Remote Kenya: Tribes of Lake Turkana, the Chalbi Desert, the Ndoto Mountains and Samburu Tour Report 2024

10 September 2024

by Inger Vandyke

Stepping into the true wilderness areas of remote Kenya instantly transports you to a fascinating world where wildlife roams freely and people move with the wind. Our expedition to western and northern Kenya this year was a spectacular tribal odyssey which saw us meeting Pokot elders on their way to a ceremony, being invited to a Rendile wedding, sitting with esteemed Gabra council elders drinking tea in the desert and a breathtaking sunrise with Samburu warriors in the foothills of Mount Ololokwe.

Perhaps the highest point, in a literal sense, was the chance to witness Micha, the Dassanech ceremony held in honour of the families of a betrothed couple where their parents get to meet for the first time. We were also plunged headlong into the world of the Diyyes, a unique sub-culture of Dassanech people who are responsible for hunting and fishing in the remote areas of northern Lake Turkana.
To wind down after all of this we enjoyed a couple of days on safari in Samburu, perhaps Kenya's most stunning arid region reserve.

Kalanjin

Our journey started with a drive towards Lake Baringo on the route that led to Uganda. After we made a brief stop in Nakuru, we realised we had entered the region of Kenya's Kalanjin people when we started to see women selling honey on the side of the road. The Kalanjin are tremendous bee keepers and their wild honey, drawn from the area's flowering acacias and shrubs, is wonderful. Upon seeing a group of women, I asked to stop and buy some so we would have it to enjoy at breakfasts on our tour.

We arrived at our lovely lodge in time for a lunch overlooking the waters of Lake Baringo. We got settled and grabbed our cameras for our first afternoon excursion to visit the beautiful Pokot people, who have regions in both Kenya and Uganda.

Pokot

Pokot people tend to live deep in the African bush, down unmarked trails that require a high level of local knowledge to navigate. After collecting our guide we started down one such trail and we met a highly decorated Pokot lady on her way to a distant ceremony. We kindly asked if she would allow us to take photos and she said yes. Her large Karen disc necklace and intricately adorned headdress made from cowrie shells were some of the most beautiful adornments I'd ever seen in Pokot culture and we were all instantly enthralled.

Walking to a nearby community we were greeted by several elders who knew me and also met others who were new. The women were all adorned with their trademark Karen discs and large brass hoop earring called Tawlyi. It was great to see these people who so generously shared their culture with us, allowing us to wander around freely taking photos and sharing laughs. We also enjoyed a couple of dances with both the Pokot men and women.

When the light started to fade we returned to the dirt track only to meet the lady we photographed on our way in. This time she had been joined by her husband, a decorated Pokot elder, wearing a crown of feathers. It was the first time I'd seen a Pokot man dressed to go to a ceremony, so although the light was quite dark, his striking appearance was a final highlight to our incredible afternoon with these people.

N'Jemps (Ilchamus)

The following morning we went out onto Baringo to explore the world of N'Jemps fishermen at sunrise. We met up with a local man, Joshua, who still fishes in the traditional way using a floating, canoe-shaped raft made from Balsa Wood. I had met him before on a previous trip but the way he expertly paddles his way around to inspect his nets, using his hand-oars, was still great to see. We spent a little time with him before taking a cruise around the shoreline, visiting the flooded ruin of Soi Lodge. Soi was once quite an established luxury lodge on the edge of the lake but in recent years, climate change driven extreme monsoon rains have worked in wicked combination with deforestation in the feeding rivers of the lake to not only create an increase silt level but also a rise in water that some estimate is up to ten metres in areas. The flood waters not only destroyed Soi, they also flooded the private home of a British man who has now fled and they have displaced many of the people living in the lowlands surrounding the lake. Viewing Soi now is fascinating. We found a nesting cavity of a Von Der Decken's Hornbill in one of the palm trunks of the lodge grounds. Crocodiles were swimming outside the ground floor rooms and we found a small group of Hamerkops who had decided to reinforce their gigantic nests with the thatching material from the lodge's roof!

It began to rain so we went back to the lodge to take a break. When the sun came out later that day we took to the lake once again to visit a small community of N'Jemps people living in a village on a small hillock of Kokwa Island. We walked up the small rocky path learning about some of the medicinal plants that the N'Jemps people use including aloes, Moringa and a highly perfumed mint called Anthrophylla which is used as an insect repellant.

