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Lake Naivasha

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Lake Naivasha is one of the few fresh-water lakes in the Rift Valley. It is 170 sq km in size, at about 1890 m above sea level and is a lovely place to come for a weekend if you are staying in Nairobi as it is only a 1½-hour drive away. Strong afternoon winds cause the lake to get suddenly very rough and the local Masai called the lake *Nai'posha* meaning 'rough water', which the British later miss-spelled as Naivasha. Much of the lake is surrounded by forests of the yellow-barked acacia tree, full of birds and black and white colobus monkeys. Acacia were once called 'yellow fever trees' after explorers who camped under them caught malaria. The lake has no apparent outlet, but it is believed to drain underground, and is quite picturesque with floating islands of papyrus. There are hippos that come out onto the shore at night to graze, and there are many different types of waterbirds. The lake is dominated by the overshadowing Mount Longonot (2880 m), a partially extinct volcano in the adjacent national park (52 sq km). On the southern lakeshore, the road goes through a major flower-growing area. Owned by Brooke Bond among other flower growers, it is an important exporter and employs thousands of local people. The flowers are cut, chilled and then air freighted to Europe from the international airport at Eldoret.

Ins and outs

The Moi South Lake Road is in good condition and has recently been re-tarred. Beyond the village of Kongoni it meets the back road to Nakuru or Moi North Lake Road where it turns into a dirt track that is only suitable for 4WD vehicles. If you are in a saloon car you will have to turn back from here and backtrack to the main Nairobi-Nakuru road. It is possible to come to spend a day at one of the lakeside hotels without staying the night (there may be a small charge or it may be free if you eat there). The lake itself is best explored by boat and a number of hotels rent vessels out for hire. A motorboat can be hired to go and see the pods of hippo and there are fish eagle nests near the yacht club. The twin-hulled launch from the Country Club on its 'ornithological cruise' often tries to entice the birds with fish. The evening cruise is a good time to see them. Alternatively you could work your way around the shore by bicycle, and there are a few places that rent out bikes.

Background

The region was first settled in the 1930s by the notorious British 'Happy Valley' set who bought all the neighbouring farmland - much of which is still owned by white Kenyans. Around this time Lake Naivasha was also Kenya's international airport. Flying boats from Europe used to land on the water and even today, when the water is low, you can see the wooden posts that mapped out the runway. The lake is about 13 km across, but its waters are shallow with an average depth of 5 m. At the beginning of the 20th century, Naivasha inexplicably completely dried up and the land was farmed, until heavy rains a few years later caused the lake to return.

Sights

Crescent Island Game Sanctuary

Morning and evening walks can be made here, a protected reserve where you can walk amongst zebra, antelope and giraffe that come to the water's edge to drink. It is located at the eastern shore of the lake near the Lake Naivasha Country Club, and it is not actually an island, as it is connected to the mainland by a sliver of land. There are no predators so this is one of the few places in Kenya offering the opportunity to walk amongst the animals. Trips can be arranged at the Lake Naivasha Country Club, Fisherman's Camp or Fish Eagle Inn.

Elsamere

www.elsatrust.org.

A few metres past Fisherman's Camp and Fish Eagle Inn is Elsamere, the former home of George and Joy Adamson. It is easy to miss, so look out for the sign to the Olkaria Gate of Hell's Gate; it is a few hundred metres further on the right-hand side. There is a small museum with first editions of her books, her typewriter, her dress that she wore for the premier of *Born Free* in London and a selection of her paintings (although the best of her paintings of the various tribes of

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Kenya hang in the State House in Nairobi). The gardens are very pleasant with lots of birds and black and white colobus monkeys flying among the trees, though in recent years some of the giant acacia trees have had to be felled because of disease. It is open daily in the afternoon for afternoon tea and a video. The aged film shows the life (and death) of Joy. Beware though it lasts well over an hour! Worth sitting through though for the tea - tables in the house are laden with scones, jam and cream, dainty sandwiches, home-made cookies, slices of cake and pots of tea and coffee.

Oserian Wildlife Conservancy

www.oserianwildlife.com.

Further south of Elsamere the road passes around Oidien Bay, a bottleneck in the extreme southwest corner of the lake, and reaches the village of Kongoni and the turn-off to Chui Lodge and Kiangazi House. For a few kilometres before Kongoni, the road passes through the Oserian Game Corridor, which allows game to move from Hell's Gate to the lakeshore and is part of the private Oserian Wildlife Conservancy, where the fences on the private land have been removed allowing the game in the area to move freely. If you are not staying, you are likely to see zebra and antelope from the road. The Oserian Wildlife Conservancy is a private reserve that was formed in 1996 on what was formerly a dairy and beef ranch of 1420 ha. The revised management plan was to create a wildlife sanctuary with emphasis on protection of all biodiversity and to create a sustainable ecotourism destination. Wildlife was present on the land but numbers were declining. There are two upmarket accommodation options within the conservancy, and the profits generated by these go towards conservation of the area. In recent years several species have been introduced including Grevy zebra, Beisa oryx and greater kudu, which all came from their native Northern Kenya, and wildebeest and topi were translocated from the Masai Mara. In 1996, six white rhino were introduced and have bred successfully and numbers now on the conservancy are presently 13. The owners of the sanctuary also own the nearby Oserian Flower farm, which among other blooms grows roses and carnations and is the biggest flower-growing operation on the lakeshore.

Crater Lake Game Sanctuary

West of Lake Naivasha, one hour's walk from Kongoni and approximately 17 km past Fisherman's Camp is Crater Lake. Its often jade- coloured waters are quite breathtaking and it is held in high regard by the local Masai who believe its water helps soothe ailing cattle. There is an animal sanctuary, but some of the tracks in this area are only manageable by foot or with a 4WD. There is a pleasant two-hour nature trail to the lake, you are allowed to walk around by yourself and it's easy to see the rare black and white colobus monkey. Besides the impressive 150 bird species recorded here, giraffe, zebra and other plains wildlife are also regular residents, but if walking, remember that buffaloes lurk in the woods. It is possible to cycle to the game park, although the soft, dusty track after Kongoni is hard going.



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