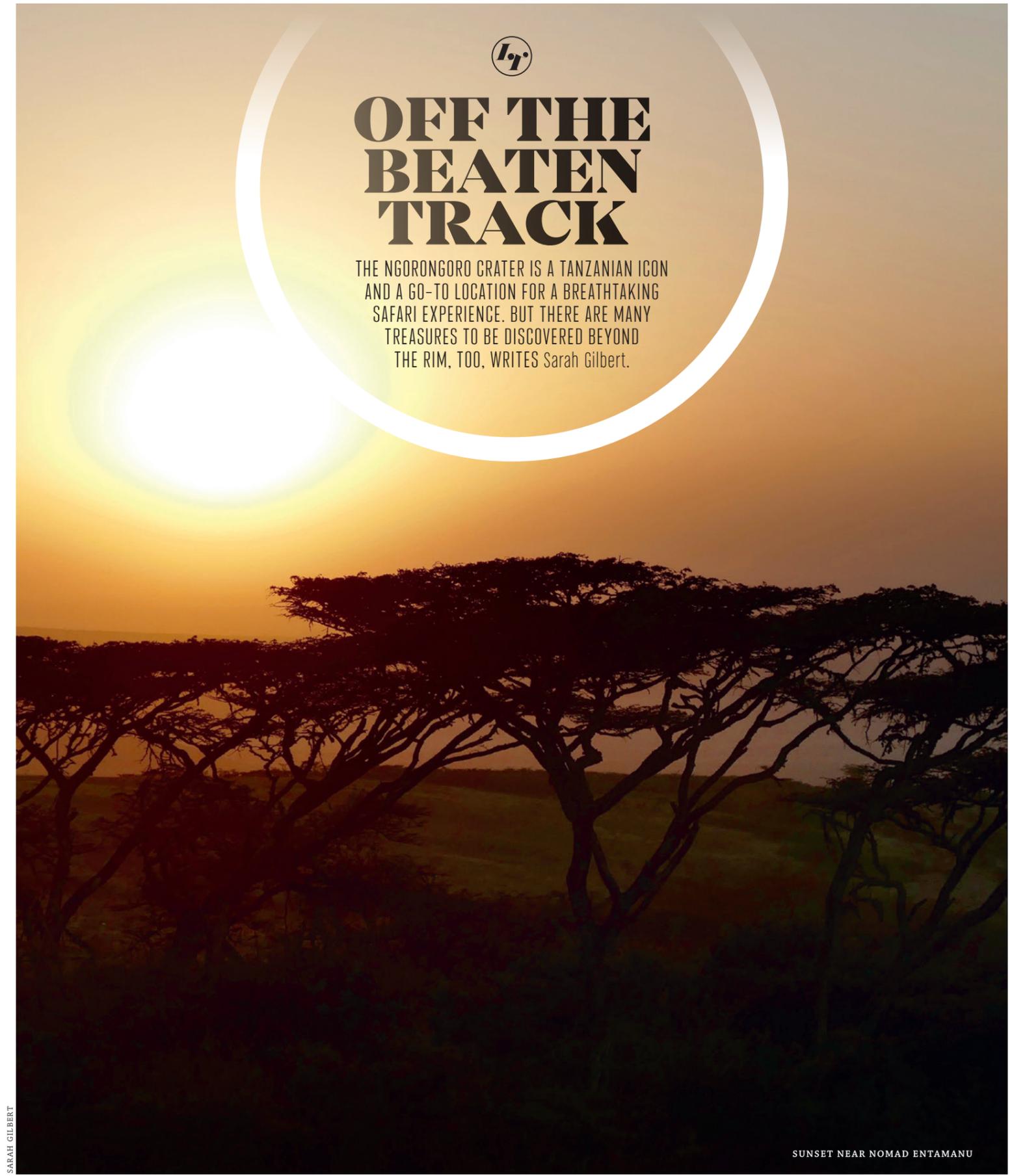




# OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

THE NGORONGORO CRATER IS A TANZANIAN ICON AND A GO-TO LOCATION FOR A BREATHTAKING SAFARI EXPERIENCE. BUT THERE ARE MANY TREASURES TO BE DISCOVERED BEYOND THE RIM, TOO, WRITES Sarah Gilbert.



SARAH GILBERT

SUNSET NEAR NOMAD ENTAMANU

DO THIS SAFARI... TANZANIA



SARAH GILBERT

MAASAI WOMAN



WILDEBEEST, ZEBRAS AND FLAMINGOS AT NGORONGORO



HIPPOS AT NGORONGORO



SARAH GILBERT

As we pulled up what seemed perilously close to a pride of lions stirring from their siesta, a powerful lioness fixed me with her amber eyes. My heart stopped for an instant but I was clearly of no interest, as she soon rolled on to her back, revealing formidable fangs in a gaping yawn.

I was in Tanzania's Ngorongoro Crater, the world's largest unbroken caldera and one of Africa's most iconic spots. A super bowl of wildlife, the 'big five' and thousands of other creatures roam across its 300 square kilometres, attracting equally large numbers of visitors.

As I explored its multiple microclimates, I was thrilled to see a shifty-looking spotted hyena emerging from its den, and a black rhino moving through the grass like an oversized lawnmower.

