

## KENYA

### Menengai Volcano in the Central Rift Valley

The East African Rift Valley is of enormous interdisciplinary scientific interest: geological, geophysical, biological, ethnological, anthropological, and palaeontological. It is considered the cradle of humanity. Menengai Volcano is one of the five recent volcanoes in the central Rift Valley. It is located immediately north of Nakuru,



Menengai Caldera, natural reserve and Massai sanctuary  
(photos: U. Hartmann)

24 km south of the equator. The borders of the crater, which reach a height of 2490 m, enclose the 12 x 8 km caldera, one of the biggest calderas in the world. From the red cliff-like surrounding ridge you look down into the caldera, ca. 500 m below. The bottom of the caldera is covered with lush vegetation. It is a natural reserve where hyenas, leopards, pythons, etc live. In places fumaroles rise and indicate that there is still volcanic activity.

Menengai crater and its vast caldera is a holy place for the Massai. On the west side of the caldera there is a cave system with the ritual shrine which every Massai is expected to visit once a year. The Massai pilgrims come from as far as Kisumu or Mombasa to venerate their forefathers here, to pray and to fast. It is said that 700 years ago during the last great depression, the bottom of the caldera broke and many Massai together with their herds of cattle were buried under the colliding masses of lava flow.

Local people regard Menengai crater as an eerie place, haunted by ghosts and demons. Legends allude to a bloody battle in 1854 between Massai clans, when hundreds of Massai warriors were killed and thrown down the steep ridge of the crater. Since then the souls of the dead warriors are believed to rise in the clouds of the fumaroles.

All this is now seriously endangered. Roads are being built in the caldera, because the state-owned Geothermal Development Company is now set to begin drilling for geothermal energy in October 2010. A similar geothermal project, Ol Karia, in the neighbouring Hell's Gate National Park has already been realised. The whole region of the central Rift Valley with its numerous lakes, volcanoes and National Parks ought to be protected.

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