Omo Valley: The Extraordinary Tribal People of southern Ethiopia: Photography Tour Report 2025

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by Ingrid Koedood

The Omo Valley in southern Ethiopia is one of the most fascinating and culturally diverse regions in the world. This remote area, located along the Omo River, is home to dozens of indigenous tribes, each with its own unique tradition, rituals and attire. From the beaded adornments of the Hamer women to the famous Suri with their lip plates, the Omo Valley is a living museum of ancient customs that have endured for generations.

During our journey through this remarkable region, we had the opportunity to meet various tribes, such as the Karo, known for their stunning body paintings, and the Dassanech, who live along the river and rely on livestock and fishing for their livelihood. We explored colorful markets where people gather to trade goods and share stories, and we witnessed two traditional ceremonies that reflect a way of life deeply connected to nature and heritage.

Addis Ababa

After a long journey to Addis Ababa, our first day was all about rest and recovery from our flights. In the evening, we gathered for a welcome meeting, where we had the chance to get to know each other. Our local guide, Tesfaw, joined us, giving the opportunity to ask questions and get insights into the adventure ahead. We ended the evening with a dinner together at the hotel restaurant. A perfect way to start our trip.

The next morning we kicked of with some sightseeing in Addis Ababa. After exploring the city from the minivan, we visited Saint Michael Orthodox Church, where, due to the fasting period, many ceremonies were taking place. Women dressed in white added to the spiritual atmosphere.

Next, we headed to the Merkato. Since it was Sunday, the usually bustling market was relatively quiet. From there, we visited Shumeta Gallery, an overwhelming treasure trove of African art and artifacts. So much to see that time flew by!

A quick lunch at Romina restaurant, then back to the hotel to grab our luggage before catching our afternoon flight to Jimma. By the time we arrived, our local team was ready for us with 4WD's and all the necessary camping gear. For our overnight stay in Jimma, we checked into Haile resort, a comfortable and welcoming retreat founded by none other than Ethiopia's legendary long-distance runner, Haile Gebreselassie. Known for his incredible achievements in marathon running, Haile is a national hero and an inspiration to many. After retiring from athletics, he turned his focus to business and tourism, opening a series of resorts across Ethiopia to promote hospitality and showcase the country's beauty.

Into the Omo Valley – an adventure begins

We left Jimma early in the morning, ready for a long journey ahead. With our three fully packed vehicles, we hit the road as the misty rainforest landscape unfolded around us. The region was lush and green, and endless banana trees and coffee and tea plantations stretching along the hill sides. This area is considered the birthplace of coffee. Ethiopia's most famous export product. Coffee has been grown here for centuries, and the rich aroma of freshly roasted beans is never far away. Passing through Bonga, I saw a sign at the university that read: ' Education is the strongest power to change the world. Together we can.' A beautiful message and so true!

As the morning chill lingered, we spotted olive baboons along the roadside, and long lines of tuk-tuks waiting for fuel reminded us of the realities of daily life here. We stopped for an early lunch in Mizan, refueled the cars and continued deeper into the south.

As we drove on, the landscape changed. The dense greenery gave way to a drier, more open terrain. Along the way, we were greeted with warm smiles and waves, a reminder of the hospitality and kindness that make Ethiopia so great.

Suri (Surma)

Just before dark, we arrived at our campsite in Kibish, a remote region in the western Omo Valley. Kibish is home to the Suri people, one of the most distinctive tribes in Ethiopia, known for their elaborate body painting, decorative scars, and the use of lip and ear plates among women. Their traditions are deeply roated in cattle herding and they have preserved their way of life despite the changing world around them.

As soon as we arrived, the Suri tribe welcomed us warmly. They eagerly helped unload our gear, set up the tents, and install the kitchen. Meanwhile, we took a short walk to the nearby river, enjoy the peaceful surroundings and the last light of the day. After a fantastic dinner prepared by our incredible cook Biruk, we settle into our tents for a well-deserved night's rest. This was our first introduction to the Suri people, and we couldn't wait to learn more about their unique culture in the days ahead.

