

## In the thick of the action

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By Karen Walker

*Last week, Walker wrote about the [first part of an 11-day trip to Tanzania last fall with her husband, Mike Halvorsen, and friends Rod and Jeannine Bertsch. This week, she offers details on the rest of the adventure.](#)*

Our first five days in Tanzania were filled with unique experiences — visiting villages, hiking in Mount Kilimanjaro Park, viewing wildlife at Lake Manyara and Tarangire.

Our next destination was the Ngorongoro Crater, a 12-mile-wide caldera formed by a mountain that collapsed almost 3 million years ago. Our balcony at the Serena Safari Lodge offered a panoramic view of the entire crater, 2,000 feet below.

More than 40,000 animals spend their whole lives on the crater floor without migrating. We saw massive herds of zebras, wildebeests and Thomson's gazelles, plus cape buffalo, hippos, hyenas, jackals, porcupines, eagles and other birds. The rarest sighting was a pair of endangered black rhinos.

Ngorongoro has the world's densest concentration of lions, and they provided several demonstrations of the crater's food chain. The most dramatic was on a sunny day when we had been watching four females resting on the edge of a thicket. A quarter mile away, a young cape buffalo became separated from its herd, and the lions struck. When the huntresses returned to the thicket, more than 15 lions, mostly cubs, emerged and ran past us toward their lunch.

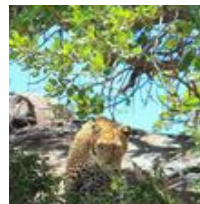
Near Ngorongoro, we visited a Maasai village to learn more about the culture and traditions of these seminomadic herdsman. We were greeted by warriors who performed a ceremonial jump dance, then took us on a tour of their school and mud huts.

From there, we began the jarring ride to the Serengeti. The road was so rough that it dislodged the battery on our Range Rover and we had to pull over near another Maasai village. The warriors there were eager to help and provided a MacGyver-esque fix with leather straps to put us back on the road.



Photo by: Karen Walker

Zebras and wildebeests travel together in large herds because there's strength in numbers.



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Serengeti National Park is Tanzania's largest (5,700 square miles) and most famous reserve. Our home for three nights was the Lemala Tented Camp, located in the wilderness of the central plains. The large tents had all amenities, including "talking showers," and plenty of African atmosphere. We could hear lions outside our canvas walls during the night.

The vast, open grasslands of the Serengeti offer an unmatched safari experience. A typical day started with coffee delivered to our tent, followed by a full breakfast and all-day game drive with picnic lunch. At dusk, we enjoyed drinks and hors d'oeuvres around a campfire, then a leisurely dinner with other travelers.

Our guide, Saidi, was an expert at finding wildlife dramas. He explained the strategy of three lions as they stalked a herd of wildebeests (one lion used our vehicle as cover) and the reasons they were unsuccessful.

A cheetah eyed a herd of gazelles but held back because of the need to stay close to her three playful cubs.

Cautious zebras approached a water hole and stampeded away multiple times when they sensed a danger we couldn't see.

There was a somewhat unsettling scene just a few hundred yards from our tent, where a male lion struggled to drag a fresh kill to shade. His two female companions, who had been the hunters, watched from nearby.

The most memorable encounter was with a pair of "honeymooning" lions, who mate three to four times every hour for up to a week. Earlier in our trip, we had seen a mating pair in tall grass, a hundred yards away. This time, we were so close to the action that we could smell the bride and groom.

We enjoyed perfect weather, even though it was the end of dry season when short rains are common. The benefits of visiting in November are a minimum of mosquitoes, tsetse flies and crowds of tourists. The only time we saw more than a few other safari vehicles was when word got out that a leopard and her two cubs were visible on an isolated granite hillock.

We flew back to Arusha from the Seronera Airstrip, which was one of the most pleasant airport experiences ever. Boarding involved arriving 15 minutes before takeoff, telling the pilot our names and loading our own luggage. After an afternoon relaxing in a day room at the Bay Leaf Inn, we took a late-night flight home with full cameras and memories that will last a lifetime.

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