We enjoyed meeting, photographing and learning about the unique way of life of these 'Fishing Masai' who originally fled to the islands of the lake to escape livestock bandits on the mainland. How they move their livestock to and from the mainland and how they use volcanic thermal springs to cook and bathe.

Our transits to and from Kokwa were highlighted by the relationship that Baringo's fishermen have with a few pairs of resident African Fish Eagles where nesting pairs are regularly offered fish treats so we watched in awe as our boatman tossed fish into the waters nearby, only to watch these spectacular birds swoop down and catch them right before our eyes.

At night, our Kalanjin host of our lodge joined us to talk about ancient Pokot, N'Jemps and Kalanjin traditions that he has learned after a lifetime of growing up in Baringo. Like enchanted children we sat listening to tails of Kalanjin honey hunters and learning how the Pokot people predict the future through their beloved goats.

In the end we were finding it hard to leave but the Ndoto Mountains were calling so the next morning we left on our long journey north, through the territories of the Pokot people and eventually into the realm of Kenya's Rendile as we approached Maralal. Shortly before arriving at Maralal we saw some really beautifully decorated Samburu women on the side of the road. Stunned by their appearance I asked to stop and they kindly let us photograph them in their wonderful dresses and necklaces. They were on their way to a Samburu initiation ceremony which, sadly, time didn't allow us to visit so after sharing a few laughs with them we continued on, stopping in Maralal for fuel.

Rendile

Eventually we started to catch our first glimpses of the Nyiro and Ndoto Mountains on the horizon and as we drove towards them, our guide alerted us to the fact a Rendile wedding was happening and asked us if we would like to go. Of course we said yes and at sunset we arrived to find a group of extremely decorated young Rendile men dancing to celebrate the wedding under a large acacia. They were joined by several Rendile girls who also danced beautifully with them. In the crowd I recognised two Rendile friends from last time, both of whom greeted us so warmly. It was amazing to catch up with them and all their news. We stayed as long as the light lingered taking photos and videos of this stunning ceremony before moving to our established tented camp for dinner under the stars and a night of being serenaded by the calls of several Pearl-spotted Owlets.

The following morning some of my friends and others joined us for a sunrise shoot in the mountains which was really special. We met a little Rendile girl who wanted us to give her a lift and, seeing her dressed in pink and white, I had an idea to photograph her at some beautiful flowering desert roses on the road to Ngurunit so we stopped to photograph a sheep and goat herder with the mountainous backdrop of the Ndotos before driving a little further to take photos of this pretty little girl surrounded by the full pink blossoms of a desert rose.

This was followed by a break in the middle of the day and a later afternoon visit to a Rendile Manyatta that was the home of several elderly Rendile women who were like delicate jewels of the mountains. I had been particularly fascinated by the ancient dress of women in Rendile culture and we were blessed to meet three women who were wearing their leather Baro necklaces and one wore a fur helmet called Doko, both of which are symbols of their elevated status in Rendile culture. We met them outside a ceremonial Rendile house which was large and covered in canvas. Adorning the roof was a Kudu horn. This building acted as a central meeting point for elders to make decisions and when a discussion was in progress the entire community would know because fresh tree branches were placed above the doorway. There was also a boisterous gaggle of Rendile children at this village so we had laughs with them as they crowded around us happily walking around.

The following morning we packed our bags and left for Lake Turkana, stopping to photograph some Samburu camel herders we met on the way.

After passing through the gigantic wind farm that now sits in the low slung hills east of the lake, we drove up a small crest to see our first views of Lake Turkana with South Island in the distance. A brisk wind had whipped up so we didn't stop for long. We drove the south eastern shoreline of the lake towards Loyangalani and I was surprised to see that rumours of high waters in Turkana were true. Parts of our original road had been shifted to higher ground, some parts of the road were right at the edge of the water and at one point we drove through lake waters to go north. The recent flooding of the Omo River had translated into higher waters, even in the arid expanses of Kenya's most dry and difficult north.

The Rendile of Lake Turkana

We passed by several Turkana manyattas and arrived at our lodge in Loyangalani for lunch.

