

Rift rendezvous

Anthony Ham proves that rewarding hiking and astounding views over the dramatic landscapes of the Great Rift Valley needn't involve a multi-day expedition up one of East Africa's monumental mountains. Here he tackles the slopes of Mount Longonot and explores the volcanic confines of Hell's Gate National Park.

the trail climbs, gently at first, then more steeply through thin scrub. The rim of the volcano above, shapely and serrated, seems impossibly high. In the distance zebra and impala graze, watchful, and there is sign of buffalo. Under the still-benign morning sun, grasses sway in a gentle breeze. I climb.

Of all African landscapes, it is the Great Rift Valley, that great fractal scar that once threatened to tear the continent asunder, that most evokes an epic. Volcanoes smoulder. Steep foothills climb to perfectly formed snow cones high above the tropics. And jagged summits resemble the ruined ramparts of some terrible and ancient kingdom.

However, unless you're willing to mount a major expedition to high-altitude peaks such as Kilimanjaro, Mount Kenya or the Rwenzoris, the lofty drama of the Great Rift can seem tantalisingly beyond the reach of mere mortals. From below, the Rift's mountains are pretty if somehow aloof. Atop their summits, they dominate and cast into shadow all that they survey.

Here in Kenya, Mount Longonot, one of the Rift's lesser-known mountains, brings that drama within easy reach. From the entrance of the national park that bears its name to the crater rim it is at most a one-and-a-half-hour climb. Its two steep sections are moderated by moments of respite in between. And unlike the more popular Kenyan mountain ascents, fellow trekkers are few and hassles from would-be guides even fewer. ▷

ANTHONY HAM



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A spot of lunch while looking down into Mount Longonot's crater from its serrated rim

▷ En route to the summit, I spot sunlight glinting on metal roofs away in the distance and hear the sounds of the Rift's human traffic rising from the valley floor. For much of the climb, the clamour of the Rift – where cultures clash and coexist, where the main trans-African thoroughfare passes – is a disturbing presence. But the further I climb, the more the world and its noisy ways recede and the essential elements of the Rift's vertical drama take hold. Away to the northwest, Lake Naivasha glistens. Elsewhere, lesser peaks rise within sight of the Rift's abrupt valley wall.



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Of all African landscapes, it is the Great Rift Valley, that great fractal scar that once threatened to tear the continent asunder, that most resembles an epic

When I crest the volcanic rim, all sound drifts away as the crater itself surpasses even the most beautiful of Rift views.

Far below, hundreds of metres down the vertiginous walls of the inner crater, is a lost, almost inaccessible, world rich in suggestion. Dense forest carpets the six-square-kilometre crater floor, with occasional small clearings merely adding to the sense of mystery and remoteness from the human world. Some contain thinly spaced steam vents that break through the earth's crust as a reminder of the Rift's enduring power. Formed 400,000 years ago, Mount Longonot last erupted as recently as the 1860s. Today, a staggering thirty Rift Valley volcanoes still remain active.

Right: Climbing to the summit involves navigating your way up the scenic crater rim

Below: The picture perfect crater of Mount Longonot



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Rumours of isolated populations of spotted baboons and klipspringer in the crater's depths ring true, although I see none. But the existence of buffalo down below seems like a fanciful Rift Valley tale. Above it all, wrapping around the crater in a protective embrace, the succession of sharp undulations that define the crater's lip bring to life the mountain's name: Longonot derives from the Maasai name olo nongot, or 'mountain of many summits'.

I linger, drawn by the temptation to gaze into the heart of Longonot for hours, or forever. But the sun is already high, and it drives me down off the rim for the return journey.

And then I stop, suddenly drawn by an equally powerful urge: to return to the rim and follow the trail that circumnavigates the crater. I stand, undecided. Finally, taunted by the idea that to descend now is perhaps never to return, I climb again and set out to climb the mountain's many summits.

Following the ridgeline, I ascend and descend with the contours of the crater, never fearful of falling but always torn which way to look. Do I look outward over



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the Rift Valley or shift my gaze inward to the changing perspective of the crater, fulfilling my urge to search in vain for signs of animal life? Occasionally a distant hiker comes into view far across the crater, and birds of prey circle high overhead on the thermals; swifts snap low overhead and then are gone with a whipcrack sound.

The climbs along the rim are gentle until the final push for the summit, which sits at 2776m elevation, some 1000m above the valley floor. Weary, I find it difficult to gain traction over the coarse, unstable black volcanic sand and curse my decision not to return down the mountain. And then, not for the first time today, reaching the zenith of the hike changes everything.

