

Omo Valley: The Extraordinary Tribal People of southern Ethiopia: Photography Tour Report 2020

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The Omo Valley of Ethiopia is Africa's birthplace of civilization. There is nowhere else on the continent that celebrates the diversity of tribal culture in Africa to the same degree. The Valley is home to around 18 different ethnic peoples who engage in some of the most intricate and spectacular decoration in the world.

Our recent tour to the Omo Valley was an adventure in the true sense of the word as we traversed rugged terrain and rough roads to camp out in villages with local people that so rarely see visitors willing to live alongside locals in the same way. We enjoyed special gatherings of highly decorated village headmen, visiting a Suri cattle camp and also witnessed a small yet fantastic Hamar bull jumping initiation ceremony during what was a very memorable trip for all of us.

We arrived in Addis in warm, sunny weather and we enjoyed a morning in the city before flying out on the afternoon flight to Jimma. For newly initiated travellers to Ethiopia, enjoying a cup of strong Ethiopian coffee is almost a rite of passage in the country's capital, Addis Ababa. Ethiopia is, after all, the home of coffee in Africa. We kick-started our morning with espressos at one of the most famous coffee houses in the city, Tomoka. This fired us all up for a morning of shopping at Shola Market and a local emporium plus a little street photography when the opportunity allowed. Mindful of the time we eventually returned to our Addis hotel to check out and enjoy some lunch at a local café before we left for the airport. It was a smooth afternoon flight to Jimma and we were met by our drivers at the airport and transferred to our local hotel for drinks and dinner.

The first day of travel into the Suri area of the Omo Valley is always a long one. It was on this day we saw our first Olive Baboons of the trip and the lucky few among us also saw a wild African Civet run across the road in front of our vehicles as the landscape fluctuated between coffee plantations and remnant native forest. We left Jimma after a pre-dawn breakfast snack and drove south through the local coffee plantations towards Mizan Teferu. Mizan is, effectively, an air strip with a town built around it. When planes don't land at Mizan, often children are playing football on the airstrip as a local pitch and the Mizan locals use it as a pedestrian thoroughfare on their way home from town. This makes for quite an interesting sight if you have an interest in civil design and engineering!

We stopped in Mizan to pick up a few fresh supplies for our camp before driving to the tiny town of Dima where we had a local Ethiopian lunch. From here we stopped at the local security point to 'check in' to the security area and pick up our local guards and guides to accompany us on our stay. Travelling over rough roads to reach the town of Kibish, we found a beautiful campsite on the side of the Kibish River where we set up camp for the coming few days. That afternoon was filled with joy as we were joined by a group of beautiful young children who used the shade of our campsite trees to delicately paint each other's faces. It was the start of a wonderful afternoon photographing the first of many beautifully painted Suri people including a bunch of young warriors who had come down to show us how they paint each other in preparation for a Donga (ceremonial stick fight). We alternated between posed shoots in front of a black background and more natural settings near the river.

I am always so in awe of our Wild Images guests who join me on people trips. Their capacity for kindness seems to have no ends and this trip was no exception. On this occasion Doris and Dominik had bought with them some small t-shirts for children we'd meet and some very nice cloth footballs to give to the children to play with. The latter proved to be a huge hit with the kids of the camp and we revelled in listening to some of them play a ball game in a neighbouring field as we prepared to spend our first night in camp.

The heat finally overcame most of us so we enjoyed a cool wash in the river with the some more of the local kids before dinner on our first night at camp. It was here that we got our first taste of the famous cooking of our camp cook, Biruch, who is known throughout southern Ethiopia for his fine camp food. Needless to say he didn't disappoint on this trip either with his delicious soups, meat and vegetarian main courses and desserts sourced from the freshest fruits. It was the perfect end to our first day on the tour, dining in the

wild with a glass of wine.

The next morning we headed out to a Suri village for a sunrise shoot with the local people in and around the village and fields. When the light was getting too harsh we decided we'd head to Kibish to do some street photography and as we were leaving we were delighted to be followed by a group of the local children all singing to us as we walked to our vehicles. It was quite hard to leave after so many beautiful photo opportunities with these kids, with older women smoking pipes and so much creative and inspiring decoration. As we were leaving the children of the village followed us out and farewelled us with singing and dancing.