Even though it was the worst light of day I wanted to meet some of the more decorated Rendile women of Lake Turkana. Driving out to their manyatta, I managed to find some shady spots and when we arrived a Rendile girlfriend of mine came running out of her home to hug me and say hello.

During my last trip to Turkana I had photographed her with her stunning headdress fashioned out of silver and flowers but this time she wasn't wearing it so, when others heard that we wanted to see this, we were then greeted by several breathtakingly beautiful Rendile women adorned in the most intricate jewellery and clothing in all of Africa.

Turkana's Giraffe Petroglyphs

It was still the heat of the day and the harsh light was terrible so we took a break and went out a to visit some ancient petroglyphs that featured giraffe engravings. The Turkana have always revered giraffes. An ancient tale tells of the way Giraffes used to 'tickle the clouds' with their tall heads, bringing rain, so they feature heavily in Turkana's stories.

El Molo

When the light started to improve we went to visit a local community of El Molo people on the shores of the lake. Even here, as we arrived, we saw that the El Molo people had already started to move their pretty homes woven out of local Doum Palm fronds, to higher ground. On our arrival we were instantly greeted by an El Molo friend of mine who came and hugged me. During my last visit there we had paid for husband's hospital bills so she kindly introduced us to him before we spent time wandering around their village. We met a local Turkana woman who was building a new home for her and her El Molo husband and we also stopped to photograph local men returning to this community from a second El Molo village out on an island in the lake. Sadly the wind was still too strong for us to visit that island but we were all content to enjoy what we could visit and towards the sunset we enjoyed photographing decorated El Molo women at the lake's edge. Just as I was leaving my El Molo friend said she had something for me. I went to her home and she gifted me a beautiful turquoise coloured necklace and she also gave my guests necklaces to thank us for our visit. The warmth of these people, despite their impoverished social status and harsh way of life, always humbles me. I was sad to go when we left.

Turkana

The following morning we enjoyed a spectacular sunrise photo shoot with some decorated Turkana elder men and also some beautiful Turkana women. We lingered until the light became harsh and we returned to our lodge for a short break before going to meet a very old Turkana lady still wearing her traditional copper labret. On the way there we all smiled when we saw some Turkana children playing with Doum Palm fronds, driving them around like cars. The inventive nature of children living in harsh places astounded all of us!

The Desert Museum

Before heading out for our afternoon visit to a Turkana homestead we drove down to the Desert Museum which, for a tiny museum in the middle of nowhere, was surprisingly fascinating and taught us a lot about the cultures, ecology and archaeology of Lake Turkana.

Sunset with the Turkana People

Time was ticking away, however, and we left to visit a distant Turkana manyatta on the edge of the lake, making a short stop to photography a sculpted Acacia on the shore.

As soon as we arrived at the manyatta we met a stoic and strong Turkana lady carrying a large load of firewood on her head so we stopped to take photos. I also flew my drone here to get a view of the stark desert lives of Turkana people living on the edge of the Jade Sea. Just as I was bringing the drone down a Turkana friend of mine saw that I had returned and came over to give me a hug. While I was flying my guests were enjoying an invitation to dance under the shade of the only acacia in the manyatta.

My friend invited us all to go and look at her house which was very kind. It was immaculate and beautifully kept. She walked with us back to the manyatta where we stayed taking photos until sunset. Just when the light became beautiful we wandered down to photograph some Turkana fishermen preparing their nets to go fishing. While we were there a group of Turkana kids decided to goof off in the shallows for us so we had a few laughs photographing them also.

We were finally forced to leave and as we drove back to our lodge the skies turned crimson so we stopped to take photos of the acacias of the lake, silhouetted against that incredible sky. What a magical end to our time here.

Arriving back at the lodge in the dark my Rendile friend met me at the car to give me a necklace she had made by hand. She also gave me a bracelet but sadly it was too small for my hands so I promised I would use it in my journal as a bookmark, a memory to her wonderful smile and our continued friendship.

