



Rift Valley

Raise a glass to toast Earth's failure. About eight million years ago, by repeating the process it had successfully used to tear the ancient continent of Pangaea into seven shards, Mother Earth tried to rip Africa in two. Africa bent, Africa buckled, but Africa never gave in.

Africa's battle scar, stretching thousands of kilometres from Ethiopia to Mozambique, forms a stunning landscape. Some of the most attractive wounds are in Kenya's Rift Valley, where serrated escarpments and volcanoes tower over ochre soils, grassy plains and soda lakes. Steam and fluids spurt from its surface at Lake Bogoria and Hell's Gate National Park.

The valley's fertile floor, dotted with large freshwater and soda lakes, is alive with some of Kenya's most spectacular wildlife. Lake Nakuru's shores are often dyed pink with hundreds of thousands of fluorescent flamingos wading in the shallows, while its forested slopes host bigger treats such as rhinos, giraffes, buffaloes, antelopes and leopards. And if you walk or cycle unguided through the gorges of Hell's Gate National Park, you'll never see a zebra or giraffe in the same way again – being on foot is the ultimate amplifier of observation.

Hikes up the valley's dormant volcanoes are rewarding and offer tremendous views over the rift. Similar views without the peaceful solitude are also available from the viewpoints signposted on the Old Naivasha Rd as it drops into the valley from the town of Limuru.

After visiting, we're sure you'll thank Mother Earth for her royal botch-up!

HIGHLIGHTS

- Realising that you're not wearing rose-coloured spectacles and that wildlife at **Lake Nakuru National Park** (p243) is truly that brilliant
- Attempting to squeeze crocodiles, hippos, a hunting fish eagle and an amazing sunrise into one photograph at **Lake Baringo** (p247)
- Dancing along the crater rim of **Mt Longonot** (p231) to a glorious Rift Valley audience 1000m below
- Staring slack-jawed atop a precipice overlooking **Menengai Crater** (p242), a place of past volcanic and tribal hostility
- Gaining an entirely new respect for nature while walking through the wild-life and striking gorges of **Hell's Gate National Park** (p237)



Geography

Kenya's Rift Valley is actually part of the Afro-Arabian rift system that stretches 6000km from the Dead Sea in the Middle East to Mozambique in southern Africa, passing through the Red Sea, then Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Malawi. A western branch forms a string of lakes in the centre of the continent, including Albert and Edward on the Uganda–Congo (Zaire) border, Kivu on the Congo (Zaire)–Rwanda border, and Tanganyika on the Tanzania–Congo (Zaire) border, which joins the main system at the northern tip of Lake Malawi. The East African section of the rift failed and now only the Red Sea rift continues, slowly separating Africa from the Middle East.

In Kenya, the Rift Valley can be traced through Lake Turkana, the Cherangani Hills and lakes Baringo, Bogoria, Nakuru, Elmenteita, Naivasha and Magadi. A string of volcanic peaks and craters also line the valley. While most are now extinct, no fewer than thirty remain active, and according to local legend, Mt Longonot erupted as recently as 1860. This continuing activity supports a considerable number of hot springs and provides ideal conditions for geothermal power plants, which are increasingly important in Kenya's energy supply.

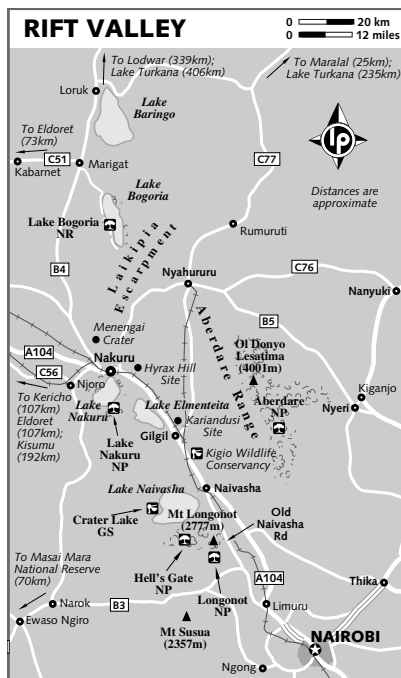
Besides providing fertile soil, the volcanic deposits have created alkaline waters in most Rift Valley lakes. These shallow soda lakes, formed by the valley's lack of decent drainage, experience high evaporation rates, which further concentrates the alkalinity. The strangely soapy and smelly waters are, however, the perfect environment for the growth of microscopic blue-green algae, which in turn feed lesser flamingos, tiny crustaceans (food for greater flamingos) and insect larvae (food for soda-resistant fish).

Climate

Although slightly hotter than the Central Highlands, the Rift Valley enjoys a pleasant climate and temperatures typically don't surpass 28°C. Like the highlands, rain usually falls in two seasons: March to the beginning of June (the 'long rains') and October to the end of November (the 'short rains').