The move to Kibish, however, proved to be a good decision in the end as we wandered the streets capturing images in doorways and against the colourful backdrops of the town. One of our guests Stu saw a red wall in the village that we aptly named "Stu's wall" as it became a much desired impromptu backdrop for some of our favourite images of Kibish.

Returning to our camp for lunch and a siesta we took some time to review photos and have a small break in the shade. That afternoon we headed out to another Suri village for more photos and a much hoped for visit to a local cattle camp. Although it was a little hard to find and the afternoon heat was sweltering we were finally guided to a cattle camp where we watched young Suri boys decorating themselves with cattle dung and paint, a few boys mocked up their stick fighting manoeuvres with Stu practicing with them and finally they showed us how they bloodlet a cow to drink the cow blood for nutrition. The heat was incredible that afternoon and in the end the heady combination of flies and smells of the cattle camp sent us packing back to our campsite at the river where we all had a swim and chatted with the local kids on our last night in Suriland.

Over the time we had been travelling I had been monitoring the weather systems and road conditions via news from other drivers. We'd had only small sprinklings of rain on the trip to date but nothing that seemed to create any issues for driving in the Omo. In comparison to our previous year's tour, the roads had deteriorated significantly due to flooding in Ethiopia's wet season so it made driving conditions treacherous. We heard about landslides and people getting bogged so when the time came to drive overland from Suriland to Kangaten, on the border of Ethiopia and South Sudan, we all looked a bit crest-fallen as a light rain started to fall at breakfast. I looked towards the direction of our travel and saw the sun shining. It had been dry for a few days at least so I made the decision with our drivers and crew to risk the drive anyway. It turned out to be the most beautiful and challenging drive of our trip. In a total of 9 hours we crossed mountains and landslides, drove through mud and through the chewed up grasslands and dried cotton soil bogs of the Omo National Park to make it on to bitumen on the other side for a late lunch. It was an amazing feat for our drivers and quite often we were getting out to both assist them and take photos of them negotiating particularly nasty parts of this incredible track. Since we'd heard the groups either side of ours had been thwarted by the road conditions, we all celebrated as we reached the bitumen road and we breathed a collective sigh of relief!!!

We finally reached the remote town of Kangaten with enough time to pick up our local guide and set up camp at a nearby village of Nyangatom people.

We were so warmly welcomed by the Nyangatom people, many of whom remembered me from my previous visit, so we spent the time until sunset doing portrait photography of these warm, hospitable people in their villages until the light became so low we couldn't continue.

Overnight, as is customary in this remote part of Ethiopia, we heard the howls of Spotted Hyena close to our camp and at one point one of our guides got up to scare them off but he couldn't find them in the end, even though they sounded quite close!

At sunrise we enjoyed some more photography with the Nyangatom people in their village. We met scarred elders, photographed a beautiful little girl in her food storage hut and also some highly decorated Nyangatom women with their stunning multi-threaded necklaces and headdresses. Group member Dominik seemed to be of particular interest to these Nyangatom women who seemed intent on circling around him to look at the photos he'd taken in their village.

From the village we walked into town through sparsely growing Calitropis bushes. We were distracted for a short time by a mixed flock of feeding Cattle Egrets and Northern Carmine Bee-eaters all flying around us feeding on flying insects in the area.

Arriving in Kangaten on foot we found out we were a little too early for the local market to begin but we did meet a couple of beautiful Toposa girls walking along the street who kindly let us photograph them. We then wandered down to the fast flowing Omo River where we photographed a small group of local boys swimming in the river. Returning to the town we met a few beautiful Toposa girls heading to the market for the morning. Instantly recognizable by their intricate facial scarring we enjoyed our meeting with them and some photography before visiting a local café for drinks and a rest. We then reluctantly left Kangaten for our next tribal region – the Kara area of Dus.

