



## An Expedition to Southern Ethiopia

**September 2001**

On the return from my pilgrimage to the North of Ethiopia, our Fokker 50 turboprop once again did the circuit - via Bahr Dar and Gondar before having to circle outside Addis for a 30 minutes due to a huge thunderstorm - trying to land in the proximity of these storms is not conducive to longevity, as many have discovered to their cost.

This time there were no formalities to be endured and we drove into town through flooded streets in the Hilton Hotel bus, inuring ourselves from the reality of the poverty around us. I am so aware that at 7,800 feet above sea level, the people left by circumstance outside will be spending yet another cold Addis night, this time wet through. But for us, the Hilton will offer us slightly worn five star luxury - built in the late 60's even the refurbishments show thin at the edges. Here we met up with our party - Carmen, her 43-year-old son Rick, and her ebullient stepdaughter Piper had had a nightmare flight. On arriving over head Addis, in true African style, the power had failed at the airport, so their Lufthansa flight turned around and flew all the way back to Cairo - eventually 32 hours after leaving home they had arrived.

Lynn Fey and her daughter Carrie had been with me to Africa before, and this was to be Carrie's graduation trip. Bob Linton, from Park City, had lived all over the world, and wisely decided to spend a few days in Ethiopia's historic North before joining us. Ron Beaton had taken Tony and Maud Indereiden around Lake Turkana in 2000, and they were all back for more. Finally Dave Herndon, a freelance travel writer, had decided this was a trip he needed to make, and all had been well briefed that this was to be a "no whiners" expedition! A group dinner reminded me of the logistics of keeping tourists on the move, and indeed our 5:45am departure time melted to 6:15am by the time our jetlagged crew got on the road. "Hurry up and wait" was the name of the game as we arrived at the airport the required two hours ahead, and a weather delay was announced. When we finally did get on board our ancient De Havilland Twin Otter, the left generator stubbornly refused to work, so off we trekked back to the terminal - and lost half the group again in the coffee shop. Eventually, and surprisingly, the engineers coaxed it back to life and we took off two hours and 10 minutes late, aware that we still had a six hour drive ahead in order to make it to our campsite, food and cold beer that night.



I asked the pilot to fly low so that we could see more of Ethiopia. The team volunteered me to sit at the front, as I am a pilot - quite what they imagined I could do to help these youthful and enthusiastic pilots, I am not sure! This beautiful landscape revealed to us grass huts and endless cultivation as we wound our way South along the Rift Valley lakes - a spectacular way to see Africa, reminding me of my days of flying this route up from Kenya. This being the end of the rainy season there were countless brown swollen rivers, but so distressing was the landslide erosion, as the heavy rains had shifted vast chunks of Ethiopia's topsoils on down towards the river deltas - the Nile 3,000 miles away in Egypt or Lake Turkana in Kenya.

1 1/2 hrs later, cruising at 150 mph low over these spectacular lands we touch down at Arba Minch on the shores of Lake Abaya where we are joined by a young Catholic priest working his ways amongst the local people, and 20 minutes later, climbing over the ancient mountains, we smoothly touch down on the fairly short uphill grass strip at Jinka The local police, wielding sticks, officiously keep everyone away from the airstrip

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including Halewijn Scheuerman, owner of Jade Sea Safaris, who had achieved all the land arrangements for this amazing trip - we are relieved that he had made it there to meet us, knowing the logistics he had endured to do it. It is a Christian fasting day which means our quick stop for a drink and a local meal in a simple hotel will mean no meat - vegetarian only - beans, lentils, cabbage and the infamous Injera, made from partly fermented teff - an acquired taste in my opinion, and 30 years of absence had clearly not helped that taste for me!

Anxious to be moving on we departed on our 100 km drive down from 4600 ft to the Omo valley floor on an atrocious road, through Mago park gate. Only 1000 tourists passed here last year on the way to get a glimpse of some of the last untouched tribes in Africa. Halewijn had warned us we would see little game due to the high vegetation, but the car's pop-top enabled us to spot gerenuk, Jackson's hartebeest, dik dik, and jackal. Just after we passed the gate we came across a small group of Spanish tourists walking happily along the road - and just 100 yards further on we found very fresh lion spoor. The temperature rose as we descended towards the valley floor, and a spectacular sunset greeted us, silhouetting distant peaks before complete darkness enveloped us; and soon the tracks disappeared under cattle hooves. We twisted and turned in the dark trying to find our way, and finally at 8:00 pm we pulled into our camp on the banks of the Omo River, neatly set up by the staff. The bucket shower was most welcome, and a very late dinner at 11:00 pm allowed an exhilarated and exhausted team to sink into dome tents in the full moon light, trying to fall asleep. No simple matter as the baboons and the colobus monkeys yelped and gurgled their disapproval at having to share their ficus sycamore tree camp with their primate relatives.