National Parks & Reserves

Lake Nakuru National Park (p243), with its sweeping pink shores of pecking flamingos,



regular rhino sightings and abundance of other wildlife, is the region's biggest hitter. While Hell's Gate National Park (p237) sees much fewer visitors, it does offer the unique opportunity to walk unguided through striking landscapes and among African plains wildlife in all their natural glory. Standing in stunning contrast to these two national parks is the harsh and desolate beauty of Lake Bogoria National Reserve (p246). Steam plumes rise from its hydrothermal shores, which play second home to Lake Nakuru's massive flamingo population.

Getting There & Away

While you can charter planes into Lake Nakuru National Park, the valley's close proximity to Nairobi means virtually everybody enters the region using the extensive road network. Regular buses and matatus (mini-buses) link the towns to Nairobi, western Kenya and the Central Highlands.

Getting Around

You'll have no trouble getting around this region. Convenient matatus and buses ply

all major (and most minor) routes. Most roads are in great shape, except the potholed A104 Nakuru–Naivasha section, though it's scheduled for resurfacing.

LONGONOT NATIONAL PARK

Few places offer better Rift Valley views than the serrated crater rim of Mt Longonot, rising 1000m above the baking valley floor. In dog years this dormant volcano is ancient, while in geological terms it's just a wee pup at 400,000 years of age.

Since the best vistas in the park (adult/child US\$15/5) are only reached with some effort on foot, peace and quiet accompany the panoramas. The steep climb to the rim takes just under an hour, while the rewarding jaunt to the summit (2776m) and around the crater takes another three hours. Despite the bounty of Rift Valley views, your eyes may just be drawn inward to the 2km-wide crater, a little lost world hosting an entirely different ecosystem. Including time for gawking, this 11km trek should take about six hours.

Although security has improved and KWS (Kenya Wildlife Service) no longer require rangers to escort you, double-check the situation at the gate.

The basic **Oloongonot Campsite** (adult/child US\$8/5) sits just beyond the gate and has basic facilities (no water or firewood). The nearest roofed accommodation to the park is **Longonot Ranch** (☎ 050-50077; longonot@samawati.co.ke; full board s/d US\$250/370), which is a lovely old-style farmhouse and cottage built by one of Hemingway's wives. It's sublime, and even has a floodlit waterhole regularly patronised by giraffes, zebras and other plains animals.

The cheapest hotels are found in nearby Naivasha.

Getting There & Away

Driving, it's 75km northwest of Nairobi on the Old Naivasha Rd. If you're without a vehicle, take a matatu from Naivasha to Longonot village, from where there's a path (ask locals) to the park's access road. Continue south past Longonot village to the actual access road for a longer but more straightforward route. From there it's a 7km walk to the gate.

MT SUSUA

Less frequented than Longonot but more interesting, this unique volcano is well worth the effort of getting there. The steep outer

crater protects a second inner crater, whose rim peaks at 2357m and begs to be trekked. There's also a network of unexplored caves on the east side of the mountain.

There's no designated route and all land is owned by local Maasai, so you'll have to find someone to guide you in the nearby villages that dot the B3 Nairobi–Narok road. You'll need a 4WD to tackle the outer crater, although it's easy afterwards.

NAIVASHA

☎ 050

Bypassed by the new A104 Hwy to Nairobi, Naivasha has become an agricultural backwater. The streets have descended into cratered madness and services primarily focus on the area's blossoming flower industry. Although a convenient base for visits to Longonot National Park, staying around nearby Lake Naivasha (p233) is more enjoyable.

The only conceivable reason to stop is for supplies en route to Lake Naivasha, as there are very limited stocks in the lakeshore road *dukas* (shops).

Information

Barclays Bank (Moi Ave) Exchange cash and travellers cheques (KSh50 per leaf commission). With ATM.

Cyber Cafe (Kenyatta Ave; per hr KSh120) Slow connections, but open Sundays.

Kenya Commercial Bank (Moi Ave) Exchange cash and travellers cheques (1% commission, minimum charge KSh250). With ATM (Visa only).

Medical Clinic (Biashara Rd; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 11am-4pm Sun) Crude clinic and lab services.

Post office (Moi Ave) With card phones and Internet.

Sleeping BUDGET

We've punted the real dives (there were many) and chosen these.

Kafico Lodge (☎ 2021344; Biashara Rd; s/tw KSh350/600) One of the odd places that 'seal' the rooms after 'cleaning', meaning you can only see the room after paying. The rooms are tattered and the toilets lack seats, but they're comfy enough. Security is good and if you use secure parking, you'll wake to a clean car (a KSh50 tip is appropriate).

Sam's Holiday Inn (☎ 0721-474556; Mbaria Kaniu Rd; s/tw KSh250/400) It's a bit gloomy, but should do the trick. Rooms have mosquito nets.

Othaya Annexe Hotel (☎ 0721-979916; Kariuki Chotara Rd; s KSh300) A bit brighter than Sam's,