The next day began before sunrise. As we drove through the quiet landscape, the sky was still dark when we arrived at a small Suri settlement, a handful of houses scattered in the vast, open land. Life here is tough, reflected in the region's life expectancy: 48 years for men and 56 for women. Cattle are the true wealth of the Suri people, and many men have multiple wives, a tradition tied to their pastoral lifestyle.

At first, only a few people emerged from their homes, but as time passed, more and more villagers gathered. Their striking traditional adornments and unique customs made for a fascinating and immersive experience. Although there weren't many different and colorful flowers (in my opinion) decorating their bodies this time, the experience itself was unforgettable. By 9:00 AM, we wrapped up our visit and drove back to the campsite, a beautiful Paradise flycatcher fluttered near the tents. With breakfast waiting for us, we took a moment to reflect on this incredible cultural encounter.

We spent the afternoon exploring Kibish town. The vibrant, colorful walls of the buildings immediately caught our eye, creating a striking contrast against the earthy surroundings. The Suri girls adorned their heads with the beautiful flowers of the flamboyant tree, creating a striking and colorful display. We took our time capturing these moments, making portraits that highlighted their creativity and unique sense of beauty.

The late afternoon light cast a warm glow over the landscape, making for beautiful riverside shots. Then came a truly special moment, witnessing scarification, a deeply significant tradition among the Suri. The intricate scars, created as symbols of beauty and identity, reflected both pain and pride. We observed the process with respect, capturing powerful images that told a story beyond words. As the sun set, we returned to camp and gathered for a diner and to complete the evening, there was a bonfire.

The next day we started early with a visit to a cattle camp. Cattle are more than just livestock here. They represent wealth, status and survival. One of the most fascinating traditions we witnessed was blood drinking, a ritual where fresh cow blood is consumed for strength and nourishment. This practice, which takes place once a day, is deeply rooted in their culture and reflects their close bond with their animals.

After breakfast we headed to a local school. Unlike the Suri children, the students here are mostly children of shopowners from other parts of Ethiopia. We met the vice director and biology teacher, who has been teaching here for 14 years. The school offers elementary and secondary education. The resources are scarce, and families often struggle to afford school materials. Many rely on outside donations to support education. This visit made us realize how valuable school supplies can be, and I decided to bring more on future trips.

In the afternoon we headed to the river to meet the painting boys, a group of Suri men covered in striking body art. Using natural pigments made from river clay, they painted intricate patterns on each other's bodies. This is a tradition that serves both as self-expression and preparation of ceremonies or combat.

The river scene was incredible, men bathing and painting each other. The men gave us a small demonstration of a stick fight. While we didn't witness a full real fight, the Donga stick fight is one of the most famous Suri traditions, a highly competitive and often intense ritual where men engage in combat using long wooden sticks. It is not just about fighting, it is a test for bravery, endurance, and honor. We spent a long time there, taking photos and soaking in the atmosphere before returning to camp for dinner.

Omo National Park

The next morning, we left the Suri people in the rain, waving goodbye to the locals. We made our way toward Omo National Park passing small villages and rough roads. We stopped near the Maji villages to buy fruit. Along the way, we spotted wildlife including Kudu, Secretarybirds, Olive Baboons and vultures. We had lunch at a dusty sugar milling town before continuing. By the end of the afternoon we reached our final destination.

Nyangatom and Toposa

We arrived at the remote village of Nyangatom and Toposa community, located in the Ilemi triangle, a stretch of land that spans the countries of South Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya. The village has unique architecture, including the granary houses, known as 'Ekore', which are built by the women of the community. Our local guide, Alex, who hails from Ethiopia with family connections in Kenya, South Sudan and Uganda, shared fascinating insights about his people and their way of life. We camped right next to the village, and though we were already in our tents, the lively sounds of the local children kept us awake for a while. The next day, we spent several hours photographing the village, capturing its beauty. However, it was difficult to leave such a captivating place, and saying goodbye felt sad as we prepared to move on from this remarkable corner of the world.