Awakening to a classic African dawn, we hungrily tucked into a cooked breakfast of everything that has incredibly been brought up here from Nairobi - 14 hours drive to Lake Turkana, five hours by boat to the Omo Delta, two hours on up the river to Omorati, the de facto border town, and then a further five hours to camp - I will never complain again about driving my safari supplies just 150 miles from Nairobi to Lewa!

A morning in camp on the river's edge is always a luxury, listening and watching the birds and watching the light build into the full richness of an African day. The heat, though dry, slowly built up - and a procession of Karo people came in to camp bringing their individual problems. These included a terribly burned hand, which this staunch young woman had wrapped in a plastic bag, and so was sweating horribly into a suppurating sore that needed penicillin. Halewijn's policy, which seemed so hard to us, is to stand back as he is not a doctor. In these remote places, if one succeeds in a healing, one is a god, but if an accident happens, the mood can turn ugly fast. In time he hopes the camping fees will be used by the elders for paying for a clinic - instead of buying beer.

The river is in full flood after record rains, rich and brown and flowing fast as we contemplate the wilderness of our African Adventure. We walk a short way to Duss, the Karo village, thronged by wide-eyed, expectant and over excited children. This is the main settlement visited by tourists to the Omo, such as they are, as it is relatively easily accessible by road; hence the resulting frenzy of applications from all and sundry asking for photos... It is a sad melee, yet so importantly, it is direct income for the local tribes from tourism, which may encourage them to preserve their culture for their future generations.



Lale, a young 29-year-old Karo who works with Halewijn, is the first upwardly mobile Karo, and amazingly his hut sports a solar panel and a satellite telephone to stay in touch. He has already traveled by jet to Nairobi and Addis, and his sweet fiancée Shampa now proudly wears a brassiere - so far the only one in this tribe of 3,000 people! Life is changing here, as everywhere, fast. But Lale will shortly be seen naked at the bull jumping ceremony, a prerequisite to pass into manhood. For the Karo, male circumcision occurs at 16, but only after achieving this unique ceremony of running across the backs of bulls without falling, can a man become an elder, marry and have children officially. The problem is that a boy cannot go forward to the ceremony until his elder brothers have, in order of seniority. The bull jumping occurs only every 3 years within the Karo tribe, and there is a price of 17 cattle for the ceremony; a man might be nearly forty years old before he might achieve this. At Duss village we pass the massive wood ceremonial boma that is burned prior to each initiation, and I watch while our group snap eagerly away at the Karo's wooden

poses and dish out the vital bir. We are invited to Shampa's hut where her mother is preparing for us traditional coffee, made from the husks rather than the bean, and drunk out of gourds - dried pumpkin skins. Leaks are repaired by sewing up the cracks with leather thongs, though apparently the repairman had not seen mine yet, as most of the hot but surprisingly refreshing liquid leaked out down my front. "Opo, Opana and Tsalina", local words of greeting keep us more or less in communication. It is the heat of the day and we trek back to the boats watching an impressive dust devil tear up the desertified river bank, and return to an excellent lunch prepared by the overworked Wilson, a Kikuyu Kenyan who always wears a cheerful smile, on his first visit to Ethiopia.

The Karo elders have invited Halewijn to bring us to watch them dance in the evening and we return to a magical and totally different experience. All the elders, young initiates of the village were ready for the party, each decorated to their best fantasies with mud from ground rock; soon the rhythms began, the women and kids appeared, and the party took off. In the richening evening African light, the dust gently rising, the rhythmic pounding of feet and raw manifestation of emotion deepened our feeling that we were witnessing something truly unique.

It is a world that can be in no way can be related to our western values or attitudes, where a child born to an unmarried girl is left to die under a bush with its mouth full of earth, where sex is a harsh and brutal short affair, and life is by the Kalashnikov. Here the wild intensity of their primitive African tribal dance is a regular occurrence and is always their most frequent and intense statement of their freedom - often intertwined with alcohol and waving automatic rifles. During the night the colobus monkeys decided to restate their claim to their site, and let David know by pounding his tent with their excrement - he was in the shit - so to speak!

The next day we pack up camp, a learning curve for some of our team, but necessary as the over stretched camp staff could not have done it in addition to all their own chores. Our convoy consists of a Unimog carrying three "minus 40" freezers, 2 Toyota Landcruisers, three 28ft boats with gleaming 90 hp 4 stroke outboards, and all the food and drink required to keep our style of clients more or less content. Finally loaded, we start off up the winding river, heading generally north. The vegetation is surprisingly tropical and the river in full flood tries to drag down ancient figs and other hardwood trees into its torrential race to the Delta. We have good headway against the flow, crocodiles lurk, colobus monkeys fly, goliath herons glide and countless pied kingfishers flutter along the thick riverine forest banks. Fishing must be difficult in this thick brown topsoily water. After several hours we reach a small Muguji settlement, not vastly different from their Karo neighbors, though "Maata" for hello will indicate a greater fluency. Their simple yet proud small family unit on the bank consists of five circular domed huts, with thick straw roofs and each with a tiny door that is plugged by a tiny snowshoe like affair consisting of bark and twigs. Their food supply, some sorghum, from last years' meager harvest, is elevated from flood and rats on small platforms. Everywhere is clean swept as though they may have been expecting some important visitors - they certainly could not have been expecting us. We are welcomed, and invited inside, and much curiosity is displayed on both sides, particularly in the breasts of the females of our party. It is unclear if they are more fascinated by the bras or the amplexness of the shape; but either way there is much tugging, probing and giggling!