Setting up camp in the riverine woodlands of Dus, we all had lunch and a break in the shade while we waited for the midday temperatures to abate and the light to get better. Later that afternoon we drove down to Dus but the heat was incredible, even later in the day. We enjoyed some photography with the local Karo people of Dus including one of the village headmen that I had met last time. Finally the heat became a bit too much for us so we returned to camp to find our camp crew cooking dinner for us over an open fire. We had showers and rested as the sun began to set and as it did so, our crew brought us glasses of wine as we sat by the river listening to the calls of African Fish Eagles and the local Black and White Colobus monkeys hail the last of our daylight. Dinner that night was under the stars beside the river and the roast lamb from the fire was absolutely delicious. We completely forgot about the heat of the river after a couple of glasses of red wine in this stunningly beautiful place.

At sunrise the next morning we were woken by the noisy cacophony of Hadedda Ibis and we had an early breakfast so we could be at Dus for sunrise. When we arrived we were joined by a highly decorated group of Kara headmen for a photo shoot which was excellent. We spent time with them on the river banks and in their sacred building called a Marmar which acts as a council house for the Karo people. We did some lovely portraits in front of a background and around the village for most of the morning. After seeking permission from the local Kara guides, Inger had a quick drone fly up the river from where we caught an angled view of Dus from the air. This was our farewell to this beautiful village and after saying goodbye to our hosts with traditional thank yous to each of the headmen we met, we jumped in our cars and drove towards the lively town of Turmi.

We arrived in time for lunch at our lodge, some much needed cold beers and a rest before our sunset visit to a local Hamar village for photography.

As always, the beautiful women of the Hamar people beguiled us that afternoon for photography in their village. Gracious hosts, the Hamar are not only beautiful to photograph, they are often fun to spend time with too. We stayed until the light was so dim we were forced to return to Turmi for dinner and an early night.

The next morning we started our drive to Omorate, on the border of Ethiopia and Kenya, before sunrise. Home to the beautiful Dassanech people, Omorate is so close to the border that all visitors to the area must register with the local police before they can go off exploring. We checked in and met our local guide at his camp by the river. Instead of driving around to the local Dassanech village, we all decided to be taken across the river in local dugout canoes with navigators and this, directly before a walk in the local fields was a wonderful way to start our morning with these beautiful people of Ethiopia.

Visiting the Dassanech and meeting their simply and elegantly decorated women in their village of huts fashioned out of twigs, remnant sheet metal and animal skins is always memorable. The atmosphere here is earthy, real and so very special. We visited a local animal enclosure, a small area for selling Dassanech crafts and many homes of these warm and welcoming people. While we photographed our newfound Dassanech friends, our drivers brought our vehicles around in preparation for our departure back to Turmi. We left and returned to our Turmi lodge where we took a break, had showers and lunch before our afternoon drive out to the region of Lake Chew Bahir where we visited the equally beautiful Arbore people.

After a rugged drive over the Buska mountains we arrived at the western edge of Lake Chew Bahir (sometimes called Lake Stephanie) and we turned north to reach a village of Arbore people late in the afternoon. Like other villages we visited a few of the people recognized me from my last visit so we were welcomed warmly by the Arbore people who allowed us to photograph them in their village. It was so incredibly hot there though with Lake Chew Bahir registering in the top two hottest places we visit, after Kangaten! As the sun set and we all got hotter and hotter, we noticed some storm clouds coming which didn't bode well for our night at camp. While we were sitting waiting for dinner and enjoying a cold drink, one of the Arbore boys that I photographed shyly watched in the background. His name was Onego and I was instantly drawn to him when I saw him herding goats back to the village. Arbore men wear necklaces that they fashion out of the hair of a giraffe's tail. These necklaces are called "Debech" and the one that Onego was wearing was made from

such long hair that the remains draped around his shoulders. It was very beautiful to see it and when I noticed him watching us, I motioned him over to see his photos. A shy smile washed across his face when he saw them. He eventually worked out that it was too difficult to communicate with us having no shared language so he left.