Karo

We headed toward the Karo region of the Omo Valley. Our first stop was Kangate to stock up on supplies. Despite a couple of minor setbacks, we eventually reached our stunning campsite by the Omo river. On the opposite lower bank, we saw a crocodile emerge from the water, adding to the wild charm of the place. The heat was intense, and though we were all tired, we made our way to a Karo village. The warmth and fatigue from the day weighed on us, but we pushed on to explore and taking photographs.

The following morning, we woke early to visit the herders. We captured beautiful photographs at the sunrise, with the light illuminating the landscape. Later, we attended a coffee ceremony, a significant cultural experience for the Karo people, and continued taking photos to document the moment.

The Karo tribe left a lasting impression. Before leaving, we said goodbye to our incredible local Karo guide Kamakoli, who had worked tirelessly to ensure everything went smoothly. His dedication to his work and his people was truly inspiring.

Hamer

When we visited the Karo village, our team packed up the vehicles and cleaned the campsite. Afterward, we were picked up and began our journey toward Turmi, an important location for the Hamer tribe. Arriving at our lodge was a welcome sight after a long journey. After refreshing ourselves with a much needed shower, we relaxed before heading out to the Dimeka market. This market is a hub for the Hamer, Karo and other surrounding tribes. It's a vibrant place, full of colorful garments, handcrafted goods, and lively exchanges, making it a great spot for photography and cultural immersion.

Next, we made our way to witness the Bull jumping ceremony. This ceremony is a rite of passage for young men, marking their transition into adulthood. The young man must jump over a line of bulls without faltering. Successfully completing the jump signifies that he is ready to marry and take on adult responsibilities. Additionally, during this ceremony, women allow themselves to be whipped with sticks by a man called Mazas. This is an act of respect for the young man and a demonstration of strength. It is accompanied by singing and dancing, as the community comes together to celebrate the transition. The entire experience was a fascinating and powerful showcase of the Hamer people's traditions and way of life and we were grateful to be part of this meaningful event.

Dassanech

We left early in the morning our lodge in Turmi, just before sunrise and headed southwards, towards the border between Ethiopia and northern Kenya, where the Dassanech tribe resides. Along the way, we were fortunate enough to witness the Dimi ceremony, a rite of passage for the young girls of the tribe, involving circumcision.

As we arrived, we observed the men preparing for the ceremony, applying ochre to their bodies and wearing leopard skins. They went door to door as a blessing to ensure the girls fertility in their future, preparing the girls and their families for the actual private event. Afterwards, there was plenty of time to take photos and document the ceremony, though it was a deeply cultural experience that can be

seen as challenging from a Western perspective.

It was a remarkable moment for us. Witnessing the ceremony and the tribe's traditions up close provided a unique insight into their culture.

After this visit, we enjoyed breakfast in Omorate, where we were greeted by Colobus monkeys overhead, their black and white fur standing out against the trees.

Arbore

Later that day, we drove towards the Arbore tribe. Upon arriving at our campsite, we took the opportunity to visit their village. On our way we encountered two fishermen who had caught some enormous fish, which I believed to be Nile perch. They proudly showed us their impressive catch. After visiting the village and taking photographs we headed to the river, where we witnessed a truly spectacular sight. Local people were swimming in the river, and a large herd of cattle crossed it, creating a vivid scene. While there are crocodiles in the river, we were reassured that they do not attack either people or cattle. What an experience, watching the daily life of this tribe unfold in such a natural and powerful way.

That night, we faced some bad weather. Due to the warm temperature, we hadn't set up the outer tent, but around 2 a.m., the wind picked up fiercely, and a storm rolled in. Our fantastic local team quickly responded in the middle of the night, setting up the outer tent to prevent any leaks. When we woke up the next morning, it was raining, so we stayed in our tents until it dried up. Fortunately, the rain stopped after just 20 minutes, and we were able to start the day with minimal delay.