Most of the men were out, though not working the fields, which are underwater at this time of year. There was strife with the neighboring Mursi tribe, we hear, at that moment; and one warrior from each tribe has recently been killed in a tit for tat food dispute. It was midday and already the local beer was well in evidence, and an attractive and characterful woman enjoyed keeping us amused with her funny faces. The situation changed quickly when the photos began, and agreements on the price we had made seemed to melt away. Several mothers and very young children crowded around, and I had the embarrassment of trying to ward off the aggressive attention of a very pretty, but irate bare breasted maiden during lunch, which had been set up for us under a nearby tree. Her husband, who we had hired to work for us at this camp, arrived to try to calm her, but she is a Nyagatom and considerably more forthright than Muguji women, and the beer was speaking loudly. We waited until we picked up the sound of our vehicles catching up with us on the other bank, and we crossed over the river to try to locate a suitable campsite. Walking inland from the river we found a huge fig tree under which we could shelter from the rather intense heat - this would be our central mess area. We all slashed away and pulled up undergrowth, and

the camp started to take shape. Ron suggested we sleep out under the stars, but I was nervous of being completely consumed by mosquitoes. Luckily, by popular vote, the tents were erected, after clearing out some of the thicker undergrowth. After a cup of tea, which in such heat is so refreshing, with a healthy ration of my beloved Digestive biscuits, we headed upstream to a Muguji settlement on the opposite bank. A line of tribesmen holding Kalashnikov's watched us as we approached for a landing on a steep bank, and swarms of inquisitive kids ran down to greet us as we walked up the hill.

It seems that most of this 500 strong tribe were at home in their settlement, and Lale came forward to sit with the elders to negotiate our visit. There was further huge interest in breasts and a lot of tugging asking for "boto" - a photo. There was a slightly aggressive feel here as the dust rose everywhere, and we spread out to visit. Life here is simple, and poor, and they know that the few travelers that come this way represent their only chance of procuring a few bir, so one cannot blame them. For us too, it will be our only visit. The deepening evening light offered memorable photo opportunities, but I enjoyed getting away from the throng and sitting at the edge of the village with a small family unit, while the wife skillfully ground her sorghum between two flat stones. It was clear that a lot of local brew had been consumed here, and several of us were uneasy at this combination of beer and Kalashnikov's, so we were not unhappy when the sun began to sink below the horizon. I stayed on with a few others for a cup of coffee at the house of one of Lale's relatives, and the scene of the family settling in here for the night was unforgettable, even if it was very hot. More coffee, and pure honey in a wooden ladle was passed around in timeless ceremony. The tensions we had felt earlier had eroded and sadly we had to leave before it became totally dark, as Halewijn did not want to traverse the river at night. Lightning was all around us and the high humidity was a portent for rain as we sat down for a delicious tilapia dinner. Not long after midnight the strong full moonlight suddenly darkened and the heavens opened - nearly an inch of rain came through the night turning our campsite into a quagmire and necessitating some replanning.



Morning brought a gray day with occasional drizzle, and at breakfast we laughed to hear that at midnight Carmen had decided to wash her hair in the heavy rain, but just as she had soaped up, it suddenly stopped, leaving her shivering, naked in the dark, waiting for the rain to start again. Moving cars and vehicles was clearly going to be impossible, so we made an 11:00am start to power two hours up river for a day visit to the Mursi tribe. We had agreed that we would carry an emissary from the Muguji with us up river to the Mursi to try to initiate peace negotiations, so we briefly beached at this village to collect him. The chosen one had six toes and was surprisingly decked out in a tee shirt and trousers; as he jumped down on to the bow of the boat, his trousers completely split around the crutch - an incongruous sight and an inauspicious start, perhaps! The changing light and scenery along the river as we drew closer to the mountains was impressive.

We ran ourselves into the riverbank for a landing to find not a soul, though bush telegraph undoubtedly meant that our arrival had been watched from afar. We walked inland some half a mile and here the vegetation thinned out to be more I had imagined. The pointed tops of the Mursi huts came into view, and we were ushered to a huge fig tree outside the village to sit with the elders. We had planned this to be a slower introduction, with no cameras in sight, to their obvious disbelief and disappointment. It was midday, but relatively cool, as we sat on goat skins and exchanged "achale" and "salaam". These men enjoy all sorts of interesting hairstyles carefully crafted with razors - which are much in demand. The peace negotiations did not seem to be a major issue, and the tension in the air that I felt did not seem to be related to that problem; though later on the senior elders did move over to one side to start some more serious looking discussions.