A throng of grumpy-looking buffalo heading to a watering hole created a traffic jam. We had to wait for elephants too. I held my breath as a fearsome female started towards us, enormous ears flapping, trunk waving. But she abruptly pulled up, gave a loud harrumph and lumbered off to join the rest of the herd.

But there's another side to the UNESCO-protected Ngorongoro Conservation Area, and two new camps are aiming to showcase its less-visited areas, far from the crater's usual four-wheel drive herds.

My first stop was Nomad Tanzania's secluded Entamanu camp, which clings to the north-western rim of the crater. Sheltered by a forest of quintessentially African flat-topped acacias, it looks out over both the crater floor and Serengeti's sun-scorched plains.

Nomad Tanzania is renowned for its innovative, eco-luxe safaris and Entamanu – which means circle in Maasai – is footprint-free. Enormous canvas tents sit on wooden platforms, where the style is understated safari chic: furniture handcrafted by local artisans, lampshades created from beaded Maasai hats, cosy hand-knitted cushions and cow-hide rugs.

One afternoon, I took a walk across the undulating savannah with a long-limbed Maasai – me head-to-toe in khaki, him wrapped in a dazzling red *shuka*, or traditional robe – along with my guide and an armed ranger in case we ran into something ferocious.

There wasn't another soul in sight as I watched three ostrich sprinting in strict formation across the plain. A hundred-strong troop of baboons darted past, their sentries stopping to check us out,



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**“There’s another side to the UNESCO-protected Ngorongoro Conservation Area, and two new camps are aiming to showcase its less-visited areas, far from the crater’s usual four-wheel drive herds”**



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From top: Nomad's Entamanu Ngorongoro camp; understated safari-chic interiors at Entamanu Ngorongoro; adventures with a Maasai at Asilia's The Highlands.

while four keen-eyed giraffes interrupted their leaf chewing for a moment to stare at us, doe-eyed and curious.

As the sun began to streak the mountains pink and gold, a table magically appeared laden with snacks and I sat, gin and tonic in hand, bathed in the scent of wild basil, and drank in the stunning views.

On our return to camp, we stopped to talk to two young Maasai guarding a herd of cattle and, with my guide translating, it felt like a real conversation, unlike some pre-planned village visits.

Nomad are creating a *boma*, a traditional camp, exclusively for their guests, for a more authentic glimpse into Maasai life, their traditions and the importance of their cows – as well as sharing a barbecued goat.

That evening, I curled up on a sheepskin-clad sofa with a glass of malbec and shared wildlife tales with my fellow travellers.

My second stop was Asilia's The Highlands, set more than 2,500 metres above sea level on the edge of a forest that envelops the slopes of the Olmoti volcano, just north of Ngorongoro Crater.

Asilia is also known for creating first-rate camps in remote places around Tanzania and Kenya, and here the design is as revolutionary as the location. Classic safari tents have been replaced by eight futuristic-looking geodesic domes, half of each being transparent to take in the views – including the star-filled sky at night. There's a wood-burning stove to ward off the evening chill, faux fur throws and striking black-and-white portraits of the Maasai line the walls.

Early one morning we drove across the seemingly boundless plains, dotted with cows, sheep, goats and the Maasai, adorned in intricate beaded jewellery, their robes vivid against the landscape, to the Empakaai Crater, ringed with steep, forested walls that conceal a turquoise lake scattered with brilliant-pink flamingos.

As I hiked down the narrow path, past tangles of bushes and ancient trees festooned with vines and creepers, the only sounds were birdsong and the tinkle of cowbells. And while it's not the crater at which you'll tick off the big five, my guide pointed out a fresh footprint of a leopard that had been prowling along the same path that very morning.

Asilia based the camp close to Ngorongoro's less-visited Lemala entrance, which gave me the chance to take in the sheer spectacle of the crater, without another vehicle in sight.



When it was time for lunch, we drove past the public picnic site with its line-up of Land Cruisers, to an enchanted forest of yellow-barked acacias, where a table was laid and the chicken was already on the barbecue.

When the sun began to sink behind the mountains, it was time for cocktails and relaxed chat in the stylish Old Moti Bar, before a convivial four-course dinner around the communal table and a bedtime cocoa laced with Amarula liqueur.

Later, I lay in bed and looked up at the silver streak of the Milky Way, as hyenas whooped late into the night.

**From top: Breakfast on the deck at The Highlands; geodesic dome interiors at The Highlands.**

#### TANZANIA

##### ● STAY HERE

#### Entamanu Ngorongoro

Rates at Entamanu Ngorongoro start from US\$655 (about A\$856) per person per night, and are inclusive of all meals, house drinks, all game activities, return airstrip transfers and laundry. [nomad-tanzania.com/north/entamanu-ngorongoro](http://nomad-tanzania.com/north/entamanu-ngorongoro)

#### The Highlands

Rates at The Highlands start from US\$430 (about A\$562) per person per night and are all-inclusive. [asiliaafrica.com/east-africa-safari/tanzania/ngorongoro-conservation/the-highlands/](http://asiliaafrica.com/east-africa-safari/tanzania/ngorongoro-conservation/the-highlands/)



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