

South Sudan Photography Tour Report 2021

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It's quite something to arrive in Juba, the capital of the world's newest country. After navigating the chaos of the airport, you are richly rewarded with dinner on the banks of the incredible White Nile.

This is how our expedition began and, as we sat watching Palm Swifts gather in the fronds of the Doum Palm above our heads and the last of the river traffic ply across the river, we were amazed to see how much water was flowing almost at our feet. For this year Lake Victoria, the watershed of this magnificent river, had received a higher than average rainfall. It was hard to imagine that the waters passing by us would eventually end up in the Mediterranean. We seemed so far away from that sea. Our first dinner in the city gave us a chance to meet our guides and also enjoy some excellent grilled Nile Perch caught fresh from the river and of course, we sampled the local cold beer to wash it all down with. What a magical way to begin our trip!

LOTUKO

The next morning we managed to have a sleep in as our guides took our passports to arrange for our permits to travel. South Sudan, like many other African countries, is sectioned off by bureaucrats and to travel in different regions requires permits and authorisation. These permits took a little longer than expected but after we received them we set off on our expedition towards Eastern Equatoria.

The rough dirt roads of Juba, bustling with local markets and city traffic, soon gave way to a relatively decent dirt road that took us east. City sprawl soon gave way to wilderness dotted with thatched hut villages and the first of three mountain ranges we would need to cross before we reached the easternmost point of our expedition.

After many years of civil war, South Sudan is not as populated as its neighbouring countries and, as such, there is a lot of wilderness in the country. We crossed the border between Central and Eastern Equatoria close to a small town named Liria. At the same time we crossed the mountain range by the same name. I looked up to the dramatic, granitic peaks of the Liria Mountains to see trails of white guano adorning the summits. Some of these had been created by Rock Hyraxes, the only living relative to elephants, but on closer inspection we found a mass nesting site of Ruppell's Vultures so we stopped briefly to watch these gigantic birds take flight from their nests and literally play in the thermals above our heads.

We stopped to have our papers checked in the capital of Eastern Equatoria, Torit, and it was here we began to see some of the more spectacular scarification in some of South Sudan's indigenous people. As we bought food for our camp, we met some lovely Nuer people with their fascinating horizontal scars stretching across their foreheads. After chatting to some local people we started to realise just how friendly the South Sudanese people actually are. Many of them speak English which stems from the time their country was part of Sudan, a former colony of Britain. It was nice to spend time talking with the local people, some of whom were very curious about our visit and they were really welcoming.

After stocking up our support vehicle with supplies, we drove further east to our camp that had been set up ahead of our arrival. It was located in the grounds of a small school with some quirky slogans written on the outside walls like "wash your hands" and "menstruation is natural" to educate the students on simple life facts. It was located close to a nearby radio tower which actually provided a good reference point to our camp as we meandered along the trails of the mountain soaring above our base. We briefly freshened up, said hello to our team and went on our first late afternoon hike up the hills to meet the local Lotuko people.

From our camp we could define, loosely, two separate Lotuko villages. We were travelling during the dry season but I tried to imagine what this place might look like in the rain. It must be magnificent as the two villages are separated by a deep gully that flows as a waterfall during the monsoon.

We scrambled and walked over granite boulders and dirt tracks to reach the village just before sunset. Along the way, itinerant Lotuko people would greet us with handshakes and the word "Mong!" which means "Hello!" in their language.

Isolated from the outside world, the Lotuko people of South Sudan mostly wear western dress. Their villages are built high on the peaks of the Ileu Mountains and they are accessed by a labyrinth of clean dirt paths that meander through glades of Doum Palms and semi-desert vegetation. Although we never reached the centre of the village that afternoon we were already impressed by the friendliness of the Lotuko people we met and photographed that day.

Our first night in the bush of South Sudan saw us camped under a massive mango tree and falling asleep to the sounds of an African Wood Owl calling.

The next morning we returned to the same village while the light was wonderful. "They know we are coming" said our guides. Laughing, I asked "How? How on earth can they see us when we can barely see them?" He said "Oh you'll see!" and we arrived to a large flat village square, crowned on one end by a gargantuan watch tower where the village men could see any potential invaders or visitors approaching from the foothills. Radiating out from that square, in no apparent design, were beautiful thatched huts that are locally known as 'Non'. Non have multi-layered thatched roofs and each are surrounded by a compound in which a family lives. These super clean family homes have sculpted mud enclosures for kitchens and also animal enclosures fashioned out of gnarled hardwoods that are used to also separate each compound.