Our entrance was agreed, and our little throng started to move towards the village's entrance: but suddenly there was a change of plan - another elder had arrived and needed to be persuaded. Such is the way here where no leadership exists, and every elder will have his say, sometimes to the complete contradiction of all that has seemingly been agreed. Finally, somehow Lale persuaded him that we had not come to rape and pillage, and we entered the village. As we did, I pondered that maybe we do morally abuse with our probing cameras, a fact that many professionals struggle with, and we visitors to such fragile places should too.

In the Mursi tribe, neither the men or women are circumcised, but the women, in a practice unique to themselves and the Surma, have their lower lip separated from the gum at an early age, and this gap is continually stretched by the insertion of clay or wood disks. The size of this disk represents the number of cattle paid by the brides father at time of betrothal. This can be removed seemingly painlessly at will, but the sight of the lip wobbling loose is not exactly stimulating. This seemingly gruesome procedure was first introduced in the early slaving days by their men, wishing to make their women seem less attractive to captors. Today it is regarded as a thing of beauty! Even though this village is not regularly visited by tourists, they have, perhaps rightly, learned the value of their looks to earn money from tourists. The price is not high, and it will surely rise as more visitors find their way to these remote places, just two bir in a land where a bullet for an AK 47 costs 3 bir, and a goat 70 bir (\$1= 85 bir). Some have learned to count the clicks from SLR cameras and in trying to get them to present themselves without the standard "mugshot at full attention" - so the price builds. I find my digital camera gives



me an advantage here, as it is soundless. The heavy rain however had necessitated a change of plans, and we were unable to camp here with them as planned, so this was to be just a day visit - unfortunate as the light was very harsh and their incredibly black skins made photography difficult in the intense midday sun. Suddenly a hum spread throughout the village, a line formed and the "Kalashnikov dance" began - a rather terrifying semi drunk individual prancing around brandishing his gun in every direction - to the usual accompaniment of much singing, clapping, foot pounding and swirling dust. Throughout the morning, astonishing looking warriors bedecked in exotic white clay body paint toting their guns arrived back in from the fields, herding their cattle, to join the throng. We beat a retreat for lunch on board the boat, attended by many flies and hordes of curious onlookers, before our two hour journey back downstream. Enroute, we stopped at a tiny Mursi settlement of just three families, which gave me the most powerful feelings of the true remoteness of our whole trip, as they had never seen tourists before. Sanity had returned to our camp, everything had dried out, a second shower and loo were in place, and we were able to enjoy a quiet evening reminiscing, and trading our emotions.

Only light rain during the night allowed us to make an early start to pack and head back down river to our camp at Karo Duss, arriving in two hours. We walked over to the village, past a hideously impractical school building recently erected by a hopeful government to spend more time with the Karo, this time without cameras; this time by mutual agreement within our group. Several of Lale's group of bull jumpers were undergoing a further stage in the process, preparatiing to exchange the kudu skin around their shoulders for a goatskin. Probably in April the rains will break again, and allow this historic ceremony to go ahead. Only then can the initiates pay the 127 goat brideprice, marry, have official children and move forward to elder hood. We sat together with the women while they danced and prepared beer for the ongoing festivities, which we know, will last much of the night.

I started awake to the sound of shots during the night, a chilling sound as I lay as low as I could on my cot, and that in turn set off the baboons screaming and colobus chattering for at least 20 minutes.

The next morning we head upstream, and cross over to the opposite bank to walk an hour through tenacious "wait-a-bit" thorn, inland, to a hot spring on the edge of a large swamp, reminding us of the mighty forces of nature that left their mark on this area in the Great Rift Valley. We are indeed here in the cradle of mankind; not too far from here Donald Johanssen discovered Lucy, and other hominid fossils dating as far back as back as 3.6 million years.

In the evening we coasted downstream 30 minutes to Karo Korcho the third of the Karo villages, dramatically situated high on a bluff on the left bank of the river; again greeted by silhouettes of tribesmen relaxing on their Kalashnikov's. We climbed the steep sandy hill hand in hand with the streams of laughing kids. There was far less pressure here for photos, and that made it a much more pleasant experience, as we walked down to Lake Dibbe, a small inland overflow lake where Lale's family has some land, playing games with the excited giggling children and spending time with the villagers before leaving to the sight of a truly memorable sunset.

That night Halewijn had invited the Karo elders to join us in a feast. Some time back they had promised him a goat, so he invited them to make good on their promise while he bought another from them. The elders arrived

en masse, looming out of the dark night eyes glinting in the light of the fire. We all sat intermingled on the edge of the river bank chewing for our lives on the super tough flesh; Tony actually relished the sinewy goat's balls! Offered only one beer a piece to avoid the inevitable consequences of more, the senior elder gave a moving speech through Lale's interpretation, appreciating our visit, and Bob, as our senior elder, replied on our behalf urging them to go forward with pride and try to resist the more decadent aspects of change, such as alcohol.

