

# Witt's Wanderings

by John W. Witt

On Monday morning, May 19, taking the road we used to come into the Ngorongoro Lodge, we went back out to the B144, turned right and headed northwest toward Serengeti National Park. Somewhere along the road, our driver/guide, Ami, received a call from Ngorongoro telling him the Lodge staff had found a carry-on bag in our room after we left. Since it probably was ours (make that, mine), what did we want them to do with it? The conclusion was that they'd find another Leopard Tours Cruiser bound for the Serengeti Serena Lodge and ask its driver/guide to bring it to us at the end of the day's safari drive.

I can't remember what was in the bag, except for my binoculars, but I was worried about its safe delivery, anyway. Ami, however, said, "No problem, it'll arrive safely at the Lodge this evening." Later, he told us there's no thievery among employees of any firm in the tourist business on the safari circuit. Anyone caught stealing, particularly from tourists, will be fired immediately and will be ineligible for employment in the industry for life. Since the jobs in question are some of the best in Tanzania (and usually support not only the worker, but his or her extended family, as well), no one would risk such a sanction. I've got a feeling that Tanzanians are basically honest, anyway, and it would never occur to them to steal from their employer's clients.

Our first stop that morning came before we got to the Park. Bearing to the right off the B144, we drove on an unimproved dirt road to a humble little building which serves as both headquarters and museum for the Olduvai Gorge, one of the most significant archaeological sites in the world. The guidebooks I've seen, however, urge tourists to accept their guides' recommendations to make their stops there brief, if they stop at all.

I guess it shouldn't have been surprising, therefore, that there were few visitors when we arrived at Olduvai and not more when we left. Of course, there's really not much to see. You stand on the rim of the Gorge, looking down into it to the northwest. It's no Grand Canyon USA. But its significance has little to do with scenery. Its importance rests completely on what archaeologists have dug up there (pardon the pun).

A museum employee gave us a brief lecture on the geology of the place, with an even more brief reference to its archaeological history. If we wanted to spend more time actually visiting the Gorge and its archaeological sites, we could hire a guide to take us down into it on foot, but it clearly seemed Ami had other plans for the rest of the day. They obviously included a safari drive on the famed Serengeti Plain, which is one of the main reasons we were in East Africa, in the first place.

If you're confused about the difference between archaeologic and anthropologic disciplines, my *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*

(1972) defines *archaeology* as “1: the scientific study of material remains (as fossil relics, artifacts, monuments) of past human life and activities 2: remains of the culture of a people : ANTIQUITIES . . .” and *anthropology* as “1: the science of man; esp : the study of man in relation to distribution, origin, classification, and relationship of races, , physical character, environmental and social relations, and culture . . .” It seems that *archaeology* is the most apt term for the activities at Olduvai.

I asked about the availability of any sort of short guidebook on the Gorge. Ami and one of the museum attendants came up with a somewhat shopworn copy of a paperback which was offered for US\$20. I bought it, mainly because it seemed to be the only example of its genus available and I had a hunch Olduvai Gorge is far more important than its outward appearance discloses.

The book is *Olduvai and Laetoli*, written by David Martin, apparently a photographer by profession, and published by African Publishing Group (International) in Harare, Zimbabwe, in 2002. It's only 64 pages long, but it has beautiful photographs (not all of them taken by Mr. Martin) and lucid text explaining Olduvai's importance in human pre-history. I probably paid too much for it, but I'm glad I have it. Contrary to the usual Tanzanian bargaining ritual, when I put it down in a hopeful show of lack of interest, they didn't rush to lower the price.

It tells the history of archaeological interest in the place, including the life work of two British scientists, a married couple, Louis and Mary Leakey. Beginning in 1911, a German entomologist, Professor Wilhelm Kattwinkle, while searching for butterflies in Olduvai, found mammal fossils, instead. They aroused some excitement when he shipped them back to the Berlin Museum. Two years later, a German geologist, Dr. Hans Reck, found the area where Professor Kattwinkle made his discovery, identified the volcanic nature of the Gorge and the surrounding terrain and excavated a skeleton, later named Olduvai Man.

Louis Leakey led an expedition to the site, accompanied by Dr. Reck, in 1931. They found more fossilized remains they believed to be hominid, leading to vigorous debates among European experts in their fields. Before anything conclusive could be determined, World War II intervened. In 1951, Louis and Mary returned to Olduvai and began the work which, in 1959, resulted in the discovery by Mary of a skull, they identified as *Australopithecus boisei*, a hominid, but one not likely to be a genealogical ancestor of modern man. In 1960, they found bones identified as those of a *Homo habilis*, determined to be a tool-maker, having a larger brain than previously discovered hominids. Experts today believe it to be a possible ancestor to modern man. The excavations and the discoveries are ongoing.

“Hominid,” by the way' is defined in *Webster's Seventh* as “any of a family (Hominidae) of bipedal primate mammals comprising recent man, his immediate ancestors, and related forms.”

In 1976, distinctly hominid footprints, determined to be 3.6 million years old, were discovered by Mary Leakey at a place called Laetoli. By an entirely

coincidental process involving volcanic ash, water and sunlight, the footprints, much like the handprints today's kindergarteners make for their parents, showed that they were left by hominids walking on two legs, with feet strikingly like ours, including the unique arch of the human foot. The debate rages on, somewhat muted today, over the conclusion that the footprints were left by three of our ancestors—a male, a female and a child. The argument over evolution, in my view, however, is rather immaterial. God made the world and all that's in it. *How* he did it is another question.

So much for the significance of the Olduvai Gorge—it seems a shame there wasn't time to hike to Laetoli to see the footprints, but we were there, at least, close to the important work of the Leakeys and other scientists collaborating with them. Time limitations prevailed, however, and we got into the Cruiser and headed off for the Serengeti. More about that later.