From here the crater is at its most expansive, a vast bowl of green high above a land thirsty for rain. The crater plunges down into the abyss and dizzy with tiredness and wonder, I stare longingly into the precipice, yearning to fly. Westwards, the land formations of Hell's Gate, rippling and otherworldly, call to me from across the chasm, an entirely different manifestation of the Rift Valley's folds and creases.

Carefully, and with regret, I leave the summit and follow the steeply descending trail until, more than two hours after aborting my first descent, I turn for one last look at the crater. And then, with newly purposeful steps, I leave it all behind and start down, safe in the knowledge that if I ever return, this mountain of many summits will remain unchanged with the passing of the years.

The next day, the exhilaration of the climb has given way to muscle soreness and self-satisfaction. But that distant glimpse of Hell's Gate – Mount Longonot's low-altitude alter ego – haunts me, still calling to me from across the valley. Partly it is the landscape, the crinkled, furrowed scar running across the Rift Valley floor. But it is also the name, a call perhaps to honour the Rift Valley's history of violent upheaval. But in this country where so much of the countryside and its wildlife may only be seen from the safety of a vehicle, Hell's Gate National Park has one more calling card: this is one of very few Kenyan parks where you can walk and cycle its trails. ▷



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Top: Hell's Gate National Park is one place you can embrace East Africa's wildlife from the seat of a bicycle

Above: The striking columnar basalt cliffs loom large over much of Hell's Gate

▷ Unlike on Longonot, the views of Hell's Gate are best from ground level. Not long after I cycle into the park along its flat and well-maintained trails, the sheer and strangely striated cliffs of rusty basalt begin to crowd in, compressing surrounding savannah grasses into a narrow funnel. The presence of eland and zebra, giraffe and warthog, impala and buffalo heightens the senses. So too does the knowledge that rarely-seen predators – leopards, hyenas, lions – are occasionally counted among the national park's animal population. Where the gorge narrows, an unusual, 25m-high pyramidal volcanic plug rises from the ochre soil, and its story carries echoes of the perdition that gives the park its name.

According to Maasai legend, a beautiful young woman was sent from her village, betrothed against her will to a famous warrior from a nearby settlement. As in the Biblical tale of Lot's wife, before leaving home she was warned never to look back over her shoulder. Heartbroken and already homesick, she was unable to resist one last, longing look. And in an instant she was cast forever into stone.

But the pyramid bears the name not of this unfortunate Maasai girl, but that of a German explorer, Gustav Fischer, who reached this spot in 1882. Sent out by the Hamburg Geographical Society to find a route from Mombasa to Lake Victoria, he was ambushed by a band of Maasai warriors. Fischer's entire party was massacred.

Any unease caused by such dark histories dissipates as I pass a trickle of cyclists and hikers, some local, most not, but all proof that dangers here are few. The birds of prey and terrestrial wildlife are distant enough to make me feel safe, yet so close as to feel that we inhabit the same terrain. And with the canyon's floor barely rising or falling, it is easy going.

At the gorge's midpoint the trail forks, and I cycle north up to the Naiburta campsite and onto one of the broad grassy ledges that overlook the main gorge. This is one of Kenya's prettiest places to sleep in the open air, and the views back down the valley are the park's finest.

Back down on the main trail the gorge meanders between cliffs, which obscure any hint of the outside world. Like Longonot and yet utterly unlike it, Hell's Gate feels like a forgotten place that has been overlooked by the onslaught of Kenya's burgeoning human population.

In the park's western reaches another volcanic plug, a finger of rock prosaically named Central Tower, watches over Lower Gorge. While the main canyon that bisects the park can be up to 1km wide in places, Lower Gorge is a deep, narrow gash slicing into the



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earth. Rarely steep, the gorge's challenge comes from its proliferation of trees and the water that sculpted it. A young Maasai boy emerges shyly from the shadows, shows me a hot spring emerging from the canyon wall, and then continues on his way.

Scrambling over mossy rocks and splashing through ankle-deep water, I marvel at the variety of the Rift's landscapes as sunlight filters down through the canopy. Yesterday I felt as if I were standing on the roof of the world. Today, I wonder if I'm about to descend into the very depths of the earth.

Top: A narrow gorge in Hell's Gate National Park

Bottom: Early morning mist around Fischer's Tower, an ancient volcanic plug

Far below, hundreds of metres down the vertiginous walls of the inner crater, is a lost, almost inaccessible, world rich in suggestion

There is another difference. Atop Longonot I was glad to have chosen to climb without a guide – the trail was clearly marked and the landscape lent itself to solitude. As I drop ever deeper into Lower Gorge, I find myself longing for human company, wishing that I had contracted one of the young guides waiting at the ranger's post – they regarded me with knowing smiles as I shunned their polite invocations. ▷