We began walking to towards the top of the village and along the way we met Margarita, an elderly Lotuko woman who still had the clippings in her ears that would have, in earlier times, symbolised the fact she is Lotuko. When Christian missionaries reached the Lotuko last century, practices like ear clipping were deemed as evil and the Lotuko were forced to stop doing this. Sadly, with that tradition, another more beautiful one was also lost to missionaries and that was the making of beaded decorative bodices which were once worn by Lotuko women. These are now almost impossible to find in South Sudan. We heard about some Lotuko women trying to revive the skill in making them in Juba but sadly never got the chance to visit them. After hearing of this dying tradition we stopped to take photos of Margarita smoking her tobacco pipe high on the hill outside her hut.

Further up the hill we were shown a baby Bushbuck that the people had caught to keep as a pet. This very wild habit still happens in South Sudan. Elsewhere in many parts of Africa, the keeping of wild animals has been curbed somewhat by modern conservation, so it was quite fascinating to see this beautiful small animal being kept like one of the local goats in the village.

We also met a very old Lotuko woman carrying a baby and to our surprise, when the baby fussed, she actually offered this infant her breast. In our culture to see such an elderly woman breastfeeding is very, very unusual yet to the Lotuko and many African cultures, a child can be fed for as long as its mother or grandmother produces milk.

As we continued our walk along pretty village paths we stopped at several viewpoints to look down on the stunning village below us with our camp at the base of the radio tower in the distance. The views from up at these villages were stunning! Even looking towards the hills behind us with more Non nestled at the base of shady Doum Palms was a beautiful scene.

Our main target for the morning, however, was to visit the steep grinding pits used by Lotuko women and girls to grind food like millet and dried okra. Earlier this year, curiosity led me to look for similar grinding pits in the city of Dassa in Benin. I found some there but, unlike in South Sudan, the grinding pits in Dassa have been made redundant for many years. Up in the Ileu Mountains, they are used every day by women to create food in this somewhat harsh environment. As we arrived at the pits we met a young girl named Stella who had brought some dried okra to grind for her family and as we sat watching her do this on the steep hillside, other children joined us to watch also. To our surprise one of them produced another wild pet! This time a baby Rock Hyrax which was so very sweet! As someone who has a conservation background, seeing people like this keeping wild animals as pets made me feel quite conflicted. On the one hand I felt tempted to give an impromptu lesson on conservation and why we shouldn't keep wild animals like this and then, on the other hand, I knew this young animal had already had too much human contact. If it was let go on the day we met it, it would have died.

After spending some time doing photography of Stella grinding okra we descended to our camp for a siesta and lunch while the light was harsh. Later that day we decided to walk to the second Lotuko village we could see in the mountains from our camp. This was a much steeper walk, made even more difficult by the heat of the afternoon. We took several breaks on the way up to drink and take photos.

Reaching the 'summit' of the walk in the second village we were delighted to meet some of the headmen of the village and also see brightly coloured rock agamas scuttling off from their sunbathing session as we arrived. We also met one of the elderly women who founded this village decades ago. She kindly showed us around her compound and allowed us to take photos after we'd had a break from the walk. Her compound was located right on the village square which probably signified her status in this small community of several hundred people.

As we walked around the village taking photos we met some lovely Lotuko youths who asked us if we wanted to meet the village witch! Of course we said yes and we were led to the family compound of Yolanda, a nearly blind woman who was living with her able-sighted daughter and her family. She asked us if we wanted to have a special wish and my guest played along while I took photographs. She was told that she'd been married before but would marry again and have a son named Origo! This was wished upon her while Yolanda shook some runes in her hand. Witches in Lotuko culture are not the same as witches in ours who are maidens of evil for the most part. Yolanda would be consulted not only to put curses on others but to tell fortunes, heal wounds and illnesses. It was a fascinating insight into Lotuko culture that neither of us really expected on our visit!

Leaving Yolanda's home we went off to visit some large grinding pits that were being used to make food for dinner by several women and girls. This was exactly what we wanted to see and it was beautiful to watch the rhythmic grinding of grains and all the bustle of village life towards the end of the day. As we sat taking photos both of us were amused to watch a little Lotuko boy curl up in one of the grinding pits to take a sleep. It was like a little boy formed by the stony earth.

When the light finally became too bad we left to do the steep walk back to our camp before it got dark. Amazingly we actually walked past a large herd of cattle being shepherded up the hill by some Lotuko men. It was incredible to think that cattle would be returned to these high mountain villages after a day of grazing on the plains but since these villages neither had a supply of water or enough vegetation to feed animals this translated into steep hikes up and down the hills each day to fetch both!

LAARIM

On our last day in Ileu we decided to forego a final hike up to the Lotuko villages in favour of a sleep in and a leisurely paced pack up of our camp.