The Singing Wells

The following morning we left early to drive along the eastern shore of Lake Turkana. Around 20 minutes north of Loyangalani we saw our first flocks of flamingoes and I was happy to see them still hanging in there, despite the altered salinity the floodwaters had created on the lake. Continuing north we found two Gabra men at a singing well. They were ‘Dabartu’ or the men sent to clean the well in preparation for ‘Totu’ herders with their animals. We stopped to take photos but sadly we couldn’t wait for the Totu to arrive as we still had quite a long drive ahead of us.

Sibiloi National Park

We entered the remote nature reserve of Sibiloi around mid morning and our first stop was the ancient petrified forest on a nearby hillside. After spending a short break exploring these stony tree trunks with their growth rings and patterned bark. An abundance of grasses was a stark contrast to the last time I was there so we started to see ungulates including Topis, Grant’s Gazelles, Dik diks and Ground Squirrels. We saw our first Vulturine Guineafowls here and we watched large numbers of Black-winged Kites hunting a locust swarm.

We found a shaded ouadi to enjoy our boxed lunch before driving further north to the remote town of Ileret. Just before we arrived we met two lovely Dassanech girls who were on the move with their entire homes and belongings strapped to two donkeys which was fascinating! We had arrived in the heart of Dassanech country and that wondrous feeling of moving with the wind and nomads was upon us.

Whispers on the Wind

A few months before I left to lead this tour in remote Kenya, a wonderful Dassanech friend of mine from over the border in Ethiopia sent me an out-of-the-blue WhatsApp message to say hello. As always I was delighted to hear from my dear friend who is one of the most skilled and experienced guides for Dassanech culture in the region. A series of conversations followed and he offered to come across and meet us to guide us during our time in northern Turkana. So when I arrived in the dusty streets of Ileret it was wonderful to see his smiling face again. We fixed our plans for the following day and after checking into our tiny guest house, I organised some beer to go on the chill so we could sit in the shade and enjoy a wonderful sunset over Lake Turkana.

Micha (Ilhene)

The next day we drove out to an extremely remote Dassanech manyatta where two families were celebrating the coming together of a young woman and man in marriage. We arrived to find some beautifully decorated people getting ready for the event and suddenly, in the sunlight a group of Dassanech men entered the manyatta singing and dancing. The sound of them echoed through us all and they heralded the start of a day of celebrations involving singing, dancing and feasting in both families. We photographed the dancing and even joined in. We also simply enjoyed taking portraits of the happy guests.

The rarely seen ceremony of Micha (or Ilhene) celebrated by the Dassanech people when the families of a future bride and groom meet for the first time (video by Inger Vandyke)
Micha is extremely difficult to see in Dassanech culture. You have to rely on a bit of luck but also be well planned and connected to communities to witness special events like it. On this occasion, all the texts, the garbled messages about where this ceremony might take place (nomads aren't great with compass points, distances or GPS units) and a superior level of local expertise made it happen. Myself, my highly skilled Kenyan driver and guide and Ethiopian expertise all seemed to make the sun and stars align to allow us to witness one of the rarest ceremonies in East Africa. What a tremendous highlight of our trip!

Diyes (Dassanech Hunter/Fishers)

When the light became too harsh for our host Dassanech community and us we retreated to a tiny village on the edge of the lake to seek shade, lunch and a beer. While we were sitting there, my Ethiopian friend said "Nile Perch!!!!" and we all turned to see a diminutive Dassanech woman carrying a gigantic Nile Perch on her head to her home. It was so huge that we estimated it would have weighed about as much as she did! We ran over to see if we could photograph her, being ever mindful that she was carrying a very heavy load so we didn't want her to stand for too long in the heat. What an incredible thing to see!

This was our amazing introduction to the Diyes, or the hunter/fisher people of Dassanech culture.

Over a lunch of the most delicious fresh Nile Perch we would eat on our trip, washed down with cold beer, I realised that we were in the heart of these people and I was mesmerised.

After lunch we wandered over to where the Diyyes were bringing in fish in their tiny boats and we learned how they salted and dried fish in the sun while discovering the large scales and tough skins of Nile Perch that had been caught before our arrival.

On the way back to our car, we spotted two women carrying massive crocodile skulls! I was instantly taken aback! We stopped to photograph one lady carrying the large lower jaw of a crocodile in her hands. From experience of my childhood growing up in Australia around crocodiles, I worked out that the original crocodile was probably between 6 and 7 metres long, by the size of its jaw and here we were, standing beside a slight Dassanech woman who wasn't even a quarter of that size, holding its jaw. It was incredible to see this!!!!