As early as possible the next morning we struck camp again and set off in our boats, bidding farewell to our ground support cars, so any comforts we wish for we must carry in the boats with us. Our three boats power down the river for 2 two and a half hours through beautiful riverine forest, all of us in awe of the huge variety of hardwood trees that constitute pristine African tropical forests - too soon they will fall to the demands of this changing world.

Animist in religion, these peoples have existed at peace with nature for thousands of years, until the advent of the submachine gun around the early 1980's. Today you will travel miles along densely forested riverbanks, all the way to the Delta, where anywhere else in Africa you would see elephant, buffalo and impala coming down to drink. But here we see little wildlife; a few crocodiles, still a major killer of people in these areas, colobus monkeys, baboons, goliath heron and fish eagles, themselves struggling to find food in the muddy swirling waters.



We are amongst the Nyagatom, a 50,000 strong tribe, renowned as fierce and difficult people. We were relieved to receive a cheerful and tuneful dancing welcome from the nearby village womenfolk when they spotted our new camp springing up under lovely shade trees on the right bank of the river. After a lunch prepared by the unrelenting Wilson and his staff of five, we threaded our way through the bush to the nearby village, and spent a quiet time with them in this rarely visited area. We were truly amongst remote people, because we were here with boats, and this is the only way to gain access to them. Without doubt this village has never been visited by white people before. The Nyagatom have smaller huts and different dress, the women wearing leather skirts made from

cow skins that fall right down to the floor, heavily adorned along the edges with metal nodes. Their thicker beaded neckwear is more common amongst the similar Gabra and Rendile tribes in Kenya, using extensive cowrie shell adornment.

It is September 11, it is 7:15 pm, 10:15 am New York time, and suddenly live news of the unfolding dreadful terrorist attack against the World Trade Center jolts us all back from biblical times to the realities of our world. We crowd around my tiny short wave radio listening in disbelief to the BBC, while all around us the tribes elders, crouching on their haunches, laugh and chat about the realities of their own lives - food, survival and raids from the neighboring tribes. Absolutely stunned, we retreat to our beds, resolving to try to move on, and not let the shock of this awful news destroy our new found group.



We are looking for the traditional crocodile hunters of the Nyagatom, but hear that they have taken to the bush to fight as mercenaries for the SPLA rebels in South Sudan. Also the river is so high and fast that crocodiles in this area seem to be few and far between.



We walk over to a nearby village to share time with other families and return there in the evening for a dance they are having, in exotic evening light. I am struck in particular by the "Kalash" tree upon which were hanging ten sub machine guns, while their owners dance and focus on the intensity of the moment.

We awoke at 6:00 am to have breakfast and strike camp, and on the water by 9:00 am, and for two hours we powered south down the river, the dense riverine forest glowing different shades of green in the soft African morning light.

Suddenly stark evidence of change appeared, vast pumps and clearing where the Derg, together with the North Koreans, devised an irrigated cotton industry. Here, 40,000 acres were cleared and farmed, before the economics of transporting the voluminous cotton crop over 550 miles of tortuous Ethiopian roads sounded the project's death knell. The small town of Omorati grew up around this project, and

now this sleepy dusty outpost overlooks a mini desert stretching for miles inland from the rivers edge, and doubles as the border town with Kenya. Here we produced our passports for the officials to confirm that we should in fact be in the country.

We settle in to the small tourist hotel to enjoy a Buzza, Ethiopia's fizzy mineral water. Halewijn fears a lengthy delay, as in the past this simple procedure has taken over 24 hours: but we are in luck, we are free to go, and in 50 minutes we are back on the river. The banks broaden out to a 400 meter width, and they are sprouting newly planted sorghum, aided by recently erected missionary backed three bladed windmills.

We pass a small dispensary, and shortly we come to a large shaded area under fig trees that will be our next campsite. We negotiate with a couple of the local Dassanech elders to be our new security guards, and there is at last a cooling wind from Lake Turkana which helps us as we set up our tents, and have lunch under the fascinated stares of an ever increasing crowd. Here we must group our tents closely together, for while being amongst the Dassanech we require greater security.



Halewijn leaves as soon as possible to cross Lake Turkana in a hellish seven hour boat ride to get more supplies and some spare parts, as one of the engines will not start. We head downstream to a local village on the rivers edge. These people have not had tourist visits before and we are without cameras, which makes it a very pleasant experience, as we both can examine each other without extraneous pressures. "Mullub" is all I can master of this language, but it seems to please elders and inquisitive young children alike. Their buildings are largely made of papyrus, readily available here in the Delta, and their sorghum is stored in large round grass covered bundles unprotected on high sturdy platforms. Uniquely in the Omo valley, both men and women of the Dassanech are circumcised, and their women are noticeably less beaded than the Nyagatom, whose beading has a predominance of blue and white, and the men share the tidy colorful and tightly wound mud hairstyle akin to Kenya's neighboring Turkana - their mortal enemies with whom they regularly trade insults, stock thefts and death.

Some of the warriors have really heavy scarification, and of course Dave's and my photo eye see sights to kill for!