From the Ileu mountains we drove to the third and final mountain range before Kapoeta, the rugged and stunning Kimotong Mountains in Eastern Equatoria.

These soaring granite peaks are the home of the beautiful Laarim people. Sometimes referred to as 'Boya' (a term that is deemed insulting to them), the Laarim can only be described as pretty! Unlike the statuesque tribal people of the Turkana region (like the Toposa) or other tribes (like the Dinka, Mundari and Nuer), the Laarim people are shorter in height but they make up for their smaller stature with stunning scarification and body decoration.

Before we were allowed to drive out into the remote Kimotong to meet them, we stopped at the oddly named Camp 15, a series of ramshackle roadside huts connected by dirt tracks that forms a small economic centre for the Laarim people. We needed to have our travel permit checked here and we also needed to shop for food and gifts to give to the Laarim people we'd meet as a symbol of appreciation for their hospitality.

It was at Camp 15 we started to see Laarim people with their beautiful scars and jewellery. We also met a wild looking headman named Longoluo who was wearing a wild necklace made of hair. I tried to find out what hair was used exactly for his necklace and not even he could answer. I think in the end it might have been the mane hair of an old male Bushbuck as that was the only thing I could think matched the colour and texture of Longoluo's necklace!

After we stocked up our expedition vehicles and our permission to explore was granted, we drove into the remote Laarim villages of the Kimotong.

Imagine this if you will. A rough dirt track fit for foot traffic mostly, lined with many blossoming desert rose shrubs and shady acacias acting as a botanical layer to some of the most dramatic mountain peaks in Africa. Dotted in this fairytale landscape are Laarim villages with their pretty thatched roofs that are connected to each other via undulating foothill trails. Scratch below the surface of that scene

and you will find pretty Laarim girls and women with their multi-layered and brightly coloured skirts, their spectacular body scarification and their stunning beaded jewellery adorning their necks, arms and ears. This was to be our home for the next three nights and the drive alone had us both enthralled.

Over the course of the next few days we visited many Laarim villages for photography and we learned a lot about the way the Laarim find water in these hills and how they survive grazing their cattle. The main kraal area for their livestock was a long way east of where we were exploring and sadly not accessible to us on this trip. We were both happy to have had this extra time in the mountains with the Laarim. There was literally so much to see and photograph!

Our camp was in a grove of shady Marula trees at the base of a granite mountain that pierced the sky above like a needle and at night, not only could we hear calling Pearl-spotted Owlets but we also regularly heard the warning howls of Olive Baboons living high in the hills. Even during our lunchtime siestas we'd be thrilled to watch wild Booted Eagles, Bateleurs and Yellow-billed Kites wheeling in the thermals above our heads. At night we slept under the blankets of millions of stars illuminating the African night sky.

Joining us at our camp was a constant flow of Laarim kids all fascinated by the foreign people entering their world for a few days.

Exploring Laarim villages was more like a sensual journey than a hike. We visited more grinding pits. We tried the young fruit of a Doum Palm which is given to children to eat like a rusk. We met groups of Laarim women carrying roof materials to villages and we watched in awe as a new house was being built in the main village of the region's headman.

Unlike the similar thatched huts of the Lotuko we delighted in seeing the personalised touches given to the Laarim huts we visited. These included decorations of African land snail shells, gourds and even plastic bottles!

We watched in awe as we saw local women making the pretty beaded jewellery while sitting in their village compound and then saw some stunningly beautiful gourds and hand made cutlery, also decorated with intricate beading.

Everything revolves around the rippled granite stone that is the feature of the Kimotong. Even household sinks are made of the pitted, smooth local granite! We felt like the Laarim left a beautiful stamp on everything they touched.

During our few days with the Laarim we were blessed to see two traditional dances – one called the Kuduma which was performed by older women. Kuduma is the name given to Jackals and when I asked why the dance was given the same name I wasn't given a straight answer! The second was perhaps more beautiful and was called a Nakeku which is the dance of young Laarim girls that is attended by boys seeking to find future girlfriends and wives. It took place at sunset and we were enthralled to watch the leader of the dancers guide these girls to the right moves to dance so they got the sequence right! He was joined by the incredibly decorated young girl named Nawuyo who was so beautiful we photographed her on her own in a portrait session the next day.

At the end of the dances we left our donation to the people we'd met, including an elderly woman who we'd donated enough for her to fix the roof of her home which had fallen into disrepair.

It was around this time that we were both christened with Laarim names. My guest was called "Nauren" or 'the short one' and I was christened "Nakoyen" or 'the tall one'!