We decided to return to the manyatta to join in more Micha celebrations but the heat was relentless so we stopped only for a few dances and photographs before driving back to Ileret in time to enjoy our final Lake Turkana sunset of the trip.

Gabra

The following morning we left on the drive from Ileret to North Horr and we stopped briefly so I could fly my drone over some pretty Dassanech manyattas. We then followed the road around the eastern side of Sibiloi. It was on this drive we finally found our first pair of Heugelins Bustards after failing to see them in Sibiloi itself, probably because of the long grass.

As the morning light wore on we crossed a large desert pan and in the distant mirage saw a “Salfa” or Gabra water scout walking on his own, almost disappearing in the mirage! We learned that he was on foot scouting before the Totus decided to bring their livestock around to where he had found water. It was quite something to see this statuesque man striding across such a harsh place on his own, looking for water.

We then came across a small fire which alarmed us all and also a wandering Salfa, who was drawn to it. As we arrived the young Gabra man who had started it ran off. Not wanting a grass fire that would destroy the grazing habitat of the region, we all stopped and our guides went to put it out. This young Gabra man had decided to burn a tire to get the wire out of it! We put the fire out to stop it from turning into a larger disaster.

Arriving at North Horr, we enjoyed lunch at the home of our main guide for this tour before settling into our basic guest house and going out for the afternoon.

The rest of the day was spent at a wonderful local Gabra manyatta where we drank tea and coffee with the community elders in the desert. We were invited inside a mandasse to see what a Gabra home looked like and we admired the decorated kalabashes that form a symbol of luck for Gabra families. They must always be full of fluid (water or milk) a sign of abundance for the family.

We also met a newly wed Gabra woman wearing her traditional “Agogo” or cream-coloured scarf indicating her new married status.

Towards sunset I had spotted a steel wheelbarrow outside the corral of the family’s goats so I emptied it and then played games with the Gabra children, taking them for rides in it until we had to leave.

Next day we enjoyed a sunrise shoot with Gabra people milking their camels and taking them out to graze for the day. We enjoyed watching young Gabra girls milking their sheep and goats and we met a beautiful Gabra girl who came out into the calitropis desert for photos.

North Horr is sweltering at most times of the year so we went back to town and just before the light became terrible, we stopped a the town oasis to photograph local Gabra Totus and the camels they had bought to town to drink.

That afternoon we visited the home of an esteemed Gabra elder who was wearing a tradtional “Itu” or white hat that is reserved for appointed Gabra council elders. We learned a bit about the social structure of Gabra people while the women of his community sat in the shade making traditional items like baskets and a goatskin bag used to carry a wedding dowry. All the while the youngest daughter of the elder wandered around wearing pretty, handwoven protective amulets around her neck.

To get to his manyatta we had to cross a palm lined oasis called Oredika which held water and also had a number of lovely birds including African Spoonbill, Yellow-billed Stork, Common Sandpiper and Blacksmith Lapwings.

It was a lovely educational and photographic end to our time with the Gabra people at North Horr.

Crossing the Chalbi

We left under grey skies to cross the Chalbi Desert the following day, passing by a number of Gabra manyattas and traversing a large salt pan which wasn’t quite ready to be mined due to the recent rains. As we neared the southern edge of the desert and the quirky little town of Maikona, we met around a dozen Gabra girls carrying firewood so we stopped to photograph them.

Building a Mandasse

Entering Maikona we were surprised to see a group of women involved in building a brand new Mandasse, a process which only requires on day. They kindly allowed us to stop and take photos and we were all impressed at both the skill and speed of construction of a typical Gabra home.

Eventually we arrived at Marsabit in time to check in at our lodge for lunch and a small break.

Borana

We spent the rest of the afternoon visiting a local 'town manyatta' of a Borana family in Marsabit, complete with its sculpted clay and hand painted buildings. We enjoyed just meeting the family and photographing their daughters with their traditional Borana necklaces before returning to our lodge at sunset

Burji

The next morning we woke to a horrendous mist and light rain which delayed our visit to a local group of Burji people. They too got a bit confused by the weather and communications and didn't think we would make it so they cancelled. We quickly spoke to the female leader of the community and we met at their local centre where we learned a bit about Burji culture, their agricultural prowess and we managed to photograph them in the shelter of a balcony at a nearby building. The Burji are not only extremely friendly but they are also very generous with their culture so it was a lovely foray from Marsabit to meet them.