On returning to camp, I can resist the refreshing looking river no longer and I dive in... too far out into the current from the boat, and before I surface I am ripping downstream. It takes every inch of strength to inch my way back towards the boat and haul myself out - quite shaken. The moon is gone now and the incredible African starlight, with no shred of pollution, melts the senses to the rhythmic pounding of tribal dancing in the nearby village. At every campsite we negotiate with the elders from the nearest village to protect us with their Kalashnikov rifles, and they in turn will guide us to ceremonies we could not otherwise find.

In the morning we head further south into the Delta itself. In a short while the main channel narrows quickly to 50 yards and soon we enter the delta itself - a vast and mysterious labyrinth of small channels. Near the town, the banks hosted large herds of lean cattle, hungrily devouring the new lush green grass left behind by the receding flood waters. They are herded by friendly tribes people; both they and their cattle are unused to boats. Our 28 foot canoes are not highly maneuverable, and soon the banks abruptly narrow to force us to make a cumbersome five point turn to retrace our steps to find another exit, much to the mirth of the on looking locals, who are far more flexible in their not always straight dug out canoes. The receding waters also make for spectacular bird life as they scour the banks and newly exposed mudflats for delights - hundreds of pelicans, spoonbills, yellow-billed storks, sacred ibis, gray heron and imperious pairs of fish eagles survey the scene. Occasionally the pelicans take to the air in huge clouds, soaring high in thermals, as they look for new potential. We find the channel, the reeds thicken on both sides, huge crocodiles slink stealthily into the murky muddy waters as the unusual vibrations from our engines disturb their morning sunbathing. It is rumored that there are still some hippo that hide in these vast reedbeds - Halewijn had run out of daylight when bringing the boats in, and had to spent a mosquito infested night here, and had heard a few inadvisably grunting - for here one hippo will feed a tribe for a week, and the hunting odds are heavily stacked against them. We come across a crocodile and hippo hunters camp hidden on a small spit of dry land, several hundred skins and strips of meat are hanging out to dry - perhaps fortuitously it is too shallow for us to get close enough to investigate. Even in this remote place the



wildlife cannot sustain this pressure for too much longer. We land on a tiny strip of reeds squashed flat by crocodiles, and up go the tables with their neat table cloths for lunch in the midday sun, before threading our way back through the Delta to return to the camp.



We enjoy a refreshing breeze, verging on a strong wind, which has covered everything at the camp with fine red dust - the very netting of the tent sides which kept us mercifully cool at night had let in sand to everything, even our pillows and toothbrushes. We hear that there will be a special ceremony by fathers celebrating the forthcoming circumcision of their daughters - and we need to be there by dawn to witness this experience with them. This is the annual "Dimi" ceremony, one of the most important events in a Dassanech man's life. The ceremony is held for all the men whose first born daughters have reached the age of eight to ten, the age at which all young women of this tribe are circumcised. Each man participating in the "Dimi" provides a large amount of

livestock to be slaughtered and distributed to members within the clan. The Dimi is only one of eight major ceremonies that accompany a man's passage through life.

In the meantime Halewijn has returned with supplies, and now there is more wine and the beer is cold again, incongruous luxuries in such a remote situation; also he brings us a Kenya newspaper containing the first shocking pictures of the tragedy that has overtaken New York.

Subdued we take an early night, arising in the intense starlight of pre-dawn Africa for tea before boarding the boats to churn two miles upstream to the village. We land on the muddy bank and thread our way through the newly planted sorghum fields; smoke curling lazily skywards from the domed grass huts presents a warm and ancient sight in the rising sun. Word has reached them that we are coming and both women and children dance and run out to greet us. The scene is spectacular as we enter; a wide circle of huts surrounds a large central communal open area, and outside the hut of each celebrating family stands a stick holding the ceremonial dress of a full length cheetah skin with an ostrich feather headdress, carefully made ready for donning by their wives. The elders are sitting solemnly in the middle, perched on their tiny headrest / cum stools in lines according to rank; they will ensure proceedings are correct. We have decided to bring no cameras, rather just soak up the atmosphere as they will dance again this in the evening. The fathers arrive one by one, each looking like a chief in his splendid robes - and soon the chanting and dancing begin - the pounding of the feet resonating on the hard dusty ground was quite unlike any other I have ever heard in Africa. We spent nearly two hours there, utterly entranced, the participants virtually oblivious to their visitors from far away places, though clearly the children here have never had white visitors before. Their over exuberance was suitably chastised by the elders for disturbing the ceremony - much to our delight!

We spent the day again going down river to Lake Turkana to say we had actually reached the Jade Sea - though Brown Sea would have been more appropriate due to silt in the floodwaters. The ancient life we observed, with a backdrop of the Burka Mountains in Southern Sudan, bird life and the monster crocodiles we saw made it a memorable day. While we were out, one of our Dassanech guards had suddenly decided that our Turkana boatmen was unwelcome in his territory. Fortunately bloodshed was avoided when Halewijn heard the unwelcome sound of the Kalashnikov's safety catch being clicked off, and he hastily intervened.