We enjoyed a dinner under the trees but soon after we went to bed that storm broke and a few of us had a bit of a wet night after making sure our valuables were secure in our cars, the boys rushing around to put rain covers on our tents and driving our vehicles close to the tents to protect them from the wind. It didn't last long, however, and most of us managed to get some sleep before a sunrise photography session with the Arbore people in the most beautiful, soft light. We all enjoyed portraits, wandering with kids herding goats and photographing groups of Arbore girls with their beautiful black head coverings in the early light before we packed up and left for Turmi. As a parting gift we bought some souvenirs and I exchanged necklaces with a local Arbore girl friend of mine, Adi, before we reluctantly left these beautiful people.

On the way back we drove through the almost apocalyptic East African locust plague as we crossed the Buska mountains again to drive to Turmi. We were quite literally driving through thousands of large yellow locusts all chewing on the local trees and most likely the crops of the Arbore people around their villages. At one point we stopped to wait for a large Nile Monitor to cross the road. At other points we stopped to simply take in the spectacle of all of it, feeling sorry for the poor people of the area who couldn't defend themselves against this almost biblical plague as they had no defenses other than the ability to make a loud noise and to try to move the locusts on. Slowly the locusts thinned out as we drove closer to Turmi but we all realized it was only going to be a matter of time before they reached the Turmi area in the next wave of destruction.

Arriving at Turmi we checked into our lodge for lunch and a siesta before our afternoon photo session around the streets of Turmi. This is nearly always a good idea to get some candid images of local people in this colourful town which is a central meeting point for the Hamar, Karo and Benna people living in the region. We met some lovely Hamar elders that afternoon who we photographed along with the street kids and a statuesque Hamar headman called Oyta with his amazing hair! Colourful buildings and dusty streets characterize Turmi and it was nice to just wander around the village capturing spontaneous images. As the sun started to go down, we all retreated from the heat to a local bar for some much needed cold beers and cokes to finish the day.

We were originally scheduled to leave the Turmi area the next morning but we heard about a bull jumping ceremony of the Hamar people taking place at a remote Hamar community, so we changed plans and the next morning our first shoot of the day was at a beautiful Hamar village where we met two of the local headmen, Wala and Nikala who kindly let us wander around photographing them and the people of their village as they went about their morning chores of drinking coffee and milking their cows. We also watched with fascination as a Hamar girl started to fix the thatched roof of one of their Tukul style round huts as we were leaving.

A late breakfast at the lodge was followed by a quick drone flight where I managed to get some shots of the local Hamar villages from the air. We then packed up for the drive into town where Turmi markets were in full swing. These tribal markets always start later in the morning to give the local people time to walk there from surrounding villages. It always means the light is a bit harsher but if you play it right and use the shade of the buildings to control the light, Turmi markets are a true photography highlight of this region! We visited a local guest house for an Ethiopian lunch and we then drove out of town to a remote village where a bull jumping ceremony was due to take place. This ceremony forms an integral part of the growth of young Hamar men as the initiate must run, naked, over the backs of a line of blessed bulls six times without falling in order to prove he is ready for adulthood and marriage. This ceremony was a little smaller than our visits previously but was still fascinating to attend as the air pulsed with the rhythm of dancing Hamar girls, ceremonial whipping and drinking the local honey beer to celebrate.

We finally left and drove back to our campsite under a beautiful grove of mature mango trees by a dry river bed near Turmi where we enjoyed a dinner under the stars.

We decided to leave our camp really early the following day so we could reach the Karo village of Korcho for sunrise photography on the river bank overlooking the Omo River. We met a few of the friendly locals including one of the Karo headmen, Suma, and we enjoyed a few hours of photography around the village at first light before driving back to Turmi for a late breakfast under the mango trees.

After packing up our camp we drove out to another village, Alduba, just in time for the markets to get going for the day. Alduba market is a central gathering point for many Benna and Hamera Besheda people so we enjoyed meeting a few of the Benna Maza boys to photograph them. Mazas are a tradition in the Benna and Hamer people. Mazas are usually young men who have been recently initiated and who are actively engaged in living with the next initiate boy to prepare him for his own bull jumping ceremony. We had a few laughs photographing some of these gorgeous young men before we wandered further into the market to meet some Hamer Besheda women to photograph. Some of these women were beautifully decorated with dresses fashioned out of goatskins and cowrie shells. To protect their heads from the sun, we met a couple of them wearing decorated hats made from Kalabashes, or local gourds.