On our final day in the Laarim area we went off on foot to some really remote villages and we met some beautiful girls doing washing in a remnant mountain pool. They stopped when they saw us and, seeing some beautiful desert roses flowering nearby, I asked if they would hold some for us to take photos and these images ended up being some of my personal favourites from the trip!

We met some lovely older women smoking a local tobacco called 'ijoo' in pipes that morning and also chatted with several Laarim children shepherding their cows. In one village we even saw some rather novel chicken houses fashioned out of old 44 gallon drums.

It was a fitting way to end our time in this stunning place and neither of us wanted to leave.

TOPOSA

As we packed up our camp in the Kimotong, we prepared ourselves for the drive out to the lively commercial centre of Kapoeta to visit the beautiful villages of the Toposa people. After crossing the shallow alluvial river named the Singata where we saw many local people bathing, washing their cars and bringing their animals to drink, we went into Kapoeta and set up camp under the shade of the riverine woodland at Mango camp. Our initial impressions of this camp were that it looked shabby but it had flushing toilets, cold water showers, plenty of shade, cold beer and fast wifi so we were happy to make it our home for the night.

By the time we'd set up camp and caught up with some chores it was a bit late to head out to any nearby Toposa villages so we instead went to the local market to buy food gifts, visit a local flour mill and also a small manufacturing shop for local tobacco. It was fun to watch the latter as gourds were used to pound and compress tobacco into torpedo shaped capsules about the same size as my forearm! We chose the highest quality you could buy as we were shopping for headmen and, in my experience, quality matters for such gifts! We returned to our camp at sunset only to have to chase a troupe of cheeky Vervet monkeys off our tents! That night we met a bunch of Aussie guys who were contracted to build roads in a remote area nearby so we enjoyed a few laughs with them over cold beers.

The next day we packed up our camp and drove the terrible roads north east of the town towards an isolated village called Nasigiriat. Our camp for the next two nights was set up in a local compound in a Toposa village that had been built as the centre for the World Food Program. As such we had a steady stream of Toposa people visiting our camp to get both food and medical care. This alone was fascinating!

On our first afternoon we thoroughly enjoyed our rough drive out to visit our first Toposa villages. This involved crossing a dry river bed in low range 4WD so we avoided getting bogged in the soft sand.

Arriving at the Toposa villages we were both enthralled to meet women making beautiful goatskin skirts adorned with patterned beads. So much work goes into making these beautiful pieces that we could have watched them being made for hours.

Instead we went off and took many photos of the beautiful vernacular architecture in these villages including the beautiful "Ekores" or stilted granaries constructed by the Toposa people. We met some women actually selling alcohol from one of these who offered some to us to buy and take back to town if we wanted to party but we politely declined.

We stayed until the light got too dim for photography and then we returned to camp.

The next morning we collected a guide from an abandoned local school to take us to some really remote Toposa villages. We drove through bush tracks to find a series of them connected by single foot paths in the African bush. During our visits to a few of them we came across a group of Toposa people who had slaughtered a goat that morning so we watched with interest the careful way in which they sectioned the carcass off to eat. The women who were present at that scene were dressed so very beautifully so we asked one of them if we could photograph her. She wasn't sure why we were so interested in her dress until we kept telling her repeatedly how beautiful she was.

In another village we met a wonderful, friendly lady named Nakai who we photographed alongside some of her family.

We were travelling in the pre-monsoon heat of Africa. Spending time out in these villages in that heat was quite tough but it was worth it to learn more about the Toposa way of life. It is during this time that women start to prepare the Ekores to store grain in before the rains come. These fantastic woven granaries are lined with dung and mud to make them watertight so we met a few women preparing the mud/dung mix and also lining an Ekore with it while one of them was breastfeeding.

As we walked back to our car, we were followed by Nakai who was singing a lullaby to her young child as they walked with us. We also met two beautiful Toposa girls named Luto and Nalit who let us photograph them on our walk. It was a fantastic way to end our morning and if it wasn't for the relentless heat we would have stayed longer.

Later that day we returned to some Toposa villages to watch a dance called Meriye or a dance of women. Arriving at the site where this event would take place we actually ran into a group of itinerant Toposa men who were on their way to the kraal. The minute they found out we were there to see a dance, they all broke into an impromptu dance of Nyakwamoa, which is a traditional dance of Toposa men to start a wedding. What a great surprise and it was lovely to meet them before the main event kicked off.