That morning, we returned to the Arbore village, one of my favorite tribes. They are incredible friendly, and I absolutely love their clothing. Some of the men had painted their faces for us, as they would for a wedding ceremony. With the wind blowing, we were able to capture beautiful photos of the flowing fabrics, making for a stunning and memorable experience.

Turmi street photography

Afterward, we drove back to Turmi, where we visited the local market and a Hamer village, where we had plenty of opportunities for photos. We ended the day with a cold beer on the terrace of a local cafe, enjoying the moment with the whole team. Although the most important part of our journey had come to an end, we still had some amazing days ahead of us.

Benna

On our way to Jinka, we left around 9 a.m. that morning. Jinka is the most important town in de region, and each tribe has a representative there to advocate for their interests. Along the way, we had plenty of opportunities to stop whenever something interesting caught our attention, like a woman carrying a bundle of branches on her back or a field being plowed.

Of course we made a stop to visit the Benna boys, young boys who walk on wooden stilts. The story goes that people used to walk on stilts to avoid wild animals in the fields, but now it's more for tourists. The boys were adorable, and they recognized themselves in the photos I showed them from Instagram. After this visit, we continued our journey toward Jinka and arrived later in a beautiful lodge with lots of flowers and a wonderful Italian restaurant.

Ari and Yetbebersh market

The Ari tribe is the largest population of any of the groups of the Omo valley. They are predominantly agriculturalist living in permanent villages primarily near the town of Jinka. We made a walk through the village and visited the vibrant Yetbebersh market. The people were very friendly and welcoming. They showed us how they prepare injera, the traditional Ethiopian flatbread. The market itself was filled with colorful goods, fruit and vegetables, and it was a wonderful experience to immerse ourselves in the daily life of the Ari tribe.

Abuche

Today, we had an unexpected visit from Abuche, the young man from Jinka with the striking blue eyes. Abuche, now 18 years old, has become one of the most photographed people in the region due to his unique appearance. His blue eyes are a result of Waardenburg syndrome, a genetic condition that affects pigmentation. The syndrome causes noticeable eye color differences, like Abuche's blue eyes.

It was special to meet him and to take portraits of him.

Konso

That morning we say goodbye to the Omo valley and welcomed the Rift valley. The Rift valley stretches from Mozambique in the south to Syria in the north and is one of the most impressive geological formations in the world.

On the way, we encountered another group of Benna boys and took the opportunity to photograph them. Our drivers had to navigate carefully to avoid the many goats on the road while admiring the beautiful terraced fields along the way. Upon arriving at our beautiful lodge with a lot of bougainvillea flowers, the rain prevented us from visiting Konso village in the afternoon. However, this gave us a welcome, relaxing break, a nice change after our intense travel days.

The next morning, the weather had cleared, allowing us to visit the terraced village after all. A local guide provided insight into the community and their way of life. We saw the Waka's, traditional wooden grave markers carved by the Konso people to honor their ancestors. These tall, sculpted figures represent important individuals, such as warriors, chiefs, or respected elders, often depicting them alongside their family members or symbols of their achievements. On the way back, we stopped to see how shoes were made from old car tires. They cost 500 birr (around US $4), unaffordable for many locals, yet incredibly durable once owned.

Dorze

After leaving Konso, we drove to Arba Minch, passing numerous banana plantations and making stops whenever we encountered something interesting. As we approached Lake Chamo, we arrived at our hotel, beautifully situated between the twin lakes of Abbaya and Chamo, another property of Haile. We visited the Dorze market, followed by a tour of the Dorze village. The name Dorze means weaver. The local people make beautiful fabrics. The architecture of their homes is truly unique, resembling elephant heads. While parts of the experience felt a bit touristy, the local drinking ceremony was an enjoyable moment.

Gamo

On our final morning, we took a boat tripe on Lake Chamo, where we spotted hippos and a few crocodiles, though most were on land, as it was breeding season. The lake was also teeming with birdlife, making it a peaceful and fitting end of our journey.

After our farewell lunch with the group and the whole team, we prepared for our domestic flight back to Addis Ababa, where our unforgettable Omo Valley tour came to an end.