Time was getting away from us so we left for the drive to Jinka where we planned to spend the night. En-route we stopped to photograph a group of young Benna boys who stop cars on the sides of the road for photographs. Walking on large wooden stilts, these Benna boys are a really touristy thing to see in the Omo Valley, but we were quite lucky to meet them again on this trip as they are not always around when you drive to Jinka. Legend has it that young Benna men used to walk across the grasslands on tall wooden stilts to avoid attacks by wild animals but there is a lot of fanciful storytelling around this legend and whether or not it is a true tradition of the Benna people is debatable. It is, however, still a much loved and fun thing for our groups to see and photograph.

Arriving at the lodge in Jinka we all enjoyed hot showers, a rest and an early dinner after a long day. For most of us it was our first time on Wifi for a few days too so we caught up with the outside world finally as well!

The next morning we left again before sunrise to drive out through Mago National Park to visit the spectacular Mursi people with their incredible, heavy decorations. After some recent tribal tensions we were forced to take guards with us in our cars plus our guide so we were a bit cramped, but we all arrived at the village in time for a very early field breakfast of fruit, bread, coffee and juices. After that our photography started and we enjoyed the most incredible morning with the Mursi, as our guides negotiated a more or less exclusive morning with these people so we could take photos. Heavy metal rings, huge kalabashes, skins, metal bracelets, massive lip plates and even large weapons all were photographed on different people in what was truly a highlight visit for our trip.

As we reluctantly left the Mursi and drove back to the lodge, we stopped to photograph some more Mursi women and painted children on the side of the road. Arriving at the lodge in time for lunch, one of our group, Dave decided he wanted to spend the afternoon in Jinka town while the rest of us enjoyed an afternoon off, doing emails, checking photos and enjoying some cool drinks. Inger ran an editing session for portraits and we all had a rest before meeting Dave for dinner that night.

On our second last day of the trip we left Jinka on good roads for the drive to Arba Minch via the Konso region of southern Ethiopia. We stopped at a lookout for our last views of the Omo Valley before we started a beautiful drive through the terraced fields of the Konso people, a world heritage listed region for its prolific and unique terrace structures in Africa. I stopped a couple of times to fly a drone over this area which was incredibly beautiful from the air. The local Konso children were both fascinated and a little frightened to see the drone flying but in the end they seemed to enjoy looking at their world from the sky.

Travelling further into this beautiful landscape we stopped at a Konso village where one of the local guides showed us around a traditional Konso housing complex, complete with its labyrinth of dirt paths, stone walls, decorative wooden doorways and the Konso Waka, or totem poles, erected by the Konso people to commemorate elders who have died. We also stopped to look at some of the communal houses that are used by Konso men to make decisions for their people.

Stopping at the scenic Kanta Lodge, we enjoyed a lunch under the shade of trees with an outlook over the Konso region before we drove to our resort in Arba Minch for our final night of the tour.

After some much needed hot showers and a rest, we invited our crew over for a final dinner on the terrace, under the stars to celebrate our incredible adventure in the Omo Valley.

On our final morning of the tour I offered an excursion for those who didn't feel like they needed a sleep in. I only had one taker so myself and Stu left after an early breakfast to drive down to Lake Chamo where we took a boat out to see some local wildlife and visit the Gamo fishermen of the area. It was quite amazing how high the water level was in the lake and even the place where we parked our car was flooded. After ensuring a couple of cheeky Grivet monkeys couldn't break into our vehicles we boarded the boats and went for a cruise where we photographed Gamo fishermen catching catfish. We spotted many beautiful waterbirds and a few swimming Nile Crocodiles before we returned a few hours later and joined the rest of the group at the hotel to check out. Once we did so our crew drove

us for our final journey to the airport at Arba Minch where we sadly said goodbye to everyone before we checked in to our flight to Addis. The boys then left us to drive also to Addis to finish the trip.

Arriving in Addis after a smooth flight we said farewell to Dave and then we enjoyed a brief rest at a city hotel before a final meal and a late departure for the airport where our memorable tour to Ethiopia ended.