As we drove out of Marsabit, we could see the sun shining in the distant lowlands so we headed down in that direction, avoiding traffic jams of camels, sheeps and goats, until the sun came out and the day got warm.

Samburu

Around lunchtime we arrived at our gorgeous lodge, nestled in a tiny valley at the foot of spectacular Mount Ololokwe. The food here was wonderful and we had a delicious lunch before retreating to our permanent tent rooms on the hill behind the restaurant for a siesta. It was pretty hard to take a break here, however, due to the comical hordes of Vervet Monkeys playing around our tents. I passed by several Dikdiks on the walk to my room and I came out of my tent at the end of my siesta to find a rock hyrax sleeping on my day bed!!!! What an adorable little creature!

I had arranged a sunset shoot at a local Samburu manyatta but storm clouds were threatening. Even though the weather didn't quite play well we enjoyed watching Samburu women and children herding their goats and sheep back to the manyatta as the afternoon wore on. We took some portraits and, stunningly, we watched some young Samburu morans painting each other with ceremonial red ochre. Some small singing and dancing followed until everyone had to retreat to our respective homes due to the rain.

Sunrise at Ololokwe

Although the ominous skies tainted the early morning sun, they quickly started to disappear as we picked up three young morans to head out for an incredible shoot of them with views of Mount Ololokwe in the background. This was such a beautiful thing to see that we were all mesmerised! We also stopped to photograph some of their decorative jewellery before saying goodbye to them and returning to our lodge for a late breakfast.

Before we left the lovely Samburu manageress kindly donned her headdress and allowed us to take photos.

On Safari in Samburu National Reserve

During the last two days of our trip we stayed at a wonderful safari lodge in Samburu National Reserve while we enjoyed four relaxing safaris looking for wildlife.

An absolute highlight of this lodge was the two tame Genets living in the lodge ceiling. They would come out at night, sometimes sitting on the dining chairs and other times hiding under the dessert table waiting for the right moment to ambush tables for scraps and tidbits. I laughed when we went out for our final afternoon safari and I looked up at the slatted wood ceiling to find this black and white spotted tail hanging down through the rafters! There it was! I went over and looked up and just in the gaps of the slatted ceiling you could see a tiny, spotty, furry belly of a gorgeous little Genet asleep. So that's where they hide in the daytime!

Our first afternoon safari in Samburu introduced us to all of the reserves highlight animals. We saw male Somali Ostriches displaying with their wings out and then a pair with a tiny flock of 13 chicks. Other highlights included Grevy's Zebras, Reticulated Giraffes, Vulturine Guineafowls, Beisa Oryx, a mother lion and her three cubs and several herds of elephants in both the forest and also drinking down at the river. We even found a small group of Grey-crowned Cranes that afternoon which was an unusual record for Samburu.

The following morning we packed breakfast boxes and headed out on safari as the first car to leave the lodge. It was a lovely morning with clear skies and the highlights of our morning safari included seeing large herds of elephants wandering around the hills at Samburu including some boisterous youngsters amongst them. They were making their way to the river for a late morning drink so we followed them and when we got there we encountered a very bossy young elephant running up and down the river bank trumpeting madly. Other highlights included close up views of Lilac-breasted Roller, a sleepind Dikdik under a tree, a baby Flap-necked Chameleon crossing the road and two young male Reticulated Giraffes engaged in a subtle fight for dominance over each other.

Our breakfast stop that morning was on a hillside with a wonderful view over all of Samburu.

Returning to our lodge for lunch and a siesta, we went out again that afternoon for a truly mindblowing safari. It started with close up views of an Eastern Chanting Goshawk youngster sitting on the side of the road eating a grasshopper for a late lunch. We stopped to photograph an elegant male Gerenuk standing on his hind legs to graze an acacia bush. As we neared the core area we could see a well illuminated herd of elephants down near the river so we went down to join them and spent almost all of the remainder of the safari photographing them grazing and watching two young males engaging in fights. We drove round to see if we could get a better angle only to see them fighting almost right next to our car. It was amazing! They eventually joined the main herd who were grazing close to a group of Grants Gazelles and Grevy's Zebras in the gorgeous afternoon light.