Our camps were always home to curious tribes people coming in to stare - and sometimes glare at us. They were only too keen to join in all activities - such as having a shower, using the bathroom or shaving in the tiny tent mirrors - but not anything that looked like manual labor. We returned in the evening to photograph the next phase of the amazing Dimi ceremony; the swirling dust in the evening light with the cheetah skins and the colobus skins of the women left us with extraordinary memories. We had to remind ourselves that we were celebrating FGM - Female Genital Mutilation - an issue considered totally barbaric by our Western standards, but something that has worked in their culture for hundreds of years. We ploughed back along the river to camp after dark giving all who could squeeze aboard a motorized chance to cross the fast flowing river. Over dinner we contemplated the world around us that is fast changing forever, as we crammed our stomachs with wine and food in this far off beautiful place.





We had to go for our 6 am wakeup again to fit everything into this long day. In spite of my being last again to get my tent packed, we were on the boats by 9 am, bidding farewell to our loyal boat crews who will now head back to Kenya and Lake Turkana. There is the usual round of renegotiation with the watchmen, strategic adjustments of the Kalashnikov's, before the final cheery waves as we pull away from the bank. The river has dropped a full two feet while we have been camped there. We retrace our way up river to Omorati, passing the modern windmills that missionaries have made available to the local farmers for irrigation. I hope this has been carefully thought out as I noticed heavy salting in the soil from their current efforts.



At Omorati we file into the local hotel to wait out the formalities. We are treated to the classic Ethiopian ritual of coffee making in this country from which coffee originally came. Carefully our doleful hostess roasts the beans, wafting the aroma over her guests, pounding them and then tipping them into a black spouted pot of boiling water. Sadly these girls have to live out a dual life here as prostitutes for infrequent aid vehicles drivers. Dave diligently cleans out all the cups before he is be happy to let us all enjoy the much anticipated end result. Once again passports are needed - we don't question it in this beaucroatic world - in Africa, whatever they ask for, we just provide, it will save several hours of negotiation! Amazingly, only an hour and a half later, we are on our way in the

cars. We bump our way through the depressing sight of a failed 50,000 acre cotton scheme built in the Derg times paid for by the North Koreans, and on into the dry country of the valley floor - a classic Africa with thousands of towering nine foot tall phallic termite hills, waving golden grasses and herds of antelope sheltering under acacias from the midday heat. We stop to join them for a somewhat sweltering picnic lunch before winding our way up the east bank of the Rift valley. As we climb the hills into a changing world, pink quartz rocks frame the track, the light softens and the temperature drops as we find ourselves 2,000 feet higher in Hamar Koke country. Soon we are stopped by vibrant singing and dancing young women - there is to be no passage without payment for their unsolicited services! After 120 km in five hours of driving, we locate a suitable campsite in a local farmers maize field as Lale goes off to make enquiries - we are in luck, a nearby village will have a bull jumping ceremony the next day. It will be a 1 1/2 hour walk through the bush to reach the actual ceremony - but we know this will really be worth it. A 24hr. stomach bug is humbling each one of us in turn, and unfortunately Carmen and Maud are not going to be up for this hike; I fade early for bed without dinner to try to stem my own tide!

Auspiciously there was rain in the night, and we left for the nearby village just after 9 am to find the women already dancing themselves into a trance, their Cher type hairstyles heavily coated with ochre and fat adding an erotic look to these beautifully decorated women. The Hamar are a Hamitic tribe and are deeply superstitious, believing that bad luck exists by certain omens, such as twins or children born out of wedlock. These are left out the bush to die to avoid risk of drought or disease. Their women are hauntingly beautiful; their traditional ornamentation consists of heavy metal bangles for the wrists and legs, and heavy neckbands, with beautiful wide cowrie shell necklaces. Today tee shirts are beginning to creep into their fashion; turquoise and emerald green elegantly contrast their skin tones, and offer support for the younger, more well endowed unmarried, during their heavily rhythmic dances. We are invited into the low-roofed meeting area to sit with the elders to enjoy coffee, and we are honored to be offered their precious honey - a brimming full half gourd, luxuriously rich and sticky, complete with comb, guaranteed to glue your teeth together. We do not know why, but without signal, suddenly we are off



to the site, the women setting up a blistering pace through the bush in the increasing heat - mercifully it is a cloudy morning - singing and clapping as we go. I am surprised to be pressed and overtaken by several of them, interested in me - but obviously unimpressed! We pass several little villages on the way their inhabitants abandoning their daily drudgery to join in with their neighbors' important ceremony. The wait-a-bit thorns tear at my trousers and my arms just as they seem to glance off their strong, and seemingly specially adapted skin. The scenery is similar to Northern Kenya; low Acacia trees and sandy soil, and at last we arrive at a wide sand lugga - a dried up river bed. Powerful naked men are already there, adorning their lithe bodies, by grinding up rock into a white paste, which they then smear all over themselves. They then work this into fantastic decoration with their finger tips, carefully creating designs on everything from penis to earlobe. Some use the reflection of the water to adorn themselves, others