After we finished chatting with the Toposa guys we had a brief rest in the shade of some acacias and we noticed an elderly, very athletic Toposa woman approaching doing some astounding dance moves and leaps into the air. People of the Toposa are similar to the Turkana tribes in that high leaps are a part of their very vibrant dance routines. We got up and started to take photos and as we did, many people from the surrounding villages gathered to join us to see this beautiful Meriye dance. It was a fantastic afternoon where the two of us were circled by dancers who were singing to the beat of rhythmic drums. At the end of it we gave our gifts to the local headman and returned back to camp.

We decided to forego a last morning with the Toposa the next day as we had a long drive back to Kapoeta to get our vehicles checked before we drove even further to make our way back to Juba. We stopped briefly in Kapoeta to visit the markets for some last minute souvenir shopping and we enjoyed some cold beers and bird photography at Mango camp before we departed for Torit.

The adventurous river crossing we navigated on the way east was still filled with water on our return but our drivers were very good at getting through it. It felt sad to leave these beautiful landscapes behind as we edged closer to Juba. To break our journey up we stopped in Torit, the capital of Eastern Equatoria, for the night.

MUNDARI

Driving back to Juba, we stopped at our hotel to drop off some laundry to be done while we were out camping with the nomadic Mundari people of South Sudan.

Normally resident in a place called Terekeka north of Juba, we found out that due to the White Nile floodplains being filled with water, many Mundari had moved their camps westward towards Dolu payam (province) so we drove out to meet them that afternoon.

It's difficult to describe the magnificent experience of spending time in a Mundari cattle camp. We were travelling in the height of the dust and heat which lent itself beautifully to photographs of these incredible camps in the haze of fire smoke and the dust of the plains. The close relationship the Mundari have with their gigantic Ankole Watusi cows is only really rivalled by another ethnic group in South Sudan, the Dinka.

As we drove out to search for camps, we saw some distant smoke rising from a plot across the river. We stopped to see if this was the camp we hoped to stay with and as we popped our shoes off to wade across the river to find out, the excitement of meeting Mundari people for the first time started to build. Sadly this first camp was not our main camp so we crossed over the river on foot again and drove further west towards a town named Koda. We eventually found our camp with enough time to meet a few of the local people and enjoy our first glimpses and photos of these incredible nomads.

Over the course of the next three days we experienced life with the Mundari first hand and in between sunrise and sunset sessions with these incredible people we spent leisurely siestas under a giant Kigelia tree where we'd set up camp. This close proximity to the cattle camp allowed us to understand the daily routine of the camp and also fall asleep at night while listening to the cowbells and the Mundari people singing. It was magical to be out there with them for our last few days of the expedition.

It seems the daily routine of a cattle camp starts with waking up, milking the cows for breakfast and untethering the cows from the camp so they can be led out to graze. Before the Mundari do this, however, they massage their cows with ash from the overnight fires to protect their mostly white pelts from sun and insect damage. Other fascinating parts of the morning routine is to collect cow dung, which is gathered into piles to be warmed up and dried during the midday heat.

The relationship the Mundari have with their cows is so close that they will even bathe in cow urine to wash and dye their hair lighter (which occurs with ammonia that is in the cow urine).

They can also blow into the vagina of their cows to stimulate them to produce more milk!

While we camped out with these guys, we actually had one night where their cows raided our camp to eat falling Kigelia flowers. We could hear their bells and feet shuffling around our camp in search of the fleshy red blossoms to eat.

During the day the people who stayed back at camp while the others went out to graze and water their herd, often kept us entertained with stories of Mundari culture, in between midday naps on a large tarpaulin spread out under the shade. At one point a young Ankole calf joined us and licked all the salt off my arm which felt quite nice actually!

It was during one of these shade stops that I said to my guest "Oh my goodness! Look!" and a group of young Mundari men began to run into the camp carrying flags. They had picked up their cylindrical drums and their beautiful musical instruments made out of cow horn called 'Tung' and began to play music to start a dance that neither of us expected. We grabbed our cameras and raced off to photograph them as they were joined by other Mundari from neighbouring camps.

The dance was called Yanguera and it involved lots of athletic jumping and men dancing in a circle with their arms in the air to simulate the shape of their cow horns. At one point I was led by a young Mundari man to stand next to a Mundari girl while we were encircled by dancing young men. I was told later that this was done to signify that the men were interested in the surrounded girl!

What a fantastic way to end our trip with them. In the end we both found it very hard to leave these incredibly tall and humble people. We enjoyed many long conversations and shared food with them and I wasn't sure who was more sad to leave in the end, us or the Mundari!

Returning to Juba on our final night we enjoyed dinner by the White Nile at a lovely restaurant called Afex Rivercamp. As we flew out from Juba the next day, I think we both physically left but a part of us will remain emotionally attached to this fascinating country forever.