On our way back to the lodge we chanced upon a herd of Beisa Oryx with two extremely tiny, adorable babies in them. The light was getting low and photography difficult so we continued on to our lodge, only to see a small group of cars stopped on the road ahead of us. Joining them we discovered that they were looking at beautiful female leopard sitting in the rocks on the side of the road!!!! Although it was near dark and we had to use high ISOs to get any worthwhile photographs, it was fantastic to see a leopard on safari in Samburu.

We were so excited when we got back that we skipped going to our rooms and went straight to the bar for a celebratory drink. At dinner, one of the lodge genets got so familiar with us that she came and sat on the balcony ledge almost at our feet! What a wonderful end to a spectacular day on safari!

The next morning we packed our bags and safari'd our way out of Samburu. We came across the same four lions that we had seen on our first day. Avian highlights included seeing an African Hawk Eagle having a small rodent for breakfast, nesting Martial Eagle, Bateleur, a male and female Kori Bustard, Secretarybird, a calling Rosy-patched Bush-shrike and a final look at the Grey-crowned cranes we had seen on earlier safaris.

You know the one thing that photographs can never fully allow someone to appreciate is the smell of the African bush. Once again we came across some grazing elephants and they seem to be trampling a shrub that smelled like a wild sage. It perfumed the air and for a brief time all we could do is sit and listen to the elephants, completely enveloped in that glorious smell!

We decided to take a final look at the river and when we did, luck was certainly on our side. We arrived just in time to see a herd of elephants crossing the river right in front of us which was incredibly beautiful! We let them pass and I saw a nearby troupe of baboons so we went to see them all happily wandering around the shady areas under the Doum Palms, feeding on the Doum Palm fruit. They were all so content with our presence that we felt like we were travelling through a film set of Planet of the Apes! What a great finale to our time in Samburu!

It was honestly so hard to go but we were faced with a long drive to Nairobi so we left the park by 10am.

Fresh Fish in a Tree House

Our final lunch stop of the trip was at the wonderful “Trout Tree” restauarant, which is effectively a treehouse perched on a large fig tree overlooking several ponds where trout are being farmed. This lovely place was a great stopping spot to enjoy some wonderful fresh fish before we returned to Nairobi.

A Company of Colobus?

The beauty of this restaurant was it’s local group of Guereza Colobus Monkeys that are regularly fed so after lunch we stopped to photograph around eight of these wonderful creatures as they were enjoying their own meal. Normally shy, it was the closest any of us had ever been to ‘wild’ Colobus monkeys and it was great to spend time with them photographing them before the final drive to Nairobi at the end of the tour.

Some final thoughts.

Our expedition in Kenya to visit it’s incredible tribal people hinges around the close relationships we have with the people we meet there. Our tour may not have the luxury safari tents that other companies offer, but as a tour leader I have express reservations about constructing these in areas where the local people are desperate for water, do not drink alcohol and couldn’t imagine having an entourage following them around, catering to their every whim. Luxury camps in the middle of nowhere creates an “Us and Them” situation. We would always prefer our groups to sit and learn in gentle interactions, rather than just move in, take photos and move out. At every chance we act with the deepest respect and reverence for the stories we hear, the invitations offered and the hospitality shown to us by people whose cultures are so alien to our own.

Along with incredible photography situations, our encounters with these people truly leave footprints on your soul, providing you with a lifetime of unforgettable memories.

The longer drives are usually very comfortable and interesting and they avoid the tiny luggage limits of small charter flights. The guest houses, some of which are quite basic, usually have all you need in terms of flushing toilets, showers and comfortable beds.

This expedition was the high point of my work in Kenya. We were just so lucky to see some of the things we did but to a certain extent you make your own luck. Wild Images draws on the expertise of over forty years of tour operations in Kenya and our long history of this region is almost unrivalled. Close relationships built over time allowed for us to see a side of life in these cultures that few outsiders have ever witnessed.

We hope. you can join us in the future.