: maa@itp.net