produce tiny Chinese plastic mirrors, incongruously pink and decorated with dragons. The women continue to dance, amidst a cacophony of noise as they blast continuously on small trumpets, while other warriors appear carrying thin three foot branches, stripped of leaves, for whips. The women start to chase them, perhaps, I assume, to take them away, but not so, they try to grab one and present themselves to be whipped. They stand close, breasts pushed forward, fronting their man, unblinking as the moran whips them hard and fast. We think maybe it is a fake hit as it seems to be hitting their leather drape, but then we see how the tail of the whip wraps cruelly around their back, savagely tearing at the flesh. Amazingly too, those with tee shirts have them rolled up at the back to ensure maximum impact. This astonishing spectacle, which demonstrates the girls' loyalty to the initiate, continues for a full half an hour, the girls continuously pushing the young warriors for more. Occasionally we would notice pairs disappear into the bushes - for quick sex, we were told with a twinkle.

Much lowing heralds the arrival of the bulls for the ceremony, and the lowly goats are quickly chased away from the pool so that they can water. Finally it seems that everyone is correctly attired and we follow the women single file again further into the bush. The women, all of whom are in a frenzied state, calmly pull pieces of bark out of each others wounds as they walk at high speed - their ugly bleeding gashes are quite shocking to us. We arrive at an innocuous small clearing in the bush where there is a four feet high arch of sticks, and 30 bulls are moaning and shuffling nearby. The initiate, wearing only a small goat skin around his neck, has a wide eyed tranced look about him, enhanced by his long and wild hairstyle - he must succeed on this important day.



The moran's father, dressed oddly in western clothes with a woolen hat, makes last minute adjustments, while nearby the elders give his son the final instructions and complete age old rituals involving a symbolic wooden penis and the whips, before he can join them in elder hood. They then single out 10 bulls and jostle them into position alongside each other head to tail, each held by the tail. The women circle the bulls, chanting as tension mounts. Without ceremony, the initiate emerges from the huddle of elders, strips naked, and vaults up on the backs of the bulls to run across them. He must achieve this feat forward and back two times - 4 times in all. It is rumored that if he falls off he will be disgraced

by the tribe... others disagree and say that the elders would pick him up and help him back on to continue his journey. Either way, tension is high as he continues the ordeal. It is a substantial leap straight up from the ground at each end onto the bulls, and his final success is greeted with much delight as the whole group joins hands and moves forward en masse murmuring a low and moving chant.

We know we have been privileged to have witnessed a unique spectacle passed down since before time, and the 80 minute high speed walk back to the village in the now hot evening sun was going to be tough. I had felt low on power, sickening with that bug, so I decided to set myself a forced pace, and was greeted with surprise and laughter from the warriors and the women as I overtook them, their scars were now visibly growing from the whippings, still seeping blood. I contemplated once again the difference of our lives as I lay on my surprisingly comfortable cot bed; as they will lie with their raw scars on their goatskins, being forced upon, hard and savagely, by their drunken warriors consummating their spiritual day. Our starlit night was penetrated by the sounds of their dancing and celebrations late into the night, and unable to eat that night, I collapsed into bed, joining Maud and Carmen.



The heavy rain that night was soaked up thirstily by the sandy soil, thankfully for us forcing the camp crew to strike the tents for us for the last time, and we set off on the scenic drive up to Dimeka. This is the little town that most tourists go to see the famous Hamar Koke, and visit their ceremonies from there, especially on market days. Markets are staggered in adjacent towns in Ethiopia to ensure that each town gets maximum attendance. We arrived early and soon Jay and I had the whole town joining us in a game of Frisbee. There was far more enjoyment from the dud throws and dropped catches than there was from successful ones, the crowd collapsing in laughter as their friends ineptly tried their hand at a new game.

We drove on to Jinka through beautiful hills and cultivation, and as we got close it came as a shock to pass vehicles after such a remote sojourn. Back at the Goh hotel we looked at our rooms with a whole new

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perspective - only to find most had no running water, and as for light - there was none - the whole town's power had failed several days earlier. Drinks and dinner by candlelight once again. I kept very quiet about my gold lame sheets and the fact that my lavatory actually did flush, in case I had an invasion from my comfort needy team mates.

At check in the next morning we enjoyed the most thorough security search I have ever experienced anywhere - no one was going to be allowed to hijack our little Twin Otter. The plane left an hour early, though after flying two legs of the triangle, crossing a beautiful waterfall and the relentlessly flowing Omo River to get fuel at Jimma, we had seen yet more of this amazing country and arrived back late into Addis. We were all excited at the thought of a long bath and a sleep at the Hilton, and we discussed our emotions on returning to civilization - watching the repeats of the horrors of Sept 11th on the TV.

We all felt we had spent time away from the world, realizing it had been a truly unique trip to witness peoples whose lives are changing fast, and forever...